

## Editorial

### *On Standing at Keats' Grave, Rome, Italy, August 29, 2024*

Walking along the Via Raffaele Persichetti in Rome on a hot, late-summer day, I find myself on an accidental pilgrimage, on the outskirts of the city, close to the Cimitero Acattolico, the Protestant cemetery where the poet John Keats is buried. Off the parched streets, I enter lush gardens of pomegranate and cypress, and find Keats' grave tucked in a far corner, presided over by the imposing eighteenth-century B.C.E pyramid of Cestius, visible high above the cemetery wall.

#### The Pyramid of Cestius



(Source: Crawford, 2024)

The graves of John Keats (1795-1821) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), another Romantic poet

also buried here, were an important stop on the nineteenth-century grand tours of young, upper-class men. Many, like Thomas Hardy, composed their own verses inspired by their reflections here. Hardy's 1887 poem, "Rome at the Pyramid of Cestius Near the Graves of Shelley and Keats," celebrates "those matchless singers" while pondering the forgotten history of Cestius.

Who, then, was Cestius,  
And what is he to me? -  
Amid thick thoughts and memories multitudinous  
One thought alone brings he.

I can recall no word  
Of anything he did;  
For me he is a man who died and was interred  
To leave a pyramid (p.144-145)

While Hardy dismisses Cestius' transient and forgotten fame, he overwrites a modern role for Cestius whose "ample fame" is to mark the spot where Keats and Shelley lie.

The anguish of transience is marked in Keats' own poem, "Ode on Melancholy," (1819) which mourns "Beauty that must die;/ And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips/ Bidding adieu" (lines 21-23). John Keats' life was punctuated by loss, with the early loss of both parents—his father to an accident and his mother to tuberculosis. He nursed his own brother through tuberculosis, only to himself die at the age of 25 in Rome from the same disease. I think of these themes of transience, commemoration, and forgetting—a cycle of memo-

ry—as I am reading this issue of *Ars Medica*. This will to remember, to make transient lives matter, reverberates throughout these pieces.

Julia Yuan’s “Bargaining,” on the cover of this issue, is a *memento mori*, literally a reminder that we will die. This ancient practice of reflection on mortality, a reminder of the inevitability of death that goes back to Socrates, is given a modern rendition with beseeching hands bargaining in futility against the inescapable (has already happened!). It is also an echo of William Cheselden’s early eighteenth century surgical text, *Osteographia*, illustrated with praying skeletons. As Mary Winkler (1989) notes, *memento mori* gained prominence in the Renaissance, not only as a reminder of death, but also an affirmation of life and memory through the regenerative power of art.

### Cheselden’s *Osteographia*. Plate 36



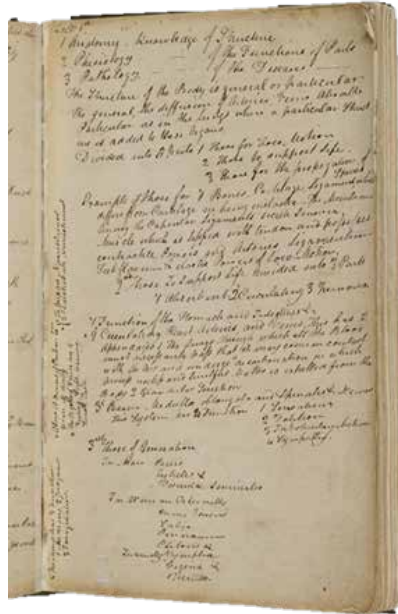
(Source: Cheselden, 1833)

This encounter with loss, while also gaining strength through art, is experienced in a featured piece in this issue. Rageen Rajendram—a.k.a. RageMD—uses rap to respond to loss. “Healing verses: ‘weak rn’” is a journey that is “Kubler-Ross, shattering/ Stages of grief life damaging.” Grief is encountered, but a connection is also made, and a vow to “Never let you suffer in silence.” Similarly, in the form of a photo essay, Isabella Cuan also uses the process of engaging with a patient to navigate her own grief and loss following the death of her grandmother.

Other pieces in this issue not only grieve mortality, but use their artistic force to resist it. In “Escape from the Cancer Ward,” Thomas Belton documents the caper of two young brothers who say “Fuck You! Time...” and spend the day “drunk on freedom, ready for anything that would get him away from the daily death knell on the Juvey Ward where today’s best friends became tomorrow’s empty beds.”

Many with interests in the health humanities will know that Keats trained in medicine. He was apprenticed to the apothecary Thomas Hammond in 1810 when he was only 14 years old, and qualified at the age of 20, though he left without pursuing membership with the Royal College of Surgeons. Hrileena Ghosh (2022) has written a book on Keats’ medical notebook, including an exploration of how his poetic sensibility seeped onto its pages. Keats left medicine to dedicate himself to his writing. Biographer Nicholas Roe traces the impact that his knowledge of anatomy and physiology, along with images of sickness, had on his poetic imagination.

