

FOR THE LANCET January 10, 2003 Samuel Shem, M.D. D.Phil.

This year, the 25th anniversary of *The House of God*, I think I may finally understand something about it. It came out of a series of “Hey wait a second!” moments, those moments we experience every day when we see, hear, or feel something that is unjust or cruel or simply not right. Usually we let these moments pass. In my medical internship in 1973, the moments came so fast and furious that they could not be passed by. We were told to treat our patients in ways we didn’t think were humane. We ran smack into the conflict between the received wisdom of the medical system and the call of the human heart.

In the 1960s, our resistance had put the civil rights laws on the books and ended the Vietnam War. We had been brought up to notice, to take ‘life as it is’ and turn it on the spindle of compassionate action to make it more like ‘life as it could be.’ And so we resisted. We stuck together and used classic nonviolent methods—especially humor—to resist. And we secretly treated our patients humanely. Many years later I realized that *The House of God*, and its sequel *Mount Misery*, are fictions of resistance.

I was a writer before I was a doctor. As a teenager I worked as a toll collector on the Rip Van Winkle Bridge overlooking the Hudson River. I

asked for the midnight-to-eight shift so I could read, focusing on the Russians. In those pre-dawn quiet moments in my cozy tollbooth I connected with Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov—the themes of love and death. I still have a Chekhov quote over my writing desk: “With the best of writers...you feel life as it should be in addition to life as it is, and you are captivated by it.”

The other major literary moments were at Oxford and in Dublin. I got a Rhodes and went to Balliol from 1966-69, and although I enrolled in a D.Phil. course that involved coaxing cockroaches to lift their legs, my main passion was writing. After a wild trip to the sub-Atlas Sahara during Christmas break 1969, I decided I didn't want to be a scientist, I wanted to be a writer. My draft board disagreed. So it was Vietnam, or Harvard Med. No problem. Medicine would be my meal ticket; somehow I would write.

During medical school, every summer I came back to Europe. One summer I went to Dublin, doing obstetrics and gynecology at the National Maternity Hospital, ‘Horne’s House’ in *Ulysses*. I lived in the hospital, slept on a horsehair mattress. Got drunk most nights at the pub across the street, nicknamed ‘The Office,’ and, shoved out at closing, my mates and I would stare up at the bright lights on the top floor where a baby is

delivered every hour, the whole year round. Should we go up there and pull out a baby or two before bed? I fell in love with Irish writing—Yeats, Synge, Beckett, Joyce, and, the great humorist, Flann O’Brien.

In August of 1978, *The House of God* came out. I imagined everyone would love it. The younger generation of doctors did; the older generation hated it, and pilloried me. The abuse didn’t faze me: I knew that what I had written was authentic. I had only told the truth, with humor and some art. The book took on a life of its own. Tolstoy, in his essay “What is Art?”, concludes: “Art...is when one man...hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and others are infected by these feelings and also experience them.” As the Russians had connected with me in that tollbooth, so I have been lucky enough to connect with others. I like to think that I am giving readers a sense that I understand, and that I am helping them to both nourish their genius for the real, and to stay on the side of the angels.

The great themes of fiction are love and death. Death is always a theme in medicine. So too, I would argue, in its many spirits, is love. And one of those spirits is resistance. Love and death. How lucky we are.

Favorite books, poems, etc.

Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

Chekhov: the story, *Gooseberries*

Shakespeare: the Nicol Williamson *Hamlet*

Garcia Marquez: *Of Love and Other Demons*

Conrad: *Victory*

Wallace Stevens: any poem; *The Latest Freed Man*, or *The Man With the Blue Guitar*.

Tikh Nhat Hanh: *The Sun My Heart*

Tu Fu, a T'ang Dynasty Chinese poet: *Written on the Wall at Chang's Hermitage*.