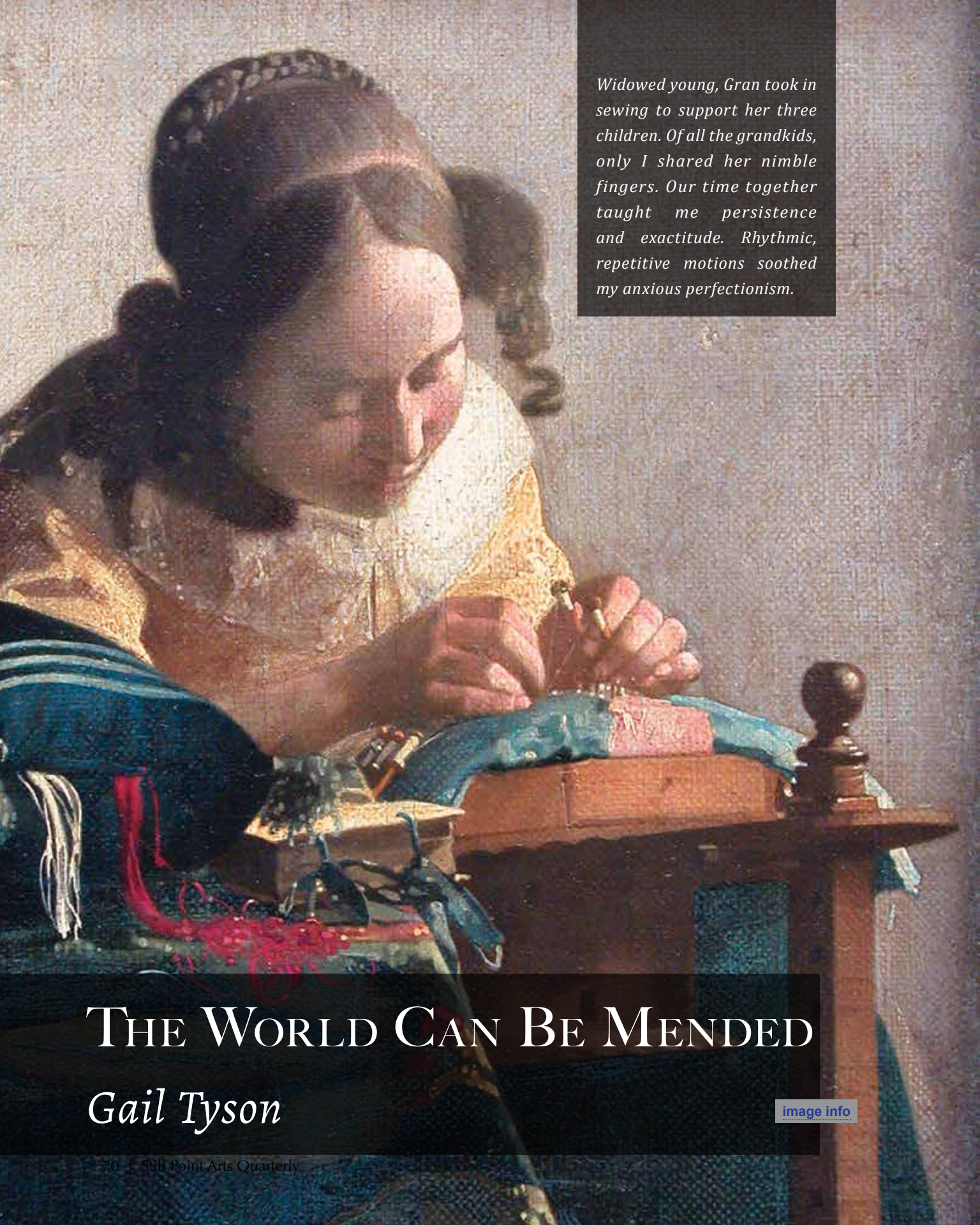




Widowed young, Gran took in sewing to support her three children. Of all the grandkids, only I shared her nimble fingers. Our time together taught me persistence and exactitude. Rhythmic, repetitive motions soothed my anxious perfectionism.

