



Burning in, not out

“Give me singleness of purpose, strength to lift at least to lift a part of the burden of my suffering fellow-men, and a true realization of the rare privilege that is mine...”

—from *A Physician's Prayer*¹

And all shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

—T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*²

0400, and I've just intubated Mohammed.
Forty, father of four, from Afghanistan,
that unconquerable country.
Not vaccinated. I know, you were curious.
Arterial line going in, my gloved thumb on the open
catheter feels the gentle tapping of his pulse.
Precious, fragile, a bird tied to a string, fluttering,
A catfish dancing on the end of the line,
A slippery, hot, wet rose petal
Or the heartbeat of a bird with a broken wing I
clutched to my chest long ago.

By the bed, his cellphone blasts, and an ancient
voice ululates, haunting, alien, a little scary,
But beautiful, even for an infidel like me.
I tell the nurses it's the call to prayer, and to turn it up.
I finish the line, the wailing voice filling the room in the
darkness before the dawn.
Just maybe he can hear it, through the sedation.

I think of towers burning. The Korangal Valley. Inshallah.
The shadow slithers back, retreating for now, and, for a
time, my patient rallies.

Some of us have trained our whole lives for this holy war.
Does the crowned serpent sense my savage joy when I
fight him,
With all my heart, all my soul, all my might? With all my
intensive cunning?

Mohammed dies the day Kabul falls. Four weeks
after admission.

His brother sits on the floor of our valley, sobbing, his grief
heard down the hall.

Sitting next to him, my arm around his shoulder,
I try to help him lift the cross he must now bear, yet know
I failed.

Later, the access center calls, the admitting phone
detonating again like an IED.

Another transfer.

A quick physician's prayer.

I think of the Cyrenian, my Saint, from ancient Libya.

I write new orders, a good centurion, and my team rolls.

Perhaps you are curious.

I am ready.

—Michael D. Schwartz, MD, FCCM

This poem is dedicated to all who suffered in the pandemic across this world of ours, and to the teams who took care of them.

References

1. A Physician's Prayer. Catholic Supply of St. Louis, Inc. Copyright by Fratelli Bonella. Italy.
2. Eliot, T. S. "Little Gidding." In *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 478. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1973.

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