

HUMANITIES

Poetry and Medicine: Old Brush Piles by the Side of the Road

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This issue, I present reflections and a poem on Mississippi's recent Winter Storm Fern by the brilliant physician writer Dwalia South, MD. For the past 40 years, Dr. South has been a family physician in her birthplace of Ripley, Mississippi. She long wrote a popular column for this publication entitled "Una Voce," and currently writes a column published in several Mississippi newspapers entitled "Southernism." In her "Southernism" column in June, 2026, entitled "The Ice-Capades of 2026: Rapid Ramblings about 'Ice Storm Fern' and her Aftermath," Dr. South writes: "How is it possible that four months have now passed since every person in north Mississippi was afflicted with the new ailment I have labeled 'The PITS': Post Ice-storm Traumatic Stress Disorder? Yes, it was and still is the PITS! Some symptoms of the PITS Disorder include: a heart-sinking response to the lights in your home blinking off and on which gives you that 'Oh, no, not again!' feeling ... a compulsion to keep your cell phone charged to the max at all times because it is your only available connection to the outside world ... and a real aversion to anything pine-scented... Recounting the misery that millions endured of course does not lessen how isolating the effects were here out in the countryside. I, along with so many others, was trapped in my abode by a couple of trees stretched across my driveway... Yes, as of the time of this writing it has been exactly 4 months since this most recent calamity has occurred, but its after-effects are inescapable. I think I will be tossing broken limbs from now 'til doomsday... The most enduring reminder of the horrors that Fern brought us are encapsulated by these cobbled-up lyrics that come to mind every time I drive through Tippah County and still see the mountainous, ubiquitous, and ugly brush heaps waiting for someone (or anyone) to whisk them away." What follows is Dr. South's poem entitled "Old Brush Piles by the Side of the Road," which she adds is "to the tune of 'Old Brush Arbors'" (1965) by country music artist George Jones.

[This issue, I present reflections and a poem on Mississippi's recent Winter Storm Fern by the brilliant physician writer Dwalia South, MD. For the past 40 years, Dr. South has been a family physician in her birthplace of Ripley, Mississippi. She is a past President of the Mississippi State Medical Association and the Mississippi Academy of Family Physicians. She has served with distinction on the Mississippi Board of Medical Licensure and on the Mississippi State Board of Health. She has been honored as the Mississippi State Family Physician of the Year. She is a past Associate Editor and past Chair

of the Publications Committee of the “Journal of the Mississippi State Medical Association.” She long wrote a popular column for this publication entitled “Una Voce,” and currently writes a column published in several Mississippi newspapers entitled “Southernism.” She is the author of the book “Una Voce,” a collection of essays, stories, poems, and letters published in 2011. She continues her busy clinical practice and maintains the Green Hills family farm, assisted by her two sons, Jesse and Jack, and a large tribe of grandchildren.

In her “Southernism” column in June, 2026, entitled “The Ice-Capades of 2026: Rapid Ramblings about ‘Ice Storm Fern’ and her Aftermath,” Dr. South writes: “How is it possible that four months have now passed since every person in north Mississippi was afflicted with the new ailment I have labeled ‘The PITS’: Post Ice-storm Traumatic Stress Disorder? Yes, it was and still is the PITS! Some symptoms of the PITS Disorder include: a heart-sinking response to the lights in your home blinking off and on which gives you that ‘Oh, no, not again!’ feeling ... a compulsion to keep your cell phone charged to the max at all times because it is your only available connection to the outside world ... and a real aversion to anything pine-scented.

“Fern was a winter weather catastrophe that we were warned about days in advance by our trusty all-knowing weathermen. Most of us who endured the February ice storm of 1994 thought that ‘it couldn’t be any worse than that one and we made through it alright.’ Well, I will say without reservation that it WAS worse than ‘94, but that the lessons we learned back then did help us to prepare to cope with FERN. With those warnings we were given, we hurriedly stocked up on gallons of drinking water and filled up the bathtubs to use for flushing the toilet. Candles, lanterns, lamps, flashlights, and batteries were hoarded. Gasoline and propane became harder to come by than the bleach and toilet paper shortage of the COVID 19 year. Loss of power and water aside, folks lost their internet service for days to weeks which for many was even more devastating.

