

Self Portrait of the Artist as Medical Student

By Anna Dove

My preceptor tells me: “the heart beats in a waltz,”
like those valves are flapping their opalescent
skirts to the knock-knock-knocking
of the AV at the ventricle door;
that beat is electric, baby.

I once heard of a woman whose heart
honked so loud
it was like a Canada goose had lost its way and
landed permanently in her chest. When at last
they put in an artificial valve, it drove her crazy
with its clicking. “Give me back the noise
of my familiar flesh,” she said – “At least a goose
knows the glory of the open sky.”

I had a G2 with a stethoscope so fine,
it could hear a murmur before it was even there –
was that a heartbeat or a prayer, folded up and
slipped into the crack between systole
and diastole.

Makes me think about what else is spoken
in murmurs, makes me think about
the secrets carried under our sternums;
the stethoscope as confessional booth.
I confess, I do sometimes get hungry
off cautery smoke; I confess
that a scooped-out intervertebral disc
does remind me of baked cod, all white and flaky.

When Toto’s Africa comes on the OR radio for
the 15th time, I confess, it still slaps.
Sometimes the best part of my day,
I confess, is when I drink a sparkling water
that I didn’t pay for. And I confess that I still
do not know
how to do a full neuro exam.

Ma'am, if I say it's a gas pedal, will you plantarflex
on my open palm, like we're tearing up
the open road, like you've always known the way home,
wheels spinning dust onto those hospital sheets? (Don't worry.
They were never really clean, anyway.)

Anna Dove is a fourth-year medical student at the University of Minnesota, planning to specialize in Family Medicine. She is passionate about the power of narrative in shaping how we relate to patients, each other and ourselves. Dove spends her free time devouring baked goods and library books, in equal measure.

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