What the Nurse Likes
by Cortney Davis (1994)

I like looking into patient’s ears and seeing what they can never see.

It’s like owning them.

I like patient’s honesty—
they trust me with simple thing:

They wake at night and count heartbeats.
They search for lumps.

I am also afraid.

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I like the way women look at me and feel safe.
Then I lean across them and they smell my perfume.

I like the way men become shy.
Even angry men bow their heads when they are naked.

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I like lifting a woman’s hair to place stethoscope to skin,
the way everyone breathes differently—

the way men make suggestive groans when I listen to their hearts.

I like eccentric patients:
Old women who wear purple knit hats and black eyeliner. Men who put makeup over their age spots.

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I like talking about patients as if they aren’t real, calling them
“the fracture” or “the hysterectomy.”

It makes illness seem trivial.

I like saying

*You shouldn’t smoke!*
*You must have this test!*

I like that patients don’t always do what I say.

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I like the way we stop the blood,
pump the lungs,
turn hearts off and on with electricity.

I don’t like when it’s over and I realize

I know nothing.

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I like being the one to give bad news;
I am not embarrassed by grief.

I like the way patients gather their hearts,
their bones, their arms and legs
that have spun away momentarily.

At the end of the gathering they sigh and look up.

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I like watching patients die.

First they are living,
then something comes from within and moves from them.

They become vacant and yet
their bodies are heavy
and sink into the sheets.

I like how emptiness is seen first in the eyes, then in the hands.

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I like taking care of patients and I like forgetting them.

going home and sitting on my porch while they stand away from me talking among themselves.

I like how they look back when I turn their way.