

## The Wound Dresser Poems by Jack Coulehan



# Reviews and reflections

David A. Bennahum, MD, and Jack Coulehan, MD, Book Review Editors

### The Wound Dresser

Jack Coulehan, MD  
(AQA, University of  
Pittsburgh, 1969)  
JB Stillwater Publishing  
Company, Albuquerque  
(NM), 2016, 126 pages

Reviewed by Patti Tana

In *The Wound Dresser*, Jack Coulehan continues the conversation that poets engage in to heal the spirit.

Drawing from a lifetime of repairing the body, he paints delightful, witty, engaging portraits. The poet's voice is erudite, playful, and wise. He listens intently to the voices he hears, and he weaves them into the fabric of his poems. *The Wound Dresser* taught me something about the healing arts—and even more about the art of healing.

Some poems made me laugh out loud. Among the poet's early encounters with physicians, there's "Dr. Barrone" making a home visit smelling "like a monsignor/smoking a cigar" as he "burst/into his wicked leer," and gave him "poison" pills that "turned my teeth/yellow."<sup>p77</sup>

Then there's the "hairy man" with Ernie Kovac's eyebrows in "Role Model" who "dug his thumbs/into my spine, humming," and lectured the 15-year-old against masturbation and "entanglement with girls." The poem ends:

...A vague  
craving began to unfold,  
a thirst to prove the quack  
completely wrong, to master  
my own medicine.<sup>pp80-1</sup>

These poems show the writer's talent for using sensory details to create characters, for developing a dramatic scene, and for punctuating the poem with a larger vision.

The pleasure of reading "Pair Chase Boy for His Urine" is increased by the strict structure of rhythm and rhyme in the villanelle form. This is in contrast with the couple's

lack of foresight indicated by the ironically repeated line, "It's a solid plan they've hatched."<sup>p63</sup>

This villanelle, the tight quatrains of "Ockham's Razor,"<sup>p95</sup> and the sonnet "Retrospective"<sup>p97</sup> are unusual in a volume of open form poems that are structured by the patterns of image and thought.

Coulehan's poems are lyrical and his phrases are memorable. This is because the poet is attuned to the music of language. Listen to the pace and subtle harmonies of the lines that begin his family's journey "Out of Ireland": Martin carries a tin chest to the coast/during the worst year of famine, alone." The poem concludes with this multi-layered image:

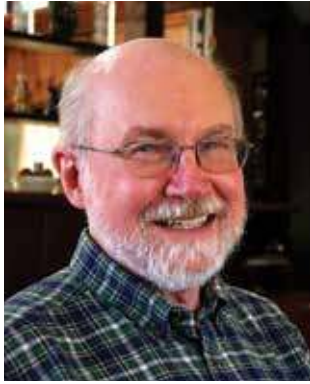
At my journey's end, a distracted priest  
driving a lawnmower repeats my name  
with moist lips. His stained, sweaty cassock,  
his thinning hair, the angel at Jesus' grave—  
*The man you are looking for is not here.*<sup>p75</sup>

The speaker uses a tone of tender intimacy in my favorite poems. In "The Exterior Palace," I hear Mrs. Melville, who is "Dressed for cocktails at noon," confiding in her physician, "*we've got to get rid of that bitch of a nurse*" as the nurse complains about the patient's "noncompliance." The physician's eyes come to rest on "six framed photos" of the patient smiling.<sup>p18</sup>

In "The Silk Robe," amid the "corridor's/odor—a confusion of solvents, seepage" and "chemicals," the doctor notices "The scent you wear—Samsara, Gardenia, Chanel?"<sup>pp16-7</sup> In another poem, the doctor gives the patient the standard directive "Take Off Your Clothes," so that "in a performance laden with gesture" he can read "a narrative in your flesh."<sup>p23</sup>

I'd love to read a whole book of poems that have the passionate electricity of "Hands of Enchantment."<sup>p15</sup> To be heard, to be seen, to be understood—I want him to be my doctor.

Coulehan learns "The Secret of the Care" "*lies in caring/for the patient*,"<sup>p3</sup> and his vision is compassionate.



Jack Coulehan, MD.

In "Shall Inherit," the physician treats the "gaunt" Kentucky children "With their small/serious eyes like coals...wearing the shrunken heads/of ancestors on their shoulders." p69

Brazilian children smear themselves with "Cesium 137" from "an abandoned hospital site," and they die "consumed by innocence/and radiant desire." p68

When the visitor hears a chorus of children "playing instruments/with toes and prostheses," at the "War Remnants Museum, Ho Chi Minh City," he feels "an ingot of shame/in my heart." p56

That same war blights the life of a childhood friend in "Poem for David." A letter begging forgiveness for his "sick/activities last year," and asking for pain medication, arrives on the same day his friend kills himself. The poet tells us, "I stood like wax/beside your open casket":

...I hovered near the guttered flame  
your father had become, recalling the months  
you spent tending the wounded in Vietnam,  
your endless shifts in hospitals back home.  
I pictured forgiveness — an orchard  
carpeted with apples, bruised and fallen.p87

Coming from authentic emotions, Coulehan's poems speak to the reader's emotions.

