

V A N D E R B I L T U N I V E R S I T Y M E D I C A L C E N T E R

HOUSE ORGAN

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July 2009



Summer Reading 2009

Memories of the Moon

BY WAYNE WOOD

This was not Dancing with the Stars—this was Walking on the Moon.

It was 40 years ago this month that all over the world people gathered around televisions and watched live pictures of two Americans walking on the moon.

I guess it was the time and place that I grew up, but I still find that absolutely amazing. In fact, I think when it's discussed, we're way too casual about it. The words should slow down so that we can give proper weight to their meaning: People. Walked. On. The. Moon. On. Live. Television.

I remember that day, July 20, 1969, as being like any other summer Sunday.

My family gathered at my grandmother and grandfather's house. I was there with my Mom and Dad and brother, along with assorted aunts and uncles and cousins.

I was 11 years old, and this Sunday gathering was typical. We would meet for Sunday dinner, and the children would go off to the side yard to play ball or chase each other around, and the adults would sit under the shade trees in the front yard and talk about the weather, or the children, or how the garden was doing.

This particular July Sunday was different, though, because these topics of conversation were overwhelmed by the fact that astronauts were getting ready to set foot on the moon.

Being 11 years old at this moment meant that I had been almost three years old when the first manned flight took place, and literally could not remember a time when the current events of the day didn't include a regular diet of space shots and near-deification of astronauts.

Those of you who are older had more context. My grandparents, at

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Tachycardia

What is really going on in the mind of the patient in 6018? Jeff High of Cardio-Thoracic Surgery imagines the world of a man facing his last night on earth.



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Lessons from the Morgue

Friends told medical student Akshitkumar Mistry that he should spend some time observing in a morgue to help decide if medicine was his career choice. He'll never think of a stick of gum the same way again.



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Nonfiction Winner

Love Wrote the Letter

What happens to a family when three new sons come for Christmas? Marti Young of Student Health shows how love, and a letter, can heal wounds to the heart.



Online Extras:

Check out honorable mentions in poetry, fiction and nonfiction at <http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/houseorgan/>

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House Organ is the magazine for the staff, faculty, volunteers, and students of Vanderbilt University Medical Center. It is published monthly, with a combined December/January issue, by the Office of News and Public Affairs of VMC. News stories, ideas, and suggestions are welcome, and should be sent to *House Organ*, CCC-3312 Medical Center North, Nashville, Tenn., 37232-2390. E-mail: Wayne.Wood@Vanderbilt.Edu.

The paper used to print *House Organ* is recycled and recyclable.

Vanderbilt University is an equal opportunity, affirmative action university.

Editor and Ex. Director of New Media and Electronic Publications: Wayne Wood

Director of Publications: Nancy Humphrey

Staff Writer: Leslie Hast

Photographers: Joe Howell, Mary Donaldson

Designer: Keith Wood, Vanderbilt University Creative Services

Stories for a Summer Night

Featuring the winners from the House Organ Writing Contest



This is the annual Summer Reading issue of *House Organ*, featuring the winners of the *House Organ* Writing Contest.

The winner of the Fiction category is Jeff High of Cardiothoracic Surgery, whose story "Tachycardia" is about a dying patient and a caregiver who spends a long night shift wondering what paths led the patient to that bed on that night.

The Nonfiction category winner is "Love Wrote the Letter" by Marti Young of Student Health, a story about building a family and what the bonds of love can do.

The Poetry winner is "Lessons from the Morgue," by medical student Akshitkumar Mistry, a powerful meditation of life and death and the surprising connections between the two.

There were almost 50 entries to the Writing Contest this year, and the quality of the entries as a whole was impressive—again presenting ample evidence that the Medical Center is full of writers walking around disguised as normal people.

But the stories and poems don't stop there: more honorable mentions are on the *House Organ* Web site at <http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/houseorgan/>.

There you'll find:

Fiction honorable mention "Packrat" by Mandy Bailey of the Pediatric Echo Lab, in which a basement cleanup project turns into a memorable adventure in the past.

Poetry honorable mentions "Finding Nancy" by Susan Roberts Cope of NICU, about trying to get somewhere in the maze of Medical Center North; and "Ode to a Shoe" by Frances Smith-House of Pediatric Infectious Disease, about "Jack the Labradog" and his destructive shoe-eating habits.

Thanks to everybody who entered the writing contest and, on behalf of those whose work is here and online, thanks for reading.



PHOTO BY JOE HOWELL

**That endless tachycardia rhythm line has
jumped off the monitor and roped itself
around my head, pulling me in.**

***Who are you, 6018?
How did you slide so far, so young?***

TACHYCARDIA

BY JEFF HIGH

Cardio-Thoracic Surgery, Main OR



6:52 PM, Room 6018, Heart rate: 152bpm

Sid always chewed gum while he gave report. It was a mindless habit. It occupied him.

He was large, overweight actually. He filled up the rolling armchair. He sat and chewed and talked his way through each patient on the monitor screens. He was good at what he did. As monitor techs go, perhaps the best. But he was bored. He was 42, divorced, and spoke with little inflection. He was putty faced with a mop of hair and heavy glasses. His fingers were thick and moved woodenly over the keyboard. I liked him, though. He was professional and detached; a measure short of cynical. It seemed part of the job description, the mindset. I had learned it from him.

There were three screens laid out with EKG blocks to monitor the heart rhythms of up to 36 patients. We covered several floors. Tonight we were at 33, pretty full. Each block was a little chaos of colors, differentiating patient name, room number, thresholds, heart rate, Irritating, bonging alarms. The EKG lines worked their way from left to right. More often than not they were irregular, fatly curved instead of sharp, undertoned with fatigue, geriatric.

It was shift change. The phones were ringing. Nurses frantically paired up; bedside talk, reciting numbers, conveying patient details, wearing game-faces, exchanging subtle glances packed with non-verbals. There was a frenzied movement of equipment, a hand-off of pagers, a cacophony of voices, noises, commands, methodical report. Clusters of white coats passed; intense young faces, posturing, jockeying for position. Families stood by in silence, hovering in doorways with drained and anxious faces.

