
POETRY | FALL 2019

Veterinary Lessons

By Jane Desmond

Yesterday,
at the Vet's
I learned how to
puncture
your skin,

to pull your wild, soft fur
up
like a tent
between your shoulder blades,
behind your tall, tufted, bunny ears
that make you look
perpetually surprised,

to prick the tiny needle in
and wait
while the thin plastic tube,
looping like a swirl of linguine,
fills
with clear liquid from the bulging pouch:

Just the right balance of electrolytes
to help your kidneys
keep flushing toxins.

This will now be
our daily routine--
a solution
to keep you
alive.

Slowly,
a balloon of that water
bulges
under your thin skin
with its plush angora coat
pushing

slate colored fur
out
like a fuzzy softball.

Then,
like a magician's trick,
it subsides,
life-giving fluids
sucked up
by your tissues.

I pluck the needle out—
short, thin, -- a minor thing,
and, treatment done,
know that

“When the time comes,”
(as the veterinarian puts it,)
when your kidneys fail,
no matter how much water
is pushed through them,

another needle,
longer-wider-but just as sharp
will deliver a different solution.

Bright blue juice from the doctor's hand
will be your final treatment:
your death a quiet endless sleep.

When my time comes,
when pain grinds all away but a tiny glimmer
of who I used to be
I wish such a simple solution
could be brought to bear:

a glide of surgical tip,
beveled steel slid into my vein
the warming plunge of bright blue toxins
to still my heart:

suffering's
generous
end.

Jane Desmond is a poet and scholar who writes about the intersections between veterinary medicine and human medicine, as well as our relations with non-human animals. A Professor of Anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, she also holds an affiliate faculty appointment at the College of Veterinary Medicine, and is the author of several academic books, including *Displaying Death and Animating Life* (U. of Chicago Press, 2016). Her poetry has appeared in *Persimmon Tree* in the U.S. and in *Words for the Wild* in the U.K.