

Event: Gold Humanism Honor Society Empathy M&M

Creative Reflection

Title: The Bean-Nighe in Medicine



While listening to the stories of two fourth year medical students who were impacted by the progression of the illness of their patients, I was especially moved by the acceptance of the shift to palliative care that is inevitable for some. We may recognize this inevitability before the patient is aware of it as a possibility. In that, I am reminded of a woman of Scottish folklore, the Bean-Nighe, or Washerwoman.

The Bean-Nighe is said to sit by rivers or streams and scrubs the blood out of the clothes of those who are soon to die. Some versions of the tale describe her singing dirges, relating her to the Bean-Sidhe of Ireland, more commonly known as a banshee, whose melancholic wails also portend death. When the weight of the knowledge of an impending death is upon a physician, are they akin to a Bean-Nighe? Their appearance at the bedside to discuss such heralds the same outcome as the Washerwoman by the Ford.

In drawing her, I see two possibilities; she washes the clothes in a stream that expands into a river akin to a vascular system and viscera emblematic of medicine. Alternatively, she tears the white spaces away from the canvas, to show the viewer that all death is inevitable and cannot be covered over forever. Importantly, the Bean-Nighe is not death incarnate. She brings awareness of death to those who find her. When the time is near, someone must take the role of peeling back the veil of the boundary between life and death. Sometimes this is initiated by the patient, sometimes the physician. Perhaps they are both the Bean-Nighe.

Below are photos that detail the progression of the drawing. I used black India ink and red acrylic ink with water, painted over an 11"x13" board covered with a thin layer of white clay. This allows for additive and subtractive technique, in which I can scratch out details from layers I have previously painted. I used a photo from "La Compagnia delle Le Lavandaie della Tuscia or the Washerwomen Group of Tuscia", a group of singing washerwomen in Italy, as a reference.



