The Disease, Then, But a Constellation

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Renee sealed the beef heart inside a black bag and dropped it like a final beat—thud!—into the trashcan at the end of our sandy red driveway. It sat there for a week in the desert heat. Our dizzy mutt, The Reverend, would whine and tug on his leash every time he passed it on a walk. Such a stink it made. Renee’s father called himself a doctor. He explained the chambers and valves to a group of Renee’s sixth grade students, the cousins and daughters of illegals. They walked to the school—lodged in a strip mall alongside the interstate—from ranches and mobile homes, through dust devils. “Atria,” her father had said, to the rapt bleak faces of the kids, sitting orderly at their desks.

“Ventricles,” said my twelfth grade anatomy teacher, Mr. Miller, pointing to a sheep heart we were about to dissect. He singled out a curious hole in the muscle, around which the red had blackened. “An entry wound,” he said, made, likely, by a small gauge rifle, a .22 caliber, perhaps. We could not find the exit wound. Nor could we locate the round itself—a mystery!—and in an illogical gesture, we looked about us on countertops and floor. Mr. Miller set the sheep heart down in a tin pan, beside scalpels, formaldehyde, and eyeballs. Those, too, the class would dissect, cutting through corneas to the gelatinous insides. The corneas, though, tough and cloudy.

Same as my brother’s eyes, tough and cloudy, while the ventilator blew his lungs full of air. “Not the eyes of a person,” said my mother, later, in the elevator. We went down for soup at a restaurant. The oncologist had asked—and we’d said yes—to power down the machine, giving my brother, David, the chance to breathe on his own. He had metastatic disease, like knots, throughout his body. What did we expect? A rally, or that the oncologist would have waited, or that the process would be gradual, or what? David’s nurse cried when we returned from lunch. She led us to a spare white room where we could not wake into my brother’s cold sleep.

A few months before, the night after his diagnosis, I drove David for Chinese takeout, pork pancakes with sweet sauce. The neighborhood: lousy, but he insisted on the restaurant. We ate in the parking lot while a group of kids slap-boxed under streetlamps, striking each other with loud claps. David reclined in his seat, digesting his predicament, until I twisted the ignition. At a traffic signal nearby, something—a strop of static, a hard metal bee—buzzed underneath our chins. It came in his window, went out my window, and again. “Step on it,” he cried, and I burnt the red light. At home, David leapt from the car, his ankle tangled in his seatbelt, tripping onto his face. The disease, then, but a constellation of nodules.

Three bright stars, now, here, in the desert sky. The Reverend paws a black beetle beside the screen door. Renee calls it a sawtooth grain beetle, but those are small, and this one is the size of her little fist. I’ve told Renee about the night of the Chinese food, how those strops of static were probably bullets, how it might have been kinder, in a perverse way, had David been struck by one of them. Our pumping hearts, I’ve said, are what make us equal, and later, when I press that part of my chest to hers, we will share in the code that is both the rhythm of our vitality and a prophecy of our deaths, our bodies and love, rapt bleak faces staring in wonder.