

# ***A deep resonance***

***poems/johanna shapiro***



***patients***  
***and***  
***friends***



**The Risks of Empathy**  
(May, 2001)

If I climb into the same boat as you  
Will it sink?

If I walk a mile in your shoes  
Will I get blisters?

If my heart bleeds for you,  
Will I need a transplant?

If I see the world through your eyes  
Will I go blind?

If I feel your pain,  
How much analgesic will I need?

If I understand your point of view  
Will I end up skewered on that same sharp point?

If I hear what you're saying  
Will I develop ear ache?

If my heart goes out to you,  
Will I ever get it back?

If I could be you  
Could the same bad things happen to me?

If I am you  
Then who am I?



**Color Haiku**  
(September, 2001)

***BLACK HAIKU***

Death always arrives  
Sometimes too soon, or too late  
But it does get there.

\* \* \*

The butterfly has  
Its brief nibble of pleasure  
We taste just our death.

***BLUE HAIKU***

Tears of his patient  
Repair the doctor's brok'n heart  
Low tech surgery

\* \* \*

The patient's eyes are  
Deep pools in which the doctor  
Can swim forever

***WHITE HAIKU***

White, white, white is the  
color of snow, sugar, swans  
this hospital bed

***RED HAIKU***

Blood rains from body  
Ripples in a crimson lake  
The doctor can't swim

\* Haiku is a poetry form, Japanese in origin, consisting of 3 lines containing respectively five, seven, and five syllables. Haiku see nature in a single bold image but do not comment (count 'em!).



**Accident**  
(January, 2000)

You were drunk  
You crashed your car  
You died  
You were twenty-four

What else was lost?

Girl's spleen,  
Leg, spirit  
Boy's speech, sight  
Thinking mind

Future doctor, future artist  
Carefree pleasures  
Invincible youth  
Unfolding future

Mother's dreams  
Luminous as light  
Father's hopes  
An Everest of possibility

Brother's teasing  
Banana peels of jokes  
Sister's laughter  
Dancing raindrops

Grandparents' solace  
Against encroaching dark  
Friends' companionship  
Taken-for-granted

So, what was gained?

New friends in strange places  
Uncertain understanding  
Depths of courage  
Unexpected faith

Not enough



**You Think You Know Me**  
(January, 2001)

You think you know me  
but you don't  
You think you know how to help me  
but you don't.

*Does he hit you?* You wonder  
I don't want to sound  
like our former president  
but I have to ask  
*What do you mean by 'hit'?*  
Because it's true he can be rough  
but it's not like  
he's beaten me to a pulp.

*You have to leave,* you insist  
as if I'm the problem,  
a trespasser  
in my own house.  
Where am I supposed to go?  
To a shelter,  
like some homeless person?

*Plan an escape route,* you urge  
*which is ridiculous*  
Whoever heard of anybody  
trying to escape from  
the place she's lived her  
entire adult life  
the place her children were born?  
It's not like I'm  
a prisoner, you know.

*It's not your fault,* you say  
But how do you know?  
Have you ever seen me  
when I'm mean-mad,  
when I provoke him  
beyond reason, beyond control?  
You've never seen me  
like that  
and you better hope  
you never will.



*He has no right, you argue*  
and that's true  
It's not like it's in the Constitution  
*or anything*  
But then *he* says abortion  
isn't really in the Constitution either  
and women still do it  
whenever they want  
for their own selfish reasons  
So who's to say really  
what's a right and what's not?

*Does he hurt the children?* you worry  
and I have to laugh  
As a matter of fact,  
he adores those kids  
He'd do just about anything for them  
as long as they behave themselves  
And he's a very good provider  
he really is.

And when I try to explain  
how that man comes on his  
*bended knees to me and is*  
*sincerely repentant* and you say

*It's just part of the pattern*  
Then I know you'll never understand me  
because when he holds me  
and kisses me  
and tells me he is sorry  
truly sorry

Then at that moment  
I am the most cherished  
woman in the world  
and I am loved  
as I never have been before  
and never will be again  
in all my  
miserable, pathetic life.

It was late on a Wednesday afternoon, and I was tired. As a psychologist on the faculty of a department of family medicine, I spend a portion of my time observing residents interviewing patients at a federally qualified community clinic. I sit in a small, windowless room, stuffed with video equipment, and watch and listen. After the



encounter, the resident and I talk. Occasionally the resident invites me in to participate in an especially complicated psychosocial interview. My role is to help residents focus on the doctor-patient relationship, hone their communication skills, and remind them of the whole life context that the patient brings to the exam room. Simple.

Mostly it's a privilege to be part of other people's lives, patients and doctors both, at such a raw and intimate level, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to do what I do. But it can be frustrating as well. Sometimes – usually – the resident is tired, even exhausted. Always the resident has too many patients, and not enough time. Because ours is a federally qualified clinic, most of our clientele fall 200% or more below the official poverty line. Many are recent immigrants to this country, usually from Mexico, who do not share a language with their health care providers. Others struggle with alcohol and drug abuse, personality disorders, and homelessness. Many of them are very sick, with multiple medical problems, complicated by factors of poverty and neglect. Often it seems everyone at the clinic – residents, staff, and patients – are all operating in survival mode. Under these circumstances, talk about doctor-patient relationship can seem like a luxury. We know it's not, but it sure can seem that way.

At the end of a long clinic day, it's easy just to want to go home. That day, the resident I was observing had already seen a slew of patients – a woman with diabetes and astonishingly high blood sugars, who couldn't change her diet because her husband liked the way she cooked; a lady with pain “en todo el cuerpo” (all over her body); a snotty-nosed kid in for a CHDP who pulled the blood pressure cuff off the wall; a follow-up with a former heroin user hospitalized for a flare-up of hepatitis C; and a young man with a laceration he'd acquired in the factory where he worked. Finally the last patient for the day arrived, complaining of being tired.

