**Winning Story 2022 by Maris Scanlon, UCD**

*The August I burned my legs in Mexico*

Feedback from Roddy Doyle

“A tale of two doctors, or a portrayal of two very different doctors, narrated by someone who is both patient and student; this story is structurally ambitious and very successful. It is very clever without seeming too clever. It is packed with vivid images and arresting words and language, yet it flows beautifully. A very satisfying, enjoyable read. A little bit more clarity about ‘where’ and ‘when’ would have made it even better.” \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I am dreaming again, humid dreams about fire and skin and serpents. I feel I have been bitten. There is a snake in my bed, licking my legs. But the serpents were driven from this island by St Patrick, and that was many years before your arrival. San Patricio sent them to the Yucatan, home to Quetzalcoatl’s beckoning warm red mouth. They fled into the sea. I am trying to wake myself up. Trying to guess the time.

It’s 5:15AM and it is a Tuesday. Tuesdays are the day the senior doctor makes fun of us. It’s on his schedule, pencilled right in there during clinic. An absurd quantity of students follow him in and out of patient rooms. We watch the doctor tell a 37 year old woman there are seven separate tumours inside of her and that’s three too many to operate. She has young children and she says that she doesn’t want to die. She is pleading, calling him by his first name.

One night I pitch my tent on the beach. There are so many stars that I want to cry out.

The woman is crying now. One of my colleagues is writing furiously in their notebook. The other is tex-ting. Her husband twists his hands. I am trying not to look. I am thinking - what on earth are you writing in your notebook. I am thinking about the colour of the exam table. It is bright blue. Colour of lobelia flowers. Gecko tongues. Yucatan water.

Next we watch him touch a series of hairy hernias. They belong to men who pick up heavy things for a living, including a funeral director with slick black hair who tells us he cannot drop a body absolutely not. Then we go back in his room and he takes turns mocking us before a break for coffee. He eats a scone and we wait, hands folded. In surgery they teach you to put your hands on the patient when you’re scrubbed in. This is so that you don’t touch anything outside the sterile field. I feel like a toad on a rock when I have my hands perched on a blue-draped leg. Like I’m waiting for a fly. Something to make me spring. Later that night as I burned I ran into the black water.

Skin continues to burn underneath even when the actual fire is out. The heat travels down through the layers, killing cells as it moves towards the bone.

The blisters were already forming, I could feel them fill with sea water as I stood in the shallows looking out at the squid boats. There was no ice in the car because the day had been so hot, all that was left in the cooler was the swill water surrounding some cans of flat beer.

When we are back in his room he asks more trivia questions. Makes us dance. He is looking at me. He coughs. Colon cancer goes to the liver and the lungs. In the morning you found no doctor in the vil-lage because it was a Sunday. Even the nurse was at home, napping in the heat. A man came out of his house when he saw you standing by the closed clin-ic with the pink cement walls. With his dog he went into the forest and when he came back he had aloe. Ah-low-eh. Thick, it was dripping thick juice onto the clay dirt road. The surgeon has spittle in one corner of his mouth which you can see because his mask is down. How cool that aloe felt on your burned legs, cool because it came from a plant sitting in the canopied shade, and as you rode in the car back up the peninsula to the town where there was an open clinic, a Red Cross clinic, you pressed it to your legs and counted iguanas to distract yourself. And those two paramedics, gosh they must have been no older than seventeen, were so gentle with you and they cut away the aloe and flax bandages and they swabbed away the sand. Pebbly granulation tissue takes a few days to form and it is a good sign. ‘Proud flesh’ is when there’s an exuberance of it. The body almost heals itself too well. I spring. He pauses. Turns to the door, lopes out. We follow.

Ward rounds themselves are a different beast. We come in to stand, early in the bright light, and bear witness to the multiple bodies all in different states of disarray. The smell is dense, warmed by the radiators. A loud blue plastic curtain can be pulled around each patient. It’s more for the performance of privacy, but we pull it anyway. The local hospital was small and it was achingly white. The colour of bones licked clean. In the waiting room they weigh you, take your history, look under your tongue. Death and sickness are a public affair here. Porfirio is the doctor who calls me from the white waiting room. I like his name; it sounds like both a request and a prayer. He says he was named for the president, Porfirio Díaz. Poor Porfirio, they exiled him and his wife to France and that is where they died.

My Porfirio is pleased with how I am healing. He tells me that I can go in the lake. He is going to tell me how to hire a longboat but then he is called away to attend to a nun. At least we have the intern, with her big brown eyes and her gentle way. The intern cannot protect us from the senior doctor but she can buffer the effects of one of the registrars, the one with the round face of a mean cop.

