

## Foreword

One of the most pleasurable tasks of editing a literary journal is assigning the order of the writings in a particular issue. After months of hard work by all of the reviewers and editors—culling the selections, editing the pieces, working with the authors, copy editing, proofreading, formatting—there is the final step: deciding the order of placement. For this issue, I spread out the 36 poems, stories, and essays on the brown vinyl examination table in my clinic office at Bellevue, pulling out the footrest to accommodate extra pages. It is a heady experience to be surrounded by such richness of literature; as with the Viennese dessert tables at fancy weddings, it is hard to know where to begin.

I moved the pages around, trying to match themes and writing styles, wondering which order would best engage a reader. Despite my best efforts to remain focused on the task of layout, time and again I would find myself reading a now-familiar story or poem, recalling the joy of the editors in selecting that piece.

As I tried to match prose and poems, I realized that there were many more poems than prose pieces that dealt with death. A number of the stories and essays considered issues of mortality, but most were not about death, per se, certainly not as many as there were poems.

How did the balance come to be skewed toward poetry? The *Bellevue Literary Review* receives hundreds of stories and essays that concern death, and often it is difficult to reject these manuscripts, particularly the nonfiction. But it seems to be very hard to write well about death. Narrating the details of death runs a fine line: the concepts are profound, yet the actual process can be surprisingly ordinary, and if not illuminated in some unique or literary manner, runs the risk of being almost clichéd. Might poetry be more amenable than prose to writing (well) about death?

The poems in this issue that deal with death suggest that poetry, by its ability to tease out a single strand of emotion, is able to be removed from the “mere” recounting of death. By offering a simple, arresting image, a poem allows us to meditate on a specific aspect of death. With metaphor we can access a sliver of insight, which is easier to fathom than the frightening black hole that death can be.

Judy Katz’s pair of poems, *Anniversary* and *The Weight of Absence*, offer images of loss that are, in some ways, more realistic than fact-based accounts of death. “When you died,” she writes, “our house sank deeper into the earth...” In the poem *Medicine Chest*, Amanda Auchter contemplates the simple act of cleaning

out the medicine chest after the death of a spouse, of wiping away fingerprints on the mirror, of erasing the last traces of presence. Rebecca McClanahan’s poem *Gesture* looks toward the Pietà, the iconic image of a mother holding a son, and then wonders how a son should hold his mother when it is *she* who is dying.

While the spareness of poetry is often the key to concise imagery, good fiction—despite its “wordiness”—can often seize a potent image. *His Own Time*, by John Thompson, takes place in a prison in which one inmate has decided to end it all. How the other prisoners view this is anything but cliché. The main character in *The Committal*, by Alice Ayers, sits with her mother, for the umpteenth time, as her mother plans what should happen upon her death. “She loves to plan any trip: Paris, Madrid, Egypt, Antarctica, China. Why should her funeral be any different? Just another itinerary to draw up.”

Most of the prose in this issue of the *Bellevue Literary Review*, however, does not deal with death. Two pieces look at birth. Angela Wheelock’s essay *Nesting in a Season of Light* recounts the harrowing experience of trying to get pregnant, set against the lush, natural rhythms of the Yukon. *Baby*, by Lois Taylor, begins with the equally harrowing experience of miscarriage, this set against historical rigidities of class, race, and sex.

Beginnings, though, are not limited to birth. The poems by Floyd Skloot—*First Steps* and *Midnight in the Alzheimer’s Suite*—hint that epiphanies can be found in the least likely of settings, as long as one’s ear is appropriately attuned.

Several selections examine young people who are facing disease. Steven Schwartz’s protagonist in *Opposite Ends of the World* is struggling to retain his self-definition in the face of multiple sclerosis. In *The Bald and the Beautiful*, William Bradley recounts how daytime soap operas were a critical component of his treatment for Hodgkin’s disease. The narrator of Whitney Scherer’s story *Erosion* decides to keep her ear tumor a secret so she can keep up with her friends on a desert hike. Seth Carey’s essay, *The Absolute Worst Thing*, about life with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), was written using the blinks of his eye to select letters on a special computer.

We hope you find the diverse writings in this issue of the *Bellevue Literary Review* both enjoyable and stimulating, and that the images will remain with you long after the cover is closed.

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