Doctors hate this complaint. Fatigue is not like fever of 101.2 degrees or a broken bone. It is a vague, ambiguous, uncertain symptom, hard to pin down, indicative of nothing at all or potentially serious, even life-threatening disease. My resident had been on call the night before. And his patient thought *she* was tired! Still, he tried hard with her, as the clock ticked irrevocably toward 5:00 p.m., then 5:30. He probed for symptoms and history of anemia and thyroid disease, and scheduled labwork. He did a conscientious depression screen; and it sounded like the patient was depressed, but it also sounded like there might be something more. At 5:25, the resident knocked on my door and asked me to come into the exam room.

Mrs. Henderson was probably in her mid-thirties. She looked a little dirty and run-down, but tough. You could see she'd had a hard life. What struck me most when I entered the room was how hostile she seemed. That hadn't come through the one-way mirror as strongly. While we talked, she kept tapping her wedding band against the edge of the exam table, which produced a little pinging sound. Mrs. Henderson had been married twelve years, and had three kids, the oldest by another man. Sometimes she worked as a waitress, but right now she was out of work. Her husband was in construction.

Because of the way she'd answered some of the questions during the depression screening, we began to ask about domestic violence. All of a sudden it became a very bizarre interview. It was like playing a game of cat-and-mouse, or fencing with a very smart lawyer. We, the resident and I, soon were convinced Mrs. Henderson was being abused by her husband. She seemed determined to deny it, to justify her husband, and to



blame herself. Actually, not an atypical reaction. But somehow, in the 30 minutes we spent in that room, we couldn't get through to her. Each question we asked, each suggestion we made met with more animosity, more resentment, more unfriendliness. From the compassionate helpers, we'd become the enemy. When she told us a little about her husband, he sounded like a jerk.

Afterwards, when Mrs. Henderson had left without giving an inch and a pretty clear intention of not returning to our clinic, I couldn't stop thinking about her. What had gone so wrong in an interview where ostensibly we did everything right? We nailed the patient's problem, assessed the safety of her children, cautioned her about an exit plan, provided shelter numbers, and even educated the patient about the dysfunctional patterns that characterize many abusive situations. Still, in retrospect, we didn't do a good job of understanding this woman, really seeing her as a particular human being with desire and longings. It was late, we were tired, the clinic needed to close, and we were quick to find a category – victim of domestic violence – for her that did not begin to scratch the surface of who this woman was.

Thinking back, we didn't listen to Mrs. Henderson nearly carefully or respectfully enough. We didn't hear how much security she found in the ramshackle little house she'd lived in for ten years. We didn't hear how demeaning she found the whole idea of a shelter to be. We didn't appreciate how important it was for her not to see herself as an abused woman. Most of all, we didn't begin to understand about the love. And that's probably why Mrs. Henderson left that day in a huff.

When Mrs. Henderson talked about her relationship with her husband, and how much he loved her, we were quick to dismiss her descriptions as “denial” or “the dv cycle.” Of course we weren't wrong, just irrelevant. Like I said, Mrs. Henderson had had a hard life. We only caught glimpses, since we were racing so fast to our tidy conclusion, but in passing we learned about an emotionally abusive childhood, a time on the streets, her own history of cocaine addiction. If we had stopped to listen, we would have heard a woman who had never had much love in her hardscrabble life, had never been valued or told how precious she was by parents, boyfriends, or lovers. To bask in that feeling of being cherished, no matter how illusory, she was willing to put up with a lot, including a few shoves and bruises. Until we understood that, we would never be able to understand anything about her.

I never saw Mrs. Henderson again. There wasn't much I could do – patients are lost to follow-up all the time - but I felt I owed her something. All I could give her is this poem. I knew deep down I'd wanted to get away from Mrs. Henderson, so the poem is a way of moving closer, rather than farther from, her. Writing the poem in the voice of the patient is a way to say that, although too late, I am finally listening. It is a way of acknowledging that, when all is said and done, Mrs. Henderson was simply a woman as I am a woman; with three children as I have; a woman sometimes afraid of men, as I have been; and a woman who yearned for love, as do we all.



**The Coal Miner**  
(July, 2001)

I was born in West Virginia  
to a family of mining men  
and women widowed young  
I was the only boy in that company town  
to come down with polio in the summer of '27  
Two girls got sick  
but I was the only boy –  
it was curious.  
My leg brace was a curiosity too  
when I came home  
from the hospital in Lexington  
a year and six surgeries later

With my disability  
I couldn't be a miner  
That world of perpetual night,  
humid tunnels, dust, glowing lamps,  
danger lurking like a psychopath,  
was lost to me  
“And a damn good thing too,” my daddy said,  
his skin slightly blue from coal-dust that wouldn't wash out  
or from black lung disease  
we never knew which  
(He died in a mining accident when I was six)

I was small and crooked  
but I could talk a coin out of my mother's purse  
and prove to my daddy why a tomato wasn't a vegetable  
At school they told me to be a lawyer or a clergyman  
Instead I became a travelling salesman  
Talked my way through the mining towns of Appalachia  
(having had practice all my life talking to lonely women)  
I sold the tools of women's work –  
cleaners, disinfectants, pungent soaps –  
what they used to scrub out the coal,  
what they used to make their world seem pure  
and womanly

I lived my life  
on the surface of the earth  
moving where I wanted  
in the light of day  
I saw sights my daddy never saw  
and slept in places he'd never heard of



I spent most of my time among women  
hollow, dried-up women,  
like empty gourds  
whose seeds rattle when you shake them  
Convinced them they needed floor polish  
or a brush for their toilet  
Persuaded them they would feel better  
when they had those things  
and I came home to women –  
widowed mother and widowed sister –  
also hollow, dried-up, empty

