

Automaticity

Bzzt—the saw splits the breast bone.
The maw of the open chest gapes at me
as the cardiothoracic surgeon plunges his palms
into the cooling cavity and methodically knits
a Medusas maze of tubing,
bypassing the body's engine.
The blood is thinned
and the native pump is chilled/stilled.

A flat green luminous trace races
across the mute heart monitor,
but the heart-lung machine,
running in a loop, like the surgeon's classical playlist,
nourishes brain and bowel
and the organ meats—kidney and pancreas.
My fledgling fingers, plunged in the frigid brine,
nestle the quiet flesh.

Gloved hands fly in precision formation,
muscle memory schooled by years of watching, do-
ing, teaching.
There are careful cuts,
arterial alignment and perfectly placed sutures.
Air is purged from the grafted vessels
and blood issues forth through fresh conduits,
purging the potassium plegia.
I scoop away the icy slush and sense warmth within
my grasp.

I hold my breath in anticipation as science unfolds,
gates open/close, ions exchange and action potentials
begin to fire.
Despite all logic and reason, it is truly a magic mo-
ment
when the muscle remembers.
At first it feels imagined, subtle as a butterfly wing
flutter,
then a trembling twitch, a rolling shudder
and finally, pulsing pressure,
a pumping piston.

The heart monitor erupts in a melody
more beautiful than Beethoven's Fifth.
And even now, no longer pupil, but practitioner,
I still wait in awe for the wizardry to unfurl,
for the quivering squeeze,
prescient beeps and luminescent blips
that signal return of spontaneous circulation,
intrinsic fire.

—JL Huffman, MD

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