

That which we carry with us

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I cannot distinguish red from dark pink, among other things. When I look at the human hand, I do not see the three-dimensional melding of all of the rows of bones into a final product. I see individual bones that happen to be neighbors. And for the first time in my life, I am beginning to wonder whether an orange tastes different if it is dark red, bright orange, spherical, or flat. I am aware that this is not the first time that there has been dispute about dimensions. Still I am bothered by the question: Would you have walked off the edge of the world because I subscribed to a theory of flat expanse? At this moment, I believe that you would not have . . . in the same way that I am certain that no hat fits any two people the same way. But we live in a one-size-fits-all universe and I am learning to navigate it. I am learning that simplicity suits. Every day, I am advised to use Occam's razor: *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, roughly translated as "Entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity." And every day, I am burned at the stake, cast off

the plank, and beheaded for carrying a kaleidoscope in a monocular time.

The world we live in, as medical students, is an optical illusion. It is composed of an endless sequence of Rorschach blots. We are a race of Picassos relegated to defining ourselves in concrete terms. Two years ago, a woman asked me what would become of me. I will be an oncologist, I told her, with finality. And two years ago I would have been an oncologist. Then I was not so intimately familiar with dying or so bitten by the frost of mourning that I could appreciate the stinging permanence of death. A year ago, another woman, curious to pin me down in time, repeated the question. A head and neck surgeon, I answered decisively. Perhaps if I see this woman now, she will address me as one addresses a head and neck surgeon. My hands will stammer, my lips will clasp, and I will shake my head. I am something else today, I might tell her, and she will scoff at my evanescence. But I do not lament the mercurial as much as I condemn consistency. My hands are not the same today as they were a year ago. Before, I held a pencil with precision as I blackened sheet after sheet of paper. Before, I believed that I could stitch the human body with the nonchalance of passing thread through a sweater. But part of me, the part that shivers in the operating room,

knows that a running stitch will never be fast enough to carry me away. Today I twine my fingers together, exploring my strength, as I pound tirelessly at a stubborn heart.

A month ago I sat beside a patient I liked so much that I wished that someone else would take her place. And a few days after she left, when another woman looked up at me from her bed, I found myself wishing that yet another person would take her place. Exasperated, I recounted my feelings to my resident. She regarded me with the same pity that I had extended to my patients. We have two new patients waiting to be admitted in the ER, she said. And in that moment I realized my error. Still, I am not angry that I confided in her. These are the mistakes all explorers make in mapping the new world. I am, however, furious that I was discovered in my corner of the jungle, clad in wilting leaves, shooting lifeless darts from a blowgun at a mighty man in a helicopter. The last isolated tribe has been discovered in the Amazon, the headlines will boast. And I, of course, will wonder how isolated one can be in a crowd in the same way that I wonder about the only man who smiles at a funeral. Most often he is the one closest to the deceased. But he does not sit with the family. We worship too strongly the ties of blood.

The other day, I saw an elderly woman



Illustration by Erica Aitken

struggling to push her grocery cart along the contrary sidewalk. I walked past her. Then I turned around because she reminded me of what my mother's mother would have looked like. Would you like me to help you, I offered. She shook her head and smiled as she dragged away. I promise that for a moment she looked younger and her back arched less. Yet I felt deflated—as if someone had punched me in the stomach—because I was realizing just how invisible we become in a crowd. I do not want to be overlooked. I refuse to be life's punctuation mark. But sometimes I am afraid that such is the fate of all.

People laugh when I tell them that I am exceptional. And sometimes, after being lanced by their criticism, I consider the cost of greatness, whether it is something worth chasing or something that I should run from, whether it exists at all or is merely a term born of comparison. Yet somehow I know that greatness exists in the same way that I know that I hear at eight channels. My teacher, trying to explain the concept behind ear implants, had us all close our eyes as he played a message using increasing numbers of hair cell channels. No one heard anything at four channels; no one is supposed to. I squeezed my eyelids and tuned out the world. I heard the message, "my appointment is for six o'clock in the afternoon." Eight channels! No one else heard it. Still, my voice wobbled as I relayed the message to the whole class. Even now, I am not certain that I could repeat the achievement. But then again, the first man who ran a marathon dropped dead after delivering his message. It only takes one time to succeed. Interestingly, my physical diagnosis class informs me that the biggest battle in old age plays out between obscurity and immortality. I wonder if I am aging too quickly because my knees whine from walking up the stairs. I wonder if I am aging too quickly because at age twenty-four I am obsessed with immortality.

I live nine hours away from home. Actually, I live many worlds away from

home. And as a wearer of so many flags, it bothers me that people wish to pinpoint my identity. For the first time, I am seeing the world through my eyes alone. My father does not always pick up the phone on the first ring. My mother tells me that she is tired. I forget to call home. And the world looks much different from two eyes than it did from six, a little more cohesive yet a little more disorganized. Every day I look out of the window of my apartment at the sailboats on the lake. I am drawn to water in the same way that a rabbit is drawn to a trap and a fish is drawn to a worm. It terrifies me and tantalizes me. It reminds me of two years ago when we celebrated our final day of the first year of medical school. As I sat down on the rocks overlooking Lake Michigan, I expounded about life. I've never seen you this happy, my friend commented, is it because it is the last day of school? No, I said, it is because I am by the water. The danger of hanging off of the edge thrills me. My friend continued to look at me, sensing that I had stopped mid sentence. I suppose it is in my blood, I concluded, my Nigerian ancestors are people of the rivers. For some reason, I feel most at home by the water. My friend nodded his head and moved on. Perhaps my words had transported him back to his own womb, the cradle of his ancestry.

It worries me that something as tumultuous, inconstant, and abusive as the water reminds me most of myself. But without water life would be infeasible. In the same way, I guess, I do not have to be sustained to provide the world sustenance. I am not the person at this moment that I was when I started writing this. I am not the person today that I was when I first moved to Chicago. Please do not expect me to be.

Last week, I stumbled across a book that I wrote many years ago, that I had forgotten during this time of change. It was not until I reread the entire book that I found my favorite line in the acknowledgment section. I did not remember writing it. "Life is too short for sitting down for pictures. Time is

About the author

I was born in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. I graduated from Vanderbilt University with a BA in biological sciences. I am currently a student at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine. I have always been interested in writing and have written several essays related to my medical school experience, in addition to two unpublished fiction books. In the past three years of medical school, I have become increasingly interested in the patient voice and background and its contribution to the experience of being ill. I plan on pursuing a residency in Internal Medicine.



not photogenic. Change is most forgiving to those who do not pose." I was so proud of the line that I made it my away message for the day. My younger brother instant-messaged me and asked the origin of the quote. I wrote it, I replied. It took him minutes to believe me. After a year of resisting, he asked to read my book. I reminded him that I had offered it to him many times before. He could not remember ever refusing it. I am beginning to believe that life will always unfold like this, in convincing contradictions. I am not disgruntled by this realization. We will not all take the same path to reach the corner of the world. We will not all walk over the edge. But those of us that do will find, upon reaching the other side, that we will still be standing beside our friends that did not cross. For life is not that which carries us, pushing us forward like a gust of wind. Rather, life is that which we carry with us.

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