Sid's voice droned on sonorously, flatly baritone; methodically, indifferently calling out rhythms, events, short histories. But I couldn't hear any of them. They were drowned out. It was room 6018. It was screaming at me. Through the fog of noise and confusion it was the only thing that did not fit. On the second monitor, fourth block down, Room 6018 was beating off the chart. Instead of the familiar dull sputtering waves, it was a perfect saw blade. It was a sinus rhythm, a healthy heart. Normal was 60 to 100 beats per minute. But it was on an Olympic sprint, a metronome on jet fuel, a blistering tachycardia.

"Sid. Hey. Sorry to interrupt. But, 6018. What the heck is that?"

"Hmm? Oh yeah, him. Interesting story. Little guy from one of the rural counties. Staggered into their ED. They shipped him up here. Sinus tach all day, above 150. Twenty-seven year old." Then he tilted down his head so he could look at me above the rim of his glasses. He paused for effect. His tone was now measured, superior, laced with contempt. "Full blown AIDS." He punctuated the words with a short nod.

"Wow, that's different." I paused. It still didn't assimilate. "How come no alarms?"

"Got the threshold set at 170. There's your reason." He pointed to the bottom right corner of the patient block on the monitor screen. Typed in neat capital letters was DNR-DNI; do not resuscitate, do not intubate. It was medical speak for "let 'em go."

I was mesmerized. There was no category for this, no proper filing. I stood there, holding my lower lip between my teeth. Moments passed.

"You okay?"

Sid's voice reached into the void. It grabbed me. He was staring up from the corner of his glasses. The look was calculated.

"Yeah..... oh yeah." The initial response was blurted. Reality had returned. He continued.

"Apparently he's a nasty one. Pulled his leads off several times. The day nurse was pretty put out. Quiet, though, for the last couple of hours."

"What'd they do, morph him?" It was code, a private language; short for morphine. We weren't nurses, but we knew things. Morphine was given for pain. But it also repressed the respiratory response, the body's inducement to breath.

"Nah. He just wanted something to draw with."

"Draw with?"

"Yeah, pencil and paper. Quiet as mouse since."

I stared silently at Sid, absorbing the words; shaking my head. Sid shrugged his shoulders.

Sid finished report. He hoisted his significant bulk from the monitor chair and gathered his things. He began his amble toward the time clock. As he passed in front of me across the nurse's station counter, he gave his usual salutation. "See you in the morning sport. Keep 'em alive till 7:05."

The sound and the fury receded. One by one all the medical staff exited stage left or stage right from the nurse's station, leaving only Carol, the Medical Receptionist and me. She didn't talk much. It was her best trait.

Time to settle in; run strips for the nurses, review some patient rhythm histories, and finally, try to figure out how, short of setting myself on fire, I was staying awake for the next 12 hours. A couple of minor patient alarms went off; just garbage stuff. A few patients had their leads off so you have to call. I hate chasing nurses. Everything is now set up. I look at the clock. Crap, only 45 minutes in. I hate the night shift. I'm hungry.

7:38 PM, Rm 6018, HR: 144bpm

I'm staring. I can't stop it. That endless tachycardia rhythm line has jumped off the monitor and roped itself around my head, pulling me in.

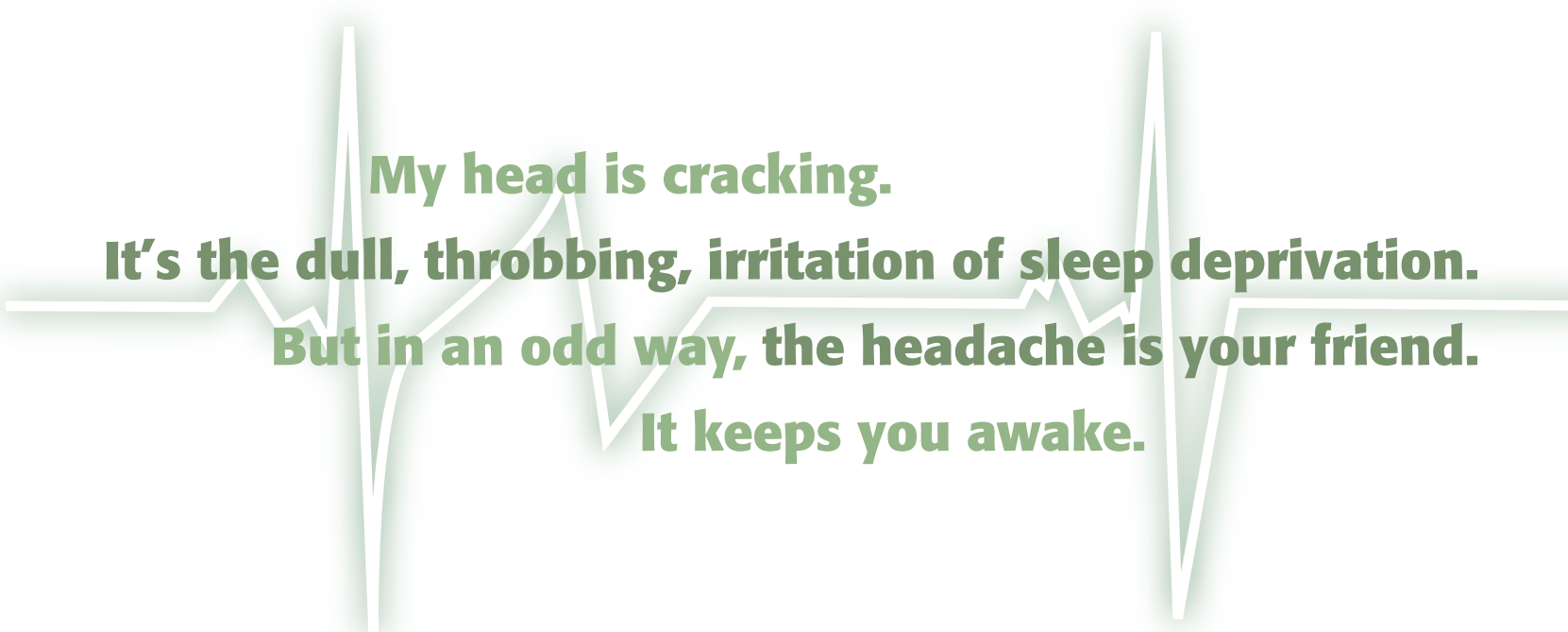
Who are you, 6018? How did you slide so far, so young?