But I never stopped wanting to go down  
because that's where the men spent their real lives  
plunging below in the momentum of the cage  
till they reached narrow paths where they couldn't walk upright  
swinging pick-axes, setting explosions  
watching for signs of methane or CO2  
smelling the salty stench of raw coal in their nostrils  
their skin slippery with water and sweat...  
Of course I can't describe it, I wasn't there,  
*There* where all the men went, even the boys.  
Only the women stayed above

Now I live alone  
Mother and sister both dead  
(each surprised in her turn she didn't outlive me)  
I've had two heart attacks  
Can't get around much anymore  
Post-polio syndrome my doctor calls it  
(funny it should sneak up on me again  
after almost sixty years)

I don't complain  
Men of my generation don't  
We were taught to endure  
so that's what I do  
I set my alarm every morning  
for five a.m.  
because my daddy told me once that  
men don't need more than six hours of sleep  
I get up and make myself a cup  
of coffee, bitter and black  
and I wait patiently  
I wait to go beneath the ground  
to join the men at last



**Sick Indian Woman**  
(August, 2001)

I live in the white world  
but I walk in the red way

By the time I wanted  
to take a long walk  
off a short pier  
I couldn't walk at all

My white doctors gave me  
only a time limit  
You have bad diseases  
they said and told me names

But I have names of my own  
Coyote the trickster  
the Great Spirit, borrowed angels,  
the Blessing Way

My children already argue  
over the Navajo rug  
and the grandfather clock  
I will outlast them all

In my garden  
I make my sacred space  
with sage, candles, incense  
and I sing my prayers

I sit in my wheelchair  
but I am rooted in the earth  
My legs won't do the dances  
but I still know the rituals

I hug the pines for strength  
I listen to robins  
My neighbors think I'm  
crazy anyway

*Bilagaana* doctors  
should listen to the  
wisdom in all things  
from before they were born

I will live to be a hundred  
I will walk in the wind  
And return on the waves  
I will outlast you all

The white world claims my body  
but my hope is red.



**Living with Cancer**

*In memoriam*, Marcia Weinstein

(March, 200)

What I wonder about  
what I worry about  
is that we really didn't talk about it  
enough  
or really at all  
only obliquely  
the way light bounces off a mirror  
at an angle  
the way eyes inadvertently  
slant from an ugly face  
All our conversations on the subject  
dribbled away  
"Let's wait and see"  
"I just don't know"  
we told each other

We'd been friends  
for more than fifteen years  
so of course we talked about everything  
Why our children  
didn't get married  
or were they going to marry  
the wrong people  
Would they ever find themselves?  
Were we ever going to find ourselves?  
How sex was with our husbands  
and how sex was without our husbands  
Was it too late to start a new career  
Was it too late to be a different person?

And of course we did talk  
about the big C  
Since her husband was a doctor  
she a Ph.D., and I a professor  
we were very mature  
about the whole thing  
Oh yes, we definitely talked cancer  
first breast, then ovarian,  
later still lung mets, liver mets,  
brain mets



We learned the lingo of chemo  
Wordsmiths both, we grew to love the sound  
of words that really are horrible  
although they did good for awhile  
bought time, postponed the inevitable

But we never really talked about  
the big D  
Yes, that big D –  
The grim reaper, the bogeyman,  
the ultimate emptiness,  
death, death, death

And because I'd read about  
women with cancer  
and talked to other friends who had cancer  
and even taught Adrienne Rich's poem  
about the guilt she felt  
for never having talked to her lover about  
*her* cancer, I knew we should talk not only about  
cancer, I knew we should talk about... death

at least once,  
just to show we could do it

Give us credit - we tried  
once or twice, half-heartedly  
We'd sidle up to it  
the path greased with chemo and platitudes  
slippery with anxiety and dread  
and all at once we'd bump up against  
a mountain so mighty, so fearsome  
it'd make our teeth shake  
It was one thing to live with cancer –  
we'd grown used to that -  
but dying with cancer  
well, that was a different story  
We couldn't find our way into it  
up it, over it, through it

In the end, we never did talk about the big D  
Death never entered our lexicon  
in any guise – cruel hatchetman  
welcome liberator  
No, he just didn't show up



although we both sensed him  
lurking on the premises  
Oh well – we never let him in  
Maybe we weren't brave enough  
or maybe we just didn't have time enough  
for Mr. Death

We did a lot of laughing though  
Planned jail-break escapes from her hospital room  
that we never quite pulled off  
but that would have made us famous  
Bought funny hats when her hair fell out  
that looked a lot better on her  
than they did on me  
Wrote each other letters about  
how much suffering sucks  
and where are the big answers  
the answers you can count on  
when you really need them?  
We cried a lot too – pretty much about  
the same things

When she fell into a coma  
we still hadn't had the big D conversation  
and I knew Adrienne Rich would be  
disappointed in me  
so after she'd been in a coma about  
a month, and I knew we'd never talk anymore about  
our children, or which type of bagel  
we liked best with black coffee  
whether our husbands cried in the same  
kinds of movies  
and how to travel to Nepal when you're old

we ended up talking about death  
It was kind of a one-sided conversation  
but that's how she wanted it  
I didn't say much and  
she didn't say anything at all  
I told her what a great friend she'd been  
what a cherished wife and beloved mother  
a woman valued above rubies  
was how I put it, finally finding a  
big answer that seemed to serve  
I told her it was time to go, time to let go  
without fear, uncertainty, recrimination



nothing left here that needed to be done  
Time to move on.

And she did  
End of conversation.



