Battle fatigue and Saturday night on call

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Neurology® 2018;91:625-626. doi:10.1212/WNL.00000000000006249

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Battle fatigue

The surgeon carves, dissects, sears the bleeding.
The anesthetist: numbness, paralysis, stupor.

My part: to hear and report
each limb's electric murmurs,

the brain's muffled replies,
mixed with the whine

of machines, arrogance, fear. We fight for
normal life on waking.

We trust normal will return for us.

They are out there, our charges,
ten thousand who woke well,

those who did not. I don't recall
their faces, just the smell

of blood and burning,
the urgent charge, uphold life,

sick wonder when the lamp goes dark, why did I
have to see that?

Saturday night on call

A sheriff guards the operating room. Inside we fight.
Her neck was broken in a brawl. She thrashes and spits
as we hold her shoulders and head still, work to
realign the bones,
constantly checking, dreading the worst,

blunt silence, slack body. Hours later with neck
straight, flipped on her belly, moving arms and legs
before she sleeps, I step out for a breath. The surgeon
is at the scrub sink, *She'll just kill someone else.*

That may be, I say, but we won't have killed her. It's been
many years. I still dread and hope for her, and I treasure
the stubborn skill of that surgeon.

MORE ONLINE

Audio

Listen to Dr. Krieger read
this poem.

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DOI 10.1212/WNL.0000000000006249

This information is current as of September 24, 2018

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