Doctor's words and images travel through the soul of sickness

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The poem is chalked on a black floor in a white room. The words are spoken by an elderly woman extraordinarily aware of her dying body. She is so sensitive, a belly rub makes her skin crinkle like cellophane. She is so sensitive, she cries just to bring an orderly to change her sheets, just for company, just for relief from the monotony of pain.

Every line is white but one. Chalked in red is the heart-breaking confession: "I am molecules breaking apart." Placed near the end of a poem with ragged margins, it resembles blood on a tombstone.

The words were written by Marc J. Straus, an oncologist and a poet. The setting was conceived by Rick Levinson, a pulmonologist, critical-care specialist and sculptor. It is the next-to-last station of their first collaboration, "The Bridge: A Journey Through Illness," a Lehigh University installation all about being inside and outside sickness.

Named for a collection of Straus' poetry, "The Bridge" traces a woman's final weeks in a hospital. Straus' taut, charged words are stenciled on walls near Levinson's taut, charged multi-media pieces. Above a pair of clinical seats trussed in wire is the message: "Pale anemic plastic chair, pitted by years/of metal keys protruding from back pockets." A re-creation of a hospital room contains a sign of hope -- a plant used for chemotherapy -- and a sign of despair -- a big card inscribed "This Basket of Flowers Is Stunning/But I Wish They'd Stop Sending Them."

The show is, in short, an MRI of the soul. "It is an emotional and an intellectual challenge, a way of celebrating the preciousness of life, a reminder that a doctor isn't God or the Devil," says organizer/curator Ricardo Viera, who directs Lehigh's galleries and museum operation. "There's a lot of beauty you can find inside sadness, and a lot of sadness you can find inside beauty."

Viera met Straus and Levinson through Ann Neitzel, a Lehigh senior development officer and poet interested in the intersection of medicine and art. Levinson and Straus met through a Chicago art collector who owns Levinson's work. They learned quickly that they share more than double careers.

Straus, 60, grew up in Brooklyn. Levinson, 61, grew up in Salem, N.J. Both graduated from Pennsylvania colleges; both are prominent in their medical fields; both are deeply committed to treating the profoundly ill. For more than 20 years Levinson has been making sculpture, video installations and other forms of art, often using the face as an emotional spine. Straus began writing poetry during a 1991 workshop at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan; his first poem concerned a female patient. Straus' first poetry collection was published in 1994; a year later Levinson had his first American solo show at Muhlenberg College, his alma mater.

Straus and his wife collect art as strikingly contemporary as Levinson's. Levinson and Straus praise each other as tough, fair critics of each other's work; Levinson relies on Straus' "stone-cold eye." They also share the belief that making art is anything but a hobby, anything but therapy.

It has nothing to do with relaxation; it has nothing to do with stress reduction," says Levinson, who

works in Scottsdale, Ariz. "This is just another animal that lives inside me that I have to feed."

"I can't necessarily write a single poem because I want to," says Straus, who works in White Plains, N.Y. "Every poem has a life of its own. Every poem is autobiographical -- even if it's invented."

Indeed, the protagonist of "The Bridge" isn't based on any of Straus' patients. She isn't even a composite of people he knows. Five years ago she simply appeared as a vibrant voice.

"One day she started talking to me, and, 26 poems later, she finished talking," says Straus. "She was articulate. Open-minded. Fair. I had this image of a John Cheever character from upper Westchester [County]. She had points of view that I wouldn't have recognized as mine. Even more interesting, she had a knowledge base I didn't know I had."

Straus has written nearly 100 scientific papers on cancer research. Yet, in a very strange twist, he quickly became his character's student. The woman of his poems taught him that a patient can tell of another patient's death simply by a change in the rhythm of a nurse's shoes. She taught him that waiting a day for a test result is "an unintentional conspiracy, no matter what the answer is."

"I was unwittingly becoming an insider to information that was new to me, and rarefied," says Straus. "It was almost that I was an outsider, being moved by what she said."

Straus' protagonist considers the hospital a seesaw she can't control. "Everything here is bittersweet," she says of the hospital, "spooned out/in dollops of castor oil with a little saccharin mixed in." A sigh inflates her lungs, which makes her feel as if she's passing out. After her equilibrium returns, she feels earthy and lofty. She considers the sudden infusion of air "a gift to make me more accepting,/so that when the angel lifts my hand/onto her atomless sleeve I will have no animosity."

