

she shouted, making sure the nurse could hear,
"and that god-damned bitch tries to tell me
I can't have TWO FUCKING ASPIRINS!"

The next day there was a standing order
in Julie's file
that she could have two aspirin tablets
whenever she wanted.

THE LIFE YOU SAVE

The intern on duty
that night at County General
had never seen so much blood before —
it covered the victim's body
like a scarlet shawl —
it gushed from his open mouth,
his nostrils, from the torn aorta
exposed by an enormous ragged hole in his chest
like crimson water from a
marble florentine fountain.
He looked as if he'd been hit
by a mortar shell.
"That one's a goner," somebody said.

Night after night
the intern had watched the same scenario:
dozens of them, carried in by family,
by friends, by paramedics —
white, black, hispanic, asian,
still flaunting their colors, their tattoos,
their shimmering jewelry,
and their garish, oversized crucifixes.
They almost always died, surrounded by
weeping mothers and sisters
clutching Bibles and Rosary beads,
pleading, "Why, why, WHY?"

But this one was different.
Nobody came to weep for him.
He was only a kid — 16 at most —
with long blond hair
and a face like Michelangelo's "David."
He wore no colors, no jewelry,
not even an earring.
A victim of cross-fire, thought the intern,
the familiar rage eating at his stomach.
They stitched the aorta back into place,
sewed up the hole in his chest,
and wheeled him off to CCU to die.

The intern followed, his other patients forgotten.
For three days and three nights
he sat with the boy.
Whenever the exhausted heart stopped beating
he was there to call "Code Blue."
He talked to the unconscious boy
about sports, music, movies,
about his own young wife and daughter,
and about his childhood summers
hunting quail and picking gooseberries
in the New Hampshire woods.
He even sang the wrong words to
long-forgotten lullabies — anything
to encourage the boy's tenuous
hold onto life.

On the third night of the third day
the intern suddenly looked up from dozing
into a pair of clear blue eyes.
The small peaks on the heart monitor
were slow but regular.
The boy would live.
The intern lay his head upon the bed
and wept — deep, painful sobs.

When the boy was strong enough
to take nourishment
the intern asked him the meaning
of the faint and amateurishly tattooed
tears he had noticed
whenever the light was on —
six under one eye
and four under the other.
Were they symbols of some religious sect,
or perhaps a commentary on the tragedy
of the entire lousy world?

"Shit, no!" said the boy, smiling
between sips of broth.
"They're like notches on a rifle.
Each one stands for some dumb fucker
I blew away."

THE NOVICE

The message on my answering machine
was garbled at first —
the caller was obviously new at this
and the sounds in the background
of young children and angry adults
shouting and throwing things
made it even harder for me