



Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma
Advancing Science, Fostering Relationships, and Building Careers

2024 Oriens Fellow Winning Essay
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To the teenage boy in room 12. Tell me, did you know how much you were loved?

Did you know that after you were brought in the ICU waiting room was filled with your family and friends, hovering on the side of the couches and on the edges of hope. The bullet passed through your brain and took your memories, your personality, and your smile, but the rest of your body still held on with the tenacity of a 17-year-old kid. Tell me, how I was supposed to tell the broken woman in the corner of the room that she no longer has a son but that she'll never stop being a mother. When the social worker approached your family, she clutched her clipboard a little tighter to her chest, as if protecting her own heart from the pain of asking moms to give up pieces of their sons. We pause in our day to stand witness by the hall as you're taken to the operating room. Some hours later, the waiting room will be empty of all the people who loved you but your memory stays alive in the cells of the organs you gave away.

To the MVC rollover in room 8 driving home tired after date night. Tell me, what thoughts flowed through your mind as you were spinning across the black asphalt? I've repeated your operation so many times and yet each time is unique. Scalpel, scoop, search. So much blood and yet you were just a shattered spleen. Not to minimize the loss of your organ but to emphasize the wonder that we can save lives with sutures and square knots. When we pull your tube you hoarsely say thank you. The hospital mashed potatoes don't compare to the au gratin you last had at dinner but when you think you're about to die I'm sure the taste of salt feels like a miracle.

To the man in room 6 who's still not out of the woods, your blood being flowing through a dialysis machine, the vent breathing for you, and your body held together with silk ties and staples. Tell me, are the woods you're in dark, or can you see shards of light through the leaves? A day ago you were selling ice cream on the sidewalk to send money to your children back home. In the operating room we tried and tried, using lap pads to tamponade your broken future. I stayed with you all night, two sticks of epi in my hand as I watched the tangled tubes and lines keep your body alive. But bodies tire when they're torn and the cruelest thing about bullets is that they never care who's waiting for you to come home.

To the elderly man in room 16, I'm sorry that you fell. I'm sorry that old age is unfair, and that your bones which held you up for 86 years decided to be done. Tell me, how many life events did your legs keep you upright for? How many weddings, how many dances. How could your family have known that a walk in your flower garden would be the last time your feet will carry you. Your spine had snapped like a gladiola and your family had to discover that letting go is sometimes the most loving of choices. Your grandson told me you played the piano for years; and I wonder how long the memory of the songs lingered in your fingers after we turned off your vent.

To the pregnant woman in room 18, tell me is she kicking? Walking to the bus stop with paint samples in a plastic bag all you were thinking of was a lilac nursery. When the car hit you, the sidewalk was splattered with your blood and three different shades of purple. We fixed your bones with titanium and your arteries with prolene while you continued to grow tiny bones and tiny vessels, every weary cell in your body determined to protect this new life. I know the fatigue of healing goes deep down to your soul but trust when the physical therapists say that walking will make you feel whole again. I sit with the social worker and tell her about your first steps since the accident; her clipboard loosens just a little.

This hallway, this collection of room numbers and human stories, is the reason I want to have a career in trauma surgery and critical care. I remember the ones who transferred out to continue their lives and the ones whose memories still echo between the IV poles. These hallways smell like bleach and blood and bicarb and to walk them every day is a privilege. To be reminded daily of the limits of my abilities, and the extent of my responsibilities. To use my training and my skills to stop hemorrhage, to diagnose and treat, to be entrusted with the care of kidneys, lungs, hearts, bowels, and brains. To do no harm and to do as much good as I can, and when there's nothing else left, to just be present at the last moments of a person's story.