

Stones in our pockets: art and the art of medicine. 2007

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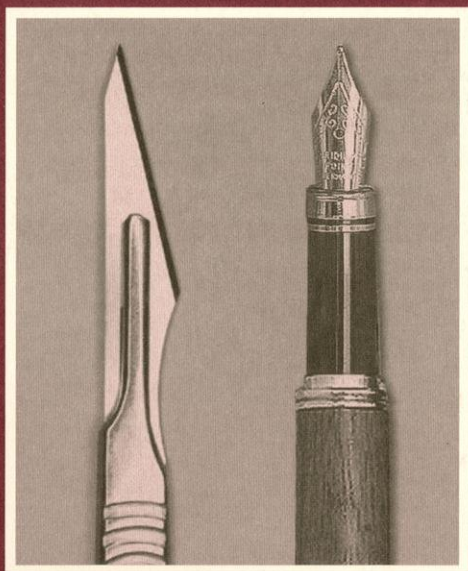
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Stones In Our Pockets

Poetry by Michael Salcman

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

Stones In Our Pockets

Art and the Art of Medicine

Poems by
Michael Salcman



PARALLEL PRESS 2007

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FIRST EDITION

*Dedicated with love and admiration to my parents:
Edith Atlas Salcman and Arthur Salcman*

“Medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my mistress. When I get fed up with one, I spend the night with the other. Though it is irregular, it is less boring this way, and besides, neither of them loses anything through my infidelity.”

—Anton Chekhov (c.1886)

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Euphoria

The world is round. From forty miles away
only the topmasts of ships appear headed
to the Bay Bridge, their hulls buried beneath
the curvature of gray water curling along
a short segment of latitude.

If you find the angle at which something shrinks
to nothing, you can get the distance;
a cross of wood, a length of twine
and soon enough the equator of existence
becomes a number as real as the belly
of an apple, a thing in the mind.

At sea you never doubt their rapture—
Archimedes predicting Newton, Michelson
his Einstein—their excitement transparent
without fog of drug or spectacle.

And how big would a forest have to be
if each tree stood for a single neuron
in such a brain? A field as large as Manhattan
or Rhode Island, or all of Montana?

We calculate such vastness, we do not measure.

Here is the child's answer, stretching his arms
beyond his parents' grasp: *this big*, his body
says. *No really, how big? This big.* No. Bigger.

Stones In Our Pockets

Though I've felt their weight from the first,
I'm not the only one
who's half-oppressed by words;
Virginia Woolf, cramped in the womb
by her father's *Dictionary*,
ended with stones in her pockets.
The thinnest curlew of typography,
weightless in flight, becomes my gravity's core
when out of motion, a porphyry of words and letters
pressing down like granite:
each sound, each sign, each referent,
bound by a flock of association,
lifts me up or beats me with its wings.
The sky, Virginia might have said,
doesn't judge us half as much
as words; we look up in wonder at the vastness of space
but from the mind to the page is as great a distance.

When the Boy Comes Back

I'm not too aware of him—he's that shy
and it's easy for me to miss the sounds
and smells of his past:
the click of beads on an abacus
counting bushels of corn;
the cool swell of a glass doorknob
on a classroom door.

Or his hand is warm from working the projector,
his ears alive with the tick of the film strip rising
notch by notch, his alertness is torn
between dust motes dancing above the fan
and the emulsion embossing the walls
with pictures of Mexico and Japan.

On such a night,
I can hear him cranking the mimeograph drum,
mixing its violet smell
with the odor of oil in the rails of a slide rule—
an aroma as metallic as a brake in a machine shop,
where the boys bent els and smoothed their edges.

Drowsing off he leaves me and, deeper asleep
even the clatter of typing with real type is gone:
the lunge of the carriage rising for a capital
and the little fists striking my words into place.

Poem on a Single Word from Richard Serra's Verb List

To cut: to sever, to divide, to incise,
to split from the herd,
to be snide, to make the body firm,
to heal the weak, to deride
a moon in front of its own sun,
to lay down a groove
and dance on a rug
with someone else's love.

