



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

---

Year 2009

Article 24

---

1-1-2009

## Threaded Flesh

Lauren A. Schmidt

Gettysburg College, schmla01@cnav.gettysburg.edu

Class of 2010

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Schmidt, Lauren A. (2015) "Threaded Flesh," *The Mercury*: Year 2009, Article 24.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2009/iss1/24>

This open access fiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Threaded Flesh

**Keywords**

creative writing, fiction

**Author Bio**

Lauren Schmidt, a biology major and chemistry minor, is a member of the class of 2010. After graduating from Gettysburg College she plans on pursuing a career in the medical profession. Lauren is the president of Habitat for Humanity at Gettysburg College. This summer she will be conducting research on frugivorous bats in South Africa alongside Dr. Winkelmann and Jennifer Merrill.

## Threaded Flesh

The child lay fully exposed in the crucifix position. With my fingertips I closed the upper lids of her eyes, concealing the glossy whiteness. Her feet, black and blue, shaped like oblong gourds, were bent behind her ankles. The skin on her knees was raw. I positioned the light directly over her legs and prepared to make the first incision. Dr. Kaschak was peering over me, "Hailey, we hardly encounter this condition back home yet this is the fifth child today with clubfeet. Before we leave you'll be a pro at this procedure."

He was right. The cases we had come across here were more severe than anything I'd seen in my residency in Denver. My hand trembled as the scalpel sliced into the flesh. The surrounding area became bathed in blood and iodine. Retracing the incision with the blunt end of the scalpel I dug deeper and deeper into the muscle. Her tendons were like rubber bands wrapped around the joints. The patient on the adjacent operating bed began to scream, "Dung dung tòi..dung dung tòi...dung dung tòi." Dr. Kaschak left my side and proceeded to help Cole, a fellow resident, restrain the yelling boy. Three hours into the surgery and I could feel the shards of exhaustion propagate through my body. It had been two weeks and I was still not accustomed to this heat. Sweat drooled from the pores of my forehead and was hovering at the tips of my lashes. Cole looked as if he too was struggling without air conditioning for his face was a camouflage of red and pink. As I dabbed my forehead I saw the crowds of people stashed in the examination hallway. Pairs of eyes peered into the operating room hopeful to be chosen next. The cries of infants were darts targeting my aorta. It hurt me to know that so many of these people had traveled to Da Nang from faraway and yet so many would be turned away. A slight tug on the suture and the flesh pinched together. Perfect. No puckering.

"Hailey," Cole yelled, "Do you have an extra stapler over there we could use?" I handed the instrument, crusted with blood, to the mother of the little girl I was operating on. She was instructed to rinse it in a bucket. Meanwhile, Dr. Bui, the anesthesiologist, approached my patient and repeated, "Cha^u...Cha^u...Cha^u." The little girl's eyelids rolled open.

Turning toward Cha^u's mother I began, "Everything went well with the surgery. But we need to keep her here overnight to monitor her and make sure that there are no complications. We need you to stay and let us know if anything is wrong." Cha^u's mother nodded along as if she could understand me. Luckily, Mai Cha, the interpreter, was in the room. She opened her mouth and syllables twirled from her tongue like water dancing from a fountain.

That night after work I met up with several of the doctors and residents from the clinic since many of us had the next morning off. As we entered a local bar a swarm of natives congregated around Dr. Kaschak shaking his hand and chanting, "Tommy, Dr. Tom, welcome home." These people were not just patients but friends. The locals embraced us and handed us mugs filled with Bia Hoi. "Bottoms up," resonated from Dr. Kaschak whose glass was raised high into the air. The Bia Hoi had a rich, nutty taste and soothed my parched esophagus. Aromas of citronelle and pate saturated the salty air as the waiters reappeared with dishes. Dr. Kaschak stood up from the table to give them a hand. Drawing a plate to his nose he closed his eyes and took a whiff, "My favorite—cua farci and goi du du. Stuffed crab shells and green papayas." In all of the excitement I had failed to realize that many of the Vietnamese men were staring directly at me. Dr. Kaschak must have noticed me shifting in my seat

and said, "Hailey, it's the red hair. Most of these people have never seen a red head." Laughing I choked on the frothy Bia Hoi. Just as I set the glass onto the table a waiter approached to refill it. I gestured "no more" but the waiter just grinned at me and kept on pouring until the foam trickled over the brim. Dowl, the Irish doctor sitting next to me belched. "If you don't drink they'll take it as an insult." With every gulp I could feel the lukewarm alcohol slinking through my body, making my sunburned skin even rosier. Slurred speech slithered around the table. The only person immune to the drunkenness was Dr. Kaschak. Every time he finished his Bia Hoi he would slip his mug under the table and fill it half-way with ice.