All right, that's it. I'm calling.

The receptionist one floor up tells me his nurse is Estelle. That's good. She likes me. For months I had made it a point on breaks to go talk to the nurses, make a connection. It made the job easier. Estelle was short and round. She had more of a fast waddle rather than a walk. Never married, a single mom. But she had this gorgeous smile and flawless, creamy, milk chocolate skin. I had told her so. She liked the attention. A good nurse, she knew her business. Our conversations were amusing, flirtatious, ripe with subtlety. I asked the receptionist to have her call me.

Ten minutes later the phone rang. "You just wanted to hear the sound of my voice, didn't you?" Typical Estelle. No hello, no introduction. Just a natural assumption that you knew. Her words fired out quickly. She was in a good mood.

She told me his last address was some place south of Waynesboro, no driver's license, no real ID. Mother died three years ago. Cancer. No father, no other family listed. He was here alone. A rehabilitated druggie; got the HIV from needle use. He was small, thin, plain, quiet. He dozed some. But when he was awake, his eyes were observant, intense, brooding.



**My head is cracking.
It's the dull, throbbing, irritation of sleep deprivation.
But in an odd way, the headache is your friend.
It keeps you awake.**

"They giving him anything for the tachycardia?"

"No sugar. His heart is all he's got left going for him. Everything else is shutting down. That little fellow is catching the angel bus, and soon. He doesn't look good at all. I've been checking on him, trying to talk to him. But he doesn't want anything. He sleeps some. A couple of times I passed by and he was drawing on that paper tablet.

"What's he drawing?"

Beats me. Like I say, he's not talking. Least ways, not to me. Someone gave him one of those little Bibles so maybe he's saving up for a bigger pow-wow. Probably not a bad idea. Anyway, why are you all business tonight? Something wrong with his leads?

"Nah, just curious."

"Gotta go. Come love on me sometime."

I hung up the phone, hoping that Estelle's words would quell the curiosity. All was quiet. Occasionally, minor alarms would sound; just more garbage. But the curiosity raged. The electricity of his heart was incessantly racing across the monitor, shrieking for attention. Housed in the dark of his fragile and unfurnished chest, his panicked heart was fashioning a hero's effort to compensate, stand in the gap. But it was an inevitable slide to exhaustion. I don't want to care. But my mind churned. I was sketching the pieces, weaving together the fabric of this feebly tethered life.

Time yawned. The minutes edged sluggishly into the deep of the night. The dull headache of fatigue was setting in, the wages of uncaptured sleep. I drifted.

Who are you? What was your life? Were you the result of some pledge of love, a bartered innocence, a broken bond, or just the random consequence of vacant passion? Did the world look upon your arrival eager with promise or did you enter only to find a land of shadowed rooms, meager supply, despondent voices, scant mercies? Did you ever know your father? Did he look into the well of your infant eyes and bury his voice deep within your memories? And sheltered in the drape of newborn sleep, when all dreams were new, was that your greatest peace?

"You gonna get that?"

"What?" I responded.

"That phone, you gonna get that phone?" It was Carol, the medical receptionist. She wasn't happy. Apparently my phone had rung several times. Her voice was acidic, unsparing, smoldering; it pulled me back into orbit.

It was a nurse from upstairs. One of her monitored patients was leaving the floor for a short while. Probably for a respiratory break with lady nicotine. I put his monitor on standby. I glanced over at Carol. She was absorbed in her paperback; content, oblivious. Somebody from housekeeping drifted by. Out of view behind me I could hear the voices of some nurses; idle chatter as they pulled drugs from the Pyxis. My head hurt. I stood for a few moments. Carol looked up at me, expressionless. She returned to her book. I sat down and took long deep breaths, trying to stay awake with extra oxygen. But in only scant moments, my thoughts returned to 6018.

What was your young life like? Did you venture with wonder in to that curious world of the classroom, only to find yourself a stranger? You were small, uncertain, turned inward. Were you the prey of the school yard, hounded by laughing bullies?

You draw. Was there a kind word, an approving smile, a doting teacher that offered some small victory in those fragile years? Was it with charcoal and paper that you first discovered solace from your loneliness? And yet, did you still yearn to be part of the pack; to year by year create an acceptable counterfeit of yourself, to act out a version of yourself that found a place, a role to play? Or were you always cast as the outsider, a shadow, uncertain of your part, quietly, desperately searching for an entry into the light and fellowship?

When adolescence came with all its' confusion, rant, and shame, was that the start of your unraveling? Did those turbulent years stoke the fires of a brooding intensity, a raging furnace? Did you wake each day to a lonely world that moved your angry heart to slowly abandon the voices

of pew and steeple? Did bitterness set in, forcing you in your disillusion to hold in contempt those things that were previously wrapped in wonder? No longer content to mask your desolation, in the vibrancy of your middle teens, did you boldly declare the marks of your separation from the crowd; hair, clothes, cigarettes, the dark face framed with boredom and apathy? Did you find yourself bored with all of life, recklessly pursuing some ever new passion, finding fault and contempt in everyone you knew, never truly caring for anyone, and desperately seeking a means to quell the unending disapproval and hatred of yourself?

And finally, unable to fill the unplumbed wells of your solitude, you chose to medicate your pain. Under the foolish notion of youthful invincibility, you bore upon yourself the means of your own destruction. And there, sequestered in the fog of your secret life, your drug-induced delusions, did you find, if only for a moment, the peace that you were seeking? Did your intangible loneliness find solace, or was it hollow, an empty pleasure?

Alicia, the charge nurse was tapping on my shoulder. She wanted to know if I wanted lunch.