In "Phone Call from Alaska," the daughter tells her father she was shot in the arm by a "random" bullet that came through the window of her basement apartment: "A scare, but no harm, you repeat/for the fifth time." p53

The final poem, "Retrospective," is based on 40 years of care. During this time, "His body replaced/its cells." "Nonetheless," the doctor says of his internship:

...a dried  
umbilical cord connects that powerful womb  
to the aging man, across a gulf as wide  
as imagination.p97

The man who speaks in these poems has a generous imagination that encompasses the range of what it means to be human. He yearns to tip "toward happiness" the person undergoing a "Metamorphosis at Starbucks." p25

The poems that frame this book are "On Reading Walt Whitman's 'The Wound-Dresser,'" pxi and "Walt Whitman

Reflects on His Doctor's Bedside Manner." p96 A physician-poet, Coulehan uses Whitman as his touchstone to guide him in delivering empathetic care, just as his hero ministered to Civil War soldiers.

If you treat yourself to some time with this excellent book, you will find, as Whitman writes in his own book, "Who touches this touches a man."

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### **My Degeneration: A Journey Through Parkinson's (Graphic Medicine)**

Peter Dunlap-Shohl  
Penn State University Press, 2015, 108 pages

**Reviewed by Jack Coulehan, MD (AΩA, University of Pittsburgh, 1969)**

Until I picked up *My Degeneration: A Journey Through Parkinson's*, I had never read a graphic book. I thought comic books were for children, or for adults who couldn't tear themselves away from a menagerie of superheroes. It seemed strange that a patient suffering from Parkinson's disease would choose to tell his story in such a frivolous genre. I thought I'd skim a few pages and put the book down.

I was wrong on all accounts. The author, Peter Dunlap-Shohl, was a political cartoonist with the *Anchorage Daily News* for 25 years until his retirement in 2008. When he was 43-years-old, his doctor diagnosed Parkinson's disease. The author was stunned, "I could only focus on three words: progressive, disabling, incurable." p6

After the initial shock and depression, he got down to the business of living with this unwelcome stranger. *My Degeneration* is the story of his life with a progressive, disabling, and incurable disease.

Personal narratives of illness have become very popular in recent decades. They now constitute an entire literary genre, which is sometimes called pathography.

Some pathographies I've read are poorly written and boring. Others contain information useful to a reader who suffers from the same condition, but are not interesting to the general reader. Still others have axes to grind, e.g.





individuals can get moving again by trying to walk backwards, rather than forwards. On the next page, he offers an illustrated list of six techniques that patients might use to abort an “off” episode.<sup>p35</sup>

While the author is sometimes discouraged, sometimes depressed, the overall message of his story is life-affirming. His initial depression resolves when a very buff spandex angel appears to him and proclaims, “Fear not! Though thou walk through the valley of Parkinson’s, thou art not entirely helpless!”<sup>p14</sup>

Throughout the book he overcomes setbacks. He learns to adapt in ways that allow him to continue a happy and productive life. In one of the final chapters, he recalls the image of his spandex angel, noting that “there are now numerous studies that confirm the wisdom of the angel’s words.”<sup>p84</sup> He reviews the value of bicycling, yoga, tai chi, and even videogames (virtual boxing), in maintaining motor skills. He fanaticizes an actual boxing match with Parkinson’s disease, no longer the huge green monster from the first chapter, but now a flabby opponent in the ring, whom he promptly knocks out.

*My Degeneration* will be an invaluable resource for those struggling with Parkinson’s disease, their families, and for medical, nursing, and physical therapy professionals who care for patients suffering from Parkinson’s and other progressive neurological disorders.

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### **Pulse—voices from the heart of medicine: Editors’ Picks**

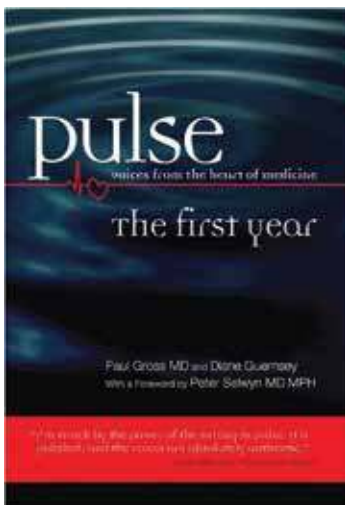
Paul Gross, MD, Diane Guernsey, Johanna Shapiro, PhD,  
Judy Schaefer, RNC, MA

Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2016, 272  
pages

**Reviewed by Jack Coulehan, MD (AQA, University of  
Pittsburgh, 1969)**

**L**iterally, a pulse means the rhythmic throbbing of arteries as ventricular contraction propels blood through the body. However, the word has many connotations, each evoking life, energy, and movement.