Cupping his hands over his wife's, who was sitting next to him, Dr. Kaschak began to tell us about why he started the clinic. "My wife, Cissy, and I love children but were unable to have one of our own. We tried for many years but eventually decided that adoption was the next step. Fifteen years ago the two of us made our first trip to Da Nang to adopt our son, Ty."

"He was the answer to our prayers," said Cissy massaging her palm. She was soft-spoken. Strands of blond hair had escaped from her ponytail and were now glued with tears to her cheeks. For the last two weeks she had assisted the surgeons in the operating room but she was actually a photographer. Every time I had interacted with her at the clinic she was completely composed; even when she was instructed to tell parents that their children could not be helped. But now she was so upset. Cissy, rummaging for a picture in her wallet, continued, "When we went to the orphanage to get him, they led us into a room filled wall to wall with cribs each containing four to five infants. The children were all malnourished, sunken rib cages with bloated tummies. See here," she said as she passed around a photograph of children at the orphanage. Many of the babies had dark rings under their eyes and brown rashes encircling their bellybuttons. Their necks were too scrawny to support the weight of their heads which bobbed against the bars of the crib. Cissy explained, "There were not enough caretakers to look after all the children. We were told by one of the nannies that when the children became really sick they were placed in a separate room and left to die so that they didn't infect the others. We stayed in Vietnam for a week after adopting our son. Ty was very lethargic even at home and soon died from a bacterial infection that attacked his heart, which he had acquired at the orphanage."

Rubbing his wife's back Dr. Kaschak began to speak. "Losing our son was rough but we eventually took it as a sign that God wanted us to do something even greater. We founded this clinic in memory of those children in the orphanage. Now doctors from many countries spend weeks to months volunteering here, giving hope to those that need it most. Cissy and I are fortunate that we are financially able to spend a month every year working and teaching here. And we are even more thankful for all of your efforts and dedication. Bottoms up. To Ty."

"To Ty," we all cheered. Raising my glass I began to feel slightly dizzy. I stood up from my stool and excused myself. Dr. Kaschak asked Cole to accompany me and the two of us left stumbling drunk along the beach. We had walked about a mile when Cole called out, "Hailey, I'm going for a swim, if you want to join." Slipping off my cotton sundress I tossed it further up the beach onto the dry sand. I ran towards the ocean in my bra and panties kicking the waves, salt water splashing into my face. Cole followed. The waves pushed me around but covered to Cole's 6'4" frame. The two of us wrestled in the sand where the waves bruised the beach. His chest was well defined and I could feel his back muscles tighten as he wrapped his arms around my back. The dimples framing his mouth made him look so innocent. I ran my fingers along his chin, protruding from his square-shaped face. Latching onto the elastic waistband of his boxers I dragged him back onto the shore. Our pile of clothes had been swept away with the current. We had no other choice but to scamper back to our hotel nearly naked under the snickering stars.

The next morning it was already noon when I stepped out of bed. I ventured to the

lobby of the hotel, bought a cup of coffee, and sat on the beach gazing into the gray sea. My flannel pajamas were soaked from the wet sand. The ocean breeze whizzed through the ringlets of my hair, tangling them into one big knot. I spun my head around in attempt to loosen the knot and saw Cole sitting behind me. "Hailey, I'm sorry about last night, I hope I didn't embarrass you too much. I haven't gotten that drunk in awhile."

"No worries. I just hope no one else from the clinic saw." The footprints the waves had erased from the beach overnight had already returned. In the distance two women were entering the water dressed in layers of silk and satin. Beyond them Dr. Bui was sitting on the shore staring into the horizon. He always sat so upright. Cole must have noticed me watching him and said, "He comes out here every day and just stares. Rumor has it his wife jumped from a fishing boat into the sea. She didn't even try to swim."

It had to be above a hundred degrees but at that instance I felt like slabs of dry ice squashed against raw fish. I was filled with guilt knowing we had a limited time to help and here I was reclining on a beach. Cole and I retreated to our hotel rooms to wash up and then met at the mopeds. The streets were congested. It was the middle of the day and the fishermen were selling their catch at the markets. Tucked under the outdoor restaurants were tourists encircling pints of Bia Hoi. We passed through the city into the rural hills dotted with thatched shacks and brightly colored tarps. In my rearview mirror I could see a little boy running after us barefoot. His voice echoing over the engine of the moped, "Giúp...giúp...giúp..."

"Cole, hold on!"

We pulled over to the side of the road and followed the boy through a dirt path that meandered along a river. There lying against a canoe was a man, his white shirt stained red. He was badly beaten. He couldn't move. I knelt down and listened for a pulse. "We need to get him to the clinic, or we're going to lose him." I dug the pocket knife from my scrubs. I had bought it as a means of protection from a street vendor when we first arrived in Vietnam. Grasping the knife I tore into the cotton freeing the man of his blood soaked shirt. Cole pulled his t-shirt off and handed it to me. I wrapped it tightly around the man's side from where he was bleeding. Cole delved through the canoe and found a net. Together we lifted the man onto the net and carried him up the hill in the cheaply made canopy. His son followed. Once we reached the mopeds we sandwiched the man between Cole's back and his son's stomach. I followed on the other moped.