To cut: to bleed, to render, to wound,
to shave a pitch
and make a fast ball rise, to dip
and leave a tackler miss,
to carve a block, to pass in front of,
to slice through a wave, to part
and cross, to gouge a ravine, to hew
or trim, to grow out teeth; to cleave.

Deconstructing Abstraction: A Joan Mitchell Painting

I was edging into middle age
the day my son found a marigold
in the corner of an abstraction,
putting in what the artist had taken
such care to take out, his eye
divining an image in a spot of yellow paint,
and felt some pride at his finding out
what occult wisdom meant, a decoding
of sense from sense, of signs
embedded in traces.
He was young then and Joan already dead—
her last years spent with cancer
pincering at her throat, the smell of smoke
on her Parisian scarf, a shot glass
in her hand—the common memory
of friends who told me sick or not
she was a handful, angry and elegant
until the end. My own eye went beyond the flower
to a formless scarf of blue, its smear
a recollection of Lake Michigan,
where her mother made Joan skate
like a champion.
It was early on when she drew this spinning hand
grenade of dark earth at the bottom edge
of the canvas, dancing a pirouette
to anchor
the drip of black piss or rain.
We both saw she had already changed
her aim, had to.

In Which Failure, Great Success

Christopher Morley once pronounced a blessing
on those patients who failed to come
to the consultation rooms in Harley Street
where a young ophthalmologist hoped to set up a practice.

This gentleman physician must have felt himself
less than a flea (though not as low as a Buddhist might)
and despite subsequent attempted communion
with the afterlife, modeled his logic on Dr. Bell,
his esteemed professor of pathology,
who could tell a man's occupation from the stains on his fingers,
his brand of hemp from the smell on his breath
and who, while lecturing in the steep pitched well
of the school's amphitheater,
never actually touched a subject.

From this pattern, he stitched a companion,
someone to see him through the lonesome nights
that followed each empty day. Had he read Poe
or *The New Prometheus*? With no thought at first
to sell his tales, boredom and hunger
deduced ambition in his pen, squeezed out a fiction
more real than life.

Though his surgery stood quiet,
the dog that failed to bark in the night
howled often in my childhood; after all, we read
before we write. And of that hellish hound,
born in the hour he put his couching needle down,
or that trap he set for us
in cataracts of gas lamps and top hats,
no one has said it better than his creature:
*if we remove the impossible, what remains,
however improbable, must be the truth.*

Last Saturday Morning in Boulder

—for Bob Cooperman

Who but us remembers one-armed Earl,
how he played guitar with a match book cover
folded in his metal claw, while I sang
in Roxbury flats, smoke-filled before the riots,
or that I came back to Brooklyn
when your father died thirty years ago?
Sure, it's a long time for two friends to lose hold
of one another before reconnecting at the foot
of the continental divide
but now we sit on Pearl Street with our wives,
not so young, not too far from a book shop
selling everlasting enlightenment
and goddess apparel.
Mountains of fresh air have not cured
your tongue or defrocked your speech
of its foul and ranting accompaniment—
it scalds me as it erupts from your circumoral beard,
while you look more and more like Jerry Garcia
or a Colorado miner, your eyes as big
as pans sifting for gold. What else do I remember
from that Saturday morning in Boulder?
That you still thrum your fist
on the table, that you still pinch your nose to drive
your glasses back up its slope—
my mind making these notes
without daring to look at your hand, its scarred wrist
and tangled mound of tendons hid
by a generous nature. Only later, I remember
how you ran laughing into that plate glass door,
shattered after a raucous game of stickball
in the street, and we stopped keeping score—
since only one could still become a surgeon
and I knew who the real writer would be.