THE WORLD CAN BE MENDED

Gail Tyson

[image info](#)

Johannes Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*, c. 1670

I WISHED MY GRAN HAD LIVED TO SEE ME get into medical school; I was glad she was not here to witness my struggle to master suturing. At age six I could pass braided silk through the eyelet of her tiniest needles. I was a microsurgery natural—or so I expected. Sewing felt clumsy when I maneuvered a six-inch scissor-like surgical needle holder. Hours of practice helped: with chicken feet (experience with tiny blood vessels), oranges (rehearsal for draining fluid from joints), and grape skin (drills for cutting and sewing together human skin). But closing incisions still took me too long, which put patients at risk of infection.

Crammed against the operating table, I dreaded the moment the surgeon would step aside. Prayed I wouldn't fumble. Felt his impatience crawl up my spine. Grimaced behind my mask, grateful that it hid my vulnerability. I felt self-conscious, slow, gawky every time I drove needle into fascia, elbows pressed in to steady my hands. Would I ever build muscle memory that I could rely on in surgery?

There was no place to hide. Is that why my skill vanished in the OR? I learned to sew in Gran's sun-steeped bedroom, the sanctuary where I felt most at home. On winter afternoons I'd sit on the floor next to her sewing basket brimming with thread, thimbles, salvaged buttons, and the strawberry pincushion I coveted. Heat waves from the old steam radiator swaddled us, its hissing echoed by her COPD breathing, her lily of the valley eau de toilette sweetening the peace between us. When I was still a toddler, she taught me to thread embroidery floss on a large needle, how to point it in and out of a mesh bag that used to hold sweet potatoes. Within two years I could whipstitch doll clothes and, later, embroider my initials on bookbags.

We sewed together almost every weekend for fourteen years, me cushioned by a nest of

old quilts, Gran dwarfed by her threadbare La-Z-Boy. A print of Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* hung on the wall behind her head. Every time I looked up, I saw it: The teenaged girl bends over her workstand. Sheer, luminous, an openwork collar rims her shadowed jaw with light; it frosts her jonquil gown. Her eyes are trained on her hands, fingers on the left wound around ivory bobbins. I can almost hear them clicking. Her right hand pins lace to a pattern pillow. Threads gush out of the girl's sewing cushion red as blood, the bright flow of life that courses beneath my fingers when I touch patients. Vermeer chose this moment—the wielding of her tools—for his subject, and I often wondered whether the painting in some way led me to grasp surgical instruments.

Time was running out for me to perfect my technique. If I could not suture well, becoming a surgeon was out of the question.

Desperate to improve, I headed one spring evening to a program called All Stitched Up. The medical museum offered this event so we students could share sewing skills with expert needle-workers. I walked from the mid-city hospital, passing my spartan efficiency apartment. Darkness drew over the deserted street, soft as the angora shawl I saw that morning wrapped around a patient. Her closest friend, she explained, had cast blessings onto every stitch, to swathe her in love before yet another surgery. I did not tell her that I knew such prayer shawls well. Gran, a member of St. Bernadette's Order of Martha, knitted these for sick members of the parish. When she herself lay dying ten years ago, fellow "Marthas" draped one across her body.

Thanks to her my nickel-plated tool, drawing fine cotton cord in and out of fabric, has seamed my twenty-eight years. Widowed young, Gran took in sewing to support her

three children. Of all the grandkids, only I shared her nimble fingers. Our time together taught me persistence and exactitude. Rhythmic, repetitive motions soothed my anxious perfectionism. When I remember her, I recall *The Lacemaker*—how the girl’s hair is parted, pulled back, braided, one ringlet springing free. After hours in clinic, my curls corkscrew out of a barrette, mimicking hers. Tonight my hair hung loose, wayward, the way Sam liked it. I tucked a stray curl behind my ear, pushed that errant thought away.

