

SLICE

ISSUE 14 SPRING/SUMMER '14

FICTION + NONFICTION + POETRY

ESCAPE

OWEN KING AND MATTHEW SPECKTOR 16

FIONA MAAZEL 64

COLUM McCANN 94

ALISSA NUTTING 111

BEHIND THE BOOK DEAL JULIE SARKISSIAN 48

US/Canada \$8.00



www.slice magazine.org

STATIC

TERRANCE FLYNN

It's Thanksgiving Day, 2010, and I've just had a heart transplant. You would think I'd be more grateful. On either side of me, two walls of machinery hum and tick. My family huddles at the foot of my bed, their faces bootprinted by the trauma of their wait. My mother has aged overnight, her tentpole cheekbones supporting the flesh draped below like canvas after a downpour. No one speaks. I can't; they don't. There's room in my head for only one question: *what the hell could it mean to have someone else's heart beating inside of me?*

The first thing it means is that my old heart is explanted, disembodied, and depending on the janitor's schedule, either sealed in a box lined in red plastic and labeled biohazardous waste, or in a pile of ashes at the bottom of the hospital's incinerator. How's that for severance?

I am an ingrate. Waking up means I've moved on, already thousands of beats into a relationship with a stranger's heart, and I resent the sudden, forced intimacy, the lack of introduction or transition. Show me someone who can say hello and good-bye at the same time, and mean both, and I'll show you a sociopath. I'll show you the type of person who calls a stepmother "mom" right away. I don't want to need this stepheart like I do. Childishly, I'd like to shout into

my thoracic cavity, something like, *Just so we are clear, you'll never be my heart. I've had a heart.*

Somewhere outside the hospital, funeral arrangements were presumably being made for the donor. Is he the thankful one? Shouldn't one of us be?

I blink my dry eyes at my family, and they stand back, looking as afraid to touch me as I am to be touched. Then, a flicker of panic: *maybe they don't recognize me.*

But my partner, James, possibly sensing my discomfort, leans over, kisses my forehead lightly, and gets a static shock so crisp that everyone jumps. I groan, but my family laughs, because we are the type who laugh when someone trips, especially each other. They close in, but avoid my bandaged core. My mother puts a cold hand on my cheek. My dad tangles his rosary. My brother lifts my hair up on one side of my head, and says, "Look, how it just stays there." When I roll my eyes at him, they laugh, then leave exhausted, returning to the Detroit suburbs where we grew up.

James stays. Our six-month-old daughter is at my sister's house, being changed and fed and passed around by her seventeen cousins. My sister is cooking the huge turkey she has injected.



Later, my breathing tube is removed. An unexpected ordeal. When it's out, my lips feel like they have lost their elastic. James hands me a styrofoam cup of grape juice, which I put to my slack mouth, and it is the best thing I have ever tasted. I ask him carefully, "Do I seem different to you?"

He squeezes my hand, but since he doesn't touch the question, his answer does not shock either of us.

« • »

Two months after my transplant, there was this issue of the thank-you note. I thought it was better to be prompt, but Mary Jo, my transplant coordinator, said, "There's no rush. Right now you're under the influence of Prednisone. Just wait."

She was right. Prednisone is a midcentury miracle drug lacking the cleanliness of architecture from the same period. Doctors call it dirty to its face, listing side effects best summed up as early old age and a sampler of personality disorders. But I was most afraid of the side effect with a one-word name that is its own slur: moonface. My old heart may have been removed, but my vanity remained intact. Regardless, I took the stuff in high doses, four times a day, because Prednisone is still the gold standard for immunosuppression following organ transplant. Despite its reputation for badness, it remains at the top of its game, like Michael Vick or Kobe Bryant. It is that good at what it does.

A year after my transplant, thanks to Prednisone, I had escaped rejection but not moonface. When the dose was titrated down, my face waned, but the curiosity about my donor intensified. Unlike California, where they tell you the age and sex of the donor, Michigan divulges nothing. I needed some information, even if it was speculative. So, like a stalker, I turned to Google for some relief and sought the origins of my new heart online.

I found something easily.

