Foreword

Tuberculosis has woven its way through the arts as the prototype of the romantic illness. In such classics as *The Magic Mountain* and *La Bohème*, TB serves as a medium for spirituality, love, and self-reflection. At Bellevue Hospital, TB is a far less romantic endeavor, more routinely associated with bloody coughs, raging fevers, and wasting away than it is with artistic delicacy. The Bellevue Chest Service opened in 1903 to deal with the tuberculosis epidemic at the time, and introduced many important new medical treatments. The epidemic waned, but the Chest Service never closed, and indeed was ready with open doors when tuberculosis reemerged with a vengeance in the 1980s on the coattails of HIV, homelessness, and drug addiction.

This year marks the centennial of the Bellevue Chest Service and the *Bellevue Literary Review* is delighted to honor it with a number of historical photographs scattered through our text, as well as an essay by Joan Reibman about the clinical experience of the Chest Service then and now. And in the tradition of Mann and Puccini, the BLR is honored to publish *A Room With No Door*, Megan Corazza’s haunting story of TB infecting a poor Nepalese family.

In the Spring 2003 BLR we also explore writing inspired by other illnesses, some with quite younger literary pedigrees than tuberculosis. Eisenmenger’s Syndrome, a congenital heart condition, is the illness—or perhaps the mark of health—against which all other lives are necessarily measured, in the delightful saga *My Blue Cousin* by Itzhak Kronzon. We also present two provocative writings on organ donation, from the perspective of would-be donors contemplating the profound issue of sacrificing their own body parts to save the lives of others. In H. L. McNaugher’s essay *Imminence*, the author wonders if she, now of legal age, will be called upon to donate a kidney to her mother, since the first donated kidney is failing. In Susan Ito’s story *The Liver Nephew*, issues of transplantation are jumbled with cultural expectations, family duties, and the clash of generations.

Psychiatric illnesses also provide potent inspiration for writers. Sheila Kohler, in her beautifully woven story *The Mask*, observes a young psychiatrist facing the reality of his own life, stirred by his meeting with a challenging patient and an older physician. In *MacNamara’s Ghost*, by Steve Fayer, the recollections of a psychiatric patient force his brother to rethink the premises of their lives. *Mood Swings*, a poem by Erica Funkhouser, provides a more piercingly accurate description of bipolar disorder than seen in a medical texts.

Orthodox and unorthodox medical treatments often rub against each other in ways that offer literary inspiration. *Ask Him If He Knows Jesus* is Clarence Smith’s tale of an open-minded but still skeptical medical student on a church-sponsored medical mission in Venezuela. Sandra Kohler’s poem *The Cure* explores the desperate need to heal the body and soul. In *wifebeat*, Michael Casey examines the chilling possibilities of no cure.

The BLR is delighted to present three prose-poems by Pulitzer Prize-winner James Tate. In a lyrical romp through humanity, Tate manages to cover birth, death, and the Easter bunny with uncanny wit and insight.
Several stories in the BLR explore sexuality. In Abraham Verghese’s poignant story, If Brains Were Gas, a thirteen-year-old girl explores life with her irrepressible but troubled uncle. In Youthful Acts of Charity, Marylee MacDonald takes her Rubenesque fifty-five-year-old protagonist on an adventure with a young Turkish tour guide.

The lives of doctors and their families take center stage in two stories. David Milofsky’s Differential Diagnosis features a neurologist debating the possible causes of her patient’s symptoms and her troubled marriage. In Home Free, David Bryant’s protagonist is a stay-at-home father balancing the challenges of raising a toddler and being a writer while his wife struggles through her residency training.

This is the fourth issue of the Belleveue Literary Review. We are pleased to offer a widening range of writing on the human condition. The prism of health and healing, illness and disease, and the human body and mind offer vast possibilities. We hope that you enjoy the fare. A read through the Contributors’ Notes will highlight the outstanding assemblage of authors who have helped the Belleveue Literary Review become a unique voice in literature.

Danielle Ofri, MD, PhD
Editor-in-Chief