A page from Keats' notebook, Keats House,  
Hampstead



(Source: Royal College of Surgeons, England. n.d.)

Many of the pieces in this issue of *Ars Medica* explicitly call our attention to language and to the act of representing experiences of the body. In “Wound Care: A Primer,” Denise Napoli Long returns again and again—“Wait a minute. There’s more. I need to tell a little more, first. Let me start again.”—to ensure that the experience of taking care “of M.’s stage 4 sacral bed-sore” is brought vividly to the reader’s senses: “I can smell it, still. I can smell the sticky, sweet scent of the wound when I first open the dressing.”

Charles A. Fishkin shares the career and life of Dr. Rowena Spencer (1922–2014), the first American

female pediatric surgeon, through conversation and through capturing her words:

Here are her words.

#### **About Herself**

On her enthusiasm for babies:

*I love babies more than a mule can kick.*

On persistence:

*I happen to be hardheaded and stubborn,  
and I don't let anything stand in my way if  
it's humanly possible.*

On aging:

*I don't fret about it. I just let it do what  
it's going to do.*

Through preserving Spencer's words, Fishkin conveys not only the highlights of her career, her dedication to treating young patients, her rejection of segregation and racism, but also traces of her:

... she was also self-deprecatory and spontaneous, evoking images of her childhood in rural Central Louisiana. She sometimes whistled.

#### **Coda**

Her usual way of concluding conversations:

*Love to all.*

Kain Kim, in "Plain English," in contrast, thrashes against the constriction of medical language, describing medical school as "not so much about storytelling as it was about recitation." A deluge of jargon creates distance from meaning

and human relatedness: “words wallpapered everything. Under fat bricks of acronyms, patient stories disintegrated into incoherent, fragmentary rubble, word salad.” This professional language is also disembodied, and the writer reminds us that these patients, “still lived in their bodies.” Read the poetry of Woods Nash, R.A. Pavoldi, Shawna Swetech, Beth Goldner, Nidhi Agrawal, Jenny Li, Marda Messick, and Elisa Garza in this issue, to experience the power of words to evoke the embodied, the sensual, the emotional, and even the stock market.

These and other writers in this issue recall Keats’ concept of negative capability. Writing in a letter to his brothers, Keats first articulated this idea in 1817:

At once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable searching after fact and reason. (p. 277)

This ability to suspend the ego/self, experience the unknown, and tolerate uncertainty, has been suggested by Jack Coulehan (2017) as a foundational skill for reflexive practice in healthcare. Certainly, many of the writers in *Ars Medica* inhabit their writing to explore ambivalent states, states of uncertainty, and even to tolerate new ways of relating to their ‘self’ after brain injury. Beth Castrodale, in “My Injured Brain” describes “a certain separation from my physical self, as if I

were floating along in a sort of twilight state.” And in “The Secret of Flourishing,” Mary Jane Potter contemplates the aspects of the self that are hidden from the critical gaze of the clinical assessment.

Clare Mulcahy in “The Witness” shares her encounter with Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”: “When I read it aloud, muttering to myself, I discovered a sing-songy rhythm and rhyme scheme that juxtaposed with the unsettling subject. I didn’t know words could work like this.” She uses poetry to navigate her own complex role as her “parents’ witness.” Through the “brutality of [her] father’s illness” she sees poetry itself as a powerful but ambivalent tool, “as a whip and as a ward.”

The main character Peter, in Dustin Grinnell’s story “Cured,” confronts uncertainty and also mystery, in his encounter with a young child with malaria. Towards the end of the story, Peter sits as these worlds of medicine and mystery, science and faith, come together: “Peter smiled in contentment as he watched them dance. As the roaring blaze crackled, he stared into its hypnotic center, watching tiny bits of ash ignite, fly off, and dissolve in the star-filled sky.”

Similarly, Aviva Goldberg’s poem “Across the Sea” explores the experience of hope in medicine through the apparent divide between science and faith: “We agree that you will continue to pray and I will page the surgeons and the nurses and the ICU,” finding instead “angels wherever we seek them,” to “make sense of the senseless.”

I am grateful to spend the time I do with Keats in the graveyard, and with these writers and artists who contribute to *Ars Medica*. They



are *memento vivere*. Although Keats wrote in “Ode on Melancholy” that the poet’s capacity to appreciate beauty has a counterweight in their proximity to melancholy—they “whose strenuous tongue/ Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine”—these writers can also bring us back to life, accompany us on life’s mysteries, and medicine’s uncertainties. Keats asked that instead of his name, his gravestone be inscribed with, “*Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.*” He brought great humility to the end of his life and to his final resting place, believing that he had failed to achieve immortal stature through his poetry. All of those who struggle to make meaning contribute to this great rippling pool of human experience.

### Keat’s grave



This grave contains all that was mortal of a young English poet.  
Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.

(Source: Crawford, 2024)

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