

BOOKS

A physician's sensitive and empathic vignettes

Ladies in Waiting

Alan Blum MD
Firebrand Press, 2009.

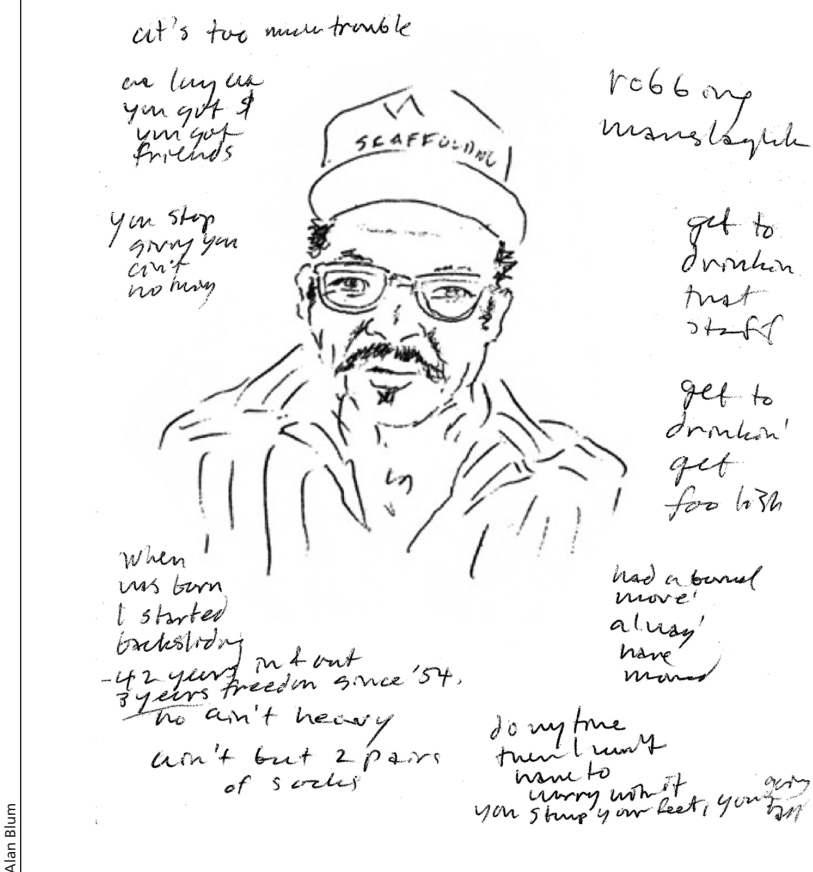
Gentle Men

Alan Blum MD
Firebrand Press, 2011.

These two slim volumes are collectors' items for both the bibliophile and the physician. Their creator, Alan Blum of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, who is a family doctor, based them on his meetings with patients over the years. The result is a series of sensitive and empathic textual and visual vignettes that convey much wit and wisdom through the patient's voice as reflected in the medical gaze. "I don't see why they have to have all those syllables just to say one word," muses one patient in *Ladies in Waiting*, and then she continues, "I like older doctors. They seem to talk to you more. Just like you talkin'." This conversation and more like it is accompanied by an original sketch of the patient by Blum who, since his days as a medical resident, realized that he had the artistic talent to capture not just people's faces but also insights into their character. As a result, this Alabama doctor has amassed a treasure trove of informal glimpses of his patients on scraps of paper, medical records, indeed on anything that was convenient that allowed him to see as well as observe his patients; to listen as well as to hear them.

This enhanced communication technique is perhaps more evident in his *Gentle Men*, where Blum's male patients seem to open up more to him than they might otherwise have done: "My wife's been dead tomorrow one year, and I imagine that's what it is" is a simple, emotional and personal revelation by a man, but one that ought to trigger much reflection by any thoughtful physician

My spinal cord got cut in two.
had to have surgery
and dead people's bones.
You don't want to hear my story,
'cause there's too much to tell.



Alan Blum

on how best to console and treat this patient. For Blum, then, this process was not just an idle, office hobby; rather it became an essential clinical element of the encounter between patient and physician.

As a humanities scholar interested in the interactions of medicine with broader society, Blum's oeuvre triggered other thoughts for me. Blum was able to sketch and scribble unobtrusively when making his medical notes

manually while presumably maintaining eye contact with the person in front of him. But how will the likely eventual displacement of paper in the doctor's office by the electronic health record along with the replacement of pen and pencil by smartphone, tablet and laptop computer disrupt patient-physician interactions? Blum's "old school" recording techniques not only will be seen as outmoded and thus fall into disuse in the brave new medical e-world

May the good Lord take a liking to you.
But not too soon.



Alan Blum

now mostly upon us, they might even, in future, be outlawed. Under federal law in the United States (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) as well as Canadian provincial legislation (e.g. Personal Health Information Protection Act, Personal Health Information Act) designed to protect patient privacy, the release of “unique identifiers” and confidential medical information is prohibited — for all I know this may well include published sketches of patients’ faces along with snippets of their personal health conditions, no matter how innocent and well-intentioned.

But for now we have these two fine examples of the physician’s art matched in quality by that of the print shop that produced them. These books are expensive (US \$95), for they are both a limited edition of 75 produced in the handcraft letterpress and hand bound traditions. Yet based on their content and form they ought to be appreciated.

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Artist’s note: Often the short vignettes I write come from another visit with that patient or from other found notes.

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I’m waitin’ for this new medicine
they tried on a dog with arthritis.
Some kinda new salve,
got rid o’ his arthritis.
I saw a dog hospital on TV.
I can’t believe they invest so much money
in dog hospitals.
All the laboratories.
All the equipment.
Better than people.



Alan Blum

I sure feel better since the doctor
took me off all them milligrams.



do you think
maybe I’ll lose
my mind
eventually
because of
this thing

I didn’t know
if I was in
the world
instruct me

I sure have
suffered

I stayed on that / shift
9 years

lined up
they didn’t
10’ steak
Sandwich
I go to the
freezer at 1704
5 or maybe 1
got 10

and before I left
I was covered
up all the
old people

Dave Stein
a Dave... Stein
I think his name was
Dave Stein.
That’s it Dave... Stein

Alan Blum