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POETRY | FALL 2019

## OUTPATIENT PROCEDURE

By Emily Kerlin

Many years ago  
they took a man I knew very well  
off his mountain bike,  
away from his favorite sauté pan  
and feather pillow

The docs said  
it was only an outpatient procedure,  
meaning  
don't think twice  
about this miniscule thing  
we're going to do

And he didn't

So I didn't

But while they were pawing around  
his portal vein,  
the scalpel slipped  
and severed  
what it was supposed to fix

And, like bridge collapse in rush hour,  
there were going to be casualties

The liver and spleen seized up  
blood pooled in his gut  
he moaned and convulsed

Gloved and scrubbed,  
they opened him up  
six ways to Sunday,  
carved and sampled and stitched

Doctors emerged from those bright  
rooms like God's own stockbrokers,  
barking deals, spewing numbers:

bilirubin, AST, ALT, platelet levels,  
buying low, selling high  
crunching platelet counts,  
sizing up odds  
at twenty percent,  
give or take

Fresh reports  
came to the waiting room  
where we, the raccoon-eyed,  
camped, waiting  
around the clock

Curveballs came:  
sepsis,  
MRSA,  
pneumonia,  
cirrhosis.

After a few weeks,  
the infectious disease doc  
asked us to call her Cora

They put him in a coma

Fall came and school started  
leaves piled up in icy heaps  
we made final arrangements  
and stood around him for his last rites

But then  
*we are going to try something new;*  
they said, heal him  
from the inside out

So away with tapes and staples and stitchery

They left him wide open,  
like a cut casserole,  
organs peeking through, layers  
of tissue alternating white and red,  
granulating on the edges.

Sent him home  
with eyes like moons  
confused, too thin to walk

Each night  
I would pack him up with gauze  
cook potatoes in his frypan,  
spoon-feed them to him in bed,  
prop him up on his best old pillow

And he healed  
in that way,  
very slowly,  
from the inside out,

as maybe we  
all should.

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**Emily Kerlin studied creative writing while attending Antioch College. She has been teaching the difference between “chicken” and “kitchen” to English Language Learners in public schools for the last 10 years. She lives in Urbana, Illinois with her husband, four teenagers, and a geriatric brown dog.**

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