

The Weight of A Stethoscope
By Jennifer Ferrante

Anatomical Ballet

Maybe it's simply part of the human experience;
the rage, the terror, the choice to be ignorant.
To stare death in the face and laugh is no easy feat
yet eventually, we all did.

What was our alternative?
We know, somewhere beneath the iceberg,
what we are moving towards.
Isn't it easier to pretend we'll be here forever?

Not so easy when you're dissecting
a finger with pink nail polish.

Some pull on the muscles
to make arms and legs dance.
She *was* a ballerina.
It's educational...

I say a silent prayer for this
daughter, mother, grandmother.
At the end we applaud her recital,
we thank her for her dedication.

We bring roses and we commend
her anonymous final reprise.

Overcoming Myself

Waiting outside the room,
fluorescent lights beam down on me.
The nurses move cohesively,
and I try to disguise my perspiring palms
with an extra dose of Purell.

The attending returns,
tells us to come inside, don't be shy.
Introduce yourself to the woman with cancer,
ask her what brought her in,
as if her shining scalp didn't speak for her.

The First

We all know it's going to happen,
but I thought I would have some warning.
Maybe during my ER rotation,
during surgery, or in the ICU.
Certainly not on Valentine's Day
as a second year during bedside.
We were looking for a patient
to take a history and physical,
we know how this goes by now,
"What brought you in today?"
"Could you describe the pain?"
I rehearsed as I always do,
but not nervous, because finally I
have found comfort in the familiar.

"Come with me!"
We file into a room with a group;
doctors, nurses, paramedics gathered
around a blue body, all I could think:
he's so blue he's so blue so blue.
We can't be in the right room?
We can't take a history here?
Working in coordinated chaos
the doctors take turns performing
compressions, switching positions,
"Another of epi!" and I pretend
I'm watching Grey's Anatomy,
I don't cry at TV shows.
"One more round, and we'll call it."

I can't bear to hear what I know
is coming next, time of death,
so I step into the hall, catch my breath,
trying to understand why I am
mourning for someone whose name
I do not know, why I can't just
wait until I get home to feel this way,
why my mature defenses are failing me,
begging for suppression for just a few
hours so my faculty mentor doesn't have
to see me cry and write in my evaluation
that I cannot handle medicine
if I cannot handle death.

But instead, he tells me that he fainted
in his first surgery (he became a surgeon).
He reassured me that it's okay, normal,
perhaps even *good* to feel this way.
My emotions are not a burden, and sure,
maybe over the years I will harden but now,
this is compassion. This is empathy,
and this is what only experience can teach.
I should not feel ashamed for feeling.
I wiped my eyes and we regrouped for
a moment before seeing our next patient,
to whom I could finally ask,
"What brought you in today?"

The Weight of a Stethoscope

She looks up at the four of us,
fresh young faces in clean white coats.
I can't help but feel as if we are
imposing, surrounding her bed and
staring down, examining for signs
of edema and ascites,
when we should look also
at her eyes, her smile, the
balloons and cards across the room.

“Poke and prod away!”
She tells us not to worry as we
palpate her abdomen, percuss in
all four quadrants, listen with
a stethoscope to her stomach
while she laughs and tells us
“no dears, you aren't hurting me!”
Still, we tread gingerly,
unsure of our own strength.

“So...what brought you in today?”
She does not know where to start.
She doesn't remember trivialities
like medications or onset of symptoms—
but she tells us it's inoperable.
We know what to say, we have been trained,
but no lecture prepares you for the reality.

The weight of mortality hangs in the air.
Moments ago we were laughing;
how quickly the atmosphere
can shift in a hospital room.

I feel a renewed determination
as we assure our patient
her time spent with us will shape us;
that she will leave her mark
in helping us strive for greatness.

And that's when I feel it most,
draped over my clean white coat;
shared dreams for the future,
the weight of my stethoscope.

The Same Side

A white coat
is not so strong a barrier.
I know you better than
you would imagine.
I know you are on *that*
side of the discussion now
and you think I could not
imagine how it feels to hear
that diagnosis and that my
“empathetic statement” is
just part of my job but trust me,
if I told you how I really *know*;
well, it does not seem fair to you.
And so I do as we’re trained to:
“I wish that I had better news,
but I’ll be here to fight with you.”
This is your narrative, and I will not
weigh you down with mine.
But when I go home, as I remove my coat
our conversation echoes in my mind,
I carry your story with mine, intertwined.

Haldol

Her eyes focus on something distant.
I don't think she truly sees us;
I feel as if I were translucent.
I look to the resident. He begins,
"How are you doing today, Miss?"
Silence. She stares through us.
"Are you doing well today?"
Silence. Then, struggling through
glued-together lips, "Mhmm."
She hears us. However faintly,
our question has registered.
"What do you do for fun, Miss?"
Silence. We ask her louder,
"What do you do for fun?"
"Nothing."
I ask, "Do you go outside?"
"No. Only church."
Her eyes are blank,
her face a mask of
unnatural neutrality.
"What do you like to eat?"
Her inhibition lifts;
for a moment, she's giddy,
she tells us, "Fish!"
Her eyes shimmer now,
I see her teeth for the first time.
"And are you still hearing
the voices?"
Her face clouds;
the mold resets,
like drying cement.
"No."
"Yes, that was a long time ago, Miss..."
She stares, changing
people into ghosts.
Silence again. And it roars.
I hope she can hear
one voice.

