

Spinal tap

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The long needle glints ominously
between my index finger and thumb.

Breath held, I stab the beveled tip
through orange swabbed skin
past a fortress of bony ramparts

till I feel, more than hear, the pop
of the membrane buttressing the moat
that guards the kingdom. Stylet withdrawn,
the shaft becomes an aqueduct, sluicing
the clear elixir that pours from a well
housed deep in the citadel overhead.

I've traveled here before,
on the outskirts of the sanctum
sanctorum—a disciple unworthy
of this intimacy, this trust.

The column of fluid settles
at 100 millimeters on the manometer,
fluctuation timed with respiration, rhythmic
as waves, no bloodstain or yellow blight.
All fears of invasion erased.

Once I knew nothing of this anatomy,
the precise geometry of disc on bone, sac
that holds the tendrils of our nerve roots
more intricate than any man-made marquetry.

The cold smell of the cubicle, a soft groan
from the woman curled like a fetus on her side,
turns my reverie to the drip, slow as snowmelt,
the steel shaft that slips out
to clatter in the tray—the only weapon
these hands will ever wield.

Neurology®

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Neurology 2014;82:e97

DOI 10.1212/WNL.0000000000000253

This information is current as of March 24, 2014

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