“When Winter Storm Fern hit North America on January 23, 2026, it was easy to feel that we were the only ones who were taken prisoner by Mother Nature. In reality, Fern was practically a nationwide disaster... deemed Snowmageddon up north and encompassing nearly 2,000 miles of length, stretching from our border with Mexico far into eastern Canada. Nearly 3 feet of snow fell in many areas. In all, some 230 million people were adversely affected by this winter cyclone. There was conservatively estimated to be greater than \$4 Billion dollars in damages in the US, and most importantly there were at least 174 known fatalities nationwide. Mississippi (always the state with the ‘worst firsts’) suffered the most US casualties with 30 deaths known to be the direct result of the ice storm.

“Ice, Ice, Baby’... Recounting the misery that millions endured of course does not lessen how isolating the effects were here out in the countryside. I, along with so many others, was trapped in my abode by a couple of trees stretched across

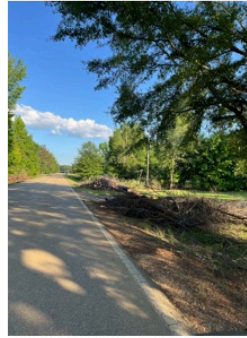
my driveway. I was rescued by my nurse Shannon's husband, my hero Big Steve Ghanem, who labored with his temperamental Stihl chainsaw to free me from that obstacle. Churches and individuals came to folk's rescue all across our area, most are too numerous to recount. I do want to say that I suddenly and happily made the acquaintance of neighbors who came to my rescue, men (angels really) that before I had only seen from a distance. Neighbor Chief Warrant Officer Joey Taylor hauled me several 5 gallon buckets of water from our local overflow well. Neighbor Zach Wilbanks helped me keep my gas powered generator going night and day. My Tippah Electric Power neighbor Kevin Orman either shot down or pole-sawed down several dangerous widow-maker limbs in my yard threatening even more damage. And this was the norm in our neck of the woods, neighbor helping neighbor!

"Another very interesting development from Fern was that the Tippah County Hospital had the first baby born there in over 38 years during these 'Ice-Capades'! On Sunday morning January 25, Mary Mitchell went into labor at her Blue Mountain home. An ambulance was called but could not make it to the home because of fallen trees in their driveway. Her husband Caleb transported her via a side-by-side ATV, then the Blue Mountain Fire Department transported Mitchell to the waiting ambulance and then on to the Tippah Hospital Emergency Room where baby Juniper Mitchell was delivered safely by Nurse Practitioners on duty, Carla Bray and Tom Desnoyers. Yay, for our historic Ice Baby's arrival!

"What is the Epilogue for Fern? Yes, as of the time of this writing it has been exactly 4 months since this most recent calamity has occurred, but its after-effects are inescapable. I think I will be tossing broken limbs from now 'til doomsday. Nature's pep-rally began to unfold immediately after the departure of the several inches of ice Fern left us. Damaged trees still put out their green buds. Dogwoods and redbuds bloomed happily, and my daffodils greeted me as if nothing at all had happened. These sights were a welcome reprieve from looking at my acres of pine trees that now appear as gigantic toothpicks standing in fields. (These pines I planted several years ago were supposed to be harvested at some future date to pay for my nursing home bed!!) The most enduring reminder of the horrors that Fern brought us are encapsulated by these cobbled-up lyrics that come to mind every time I drive through Tippah County and still see the mountainous, ubiquitous, and ugly brush heaps waiting for someone (or anyone) to whisk them away."

What follows is Dr. South's poem entitled "Old Brush Piles by the Side of the Road," which she adds is "to the tune of 'Old Brush Arbors'"(1965) by country music artist George Jones. As illustrations for this poem, Dr. South sends several photographs of gigantic brush piles in the Springdale community beside Highway 4 East that still adorn her local "highways and byways" after four months. She writes that the photos are demonstrative of "the mess we are still

dealing with.” She adds, “There are thousands more like them everywhere in Tippah County...This brush heap was about 8 feet in height and at least 20 feet wide. A prize winner!”



To contact Dr. South, email her at rwbdsb@ripleycable.net. Physicians are invited to submit poems for publication in the Journal either by email at drluciuslampton@gmail.com or regular mail to the Journal, attention: Dr. Lampton.]—Ed.

Old Brush Piles by the Side of the Road **(to the tune of “Old Brush Arbors” by George Jones)**

We can still see them so clearly,
And we hate them very dearly...
Those old brush piles by the side of the road!
“Fern” left us with disaster...
Can’t we get help any faster
With those brush piles by the side of the road??

chorus

Those old brush piles by the side of the road!
They remind us how God’s great mercy flowed.
They might be here ‘til Thanksgiving,
But we made it through, we’re living
With those brush piles by the side of the road!!

—Dwalia South, MD
Ripley, Mississippi

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