

@ JACKSON

BENJAMIN LEMELMAN

@ Jackson

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a collection of poems and photographs

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*To Jackson Memorial Hospital,
May you continue to serve those who have,
And those who have not.*



behind these walls

Behind these walls
young healers
learn the art of patience.

And give thanks
for the gift
of a life
of service.

For only with
patience and service and healing,
can we give meaning
to these walls

my baby's daddy

Lying in a bed
Sea of baby green blue

Gowns
Curtains
Wristbands.

I saw her hunched.

Practice the patient history
Just like practice,
Except real life.

What brings you in today?

Pains,
Stomach.

Have you had trouble eating?

My father died three months ago
Haven't had an appetite.

Oh, Ok.

Any illness in your family
Mother
Sister
Grandmother?

Yes,
My baby's daddy
Has sickle cell.

Oh, Ok.

Just like practice,
We drilled her
And got her good.

We left
Her tears behind us
For her daddy
And her baby's green blue daddy.



Kenya*

Her hips were dinosaur bones
Beneath a white sheet in the basement of the
downtown museum.

Her arms were tinker toys
Stuck into her body at the joints.

Her legs were equally thin.

She was my first patient. And the day before we
met, I saw a half-sentence description next to her
name. Such an unusual name. And I thought
something about *me* could get through to *her*. To
get to the bottom of her story.

To give her a full sentence description.

Her short hair was covered by a muffin cap.
Her tattoos were dusty like an attic filled with
memories of grandmothers.
Her breakfast sat on a tray, cold and untouched.

She was my first patient. And before we even met,
I was sure we'd make headlines together: *Third
Year Student Cures Terminally Ill Patient*.
My mother would be proud — maybe even tell her
Mah Jong group.

Her voice was soft in the morning, yet strong in the
afternoon
Especially when talking about seafood or gardens
or Full House.

My voice was soft in the morning too. 6:00 AM was
a new hour for me.

She said: You're not like the other doctors. You're
different — I mean they're great doctors, but they

have a wall. And I think if you're gonna be in this profession, you need a wall. You need-to-not-get too close.

I never had the chance to meet her daughter. She was my first patient, and we didn't talk about her baby much. It was an elephant packed room — and I tiptoed around the big questions.

Why didn't you take your medications? Who will care for your daughter?

She was in denial — refusing the palliative care services offered by the hospital. I was in denial — refusing to discuss her prognosis. We both knew the elephants, but it was easier to talk about anything else.

What's your favorite food?

Grandmas baked chicken and rice. And seafood, do *you* like seafood?

I like fish, but I've never had *seafood* seafood.

Shrimp?

Never tried it.

Conch?

Nope.

Lobster!?

I laughed a no.

I asked if she'd ever been to a hibachi restaurant where they throw shrimp into your mouth.

She had never been.

Does anyone catch it? she asks.

Of course! sometimes on the first try, I laugh. I told her she should try it

one day.

This 20 year old skeleton lay in front of me, and my body was breaking for the shrimp she'll never catch midair and the daughter she'll never pick up from pre-school midday.

What are you doing here? she asks.

You're my patient, and I'm supposed to take care of you.

She wasn't used to a medical student visiting her in the afternoon. That was a time for nurses and social workers, not doctors.

Are you tryin' to learn from me or somethin'?

I guess you could say that.

Well,

I had a nurse and she was from

Kenya*.

So I asked her about it: what it's like, are there any lions and tigers? What do they eat? What do they speak? What do they wear?

This way, if anyone asks me about my name*

I can tell them about the country.

You're wise, I say to her.

You're weird, she says to me.

Everyone says that—that I'm so smart so why didn't I take my meds.

Well, one thing ain't got nothing to do with the other.

She was my first pediatric patient, but the only thing pediatric about her was the diaper fastened around her hips.



Quentina

It didn't fit on the first try.

Here, let me have a go
says my Attending.

I jump from the short metal stool,
crashing my head into the overhead lamp.