"Sure."

2:19 AM, Rm 6018, HR: 120bpm

6018 is sliding. He's dropped 25 bpm in the last couple of hours. Not good. The math doesn't work. He may not make it to daylight. I can't think about that right now.

Lunch was a chicken sandwich and 30-minute nap.

Why do they call it lunch? It's the middle of the frigging night. Right now the world is asleep, not eating lunch. Lunch will be tomorrow, with sunlight, not here, in the deep of night, watching the sputtering electricity of frail hearts. Except for you, 6018. Your heart is not frail. Just what is your name anyway? You have a name don't you?

I clicked on his screen block, causing it to expand. His first name was Samuel. I rolled the name around in my head for a few soundless moments. About then is when all hell broke loose.

It always starts with an alarm, a wicked annoying bonging. Room 6204, just across the hall, had an 8-beat run of Ventricular-tach. Not a good thing. It's a heart in panic mode. It gives me an adrenaline jump. But just as quickly, it returns to a gasping normal rhythm. I cut off the alarm, start printing the strip and paging the nurse. Bullet dodged. Then it bongs again. This time it's V-fib, and it's not stopping. This is a heart that's just quivering, not beating. If this goes on long enough, the next rhythm is a straight line. I'm yelling. Nurses begin to emerge from everywhere. Carol overhears the code. White coats rush down the hall with sleepy, frenetic faces. Someone's yelling for the crash cart. I let the paper strip run constant. It's protocol. I'm standing, pointing, shouting across to the room "Still in V-fib." The proximity is a luxury. You can't do this when they're on another floor. A code is always a combination of cool heads and chaos, an intuitive, spontaneous, unspoken assignment of roles. My part is already cast, but for the nurses and docs, it's often a fumbling assimilation of what character to play. Who calls out drugs, who grabs the cart, who does compressions, who charges the paddles. The room crowds up, frenzied voices, frantic words, commands are flying everywhere.

Finally, above all the noise and thunder someone yells "clear." Then it happens. The symmetrical beat of a normal rhythm returns. Everyone holds their collective breath, waiting, watching. Nothing changes. Still a normal rhythm. Silent looks of confirmation are exchanged, body language relaxes, the room exhales a group sigh. A few more commands are called out. But slowly, methodically, the players begin to drift away, retreating to their own small stage of responsibilities. It's over. Fortunately this drama was short, one act instead of three. And as always, the real hero was ol' sparky, the defibrillator.

I get everything together, all the strips and histories, waiting for the onslaught of residents who want to play 20 questions. It's the job. Being a monitor tech is like taking off, flying, and landing an airplane; moments of sheer terror followed by long hours of boredom.

It was shift change.

The phones were ringing.

Nurses frantically paired up; bedside talk, reciting numbers, conveying patient details,

wearing game-faces,

exchanging subtle glances packed with non-verbals.

4:40 AM, Rm 6018, HR: 87bpm

My head is cracking. It's the dull, throbbing, irritation of sleep deprivation. But in an odd way, the headache is your friend. It keeps you awake. The adrenaline from the earlier code has long passed. The nurses have somber, sleepy faces. There is a small rise of activity; getting vitals, blood draws for labs, dispensing meds. But for the most part, all is quiet again.

Come on Samuel, come on. Stay there, stay right there. You're in the norm. Hold there, stay there. Let the meds work.

Why is no one with you? Surely there must have been a girl. Perhaps a small frail thing like yourself, drawn to you for your passion, the unchecked furnace within. A girl, a sensuous, gently curved creature with yearning arms and tender eyes whose heart reached for you with a slender supply of strength. Was there that moment for you? That incredible cosmic moment of the knowing look, the spontaneous smile, the laughing, dancing eyes that glow with early love. But did your torment turn her away? Did you learn that even with her you found cause to exercise your talent for concealment? While pouring out the sad measure of your life into those sympathetic ears, did you only seal the plot of your inexpressible solitude? The story told, the mystery gone, was she gone also? Oh Samuel, why alone?

It's time to print the final patient EKG strips for the nurses. The 5 o'clock strips go in the chart. Something for the white coats to look at. A six-second captured moment that tells the story of an entire evening.

5:55 AM, Rm 6018, HR: 49bpm

The floor is warming up. Daylight starts to appear out the patient windows. Activity starts to crescendo. A cardiac step-down unit is like an extended holding room—you're either coming or going. Post-op patients are roused from precious sleep and made to walk around the unit; stretching muscles, measuring steps, inhaling deep volumes of oxygen. Pre-op patients are being scrubbed, shaved, assured. There's an energy that comes with daylight. It pours over you. You feel it. You know the shift will end soon. The last hour always passes quickly. For me, all the "to do's" are done. I'm simply waiting, watching, mesmerized.

Oh Samuel. What has been your life these past months? Poor and alone, broken and unsheltered, in the dust of forgotten streets. And now, what are you thinking? What words are left for a life that is measured in minutes rather than years? Are you bitter at the unkind patterns of fate? There you lie in solitude. Is there at least one voice in your dreams, one voice from the past that still whispers solace to your broken heart, one voice from childhood from which you can draw love and courage? A voice of tenderness, of complete acceptance, a voice that still edits your day? How

could you know you would possess a life that would always know hunger? Yet now your poor and tortured heart is slowing down. Why? All your days, your dreams, your rage, your shame, your tears have brought you forward to these final hours. And what are you drawing? In these closing minutes between the moments of sleep and dreams, what image still stirs in your memories? How can we know what moments will sway a lifetime? Where is our place? What is our part? Samuel, who were you, and why?

6:57 AM, Rm 6018, HR: 43bpm

I give report to Sid. Not even 7 and he is already chewing gum. I am about 4 patients in and then he interrupts. "So how'd our boy in 6018 do?" I cannot find words. I simply click on Samuel's expanded chart showing the gradual decline in beats over the course of the night. Sid shakes his head. But before he can speak, I glance at him sharply. I'm fatigued, inwardly furious. The look is hard and short. He sees it and doesn't speak. His face turns blank. There's a pause. He nods quietly, expressionless. I continue. I finish report and give Sid the chair. It's time to go home.

