

Prufrock as a second-year resident

This piece is a line-by-line reimagining of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" through the lens of a weary second-year internal medicine resident at the turn of the millennium, who recognizes in Prufrock a kindred soul: isolated, drowning in self-doubt, and lacking agency amid the machinery of modern hospital life. Prufrock's paralysis and self-loathing in early twentieth-century London translated naturally to the fluorescently-lit beige corridors of a large Manhattan hospital nearly a century later. The resident who emerges is a frightened and exhausted observer of the absurdities around him. Most physicians who trained in that era will recognize him, and themselves, in ways that are not entirely comfortable.

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like an old man stuporous from Haldol;
Let us go, through certain overcrowded rooms,
The institution's wombs,
Where restless nights are spent among the smells
Of elderly women who came in with spells:
Chief complaints that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question …
Oh, do not ask, "Why the visit?"
Let us go and do the admit.

On the floor, the nurses sit around,
Ignoring every patient's sound.

The yellow cirrhotic that rubs his back along the windowpanes,
The yellow drunk who hacks his lungs onto the windowpanes,
Licked his tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon his back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by 100th and Madison, had a sudden thought,
And seeing that it was a cold October night,
Strolled into the ER and got a bed.

And indeed there will be time for the yellow cirrhotic
That stumbles along the street
Hacking his lungs out onto the windowpanes;
There will be time, there will be time,
To prepare a case to meet the attendings that you meet,
There will be time to write orders and dictate,
And time for all the works and days of hands,
That lift and drop a question on your plate.
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the drinking of Coke and a pee.

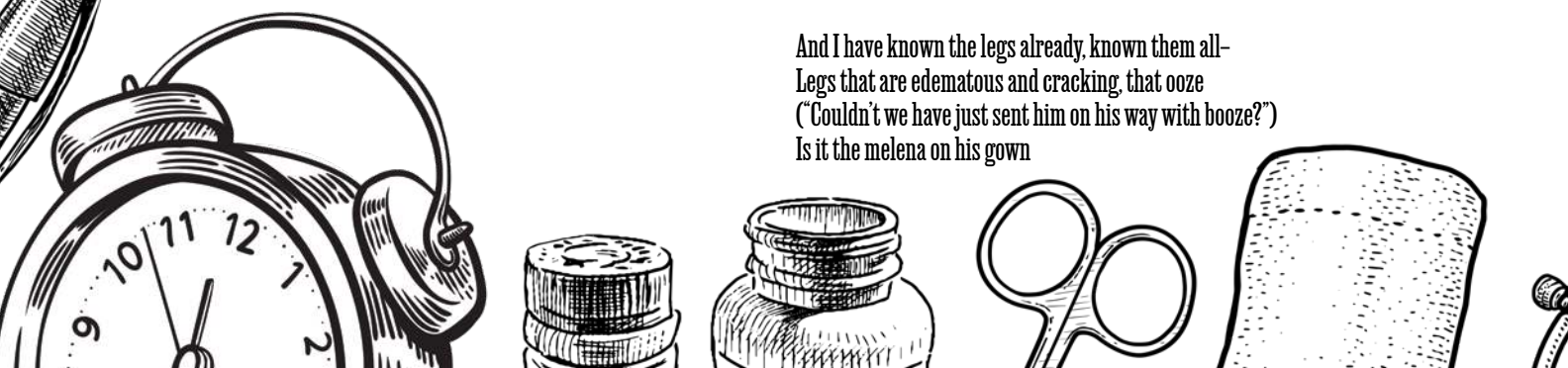
On the floor, the nurses sit around,
Ignoring every patient's sound.

And indeed, there will be time
To wonder, "Do I care?" And "Do I care?"
Time to turn back and get off your chair,
With a code being called just over there,
(They will say: "How his clinical judgement's growing dim!")
My dirty lab coat, my scrubs rich blue but wearing thin,
My jacket torn and empty, but asserted by a Sinai pin,
(They will say: "Why can't he make his service trim?")
Do I dare
Begin some heparin?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which your fellow will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all–
Have known the drunkards, whiners, VIPs,
I have measured out their life with chemistries;
I know their bells are ringing for a nature call
Or from the tonic movements of a seize.
And what of that new wheeze?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all–
The unreactive eyes which tell in no uncertain way,
And when you have seen them, drooling on their chin,
When they are trached and pegged and vented,
Then how should I begin,
To tell the son-in-law that the end will be today?
And what of that new wheeze?

And I have known the legs already, known them all–
Legs that are edematous and cracking, that ooze
("Couldn't we have just sent him on his way with booze?")
Is it the melena on his gown



That makes the intern frown?
Legs that are elevated and leave a stink out in the hall.
And what of that new wheeze?
And what should we present?

Shall I say, we had gone at dusk through narrow halls
And heard the beeps arising from our beepers
But we were tired and hungry, so we went to get some pizza?...

I should have worn a pair of cleaner socks
But the laundromat has such lofty fees.

And the afternoon, the evening, went so peacefully!
Smoothed by long benzos,
Caught up ... tired ... but not ready to doze,
Stuck on the floor, calling to find out the last PTT.
Should I, after Thai and Coke at criminal prices
Have the strength to admit eight patients and deal with seven crises?
But though I have wept and pleaded, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen the ER (grown to a swell)
Brought dozens in for no matter,
I am no concrete wall, and here's my intern, sadder;
He has seen the moment of our greatness flicker,
And has seen the ER attending hold my pager number, and snicker,
And in short, we were afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the Coke, the Thai food, the pee,
Among half-finished notes, among some talk of ITP,
Would it have been worth while,
To have gone to the ER with a smile,
To have caught the attending in the hall
To lead him to some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am the resident, come from the floor,
Come to discharge all, I shall discharge all"–
If he, settling a chart by the patient's bed,
Should say: "I don't know this patient at all.
Sorry, it was the last shift's call."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After admissions for gassiness and UTIs and infected feet,
After the old with poor intake, after the hiccups, after the drunks
who puke upon the floor–
And this, and a mild bed sore?–
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if I had a magic bullet that forced the attendings to think and screen:
Would it have been worth while

If one, settling a chart and taking off down the hall,
And leaning toward giving us three more admissions, should say:
"It was the last shift's call.
I'm sorry, I don't know this patient, at all."

No! I am not Sir Osler, nor was meant to be;
Am a junior resident, one that will do
To call an attending, start a line or two,
Advise my intern; no doubt, an easy tool,
Make differentials, include some things abstruse,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Not quite stellar, but happy to bring some patient apple juice;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous–
Almost, at times, an M2.

I am told ... I am told ...
That when you're an attending the street is paved with gold.

Shall I order cefepime? Do I dare to tap the lung?
I shall call my sleeping fellow, who will be so glad I rung.
I have heard the fellows talking, each to each.

I do not think that they will talk to me.

I have seen them walking out at four o'clock,
With smiles on their faces, toward the Park,
While the cabs are still in motion and it's not yet dark.

We have lingered in the call-rooms on our floor
By nurses who will let us all alone,
Till three AM, when they'll pick up the phone.

—Aryeh M. Abeles, MD

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