Editor’s Note: In 2005, the STFM Group on Ethics and Humanities initiated an award recognizing excellence in poetry by STFM members, which reflects on medicine in all its varied aspects. The winning entries were read at the Poetry and Prose Reading session at the 2005 Annual Spring Conference in New Orleans and are featured in this column. This year, the Group is expanding the award to include prose writing as well. Information about the award can be found at the end of this column. In the meantime, enjoy!

CA-125
Andrea Wendling, MD
First Place

I looked at the sheet, the number
The number that had become such a focal point of emotion
For so many months.
It passed my desk unannounced
Lost in the shuffle
Unaware of how powerful it was.

Time stopped as I read, I knew
How your face would crumble and melt because of my voice
A weapon.
And I knew on another desk

My friend, your doctor
Was realizing he would destroy our world as well.

Two days I knew I had, before his call
For months we had played this game, pretending we had won
And fearing today.
You know as well the good news
Should come now, tonight, from me
We should celebrate another month of peace.

The number, you ask, hopefully
As you kiss me hello
And look into my eyes.
I tell the only lie I’ve ever told you
As I look away
And give you the gift of another day.

Oh my wife, my beautiful wife
I couldn’t explain again, watching your pain
Without an answer.
I am so sorry, and so tired
Of all the bad news I’ve had to share
And that we’ve had to live.

Please enjoy tomorrow for what it is
The greatest gift I could give you
Today.
Tomorrow I will be lonely
And frightened enough
For both of us.

(Fam Med 2005;37(9):627-9.)
**Bad News in the ER**
Emily Ferrara, MA  
*Second Place*

The serious young doctor started the story at the beginning.

“Your son was at a concert when he collapsed.”

*Can I see him?*

“An ambulance was called. EMTs started CPR.”

*Where is he?*

“They tried to revive him, but got no response.”

*Please...*

“They brought him here. We worked a long time.”

*Oh God.*

“We didn’t want to give up. He was so young.”

I searched the doctor for sorrow found a stoic earnestness. He ended with an apology.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, as if he’d hurt my feelings, as if I could forgive him.

**Frank’s Autumn**
Kenneth Kessel, MD  
*Third Place*

and a short time ago  
the nights were clear  
and the trees were turning  
and my children came  
and I laughed with them and remembered their names.

Sandy or Sarah my wife brought soup and something to me in this chair and a man on the flickering wall rambled on about cars and remedies that matter very little.

I always enjoyed coffee in the morning with the sun at the window and the young woman who called me Dad and the time we drove to the farm on Sunday.

The flowers are done  
and my garden wonders where I’ve been  
I spoke to old doc Ken about the sounds at night and mother’s sweet call.

**A Cat’s Last Breath**
Deborah Kasman, MD  
*Honorable Mention*

One day, yesterday, yesteryear,  
She was quiet, not eating well, not her usual self. Then again, she was old, over 90 in “cat” years. Alas, was it time to say goodbye?

The vet merely said her kidneys are failing. You can hydrate her easily with infusions. Is this “kitty dialysis”? I queried. Not exactly replied the vet, Just some fluid infused beneath her skin once or twice a week.

She perked up, her food was pleasurable. She cuddled through the night With her nose beneath my chin, Insistent upon affection.

Sunning by the window, Outdoor visits rendezvousing with neighborhood cats, Nose pressed forcefully upon busy hands, Meowing consistently for attention.

Yet, as more bags of fluid were hung and the process of Intervening persisted, the questions remained. How long does one persist? When is “old” truly “old” for a cat? Should one let nature take its course?

For a cat, the answer was simple. “When she no longer enjoys being a cat, When she no longer gets pleasure out of cat activities” Replied the vet. Then one stops. Then it is time.

Six months later, despite infused fluid, special foods and affection, My beloved cat was all skin and bones. Her weight cut in half, difficulty defecating, Urine deposited all over the house. Her appetite greatly diminished, albeit not gone.
“Now” says the vet. “It is humane. You should not wait. She is too weak to go to the Litter box, and could break a hip. She is no longer enjoying the usual activities of being a cat.”

She devoured one last bite of crab as a special treat, and Sat for a short cuddle upon my chest Before wandering aimlessly that last night. Unable to settle her sore bottom.

We brought her in. She did not struggle, as she had fuss The last time I infused the life-prolonging fluids. This time, she sat calmly as Her peaceful serum of respite was injected. In a humane moment, we assisted her calm, quiet end.

Tears flowed, hugs given to our soft cachetic cat Peacefully returning to her beginning. A kiss planted on her head, and upon the beloved heads of my children Who petted her one last time. I returned to work in the hospital that same day To see many sick adults, counting the number Who no longer eat, no longer speak, Demented, unaware, patient upon patient In adult diapers, unable to recognize loved ones. IVs hanging, tubes placed into noses and stomachs And out from excretory orifices.

Reading charts of months of incapacitation. Multiple trips back and forth between the medical floor And ICU. I ask for simple answers to difficult questions. Are these patients enjoying the acts of being human? Is our course of intervention humane? Is there a simpler Peaceful end that their blessed lives deserve?

I order one more blood test. Another round of antibiotics, Delaying the inevitable yet again.

STFM hosts a poetry and prose reading the night before the Annual Spring Conference begins, and all are welcome to read their writings or attend and listen to the works of others.

Additionally, the STFM Group on Ethics and Humanities sponsors an annual prose and poetry contest. Any STFM member is welcome to contribute their original work. Poetry and prose are judged by members of the Group on Ethics and Humanities, and winners will be announced the night of the STFM reading in May 2006. Winners’ writings will be published in Family Medicine and displayed at the conference.

The contest is open to all STFM members. Guidelines and deadlines for submission will be published in the December STFM Messenger.