



Query

Did you always want to be a doctor? I didn't. I always wanted to be a novelist. I wanted to write tortured stories of impassive, inarticulate men and outwardly cool, inwardly devastated women. If this sounds Harlequin, that's because it is. I was young and stupid and though I read well — Dickens, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Fitzgerald, to stick with the Ds and Fs — I really didn't write all that well. My submissions to the school "literary" magazine — poems about does (you know, deer), about peanut-butter sandwiches — were all rejected by a future infantry wife.

The guidance counsellor had roué Playboys on his shelves and reeked of cigarettes. I told him I wanted to be a writer.

"But with your marks, you could be anything — why a writer?"

I told him about the women, about the men. I showed him the ode to the gentle doe.

He was unmoved. Impassive, even. But not inarticulate. "Take science in university. Earn some money."

My marks were indeed good. I took the path of least resistance and decided to become a doctor. I kept writing, though, all the way through my initial undergraduate years and on through the medical school slog. Most of this "writing" consisted of poems that I used to try to impress girls with, unaware that poetry didn't win hearts as much as it had in Flaubert's day. I sent a lot of this palaver to little magazines, which were a kind of life-support system: each time I was published, I felt a little success, a little affirmation that the writing was worthwhile.

I often hear from writers that writing is "hard work" and "interminable" and that "the last book almost killed me." Well, it was the *exams* that almost killed me. Those times I could actually write were respite, not toil. I took my 300-page *Collected Poems* (minus the doe poem, sans the peanut-butter poem) to the local copy shop and bound it. And promptly decided that it was a work of unparalleled genius.

That done, I safely put it in the closet. And I then gave in to the tide: of wife, of daughter, of career. The advice of the counsellor was paramount: *earn some money*. I stopped writing for decades, until I started to write for this journal. I have

no books, no real credentials, save for little magazines long dormant and dead. The men and the woman I had dreamed of were exchanged for real men and women.

I think we all look back at what might have been. Did my writing show promise? Probably no less than any other kid, though definitely not more. Might I have become a Harlequinist? I might have. But the tide swamped my boat, and I couldn't do the bailing that would have meant life in penury as a writer. I had a choice: to be broke and writing, or to be comfortable and be a doctor. To whine about it now would be indulging in self-pity. It was what I chose.

Would, though, that the counsellor had not been so unequivocal (another feature of my "men") and suggested instead: "Why not be a doctor *and* write?" It was a choice I didn't know I had, until I had grown older, looking back through the hilarious *Collected Poems*, with their breathlessness:

O, learned tree, your boughs so bountiful and O, O ...

And their nonsensical purpleness:

Placid water, place of implacable strength, of petulant imperturbability ...

And their unintentional silliness:

The leopard leaped, his larynx loudly lolling, ROWWllll, Rowwll, Onto the park bench and studied passersby, delectable morsels He'd eat, this fat one, that skinny one, moving treats ...

And thinking: maybe he was being kind in directing me toward science. Imagine if career counselling were more like *American Idol*. I wonder what kind of bruising feedback I would have received then?

Remember, the above excerpts are earnest. I was *serious*. I was sending these out to editors. I was wooing women with "O, O."

And now, here I am, utterly without credibility.

— Dr. Ursus