***grandparents***



**Driving with My Grandpa**  
(January, 2004)

After my grandpa stopped  
being a big city surgeon  
he moved to the Ozarks  
and became a country doc

When we visited,  
my brother and sister  
stayed back to eat pancakes  
play dirtball or catch fireflies

I went with grandpa  
in his rickety, rattletrap car  
driving along bumpy, unpaved  
roads that seemed relentless

Grandpa didn't say much  
He had a small smile  
that showed up  
when he asked me if I knew

how to tip a cow  
Mostly the radio blared  
twangy tunes or hell-fire preaching  
which also brought back the smile

One time he drove farther out  
than I'd ever been  
The house was just two rooms  
a dirt floor, no electricity

In the bed  
was a woman with no face  
Skin cancer, my grandpa said  
This didn't need to happen, he said

She never sought out care  
until it was far too late  
She was too proud and too poor  
She worked too hard



feeding her men  
and her pigs, sweeping that floor  
till the cancer ate her face  
and there was nothing left

I remember she had no face  
But I remember more  
the way my grandpa  
caressed where her cheek had been



**The Gambler**  
(January, 2004)

My grandfather was born  
in Rumania  
He came to this country  
at the age of two

because *his* father got himself  
involved on the wrong end of  
a failed revolution  
to oust a despot king

When my grandfather died  
he was only thirty-eight  
He had a heart attack  
at his office, walked home

had another heart attack  
and died leaving a wife  
who idolized him  
for the next fifty years

and four brilliant, bewildered  
children striving to meet  
his prodigious expectations,  
their only inheritance

My grandfather was a gambler  
who bet on horses,  
football, card games, raindrops  
running down a window-pane

He wrote vaudeville jokes  
for Jewish comedians  
and bet he would become  
an American success story

Grandfather almost won  
that bet. But in death,  
there are no more jokes.



**Drowning**  
(January, 2001)

When my grandmother died  
my mother's grief knew no bounds  
It raged and roiled  
an angry current  
overrunning its banks  
spilling inarticulate and destructive  
from bedroom to living-room  
a soggy flood of feeling  
knocking over tables and chairs  
the way my grandmother did  
when she was drunk  
Each one of my mother's tears  
perfectly transparent  
like a drop of the vodka  
my grandmother drank neatly  
straight from the bottle  
she hid in the chandelier

We always visited early  
I would wait in her garden  
among the chipped plaster fish  
while the sound of shattering glass  
and weeping voices dissolved  
into the careful clink of ice-cubes  
Once, framed by pale light  
my grandmother ran naked in the rain  
her sad breasts flapping  
until my father  
who liked dry land  
better than the uncertain expanse  
of alcoholic seas  
caught her up and wrung the water  
from her seaweed hair

When my grandmother died I watched  
as the river of my mother's grief  
muddy, vicious, turbulent  
its pale fish floating belly-up  
flooded beyond our shipshape house  
into the streets of our quiet green neighborhood  
(who knows what lay beneath its leafy calm?)  
sweeping away cars, trees,



domestic pets, small children  
First it smelled sweet, like bourbon  
Then it smelled sour, like gin  
Sometimes, out of the tide  
a hand reached up for help  
small water-logged fingers  
barely breaking the surface



***parents***



**After Sextuple Bypass Sugery**  
(December, 2002)

“You requested a visitation,” the chaplain said,  
hovering doubtful and black-garbed beside my bed  
“Wrong room,” I said, not unkindly.  
Then noting his collar, added  
“I’m old and sick,  
not Catholic.”  
He looked forlorn  
so I said he could stay,  
even offered him my jello,  
which he ate, by the way.

“I have nightmares,” I mentioned.  
“Is it the morphine,” he questioned.  
“Maybe. Still, every night I’m standing  
on an empty stage.  
The audience has left.  
I’m alone. I’m afraid.”

“Are you a person of faith?” he probed  
“A mathematician,” I said, “brought low  
by angina and clogged arteries.”  
“I never had a head for numbers,”  
the chaplain confessed. “It must be nice  
not to roll the dice,  
to work at something sure.”  
“That’s where you’re wrong.”  
I painfully scribbled out  
a theorem, rather long.

“Mathematics solves a lot of problems,  
but the catch is it only solves ‘em  
if you’re willing to accept  
certain premises.”  
He smiled a bit. “On faith.”  
“On faith,” I agreed. “That old nemesis.”

Contemplating the final curtain,  
we gave a nod in recognition  
believers both and both uncertain.



**The Mother without Breasts**  
(April, 2003)

When I was little I thought  
women were flat-chested  
like men  
only they had long purple  
squiggles across their chests  
I thought  
this way because cancer  
filched both my mother's breasts  
when I  
was born

Later (I was three or four)  
I saw another mother  
naked  
her swelling, succulent orbs  
hanging pendulous and ripe  
so full  
I spent the rest of that day  
naked in front of a  
fissured  
mirror

pulling my cherry nipples  
trying to make those luscious  
fruits grow  
trying to escape my  
mother's chest, those plum-colored  
scars like  
sanguineous highways,  
barren roads leading nowhere  
waiting  
for me



***children***



**The Snake**  
(February 2000)

Our oldest daughter turns thirteen,  
beautiful, athletic  
tall and straight  
One day she comes home crying:  
*The nurse at school said*  
*I have scowly-osis*

She's right  
Tall and straight  
inside her spine grimaces and spits  
a malevolent snake  
two curves conspire to create  
the appearance of flawless beauty

No gentle kingsnake, this  
kindly ridding our garden of  
unwanted gophers  
Think rather a python  
ineluctable, irreducible  
gently squeezing heart, lungs

*She will never have surgery*  
we say, *Never*  
So we try the alternatives  
Braces, electric currents  
to stimulate muscles,  
physical therapy, swimming

