

A Woman's Cut

Poetry Highlighting Moments of Meaning and Connection in the Woman Surgeon's Care of Patients

Joey Lew, MFA

BACKGROUND

Women are under-represented in surgery, and especially so in surgical subspecialties such as cardiothoracic, urologic, orthopedic, and neurosurgery. Additionally, in comparison to male colleagues, women surgeons remain disproportionately underpaid. Unsurprisingly, women are also under-represented in the editorial boards of the journals that craft the dominant narrative, the state of the field, of surgery. It is important to continue to advocate for and highlight the voices and experiences of women in surgery so that the next generation of women in medical school can more easily see themselves as surgeons. In writing this collection I hope not only to contribute to representation but also to nuance the view of the woman surgeon and surgeon more broadly for lay readers.

Formal & Content Influences included: Anastacia-Rene , Ross Gay, Cait Weiss Orcutt, Louise Gl ck, Kaveh Akbar, Leila Chatti, Fady Joudah, Rita Dove, Lucille Clifton, Ocean Vuong, and many others!

GOAL

A series of poetic portraits based on 12 shadowing experiences that highlight the humanity, strength, and empathy of 12 women surgeons in their many manifestations.

METHODS

1. Background reading, scheduling, and series planning
2. Shadow a surgeon in clinic and/or wards and/or OR
3. Interview surgeon with standardized questions
4. Write the poem
5. Workshop & revise the poem with MFA cohort
6. Submit poems to journals & contests
7. Repeat x 12!

Portrait of the Endocrine Surgeon as Oracle of Butterflies *For Dr. Sosa*

seeing you lace your shoes through
her crystal computer ball; she puts both hands

through her hair and reminds you that
the butterfly she removed from your neck

was in the process of metamorphosis,
had bad things to become and was already becoming.

She can tell you how your neck will swell, toad-
like and terrible, if you persist in this secret

bending, in this stubborn independence. It's no rim
off her round glasses, no iris removed from

her large brown eyes, but you should know
the dissection was difficult. A spider's web

of nerve and muscle and blood. She preserved
everything that was untainted. You get it

but you don't get it. How eight hands were
required in the small triangle of your under-

jaw. She has seen you and she has seen other
yous, for decades. The oracle used to treat

pancreatic cancer, but was tired of predicting
death and being right. *I like that my patients*

survive. You get it but you don't get it.
She smiles. Answers your questions before

you ask them. Checks the texts on her watch.
It is a busy business seeing to the removal

of cocoons. She orders bubble-
tea. Asks after the next patient, pretends

for a moment at mystery, at unknowing
the delicate workings of insects and excision.

She always anticipates six drops of blood but
this next patient had fewer than five.

Portrait of the Endocrine Surgeon as Gardener *For Dr. Gosnell*

A woman believes she is warmer
than her friends, but *some folks are just sunflowers*,
and can't get enough heat

the crescent moon of remaining windpipe
compressed by the heavy lopsided bowtie
of thyroid must be pruned, must be weeded,

told to get his affairs in order a man sought
a second opinion (hers) with more calloused hands,
was rewarded with years, built himself a house, remarried

she tends to the salt of the earth, stem, stalk, and
seed, asks after the lovely daughter and lively grandchildren,
asks after fire season, the fog melting and returning

necklace of blue wooden beads and three stars
on each ear, for years she has cultivated,
watched and waited, eying the blight

born into, borne by each bowtie plant, some into a vast
desert, but *some folks are just roses* and can't help
but bear children with sweetness and thorns,

three wedding rings have been lost in the dirt
during digging season, tied to her scrubs,
slipped onto a hair scrunchy, knotted into a necklace

she didn't notice she'd grown a garden until a friend
stopped by, noted all the plants, saw her hands on every
wilted leaf, lifting gently, asked her how long, how long—

she sees to the generation of generations, the seeds
that need staking for growth, partners with the sole sliver
of moon to offer the most predictable tide

RESULTS

- Portrait of the Endocrine Surgeon as Oracle of Butterflies
- Portrait of the Colorectal Surgeon as Echo
- Portrait of the Trauma Surgeon as Artist
- Portrait of the Surgical Oncologist as Necessary & Sufficient Medium for Growth
- Portrait of the Pediatric Surgeon as Siberian Iris
- Portrait of the Breast Surgeon as Plainclothes Superhero
- Portrait of the Endocrine Surgeon as Gardener
- Portrait of the Minimally Invasive, Foregut, & General Surgeon as Oasis
- Portrait of the Colorectal Surgeon as Poem
- Portrait of the Abdominal Transplant Surgeon as 3-Star Michelin Chef
- Portrait of the Trauma Surgeon as Atlas, Greek Titan
- Portrait of the Abdominal Transplant Surgeon as Our Story's Protagonist

OUTCOMES:

Collection of 12 poems, 8 sub-specialties represented
3 accepted for publication (The MacGuffin, 3/2023),
8 under review/consideration at other journals
1 short-listed for a festival prize (The Wolverhampton Poetry Festival)

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