

Amphibian

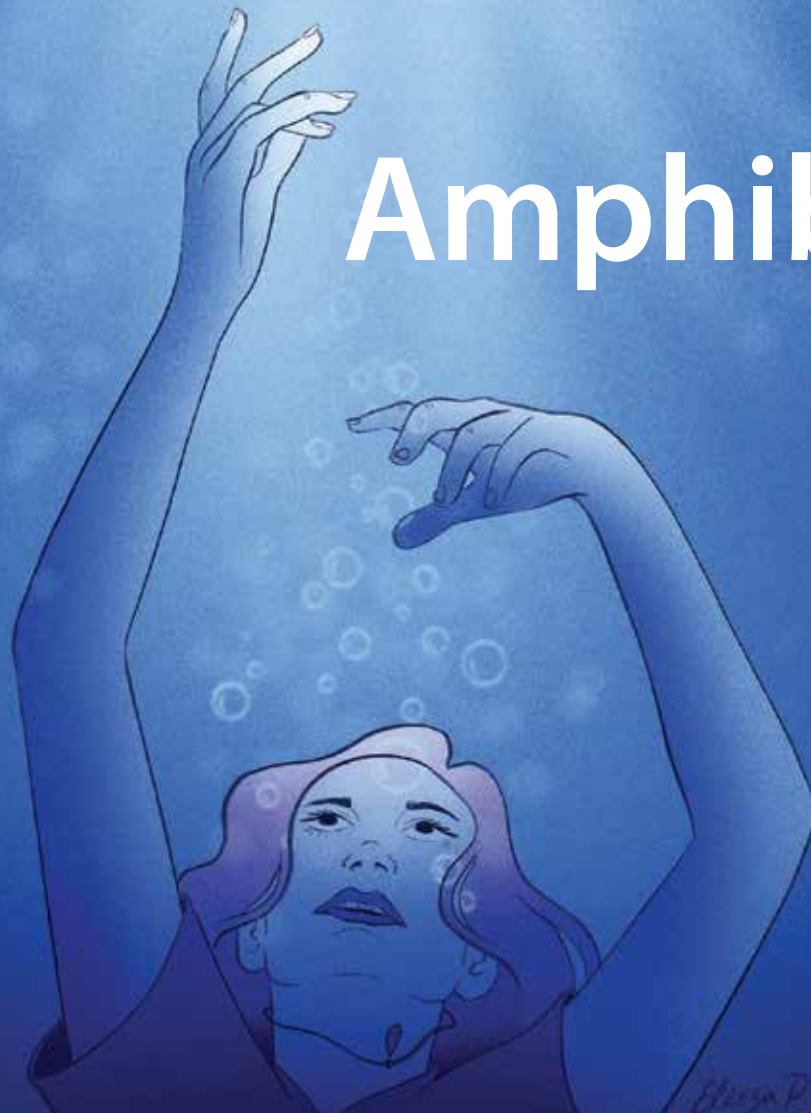


Illustration by Eleeza Palmer

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I felt as though I was drowning. I was thrown into a tide of emotion and grief that had not allowed me to evade its grasp. The air around me now escaped me. My drowning began abruptly, decompensating everything I had known to be a normal life. The amorphous thing that was in my father's kidney had a name: cancer.

Just a year and a half ago, my father had battled stage 2a squamous cell esophageal cancer with a combination of chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery. We had hoped

he would be part of the 48 percent of people that would still be in remission after five years. But a few months ago, while I was on residency interviews, my father began developing hematuria and had significant weight loss. Urgent care treated him for a urinary tract infection. I begged my mom to take him to his oncologist. Was it a bladder wall papilloma, or maybe a urothelial carcinoma? His history of alcohol use, smoking, coupled with his family medical history, would suggest cancer.

As part of his continued oncologic follow up, he had a six-month PET/CT scan to monitor for any recurrence. His right kidney and three pulmonary nodules lit up in

red and white. After a biopsy of the kidney we began battling again. His squamous cell carcinoma had come back with a vengeance. An “incurable malignancy” as the oncologist put it, with only a 30 percent to 55 percent chance that he would respond to the chemotherapy at all.

It didn't take long after the appointment before the wave of anger and depression engulfed me. My head dipped below the water, as it began to get dark around me. The refractions of sunlight through the water made it feel as if the expanse between the sun and me was infinite. The gravitational pull of Earth's molten core pulled me farther and farther away from the surface. The weights around my ankles of prognosis and medical knowledge leaden me, keeping my feet still despite fighting for my life. Like all creatures, I needed to adapt to survive. I must either succumb to my grief, losing all hope and accepting that nothing is within anyone's control, allowing myself to fall, or I must adapt, which includes developing gills with which I could survive under the crushing pressure and darkness of this expansive ocean.

I am not alone in this ocean. Others gasp for breath, as each wave engulfs them. Each sputtering out the salt and bitterness before being engulfed once more. Each time their heads emerge from below the water to breathe again. They do not know yet if they are creatures of the land or sea. Over time, they haphazardly amass pieces of broken dreams and shattered expectations to create suitable rafts upon which to escape the water. From these rafts, they throw me buoys filled with rocks and life rafts with punctured holes to save me, but to no avail. Maybe this time will be better. Maybe this time he will beat it.

Deriving my gills is uncomfortable. The pain sears in my neck with each passing day, as I begin to learn how to receive life-sustaining oxygen from the water. The tide above no longer rocks me to and fro as I settle to the bottom.

Thrashing turns to stillness as I accept my new home. The pressure not as immense as it felt before. My legs begin to hypertrophy as I walk along the floor to explore, as I work against the weight to push myself up from the sandy bottom. My heart hypertrophies as well, learning to handle more complex emotional demands.

With each stroke, with each day, I get closer to peace, knowing that I have become who I was meant to be. All of the medical knowledge that I have acquired does not help me navigate the water. Initially, my knowledge created chaos, as I tried hard to predict what the future would hold based on Kaplan-Meier curves and research

articles. Eventually, the chaos gave way to peace, as I was able to have deeper conversations about advanced directives and my father's belief system. It forged a bond that I never had with him prior to this experience.

I rise, my head breaks the surface tension of the water, and the warm sun bathes me. I tread slowly toward the shore, uncertain about when I will be engulfed again and swept out to sea. This time I will be more prepared than before, stronger than before. I can save those who are drowning as I once had, bringing them to the surface, and maybe saving them the pain of becoming an amphibian, like me.

It hasn't been easy since the diagnosis, treatment, and ultimately the loss of my father to cancer. A tidal wave of grief washed over me again when he passed away a day before his 62nd birthday. Occasionally, the anger and sadness consume me for an hour or two and I am reminded of my unlikely expectations. It's difficult to come to terms with my children never being able to meet my father, and the hope that my father would have made it long enough to walk me down the aisle at my wedding.

It hurts to know that he couldn't celebrate major milestones with me like Match Day, and graduation, but I know that I am the physician I am today because of all the lessons he taught me—in life and in death. And in the meantime, I will work every day to overcome the grief and swim once more.

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