



# Bellevue Literary Review

*A journal of humanity  
and human experience*



*Including:*

*Plagues and Pens:*

*Writers Examine Infectious Diseases*

Volume 5, Number 2, Fall 2005  
Department of Medicine  
New York University School of Medicine  
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## How Suffering Goes

*Melisa Cabnmann*

I sit. The ache in my calves and ankles is severe.  
I watch the monkey scratch my mother's head. Mother says  
she has a headache. The monkey is laughing.  
She says she has a sharp pain in her eardrum where the monkey  
has pinned his long pink finger and stuck out his tongue.

From the far right corner of the room someone sneezes. I hear it.  
A car engine, a cough. There are needles in my toes.  
The Insight Meditation leader says to name your feelings.  
I had car rides with my mother in mind. Naming  
and holding herself one part at a time. She punctuated silence  
with *stomach, stomach, stomach* and *neck, neck, neck*.

An abbreviated story of two failed marriages and a childhood  
of bandages. Self pity like a cool, wet rag pressed to her forehead.  
The meditation leader says it's best to catch the pain early,  
when the unpleasant sensation arises, to come back to breath.

I am in the car with her and the unpleasant sensation arises.  
I remember her beached body under afternoon blankets and bottles  
of prescriptions willing to concede she was *sick, sick, sick*. The leader  
says to name feelings three times before we scratch an itch, lift  
a numb leg, or brush a stray hair from our face.

I sit in the car and say: *pain* again and again. Still it's there  
where my face is *aversion* and *suffering* in the side-view mirror.  
We climb stairs to our destination, and she cries  
three times about her knees. Her chant is a haunt that echoes  
from closets of old clothes, old minds

like old monkeys, always moving, scratching, knocking on glass.  
I hear them. Their laughter, a group of girls running through  
the apartment hallway. Rain falling over the porch. A change in light.  
A small tremble of breath across the upper lip,  
again and again and again.