

MIND TO MIND

Creative writing that explores the abstract side
of our profession and our lives

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Anesthesiology and Poetry

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In the December 2013 issue of *ANESTHESIOLOGY* Eduardo E. Icaza and George A. Masour had an interesting special article entitled “Altered States: Psychedelics and Anesthetics.”¹ They end their article by citing Beat poet Allen Ginsberg’s poem *Laughing Gas*.²

A grey and cold day in January 1983 the train rolled out from Karlstad’s central station toward Oslo, Norway, where work waited.

A rounded, brown bearded man came down the aisle followed by a slender fellow with a guitar case.

- Are these seats free, he asked?

- Sure, please sit down.

I continued reading my newspaper.

- Is there anything about me in that paper?

I lowered the paper surprised by the question and suddenly recognized Allen Ginsberg and his partner and accompanist Steven Taylor.

- No, but in yesterday’s paper there was a very positive review of your performance in Stockholm.

Allen Ginsberg and Steven Taylor were on a recital tour in Northern Europe, now on their way to Oslo.

Small talk, weather, where from, where to. Taylor fell asleep.

- So you’re an Anesthesiologist?!!

I saw the sparkle behind the thick eyeglasses.

- Which is your favorite drug?

- Well, it depends on the operation and the patient and...

- No, no, no which is your personal favorite drug?

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I slowly realized the meaning of the question when Steven Taylor opened his eyes and asked about my favorite needle drug.
 Ginsberg looked upon me with disbelief when I said I only used alcohol and accidentally Halothane in the ENT theatre. A guy with access to all the drugs but not capacity to use them!
 He opened his worn out suitcase and took out a thumbed booklet.
 - Here, read this poem. I wrote it in a hotel room in Chicago with a cylinder of nitrous oxide. What do you think?
 Not used to reading modern American poetry, I still ascertained him it most likely was written under anesthetic influence. Ginsberg appreciated my expert comment.
 - And read this one. Then I had a bottle of ether at home in New York.
 - We don't use ether any more but I believe you. The anesthetic and poetic depth was even greater.
 - According to the Greek philosophers ether is the medium that fills the universe.
 - Yes, but I don't think it was medical ether.
 - Pythagoras said the planets were moving in the ether at exact distances in perfect harmony. They vibrated and sounded as they rotated.
 - Yes, the harmony of the spheres, I said.
 - Is it true that hearing is the last sense to disappear when we become unconscious or die?
 - Yes, we think so and we always treat our patients as hearing. We also believe that hearing is augmented when we fall asleep and keep quiet during induction.
 - Then perhaps the harmony of the spheres will be the last thing we hear when we die.
 Allen Ginsberg looked very reassured and comforted by this thought about dying – celestial music instead of earthly howling - and with that, the conversation died.

References

1. Icaza EE, Mashour GA: Altered states: Psychedelics and anesthetics. *ANESTHESIOLOGY* 2013; 119:1255–60
2. Ginsberg A: *Kaddish, and Other Poems, 1958–1960*. San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1961, pp 100