

Unreturned Pages

Category: Poems

written by Doug Hester | November 28, 2014

Doug Hester

Exhalations materialize in the dark as I walk
from the empty parking deck. I brew coffee,
then print a list—our census is up to thirty.
I grab my coat and start seeing patients:
the gastric bypasses, the nine ex-laps,
the psychotic panniculectomy patient,
and the bowel obstruction we are watching.
I page just before six to ask about his diet,
but you don't answer me, so I move on,
jotting ins and outs, celebrating flatus.
Knocking on the Whipple's door, I think
of you suddenly and my gut spasms,
smothered by the weight of living like this.
I page again from the ICU, staring at a phone,
wondering if it has finally gotten to you, torn flesh
with no one to hold pressure or throw a stitch.

I remember your face, how you look on rounds,
the light in your pupils fading to a dull black.
Waiting for a reply, I prewrite some discharges.
I know you're just running late for rounds,
but I wish you'd call me back about the diet.

Editor's note: The term ex-lap is medical shorthand for exploratory laparotomy, a procedure used to examine the abdominal organs; panniculectomy is the surgical removal of certain excess abdominal fatty tissue; and a Whipple procedure is an operation used to remove a pancreatic cancer.

About the poet:

Doug Hester is an academic anesthesiologist at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN. His academic work focuses on airway management and resident education. "When I'm not working or spending time with my wife and daughter, I write poetry, fiction and essays about medicine, fatherhood and adoption—subjects I think over throughout my day." His work has appeared in publications such as [The Examined Life Journal](#), *Anesthesiology* and *Chest*.

About the poem:

"This poem was inspired by a recent, cold morning commute on foot into work that recalled the distant, cold February mornings of my surgical internship. The camaraderie that developed among the interns and residents during that stressful year created fear when one of us failed to show up. The

frustrations and fatigue of the job made us wonder if the person was physically okay; many programs have at least one story of suicide. We would continue our workday, picking up the slack for the missing person and hoping that the no-show was simply a case of oversleeping. We rarely talked of our fears about suicide or car accidents.”

Poetry editors:

Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer