

Forest Delivery

River Gbeh, Liberia, 1976

The swaddled boy came to clinic in the afternoon heat
Tethered to a pole, bound by ropes, abdomen wrapped and pulsing
A captured leopard, borne up by his brothers, a child of the forest.

"I fell" he said.

"On a stick" said his brother. And out came the rest.

His intestines were alive, lying in a pile on top of his abdomen
A moving, writhing mass of tubes, engorged with worms.

We ran, my coworkers and I, to the Lebanese trader in our village
Hearts in hand, ready to deal.

"We'll give you our cocoa crop" said a brother.

And for the promise of a month's labor, we filled the truck with bodies
And set out for the district hospital in Zwedru
A three hour drive down the sinuous, mountain road to the capital

I cradled the boy while his brother drove, applying wet rags to his belly
As we bounced and rocked our way to the hospital
A nurse was sent to fetch the doctor, and he came running, in his bathrobe
Prepared to save a boy's life.

Dr. Rama turned on the generator which turned on the lights

He washed the bowels and gently nicked a small incision
And evacuated 10 pounds of *Ascaris lumbricoides* into a bucket
While I watched in wonder as the incision was sutured closed

The boy was ecstatic.

The bowels repositioned, the abdomen was sewn up
Anthelmintic in hand, the boy bounded off the table
And off into the night we returned to River Gbeh and remanded our package

On the ride home I wondered if he'd live
But the boy had no doubts and declared he'd survive
And he healed up and went back to his life
Running barefoot in the dirt, eating with his hands
Picking cocoa with his brothers
With a belly flat and happy, delivered of its burden

And in the decades since that surgery
I have delivered babies in parking lots and playgrounds
I have dewormed horses and dogs with my wife the vet
And have eaten the unspeakable, fried, baked and boiled

But I have never again delivered a boy of his burden
As we did on that sweltering day in the rain forest
Back when I would do anything for anyone
When I was myself but a boy