If You Can't See Him, He's Not There or Voilà, the Dog

Because I was not quite eighteen
each time we exchanged a breath
the thought of cutting the nerves to his heart
made my voice wobble,
me smelling the wet dog slobber
on his tongue and both of us that first hit
of anesthetic gas
piped into his throat.
Needing a bit of misdirection
I hid him with a rectangle of cloth
towels clipped to his skin,
leaving the left side of his chest exposed
where I hoped to begin
my first solo trick with a knife.
A sucker for magic, I imagine
me closing my fist
on a colored silk to make a pigeon
or egg disappear—first there's a gasp
for the shell and its contents,
then a laugh from the audience
when you don't hear it crack.
Partially veiled by my fear,
I gaze into his fleshy window, happy
to not know where he's gone, the dog I mean.
Perhaps he's offstage in the wings
waiting for me to fix his wet tv,
its parts clumsily moving like a watch
held by a walrus, counting on us both to reappear
as ourselves, after the sheets are torn off.

The Ice House

Later, in our yearbook, they caption a photo of George, his mouth gaping open as if to say 'we're going to carry what up from where?' that first day of class two or three of us at a time lift bodies onto a fireman's stretcher, and carry the corpses out of a late nineteenth-century red brick Victorian across a small courtyard and up a short flight of stairs into the anatomy lab next door. The dead weigh more than we do, fresh from the ice house they're heavier still; hands at their sides, standing attention in repose, their clay-colored faces flat as cardboard, eyes closed lips pursed, holding in the separate secrets of their final moments, the fleeing of their souls. Because of a shortage in donations, it's four to a body. Over the next weeks and months, nerves and tendons come up to greet the ministrations of our knives. We give them names before we flay (in order) their extremities, belly, heart and head, and leave nothing much behind except attachments to bone, the black tongue and the brain in its casement. Not all of us are equally deft—you can already tell who the future surgeons are and who the psychoanalysts. We make the usual jokes about girls who study late and fall asleep over the bodies, but in general these dead get a modicum of respect not accorded them in life. They're the first people we learn to read like books, exemplars of the future and texts off the street.

Vault No. 2, Shelf No. 36

In order to make way for new buildings at the asylum they plan to rebury patients once disinterred and burned. A scant few, identified by families who claim “what was lost has now been found,” are taken home to Pistol River or somewhere else outside to rest. In a State Hospital in Salem Oregon, where patients lived and died in obscurity, a majority of the “cremains” reside in a locked room next to the old mortuary that consumed them. Doctor Fickle, the hospital superintendent, says “people seem more concerned about the dead than the living.” But there’s little proof of this. The room itself lacks a name (not to mention visitors) and the array of canisters, tops engraved with stamped numbers, sits corroding on wooden shelves, each tin detached from its tape peeling away in strips. . . . From 1880 on, a parade of death marches on an avenue of planks, that abruptly ends in the Seventies when they filmed Nicholson in “Cuckoo” here and asylums like this were emptied by miracle drugs and community care. Now a population as big as a town fills a nameless old room: three thousand copper tins of mortal remains, their labels washed from the cans by rain, stripped by time. Here and there, something legible persists of Bess, or Ben, or Andrew, and frees them from anonymity—but no master ledger exists, no listing on a web site. They sit in their involuntary forbearance, the last we called insane, each urn a powdered soul expunged by madness unclaimed by family or law. So deeply lost were they in the mind’s misery they did not know themselves; and which of them is known to God is also unknown today.

Small Bones

In my hand an opera sings:
navicular and lunate speak of a boat drifting too close
to a moon, hamate and capitate of the hook
that will seek the performer's head
if he sings off-key, and like a modern staging
of Antigone, the rest of my wrist bones
are abstract props, pisiform, triquetrum,
trapezoid and trapezius, geometric shapes
against which the songs of my fingers lean,
metacarpals and phalanges drumming
my noises, tapping my rhythms, disguising my rage.
I imagine at the end of this musical play
the entire cast will close in a fit or spasm,
before fisting the earth with their gelatin nails.

