

Ceremony
First Place Prose 2007

Mr. B. is breathing hard. Ten days of bronchitis, twenty years of uranium dust. I listen for only seconds to his lungs' tight whistle. He needs a treatment now....

But there is no nurse in sight, so I'm dashing down the hallway, Can someone please page the respiratory tech?, when here comes his wife, Mrs B, and a stout man beside her whose purple grey tee-shirt puckers and swells at the belly. He wears an old baseball cap and looks no more holy than you or I after half a night on call. But already I can guess.

Doctor, she asks me, though in fact she is telling me, We'd like to have a ceremony.

I catch my own breath, eye the heavy man to her left. You mean now?

There is a patience implacable and disarming in the Navajo. Patience to sit for hours in my crowded waiting room, or to smile at my white man's impertinence. I am bellagone, they understand, so cannot be blamed for my rudeness.

Well yes, she smiles, if that is OK. Here is my cousin, the medicine man.

I check him out without trying to. If a great mystery is hidden here, it is hidden deep inside blue jeans and cowboy boots, deep behind dust-brown eyes that fail to meet my own.

Mr. B., I remember, is breathing hard. His sentences short as this. He needs a treatment now.

But that is not what I say. There is a question between us, and inside me as well. Five minutes delay will not harm my patient. And here is the medicine man, after all.

Ya'a'te'eh, ch'cheh, I greet him. Ya'a'te'eh, ch'ash, he responds. In my first three months on the Reservation, I have learned only the essentials of their inscrutable language: Hello and goodbye. Any pain? Can you take a deep breath?

So we are off to Mr. B.'s hospital room. I avert my gaze and ask with some embarrassment whether I might attend the proceedings. There is a tone of deference we adopt almost instinctively in the presence of priests, even when we doubt their Authority. Even when they are vested in tee-shirt and cowboy boots.

This is fine with him, my watching. He is always happy to work with the doctor. His own sister, he says, is a nurse in this very hospital. This information he offers me like a secret handshake. We enter the room together, and my hands fold in front of me in helpless and unwitting piety.

Mr. B. is breathing hard.

Ya'a'te'eh, ch'cheh. Ya'a'te'eh, ch'ash. They greet each other like grandfather and grandson, though probably they are identical in age.

There is small talk between them: too much of it in my medical opinion. His breathing, his breathing, I wish to holler out loud. Already I regret my decision.

They converse in Navajo, completely beyond my grasp, but occasional English phrases bring the meaning home to me. Tight. Throat. Doctors. Uranium mine. (He worked one for years, at our government's bidding, unaware of the Cold War his labor supported, unaware of his body's own sacrifice.) And he points, Mr. B, to the base of his throat, where subjectively his ill sensations reside.

Now a sudden hush descends upon the room. Casually, and without ceremony (or without my own sense of ceremony), the medicine man removes from his pouch four unlikely objects, arranges them neatly upon the bedside table: a short wooden tube, maybe five inches long; an irregular crystal, the size of my fist; an eagle's feather; and a small satchel of corn pollen, sacred ingredient in Navajo ceremonies. Alongside this collection, and strangest of all, he sets a standard white styrofoam cup.

Further words from the medicine man, in a cadence now notably changed. I believe he is praying. From the table he takes the large crystal, lifts it to his own eye, and through it scans Mr. B slowly, from head to toe.

I blink twice in surprise.

My patient has closed his eyes comfortably, relaxed into the stiff hospital pillow. With his body and spirit refracted through seemingly common stone, Mr. B. acts as if... as if he feels himself scanned. It appears to be a pleasant experience.

More words, more gestures. Then corn pollen is removed from its satchel, placed here and there throughout the room, and on my patient's forehead and chest and throat. He is still breathing hard, I note with some anxiety, though Mr. B. seems less bothered by it than I.

The medicine man takes up his white feather, and waves it almost casually in the six cardinal directions. East and west, north and south, but also upward (into heaven, I imagine) and downward (whence came the ancestors, according to Navajo tradition).

There is something compelling in this, I acknowledge to myself. The room is intangibly altered. But his breathing.... How much longer can I wait? I rehearse in my mind some polite interruption. Thank you very much, I will tell them, But now he needs his respiratory treatment.

One last prayer and then I'll insist. But there is increased intensity in the medicine man's voice. He brings the small wooden tube to his lips, blows into and through it a tuneful whistle. Blows east, west, north, south, up and down, until the room is full of this strangely familiar sound. It is almost the wheezing music of Mr. B.'s bronchi themselves.

This too is impressive, I think, imagining we have reached a dramatic conclusion, when suddenly there is more. Now he brings the wooden tube to my patient's throat, to his throat, stops his blowing, and instead begins to suck.

Schlrrrlspkkkkkscsprk...

I am holding my breath.

...ssppklrschlp.

He pulls himself upright, the medicine man, mouth seemingly full of Mr. B.'s sickness. There is a pause, a further pause, and then he leans over the styrofoam cup and he spits.

Mucopurulent green and gobbled with blood, it is spit in its slow cupward descent like I have never seen, tenacious and foul and filling half the white styrofoam, brownyellowredyellowgreen.

Where am I? What is going on?

He shows these inarguable results to his patient (his patient?), who appears thoroughly satisfied. A final prayer, and then handshakes and smiles all around. Mr. B., my chronic bronchitic, is smiling as well.

When all this is over I listen closely with my stethoscope. He is still wheezing tunefully, echoing in the chamber of his chest the reedy whistle which previously filled the room. But the airflow is clearly improved, I am sure of it, and he is no longer struggling, no longer in distress.

I listen further, and feel quite suddenly the roomful of eyes upon me, and Navajo smiles which communicate nothing but reflect everything, anything, that I project upon them. What do these people think of me, intruding upon their ceremony and their health and their very world, my white bellagone face flushed to red with irrelevance? They are tolerant, the Navajo, but is theirs the tolerance of open-mindedness or of indulgence, as an annoying child is tolerated because there seems no way to propagate the race without him? I listen further, and the company waits politely for my pronouncement.

So I fill my own lungs with sufficient baritone to imbue the next words with significance. Mr. B., I bellow falsely, May I order you a treatment now, for your breathing?

He seems puzzled that I have asked his permission. Whatever you say, he smiles benignly. You're the doctor.

My own breath catches in surprise, and I wait for the room to fill with laughter. But it does not. If there is irony in his words, or in the grin which parts his wheeze-pursed lips, I

cannot read it. Neither Mr. B. nor his healer has any aversion to my medicine, but they have created together the right spiritual environment for that medicine to produce its effect. How else might mere vapor and pills acquire their power?

As we wait for the respiratory tech to arrive, I contemplate that cupful of magic phlegm. A showman's trick, I would like to conclude, but what do I mean really by "trick?" Any more a trick than my own white coat, worn less for its extra pocket space than for the image of authority it perpetuates? Any more than this stethoscope around my neck, which occasionally uncovers a murmur, but which more often extends not my ears but my fingers in a form of symbolic and ritualized touch?

For indeed, as I lay my stethoscope one more time against Mr. B.'s chest, there is a palpable easing of intercostal muscles in response to the contact itself. I realize quite suddenly that this has occurred many times, with many patients, though until now I had never noticed.

The respiratory treatment begins. I listen as mistified medicine fills his waiting lungs, as the hard music of whistling airways slowly softens. I listen a long long while.

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