Out on the pavilion people are moving in all directions. There is a still and deep breathed silence to the morning. The glow of early light fills the space. The air is soft, warm. The dogwoods are out. The aromas of April push through the buildings and I walk my way across the bricks and concrete. It's Friday morning. I'm off for four days. I'm exhausted. I can't stop thinking.

8:54 AM. Room 6018. Asystole (flatline)

The resident looked into the faces of the medical staff gathered in the room. It had been 20 minutes. He released a deep sigh. "Okay, let's call it."

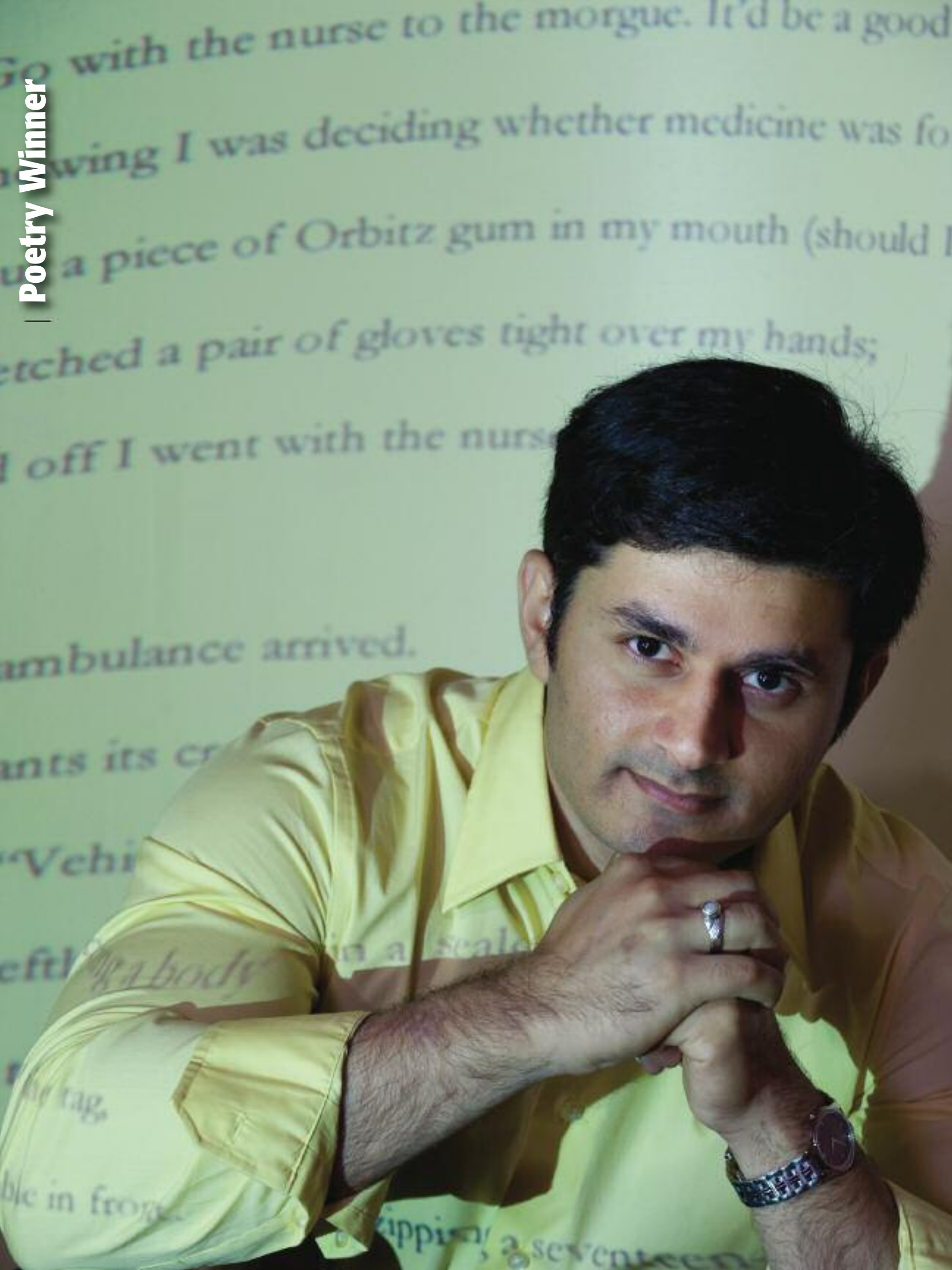
10:07 AM. Room 6018.

A housekeeper has pulled up all the blinds. Cleaning up rooms where the patient had died was always unsettling. Light seemed to cleanse it. As she swept up, she saw a piece of paper on the floor with the dirty imprint of a shoe. But when she picked it up she noticed that someone had drawn on the other side. It was the portrait of a woman in her middle years. Her features were delicate. She held her hand partially over her mouth in a pensive and worried manner. The tilt of her gaze was distant and sad. But her eyes were soft and accepting. And scribbled at the bottom in small, awkward lettering was the single word "soon."

By now, many miles away, I lie in the cool, silent air of my shaded room. For the moment, the questions no longer rage. It is the temporary and dulling opiate of deep sleep.

Back at the monitor station, the electricity of frail hearts still travels silently across the screens. Sid's chewing gum. And the nurses are well into the work of another day.

Poetry Winner



LESSONS FROM THE MORGUE

BY AKSHITKUMAR MISTRY
Medical Student

“Go with the nurse to the morgue. It’d be a good experience,” said the ER doc,
Knowing I was deciding whether medicine was for me.
I put a piece of Orbitz gum in my mouth (should I need to sustain my stomach),
Stretched a pair of gloves tight over my hands;
And off I went with the nurse to the morgue.

The ambulance arrived.
Like ants its crew came out carrying a body in a sealed bag
With “Vehicle Crash” written on the tag,
And deftly they placed it on the table in front.
“It’s a terrible one, this one,” said one, unzipping a seventeen-year-old boy.