The day before Thanksgiving in Cadillac, Michigan, Melanie Aston was driving with Stephen Meyers in her Ford Taurus when it was hit by an eighteen-wheel semi, killing them both. The timing matched. The accident occurred just hours before Mary Jo called to tell me a heart was available.

I found a picture of the totaled car online. Is it possible that either Melanie's or Stephen's heart could have survived that crushing impact if their brains hadn't?

The skull is not a black box. Even so, what must their brains have recorded in those seconds before all was erased?

Stephen died at the scene. He was nineteen. There are stages to death, but even terms like "sudden death," which I've experienced, or the phrase "killed instantly by a semi," which I haven't, are deceiving with regard to what stops when. After brain death, was a pulse detected? Did the team scrub in at that intersection, then place a Coleman cooler next to Stephen, while the flashing lights outlined the rising wisps of blue crash smoke?

During my heart-transplant evaluation, I asked Mary Jo how hearts are harvested. She scolded me gently. "Please. We say *procured*."

Maybe it wasn't Stephen's heart, but the driver Melanie's heart that I received that day. They will give you a woman's heart if you're a man. And vice versa. This disturbed me; I'll be honest. Growing up, I already had a unisex name: Terry. My brothers told me I had "girl hair," so I thought, *Fuck, would it be too much to ask for a man's heart?*

They'll give you a much younger heart, which is what everyone on the list wants, but they'll also give you an older one, which seems like a gyp. If the heart is much older, or genetically challenged, or compromised by a life that is just too hard or too easy, it is called marginal.

The transplant team won't give you a heart from a much bigger or smaller person. Size mismatch, it's called. I am six-foot-one, one-eighty, so Melanie would have to have been tall and relatively thin: unlikely for a forty-nine-year-old woman in Cadillac, Michigan, who works in the mental-health profession. I found a picture of her from the obituary posted on the funeral home's website. She looks tired. There's no way Melanie could have known, when that picture was snapped, that someone would be staring at her hesitant eyes, a year after her death, wondering if he now had the heart that she was born with.

Melanie was survived by her two daughters and a woman the obituary called a "special friend." With Stephen sitting next to her in the Ford Taurus, Melanie had gone through a stop sign before the semi hit her car. Did she not hear an eighteen-wheeler coming? I stared at the intersection

on Google Earth; it is not a busy road. What were Melanie and Stephen doing together, a forty-nine-year-old woman and a nineteen-year-old man? What was the last thing they said to each other before they knew the danger?

The driver of the semi walked away. I'd like to share some math with him if he'd have it. *You killed two people, I'd say, but you might have saved five.* That's how many organs came from my donor. In the waiting room as I was in surgery, my mother spoke with the other families whose loved ones were receiving various organs. James later told me that my mother said, "My son's getting the heart," as if she were calling dibs.

Last Thanksgiving was the second anniversary of my transplant. James and I cooked a turkey for family and friends. When the doorbell rang, I raced my daughter, now a fast-moving toddler, to the front of the house where I greeted guests, grabbed potluck dishes, and then bounded back up the stairs to the kitchen. At my sister's suggestion, I injected the turkey using a syringe to pierce the bumpy skin. I depressed the plunger with my thumb, infusing it steadily, repeatedly, relentlessly, so that I got lost in a kind of medical revenge fantasy. When James took the syringe from my hand, he said, "I think you're good."

Even though I later burned the skin a little, people said the meat was bursting with flavor. Still, my mother remarked, "What a shame," adding, "the skin is always the best part."

Maybe my heart is neither Stephen's nor Melanie's. When it comes down to it, who owns a heart, really? But then again, mine is working so well, I'm starting to feel like it may be mine. I never think about my old heart.



I wrote a thank-you note to my donor's family. In it, I mentioned I was gay, not like, "Greetings from Christopher Street!" but I described my daughter, my partner, and my large family.

"Thank you from all of us," I wrote. "Today is Thanksgiving," I wrote. And also, "I'm sorry."

The donor's family hasn't responded. Most don't. Maybe Stephen's parents or Melanie's daughters crumpled up my letter. Cadillac, Michigan, is a conservative place, after all. Very red politically, with lots of Michigan militia and venison. Even so, maybe one of Stephen's brothers or Melanie's special friend is composing a response to me right now, struggling with words the way my old heart struggled with a beat. **TF**