Anatomy of grief:

For Anna-Christina

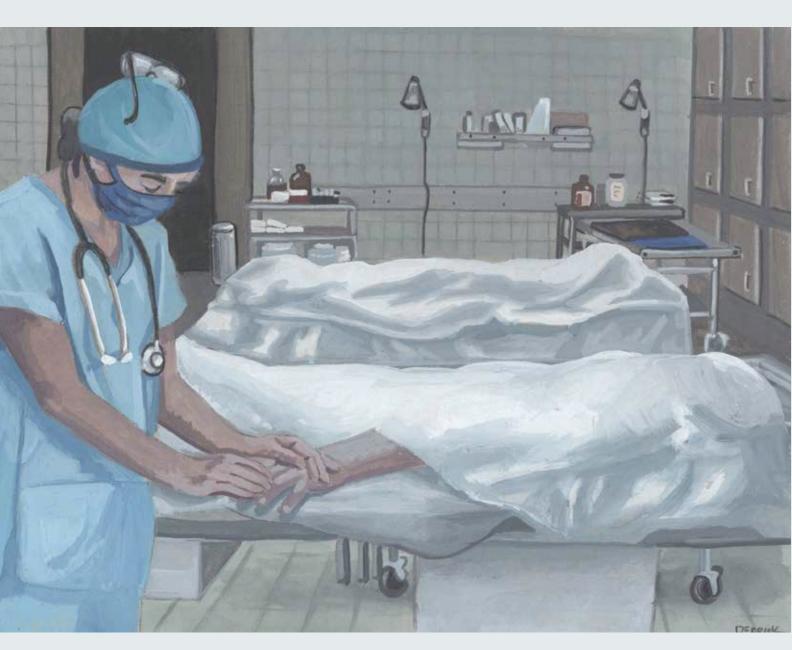


Illustration by Steve Derrick

Sometimes, in the anatomy lab
I imagine one of the bodies is yours
I never know if that would be a nightmare or a
dream come true

But it always makes my breath catch in my throat Right before I lift the sheet

In medical school, we call them "donors"

A crucial reminder that this knowledge is a gift

That the privilege to hold someone's heart in my
hand was born of sacrifice

That it is an honor to learn a body from the inside out

The night after our first dissection, I lie awake for hours

Wondering who my teacher had been

If there was someone out there missing him the

way I was missing you

Wondering if his family had cried while filling out the donation forms

If they were angry at how reductive the process felt

I remember sobbing at my laptop

Trying to distill years of your pain into paperwork Surgeries

Chemo

An endless litany of failed clinical trials

There was nowhere in the forms for me to write about your smile

How soft your hands were

How you loved vintage clothes

How you always insisted on making me loose-leaf tea

How we used to sneak cartons of raspberries into movie theaters

And eat them until our fingers were stained red How you never stopped thanking your doctors Even when there was nothing they could do to save you I hope the people who received your body could feel your grace

I hope they knew how lucky they were to learn from you

I hope they were gentle

I hope they held your hand before someone made the first cut

I hope they thanked you

I hope they remember you forever the way I will

When I go into the anatomy lab to see my teacher I always say hello and how are you doing today and thank you and I'm sorry if this hurts you I hold his hand and bow my head before beginning It has become something of a ritual Something like a prayer
I imagine his hand tightening around mine
His voice whispering I'm sorry if this hurts you too

Some days it hurts me too

Some days I cannot tell the body beneath my blade from my own flesh

Some days it seems I flay myself under the fluorescent lights

Sometimes all I can see is your ghost

Sometimes all I can hear is the last agonizing breath you took

But my love, I am determined to be worthy of this honor

Determined to do for him what I hope someone has done for you

If I cannot bring you back to me, then I will carry you forward with me

On the good days, I feel you as an echo instead of a ghost

A memory instead of a haunting

On the good days, I can imagine you proud and peaceful

On the best days, I can almost see your smile

—Joya A. Ahmad