

The Awful Grace
Reflections

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Anatomy

I held her hand when we cracked her chest.
When we stole her lungs, I held it.

We lifted out her heart, and we cut into her stomach
and we took her skin.
While I held her hand.

They were covered. Gloved.
Encased in white fabric and sealed behind plastic
they resembled nothing.
But today,
today we pulled the shroud back.
We uncovered her hands.

Her nails are neat.
Were some of her last hours spent waiting for an
appointment
Or was it only after that
someone filed and shaped and cut and polished?
She was gone.
Was it important to her?
or to them?
For someone to take that time,
it must have meant something.

We've taken her apart now.
Nothing is where it is supposed to be.
Her lungs and her heart and
her skin is gone.
So, what made her decide to give this?

It can't have been reckless. It must have been
rooted.

Anchored to something.
If I asked her to choose
To choose something like a star,
what would she tell me?
What made her certain?

I held her hand again today,
palm to palm.
I hope she forgives
the pieces of herself that I have
cut and pulled and torn
and lost.

But I am beginning to believe
I know something.
Maybe even something significant.

I think she would forgive me
because whoever else,
she was generous.
And whatever else,
I've been holding her hands the whole time.

So.
I have a number of wishes for her,
but the only one worth saying is this:
I hope the last circuit her brain created,
Her very last memory
Was quiet.
I hope it was peace.

Surgery

We don't usually hold their hands.
At all.
Not when we meet
when we prepare
when we call time.

Not when they breathe deep
or go under.
And not when the first cut
is drawn across.

The symphony starts well before
they arrive.
Cacophony disguising euphony.
Where each plays a role
all at once.
Propelled around the room
along a current
from one task to the next.

It is an exacting choreography.
Steps I don't know.
To a beat I can't hear.

And the person I know best
Will not remember me
as more than a pair of eyes
under a blue cap.
Or a voice in the distance.

The role I occupy in this play
is a small one.
More Rosencrantz
than even Horatio.

But they will stay with me.

And I will remember
what lies behind their ribs;
and the color of their eyes.

Their children
their hope,
their history.

All that they brought with them
Into this place that is
Incongruous and
Unfamiliar and
Foreign
to them.

And to me.

You can see it in
Their eyes as we tell them to
cross the gap
onto what could be called an altar.

Where we will all make an offering -
Of trust and faith,
Of knowledge and skill.

We begin with
A moment of quiet

The breath before going underwater.

And we are, all of us, submerged.

A reflection on the first days of my surgical rotation

Pathology

At the side of the bed, I held his hand
Reached out and touched
Briefly.
To say farewell, although
I had not known him.

The calls come
When they come.
And we must go and visit.
We must make
A declaration.

She was alone, when we arrived.
Waiting for us
To lay to rest
The question of living.

A question they had,
for themselves,
answered already.

The room is dark
and quiet
and still.
When the ritual begins.

It is a laying on of hands.

In some ways a blessing.

We listen to airless lungs
And hear a pulseless heart.
And check for reflexes
Where nerves have
gone powerless.

This completed, we must
Turn away from him.
And speak to her.
It is complete.
We can tell her that

This life is past.

This fight is over.

Although it is not my
tragedy, I find myself
nearly overcome.

Although I wish to,
I cannot reach out and
take her hand.

The hand that would
feel meaning in being held.

But we are here with her.
Sitting in the darkness in silence.
Keeping company
and holding vigil.

There are those who
believe we are all composites.
Amalgams.
That every bright eye,
Every inspiration,
Can be seen and weighed and measured.
That all we are is contained
By the vessels in which we reside.

Perhaps they are right.
Perhaps they are wrong.
I claim no special knowledge.

But I can say this.
Drawn in green marker
on a board
across from the bed:
“No matter how far
You go.
I will always
Love you.”

That part is true.

A reflection on visiting with a recently deceased patient.

Radium Emanation

I don't understand
What I am seeing.
This one looks like a dancer.
And there, a vaulted ceiling.
A full skirt swinging wide.

Maybe I am getting the right impression
– it is the chest I'm looking at.
Perhaps they are paired after all,
heart and soul.

Mother tells ghost stories
that start the same way.
Space is left – by the great
or the terrible –
a shadow rushes there.

This is what is left for shadow readers.
A picture overexposed
– light around the frame
of the closed door.

That might not be far off.
Voices echo in a hollow place
– replaying words spoken before.

Perhaps these are they.

It's all shadows.
But the demarcation
of place has meaning.

I'm seeing shadows
cast by someone -
but not themselves.

Even if I am cracking open their chest
and peering inside.
Looking beyond the barrier or skin
And into the bone.

Am I losing the meaning?
Maybe.
Or am I finding a thread,
The truth of one's narrative.

At this moment, though,
it looks like a dancer.

I know what it is,
What I should see.
And I know who it is
but I don't know what they are.

The deepest heart tells me nothing about that.

