I fall for you every time I look at blood, especially when my own gurgles into a test tube or drib-drabs onto the floor, or when my knees lock from standing too long in one place, or even when I eye a needle pointed at me. Once you refused to intervene when a migraine sucked me into its funneled vision—so deep I had to retreat to Holy Cross where Sister Demerolled me down verdant pastures dotted with blooms as purple as Elvis’s ’56 Cadillac. You, longest of nerves sprung from gray matter, tendril south, dominatrix of the diaphragm where you respond to every deep belly breath I release like a voodoo sin city doll with a slow leak. Rest and digest, soothed as fright gives up the fight, takes flight, and I croon, returning my vagal tone.

### Editor’s Note

**Vagal Maneuvers**

Rafael Campo, MA, MD

This issue’s poem, “Viva Las Vagus,” takes the reader on an appropriately wandering, at times dizzying journey, beginning with its title’s jokey, far-out allusion to, yes, the 1964 Elvis Presley movie.\(^1\) As the poem unspools we veer between playful camp and profound physical experience of our frequently off-kilter world. Though the speaker references the film elsewhere in the poem, in asides like “purple/as Elvis’s ’56 Cadillac” with its trippy enjambment ([**enjambment**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enjambment) is an unpunctuated line break across which words spill from one line to the next) and “I croon, returning my vagal tone” implicitly evoking The King, the poem’s true subject is the vagus nerve and how it animates us. The speaker juxtaposes what clinicians recognize as classic vagal episodes with wonderfully quirky expressions of parasympathetic tone: “Ifall for you every time I look at blood” (more syncopal enjambment here); or “even when I eye/a needle pointed at me” (the pun in “I eye” at once disorienting, needling the reader, and spot on). The vagus nerve is giddily reimagined here as “dominatrix of the diaphragm,” mysteriously bestowing life via the deep breathing it governs upon “a voodoo sin city doll [another Vegas/vagus evocation]/with a slow leak.” The thread or “tendril” of the vagus nerve indeed meanders through all manner of human experience, as it does through the human body itself and this delightfully nervy poem, reminding us that such uncanny, vagally mediated experiences connect us all. Rest and digest this poem!

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