Birth
Joanne Wilkinson, MD
Essay—First Place

Push push push that’s it c’mon c’mon you can do it, I say with a rush of energy as my hands wiggle their way into sterile gloves, size six-and-a-half, the blue ones that match my scrubs but are a little too small for my hands. That’s it that’s it that’s it I say while I fumble for the delivery table, maneuvering it into position at a 45-degree angle behind my right hip. My patient’s husband counts to 10 for her as her face contorts, her lip turns dusky with the effort, and she looks at me beseechingly as if she wants to go back in time, as if she knows only I can get her out of this and I think of all we have been through together, her high school sports physicals, her parents’ divorce, her pre-marital bloodwork, the laceration she got tending bar, and then the day she showed up in my waiting room holding the positive EPT wrapped in a baggie so I could see it myself and know it was true, the times I measured and palpated and listened to that little heart, pushed against her belly and felt the life inside push back at me, and she says “I can’t” to me and I remember how I have been with her through the swollen ankles and the choosing names and the advice from her mother-in-law, and I meet her eye, and in my strongest and surest voice say, “Yes, you can.” Another contraction builds, crests like a wave breaking and I know this will be the one, I can see the head just out of reach but I know it’s there, and we all chant c’mon c’mon c’mon push push and then there is movement, explosion, fluid, tearing of flesh, a sudden shocked silence and then I pull gently but firmly on the warm slimy head, release the little shoulder, I lose track of everything for a moment, the baby warmer beeping, the people babbling, all of it, as I try to find the right angle and then suddenly I am snapped back to myself, the warm wet length of the slippery infant clasped firmly across the front of my gown, the room’s noises loud around me again and I look at the little wrinkled face, eyes blinking and opening like a turtle’s, my right hand busy with clamps and scissors, cutting the cord like always; I think: I know you, little one, I have studied you for months like an anthropologist from afar and now you are here. I say, “There you go, sweetie, let’s go see your mom,” and at the word mom my patient’s face softens and she reaches out her arms like she already knows this baby, knows where it belongs. And she reaches, and I reach, and our arms overlap as I give her the baby and then deep breath, gently let go and step away, one step, two steps, backing up a little so I can begin to catch my breath and we all breathe for a moment, some of us more heavily than others, and some of us for the first time.
My Tonight and Tomorrow
Donald Kollisch, MD
Poetry—First Place

When I traced the rising and falling of your spine
with my finger you
didn’t move, but your breathing changed just a little so that I knew you were awake. Nothing more.
I lay there beside you thinking about you and the patients I will see in the morning.

There will be Ronald, dying at 57 of pancreatic cancer,
a hipster planning Creedence Clearwater for his memorial service with a grin; and Mrs. Gerow, 83, holding off her heart valve repair as long as she can (she will tell me) until her husband no longer needs her.
And bruised cheeks in women whose boyfriends wait, too nervously, just outside, (they will tell me) and more.
Old Man Laroux sold his farm and shares his wheezy heart failure with both me and a winter doctor in Florida.
Best of all, little Lizzie, the 2-year old wonder who didn’t die.

You shift your hip and your breath rasps against your dream.
With my lips I feel your pulse in your neck. I think I hear you say “learn” and I think of my students in the afternoon.

First I’ll meet with Laura, who thinks that medical school should have more substance than to simply remember more than she can possibly remember; she will tell me if she has decided to stay, and she’ll tell me about her family, and what she means to them. And Travis who will tell me of his project with children’s teeth, their carious, rural mouths; we will see if we can understand how chi-square analysis will prove the link to get money into their communities.
Angelica is on call tonight, while I’m here with you, and tomorrow she will tell me about the patients she admitted; I’ll show her how she can percuss the fluid in someone’s chest, and she will tell me about his cough and rheumy wife.

Ah, you relax, now, and murmur “shh,” to somehow turn me away from you so you can pull me close to you from behind.
You hold my chest with one hand, and skim my mouth with the other.
“Shhh,” you say. “Tomorrow is not for 2 hours.
Sleep.”
Grief
Susan Arjmand, MD
Essay—Honorable Mention

You are feeling harassed and rushed as had become too usual during your shift in an urgent care center. It was an arduous schedule: 14-hour shifts, and very high volume. You usually come home physically and emotionally drained. Trying to unwind while listening to a bit of music…Rudolfo and Mimi singing of their undying love for one another…too tired to listen, you can’t wait for Mimi to put an end to things. You wonder at the emotional exhaustion that robs you of your ability to experience music now. The image of Rudolfo, griefstruck over his loss…you are too numb to feel or to care. The fatigue rolls off your body in waves…

The gentleman is waiting for you as you rush into the exam room. Frail, with a drawn face whose deep lines trace the path of many memories. Eyes, once bright, now dull, look calmly at you. His faded but clean shirt, carefully knotted tie, and worn hat speak of the weight of his many years on this earth. His hands droop slightly, as does his whole body. He seems exhausted, worn down by something… A younger man—his son?—is with him. The younger man stands silently to the side, watchful, protective. He does not speak, allowing the patient to tell his own story. Like most patients of his generation, the older man speaks very politely and respectfully to you; you are his physician, even though you’re young enough to be his daughter and had only just met him. He seemed to regret disturbing you, as if his physical complaints were really quite minor after all.

He complains of cough and congestion and of feeling run-down. “Maybe I’ve just got a little cold or something. I just don’t know why I’m feeling so run-down.” Then, so quietly that you barely hear the words, “My wife died yesterday, Doctor.” The sadness in his voice and face stops you in your tracks. You are struck by his stoicism and quiet dignity. You remember self-consciously the abrupt and frenetic way you had entered the exam room just a few moments before as you thought, “…one more patient to see, should only take 5 or 6 minutes…”

Forcing yourself to take a deep breath, you wrestle with the sadness that comes over you. You question him gently, and examine him slowly, feeling that the least you can do is to show him the respect of your time and full attention.

You listen to his breath sounds and don’t hear anything that suggests bronchitis or pneumonia. What you hear, perhaps, is the sound of grief and of loss. Slowly putting your stethoscope away, you wonder how many other times you have heard those sounds, not knowing how to listen.

Silent Night
Amy Odom, DO
Poetry—Honorable Mention

Do-Do–Do-Do-Do my pager melodically tones Waking me with news of my apparent need
Clip Clop down the deserted hall at 5 am. my shoes make my presence known.
Bing! alerts the elevator my chariot has arrived to take me to my next task.
Ding. Ding. Ding asserts the cardiac monitor Someone’s leads are off
Beep Beep goes the IV monitor Endlessly occluded downstream.

Zhum, Zhum whirs the floor buffer Cleaning to get dirty again
Whayaa! wails a newborn as he enters this new world
Lub Dub churns the heart of my patient Documenting his life-ness
Lub Dub pounds my heart in my own ears When I hear the operator page my name
Sigh In And
Sigh Out As my patient exhales her last breath And enters into a true silent night

STFM 2007 Poetry and Prose Contest

STFM hosts a poetry and prose reading the night before the Annual Spring Conference begins, and all are welcome to read their writings or attend and listen to the works of others. Additionally, the STFM Group on Ethics and Humanities sponsors an annual prose and poetry contest. Any STFM member is welcome to contribute their original work. Poetry and prose are judged by members of the Group on Ethics and Humanities, and winners will be announced the night of the STFM reading in May 2007. Winners’ writings will be published in Family Medicine and displayed at the conference.

The contest is open to all STFM members. Guidelines and deadlines for submission will be published in the online December STFM Messenger.