

## BOOKS

## Current writings in medical humanities

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The medical humanities have long held a vital place in literature, but have more recently emerged as a discipline in their own right through journals such as Canada's *Ars Medica: A Journal of Medicine, The Arts and Humanities*. Its latest editorial (Vol. 6, No. 2) states that "Making art to grapple with the human condition of being embodied is the infinite theme that we continue to explore...". This clear purpose reverberates through every featured work and is fostered through the provocative questions in its "Discussion Guide."

As the biannual turns the corner on its fifth anniversary, it continues to provide a venue for lesser-known authors and heavy-hitters. The current issue features an excerpt from Katharine Govier's newest novel, *The Ghost Brush*, stories from Jay Baruch MD and Ann Ireland and an essay from James FitzGerald about his memoir, *What Disturbs our Blood*.

In the latter we are tantalized by a sprinkling of details about the author's father and grandfather, both imminent physicians who succumbed to debilitating depression. But there is an urgency to the mystery as FitzGerald writes, "My future lay in the past."

The biographical narratives continue in "Walking through the Interzone," by Allan Jones who suffers with retinitis pigmentosa. One is alarmed by his frightening forays into the outside world, where seeing is a "dimensionless incoherent wash of blurry shades of grey with no edges anywhere." But Jones accepts his waning eyesight as part of his journey, not its end point.

Other pieces explore the nuances of loss. In "Unpacking My Daughter's Library," Joan Givner finds solace: Books are "our bulwarks against despair," she writes. While poet Anne Meisenzahl offers a tender telling of the loss of her breast to cancer in "The Drama of the Daytime Sky": "You wake up carved up, but restored, half

what you once were, but whole."

This is insightful and illuminating reading, although the lack of department demarcations sometimes left me adrift: Is this fiction? A narrative of illness? Like a box of assorted chocolates without the key, I never knew what I was biting into. Still, I enjoyed every morsel.

Most surprisingly in this issue is an art critique that provides a literary understanding, through cadence, rhythm and repetition of words, of the cover art. And what do these autopsy paintings mean? asks Dagmar Dhale in "Painting John Brown Painting." "They make me feel," she concludes. One could say the same for this entire journal.

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**Note:** Allan Peterkin MD, a founder and senior editor at *Ars Medica*, is an advisor to *CMAJ*.

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