Even the woman's humor is triple-edged. She's tickled when a priest visits her room, mistaking her for one of his parishioners. She sends him away, then feels sorry. "I could borrow his God," she tells herself, "for a while."

Levinson bridges Straus' words tangibly and intangibly. A mobile of bent wire eyeglasses, including a pair held by mesh hands, is an indirect translation of three see-through words: "Might," "Maybe," "Perhaps." In a show handout, Levinson writes that the work symbolizes "the unintentional tyranny of medical jargon" and the "distorted ability to see when we are under duress."

An upholstered chair with hidden speakers playing snippets of rap, Gregorian chant and "Like a Virgin" is a direct translation of a head crammed with conflicting sounds, a radio speed-dialing itself. "I am confounded by these inexplicable noises," says Straus' patient, "from my mouth each recognizes as familiar. I think/God hears them as my prayers."

This collaboration was edited and elevated by Viera, himself an installation artist. Viera convinced Straus that his poetry would be more effective with fewer examples. He asked Levinson to design an entrance piece that would prepare visitors for the labyrinth ahead. Levinson responded with a bank of monitors playing video of ghostly figures passing through ghostly hospital corridors, an environment that's safe, sterile and other-worldly.

It was Levinson's idea to expand Straus' line "I am molecules breaking apart" into a floor poem that could be erased. It was Straus' idea to shape the poem like a tombstone. It was Viera's idea to keep the room white and the doorways free of curtains. The openness creates the feeling of a threshold for the last station, which features a long, white, bridge-like bench and a surreal wall poem that bridges sadness and gladness, consciousness and stream-of-consciousness, the here and the hereafter.

The physicians differ on the afterlife of their art. Levinson doesn't like to publicize himself as a doctor-sculptor, partly because reviewers tend to reduce one career to a hobby. "They say things like: "Oh,

pills and sculpture: what a combination.' That's devastating to anyone serious about their art."

Levinson says that only a few patients know of his other life. "I don't want to put a burden on them to judge my art as good or bad or stupid or aggressive or insensitive, and then have them make presumptions about how I see them," he says. "I don't want to inflict my art on them. That's not something that they need for their care."

Levinson is more interested in sharing information with colleagues. The book "Rehabilitation of a Pulmonary Patient" ends with his essay "Art and the Physician." He writes about out-of-body experiences, preserving personal history, "the trance of time."

Straus was initially reluctant to read his poetry to patients. He thought they would be wounded by his fairly stark words. He changed his mind about 10 years ago when, after lecturing on breast cancer, he was asked, out of the blue, to read a poem. The all-female audience, which included his own patients, responded with "overwhelming generosity." He was on the road to being "cured" of his performance anxiety.

Empowered by the reaction, Straus did something unusual for a medical-school reunion. Instead of giving a keynote speech, he gave a poetry reading. This time his intuition was spot-on. "There were my classmates from 25 years ago, crying," he says. "And I went: "Ohhh, they get it.'"

Straus insists that writing poetry has made him more patient with patients. Doctors "have to listen better; we have to narrow the gap between what we say, and what they hear we're saying," he says. "Patients will feel more whole if they realize that we're giving them a piece of ourselves. They'll feel better if we absorb some of their anxiety."

Guided by Levinson, listeners and his character, Straus wrote "The Doctor," a collection of poems spoken by the physician for the protagonist in "The Bridge." Poems from both series are staged in a show being auditioned for an Off-Broadway production. It's called "Not God."

Straus and Levinson are pleased by the universal responses to the Lehigh installation. Everyone, it seems, walks the bridge between sickness and health, the loss of hope and the need for compassion. The artist-physicians are particularly pleased by the treatments of the floor poem. Some visitors tiptoe over Straus' words, to avoid smudging the chalk. Others rub the words with their feet, accepting the red-letter invitation to break molecules of body and soul.

Levinson blesses both acts. "They remind us that we should not just cavalierly walk on people and act as their agents of decay, but maintain each other, either spiritually or physically," he says. "We're all in the same situation. Our molecules break apart. We die, we're replaced by our kids, we're remembered in one way or another. It's OK. It's just biology; nothing beats biology."

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THE DETAILS

"THE BRIDGE:

A JOURNEY THROUGH ILLNESS'

What: Installation by Marc J. Straus and Rick Levinson of art and poetry examining a woman's final weeks in a hospital

When: Through June 20

Where: Zoellner Arts Center, 420 E. Packer Ave., Bethlehem

Info: 610-758-3615, www.luag.org