

conversations of mutagenesis without showing what I did know or pretending I knew more than I did. I allowed myself to share conciliatory smiles with people so sick I would never see them again, while remaining ghosted into the background. And I'll admit it. It emptied me out.

So empty all I could do was sleep. So empty I didn't realize I was empty until the next day. Even thinking now about how I felt yesterday makes me empty again. All the things I thought were good became wasteful. My own motives became wanton. The world became hostile and aggressive: a machine for breaking people. I was stripped bare. And that was only on my first day. But at least it was only my first day.

Witnessing death stare at you, all knowing, is a consumptive task. The time you've wasted, the things you've never done and the lies you've told yourself are all revealed. It is inescapably unnerving. I saw here that

becoming a fully fleshed witness to the harsh omnipotence of death is a learned skill. I'll learn too how to hear from someone who is suffering, to give myself over to their story, and then to rebuild stronger, like a muscle.

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Last night, while I slept, a man came to me with his cancer. He didn't know much about it, except that it scared him. I asked him to open his mouth, and I looked inside. It grew out of every junction. It grew out, green and treelike, from where his tongue met the bottom of his mouth. Down his throat and into his muscles and membranes and tissues. It had its own fleshy plant structure: all stems and waving green branches and seed pods. It was well rooted and greedy. It pushed its way into the spaces between the different parts of him. It made him its home. They lived together, the two of them.

They were joint animals. The same creature and, at the same time, not.

When I pulled my vision back out of him, he snapped his teeth shut like a gate and smiled at me. He was an average man again, indistinguishable from any other. But in his smile I knew we shared a secret. He harboured a growing life inside him, and he had shown it to me like a gift. He turned on his heel and left me standing there to sort out the pieces of myself and the world of his cancer with clumsy, well-intentioned hands.

**Tavis Apramian MA MS**

MD/PhD matriculant  
Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry  
Western University  
London, Ont.

All characters in this work are fictitious.  
Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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## POETRY

### light

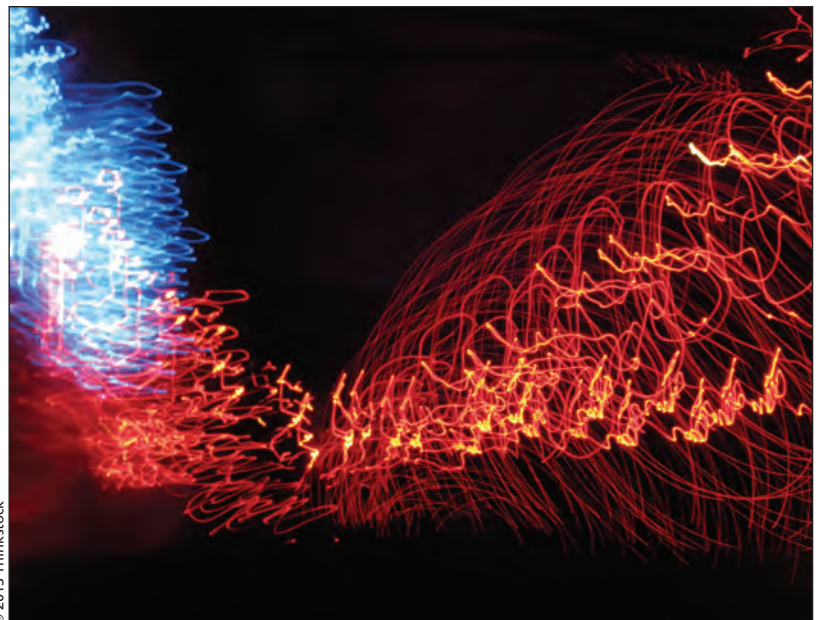
quantum physics says that observation  
of light changes its behaviour  
(particle or wave)  
that reality changes with the watching

could it be light gets nervous?  
panics during the investigation like a criminal  
found out  
or a patient having their pressure checked  
(now hypertensive)

cortisol precipitating particles  
creating a billion watched lights  
and an infinity of little truths turned false

**Andrew Smith BSc (Hons) MD**  
PGY2, Department of Psychiatry  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ont.

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