She was praying in the hospital chapel before her gallbladder surgery. As she knelt, asking the Virgin Mary to aide the good doctors in its speedy removal, she had one knee on her oxygen line. In the throes of revelatory ecstasy she would not have noticed the oxy-gen slowly being cut off to her brain, indeed it might on-ly have enhanced her pious visions. A janitor heard a bang and there she was found, prostrate at the Virgin’s feet, lips, gums, eyelids turning blue.

Perhaps he doesn’t like us for confusing apple core with lead pipe with shoe string. Or perhaps it is because the intern is learned in the ways of tactful absence, so the next target for bullying by the senior doctor is him. I don’t really listen to the registrar. I swim laps in my head. The lake is special because nothing lives in the lake besides that which you imagine. They say they threw witches in the deepest parts but I don’t think that is true. The lake is high in calcium from the lime stone that gives it its seven colours. If you have recently burned your legs with candles it is quite an aseptic place to swim.

Hospital lights are either on or off. There is no gentle dimming, no nurse stooping at the bedside with a can-dle and kind eyes. Our last patient of the day is a man dying of stomach cancer. He has the face of a mountain climber, face of someone who knows the outdoors. They are unsure if he understands what is happening because they haven’t found a translator. I look at the green grapes he has in his lap. There is a very, very small spider on the stem of one of them and I hope that both he and the spider can make it out alright. One day when I was convalescing, I let a majana into the house. Mami was very angry and very scared. She was looking at me. She asked god to remove the moth, and then when he did not oblige quickly enough she did it with a broom. I told her I liked bugs, even the big ones. Ma-jana moths are the size of your hand, if not larger. When I asked in the village why she was so frightened they told me it was because they believe that the moths are harbingers of death. To find one in the home is a bad omen. Today as we finish rounding a man is screaming as if he is on fire. He is screaming to make it stop, screaming no. In between the shouts our intern shows us a chart of how to classify delirium in a patient. They’ll awake in the night, brain afire, confused, maybe aggressive. Delirious patients need darkness and sleep. Classify them with DSM-5.

The part of the day I enjoy most is when we’re in theatre and they turn the lights down so that they can see the screens. The darkening of the room feels like someone is about to lean in and tell you a secret. And I suppose in a way they are. They open the abdomen and inside we see a wide liver, glossy from the jaundice. When you press an instrument on it mango yellow surges to the top. Incredible.

The Ataulfo mango crossed the Pacific from the Phil-lipines to Mexico in the 1700s just to appear on a liver here in Dublin, Ireland. In laparoscopy they blow the abdomen up with gas and it stretches out thickly, trying to get away from the sick parts inside. Diathermy is done wth a tool that burns as it cuts, and as it works it fills the abdomen with black smoke. The cavity pools with blood, water, oil. A small relief is that the smell is contained to the sick, bloated abdomen. Just watching it makes my body hurt.`

When I still had fever, when I wasn’t healing, Mami rubbed an egg over my body and then cracked it into a glass of water. The diathermy runoff is the same colour as what came out of that egg. The black stuff she drew from my body was the mal de ojo, the evil eye that was poisoning me. Then she put something on my feet and covered them with socks. Most patients in the OR are dressed in compression stockings to stop the blood in their legs from pooling into a clot. All that peeks out are their pink toes

When we are dismissed for the day I walk out and swallow a scream on Eccles street. I think I hurt from the inside, like I had break bone fever. Porfirio winces as he dresses my legs. He tells me that the second time you get the Dengue, the pain is even worse.

At night my hands smell like the hospital. A mixture of alcohol, whole milk, bodies. I scrub them raw with a nail brush and soap but they retain a decomposing, sweet scent. I touch my pink hands to the pink scars. Formed on fibroblasts, collagen bundles, macrophag-es, Bacalar water, witch bones, silver sulfadiazine, and Mami’s fearful whispered prayers that she made in the night back when she didn’t think I knew how to under-stand her yet I shower, drink some juice, sit on the floor and wait until I am ready and then I curl my body over a desk and work until late. When I get in bed I ask my brain for

dreamless sleep. No sickness. No hospital. No diather-my. No sneering surgeon with a dry scone mouth. That night I slept on my back in the tent. What else could I have done? I sent nice thoughts to my legs. I breathed deeply, listened to the mosquitoes hitting the canvas. Here I sleep curled on my side with my knees close to my chest. I cup my shins with my hands. Touch the still new skin. Remember that things grow back.