Heroic Measures

the hum of the machine
keeps you breathing

the beeps of the screen
show your heart is still beating

when night comes
I will my eyes to stay open

while I watch your chest move
the mechanical motions assure me

you are still of this world
but if my eyelids betray me

your body may fail you
so I steadfastly stay to ensure

you do not flee this earthly prison
for if you do

you will lock me in
my own solitary confinement

A Quiet Departure

He died silently.
No pain,
as if his body planned
this self-betrayal.
No swelling or explosions
nothing loud
nothing presumptuous
a silent and graceful
apoptosis.
Death is feared,
worshipped,
revered,
but death does not roar.
It is strong, unsettling, quiet—
terror and peace in one still corpse.

A Tree in Winter

in former glory
I shrink
like winter's tree
a shadow of his summer self

trying to compose
against my past
I, a critic, loom over my words
my shadow persists in the light

I said I would never tell
about trees or seasons
it's all been done and undone
but now I must reconsider

a ubiquitous picture
of loneliness and melancholy
a tree without leaves
a shell in the snow

no snowflake is to blame
when my leaves fall,
when my branches bow
together, each is innocent

freely they land, without guilt
nobody can stop an avalanche
does that one flake really matter?
one of them takes my last leaf

I try and retreat
but my trunk still stands
the wind beats against me
but for my roots I remain

I recall summer
how I flourished
and so I don't wither
I write

A Few Minutes

At first, I didn't want to
walk into the room.
"Previously healthy
11-month old..."
I had started to see
how pieces of you
leave when patients do.
And then I saw you
through the window.
Your big brown eyes
searching for solace,
I haven't seen your mom
come by for a few days.
I don the gown and mask
and gloves-contact precautions-
and for a few minutes
I don't worry
about metabolic acidosis
or the notes waiting for me.
Instead, I read to you,
watch you smile as you
grab at my glasses.
Maybe for a few minutes,
you forget about your
tracheostomy and stop
pulling at your IV and
maybe you can just *be*.
For a few minutes.

Nice To Meet You

I go back to your room
and you sit on the floor
playing with firetrucks
choosing a sticker from
my still too-large collection.

You're running around now!
A changed person from the
sleepy, pale boy who I met
in the emergency room-
and I am glad to meet you.

Call Me Beach Glass

Have I been eroded?
Like a shoreline on the beach,
pummeled by the weight
of the waves on my shoulders,
a victim of the warming earth.
Perhaps I have been made beautiful
like rounded beach glass;
my sharp edges softened,
dangerous points smoothed
to sit in a child's palm.
Perhaps I am a wonder
carved by roaring waters
and people will travel
to gape at me and marvel
at all I have endured,
they will wonder
how I am still standing.
Not eroded, but carved.

Desperate Times, Desperate Measures

Doors to the visitor rooms unopened,
protocols changing, morale is broken.

A mother arrives unvaccinated
pleading to save her, now she's intubated.

Her baby's taken, premature,
not yet named, as we're not yet sure.

If mother wakes, she will find
one less limb and foggy mind.

We do all that we know how to do
so mother and baby make it through.

How do they preach outside of here
that it's all a hoax, there's nothing to fear?

If only they could see inside;
a desperate measure to change their minds.

Steps

My vision is obscured by
golden paths and figs and leaves,
creating blind spots.

I am frozen at the fork,
between the branches.

I cannot choose,
though I beg my feet to move;
tell myself to follow instinct,
but I was raised in a city.

My soles have no trust
in soil or forested paths;
my eyes give no credence
to the shadows cast by sun.

I watch a stream carrying
floating twigs and I wish I, too,
could flow as the current does,
but I sit on the bank,
immobile, paralyzed by indecision.

I wave goodbye to the star and
welcome his sister as
the world becomes shrouded
in the glow and I can finally
pick up my feet, with no one
but the Big Dipper to see me
forge my path.

Into the Fire

All around, buildings burn
wherever you look,
the world is torn.
It's all been melted,
charred to black,
and if you could,
would you go back?

But you are not able
to stay inside,
though part of you
wants to run, to hide.
“Is this what I signed up for?”
you ask yourself each day;
in a way, in a way...

But did you know
there would be no hose?
You've mere cups to drench
a fire that blazes and grows.
Gardens are scorched, the roses are gone,
you mourn the birds, missing their songs;
your duty commands you keep moving along.

When you walk by, the people cheer;
you wonder if they know how deeply you fear.
But even without a hose, without a mask,
you work in smoke until you collapse.
Because when there's a fire,
you know what you'd say:
walk towards the flames, not away.