

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