

On the Watch

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I saw it the next morning, clinging to the face of my wristwatch: a dried swatch of blood draped in a v-shape between the ten and the two. Immediately, the images flooded back:

His face—his placid, eleven-year-old, chubby-cheeked face. His hair—a maroon, matted swirl of gore splattered on his head like an upturned bucket of paint beginning to dry. His limbs—flaccid and pale.

I was there again, at his bedside, looking into his eyes for a sign of a reaction, a sign of his life. There were the shouts, *His brains! His brains! His brains are coming out!* And a muted, disembodied voice sounding vaguely like my own muttering, *The good brain stays in, the bad brain comes out.*

I rushed him to the operating room not because it made sense to, but because of the screams of his mother, because he was eleven, because the bullet had been intended for someone else, because—for the sake of that place inside myself where hope is nurtured—I had to.

His scalp bled profusely, as though it were uninformed, a late recipient of the news. But underneath the flap of bone I removed, the word had spread: the vessels lay quiescent in acknowledgment. I picked through dusky brain cells by the billions, slurping them up with a sucker. Soon I encountered the resistance of a solid object, the twisted shape of a 115-gram metal wad. I picked it out with my forceps.

They say the most satisfying part of removing a bullet is dropping it into a tin specimen tray and hearing the ping of metal-on-metal that signifies a job well done. But when I dropped this one, my ears blinked, missed it. The bullet didn't bounce, but stuck heavily to the bottom. The scrub nurse stared at it. Transfixed, she became increasingly useless as the case wore on. I helped myself to instruments. I sewed and tied.

After an hour the scalp was reassembled, but it bulged under the pressure of the ever-expanding brain beneath. I left the bone flap out to allow more room for the swelling; it lay on the sterile table like an organic keepsake, like the broken half of a Halloween pumpkin still lying on the porch in the mid-November chill.

When we ushered him back to the ICU, the intensive care docs stood about, slump-shouldered and despondent. Transplant services employees loomed in the background like hungry hyenas. Family members came into his

room by twos, swearing their love, swearing their revenge, swearing their new disbelief in God. A ventilator pumped air into his lungs. His heart pumped blood in fits, hammering the fluid column into the dead-end at the base of the skull; his head bobbed with each heartbeat, his brain too swollen to allow the blood to enter.

I changed clothes before leaving, tossing my bloody scrubs into a hamper and selecting a new pair from the shelves in the OR locker room. After washing a few red splotches from my neck, I emerged from the sterile confines of the OR and trudged to my car. I drove home with half-closed lids.

In my home, my place of forgetting, I took off the scrubs and sat on the couch in my underwear, watching sitcom reruns on late-night television. After a while I could appreciate the jokes; later still, I could laugh. Soon I was falling asleep, slouched and droop-headed, the flashes of happy TV lives reflecting off the blood-streaked face of my watch. ☞