SYMBOLICAL HEAD.
Listen to the man in Jack Coulehan’s poem, wizened and readying to fight. I might not have much body left, he tells the doctors who stand over his bed, but I’ve got good arms—the polio left me that. Listen to the physician in another poem, his patient stunned by the past. What can you do, he asks, when you’re stranded in this hard, brazen country?

What he does, like the narrator in so many of Coulehan’s poems, is stand witness. “I have a real belief in, and commitment to, the power of connecting with another person,” Coulehan (MD ’69) says. The professor emeritus of preventive medicine at SUNY Stony Brook, and former Pitt professor of family medicine, is the author of four books of poems and a widely used text on the doctor-patient relationship.

For Coulehan, the stories people tell are as important as any objective truth, any scientific fact. The privileging of science is a sign of a “radical misunderstanding” of the nature of healing, he says.

Our view of technology borders on the mythic, says Coulehan, because we welcome the illusion of certainty it provides. The poet who once practiced medicine among the Navajo likens a typical Western patient’s relationship to, say, an MRI to a Navajo’s relationship to a sand painting. For both, the object is a powerful symbol of healing. “We have a magical belief in science,” Coulehan says, “not a scientific belief in science.”

Yet, far from dismissing this kind of magical thinking, Coulehan embraces the power of myth to shape human experience. In “Heroes,”
as gunshot victims are rolled into the emergency room, their lavender shirts and bloodied chests eliciting disdain, the narrator suggests:

remember the myth among them—

they are the sons and daughters of dukes, the heirs of dukes, and deserving of love, they are the lost children of heroes, the bastard progeny of gods

In a poem so much is possible. Here, the physician can set aside, however briefly, the urgency of clinical practice. He can reflect, not only on the lives of his patients but on his own life. Coulehan, who directs Stony Brook’s Institute for Medicine in Contemporary Society, considers such reflection crucial to good doctoring.

Physicians, like poets, live in doubt. They must be able to hold mystery and contradiction in their hands—Keats’ “negative capability.” “At the core of medicine,” Coulehan says, “is a poetic sensibility.”

His latest book, edited with Angela Belli, is Primary Care: More Poems By Physicians (University of Iowa Press, 2006).


PHRENOLOGY

Concavities and lumps above my ear
speak narratives I never would have known
before relentless loss of all my hair

turned truth about my scalp so baldly clear—
the story of my life is in the bone.
Convexities and slumps above my ear

identify the site of passion: here.
Like tenacity and hope, it’s in a zone
invisible before the loss of hair

writ large the heady script of character.
Depression, fancy, awkwardness intone complexity that’s bunched above my ear

for you to read. Your gentle fingers, dear,
interpret my desire and mine alone.
My scalp is blessed to have no trace of hair.

It shines with gratitude—I love your care
for this old scalp, though never have I won
a way to read the bumps above your ear,
which even now are swathed in silver hair.

HANDS

It’s come to this—bowels. Six weeks
from the time you teeter, fall
and spend the night strapped to a gurney,
your hands lie in wait, jump, grab,
tap my fingers. You talk about bowels
but hey! Yours are not the hands of misfortune. They have a life of their own, buds at the end of old boughs. Your skin hangs from sickness, fever, fasting, but not your hands. Your hands put on an old one-two, a little vaudeville between the act in which you lose your brothers, wife and commonsense, and the one where knots are loosened, pipes reamed out and ropes replaced.

Every morning brings a new task,
a new way of looking at what’s left.
But only your hands leap from the bed.
The rest of you is pale, tenuous
and devoted to bowels. Just now,
when I speak of the future,
your eyes water like red springs,
but your hands brush my fingers
with Hey Bones! and that old soft shoe.
LACHRYMAE RERUN

Fried flounder on cardboard plates, slaw, drafts of dark beer. Pain has followed us here to the fish place in Riverhead. I’m fed up with clammers’ shot backs, bad kidneys, and their wives’ arthritis. I’m fed up with cancer wearing suspenders and dousing its flagrant heart in wine. The tables here are crammed with pain. The coolers are stacked with eel like black, pickled sausage. Go ahead, though, keep talking about your cancer’s home—the church you grew up in, its Baroque Italian priest and pinched nuns that scuttled across your youth like bugs. You’re not buying it, not an ounce of original sin, not a word of Augustine, nor anything that carries you down from joy. That’s what you say. Even the walls of this joint are sweating blood, but you’ve converted to a new belief in the cosmic dance. Go ahead, keep talking. I’m not thinking now about the sweating bodies of the dead in Africa, nor that woman with the bomb beneath her t-shirt in Sri Lanka, nor the kid gunned down in Brooklyn, nor the arrogance of righteous violence. I’m trying to imagine the original blessing. Go ahead, tell me the wizened eel of history is somebody’s fault, Jesus’ or the popes’ and if left to ourselves we’d surely dance. And be compassionate and tender. Go ahead, finish your beer. Let’s kick up our heels. It’s Saturday night in any case, and I’m tired too, of tears.

ANATOMY LESSON

When I move your body from its storage drawer, I brush my knuckles, Ernest, on your three-days growth of beard. Cheeks, wet from formaldehyde, prickle with cactus. My eyes burn and blink as if a wind of sand blew through the room.

Bless me, Ernest, for I cut your skin to learn positions and connections of your parts—caves, canyons, fissures, faults, all of you. Show me. Show me your flowers, your minerals, the oil of your spleen.

Do not mistake these tears. These tears are not for your bad luck nor my indenture here, but for all offenses to your heart—yours, mine—for the violence of abomination. Think of my tears as rain staining your canyon walls, filling your stream, touching the blossoms.