We stampeded through the doors of the clinic yelling for help and Dr. Kaschak emerged from the waiting area. "What's the matter?" he questioned.

"We were on our way to the clinic when we found this man lying along the river. He's bleeding from his side and his pulse is slowing. I checked his airway, it's not constricted."

We carried him into the operating room but all the beds were occupied.

"Dr. Bui, hold off on that patient's surgery we need this bed," Dr. Kaschak yelled. Cole placed the man onto the bed and red poured from his wound soaking the sheets. The man's son lost in the chaos, had followed us into the room and was now standing by his father's feet. I found Mai Cha and asked her to find a safe place for the boy to wait.

We began to peel through the serrated muscle and flesh. Grains of dirt and pebbles were infecting the incision. Lodged about an inch deep below the right armpit was a bullet. The bullet had traveled through his arm and had gotten trapped in his side. "We need to amputate his right arm," Dr. Kaschak instructed, "There's no way we can save it. See here. When the bullet struck the bone it caused it to splinter, the dirt surrounding the wound has led to an extensive infection." I felt the skin surrounding the wound; it was cold. The injury had destroyed the blood vessels—the tissue was dead. "Hailey, I need you to remove the bullet while I determine the incision site for the amputation. This man's been bleeding for a long time—medicine alone won't save him."

Dr. Kaschak began instructing Cole on how best to apply the clamps to the blood vessels in order to minimize bleeding. Using a blunt probe I poked around in the muscle for

any shards of the bullet. As I retrieved more sutures from the supply table I noticed the man's son. He was standing on the other side of the window, standing and staring at his father, at the arm that was now detached from the body and was lying on a table. The fingers of the arm were fully extended, yearning for the boy. I laid a blue huck towel over the arm. Mai Cha was standing in the entrance of the operating room. "Mai Cha," I said, "Have you found out anything about the child's mother?"

"He does not speak about any mother. He only speaks of his father."

Cole sealed the socket from which the arm was removed. The blue sterile linens dressing the operation bed were tie-dyed purple. Taking a sponge I cleaned off the blood that had covered his face. We couldn't let his son see him this way. Once Cole had finished the suturing we lifted the patient onto a clean bed and covered his naked body with fresh sheets and thermal blankets. As we rolled the bed into a private room Mai Cha grabbed the child's hand and followed.

About four hours later, I was examining a patient in the hallway when I heard screaming coming from the man's room. Mai Cha and the boy were still standing at the bedside. "Mai Cha, what's wrong—what happened?"

She answered, "He wished you would have let him die."

"What do you mean? We saved his life."

"He's a fisherman—he said he cannot survive with no arm."

"Mai Cha, tell him we can make him a new arm."

"I have. He refuses a new arm. He says it's not the same."

As I entered the man's room I could see him fighting with his breathing tube. He was still too weak to raise his arm and had resorted to biting the tube with his teeth. His lips were tightly curled around the ridges of the tube. He must have bitten his lip for blood and spit dribbled down his chin. In the corner of the room stood his son. I held my hand out for the boy. He squeezed onto my palm and I could feel the bones of his fingers through the tissue-paper like flesh. The two of us walked over to his father's bed where Mai Cha was standing. Looking into the man's eyes I began, "Sir, I know it's not fair. I know right now all you want is to die and to be in peace. But you can't. Look at your son. Look into his eyes. Look for his hope. If you leave, what will happen to him? He needs his father. I need you to trust me. I need you to fight for your son."

While Mai Cha repeated my words the man's tongue gradually unwound around the breathing tube. His lips became more relaxed. Reaching for a tissue I wiped away the blood and spit that had dried on his face. Extending the fingers of his clenched fist one by one—the man fished for his son's hand.

I awaken in the room I have spent many of my days in. My complexion is but a shade deeper than that of the white walls surrounding me. Fighting with the knot, securing the gown behind my neck, I eventually get it untied. Slowly I unroll the gown down to my bellybutton exposing the bandages that cover my chest. Peeling back the medical tape I reveal the railroad tracks crisscrossing through where my right breast used to be. I have seen enough. I slide my arms through the gown and bury beneath the thermal blankets. On the nightstand still sits the blue vase my mother had brought, the sunflowers clenching onto their petals. It's hard to think that a year ago I was the one doing the repairing and now here I am at 29 battling breast cancer.

I can hear the shuffling of a visitor but my eyes won't open. Warm fingertips gently stroke my bald head. "Hailey, I'm here for you," the voice says.

I see the face—the face with the stormy gray eyes, the face with the cracked lips, the face that complements mine, the face of Cole. He slides into the bed and continues to stroke the fuzzy patch on my head. While I watch two monarchs play outside the window, their papaya colored wings powerless against the wind.