

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 fluores-
cent 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