

The physician's salary

I. The ledger

They ask me what I make, a forward question.
Maybe it's improper, but I tell them.
Only not in the language they expect.

Not the direct deposit on the fifteenth,
Not the retirement account accruing interest.
Not the diplomas framed along the wall or the title stitched to the white coat I wear.

I am paid in mornings.
Mrs. Rivera, seventy-three, her pneumonia cleared,
Walking to the bodega through the October breeze,
Laughing at her husband's joke,
Warm hands cupped around coffee going cold.
I only gave her antibiotics, and she gave me her Sunday.

I am paid in arguments.
Mr. Petrov, his chest pain gone, shouting at the television during the game.
His daughter is rolling her eyes, sighing with exasperation.
The gift of one more battle over whether he takes his pills, eats less salt, goes for a walk.
The luxury of annoyance.

I am paid in the runner's stride, music pulsing through earbuds as legs find their rhythm,
And in kitchen experiments, flour dusting countertops, a new recipe attempted.
I am paid in laughter in the dark, two bodies in bed, the weight of the day released,
And in books read alone on rainy evenings, pages turned slowly against the loneliness.

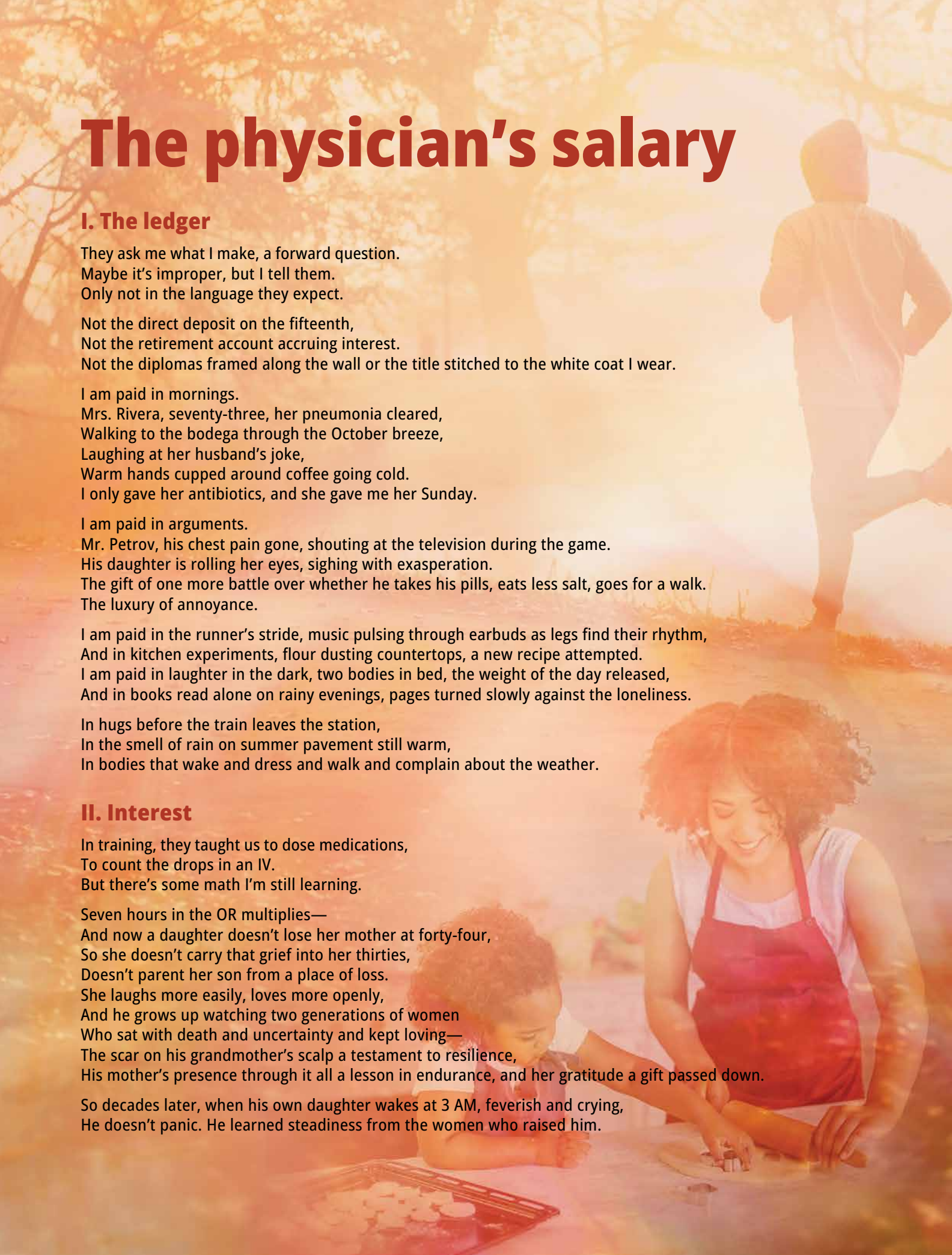
In hugs before the train leaves the station,
In the smell of rain on summer pavement still warm,
In bodies that wake and dress and walk and complain about the weather.