In 2008, when Paul Gross, and his colleagues in the Department of Family and Social Medicine at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, decided to create an ezine (electronic magazine) that tells “the story of health care through the personal experiences of those who live it,” they chose *Pulse* as the name for their publication, reflecting the vibrancy of “voices from the heart of medicine.” Since then, *Pulse* has grown from a few dozen subscribers (it’s free, by the way) to more than 10,000. Appearing weekly,



*Pulse* (at pulsevoices.org) features the stories, poems, and personal reflections of patients, health professionals, students, and caregivers.

In *Pulse: Voices From the Heart of Medicine*, their third anthology, editors Paul Gross and Diane Guernsey present a remarkable sample of pieces that have appeared in *Pulse* during a three year period—2011 through 2013. I use the word “remarkable” advisedly, although I could just as well replace it with “engaging” or “provocative,” which are also on target. Limited to 1,000 words or less, these tales draw us into the experiential world of health care, and allow us to take its pulse.

Some stories are about patients, and/or their family members. In “Shujinwa Byoki Des” (Japanese for “My husband is sick”), Lucy Moore tells of her husband’s acute illness while on a vacation in Japan.<sup>p5</sup> When he becomes violently ill with high fever and rash they rush to a hospital where they are astonished by the deep respect physicians and nurses show them, despite language and cultural barriers. In gestures and broken English, the staff is able to convey “a sense of shared responsibility” throughout the five day hospitalization, which includes numerous tests and interventions. And, the final cost is only \$3,500 (U.S. currency)!

Steven Lewis, in “Desperately Seeking Herb Weinman,”<sup>p164</sup> tells of his visit to an emergency room for persistent chest pain. As he lies on a narrow gurney feeling lonely and ignored he yearns for the warmth of his old family doctor, long since retired. He finds the hospital staff “not disrespectful or callous or incompetent. But to them I (am) little more than what appeared on a computer screen.” In the end, he is relieved that his chest pain wasn’t caused by a heart attack, and, yet, he feels that something is missing.

We hear the voices of health care professionals like Anne K. Merritt, who reflects on her emergency medicine residency in “One Hundred Wiser.”<sup>p22</sup> At first, she approaches each shift with excitement, anticipating a novel learning experience, like her first intubation or first placement of an arterial line. As these procedures became routine, her patients come more clearly into focus as individuals. The initial adrenalin rush subsides, and she learns to “face and feel my patients’ pain and vulnerability and my own.”

Priscilla Mainardi gives us a glimpse of a hospital nurse’s day in “Nineteen Steps.”<sup>p141</sup> When she begins her shift, she has seven tasks on her to-do list; by midday the list has increased to 26. Each nurse on the unit depends on a personal coping mechanism, Priscilla’s is counting her steps. Her story focuses on Mrs. Napoli, a “wisp of an old

woman,” who is terminally ill. When Mrs. Napoli begins to cry, Priscilla walks 19 steps to the utility room to get her a box of tissues, and then, despite her long list of pressing tasks, she sits down to spend time with Mrs. Napoli.

The poems in *Pulse* tend to be miniature stories that arise from sudden, incongruous moments of insight. Tabor Flickinger’s “In Line at the Hospital Coffee Stand”<sup>p111</sup> gives insight to the voices of hospital personnel making momentous comments in a mundane setting—“Oh, did you take care of him before? He’s dead.”

“Catching Chickens,” by Daniel Klawitter<sup>p97</sup> depicts a moment, “my grandmother/was trying to catch an imaginary chicken/on her deathbed.” When the grandson tries to console her with, “I caught the chicken for you./You can rest now,” she cries, “No you did NOT!” The poet concludes:

I guess we all have to catch our own chickens,  
before we cross the road and reach that other side.

Dr. Alan Blum’s (AQA, Emory University, 1985 Alumnus) drawings are among the best features of this anthology. For many years, Blum, a family physician and professor of family medicine at the University of Alabama, has been sketching portraits of his patients, usually as a result of a particularly quotable comment they made. The editors have scattered 12 of Blum’s portraits throughout the book, like tiny facets of the human comedy. On one of the first pages, we see a bemused woman looking downward, holding her forehead, and saying, “You think you got a medicine to stop my seizures? I don’t know why, it’s the only exercise I get.”

Later, an elderly woman complains from her wheelchair, “Doctor told me I need an autopsy, but I said I wanted to wait.”<sup>p208</sup>

There is one problem with *Pulse: Voices From the Heart of Medicine*, the pieces are so engaging you want to keep reading and reading. I’d advise trying to slow down and savor each story, poem, and drawing.

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