She stretches, she twists  
trying to outwit the snake  
who continues to chase her  
She hangs from her knees  
every night, suspended from a gleaming bar  
Every night we hear the snake hissing

When she runs,  
when she plays volleyball,  
when she dresses for the prom  
we can barely see the snake  
*Is that him, we ask each other,*  
*peeking out over her shoulder?*



Only at night  
when everything is still  
we sense his footless power  
We hear him slithering  
and hissing  
waiting patiently to seize his prey

In desperation  
we try a more extreme brace  
At nighttime we lock her in  
with a series of padlocks  
But our daughter is Houdini  
Each night she escapes

into the coils of the waiting snake  
and they cavort in the dark  
where no one can see them  
The hypnotic power of the serpent  
entwined with the pliant limbs  
of our lovely daughter

She is ingenious, she is athletic  
She is beautiful  
tall and straight  
But in the end the snake claims her  
captures her with his mesmerizing spell  
devours her like a naive rabbit

So we are forced to allow  
the orthopedic surgeon  
to wield his knife oh so gently  
until he captures the snake  
and encases him in a rod-like coffin  
forever, and our daughter is free

Only at night  
when everything is silent  
we wonder, does the snake still stir?  
Does he try to lift the coffin lid  
Does he wait for a kiss  
to rouse his soft charms once again?



**Commentary:** Twelve years after our eldest daughter was diagnosed with severe scoliosis, and seven years after she'd undergone a five hour surgery to correct the condition, I tackled the experience in verse. When our family first consulted an orthopedist, he explained that Shauna had what is known as an S-shaped curve: actually *two* complementary and severe curvatures of the spine that resulted in a deceptively upright appearance.

Things went along pretty much as the poem chronicles. We tried all sorts of treatments and procedures, some physician-approved and some not, which seemed to slow the progression of the condition for awhile. Then, after what we all thought was a routine exam and x-ray, we learned her curves had progressed dramatically to the point where they posed a significant health hazard. Desperate, we really did try the torturous brace described in the poem, which literally involved applying padlocks so our daughter wouldn't remove the brace in her sleep. Which she did anyway. Eventually, the surgery was unavoidable.

For years, my husband and I were haunted by the imagery of a "snake" lurking in our daughter's back. Something about the way the doctor had explained her problem to us made this picture particularly vivid and ominous. A snake is associated with all sorts of malevolent and trickily clever symbolism of betrayal and destruction. Our poor daughter didn't stand a chance! What was most disturbing was that, even after a successful operation, we worried that the "snake" would somehow find a way to put her in harm's way again.

When I wrote the poem, images of Sleeping Beauty and Eve in the Garden of Eden floated through my mind in jumbled progression. Perhaps because all this happened during our daughter's pivotal adolescent years, the seductive, sensuous aspects of a snake got mixed up in the poem as well. I hoped the form of the poem would suggest the sinuous curves of a snake because this was the image that dominated the thoughts and fears of our family life for many years.



**Leo the Late Bloomer**  
(October, 1999)

In kindergarten, our daughter  
Was a rabbit in reading  
Is that good? We wondered  
Oh yes, enthused her teacher  
The rabbits are adorable  
Only later did we learn  
Rabbits can not read

At night I would cry  
How can she not read?  
Phonics were a mystery  
Incomprehensible, impenetrable  
Like the virgin birth  
Words themselves uninteresting hieroglyphics

Later there were other mysteries  
Spelling for instance  
She strung letters like beads in random fashion –  
Made pretty patterns, hoped for the best  
Multiplication tables would not imprint  
Division long remained an unbreachable concept

Her favorite tale (she asked for it over and over)  
Was about a little tiger who  
Didn't seem to amount to much  
But after a time came into his own  
Until he filled his storybook jungle  
With radiance

Testing gave us labels  
We collected diagnoses like precious gems  
But in the end they had no value  
When she became bat mitzvah  
Our rabbi said in awe  
She reads Hebrew better than English

Eventually our daughter learned  
To read, although she still can't spell  
She learned to add and subtract on her fingers  
And uses them still to good advantage  
She learned to work a calculator for the  
Harder stuff



Our daughter went to college  
Worked twice as hard as most  
Then studied to be a Montessori teacher  
And wrote in her application that  
She wanted to help kids with disabilities  
Because she knew what it was like

So our daughter learned enough  
And more than enough  
To know how to make her life work  
How to find what was important  
And not let go of it  
Learned how to make it shine

And we, desperate parents, what did we learn?  
In a family where  
intellectual accomplishment  
Counted for everything  
We learned it really didn't count  
For that much

We learned that our daughter was  
Loving, brave, determined,  
Full of insight  
And wise beyond her years  
We learned that she never failed  
At anything she set her mind to

Where at first we saw gaps  
Now we understood  
Gaps let the light shine through  
Our daughter shone like the sun



**Going to Alaska**  
(April, 2002)

When he was three, our son  
always beat me when we played  
When he was five, he got mad that  
he was white

and didn't have a name  
like Kareem or Magic,  
a name that could soar  
and slam dunk

At fourteen, he was voted  
best all-around player  
Next year, Best Defensive Player  
He was good

But he hurt all over  
back, hips, neck  
Our family doctor said  
pains, strains, sprains

After each practice  
he lay on the floor  
he couldn't climb stairs  
Sometimes he cried.

We wanted a cure.  
We got x-rays, blood tests  
We got ankylosing  
spondylitis

The rheumatologist prescribed  
NSAIDs with names that rhymed  
but ate our son's gut; then came  
scarier drugs

Finally he quit the game he loved  
After school he lay on the floor  
He watched cartoons, never  
basketball

He seems depressed,  
said our family doctor  
Try talking to him . . . but  
he didn't talk.



Then one day, our son said  
I'm going to Alaska  
Hiking, camping in the  
great outdoors

Alaska? Aren't there  
grizzly bears up there?  
Brown bears, he said, Don't worry,  
you'll see

I'll be the last one eaten,  
I'm a fast runner  
Although he had not run  
in a year

The rheumatologist frowned,  
suggested yoga, biking  
Those are for old people,  
our son said

We asked our family doctor  
He looked carefully at our son  
Casually, as though it was  
no big deal,

he started to check off  
questions on the health form  
I'm envious, he said  
You haven't lived

till you've seen Alaska  
It's God's country



# ***grandchildren***



## **Sometimes I Wonder**

(July, 2001)

Sometimes I wonder about the doctor  
Who for a moment held my daughter's life  
In his hands  
And then held my grandchild

What did he feel when my son-in-law told him  
To put my daughter first?  
What were his thoughts when my daughter begged him  
To keep her baby safe?  
Did he pray for the wisdom of Solomon?  
Did he weigh the advantages of cervical massage  
Versus an IV drip?  
Did he feel a tiny bit of love  
For this young couple, so afraid, so alone?

When that slippery new creature  
A baby in miniature  
Slid unwilling into his grasp  
And hiccoughed a first tentative breath  
Did he thank God for the miracle of life?  
Was he checking the APGAR score?  
Did he look into my grandson's eyes  
And see the face of his own child?  
Did he monitor the respirations per minute  
And calculate whether he'd make it home for dinner?

Physician, scientist, compassionate healer  
Whatever your training, abilities,  
Inclinations and talents  
I thank you for the health of my daughter  
And the life of my grandson  
However he arrived, however he first was held  
In hands loving, wise, or merely competent  
I welcome his new soul  
To this our world.  
And pray that all future hands  
Will also hold this child in grace



***myself***



**Back Pain**  
(October, 1999)

I a lowly stricken bug  
lying helpless on my back  
Limbs like feelers scratch the rug  
Both my soul and body wracked

Cannot move nor turn nor rise  
nor yet even try to crawl  
Upward glancing, curse the skies  
Misery casts a painful pall

Just a normal, routine day  
Then a twist, a turn unsweet  
In an instant, I must pay  
Metamorphosis complete

Gregor Samsa, we are kin  
Twist of fate or tight-pinched nerve  
All this suffering from within  
makes a life that's lost its verve

Insect with a human heart  
apple-backed and lonely, scorned  
Shunned, you lived and died apart  
Stunned, I too have been transformed

**Commentary:** When I composed this poem, I was lying flat on my back, munching anti-inflammatories and feeling sorry for myself, in the midst of an acute episode of back spasm. Having had back problems for 20 years, originally as the result of an injury, and later complicated by arthritic and auto-immune changes, I knew the drill. I couldn't read, couldn't use the computer, couldn't watch tv, couldn't work. All I could do was wait... and think. Experiencing serious back pain is unnerving, because it can strike at any moment, often without a clear precipitating event. It can be agonizing, and over time, debilitating. But it is also undignified. Rolling about on the floor, I began to think of Kafka's short story, *Metamorphosis*, in which the poor clerk Gregor Samsa awakens to discover he has been transformed into a bug. Gregor suffers, but he suffers in an ungainly, humiliating way. Mostly he suffers because even his family eventually avoids him, and is relieved when he dies. Back pain sufferers can experience a similar fate. Back pain isn't glamorous - it's not like Camille swooning romantically with tuberculosis - and after awhile even loved ones get tired of the whining. You can be a perfectly productive and cherished member of your family one day, and an annoying parasite the next. Not a pretty thought.



Having nothing better to do on the floor that day, I imagined this poem. I chose a somewhat “formal” structure – complete with a kind of meter and even rhyme! – because figuring it out kept me busy. Also, since *no one* writes formal poetry anymore, it struck me as slightly ridiculous, and in that sense underlined the absurdity of my personal situation. When I finally came to write it down, I played with a visual format for the stanzas that would remind readers of that awful *tweak!* in the spinal column that signals the onset of an attack.



**Choosing the Operation**  
(April, 2002)

Cataract surgery  
under local anesthesia  
means you get to watch  
while they do surgery  
on your eye

So you can see  
(although not too well  
because you're almost blind)  
as the sharp implements approach  
then make contact  
and the surgeon says  
"Incision made" or "Lens removed"

It's just like on TV  
You (the patient) lie politely and quietly  
while the surgeon cuts and sews  
Elevator music plays in the background  
Everybody else  
seems to like it

They chat  
about someone's baby shower  
whether the weather will be nice enough  
to go to Mexico this weekend  
and the new movie  
that's just come out

*You've* seen that movie!  
You could join in  
say something clever  
like how you couldn't really see  
the point of a movie  
that focused so single-mindedly  
on the absurdity of the human condition

But then you think  
*Wait!* This is an operation  
This is *surgery!*  
Somebody should be paying attention  
Somebody should be *really* concentrating  
So you decide this is what *you* will do—  
this will be *your* role



And you become absolutely focused  
You don't even bother  
to tell the surgical team  
that the leading man is about to get divorced  
from his third wife  
even though he only got married last year

It all goes pretty well  
except for the moment when the surgeon says  
"It's stuck"  
*And you wonder "What's stuck?"*  
And one of the nurses asks  
"What do you do when it's stuck?"  
And everyone goes to the other end  
of the operating table  
to discuss this interesting question  
so even though you're still concentrating  
*really hard*  
you can't hear the answer

But afterward  
ah, *afterward* you have a new silicon lens  
and you feel good, powerful, *bionic*  
The world looks crisper, brighter,  
somehow more hopeful  
And you decide to go see that movie again  
because maybe, seen with new eyes,  
it will make more sense.