Open Heart

He withdrew his hand slowly
just as my own slid over its back
index finger plunged between
the sucking, mulching cusps
squeezing the swirling current
of blood between our flesh.
How close to the center I had come—
a hard knot of muscle
fighting for breath
awaiting a small steel cage
and its white plastic ball
swimming in place,
sending our hearts racing to shore.

Romantic Organ

In daylight, I don't know the heart at all.
I have seen it in a jar, each muscle fiber matted
by formaldehyde
submerged in the gray-green light, held to the window,
like a tuberous plant among the lilies.
I have held it in my hand while it rested
between penultimate beats
and plunged a finger through its sucking
valves while life swirled red and frantic.
I have seen its chambers magnified many fold
by electrons and invoked in prayer.
I have seen it on the point of a maniac's knife
and punctured by a bullet; in the eyes
of a friend's wife or my own children
I have seen it broken but have never known it
like an Aztec might holding it up to the sun.
Only you have seen the one I carry like lead
inside me;
I don't know the daylight heart at all.

Emergency Meditation

Flat on my back on a cot in the hall,
the smell of our love-making fades
from my fingertips—it's 2 in the morning
as I wait for assistants
to open the head of my patient
like a persimmon, layer upon layer
until the killer clot and arterial bubble
deep in the brain
are caught in the light of my microscope.
Hope squeezed out from our love
rides in my veins like anesthetic gas,
floods me with forgetfulness,
lets me sleep precious moments
before I must chase the orphaning
of eight year old boys, the widowing
of young wives;
tonight I will share your anodyne
with those nearer death than I,
waiting after loving on a winter's eve.

This Is Not a Rehearsal

A candy striper steps aboard
a crowded elevator, conveying today's ort
of philosophy on a white metallic button
pinned to her breast. We both see it—
the black letters say
“This Is Not a Rehearsal”; I sense
an urgency not proclaimed by Aristotle,
and touch, in a surreptitious way,
the inside of your arm, where a spot
between wrist and elbow
feels as warm as your pink genital flesh does.
It's the first next day and thoughts of us
together still bring twinges
as patients get off
and doctors on at each stop.
I'm as good a Cartesian as you,
it's the aroma of sweat, raw silk
and lavender on my fingertips
that does it for me; for five straight floors
this scent mixes with street odors
and ascends in my brain
like a Madeleine dipped in tea.
The crowd thins out, the girl with the button
has left, a nurse steps off with a tray, suddenly
it's our stop and I must let go of your arm
to watch the crisp blue edge
of your dress walk out just ahead of me,
in the unconscious light of day.

Intensive Care

They call you at 3 in the morning
to examine the dead:
nightclothes puddled around her,
her face the color of cocoa,
cornrows and braids
stiff on the unseeing head,
surrounded by an extended family
of nurses and myself, who watch
her heart squeeze
blood into her brain
until she's stunned
and clear water flows
down a long tube like tears
and drains in a plastic bag.
At five o'clock I pronounce
some of her dead—
the pupils that fail to see,
the ears that can't hear,
even the limbs that fail to move
with all the pain I can give.
But her killer heart lights up
on the monitor, orange and red,
it winks and whistles at me,
beating the tattoo of its victory.

Miraculous Recovery

All day we work to peel the tumor
from the side of his brain stem—where
the heart beats, the lungs breathe
and dreams know no difference from illusion.
When he awakes the next day
he does not speak, his left eye opens to a tap
on his shoulder, his right temporarily closed
like a shop whose owner's away
on vacation, its nerve still shocked from my
illuminated touch beneath the microscope,
his arms and legs working like a tinker's
toy in the wind. We came from the right
like poor Hussars flanking Napoleon
afraid of the tumor spouting blood at us
or turning to hide in a hole so deep
that it seemed the keep of the soul's own
castle, without hope of extraction.
On the second day, each wounded from
a 12-round fight, the patient in his bed
asleep, the surgeon awake at home,
I think of silent strangulation moving his bones
and his agitation, whorling the sheets into knots,
like the words he'd speak if he could, if only
to give me courage and satisfaction
if only to acknowledge a small war won.

