

# Thoracic Anatomy: A sestina

A scalpel cuts clean lines through  
the fibrous pericardium, peeling away  
delicate slices at the vena cavae, looking  
out for the phrenic nerve. A gloved hand  
plunges in, pulls out the heart. We marvel  
at the hypertrophied chunk of flesh in front

of us, a perfect example of pathology. Front  
and center, differential diagnoses: diet through  
smoking, the usual suspects come to mind. Marbled  
fat courses through the coronary sinus, weighed  
down by clotted blood crumbling in our hands  
as we trace the great vessels, looking

for muscles and nerves, looking  
for clues of who lived here before. Front  
and center, differential diagnoses hand  
themselves over: those loved through  
those lost, the ones who got away  
like blood sludging onward. I marvel

at the lacy chordae tendineae, marbles  
of blood tugging on heart strings. Looks  
like mitral valve prolapse, leaflets weighed  
down by a broken heart, affronts  
etched into pectinate muscle through  
loves gained and lost. I handle

the heart carefully. Who handed  
themselves over to this heart, marveled  
at its capacity and flaws. Through  
good times and bad, who looked  
here for comfort? Who was confronted  
instead, locked out, shooed away?

Dissection is over. Put his heart away,  
nestled back into the cardiac notch, handed  
over to the thorax, the sternum closing in front.  
Formaldehyde rags laid, threads of fascia and marbles  
of fat collected and disposed. The cadaver looks  
asleep now under his plastic sheet. Gloves thrown  
away, gowns discarded, the marvel  
of the extraordinary fading. One last look  
at his heart, a stone's throw from our own.

—Natalie Michal Perlov