Yea, I should have warned you about that
says my Attending.

I should have
looked up
I say.

The Attending works her instruments,
and I find myself on the stool once again.

Two visiting students
(future female physicians)
wait outside the procedure room.

After a few minutes, it's all over.

How many have you done before?
asks my patient.
You want the truth?
I say.

It didn't hurt like last time
says my patient.

She reaches out to give me a
high five.
My gloves are stained with betadine
that looks like
blood
so I clench my knuckles she does the same.
Our fists meet, and she

smiles.

Outside the procedure room
in a closet-turned-laboratory,
I join the other students
in search of
pieces of
tissues of
casings of
(future fetal phenomenon).

Back in the recovery room
my patient, dressed in a lime jumpsuit,
blends in with walls.

She tells me about her 7 year old son,
orange slices and
football games.
She tells me about her nursing classes
(I want him to be proud of me).

Don't you forget my name
says my patient.

I won't
I say.

home sweet home

Lips like LA housewives
puffy and pink pathetic.

Bleached hair with sharp
jagged
bangs
chopped with a rushed razor.

Her skin
glows
like the lone lamppost in a 5 AM alley.

I ask her a bunch of questions, and she makes
sure I write everything down.

Did you get that? Tell the doctor that

I have a few options: (*Are you getting all of this?*)

1. Stay here and wait for a drug program.
2. Go back to Home Sweet Home.
3. Get a bus ticket to NYC to live with my
brother.

It's her seventh stay at the Adult Intensive
Inpatient Unit in just a few months.

It's my first day, and she welcomes the new
attention:

You're SO handsome, she repeats, as I continue to
question her:

Tell me about "home sweet home."

Oh, it's the most wonderful place in the world! I
LOVE Home Sweet Home! (plus the TOP lady says I
can go back there. *Write that down.*)

She struggles to remember the address,
and I scribble down what she can recall
next to some family history:

Mom — royalty— Seattle.
Father — anthropologist — Europe.

Over the next week, I watch her on a rollercoaster.
Some days she screams I love you from across the
room. Other days she tells me to go to hell.

She celebrates her 42nd birthday on a Friday. A
family friend, Old Bill, comes
dressed in fly fishing gear
bearing freshly caught sodas and cookies to share.

Many patients come and go.
She remains.

In my last week I find a note from her social worker
and a letter from the director of her most recent
residence.

Home Sweet Home.



An apprentice's view in a Gynecology Oncology
operating theatre

As blood can do each function gently,
heavy internal junctions knit like
machines.
No other parts quickly resolve.
Seeing tubes,
Uterus, vagina.
Winching, extracting, yearning, zapping.



tumor

You were a bomb to my spirit.

And like I was saying:

If I hadn't lost my job,
[I worked at the post office]
If I hadn't lost my job,
I wouldn't have waited so long.

I knew it was growing,
But I finally got a new job
After months
Of training
In security.

And I could feel it getting bigger,
But I just got a job,
And I had never been out of work before that.
In my whole life.

It just got so big,
It exploded.

And you were a bomb to my spirit,
Talking about the stages of healing.

I'm starting to get emotional.
Don't let me get emotional now.



Alfred

My eyes,
I can't describe it.
The only word I can use,
I suppose,
Is *sleepy*.
They have this layer of *sleepy*.
This film?
You know what I mean?
I can't really describe it,
But it is just so
Annoying.
Is there anything that will help?
Drops or something?

I love to read
I need to read.

Other than that,
And the stomach pains I have,
Which I expect,
After having my stomach removed,
Other than that,
I feel fine.

And when can I get this tube
Out of my nose?

in the middle

Like a Nascar speedway
They take laps around the tenth floor.
Some recovering,
Some discovering,
Others uncovering.

I sit in the middle,
At the nurses' station,
Doing whatever we do do,
Watching them race.

Some show off,
Others take off.

Then one patient
Stops.
Smiles and says:

Don't you have a home, doctor?





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