

The girl and the snake

The winning entry from the UBC Faculty of Medicine's 2015 Art as Adjuvant writing competition.

Patricia (Trish) Caddy, BSc

She tumbled and tumbled, down, down, down. There was a bang, and then nothing.

Instantly, she slept.

In and out, in and out. Her breath kept perfect metred time. The grown-ups, having seen the fall, wailed as they scooped her up in arms. They ran the way that children run, not looking at the ground.

At the hospital her little veins were mined for clues and secrets. Wires watched her beating lion heart. Computers looked inside her bones and there, there! They found her story. The girl was almost perfect, head to toe. The tumble, though, had shaken loose a snake of vein inside her head, behind her blue-green eyes.

Her purple blood—made red with

Ms Caddy is a medical student from Nanaimo, BC, enrolled in the University of British Columbia's Southern Medical Program, class of 2016. Having forgone a creative writing degree to pursue biology, she attended Malaspina University-College (now Vancouver Island University) before earning her BSc in biology at the University of Victoria.

The Art as Adjuvant competition was open to UBC medical students to celebrate the power of poetry and prose. The winning submission was selected by a panel of judges with literary experience and an interest in fostering the relationship between the written arts and medicine. The judges were chosen by members of the Arts in Medicine club.

every gentle, numbered breath—was fast escaping, thanks to that shaken snake. It spilled into her bustling skull, chock full of 2-year-old wonder, adventure, and wit.

Her mother kissed her curls and made a sound, out in the hallway. The man in the mask cut her hair so short. Down we descended, not unlike she did, to a place where there had never been light. When we arrived we saw many colors. Violet and gray, scarlet and blue, creamy white and golden yellow. We let the colors wash away, and gasped at what was left behind. A jewel. The seat of her wild, joyous mind. Her brain, folded like coral. Immaculate. Gorgeous.

We worked as fast as our hands could go, as carefully as anyone, ever, to keep what was perfect, perfect. We put her back together as best we could, and after our job was done we made armor out of the slack in our faces. We grew lumps in our throats, stopping hot, fat tears. I asked the surgeon to please change his scrubs. Her mom made another sound, out of sight, in the hallway.

We all crossed our fingers. Some crossed their toes. Our hearts thumped like rabbits inside of our chests and above everything else, we hoped. For the snake to sleep. For her eyes to open. For so much and so little, we hoped and we hoped. And all the while, the little girl lay there.

Breathing in, and breathing out, and who knows for sure? Maybe dreaming.

Disclosure

This is a work of fiction; any resemblance to specific details, patients, or events is entirely coincidental.

Acknowledgments

Competition organizers would like to thank the UBC Wellness Initiative Network and the UBC Arts in Medicine club (www.arts.med.ubc.ca). Ms Caddy would like to thank all the patients and families who let students be involved in their care.

Students: \$1000 writing award

The *BCMJ* invites writing submissions from student authors, and each year awards a prize of \$1000 for the best full-length print article written by a medical student, and \$250 each for the two best med student blog articles.

The *BCMJ* J.H. MacDermot Writing Awards honor Dr John Henry MacDermot, who served as editor for 36 years (1932–1968), overseeing the publication's transition from the *VMA Bulletin* to the *BCMJ* in 1959. Dr MacDermot also served as BCMA president in 1926.

For submission guidelines and contest deadlines, please visit www.bcmj.org/jh-macdermot-writing-awards.