

# Triptych for John

Category: Poems

written by Yun Lan | April 23, 2010

**Yun Lan**

## **Part I: The first time I saw you**

I met John  
without  
John,  
without introduction.  
Cold,  
cold,  
cold hand.

## **Part II: Cadaver as Decapod**

John was surely a hermit crab, having four small limbs to anchor the body and six long limbs to advance it. He gathered sea anemones on his back, and weeds in his spiny beard. He bore stellate scars, the digitated marks of five pointed teeth. There was a constellation of them, surely from the care of blue spined urchins. The urchins couldn't make him stay. Did they evict him or had he just outgrown his home?

Surely, his soft belly was turned out to the brine, the ocean full of predators. In each eye of many lenses, what did he see? Was he afraid to scuttle from this white ribbed shell to the larger? Perhaps not. He trusted he could replace his old limbs. He could carry anemones to protect him. He would fear neither octopus, nor fellow crabs, nor stars.

We can pick at the questions, we each with ten limbs: sharp scissors, blunt scissors, olive point probe, teasing wooden handled straight needle, thumb forceps, "fitted teeth" tissue forceps with 1x2 jaws, Jones artery forceps, straight eye forceps, stout probe, and scalpel. Trace his spiral atria. Study the attachments—how his limbs clung to this concavity. Then, saw from sinus through concha, and chisel to where his eyes hid. We know just the angle and just the force to pince the bone.

We are surely young hermit crabs, still small enough to make John's shell our

new home.

### **Part III: Ode to the Donor**

My practiced nonchalance at pulling  
fat from skin could not prepare me for  
the treasures that I found within:

a perfect ruby—the size of a pea, a piano,  
its thousand strings, and worn  
white lacquer keys.

Beside a river was a crane bowed low against the dawn,  
to welcome every cargo load,  
to lift on and on and on.

Volumes of voice and discipline were written in his flesh.  
Could I study only  
syllables, their pathways and their breadth?

What is the body's story?  
A machine at its best? A way to know hunger,  
and sickness and death?

I ask this remnant  
of a face. I wait  
and watch your lips.

I ask, what is a body? You say,  
It is  
a gift.

When time for giving  
time was gone, still you gave again.  
Was it to cease the ceasing, or yield to end as end?

May I too give beyond to heal the hurt and bruised.  
It is my only way to say,  
"John, thank you.

Thank you."

### **About the poet:**

Yun Lan (a pen name) is a rising third-year medical student. She wants to thank all those at her medical school who have encouraged her poetry.

### **About the poem:**

I wanted to describe phases in my experience of anatomy lab. I also wanted to write a piece to share at my school's Convocation of Thanks, a ceremony in honor of those whose remains we've dissected during our anatomy labs.

**Poetry editors:**

Judy Schaefer and Johanna Shapiro