

ESSAY

Ad infinitum

Once, as an intern, she pronounced four people dead in 24 hours; by four o'clock in the morning, she wanted to go home to her brand new husband, but she had to stay until the morning report. The sparrows were rioting outside her call room window that June morning.

Once, as a senior pediatric resident, she had to finger extract stone-hard feces from the rectum of a screaming five-year-old boy. The stool clanged as it hit the metal bedpan.

Once, after being up all night as a junior, barely in control of her senses, she bent a spinal-tap needle inside a boy who squirmed the wrong way during the lumbar puncture. Afterward, she shook the warped needle in front of his nose and said: "See what you have done?!" The nurses reported her, and she was almost expelled from her coveted residency.

Once, as a hospital volunteer, she lost her lunch while watching a percutaneous needle biopsy of a coin lesion of the lung through a window in the fluoroscopy suite. She did not know what a biopsy was. She did not care about the lethal prognosis of a coin lesion. She only worried whether this incident would prevent her from getting into medical school.

Once, as a fresh-off-the-boat immigrant with dreams, she stood on the curb of a busy downtown street outside a teaching hospital while doctors — she was sure it was doctors, it must have been doctors — talked a white-haired woman in a hospital gown down from the ledge of an eighth-floor window outside the hospital library. Years later she spent nights and days studying there.

Once, as a medical student, she stood in awe in the operating room while pink-petalled flowers of human tissue blossomed in the mass of a collapsed grey-brown lung as it was reinflated during a thoracotomy. It was magical. Later, at home, she wanted to write a poem about it, but she did not know how.



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Once, on duty in the emergency department, she saw a 17-year-old girl's left pupil dilate and her left eye deviate down and outward, and she knew that an artery inside the girl's brain had just hemorrhaged and was killing her. She wanted to crack open the girl's skull to relieve the pressure, to let the blood out, to allow the brainstem to spring back to normal, but she called the code instead and the cardiac-arrest team pushed her aside as the girl died.

Once, as a young genetics attending, she was too tired to go to the hospital in the middle of the night because

her colicky newborn son had kept her awake for 10 months, and the patient, an 11-year-old girl with a metabolic liver disease, died before she saw her. At the funeral, the parents thanked her for the wonderful care that she had provided.

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