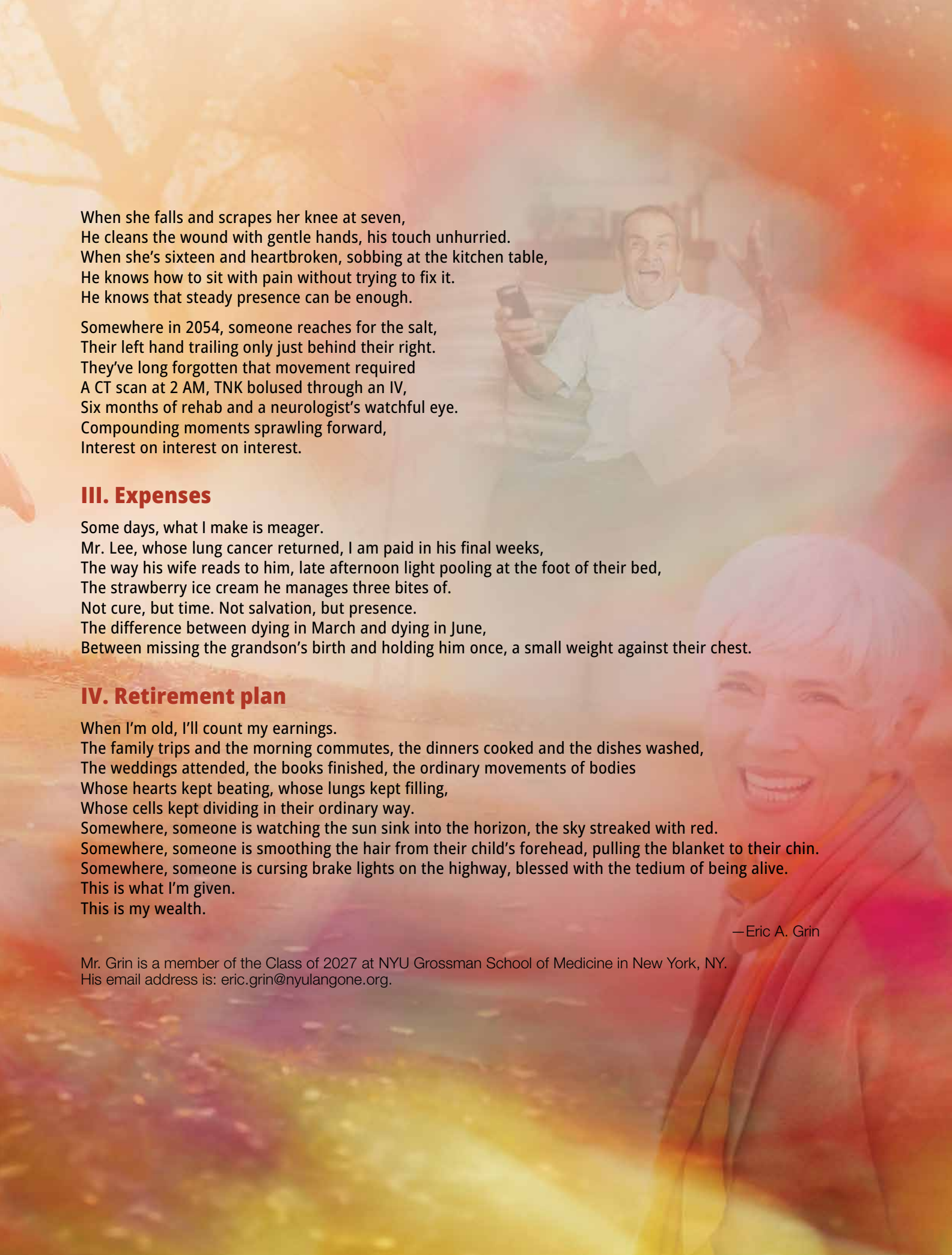
II. Interest

In training, they taught us to dose medications,
To count the drops in an IV.
But there's some math I'm still learning.

Seven hours in the OR multiplies—
And now a daughter doesn't lose her mother at forty-four,
So she doesn't carry that grief into her thirties,
Doesn't parent her son from a place of loss.
She laughs more easily, loves more openly,
And he grows up watching two generations of women
Who sat with death and uncertainty and kept loving—
The scar on his grandmother's scalp a testament to resilience,
His mother's presence through it all a lesson in endurance, and her gratitude a gift passed down.

So decades later, when his own daughter wakes at 3 AM, feverish and crying,
He doesn't panic. He learned steadiness from the women who raised him.





When she falls and scrapes her knee at seven,
He cleans the wound with gentle hands, his touch unhurried.
When she's sixteen and heartbroken, sobbing at the kitchen table,
He knows how to sit with pain without trying to fix it.
He knows that steady presence can be enough.

Somewhere in 2054, someone reaches for the salt,
Their left hand trailing only just behind their right.
They've long forgotten that movement required
A CT scan at 2 AM, TNK bolused through an IV,
Six months of rehab and a neurologist's watchful eye.
Compounding moments sprawling forward,
Interest on interest on interest.

III. Expenses

Some days, what I make is meager.
Mr. Lee, whose lung cancer returned, I am paid in his final weeks,
The way his wife reads to him, late afternoon light pooling at the foot of their bed,
The strawberry ice cream he manages three bites of.
Not cure, but time. Not salvation, but presence.
The difference between dying in March and dying in June,
Between missing the grandson's birth and holding him once, a small weight against their chest.

IV. Retirement plan

When I'm old, I'll count my earnings.
The family trips and the morning commutes, the dinners cooked and the dishes washed,
The weddings attended, the books finished, the ordinary movements of bodies
Whose hearts kept beating, whose lungs kept filling,
Whose cells kept dividing in their ordinary way.
Somewhere, someone is watching the sun sink into the horizon, the sky streaked with red.
Somewhere, someone is smoothing the hair from their child's forehead, pulling the blanket to their chin.
Somewhere, someone is cursing brake lights on the highway, blessed with the tedium of being alive.
This is what I'm given.
This is my wealth.

—Eric A. Grin

Mr. Grin is a member of the Class of 2027 at NYU Grossman School of Medicine in New York, NY.
His email address is: eric.grin@nyulangone.org.