

The Best Storyteller Award

Category: Poems

written by Daniel Becker | December 28, 2018

Daniel Becker ~

At the clinic retreat everyone gets a prize,
and the *Best Storyteller* reminds us of those times
a man goes on a journey. Not just any man: Dr. William Osler,
the doctors' doctor, the professors' professor, the textbook author,
and this Canadian in Philadelphia crosses the Delaware to Camden
where Walt Whitman, the great American poet, the poet's poet,

endures fame and poor health.
Every case is supposed to be interesting, but Whitman,
according to Osler, suffered only from what his age could explain

plus or minus the usual slings and arrows,
the wear and tear of gravity,
the side effects and worries,

the incidentals that let doctors hedge their bets.
Chance, then as now, regressed to the mean.
A stroke, then as now, was what it is.

Tuberculosis, then as now, was in the air.
Whitman died from or with tuberculosis.
Osler lived with prosector's warts from more than one

of the hundreds of TB-ridden autopsies
his curiosity insisted on.
When Whitman says *the poet drags the dead out of their coffins*

and stands them on their feet,
the Storyteller wants to see them walk—
it's not the destination, it's the journey—

and in a tale about a man who crosses a river
listeners feel the breeze and the motion
while doctors recall that case of disembarkation vertigo

and how easy it is for life to be uneasy.
Osler, between two shores, puzzles over Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.
Whitman, between revisions, puzzles over *Leaves of Grass*.

The housekeeper's cat can't resist the poet's great lap.
The ferry fights the current. At least one passenger is queasy

while the story moves to the next generation of doctors and poets.

When Dr. William Carlos Williams lived in Philadelphia
he studied Osler and Whitman and where to draw the line
between uncertainty and mystery

and how to make a line of poetry speak for everyone
while the poet earns a living as a doctor.
In the story of a stranger coming to town,
our clinic allows 40 minutes for the Initial Visit.

About the poet:

Daniel Becker, a general internist, retired from clinical practice at the University of Virginia in July 2018. In October 2018, he reenlisted to teach medical students, many of whom go on to subscribe and submit pieces to *Pulse*. "I was taught three kinds of stories: a man goes on a journey, a stranger comes to town, boy meets girl. Pithy enough, but the genders are out of date."

About the poem:

"I know a little about Whitman, Osler, Philadelphia, disembarkation vertigo and storytelling, and more than I want to know about not enough time at clinic."

Poetry editors:

Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer