

HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

Sutures

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Silver staples and black thread, a neat railroad track across the bottom of her mother's stomach, clickety clack, clickety clack. Kristin at four is fascinated with sutures. She imagines the staple gun, sees the needle's red-dot insertions, the thread untrimmed, a loop and coarse knot at the end of the moon.

We are frog-squatting on the bathroom floor, the baby asleep, my sister's breasts no longer aching. She's lying back on a spongy bathroom mat, triple layers of clean towels, a pillow under her neck, her knees up to limit the stretch, the horrible sense her gut will fall out.

Silent, her eyes closed, she trusts what we do. We've lined up antiseptic cotton swabs, Q-tips, the brown hydrogen peroxide bottle, a roll of gauze in its Johnson & Johnson box, the metal circle of adhesive tape clicked into its metal circle, and Kristin's Fisher-Price doctor kit with stethoscope, tongue

depressor, knee knocker—useless, she already knows, ready to hand me another Q-tip she's dipped in the bottle. The wound oozes

pus in two places where it's not healing, gray-green ooze, some new yellow ooze. It bubbles when I touch it, and this is what I lift as I roll the Q-tip, picking up pieces

of rotting flesh, the soft scab matter that soaks loose. There's a bad smell. One place in the wound is a hole or trench where another stitch or staple was needed or broke. I use tiny sewing scissors to cut away a rim of flesh, so dead it doesn't hurt at all. Kristin watches and then from her side

of the swollen stomach, she rolls a peroxide-saturated Q-tip over a place I can't reach. She's steady and focused, careful and exact, not forgetting: this is her mother, this is the spot where her baby brother crawled out safe in her world, no splotches, square shoulders, his perfect round head. She doesn't know

this is the beginning of her love for microbes, benign, malignant, healing—cell lines she will grow in square glass dishes, anything alive or dead she can measure on film graphs, especially what she can't see, mysteries of the body. An open wound, a stitch, peculiar passions, ties tightly bound, no matter what.

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