
POETRY | SPRING 2014

Letter to a 93-year-old Cadaver Who Died from Multiple Causes

By Jennifer Stella

Letter to a 93-year-old cadaver who died from multiple causes

I opened your willing body
as an act of love.

The pleasure in dissecting
fascia. Pleasure
in removing clothes.

I never held your hand
ungloved. It was more intimate—your
brittle fingers cradled in my palm, other
hand guiding the scalpel. Probing
nerves or arteries or whatever
loses color.

Reflecting your thoracic cage—not my
saw to your manubrium, not
my cut haphazard-sliced your
lung. Dense, dark. With cartilage
compressed like tears.

Hesitant, macerating muscle, I
glided over your fifth rib, reached
back, twisted my aching wrist up in
inchoate effort to help you
breathe. With child-sized tubes.

The worry when I detached
your heart. Worry when I
spliced your small intestine, removed
your spleen, unsheathed your arms

and legs. Without Anubis-headed jars
or nacron linens.

And the staples close to lost
in the louvers of your chest—you
had been opened before. The plastic
mimicking valve. Illicit reconnection.

Stunned by brachial plexus. Triumphant
twinned arch. And your exquisite
heart. Fleur-de-lis aorta. Scalloped edges
of left ventricle fluttered
open. Tendon chords like
butterflies can rupture.

Did you know how beautiful
you were disintegrating.

Jennifer Stella is a doctor and a writer, or a writer and a doctor. During medical school in San Francisco, she pursued an MFA in poetry at Brooklyn College. Her poetry and prose have appeared in *The Drunken Boat*, *Switched-on Gutenberg*, *The Brooklyn Review*, *The Examined Life Journal*, and others. She blogs for *Primary Care Progress* and *KevinMD*. Jennifer is currently a resident physician in primary care/social medicine at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, NY.
