

MIND TO MIND

Creative writing that explores the abstract side of our profession and our lives

Stephen T. Harvey, M.D., Editor

The Path of Minimal Pain

Kate E. Lee, B.A.

“You can do it, we trust you,”
My resident tells me, but
I don’t trust myself.

I don’t trust that I will prick my patient
Once
And see waxy mahogany climb
The silvery hollow thorn
I hold like a pen.

I hold a ballpoint pen
And practice my movement,
Charting landmarks on my wrist:
The styloid process of the radius, a cliff
On the lateral edge of human wrist,
The tendon of the flexor carpi radialis, tense
But tensile like the Q’*eswachaka*,
And in between and under,
The winding, pulsating river from which I will draw.
I ink in my wrist and my memory
The path of minimal pain.

Because I’ve seen the paths of maximal pain,
Where the beveled steel carved tunnels into the flesh,
Making faces grimace as if crucified.

From the Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University, New York, New York. el2901@cumc.columbia.edu

Accepted for publication April 22, 2021. Published online first on May 17, 2021.

Permission to reprint granted to the American Society of Anesthesiologists by copyright author/owner. *Anesthesiology* 2021; 135:366–7. DOI: 10.1097/ALN.0000000000003832

In my patient's face I see fear or my fear
Because my hands are trembling,
Because she knows I'm the student,
Because I'm shaking sharp metal
At a 45-degree angle to her wrist but
I trust myself.

I trust my intelligence that gave me this white coat to wear,
My compassion that made me memorize the landmarks,
That also made me tremble.
Once.
A flash of red lightning for me,
Reassurance to her,
And relief for us.
Light at the end of the tunnel I made through
The path of minimal pain.