

HEART BLOCK

bradyarrhythmia for short

When I go to the Doctors they run an ECG. We check the arrhythmia, fluttering on graph, listen on headphones as the beat continuously falls more out of pace with itself, each time greater than the last time I took care to listen to it. I don't listen to it as often as I should anymore, I never find it has anything important to say. Only mutters and murmurs under its' breath, cursing at me for my weakness.

I need a new heart and I want one untouched. A heart is the size of a fist when you clench your hands tight and dig fingernails into palm, and I can only picture dirty nails digging into my heart, into my new heart, and how damaged it could become before I even get any use of it. All I want is a clean heart, a fresh start.

The Doctors say they can't do this, they can't promise that I'll get a fresh untouched heart when it's hard enough to get a new heart to begin with, but that's not good enough. My heart is clean and untouched, so why should I settle for one any less? I'd rather have a sick heart than a dirty one. Doctors promise me they use the best care available, the best tools, the most hygienic practice, but it's not enough.

I have been told by the doctors and the patients and people alike that I am strong for going through this.¹ But I struggle with this - with this notion that a replacement is a declaration of strength as opposed to the exploitation of my own weakness. Would it even be an improvement? How can I hold this guarantee? I sign

¹ One set of messages of the society we live in is: Consume. Grow. Do what you want. Amuse yourselves. The very working of this economic system, which has bestowed these unprecedented liberties, most cherished in the form of physical mobility and material prosperity, depends on encouraging people to defy limits.... Hence much of recent discourse about the body, reimagined as the instrument with which to enact, increasingly, various programs of self-improvement. - Susan Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*

the paperwork and the forms assuring me of the chances of failure, of giving up the one that's lived and died me only to be rejected by this new, foreign heart.

I press my pen so hard on the paperwork that the ink seeps through and the fountain pen tears through the page and they have to print me new forms not once but twice, and I still feel the precision in every pen stroke pushing and testing the paper for weakness.

When I return home I continue to read papers I've already signed, agreements I'm already bonded to. Then I read articles online, repeating the same statistics and facts with more adjectives and less verbs. Then I read journals, adding emotions and auras to the text, turning fact into background noise. Then I read descriptions on Amazon, then I read my credit card statement, then I read the receipts for dozens more books to tell me the same few facts about heart transplants; 1) it will hurt, 2) I will never be the same, 3) that I will die. All of these things exist in the abstract, on no kind of timeline, but they are certain as well. I wish I had guarantees, a certain amount of time to mark the remains of my life by, but that'd provide too much comfort I think.²

When I return to the doctors, I feel as if I have a better grasp on the procedure than the officiant dictating the timeline to me before I swipe my card through their machine. I take my last few hours with my own heart solemnly, listening only to its weak murmurs and feeling my pulse in my neck, my wrists, my fingertips, and wondering if it'll ever feel the same again. Before I go into the surgery I ask if I can keep it, my heart, if it can be mine once more, if I could put it

² Apprehensions of Sicknes, before we can cal it a sicknes; we are not sure we are ill; one hand asks the other by the pulse. - John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

in a jar and sit with it and have dinner and watch TV and get to know it better now that it's no longer a part of me. The Doctors say they don't know why not.

Waking up after is agony. What happened in between going in that bright white room asleep and exiting the same but patchworked together is irrelevant, I know it all, even in my sleep, and have written it over hundreds of times. This pain after is new, something you can never quite prepare for until it happens. It feels like birth, like eating dirt, like a wooden spike driven through my chest. Something foreign inside of my chest, bones barring it in to keep it from bursting forth.³

I learn to regret what I gave up at this time, rapidly. I miss low levels of ache as opposed to this acute pain, the possible infection, rejection, sudden death and such. I miss the comfort in knowing how to define my pain. I stay another week or so with nothing to report. My life feels duller now, too preoccupied with the intense shaking in my chest, happening on and on. It keeps me from sleeping, makes it hard to eat when my hands shake so suddenly, deafens out nurses' words as I'm too preoccupied with the thumping.

When they bring me my heart back it feels like a reunion. The two of us look so different, I, weary in my textured hospital socks with cheeks blushing from the strangeness inside me, and it, able to gaze upon me after all. I realize that in all this time, all these appointments, that I've had scans and diagrams and photos of it taken, while it's never seen me at all. I wonder if it's disappointed, to only know me physically after we've parted ways.

³ It is as if the old year is being burned out of me through fever and the new one will come in renewed, because any illness that doesn't kill you sets you on fire and then you start over, just like that. - Anne Boyer, *What Cancer Takes Away*

I slip my sneakers over the socks, determined to take them home regardless of regulations. My heart is in a small jar about the size of my forearm, brined in some sort of solution that I can only guess is suitable. I realize how little I know about what makes my heart comfortable outside me, that I could never make another bath for it should that jar break, and I push that thought aside as I slip the jar into my inner coat pocket, pressing the cool glass into my thin t-shirt. It hurts a little, but I don't mind, finding comfort in having my heart close again.

Once I'm home, bedrest still, awaiting a rejection of the new organ hooked up to my veins, I find myself carrying my heart everywhere with me.⁴ To the kitchen, to my bed, and to the bathroom, the bed again. My days are mostly spent in this cycle, so I suppose to carry it everywhere isn't difficult. It's like old times, albeit I feel stronger and warmer, let's not consider that for too long. Watching my heart is a comfort, learning of it and its behaviors in new ways as it grows more foreign in others. An attempt to maintain our status quo: I care for it and it keeps me company in exchange.

As time goes on this grows more difficult. As much as I fear infection inside of me, it's difficult to deny that I'm more capable now than I've been in months.⁵ It doesn't seem likely this new heart will cast me aside, or if it does, there's no telling when, and I find myself growing fond of it. Maybe not of it, but of the freedom it allows me. I wonder if the doctors maybe didn't spend all that time finding me a match in vain, if their science was accurate.

⁴ I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store. - Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

⁵ The most common causes of death following a transplant are infection and rejection... many heart transplant recipients lead a long and productive life. - Apollo Hospitals, *Facts on Heart Transplant Surgery & Procedure*

My heart, my old heart, doesn't seem fond of this new development, but it keeps quiet, only whispering to itself as I walk out the door, and creating awkward pauses over dinner. Jealousy maybe, a desire to crawl back into where it was safe and comfortable, and knowing that that's no longer an option.⁶ I keep waiting for it to tell me what's wrong, but it only ever mutters to itself as the jar rolls off of its pillow in my bed.

One day over oatmeal, my old heart sitting on the kitchen counter, I say I'm going out, the first time I've been out for anything since the surgery. It says nothing, no bubbles arising from the jar, not even a whisper as I close the door behind me on my way out. Out I go and I stay out, and it's good, I feel good. I can't do the things I wish I could, drink or dance without feeling winded, but I try to all the same. It's good and it's new, so foreign but good nonetheless.

I return to my flat with my shoes in my hands and I miss my key hook, but I pay no mind to my keys as they clatter on the wood. My old heart is sitting in its jar at the other end of the table, lights on, waiting for me to come home. "When will you come to bed? When will you hold me again? You're like a stranger to me."

I don't know, I don't know, I know.

⁶ The rational explanation of why I feel dead half the time does little to mediate the irrational horror of existing as if I do not. Here we are, here I am, alone and myself, half of me fallen off, half of us gone.
- Anne Boyer, *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care*

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