

Danse Russe

If I when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees,—
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
"I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!"
If I admire my arms, my face,
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades,—
Who shall say I am not
the happy genius of my household?

William Carlos Williams

PASSION, RESILIENCE, AND POETRY

It is hard to pick up a professional medical journal today and not see another article about physician burnout. Burnout has been a constant in our profession throughout time. It is at the root of many problems including severe anxiety, depression, disengagement, and even suicide. The key to combating burnout is passion and resilience, which give us perspective and perseverance. Of course we are speaking of passion for the profession, but having interests in things outside of medicine is an important nostrum. Many of us turn to family, friends, sports, exercise, cooking, music, or study of the arts, including literature. Dr. DeBakey, for example, enjoyed poetry, and so do I.

One hero of mine is the physician, writer, and poet William Carlos Williams (1882-1963), a 1906 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. He was a stalwart of the Imagist movement and, in some senses, a quintessential Beat Generation mainstay. He had an extraordinarily busy primary care practice out of his home in the gritty industrial town of Rutherford, New Jersey. He even suffered burnout, which he deals with in his writings. His nostrum was his passion for poetry and medicine. Robert Coles, a prominent psychiatrist, and Thomas Roma, a noted professional photographer, show us this in an artful documentation of Williams's practice titled *House Calls* with William Carlos Williams (Powerhouse Books, Brooklyn, NY).

My first introduction to Williams was reading *Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg, another Beat poet. Williams penned

the introduction to that iconic work. I did not know of his professional credentials in medicine at the time, and you would not glean that from reading this particular work. I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and came of age in the 1960s era of "sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll." My pot-smoking high school English teacher assigned us *Howl*, and it created a huge kerfuffle since it was just short of a decade after the *Howl* obscenity trial in 1957 (the ruling was "not obscene").

I became captivated by several lines of the introduction, including "Everyone in this life is defeated but a man, if he be a man, is not defeated" and "Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell." Though some would look at these sentences as sexist, getting to know him through his works, I think it's not the case. They were lines focused on passion, resilience, and the changing world. *Howl* became a manifesto for the Beat Generation and its evolution to hippiedom. For me, it sparked many Friday night trips to Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore during my high school years. It is still open and well worth the visit the next time you are in Bagdad-by-the-Bay. And thus, a passion of mine was born: the love of literature and, particularly, poetry. Over and over that passion has helped me through some rough times, and I think that was the case for Williams. He wrote passionately and disturbingly about his patients (unencumbered by HIPPA). Reading his autobiography, biographies, novels, essays, and poetry has given me joy in both tough and great times.

This edition of *Poet's Pen* presents DANSE RUSSE, which I hope you will enjoy. Smile as you picture Williams dancing in his nightgown in front of the kitchen refrigerator at an odd hour, and understand how a little self-deprecating and mirthful humor can help with those frustrating moments. We all need our ways to escape when the drudgery of our profession gets us down. And then listen carefully, listen really hard...you might hear Miguel Quiñones playing in that band of his!

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REFERENCE

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