

Witnessing Consent for an Autopsy

Category: Poems

written by Patty Bertheaud Summerhays | December 2, 2011

Patty Bertheaud Summerhays

"They just cut the abdomen like an operation, look in and sew him up. No one will know."

I know the inside story—the body parts,
the heart, brain, liver, lungs,
kidney, spleen, bowel, and bladder
sliced on a cutting board
like loaves of bread.
The coroner donning a butcher's apron
splattered with blood from the last
scrape of blade over bone,
slipping off the scalp like a mask.
The eyes stopping him
like the end of sentences until
he doesn't feel the frown of brow—
anger as he drills to its roots.

Emotions leaving both men
with a grasp of brain.

A slice of brain placed in formaldehyde
jiggles like a thought trying to collect its thoughts.

Every organ shredded and a piece
saved until the jar is filled with
a body of its own.
The leftovers gathered
into a plastic bag and placed
back into the body
like a well-kept secret.

A secret longing for a slip
of the tongue.

About the poet:

Patty Bertheaud Summerhays received her MFA in poetry from George Mason University in 1991. She worked as an intensive-care nurse in hospitals in the northeastern U.S. and as a nurse and ESL teacher in Mexico and Guatemala. Patty's poems have been published in [The American Poetry Review](#) and other journals. She died of colon cancer in October 2009, at age forty-eight.

About the poem:

This poem, written when Patty was in her late twenties, draws on her

experiences while working in hospitals.

Poetry editors:

Judy Schaefer and Johanna Shapiro