

Heart of a Monster

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When I lift weights, I become very aware of my heartbeat. Trapped. It seeks to push out beyond my body; hits my fingertips, my heels and then throbs into the scalp desperate to uproot the hair and escape down its length. When I practice tai chi, my heartbeat becomes a tightening and relaxing of the spirit. A strengthening and stretching of the awareness, and of the forgetting, of life. Alone, I become the heartbeat of the room – the contraction and subsequent pulse of life in the center of a sleeping soul. And yet, I am nothing. The room continues to be a room.

I drive home in the nothingness. Afloat in the centered sensation of being. Nothing. The road sustains my calm – soft pulls of the wheel keep the gray steadily streaming beneath me. The last curve is a sharp, hard left and demands a lowered speed and double-handed spin. In the apex of this arc, a drop of blood. I stutter the grip on the wheel to avoid it. Slide close to the guard rail. In the rearview, a car behind me swerves away. Feathers ruffle. I pump my brakes; another car pulls from the apex – from a cardinal unperturbed on the yellow line.

It's nothing. Drive. Nothing. I pull sharply into the grass, palm my keys and, out in the road, I run. There is no complaint of muscle, no remembrance of the earlier hours. Another car passes. I cross into the road, scoop up the bundle and quickly to the bald patch of earth where tire marks have dug into the skirt of the curve. Now, I feel the pound of that short run, the knowledge of the blind spot. And the relief of life – still breathing. He tucks his head under my hands and does not fight. I feel the flutter of his eyes, the rhythmic scissor of beak against my stomach. I tell him not to worry. He's okay. I'll keep you safe, I tell him.

I've never held a bird and not felt the strength of its heartbeat threatening to burst with the will to escape. I murmur a prayer.

His head locked, cocked in lack of terror, legs crumpled too far to one side, eyes half-open. He gasps. Again. Again. I sing for him. It seems the right thing to do. I hold him against my chest and hope my heartbeat is steady with comfort; that my voice becomes familiar when heard through it.

His wings loosen once, then easily smooth to the back. No injury apparent, a magnificent crimson head gives way to a body of soft magenta-tipped gray. He is beautiful. Perfect.

I love him, says my daughter. I talk with my husband as he prepares for work, then peek at the bird. His half-closed eyes seem to understand Human, and he startles. His gaze is too far over to one side for the recognition, but the cramped neck stretches, reaches to panic. His mouth gasps wild silent notes. I lower the lid and wonder what I've done.

Surely, this is a good sign. The sign of fear in the wild. A sign of wings in the heart, I say to my husband.

My forehead pounds. I trace the power of it past my ear and into my neck. The heartbeat of lifting weights. Of running. I run my hands down my arms. I can feel the heartbeat even there.

"I don't understand how I just let things go," a mere breath of thought. I look at the walls. At my hands. I feel as if my hangnails are the start of some sort of stripping of the soul. If the stretch of

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skin continues to redden and peel, I'll lose a hand, an arm until I'm a hazy shadow keeping the form of the skin now sloughed to the floor. And the day pushes my feet into the carpet, drills me down into the soil. My heart mocks a rhythm heard once at some country fair, and though I can't quite find the steps, I begin to follow its pace. I will myself to stop breathing. To keep the memory. It pushes into my scalp.

A drop. I will my heart beat slower. Slower. The long clotted lines come. I wrap up the heat of them and hold my breath until the burn implodes in a gasp. My head hurts with the effort of it.

There's nothing to do.

"I don't understand." I look. I hold them up closely. I say, it's okay, it's okay. Exhale until my lungs fight the effort and stutter. I'm so careless with the pieces. There's so much of nothing.

No face to consider. No hair to smooth. No trying on of names.

I whisper the word to a friend. How far? They wonder. As if a promise would be invalid if new.

"I feel like—"

My body ripped my baby's body apart. And I disposed of piece after piece after piece. The trash. The toilet.

"She's trapped. I trapped him. Always nothing. Always nothing."

A drop of blood. A drop of blood. A drop of blood.

Each strand of life, a heartbeat undone. Each pump of blood, a loss. I constrict. It's over, I tell myself. It's over. Over.

From the window, a mockingbird trills. A low breath of dove. I listen for the song of the cardinal, but I don't know its voice. I rise, feeling the weight of an unfinished prayer, and peek at the bird.

I find the outline of his head tucked beneath the towel. I blow softly. I trace the curve of a wing.

I work my fingers under his body.

He is loose. Unhinged. The neck flops like an infant's. I allow the squeeze of pain, the escape of tears. I take deep breaths of injury, last breaths of mourning. I lift his beak until his chin settles properly onto his shoulders. It takes some time. He settles in the hollow of my hand and I rock him. It seems the only thing to do. I smooth my hand over him and stroke his head and back. A bright red calm in my hand. My palm cups to him.

He settles back into his cotton nest. Eyes half-closed. It seems too soon to bury him. I wait. Feeling the new peace of unheartbeat.

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My children hold the bird again. He doesn't seem real anymore, they say. Wrapped carefully – loosely in paper towels, he seems somehow heavier. I place him in his grave. My son prays – his eyes tightly shut and his arms folded around his neck. I close my eyes and listen. During the prayer, I hear birdsong.