

OR Tears

Category: Poems

written by Anne Vinsel | December 12, 2015

Anne Vinsel

Tears in the operating room are different from tears cried by civilians, by veals.

There are rules.

A single tear from one eye is unobjectionable.

Two tears, either one from each eye

or two from one eye

are permitted if they are unaccompanied by sniffles.

Three tears risks discovery and humiliation.

There are rules.

The mechanics of crying in the OR are difficult.

You may not brush a tear away.

Sterile and dirty may not touch.

Gloved sterile hands may not swipe unsterile eyes.

Best to let your tear take a quick dive into your blue pleated mask

which will blot it up before it can drop into the sleeping

patient's incision.

There are rules.

You can sneak peanut M&Ms one by one at decent intervals under your mask, but

you cannot touch your face just a little higher up to flick away a tear when

a child's severed leg thunks into the stainless steel basin.

There are rules.

Eyes can be red but not too red, wet but not too wet.

Many in the OR are sleep-deprived, and a few are hung over,

so you will blend in.

Some eyes blink rapidly, chasing an errant eyelash or contact lens,

tearing up and reddening. You could be one of those.

It is not permitted to rub dirty eyes with sterile hands to prevent a snail trail of

tears sneaking down cheek and over mask.

There are rules.

OR tears are different from veal tears, civilian tears.

They burn.

They track fire down unprotected cheeks, leaving a faint trace

of light umber against the sky blue mask, disturbing the pressed-down fibers and

making fuzz as they go.

The color is from the anesthesia in the air,

seeping out from around the mask and the tube.
It does burn,
and there are rules.

Although others can tell you've been shedding tears, if you follow the rules
they will not

mention your shame.

If you break the rules, others can be mean.

You may acquire a nickname.

About the poet:

Anne Vinsel, a painter, also works as a surgical photographer at a large academic medical center. "I began writing three years ago, when I had trashed both knees and was having difficulty painting. At that time, a grateful patient who had headed our university's writing program started a writing group for hospital employees." Her suite of ten poems won first place in the poetry division of the 2015 Utah Original Writing Competition. "I previously received an honorable mention for my short story "Concentration Camp Stories for Doggies" and am now working on a novel, *Radium Springs Self Storage*, but I have found that some situations are better suited to poetry. I live in a carpenter's Victorian house of no particular architectural merit with my pit bull, Dr. Jackson."

About the poem:

"This poem comes out of my personal experience of shooting surgery. My day job sometimes lets me be in the OR as neither a tourist nor a team member. When I'm not actively shooting but cannot leave the OR, ideas for poems or stories often emerge. I wrote the first few lines of my first surgery poem in Sharpie on my scrubs leg. This is my first completed surgery poem."

Poetry editors:

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