*THE SARCOMA POEMS*

**Thunderstorm**  
(October, 2004)

Past the hospital  
a thunderstorm - unruly  
demons are unleashed



**Russian Dolls**  
(October, 2004)

As a child, not yet a woman  
I loved those Russian dolls-within-dolls  
The smooth, colorful, varnished surfaces  
of that red-cheeked, flowering babushka  
and (as I conceived it) her many daughters  
some happy, some pensive  
all safely tucked away inside the womb  
of their mother.

But the one I liked best  
was the last one of all  
The littlest daughter  
the tiny baby I claimed as my own

Now once again  
the magical dolls open up  
to reveal their secrets  
The scalpel carves neatly through the  
superficial flesh  
plunges deeper into the abdominal cavity  
then penetrates the core of womanhood itself –  
Oh marvelous uterus – home to such beautiful babies! -  
Still pure, still pure these dolls  
greeting each opening with a  
benignly smiling countenance

The knife keeps twisting  
into the innocuous fibroid resting securely  
within the uterine wall  
finally reaching the heterogeneous mass  
Of cells within

The tiniest doll of all  
leers back at the astonished surgeon  
with malignant eyes



**The Cradle**  
(October, 2004)

When you are so sick and feeble  
you can't get up from the bed  
the nurses will still change it  
They ingeniously  
position you  
knees bent, hands crossed against chest,  
on the upper third of the bed  
then unwrap the skillfully folded sheet  
and lift you until you are cradled  
swinging above the bed  
while they efficiently  
place sheets fresh and clean as Eden  
And you weep  
as a baby might weep  
seeking comfort  
seeking a wise mother  
who will make all the horror  
go away



**Sequential teds**  
(October, 2004)

Sequential teds are not a row of inconsequential little men  
known to their everlasting humiliation by a trivializing diminutive –  
No, they are uncomfortable, scratchy calf-length “boots”  
unstylish white cotton Velcro design  
But as Nancy Sinatra might say  
Should she ever need to wear a pair,  
“These boots are made for walking!”  
or more accurately put,  
these boot are made to do the walking for you  
if you find yourself in the unfortunate position of being a patient  
in a hospital bed  
supine, confined,  
unable to do your own walking

Sequential teds are another great American invention  
fueled by that other great American discovery  
(I was about to say ‘invention’ but even  
we Americans leave a few things to God),  
electricity. As my nurse explained  
(she herself was Filipina)  
“When Americans find a problem  
(she didn’t say death, suffering, anguish, despair,  
but I know these were included in the list -  
we Americans have these in our sights as well)  
they just fix it.”

Once in the grip of  
the sequential teds – and this grip can convince you that given half a chance  
at least one of these teds could have been a real man)  
you walk without walking  
It’s the abdominal exerciser – lose weight while you sleep! –  
come true at last!

Thanks to good old Yankee ingenuity -  
I knew we could do it -  
(death, pain, suffering finally erased)  
just a matter of time!  
And those sequential teds  
in their own inarticulate, heavy-handed way, do yeoman work  
Because who wants to go through the indignities –  
not to mention the expert time and precious resources expended! –  
of abdominal surgery for a complex endometrial sarcoma,  
make it out of the OR, past the morphine induced glow,



past the headaches, nausea, clear liquid diet,  
pain, pain, pain,  
plastic-tasting food, determined cheerfulness of nurses,  
awkward conversations with the visiting well,  
constipation,  
resigned recognition in the eyes of your fellow travelers,  
existential despair –  
to be *recovering* for God's sake  
Doing your patriotic red white and blue best to *get better*  
overcome the odds, get back to being a productive member of society -  
only to be carried off unexpectedly one night by a random blood clot.  
How un-American.

And that's why the teds are there  
While you sleep they walk, keeping you safe from yet one more vicious assault  
from that random, unpredictable universe that must have been invented in Europe,  
probably France  
just one more un-American phenomenon we will surely soon put to rest alongside  
weapons of mass destruction, suicide bombers, Bin Laden, and  
lack of appreciation for the freedoms we've bestowed  
on yet another undeserving country  
After all, what is cancer really but a mass of unruly, violent, terrorist cells?

Hospitals are full of nifty devices  
like my good friends the sequential teds  
IV lines, monitors, bed rails, open-back hospital gowns  
They keep you safe  
and they keep you tame  
and any redblooded American is grateful for their vigilant presence  
guarding the destabilized perimeter

Still, lying in hospital  
at unguarded moments  
waiting for the pathology report  
to give a definitive ruling on  
the complex mass of unknown origin  
that will decide my life or death  
I sometimes dream  
of rising from my bed  
gently extricating from the determined embrace of the teds  
leaving gracefully behind the functional and humiliating hospital gown,  
the tethered cord of the IV drip  
the bleep of the monitor  
to roam the silent corridors of pain and suffering and death  
naked, unencumbered, free



**The Hospital Bed**  
(October, 2004)

The modern hospital bed is  
a thing of wonder  
Maybe not in the same league  
as the Sphinx – it lacks  
perhaps this marvel's ancient  
awe and mystery  
Nevertheless it is something  
to regard with awe  
with its crisp, clean, expertly  
formatted fitted sheets,  
its electrical ability to  
move up down feet head,  
its polished rails,  
it is indeed a thing of wonder.

While a carefully crafted mannequin  
might enhance the amazing properties  
of the hospital bed,  
to put a real patient  
in such a contrivance is  
always a complication

The patient has no appropriate sense  
of shock and awe  
(the patient is usually shocked, but only because her puny  
existence has taken a turn for the worse, and this kind  
of shock is incompatible with true appreciation for  
the hospital bed)

Furthermore, the patient  
is disheveled, unkempt, oozing bodily fluids  
Again the antithesis of  
the bed's pure and utter cleanliness

In the bed, the patient lies  
either huddled in pain or  
flung about in haphazard exhaustion  
both postures violating completely  
the precision and composure of  
the hospital bed

Under the circumstances, it is  
easy to see why anyone in the



presence of the bed would be tempted  
to give its inhabitant a thorough  
cleansing, improve her posture,  
or kick her out entirely.  
Medicine in general  
without the patient  
is so much simpler.