Lights glowed ahead. Voices spilled across the medical museum portal, sound dense as a bolt of textured cloth. Inside, I scanned the lobby. Most of the participants were female. Not surprising: Sewing has been women’s work for thirty thousand years. Huddled in caves, our foremothers dragged sinew and catgut through fur and skin cloaks with bone, antler, ivory—work as urgent as hunting when winter approached or the Dark Ages brooded on the horizon. Generation by generation, their daughters have patched clothing, gone blind making lace, pieced national and revolutionary flags, created thermal blankets for spacecraft. They have sutured wounds of all kinds: During the Pinochet regime, Chilean women crafted *arpilleras*—three-dimensional quilts that documented harsh living during those decades, art made from scraps of misery. These days, Danish and British women loop coral yarn into octopi cuddled by infants in the NICU; those newborns breathe easier when they clutch the crocheted tentacles, reminded of the umbilical cord in the womb. Are stories like these why so many painters from Vermeer to Vuillard have portrayed women sewing?

I crossed the threshold and headed to a registration table. The registrar paired me with a plump, forty-something woman, Meredith.

Chatting, we discovered that we both have sewn for years and work in healthcare. She is a chaplain for several city hospices.

“Let’s sit in the back, Ashley,” she suggested. Grabbing an “arm” fabricated from leatherette stuffed with red taffeta, she moved toward a quiet corner. Behind our table rose a white case filled with spotlit specimens—a tumorous bladder, yellowing flesh, unborn dog—jarred in glass. Once settled, Meredith stuck a needle into the “arm” at ninety degrees, just far enough away from the “wound” that it won’t rip, the same way we work with fabric.

“Good,” I told her. “But push harder. You’d need even more pressure on the callous skin of a foot.”

She took my outstretched needle holder, and I sympathized as it wobbled.

“Why can’t your fingers hold the needle?”

“Not sterile. Holding a needle, you could also cut your hand.”

We talked about stitches common to craftwork and surgery: interrupted versus continuous, how continuous are quicker but more likely to infect. She attempted a few knots: square, instrument tie, friction. I showed her how to tie them one- or two-handed. Then it was her turn to teach. She opened a large sack to show me her project: a “green” burial shroud.

“I use natural cotton or hemp,” Meredith told me. “Twill tape, strung through wooden closures, works best because all those materials will decay.” My fingers kneaded the coarse sacking while Meredith pulled out more tape and closures. Her first shroud, made last year for a woman who was passionate about the environment, has turned into a ministry.

Draping the rough cloth over our knees, we basted it with tape. As we worked, I told her about the refugee girls’ school in my



Thomas Eakins, *Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (The Gross Clinic)*, 1875

neighborhood. I grew up in a world that was tearing apart at the seams, but not on my doorstep. Once a week I teach these teens sewing, so they can earn money mending or altering clothes that other people tear or outgrow. When each girl graduates from the course, she receives a sewing machine. I loot my fellow students’ family closets for equipment that has gathered dust for years. “Those old workhorses hold up better than newer models, don’t they?” murmured Meredith.

“I like to think they love whirring a needle through fabric again.” Tension flexed from

my fingertips with each stitch. Silence grew intimate as we sat and sewed, the handwork I had no time for any more.

Instead of needle, thread, and fabric, I held suffering in my hands every day. Last night one of the refugees brought a parent to the ER. When I glimpsed Anisa, I hurried to her side. Her mother, thrashing with high fever, muttered, “They are breaking down our door, and our past is far away.” I wished my fingers could transmit healing energy, that I could lay my hand on the woman’s brow and draw out her sickness.

Except for my hands, I have long felt divorced from my own body. When my father

left, I was too young to understand sorrow or the silent treatment my mother gave me when she saw his stubbornness in me. Easier to just feel numb. Later my mind became a sanctuary from mean girls at school who ridiculed my homemade clothes. When I learned early on that my studies could numb the pain, I discovered that scholarship also made me feel less vulnerable.

Until Sam. The moment we met on rounds, my brain turned to mush. Tall, rangy, his ice-green eyes seemed to linger on mine. A sun-bleached wave slid across his brow. His mellow Australian twang and heartbreaking grin made my flesh tingle. I tried to resist; an affair with a married man, especially a well-known visiting fellow, did not seem prudent. But my body had come alive, and I wanted to feel its power. Sam smoothed the way with reassurances. We were just going to have fun, no one was going to get hurt. Soothed, I felt safe. Not to mention the fact that his wife was tucked 11,600 miles away back in Perth with their three kids.