Language and the Brain

"Imagination is intelligence with an erection"—Victor Hugo

Somewhere in the left hemisphere
of my brain, a monkey sits in a pile
of dictionaries, surrounded by old
typewriter keys, a word processor,
a thesaurus on a CD, a reef
of synonyms, a daisy chain of rhymes.
From this same location go out
the cables to my right arm, the nerve
that tracks to my heart and the half
of visual space to which my arm wires
the actions of my imagination.
You'd think the monkey in my brain
would get off my back, let me go
word blind looking at a painting,
let me see a woman's legs cross once
without the thought of making
some immortal gesture but no,
he knows the organ in which he sits
is as potent as any other
I'm afraid of losing, and when his pen
drills through my head, parsing cables
and trunk lines into syllables, I know
it's just the monkey begging to be fed
or else it's cursing, cursing, cursing.

Baltimore Was Always Blue

Goodbye America of the blue overalls and steel-toed boots, goodbye, goodbye. The headline in *The Sun* said it all today in type as tall as the re-election of a president:

General Motors Closes Its Broening Highway Plant.

Don't you remember when they said what was good for GM was good for America? In the Forties they called men like Bob at the gym "expeditors"—they sorted parts for fifty cents an hour, everything in its proper place at the right time.

Goodbye to you and the smell of cayenne and cinnamon drifting over the Inner Harbor when it had rotting piers and McCormick Spice. Goodbye, goodbye General Mills, Bendix and Western Electric, farewell to the steel plate and memories of Liberty ships, their hulls bent true and shaped at Sparrows Point by thirty thousand hands. Goodbye to London Fog, its raincoats and umbrellas, "Born in Baltimore, Raised Everywhere," and sterling silver candlesticks turned on lathes in Hamden. Goodbye steel beams, locomotives and trains, automobiles and ships, military bombers, telephones, stoves and Natty Bo Beer.

Over half a century, a city dies a thousand cuts: condos rise where breweries stood, the Ritz-Carlton goes up at Beth Steel, and office towers are put where Proctor and Gamble made soap on the harbor. Near Seagirt Marine, 7000 men (and women too) made metal vans, things on wheels we import from Japan.

For seventy years, while New York and Chicago wore tweed topcoats and gray fedoras, Baltimore was dressed in blue.

Now it's goodbye to factory whistles, tin hats, lunch pails filled with ham and mayonnaise. No welders eat Italian on Holabird Avenue, no salesmen sleep at the Brentwood and Carson Inns, no one raises a shot to a crab at the Poncabird Pub. It's goodbye to all that.

The Block, 1952

Despite her smeared lipstick, I think she's a matron
who hates to be immobilized even for a little while;
her aching back isn't pain but pure frustration.
Not that she'd complain—in the past few months
alone, three lady friends have died of cancer
but she smiles and says she's had a good life:
four children, an equal number of husbands,
and all those trips up north when vaudeville
was king just so Blaze Starr could follow the circuit south;
a stripper's code of honor, headliners didn't compete.
“When Blaze first worked the Block, she was flat
as a little girl. But after she got injected,
we all went up to touch her chest—her breasts
were so hard with plastic that when she lay down,
they sat up like teacups!” She laughs
and circles her hands like tassels,
dozens of rings and bracelets tinkling,
then takes a moment to smooth her hair, still streaked
with henna and big like Baltimore in 1952.
She played all the best places: the Trocadero,
the Oasis and the Two O’Clock Club (where Blaze
was the star), when the Block was really the block
and the White Castle wasn't a burger joint.
In those days, a girl felt safe; the cops hung out
at Fayette and Fallsway, waiting for their payoffs.
She remembers the sitters who drank in the afternoon,
shy men who never looked up at the girls,
and every shortstop and working stiff
who ever fell in love with her. She grimaces
and shifts position. She hopes it's a disc,
that makes her leg go numb whenever she tries
to dance with her grandchildren, and not a tumor,
something I can fix. I lift her leg up until she cries;
the wrinkled satchel of her life overflows my hand.

