One
Stuff I Learned in Nursing School

to live in a tiny room with two other girls,
to drink red wine, Cuba libres,
to smoke cigarettes,
to say all the forbidden words:
goddamn, hellfire, fuck, shit,
to French inhale, French kiss—
to swab down eight bodies, make eight beds
at a fast trot, dizzy from not enough sleep
the head nurse yelling like a drill sergeant
before running off to three hours of class,
to learn how to poke needles
in oranges, in my roommate—
which hole for the enema, which for the catheter,
to stand when some asshole doctor
ambles in, all hands—like the one
we call Molest Me Gillespie—
to kiss some intern, me all over him,
like a tabby cat on fire,
then night duty, helping to catch
greasy babies, the gush of blood
missing the bucket, I have to swab
along with clots on forceps—
to keep arm distance from old men's
pinching paws, to flip the sheet
over a show-off's wrinkled weenie,
to scrub for surgery, holding
my hands like the holy mother,
to duck when I hand some
hungover surgeon
the wrong instrument
and the whole tray comes flying at me,
to stifle gags at clouds of stink,
wiping shit-ooze from a withered butt,
or cleaning a bubbly mass,
cancer that used to be pink skin,
to hold my face flat,
even smile and pat an arm
while I'm screaming inside
at guts throbbing in an open belly,
to have some MD come at me
mad dog crazy, snarling,
mouth foaming
when his patient goes bad,
for the whole world to treat me
like a retard maid
when I’ve just watched
someone’s father die,
all of the above my ticket
to punching a time clock
at a job that gives me
a bad back, varicose veins,
work that makes friends think
that they can say any damn thing
about their bodies or their bowels,
that I really want to see
their hairy surgery scars,
and, yes, to have a new patient say,
“Oh, you are that Anne.
My neighbor still talks about you,
how you helped him
get through that terrible time.”
My First Death

This spring I’m nineteen, a student nurse working the night shift, me with twenty-six patients. Mr. Burnett, an old farmer, almost well from gall bladder surgery, rises early to sit with me as I nod over charts. But this morning, his call light blinks. I find him, his face oatmeal, his breath a whistle.

It’s ten years before “Code Blue” or CPR, so I call the intern, hoping he won’t go back to sleep. Gordon bursts in just as Mr. Burnett rattles his last gasp. “Get me Epi and a long needle.” He pounds Mr. Burnett’s chest while the drug slips from my sweaty hands, rolls under the bed. I crawl though dust, whispering, “Please, God, please.”

Like a crazed killer, Gordon stabs for the heart, hits a rib, the silver needle arcs before he slams it home. Sparked by the curls on Gordon’s nape as he leans over the patient, a warm honey oozes across my belly. Even as I curse my traitor’s body, I will my patient’s heart to jump-start. But Gordon shakes his head, and I hear sobs.

Mr. Burnett’s son leans against the wall, his face a gargoyle. I dart past him, my teeth clattering as if I’ve been caught in murder. I should have stayed, I should have put my arm around his shoulders, but I am as green to death as the jonquils coming up on the hospital lawn.
At a benefit for a wild bird sanctuary
people gnaw ribs to a blues band.
In chicken wire cages pelicans squawk,
hop, peck at dry dirt. One teeters on
a single leg. One circles, dragging
its broken wing. Another, a chick in its beak,
beats the yellow body flat against a rock,
and it’s 1961 again. I’m nineteen,
a student nurse at Central State Hospital,
a jailer’s keys hanging from my belt.
On the men’s ward, psychopaths herd
schizophrenics through the showers,
shave the slack faces of catatonics.
In the dayroom a screened TV blares.
Patients stagger in orbit, rock in corners,
or argue with unheard voices while I play
gin rummy with joking psychos, soon
forgetting who has murdered, who has raped.
On Fridays patients from the chronic wards
pour into the gym. An inmate band saws
hillbilly tunes while I bump bellies
with Jesus, Napoleon, and sweaty men
who gallop or drool on my starched bib.
Other days I lead muttering women,
shuffling like Mother after her shock
treatments, to have their brains fried.
When the doctor turns on the juice,
I feel like a Jew herding loved ones
to the ovens at a death camp, holding down
a bucking arm or leg. At night, I wake
from a dream of maimed birds and wait
for a voice to order me to hand over
my keys, to join my kind in the pen.
He comes walking into the ER, holding hands with a wife and a little boy. A big guy, he’s wheezing like a pump organ in a country church. “I’m thirty-five today. It’s my asthma.”

