

# A Poetic Stroke

Category: Stories

written by Thomas E. Schindler | November 30, 2018

**Thomas E. Schindler ~**

*Editor's note: This Sunday will mark the last day that we accept poetry submissions this year. We offer today's story in honor of the poets who are sending us their creative works for consideration.*

For the past few years, since becoming a grandfather, I have indulged in an afternoon nap. Last year, while arising after a nap, I fell on my face—hard. Cautiously, I got up, and then carefully lay down again, confused about what had just happened. Whatever it was, it passed—and I tried to forget about it.

Next morning, my reflection in the bathroom mirror startled me with a garish reminder of my fall: a purple bruise beneath my left eye. Also, something was wrong with my vision. When I looked left, I saw a blurry absence. Later, my ophthalmologist performed a field-of-vision test that revealed a significant blind spot. Although a CT scan failed to detect any brain lesions, he pushed for an MRI.

Full disclosure: twelve years ago, at age fifty-five, I suffered a major heart attack. My left anterior descending cardiac artery was blocked, and I needed emergency angioplasty. The next morning my surgeon told me the nickname for this particular artery: the *widow-maker!* Fortunately for me and my lovely wife, the angioplasty plus a stent and drugs with names like atorvastatin and clopidogrel have contributed to my remarkable recovery.

Tim Russert, the late moderator of NBC's *Meet the Press*, was not so lucky. He died suddenly, while working at his office desk. I have been quite healthy—healthy enough, at least, to impress my cardiologist—for the past decade.

The second day after my fall, I saw flashers: tiny Christmas-tree lights of yellow, cyan and fuschia—just like computer-screen pixels—pulsating at the lower edge of sight. The MRI showed a few tiny lesions: I'd suffered a stroke in the part of my brain that controlled vision. My ophthalmologist was so alarmed that he prohibited me from driving.

Not driving really bothered me. I live in Lakeville, a small town in bucolic northwest Connecticut, where everybody drives everywhere. There aren't even any sidewalks until you get into the center of town, two miles from my home. So now, whenever I couldn't persuade my wife to drive me, I had to start walking.

It was an existential mind-body jolt. Like most modern humans, I'd been thoroughly educated by a system that focuses on the head and ignores the body. I had succeeded at living in my head as though disembodied: straight

As, Ivy League College, PhD. But now, each day that I couldn't drive confronted me with the constraints of my *embodied* experience. Pathetic, perhaps; but what happened next changed everything.

I recalled that one of my favorite writers, Roger Angell, had described starting to memorize poetry (in his nineties) "as a prop to my declining brain." This seemed like a good idea, so I started hunting for poems on the internet. Soon I had two or three poems printed on a sheet of paper that I would take along during the two-mile walk into town.

Soon I looked forward to strolling with my new companions: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Walter de la Mare and Derek Walcott. Somehow, poetry enabled a lyrical embrace of life's contingencies. Ursula le Guin perfectly described my experience: "Poets can give us the words we need. When we read good poetry, we often say, 'Yeah, that's it. That's how I feel.'" "

At other times, a mental tongue twister like the one below, from Hopkins' *Pied Beauty*, elicits the response, "Ooh, how delicious!"

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change.

It was satisfying to find a poem that captures an experience so eloquently that I felt deeply validated. We all yearn for soul mates who can validate our joy and grief, hope and despair. The poems conveyed exquisite comfort.

Within two months, my brain had healed itself. The follow-up visual-field test showed an 80 percent improvement, and I resumed driving. Still, I fondly recalled those solitary hours reciting poems step by step by step, syncing feelings and thoughts and feet. Walking slows you down to a pace that fits your own body. My steps would become unhurried and intentional, enabling me to relish the moment and to focus on beautiful lyrics and provocative images like those in de la Mare's *Dream Song*:

Elf-light, bat-light, Touchwood-light, toad-light,  
And the sea a shimmering gloom of grey.

A poem may evoke images and sensations of childhood that transcend life's changes and losses—a reconnection with the ageless, essential self.

Recently, when I described those walks to my friend Jack, he sensed my yearning to relive the experience of walking poetry.

He smiled. "What's stopping you?"

So, trusting the promise offered by Derek Walcott's poem *Love After Love*, I set out again.

The time will come  
when, with elation,  
you will greet yourself arriving  
at your own door, in your own mirror,

and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.

**About the author:**

Thomas E. Schindler studied immunology and microbiology at the University of Illinois at Chicago and received his PhD in 1981. After working for a start-up biotech company, he switched careers to teach high-school science. Last year he completed a masters program in science writing at Johns Hopkins University. He is currently working on a biography of Esther Lederberg, who with her husband, Joshua Lederberg, discovered bacterial sex ([bacterialsex.com](http://bacterialsex.com)). "I firmly believe in the essential importance of stories. As Jonathan Gottschall wrote, 'Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories.' My mission as a writer is to craft compelling stories."

**Story editor:**

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