Foreword

Ten years ago, when Martin Blaser, the new Chairman of the Department of Medicine at New York University, decided to create a literary journal, no one anticipated what the BLR would become. The journal didn’t have a name yet or mission statement or design. That fall, Danielle Ofri, Jerome Lowenstein, and I sat in a small, windowless conference room at Bellevue Hospital, hammering out the details of the journal. We were excited about the idea of publishing work at the intersection of literature and medicine, although we didn’t know whether readers would be interested in these themes. And we had never run a literary journal. We learned on the job.

We brought on two poetry editors, Donna Baier Stein and Roxanna Font. The first issue of the BLR was published in 2001. Since then, we have continued to expand with additional fine editors, reviewers, and an advisory board. It’s been a privilege to read the 25,000 manuscripts that have come our way. We’re always touched by the submissions, although we can publish only a tiny fraction of them.

Recently, a reader wrote us a letter and objected to a story we had published. She felt one of the characters in the story was unfairly dismissive of nurses. Her letter caused us to think about the BLR’s goals. What can a reader expect from creative work about health, healing, and illness published in a literary journal?

Literary work about these themes differs from scholarly work, of course. Articles in medical journals must be fair, based on fact or rigorous research. A personal essay that appears in the BLR is grounded in fact as well, although the writer often expresses an opinion. But a short story and sometimes a poem create a fictional world. What does fiction promise us? How does the world of a story differ from a creative essay or scholarly article?

All readers bring their own experiences to a work of literature. The reader who wrote to us understood the objective reality of the medical world and the importance of a strong partnership between doctors and nurses. But fiction does not always reflect reality. A character can think what he or she wants. A short story allows a reader to enter another person’s mind, to be privy to thoughts that might not otherwise be expressed.

Fiction doesn’t promise us a measured view of life or even a fair view, and it doesn’t always present a flattering portrait of people or a profession. A short story provides the reader with the vision of one author and the perceptions of the characters in that story. Readers, like our letter writer, may be offended by a story or feel that a character is insensitive. However, this is the beauty of fiction: it allows the reader to live another life, experience a new perspective, journey into unfamiliar worlds.

This issue of the BLR captures a variety of worlds, some familiar, some not. In the poignant story “Girls, At Play,” by Celeste Ng, a group of girls usher a new student into the adolescent world of stealing, lying, and random sex. The narrator in Adin Bookbinder’s “Feet: A Love Story” recounts why he became a podiatrist, frankly admitting he doesn’t enjoy his work or have noble reasons for his choice of profession. Cortney Davis’s poem, “The Vocation of Illness,” elegantly captures the medical world that existed “before all the sweet nectars of relief we have today.”

Many pieces focus on family relationships and how they change because of time and circumstances. In his essay “Mathematics, God, or Magic?” Carey K. Bagdassarian explores, with a scientist’s determination, his relationship with his grandfather, the mating behavior of coyotes, and the meaning of life. The powerful, unsettling “Katie Ireland,” a short story by Hunter Liguore, takes the reader to Ireland during the potato famine, portraying one family’s struggle to survive. Mothers, their eccentricities, and aging are the subject of Guillermo Castro’s “Mom Poem Seven,” Lyn Lifshin’s “In the Dream,” and Elana Bell’s “The Shed.” Mary Akers’s story, “Like Snow, Only Grayer,” provides a striking portrait of the contemporary Bikini Islands, where the atomic bomb destroyed the lives of islanders and soldiers, redounding through generations. “Cycling,” a story by Heather Dewar, explores how death and widowhood alter a family’s constellation of relationships.

We are thrilled to report that Tinkers by Paul Harding, published by the Bellevue Literary Press, won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. We congratulate Paul Harding and BLP editor Erika Goldman on this stunning achievement. The BLP is a sister organization to the BLR and was founded five years ago by our nonfiction editor Jerome Lowenstein to publish full-length works on themes similar to the BLR’s. This is the first time in twenty-nine years that the Pulitzer Prize has been awarded to a book from a small, independent press. We hope you will take a look at the exquisite prose in Tinkers and also pick up the other fine books published by the BLP (www.blpbooks.org).

We hope, too, the work in this issue of the BLR—whether grounded in fact or fiction—will enrich and expand your world.

Ronna Wineberg
Senior Fiction Editor