HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

I fed you milk as we condemned you to die

Zachary G. Jacobs, MD

University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Pittsburgh, PA, USA.

I lift the straw slowly, cautiously to your desiccated lips.
My eyes track along its length
as it runs from the square, cardboard carton
with the cartoon cow on one face,
to those lips, craggy and bleeding,
which you hold puckered outward like a child.

The straw is striped, red and white
like a miniature barber's pole;
I think to myself how badly you need a haircut
with your greasy tangle of gray locks
cascading to your shoulders.

With a Herculean effort
and a marathoner's resolve,
you implore the drink toward your mouth.
I watch as it travels
in fits and starts through the narrow tube,
along a distance so tiny
yet Sisyphean.

Then comes the coughing and sputtering.
That sickeningly familiar rattle
as the liquid once again finds its way to your lungs.
For the briefest of moments I reconsider my actions –
question whether I am hastening your demise
as I picture the infection blossoming

deep within in your lungs:
a direct result
of the seeds I have knowingly sown.

But those doubts flicker and extinguish,
quickly, like so many lives in this place.
For I know this to be your fate:
abandoned by your mind and your estranged family
you too, will soon go the way of the fading flame.

Sooner now
since we, your makeshift guardians,
have elected to withdraw care.
And so, as your cough and spasm abate,
I once again guide the straw toward your lips.
And you look to me, and smile.

Corresponding Author: Zachary G. Jacobs, MD, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA (e-mail: jacobszg@upmc.edu).

J Gen Intern Med 31(6):702
DOI: 10.1007/s11606-016-3653-y
© Society of General Internal Medicine 2016