I put him on a stretcher, start inhalers, get a page in to the ER doc, an IV going, shoot some epinephrine, but the dumb galoot stops breathing. Laryngospasm. I grab a lung man who’s walking by. He intubates, and I squeeze that ambu bag like a pastry chef icing a wedding cake, but the man’s lungs aren’t getting air, his blood pressure rockets. Now his heart flutters, stops. We pump his chest, shock him—again and again—nothing but a straight line. Thirty minutes after he arrives we pronounce him. His wife and kid wait in reception, expecting him to amble out with a birthday grin ready for songs and cake. What they get is me and some strange doctor, our faces wearing the news. I drive home, waiting to draw my next breath, and the next.
You were going to show your boy how a man rides. Instead you taught him how to fly. Sailing over handlebars, did you see the sky swirl to meet concrete, feel your head splatter like a melon? Now bound in hospital white, your muscles rev with power. You are Evel Knievel over Snake River Canyon a Hell’s Angel with teeth strung like scalps from your belt. The bed rises in a giant wheelie. You fly this new chopper through nurses, needles mummy wrappings on a road only you can see.
When the alarm howls like a hungry coyote, it’s still night out. I stagger from bed, slide into scrubs, ignore coffee’s acid stab on an empty stomach, race for a good parking spot, clip on my ID, become Nurse Anne—not wife, not mother, not me—match boxes of time to stuff that won’t wait—meds, dressings, patients to walk, those complaining puppets—run against the clock, stop everything for this doctor, that PA, the sudden onset chest pain, trot down the hall double time trying to blank out thoughts of last night’s sulking child, the quarrel, the sex we didn’t have. I make it past lunch, eyes drooping over charts to office drone, push myself back up to answer lights, smile for the new admission who puts me into overtime, make myself think Friday paycheck, drive home on clogged roads head spinning with forgotten promises pocketed on scraps of paper, leaving the patients still waiting for juice, a pain pill. I pull into the garage, take a deep breath, and brace myself for real life.
My husband phones me from Costa Rica in the shadow of the Arenal Volcano, a growling monster I can hear thousands of miles distant over crackling wire. He describes chunks of molten rock big as boxcars bouncing down the hillside, a night sky lit by flames, bubbling lava rivers and—click—he is gone, the phone dead.

At work I am thinking of him, when Mr. Gleason, a coronary bypass patient I had just seen, turns on the call light. I find a canyon in his chest, an infected sternal wound laid open by festered muscle, rotted sutures. A wayward finger of bypassed artery waves free; the walls sparkle, sprayed gang-war red. Mr. Gleason’s dead eyes stare.

My husband comes home to me unsinged, but I am scarred, as if by Arenal. I tiptoe around boiling pots, honed blades, drive slowly in the right-hand lane. Mr. Gleason visits my dreams to remind me of my own pulsing lava, the hidden rainbow palate—goldenrod fat, damson spleen, lilac intestine—and the price of opening this thin skin sack to my own scalding beauty.

True Colors
I’ve mislaid a lot of stuff lately—
a button from my new coat,
a left contact lens, my favorite pen.
Now I almost lose my husband.
He comes to me as I sleep
in a halo of bathroom light.
He dances a jig by the bed,
his voice a faint metallic whistle.
I’m a nurse, adept in CPR, certified
in advanced cardiac life support,
so I know how easy it is to die.
I’m on my feet, ready to stop
that domino cascade—
the breath, the heart, then the brain.
I hug him a la Heimlich again, again.
Still the shrill noon siren, not breath,
and he begins the float away to join
patients who’ve died despite my skill.
I shove him facedown over a chair back
jerk my fists into his gut hard enough
to massage his backbone. A cough drop,
sucked down with a snore, flies
into a corner. My husband lies down
already asleep, a burped baby,
while I tremble beside him, thinking
how, like the pale blue contact lens
that swirled down the drain,
he could have been lost to me forever.
“We’ve got a man with gas gangrene.”
I look up from my crossword puzzle, raise an eyebrow. Gas gangrene?
It’s a couple of hick ambulance drivers who’ve seen too many old movies.
But one of them is carrying a big carton marked “O Positive,” so I pay attention.
They drag in a stretcher, blood dripping off the sides. “He was working under a truck, and the jack slipped.
Wheel rim caught his belly.”

The patient, a black man, mid-thirties, clutches at the sheet with callused hands when I tug it down to see something more personal than his pecker; ropy blue intestines studded with brassy fat spill onto the gurney. By then I’m on the horn, calling for orders: stuff the guts back in, cover the yawning wound with saline-soaked towels, pump in more blood.

