

Tu Fu, Uncle Jack, and Doctoring Epidemics

JOHN MCGONIGLE, MD

*In the Unicorn Gallery of this age
what person is first in merit?*
— Tu Fu, circa 755 C.E.

There are those who survived, and those who've seen
a black spreading lesion go way too far.
Jack burned those things off in Dermatology,
and the last ones he forgot were those who died.
Death took him far away, beyond good-byes,
and the kids got to live what he was living through.
The doctor died demented; Uncle Jack: surrounded,
his familiar overrun, underground.
Uncle Jack stared straight ahead.
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He raised them dying to the mysteries of grief.

Tu Fu, also exiled, also fled away.
Panic swept everything off that was familiar.
The court was devastated. Tu Fu sulked
and wrote out almost every line he walked.
He dreamt of dragons, trudged through snow uphill;
Tu Fu saw crevasses filled with more than snow.
Still, he dragged the bodies North. Invaders infiltrated,
and they all arrived at a lasting peace,
Tu Fu and his enemies.

He wondered at the skin in epidemics.
The first to show up was the COVID toe.
A guy in South County saw it coming.
He sent a text, picture attached. The doctor made
a doctored image inside out of him –
antigen-antibody complex, its odd expression,
toenail green and purple – unroof the pressure?
Serosanguineous forces lurking dormant – let them go?
A painful freedom. Proud flesh. The barbaric alternative
was to bleed the bloodstream in its course,
hope against hope, and watch lest sepsis
go straight through the heart of the river's source.
Systemic Inflammatory Response Syndrome.
This COVID had a name, and not much else.
Would every organ system just shut right down?
The way was straight ahead. The way was perilous.
He texted back: "Come see me in the morning".

At night he read to her from Tu Fu's version
of the story: seems barbarians are always at the gate.
Civilizations live, die, and live again.
It is the fear of death that was the epidemic.

Author's note

Tu Fu is the great Tang Dynasty Chinese poet, active during the devastating Lushan Rebellion of 755. Jack McGonigle was the poet's uncle, and a local dermatologist for many years; he died in 2011. The poet, a Family Doctor in East Providence, recalls his experience in the early days of 2020 from the vantage point of 2021, and history. This is one of a series of poems written over the course of 2020–2021.

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Disclosures

None

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