A Short History of Pharmacy

What would you think they were doing
faced with three women
gathering saffron
at the side of an altar in Thera, who
having plucked thick husks
of yellow crocus, collect stigma, paint
a bloody foot with balm, lay down
their gifts to a frescoed goddess
enthroned on the next wall
flanked by a blue monkey
and a griffin?
Is this the world's first pharmacist,
she who commands them to grind
unguents and creams
thirty-five hundred years ago
as if making a spice or perfume?
Almost famous too if not
locked in this Attic room
by a volcanic eruption,
her image embalmed like her claim
of discovery
six centuries before the reign
of Ashurbanipal, that biblical king
in Jonah's Nineveh,
in which great city a library of clay books
contained a botanical dictionary
from which you might draw potions
to calm sore hearts and make sleep come
from sprigs of myrtle, pulverized lily,
and poppy dissolved in beer.
King Ashurbanipal, evidently not much
of a medical pioneer
or even a seer like this goddess
was human like us, a plagiarist who divined
the hidden anodyne everywhere
now flooding our blood.

Dirty Glasses

He carries them everywhere—
flecks of blood in the crossbar of his glasses,
microscopic crud in the narrow gap
between the brass and the top-half of each
bifocal lens, worries if his patients,
relatives and friends can see them
above his nose and nearsighted eyes.
How often has each ort of blood been ground
down and recompactd with a new donation?
What part of brain or blood vessel is buried
there near the temples and the hinges, bronze
colored beneath his graying hair?
A lifetime of cutting after nerves in arms and legs,
unroofing spines and opening heads is planted there
with more success than death since the last time
his eyes forced a change of lenses
and he was left without a new direction
or the ability to see into the distance before him.

Explaining the Odds

The night before merciful gases blank
the universe, it's a wonder
anyone agrees to let him proceed
down those gray watery canals
hidden behind an eyebrow.
He's careful to tell how rare
an anatomical exercise turns to accident,
careful to show a confidence bred
by years of coastal navigation
piloting through the fog
of ignorance.

He shares my hope
that patients hear how likely
the uncertain shipwreck is,
but they never do.

During that last conversation
in the office, he serves
no refreshments,
but goes through the usual litany:
this much for an eye, so much
for an alphabet,
is a right arm really worth
a few extra milligrams
of tumor removed from your brain?

Why I Gave Up Oncology

Poor Charlie Green, soon to be killed by the sun
and melanoma, sat outside the sauna
in the gym with his copper-headed cane
and Aquasocks on. He used to run
from place to place in Fells Point, his face
like a boiled potato with freckles and red hair,
hoisting a beer in one of our favorite bars on Broadway:
the Whistling Oyster or Drowned Rat.
Always too thin, like my worst patients
he kept detailed notebooks of the miles he'd run
two or three times a week and totaled his aches and pains
in careful columns; he wore out both knees like this,
jogging more than one trip around the equator,
two pints of joy his only reward on the weekends.
Now chemo's overcome his desire for drink
and his soft Irish slur sounds more like a gurgle;
my unreliable ears need him to repeat
the name of an old attorney or bail bondsman
no longer seen at the club, their races long over
and done. His politics are always the same,
filled with hates that exhaust me, and yet
he breathes just to wave that perfect flag-like name
as if it were Erin's green or his torn runner's shirt
hung up with pride and him entering a distant territory.

The Body Painted In Grief

The sick man knows a single landscape,
a single artist, a single sun.
In the good spring two rocks
on the horizon shimmer from winter melt
flowing through them like kidneys relieving
the body of waste. And the hills beyond
are like lungs, their gray mist and purple
flowers making a deep breath from the rain.
And the coiled valley below
crawls with colon-shaped bugs transforming
succulence into nightshade.
And everywhere the pulse of crickets
tweaks his ears as if life's sound
were too busy to stop this evening.
And though he can't see the high chapel above
the snow-white sheets,
he can hear in his head the words
the body's softly preaching: pain is the signal
the brain must believe in and nothing else.