I can’t do it. My hands won’t work.
I stand outside the curtain, shaking till his soft voice comes at me. “Miss? Are you there?” I glove up, put on a big smile, walk through those drapes like a movie star on Oscar Night, “We’re going fix you up as good as new.”
I keep up the stupid grin, lifting the dead weight of hot guts, feeding them back into his belly’s maw. “How’s the pain?” I ask. “Just a little.” He points to a tiny nick on an eyelid. I think maybe there is a God until a week later kidney failure kills him.
Seven a.m. on the post-op heart unit morning report drones. I doodle through all the patients but mine—Mr. Johnson for discharge, Mr. Elton for tests, a post-op triple bypass—gut hanging like an old hammock, pack-a-day smoker. Lucky wife, luckier still the guy, his widowmaker caught before it axed him.

My buddies and I do all the right stuff, eat our veggies, exercise. Today we hike the Smokies on a bright leaf carpet. Doug and I plunge ahead until he stops—“I hear something.” A loud crack shakes the tree canopy. Overhead a hickory tilts, snaps, raining leaves like golden eyes, bowing to take us in its deadly arms.

Doug’s wife, Janet, and I once shared a toke for old times. As I drove home that night, an hour passed to the first stop sign. Now time flashes as I run from yellow death. The forest floor thuds. I’m still standing, but Doug lies facedown under branches. Another moment freezes before he climbs free. “That was almost a widowmaker,” he says.

We clamor over rocks to cascading falls, but I can’t stop shaking, seeing myself smashed, just as earlier that week I jumped from the path of a cell-talking soccer mom gunning her rhino SUV, inches saving me. All weekend, we chant “widowmaker,” a magic charm, but any nurse knows that the tiger death is always stalking.
I work in a hospital where we speak the obscure English dialect called Cardiology—beta blockers, Wenckebach, Tombstone Tees. My patients wear electronic stickers on their chests, mapping the mysteries of their hearts while I concoct chemical cocktails to synchronize the wavy lines. Certified in defibrillation, cardiac conversion, I program pumps, Doppler silent pulses, dispense drugs from a computerized bank, my nimble hands always cool, quick, efficient. One day I see a film: in a Russian hospital the nurses’ station is only a portrait of Lenin over a card table. The narrator says nurses don’t keep charts, since patients cannot sue, says medicines and equipment are scarce. I wonder what they can possibly do for the sick.

On vacation in Scotland I beg at the bar for ice when my friend Sandra vomits for two days till her kidneys fail. I ride with her to the hospital. The ambulance driver says, “You probably want to pay. Americans always do.” The nurses ask only her name, age, my phone number. One room holds two rows of iron bedsteads, a bad joke from a World War II movie. Sandra, sicker than the rest, lies behind a screen at the end. Beside her bed stands only an iron IV pole. I grab a plastic chair from the pile by the door, to sit, useless, as the nurses flutter over her like white butterflies. The next day I find Sandra sitting up in bed, smiling. As Mr. Pillow, the head nurse, informs me of improved vital signs, increased urine output, he strokes her arm. When I go home to my job, I let my hands linger on a shoulder, warm a wrist, knowing now that it all comes down to this, the touch.
Immune to flies and smell
I cruise back wards, listing
casualties with a practiced eye.
Bodies of men glisten with
iced sweat. Yet, hearing
my long skirts rustle between
cots, they move hands to cover
soft hearts of sex, leave
open the grin of wounds.
In front wards the sun
blinds me, glinting off
yellow mums and waxed
floors. Neatly bandaged men
greet me with smiles pinned on
like medals. Sitting among
straight bed rows, I speak
of the future of nursing—
my womanly art, the fight
against sepsis. As I talk
a red stain creeps under
the locked door and soaks the hem
of my immaculate white dress.
White

At first white means bride dolls, the snow that falls once or twice each winter. Then it becomes the lacy dress I wear in the baptismal pool, cotton bras and tampons, the shoes called white bucks my boyfriend scuffs under my grandmother's scrutiny.

The spring I'm fifteen, Grandmother takes me to a place where white burns. Mother lies under spotless sheets. Her head flops, black hair gleams with silver. Her eyes, the sclera shining and wet, slide over me, never pausing. Drugs and shock white-out memory.

Almost a woman, I leave her for a starched uniform in a world that worships white. I learn to strap metal onto foreheads, to ignore the bovine bleat of patients, biting on rubber, to hold down jerking legs and arms. As if a white-hot current could erase a dead father, her drunken husband.

Mother’s Bible shows an old God wearing a sparkling beard, a milky robe, but my heaven becomes the drifting snow I ski on Colorado slopes under peaks like hands folded in prayer. I choose this aching white over the fluffy clouds through which Mother, clawing, fell.