


# Death Exam

Kate E. Lee, MD, MS<sup>1</sup> 



<sup>1</sup>Duke University Medical Center, Durham, NC, USA.

J Gen Intern Med

DOI: 10.1007/s11606-024-08766-y

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Society of General Internal Medicine 2024

---

**W**e all knew he would die by the end of the night:  
he started the night with the final cocktail –  
phenylephrine, vasopressin,  
dobutamine, epinephrine,  
which clamped  
his vessels; we watched  
the waves  
recess and slow, until  
five a.m. and  
flatline.

My first death exam alone August of intern year, I read  
bullet points  
of what to do  
before I opened the sliding door to his room.  
We all knew he was gone. But I called his name  
observed his chest wall

listened to his silent heart  
pinched his nailbeds.  
I shone a light into his right pupil and  
Deep  
Wide  
Dark  
Vast  
Dead – were those eyes, but  
in the hollow black canvas there is  
a dance going on  
unclamped  
from the parameters of life

---

**Corresponding Author:** Kate E. Lee, MD, MS; , Duke University Medical Center, Durham, NC, USA (e-mail: kateleemd@gmail.com).

**Declarations:**

**Conflict of Interest:** Kate E. Lee reports no disclosures.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.