

2018 Hope Babette Tang Humanism in Healthcare Essay Contest

Third Place Nursing Student Essay: The Fish Tank

Lucy R. Frank

“What are they all looking at? I think they are looking at you. They used to look at me.” The fish tank is small and nonobtrusive; I didn’t even notice it on my first few clinical shifts. The idea, it occurred to me, is to bring some semblance of relaxation—that sound of water as it recycles itself, that repetitious gasp of air escaping cohesion. It enables the room to hold the essence of a stream. The ceiling even has scattered panels with images of the sky, as if to recreate existence outside the dim glow of hospital lighting. At the time, I recall that this recreation seemed piteous and sad to me.

There are seven of them, these fish, and despite how large the tank is, they congregate together, constantly swimming in stasis, as if sharing some intimate secret. They look out the glass as if observing us, two people sitting in uniform, her in a hospital gown, myself in scrubs. She is fascinated by them, these fish, jealous almost. I assume she covets how simply they live, without memory or knowledge of what it feels like to have cells that sickle themselves and plop, like rocks, within the bloodstream. I suppose I would want to live simply, too, were I her.

“Stupid fish. They just stay in the same spot all day. I think I want to go back to my room.” I stand in front of her, this girl with long black hair, five feet, three inches when she’s up straight, her bones jutting out at the hips. “You stand in front of me and hold your hands out . . .” she commands, “and move that cord over there, that’s how all the real nurses do it. You’ll learn, you’re still a student.” She has taken the opportunity over the past few shifts to explain to me exactly how everything in the hospital works, and her proficiency is astounding. This is a girl who was born in a hospital and spends

what should be vacation time back in its womb. At the time, I recall that this truth seemed piteous and sad to me as well.

She was only my assignment for one shift, but each week she was there she asked for me. I didn’t quite understand why—I had tripped over her IV, dropped the blood pressure cuff, and, according to her, was not realistically capable of catching her if she were to trip. But each week she would ask for me, and I would take her to the fish tank.

By our third week, I noticed a trend. Each week we would take her vital signs before heading to our unique foyer to what felt like outside hospital living, and each week, she would have a fever. Then, after our stay by the fish tank, her fever would have vanished. Maybe, I conjectured once, the fish had stared that fever down, and it had become scared enough to leave forever. “Fat chance,” she responded,

but the thought had her lips quivering upwards, reaching towards her eyes. She seemed to have the saddest life to me, and my pity outweighed my compassion. She was young and too wise, with a family that did not visit and a younger sister whose health she admired; all her friends from school had left, and her new companions were a rotating sea of faces who wore gloves when they touched her.

“What is it about the room that you like?” I asked, helping her back into bed. She considered.

“Let’s go back. I’ll show you.” We made our walk down the hall. She rested once or twice; we’d done this already today. We opened the doors to the room. Within it was a big wooden table that faced the fish tank, and the two chairs we always sat on.

“Look at the fish. They are still in the same spot.” I looked over at them, swimming.

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The Arnold P. Gold Foundation holds an annual essay contest to encourage medical and nursing students to reflect on their experiences and engage in narrative writing. The contest began in 1999 focused on medical students and expanded to include nursing students in 2018. Students are asked to respond to a specific prompt in a 1,000-word essay.

For the 2018 contest, students were asked to reflect on the following quote and share a health care experience with a patient or fellow clinician that led to a new, unexpected understanding or perspective:

“It’s not what you look at that matters, but what you see.” —Henry David Thoreau

More than 200 essays were submitted. A distinguished panel of judges, ranging from esteemed medical professionals to notable authors, reviewed the submissions. Three winning essays from medical students and three winning essays from nursing students were selected, along with 10 honorable mentions. The winning essays were published on the Arnold P. Gold Foundation website (www.gold-foundation.org) and will be published in consecutive issues of *Academic Medicine* and the *Journal of Professional Nursing* in the fall/winter of 2018.

The contest is named for Hope Babette Tang-Goodwin, MD, who was an assistant professor of pediatrics. Her approach to medicine combined a boundless enthusiasm for her work, intellectual rigor, and deep compassion for her patients. She was an exemplar of humanism in medicine.

The Arnold P. Gold Foundation, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, champions the human connection in health care. The nonprofit organization engages medical and nursing schools and their students, health systems, companies, and individual clinicians in the joy and meaning of humanistic health care, so that patients and their families can be partners in collaborative, compassionate, and scientifically excellent care.

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“You always sit in the right chair, and it looks like they are swimming to you, but they aren’t. They are swimming to that.” She raised her arm and pointed at the light on the ceiling. I didn’t understand what she meant, but I smiled and nodded anyway. I figured whatever made her happy, stuck in the place where death hides.

By my last shift, she was gone, back home to her family. I missed her and our trips to the room. On my last rotation, I looked again at the ceiling where she had pointed, up at the fake clouds in the panel towards which she said the fish were

swimming. That day, I could see it. There was a sun lamp under this ceiling panel by the tank, and whether or not the fish knew it was there, they were constantly swimming towards it. They were not in stasis as I had assumed, never stuck or sad or trapped. Despite how cracked the edges of the ceiling were, and how hard their journey, they were always staring at that light. She had always beckoned us to come here, to this space on this floor, as if her body knew, despite the cells and the sickling and the clots, how to better itself. As if she knew that her body, much like the fish, was always swimming.

I learned my greatest lesson over those few weeks. As nurses we help, we support, we care and embolden. But really, our clients are the ones whose wisdom leads us to guide them. There is no room for pity, for how can one pity such strength, such wisdom, such incredible feats as a woman like her accomplishes each day? How magical it is that she can harness the sun, show it to those of us who have lost, for however brief or long, the understanding of what it means to stand in its wake, and help guide us back out into the daylight.