Am I Seeing This?

The world's not burning yet;
no smoke curls out from between my lids.
In dozens of shots a second
the laser fires, a green flash bursts
its dark corolla of argon
in my eye, little welds shut
the U-shaped flap that threatens
to divorce me
from my hierophantic pleasures.
Vinod says I might as well roll up
all my books, the pictures
on the walls, the spongy cavities
of the soul
I enter in my day job if
this thin carpet of ganglion cells
he wants to zap, its color-seeking cones,
its shadow-loving rods, lifts away
even a bit more. The laser clicks. I think
I must not move and make him miss,
my aching eye squeezed below the jellied lens
he holds like a shot glass
or a dice cup on a bar top.
I know poor Joyce would have taken this bet
in a heartbeat, so I hold my breath:
one moment Vinod's face hangs there
in the darkness
as pale as Veronica's silk; the next
he disappears in a shimmer
of fireworks; the laser clicks.

Rilke in the Morning

We imagine dying as drowsiness
and death as dreamless sleep.
To wake in the early morning
is not the same as not to sleep—
traffic first, then robins speak
a gray dawn, and small thoughts
like knives, nerve me to boil
water for tea and light a corner
to read an elegy for angels.
Who is this pantherine being
who seeks meaning
in the death of roses?
A century of woe blooms
in his garden, a false spring
kills the forsythia.

Dr. Williams Delivers a Baby

Dr. Williams was making his rounds:
one dilapidated house, then another,
powdered oxygen on the aluminum siding,
brown shingles on the roofs.
In between visits, he'd sit in his car
a notebook on his lap and arrange words—
instruments on a surgical tray—
uterine sounds blunt as tire-irons,
scalpels sharper than paper.
Often a cry from within the house
would bring him running past its yard,
past a tomato plant or wheelbarrow or red hen,
things he took in as he sprang
up the porch steps, hoping the family
was already in the parlor, had put the kettle on,
had found clean towels and disinfectant
to swab the wound or welcome the crowning head.
He put down his old-fashioned doctor's bag,
a satchel peaked like a dormer at both ends,
his initials stamped in gold, long ago faded,

and took off his wool overcoat. Tonight,
he noted the burdened book shelves,
responsible chair, the goose-necked reading lamp,
the desk loaded with papers, writing tools
and a folding pince-nez: the father
was a professor or writer of some degree,
who could afford both coal and electric.
He suspected they were Jewish, the mother
of German ancestry, the father Sephardic—
but had no reason to know. In truth
he had only a cursory familiarity with their tribe
and knew no Hebrew. But the mother's cry?
Soon, it was going to be soon. He timed her pain
until a dark spot between her labia grew
and it was time to prep and drape her;
then he encouraged the head with a gloved hand
turned the shoulders and delivered the rest.
Dr. Williams told the father it looked like a writer,
this noisy boy, vigorous and exploring.
They would name him Allen.

Treadmill

I saw my heart today, inflow coded red
outflow coded blue, the coldest gel
the hardest probe rubbed on my chest
and there it was on the screen,
a small cauldron of intensity
beating. It seemed immortal—
the squeezing ventricles, the soundless click
of the tricuspid valve, the seizing
of its walls.

And there, the pressure that lives
or kills was no mere poetry
but a threat first felt at five
fearing the respirator advance on me,
its demon's barrel and bellows
my only foreseeable future for a while.
But the little deaths of polio muscles
never progressed above my knee
so the rest did laps for fifty years. . . .

Yesterday, behind a scrim of gnats,
an anxious wind shook the tulip poplar
and a hollow branch fell like ash,
its scabrous skin cupped by the grass,
and air squeezed out until space collapsed
threw one thing down
so another might stretch,
its flickering promise there on the screen
as the treadmill ran and ran.