*A reflection on a chest x-ray during my first semester of
medical school.*

Positron Emission

These four pillars of inflammation:
Rubor. Calor. Dolor. Tumor.
Red. Hot. Painful. Swollen.

The body's response to damage
and to threat.
The meshwork that makes us all
knows its enemy,
seeks it and marks it out.

For twenty centuries,
For nearly two thousand years,
These have held.

And now I stare at a map
Where bright spots in the darkness
Show this same devastation
From a different angle.
Through a different window.
In a different color.

Tumors glow.
It was once a surprise to me.
But there they are –
Bright against the darkness.
Flares against a night sky.

Because we have harnessed
vision beyond our own sight
I know what this is.
And what it signifies.
I know where it is.
And what has been destroyed.

But, in this gain, I also sense a loss.
And wonder
Have I lost the context -
by understanding the content?
As I find what I am looking for,
Perhaps I am losing beauty in what
there is to see.

Am I failing to see the Soul
where it resides?

Upon reflection, I disagree
with myself.
I am looking -
unraveling a secret
someone keeps without complicity.

And although they signify
nothing good.
The whole of us found a way
to force a show of themselves.

Thus, we still oppose the fates
and perhaps preserve
those threads of a life.

And have not forgotten the soul
in such a seeking.

*A reflection on learning to interpret radiology results in
practice, during my M2 year.*

Magnetic Resonance

It is there and gone
In the space of a second.
Moving through the topography
Of the brain.
The tumor appears from nowhere
And disappears into nothing.

Glioblastoma.

It barely sounds like a word.
But there it is.
A tumor of glial cells.

*Abnormal growth of
nerve cells of the brain.*

And although we speak often
In public of
Cancer warriors, and survivors
This particular journey
Will likely be brief.
Barely enough time for armor.

He fell off his bicycle.
That was the beginning.
In the emergency room,
The physician noticed a troubling sign.

An hour later, a new diagnosis.
And an entirely new life marked by
surgery, medication, and radiation.

I meet this man - hopeful.
Finally leaving the hospital.
He says he is tired,
but plans to fight.
We discuss his treatment, the plan,
and send him on his way.

Two weeks later, he returns.
Altered.
Even I, who know him least, can see
There has been a change.
And not for the better.

He asks us about a cure, about a trial,
about a scientist on an island in the Pacific.

He cannot stand, he cannot walk.
It is difficult to understand what he understands
From our conversation.
But that is ultimately irrelevant.

For we must begin where the patient resides.
There is nothing before this.

While his is a personal disaster.
None of us are thinking clearly,
He is distanced and disconnected.
And we are only people, as he is.

This is not cause
And ensuing effect.

And none of us are gifted with prophecy.

We may fail
or we may succeed.
Much of it is beyond us –
Out of our control.

But what we can do, is seek to understand
And to be understood.
We can walk with you,
as far as the road takes us.

Although we can promise nothing.
Because medicine is both a science and an art
Mystery and magic flow through it
And the outcome is not always what we await.

The magnets that told us where this tumor lived.
What structures it had eaten through,
They resonated,

Our words do too.

*A reflection on a patient with Glioblastoma, a conversation with
my sister and from reading the reflections of Dr. Scott-Connor on
the presentation "Words Matter" during my M3 year*

Nothing has happened.

She is standing in front of me
And I am without words.

Or plan.

Just do it.
Say it.
Push the words
Past your lips.
And let them breathe in the world.

It has to be done
It must come to pass.
And you must be
The one
To do it.

So, let the words fall
Now.
We have lost him.

[Lost is an inexact word.
Does it mean no return?
Ruinination?
Absence?
Has it simply gone beyond reach?

There's an ownership to lost.
So then there's a fault.
How did it come to be lost?
Did it slip through your fingers?]

It is my duty to be clear

"He died."
I say, and she screams.

Stop.

This is only pretend.
We're only playing at grief
And love
And hate
And fear.
Today is imaginary
but
Tomorrow
it will be real.

No one is hurt today.
The news I impart
Has no impact.
It is an illusion
Ephemeral.

A scenario
On brightly colored paper.
Blue, green and gold.

When I am done here
The world will reset,
the next of us
Will begin.

Nothing of this is true
Or permanent.

Except for me.

The fear I feel is real
The dread at creating a fracture
Of before and after.

Breathe.

When the time comes
For me to tear open the seams of the world
For a stranger.
I hope I call on what blood I have
From my grandfather -

Whose words these are:
"We who are finite
huddle together in finitude
and we seek to find
that which is infinite."

*It is he who has gone.
Not you who have lost him.*

But more than that,
"He has slipped out of the window
of this world and he has gone home."

*A reflection on learning how to "break bad news" during my M2
year, with quotes borrowed from my grandfather, Jay Monroe
Jensen, M.D*

Ghost of a Shadow

I am Tiresias
Not Cassandra.
When I predict the future
I will be believed.
Although, so far
I have not yet seen it
Come to pass.

It shocks me every time
But my words
Now
Carry weight.

A reflection on knowing bad news, during my M2 and M3 year.