



POETRY | FALL 2022

## Formaldehyde

By Jonathan Grubbs

“‘Out damned spot! Out...’”

—*Shakespeare, Macbeth*

“The heart is deceitful above all things and it is exceedingly corrupt. Who can know it?”

—*Jeremiah 17:9*

My sharp steel  
cuts through flesh, excising  
the soul of a man who once walked as I do—  
who once felt the chill of raindrops on his face,  
who turned up his collar to the chill and walked faster,  
his heart hurrying in time with his gait.

My knees lock as I breathe it in,  
my cilia quivering as they expel the noxious fumes.  
My eyes water as I feel it seep into my skin,  
inching up the blade of  
my sharp steel,  
through the nitrile that distances my mind from my task,  
that prevents the feel of flesh on flesh.

I feel the fixative injected into him,  
arresting the grand cycle of life,  
adhering to his dust, that to dust  
he does not return.  
Not until I am finished with him.

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And so I slice through majestic archways,  
canyons, valleys, veils of flesh and muscle.  
I pause momentarily to admire this engineering,  
this Alhambra, this Alexandria, this temple,  
before I cut it all down.  
My sharp steel  
respects only my schedule.

Out comes the soul of a man who once stood as I do,  
feeling the sun on his skin—  
never for a moment thinking of the pulsing pump striving every moment  
to provide his salvation.  
Or perhaps he did, as I do now,  
and said a silent prayer of thanks.

I hold his soul in my hands now,  
freed from a sinewy cage.  
I pry the fibrinous plugs, congealed lifeblood,  
from the great vessels that once carried  
might and love and passion and sorrow  
from soul to mind, mind to body,  
body to soul.  
Another cycle, one calculated to inscrutable precision,  
that I have ended with  
my sharp steel.

I dissect his soul,  
interrogating it, divining the secrets beneath its flesh with  
my sharp steel,  
dowsing for the well in which his waters once flowed.  
I marvel at the vast prairies over which those currents once coursed,  
the gates through which his might stormed and crashed.

And then, with somber regret,  
I discard the pieces of his soul that  
my sharp steel  
smote in error,  
through speed or carelessness.

And now, like the eviscerated heart I scrubbed in a utility sink,  
I launder my coat, bleach and bone-whiten.  
I can still smell it, but I barely notice.  
Like a melody drifting across the summer fields outside, the sadness fades as  
I launder my soul, bleach and bone-whiten.

*Red pill. Blue pill.*

He expectorates the wages of his labor,  
the fruit of his years of servitude.

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**Jonathan Grubbs is a third-year medical student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine. He received his B.S. in Biology with a minor in Psychology from North Carolina State University, where he also assisted in teaching organic chemistry and volunteered at community hospitals in the area. He has a passion for volunteering to improve health access for underserved groups. He led one such organization, the Samaritan Health Center Mobile Clinic, at the University of North Carolina. His work focuses on confronting the uncomfortable necessities of modern medicine and medical education with a mixture of sincerity and humor.**

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