Perfect

This is what we meant for it to be—
backing out of the brain,
letting eloquent lips close over
the small spitting heart of a bruised vessel
recently clipped shut
or hiding the bed from which unruly cells
had been wrestled, removing ourselves
and our miniature extensions, closing
the *dura mater* with a crotchet of sutures
as if zippering a body bag
over a person's head, replacing the lid
of sawed bone, sprinkling its dust into holes
pneumatically drilled four hours ago,
after lifting a dog-ear of muscle
and cutting a semicircle of scalp and skin
with blade and hot smoking wire,
from just in front of an auricle
to just above a brow, and now, now
no longer looking in but looking out
at the soul propped up in bed, its crown
of bandages turbaned and taped,
its eyelids bruised and closed
with seepage, its mostly successful struggle
to awake in minutes, in hours,
even the next day, applauded as perfect
by our own exhausted eyes.

Envy

This fine day I'm eating paint,
licking it from my fingers
after spraying air vents on my lawn,
their white bowl-shaped cowl
resting on the backyard grass,
too far from the sloop
they ordinarily grace.
An industrious bee
investigates the pansies and boxed violets;
the pollen and budding trees
hang heavy on the sea of grass.
My blood has slowed from dozing,
endlessly wishing for something else,
not merely beauty but the beautiful—
what the sailor feels on land
and the farmer on the ocean.

NOTES

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) trained as a physician but supported himself by writing plays and stories; the epigraph is taken from a note he wrote to a friend.

“Euphoria.” “. . . a thing in the mind” speaks to the metaphysics of measurement and the influence of Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) on this poem. Albert A. Michelson (1852–1931) made the first accurate measurements of the speed of light.

“Poem on a Single Word from Richard Serra’s Verb List.” Richard Serra (b.1939) is a post-Minimalist sculptor. An English major in college, his hand-written verb list is often presented as a conceptual art work.

“Deconstructing Abstraction.” Joan Mitchell (1925–92) was the most important woman artist associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement; her mother helped found *Poetry* magazine.

“In Which Failure, Great Success.” Christopher Morley (1890–1957) was an American essayist and founder of the Baker Street Irregulars; see his wonderful preface to *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Doubleday, 1930). Joseph Bell, Arthur Conan Doyle’s professor of pathology in Edinburgh, provided the model for his detective.

“Open Heart.” This poem dates from my surgical internship (1969–70) and was published in 1977; all the other poems in this book were written from 1987 on.

“The Block, 1952.” Blaze Starr (b.1932) was Baltimore’s most famous ecdysiast.

“A Short History of Pharmacy.” The unique wall painting of the goddess at Thera dates from the Bronze Age (c.3000–1100 BCE). Jonah convinced God to spare the great Assyrian city of Nineveh, situated on the eastern bank of the Tigris in present day Mosul.

“Why I Gave Up Oncology.” Fell’s Point, still home to sailors and artists, was founded as a separate town in 1763; it was the original watermen’s section of Baltimore.

“Am I Seeing This?” James Joyce (1882–1941) underwent the first of his eleven eye operations midway through the composition of *Ulysses*.

“Dr. Williams Delivers a Baby.” William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) was a physician as well as poet; in this capacity, he delivered another major American poet into the world.

“Perfect.” The *dura mater* is a layer of thick connective tissue sitting between the inner table of the skull and the surface of the brain.



Michael Salcman is a physician, brain scientist, and essayist on the visual arts. He was chairman of neurosurgery at the University of Maryland and president of the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore. Recent poems appear in the *Ontario Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Raritan*, *Notre Dame Review*, *River Styx*, and *New York Quarterly*. His work has been heard on NPR's *All Things Considered*, and in *Euphoria*, a documentary on the brain and creativity (2005). He is the author of six medical textbooks and three previous chapbooks of poems. His first collection, *The Clock Made of Confetti*, was published by Orchises Press in 2007.

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