A chill ran down my spine, holding me still at the very moment of his sight.
Torpid, pale with glass sprinkled all over him,
In a pool of his own blood was his ruptured head turned towards me.
With a mouth half-open, eyes sleepy but fixed on me,
Eerily he was communicating with me.

Lost, confused, I didn’t know what to do.
Helpless, almost insecure I felt.
How do I respond? What do I say?
I stopped chewing my gum.
That was all I could do: pay the respect.

The nurse searched his bloody pockets and found belongings—
Belongings that very much made him alive.
Pictures, a wallet, his driving license—he smiled—
And, a pack of Mint Orbitz—
Just like the one I had.

The nurse picked broken glass out of his mouth
And a white gum, too, red with blood, hiding beneath his floppy tongue.
I knew it was the gum he’d been chewing just minutes ago before the crash.
Just minutes ago, he was enjoying the very same flavor I was.
Images of him chewing that gum overflowed my mind.

I couldn’t keep my gum any longer.
I ran out and spat it.



LOVE WROTE THE LETTER

BY MARTI YOUNG
Student Health

We were five months away from our wedding when I met my now-husband's three sons, Chase, Chris and Sean. The October breeze whirled leaves around them like a cyclone as they stepped out of the car. I welcomed them in our home, telling each one of them how many stories their dad had told me about them.

Like bouncing puppies, my three children greeted them excitedly and quickly gave them a tour of the house. Bonding was immediate due to the closeness of the ages. My oldest son, Michael, was 11. Chase was 10. Chris was 9. Sean and my daughter, Keagan, were 8. Elijah, my youngest, was 5. Thicker than thieves, they ran through

the house playing everything from spies to superheroes. Craig, my husband, was thrilled. His boys had “taken to me,” and my kids “had taken” to them. Nothing made him happier.

That weekend I got to know his boys. Bright-eyed and sweet to the core, they told me stories of heartache and pain. They lived in a shed. They slept in tents. And there were forbidden secrets they said they could never share. I never pushed them. I would fold my arms around them in a big hug and tell them if they ever needed us, we would always be there. They would nod their heads and

sent ever.” They were upbeat and excited to “always have someone to play with.” They hurriedly ran off to make room for their new full-time brothers.

Gray, dismal rain fell as we arrived to pick up the boys. They quietly filed into our car. Their hugs were empty, defeated. My three welcomed them into the van with jubilation. Seeing that Chris’s eyes were swollen from crying, Keagan quickly began to tell silly stories to lighten the mood. Chase soon joined in. Sean remained silent and detached.

We made sure that every child got an equal amount of Christmas presents. Sean

I asked, stroking his red hair.

He nodded and burst into tears. His little arms reached around me and clutched me tight. I scooped him up and sat down in a chair. I rocked him while he sobbed. I can’t begin to describe the feelings that flooded through me at that moment. I can tell you that the most prominent of the emotions was anger. Not at this broken little boy in my arms, but at his mother. Who could put her child through this? All he wanted were answers and a normal life.

Wanting to unleash my personal thoughts on the entire situation, I held

As we were frantically preparing to visit his mother for the holidays, Craig got a phone call **that would alter everyone’s lives.**

walk away. Sometimes their shoulders looked heavy, like a burden too big to carry had been heaved upon them. I wondered if it was me.

On Christmas Eve, I found out it wasn’t.

As we were frantically preparing to visit his mother for the holidays, Craig got a phone call that would alter everyone’s lives.

The boys’ mother, Heather (whose name has been changed for this story), had been taken into custody for making meth in the home. We were to take the boys that evening, and retain full custody. The state was preparing to sever all child custody ties with their mother. As he told me about the phone conversation, I could see in my husband’s eyes a variety of emotions: anger, sadness, relief.

We had wondered if there was drug use. Craig had even cried over the helplessness of not being able to offer them a better life. We found out later that relatives around the boys knew that their mother was into drugs, but failed to do anything about it.

I sat on the bed as Craig quickly made preparations to welcome his boys into our home on a full-time status. I closed my eyes and fought back tears. *Those poor boys*, I thought. *Those poor little boys.*

Together, we called my children into our room and told them that Chase, Chris, and Sean would be coming home to stay. Instead of focusing on anything negative, I instructed the children to thank God for “the best Christmas pre-

finally stated that he wished his mother could have shared Christmas with us. The room went silent.

“I bet she would have liked that,” I told him and gave him a big hug.

On New Year’s Eve the inevitable question came. We were all sitting down to dinner when Sean, perhaps the most fragile of Craig’s crew, asked aloud, “So, what do we call you?”

All eyes turned to me, even Craig’s. I searched my heart quickly and laid down my fork. Knowing this situation was delicate for everyone, I prayed for the right words to say.

“I don’t care what any of you call me, as long as you know I love you,” I replied.

The children’s faces lit up with smiles. Craig’s face beamed. I suppose it was a good answer because after a few days, Chris began referring to me as “Momma.” Chase tested the waters with “Momma” and “Marti” intermittently for a few days. When all was said and done, though, he chose “Momma.” Sean held out for a few more days.

“Would it hurt your feelings if I didn’t call you Momma?” he asked while I was pulling a meatloaf out of the oven. I sat the food down and turned to him. His brow was furrowed and his cheeks were puffy like he was holding back buckets of tears.

“Why, no Sweetie, not at all.” I smiled.

“Because I just feel like I would be ... would be ...” tears filled his little eyes.

“You would be forgetting your mom?”

my tongue. Sean loved his mother dearly and I wouldn’t become an enemy by making a rash statement about her or her choices. I comforted him and told him that I was not there to replace their mother, rather, I was an added addition to the family for him.

“I’m a bonus!” I said. “So don’t you feel like you could ever hurt my feelings. I want you to call me what you want to call me. As for your mom, why don’t you write her a letter and I’ll send it out for you?”

Through sniffles, Sean nodded. I guess that was a breakthrough, because that night he began to call me “Momma,” too.