## **Waiting**

(November, 2004)

The bad news is  
You might have ovarian cancer  
The good news is  
You might not  
Wait two weeks  
We'll do surgery  
To find out.

You scream, you rage  
You revise your will  
But you wait two weeks  
Which seem like two years  
Then surgeons split you  
Down the middle  
Peel you apart with retractors  
Plunge in, snip and cut

You scream, you rage  
It hurts like hell  
Morphine gives you a headache  
And makes you nauseous  
But at least you'll know  
Or not

The first pathology report  
Is pretty positive  
We think you have a  
Leiomyosarcoma  
(are you kidding?  
Is that a real medical name?  
It sounds like a bad  
Country and western song)  
Which hardly ever comes back  
And which we can't really do much about anyway  
So – you might as well forget about it.  
But you'll have to wait a week  
Till we know for sure.

Being a good patient,  
You forget about it for a week  
You have the occasional nightmare  
And the less-occasional panic attack  
(What if it's not country & western?)



but you wait  
Then they call you with the *real* path report  
Oops! It's not lie – oh- my-oh  
(Although it *was* a kind of lie)  
Instead, we think you have  
Endometrial stromal sarcoma  
(this one doesn't even sound fun)  
only it could be either the high-grade  
which kills almost everybody in  
about two years  
or the low-grade, where you have  
a fighting chance  
to stick around awhile longer  
we have to consult with a superlab  
so you'll have to wait two more weeks

You rant, you rave, you sob,  
You are a crazy person  
When the two weeks are up  
They're pretty sure it's the good kind of  
Bad kind  
And they wish they'd known that  
When they did the surgery  
Because they would've done  
A different kind of operation  
But it probably won't affect  
"your outcome" anyway.

So now you know.  
There is nothing more to wait for.

When they pass out these diagnoses  
They should pass out the xanax and  
The prozac as well  
They should give you the number  
Of a suicide hotline  
They should schedule you for therapy  
Five days a week  
They should look at your face,  
Look in your eyes  
And say, this is going to be really, really tough  
They should give you a hug  
They should say,  
Call me if you need to cry.



**Sarcoma Haiku**  
(October, 2004)

All the crying, all  
The clinging – death sits patient  
But implacable

**Remember This**  
(October, 2004)

Remember this  
This purple flow'r  
This silv'ry green leaf  
This still fountain  
Beneath the earth  
Beauty must be  
A memory

**In the beginning, one**  
(October, 2004)

In the beginning, one  
Then marriage, two  
Then baby, three  
Then two more babies, five  
Then two again  
But now three  
My man, my cancer,  
And me



**Here is my body**  
(November, 2004)

Here is my body  
I know its wounded places  
Here a scarred remnant  
Here an imperfect healing  
Fissures and canyons of pain  
Flowers of suffering  
In steps now uncertain  
The body still stumbles  
Forward. It is ready  
I am ready  
Hineini  
Here I am.



## **Tarot Cards**

(November, 2004)

All of a sudden in my life  
The news is never good  
We've found a mass  
It could be cancer  
You need surgery  
It is cancer  
It could be fatal  
Sorry, it is an orphan cancer  
No one knows much about it  
We think it is too big  
To just watch and wait  
We can try this approach  
But there's no proof it works  
You'll probably have  
Recurrences  
Maybe more surgeries  
If you're lucky.  
We save radiation  
And chemo  
To the last  
Because they're not  
All that effective.

I think of myself  
As a scientist  
I've been trained to believe in  
Numbers, data, evidence  
But in their absence  
In a world of bad news  
I now read my  
Fortune cookies  
With more care  
I pay attention  
When friends dream  
They see me healed and whole  
I scan the papers  
For improbable happy endings  
And when my eighty-five year old mother  
Reads the tarot cards for me  
And pronounces them  
Just beautiful, not a single  
Black card among them  
I am consoled.



**The Transformation of Water**  
(November, 2004)

In the beginning was the Word

Across a great body of water  
a Japanese scientist  
fills beakers with  
molecularly identical  
water samples  
then affixes labels to each:  
joy, rage, peace, despair  
when next he analyses  
the beakers' contents,  
each contains a radically  
altered organization  
of molecules –  
water transformed  
by words

Outside the Cancer Center  
I pause, watching translucent  
beads and rivulets of water  
cascading down  
a decorative stone wall,  
seeking words  
powerful enough  
magical enough  
to change the  
molecular structure  
of sarcoma  
or at least transform  
the fear of death



## Statistics

(November, 2004)

As a scientist  
when I first became ill  
I obsessively asked my doctors  
for the numbers:  
What is the survival rate  
at 2 years? 5 years?  
How many  
are alive  
10 years out?  
The doctors gave me numbers:  
80%, 30%, 65%, 72%, 20%  
I was possessed  
by the statistics  
Maybe this study is newer  
Maybe the treatment approach differed  
Maybe this sample was contaminated  
No matter the number  
I kept asking.

Then one day  
I found the perfect answer  
the one true answer  
heavier than lead  
lighter than air  
more precious than gold

Sitting in the office  
of the sarcoma specialist  
in a moment of grace  
I gazed past the doctor  
toward his kind-faced nurse.  
Tell me, Susan, I said,  
Is there a chance  
I will dance  
at my grandson's  
bar mitzvah?

Her eyes perfectly  
untroubled  
gazed back.  
Life is so  
Unpredictable, she said.  
Go buy a dress.