What did he see in me? A woman ten years

younger than he, but who seemed much younger? Unsophisticated enough to believe the rules governing our affair? An aphrodisiacal blend of reticence and passion? Or was I just undemanding company, both in bed and on our discreet roamings around the city?

Halfway through his tenure, I took him to see Thomas Eakins's painting, *The Gross Clinic*, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. His 1875 portrayal of innovative surgeon Dr. Samuel D. Gross shares the luminosity and psychological intensity of Vermeer's portraits. Eakins's chosen setting—in the operating theater, Gross surrounded by tiers of medical students—is a stark contrast to the Dutch master's intimate domestic rooms.

Sam and I stood shoulder to shoulder in contemplation. My gaze lingered on the blood smeared on Gross's scalpel hand, shining like scarlet threads from the lacemaker's cushion. Then Sam darted away, spying Eakins's canvas, *The Pair-Oared Shell*, of rowers on Philadelphia's Schuylkill River. Years before, a friend had talked me into rowing, and as I crossed the gallery to join Sam, memories

surged: feeling cramped in that two-person scull, legs stretched in front of me under the tight-fitting fiberglass hull; back aching from sitting upright in a plastic bucket seat; arms throbbing as I thrust oars through strong current. Sam saw the strength and harmony of two bodies at physical peak caught when sunset bathed them in a victory-glow.

When we exited the

museum, he propelled me down the stone steps toward the river. That Sunday afternoon was raw, wind whitecapping the steel-gray water, Boathouse Row deserted, the bridge parapet a block of ice beneath our hands. In two months Sam would fly back to sunny Perth and his beaming wife and lighthearted children. Emptiness—the hole he would leave in my life—loomed. The afternoon seemed to hold the past few months like a picture frame; after he left my life would make no sense.

Later in bed, Sam laughed at how bloody cold it had been until we got back into the car and “we finally stopped shivering and kissed while the heater thawed us.” Sadness had engulfed me as I huddled against his woolen jacket, his one-day beard bristling my cheek. How could two people remember the same moment so differently?

“Ashley? Ashley?” Meredith's voice ripped into my reverie like shears through fabric. “You were a million miles away.”

No, Sam was, and I was history. “Sewing does that to me.”

“Is sewing what makes you so pleasant?” asked Meredith. “Most surgeons I've met seem arrogant.”

“I could use some arrogance,” I admitted. Perhaps because our sewing together reminded me of afternoons at my grandmother's knee, or because Meredith was a stranger and a chaplain, I found myself confiding in her. “I'm still not dexterous enough at suturing. I don't know how to get better. Maybe it just takes practice, but I don't feel confident about taking that time.”

“How did you learn to sew?”

I described Gran and *The Lacemaker*, how both had been touchstones since childhood and, still, calming memories.

“They inspired you.” Meredith knotted thread.

“Let me ask you: Would you consider coming to my Sunday School class? Several girls would like to know more about medicine as a career. I've told them that women performed surgeries in ancient Egypt, but that kind of fact would be more believable coming from you.” She smiled. “We could make it hands-on, like tonight. With your guidance they could practice suturing and tying knots. What do you say?”

“They need someone proficient to teach them,” I protested. “I'm not good enough.”

“Actually, the saddest thing these girls tell me is that their parents don't want them to fail. Much better for them to learn from someone who has to struggle at mastering a skill and who persists despite setbacks.”

I had so little time, I pleaded.

Meredith's kind resolve prevailed. When I agreed, I could not foresee how much I would enjoy time spent with her class. How the girls would beg me to return for more lessons and talk. Each time I did, they loosened my self-restraint, like a seam let out to allow for growth.

I mentioned these classes to my department, and we put together a summer camp for high school students. Awed, those teens cradled 3D models of human organs, and they practiced suturing pig skin with reverent concentration.

Looking back, I see how the months I served as a mentor brought me home to myself. At last my gloved hands could cut and stitch with quick, quiet competence. Surgery after surgery, I felt acutely present to the patients. My whole being had absorbed the peace, calm, stillness, and order of Gran's sewing room. Her genes coursed through my body, binding me with an even longer lineage. I took my place among women who mend what they can—broken hearts, devastated cities, massacred homelands, ailing patients. ❖



Thomas Eakins, *The Pair-Oared Shell*, 1872