A tempest hit the house soon after that with a phone call from their mother calling from her rehab facility. Craig put the conversation on speaker phone to monitor what his ex-wife was telling the boys. The conversation was pleasant. Barely able to speak between sobs, Chris was the most emotional. Then Sean, in an innocent response to a simple question, referred to me as “Momma.” Dead silence on the line.

“I’m the only Momma you have,” she stated.

“No, I have two. And I love you both,” Sean responded.

After the boys had left the room, the verbal tirade began. Were we forcing them to call me “Momma?” Why were we hell-bent on pushing her out of their lives? This was Craig’s fault. We were turning her children against her.

It was not a pretty conversation. My

husband unloaded years of frustration about her parenting techniques and judgment skills. The conversation ended abruptly when Craig threw in a few choice words.

After the conversation (or yelling match, whichever you prefer) was over, I felt terrible. Craig was completely justified in stating that her choices put her in this situation. He was completely justified in stating that she had no right to say who they should call “Momma,” since she had made the boys call every boyfriend she shackled up with “Daddy.” Still, something was nagging on the inside of me. And I just couldn’t shake it. That is, until three days later.

I kept replaying the conversation in my mind. What was nagging me? Her view of me as a threat? That wasn’t bothering me. That was more or less expected. What was it? I searched my mind. Then it hit me. And I sat down at my computer and wrote their mother a letter.

Dear Heather,

I understand that there have been some rather heated conversations between you and Craig. Because of these unfortunate circumstances, I am writing you this letter.

First of all, no one is forcing Chase, Chris, and Sean to call me “Momma.” They asked me what I wanted to be called. Knowing the delicate nature of this situation, I merely told them that they could call me whatever they wanted, as long as they knew I loved them. They began calling me “Momma” because they wanted to. I didn’t feel it would be right to stop them since I had given them the choice. At no time were they instructed or forced to call me that.

I also have been encouraging them to write you letters. In fact, I am the one who has been mailing them to you. Please don’t ever think that we would try and force you from their lives. You are their mother, and they love you. For Craig and I to try and

“erase” you would make us enemies to them. And it would be unfair to force them to choose sides. So, as far as I am concerned, we are all on the same side ... period.

I have found old pictures of you that I have given to the boys. They have part of a wall devoted to pictures of you; you are by no means being forced from their lives. I can only begin to fathom what it must feel like for you to be going through all of this. As a mommy, my heart would be broken. I know yours must be, too. My worst fear would be for my children to be taken away to be raised by someone I don’t know. That I would be forgotten. And that an anger would harbor in their hearts against me.

I know you don’t know me, Heather. But these boys are being raised to love you and to understand that we all make mistakes. Some are just more costly than others. You have a chance to make things right with them. Get clean and stay clean. It will be a long haul, you know, getting trust from people. Take it day by day. Focus on recovering. Your kids are fine. Anytime you want to talk to them, call. When you get out, we will fix up visitations. The point of this letter is, from one mommy to another, to let you know that you will not be forgotten. And, you will be loved.

*Sincerely,
Marti Young*

With a sigh of relief and a sense of release, I dropped the letter into the mail slot. Getting ready for bed that night I told Craig about the letter.

“I don’t really care about her feelings,” he stated flatly. “I could care less. Look what she did to the boys!”

“I know, I know,” I replied softly. “But the tone of her voice on that phone wasn’t anger, it was desperation. It finally hit home that she had messed up. And as a mother, she deserves the respect to know that all is well with the boys. This letter will make things better for everyone’s future.”

A week later another phone call came to our home. Craig answered. With an inquisitive look he announced it was Heather, and she wanted to speak to me.

Through muffled sobs she whispered, “I just wanted to thank you so much for your letter. You will never know how much it means to me. I have it in my Bible and it’s given me strength to try hard—so hard I make it out and be OK. I read it every night. I even took it to group with me. Everyone in there has these terrible stories. And I read your letter out loud. People in there were crying, Marti, over your letter. Their families won’t let them see their children. And here you are, thinking of the boys and ME! To calm me down! I have cried every night over losing them. I have been so stressed out I can’t think straight, worrying and all. I will always have to pay for the fact I made a mistake. My payment is my boys. I’ll never have them living with me again. But at least I know they are in good hands. Not with someone who is poisoning them against me. Thank you. Thank you so much for setting my mind at rest.”

Smiling, I handed the phone to the boys. As Craig put the call on the speaker, Heather asked about the boys’ day and referred to me as “Momma Marti.” She told each one of them that it was OK to call me “Momma” because she knew how much I loved them. I watched their faces brighten as the feelings of their “betrayal” of her were cast off their shoulders.

What would have become of our family if I had not written that letter? I’ll never know. But I’m so glad that I heeded that inside nagging, that urging. It was love that wrote the letter. Love of some fantastic little boys. And in doing so, Chase, Chris, and Sean were no longer Craig’s boys to me.

They were my sons.

I kept replaying the conversation in my mind.

What was nagging me? Her view of me as a threat?

That wasn’t bothering me. That was more or less expected.

What was it? I searched my mind. **Then it hit me.**

And I sat down at my computer and wrote their mother a letter.

THE ROAD

BY KEVIN HIGH
Emergency Medicine

There is a road near where I live. I've traveled it since I was a young boy. It leads to the place I used to swim as a kid, it goes past my first girlfriend's house and it leads to the small farm to which I called home for many years. Many people travel the road daily and have so for years. Almost 150 years ago young men dressed in gray uniforms marched down the road; to fight in a great battle, and many of them died that day. The road is no stranger to death.

I've encountered death there also. Two places in particular bring back vivid images of two women and our meeting.

The first lady was in her 50s. She was on her way home and was involved in a small fender bender. She pulled over to talk with the involved driver, got out of her car and was promptly run over by a tractor trailer rig. The driver of the truck was intoxicated and unhurt. She was pinned beneath the rear axles of the tractor trailer. The EMS and local rescue squad called LifeFlight to assist with the treatment of the woman, and I was one of the flight nurses on duty that day.

I hate being called to accidents on the road as I am always scared it will involve a friend or loved one. As we circled around the accident site I noticed a large tractor trailer, a couple of crunched cars and it seemed like every fire engine, rescue truck and ambulance in the county. The pilot landed our helicopter in a nearby field; my partner and I carried our equipment through a ditch and crawled under the tractor trailer.

When I first saw her she was lying on her back. Her legs were crushed and imbedded with gravel, tar and dried grass.

She asked me to pray for her. I told her I would and went about helping free her. Her long hair was trapped beneath one of the dirty black tires of the tractor trailer.

I took out my trauma scissors and cut her hair from under the tire. As we worked to free her her level of consciousness diminished. A few minutes later we got her out and placed her in our helicopter. All the way back to Vanderbilt my partner and I did everything we could do: endotracheal tube, central lines, blood and IV fluid. We called ahead to Vanderbilt and requested to take her directly to the operating room.

We later heard that she died in surgery.

The truck driver, who lived nearby, was sentenced to prison.

A makeshift marker still shows the spot where the woman was hit. I go by it weekly and when I do I pray for her, and think about talking to her and cutting her hair.

The second woman I remember was also in her 50s.

It was a beautiful spring day and she and her husband were taking their newly purchased motorcycles out for a Sunday drive.

The woman was sideswiped by a passing vehicle, which suffered very little damage. One thing that my years as a trauma nurse have taught me: no matter if you have a helmet, have taken a safety course and are a careful person—if you wreck a motorcycle your chances of serious injury are great.

A passerby called 911 to report the wreck. He described it as "bad" and "involving an amputation." That was an enormous understatement. The 911 dispatcher called for LifeFlight.

As we made a reconnaissance pass over the accident scene I saw a large mark in the asphalt and a motorcycle on its side. The EMS personnel on scene were bent over the patient working quickly to get her ready for transport.

We landed in a nearby field and I walked up the road toward the patient and the motorcycle. The accident, as we had been told, indeed did involve an amputation. Her body has been shredded by the asphalt of the road.

I walked over to the patient and with a glance realized that she was going to die no matter what we did; it was just a question of time and place. The outcome of this was determined long before we landed next to the road. For the first moments she was still alert; she knew we were there and were trying to help her, but she was very pale; even her lips were white.

We loaded her in the helicopter, with an accompanying bag of parts of her body that had been severed in the wreck,

and began our efforts to keep her alive. She went into arrest just minutes before we landed at the trauma center. She was pronounced dead shortly thereafter.

On the road, a simple marker also marks the place where she died. The mark her flesh and blood left in the road washed away within a week after the first good rain. There's a nice crop of corn growing in the field where we landed. I pass by there often also, and I pray for her also.

As I drive down the road past those places, I choose to look back briefly at those incidents; I just try hard not to stare.

I've learned it's always good to keep my eyes on the road.

She asked me to pray for her. I told her I would and went about helping free her. Her long hair was trapped beneath one of the dirty black tires of the tractor trailer. I took out my trauma scissors and cut her hair from under the tire.

Honorable Mention—nonfiction

whose house we gathered that day, for example, had been teenagers when Charles Lindbergh flew the Atlantic, and had been born less than a decade after the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk.

Those of you who are younger have no idea of the excitement of that time. We were sure that soon it would be commonplace for people to travel to and live on the moon. There was a popular children's book called *You Will Go to the Moon*. We believed it.

So after the evening meal, instead of everybody saying their goodbyes and heading for home, we all worked our way into the living room and gathered around the floor model black and white television in the corner. The couch and chairs filled up, some extra chairs were brought in from the dining room, and some of us sat on the floor.

Eventually—I remember it as being late, but it probably wasn't—there was a fuzzy image that you could make out as the outline of the lunar module against a background of the horizon of the moon and black space beyond. Then a slow-moving, out of focus figure moved down the ladder from the spacecraft, and then he was standing on the moon. His name was Neil Armstrong, and soon he was joined by Edwin Aldrin.

As we drove home that night, I

leaned out the back seat window of our car, and looked at the moon, high in the dark summer sky. My Dad had the car radio tuned to a news broadcast and the voices of the astronauts came from behind the lighted radio dial. I didn't understand the science, I didn't understand the politics, but I knew that, at the age of 11, I had seen something extraordinary in human history.

This may be a grown man embellishing the feelings of the boy of long ago, but I remember feeling genuine awe. And I remember being thankful for being alive to see it.

Sometime in the early 1990s, Sharon and I were at Bellevue Mall, wandering around in search of something or another. I don't remember.

As we walked through the mall, I could hear somebody giving a speech in the stage area for speakers and public performances. The words grew more distinct as we drew nearer the center of the mall, and I could also see sort of a sparse crowd sitting around listening to the speaker. He was a tall man with white hair and was dressed in a light blue sport coat, and looked more or less like the proprietor of a prosperous golf accessories shop.

I heard him say something about the importance of education in

achieving goals and I was about to tune it out. Then I heard him allude to the Apollo project. I looked closer.

The speaker was Edwin Aldrin, astronaut, American hero, the second man to walk on the moon. His appearance was part of a promotion the mall was putting on that day in hopes of drawing in more shoppers.

He finished his speech to polite applause, and a few people came up and gathered around him to ask a question or shake his hand.

It seemed difficult to reconcile the decidedly non-heroic looking man at the mall with the figure I remember from when I was 11. There was a time in the summer and fall of 1969 when it was almost literally impossible to pick up a magazine or newspaper without seeing something about the astronauts who had landed on the moon. Their faces looked down from a million bedroom walls of young dreamers who thought they were going to follow their trail to the stars.

Well, for one reason or another, it didn't work out that way. I'm not going to the moon, and you aren't either. When Edwin Aldrin and I found ourselves at the same place, it wasn't in a space capsule, it was at a mall. A long way from that summer night in 1969, when anything, anything, seemed possible.



Robert Vantrease of Creative Services is the Medical Center's longest-serving employee, having begun work at age 20 in 1949. Recently some friends held a party in honor of his six decades of service. He chats with well-wishers Mildred Stahlman, M.D., and Patricia Sagen, Ph.D.