

Poem

The anatomy lesson: resection

You didn't know what to do with the wisdom teeth
so you saved them for a while
for nothing, or what to think of the ganglion cyst —
smooth, benign — they removed
from the wrist just above the pulse. And then
there was the first biopsy
of the cervix, a plug the size of a pencil eraser
they said, and that mole
you'd had all your life they of a sudden called
suspicious, and the nuisance
the gall bladder became, and the thyroid gland.
But it is the tumour
in the gut that gets everyone's attention
its slow, mute explosion
in the liver. This time, you are the anatomy
lesson, your surgery
a sharper degree of difficulty. Starched
bleached, their names newly
stitched on crisp lapels, the medical students
file in and listen;
they write things down. They observe the operation;
there is a quiz, a test;
you are the exam; what they can access of you
theatre — now — in the surround —;
you are the text, the close reading and radical
revision, the offensive
part lifted out and taken away in a pan
fetus-like — that kind
of measure, that kind of heft. Only they can tell you
when you return to them
what you can live without, what regenerates
and on hearing it
you feel a lightening, the way a snake must
on slipping through its discarded
mouth into another year, or, knowing nothing
of a year, into time itself.

Claudia Emerson
Professor of English

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Va, USA.

caemerson@vcu.edu

doi: 10.5694/mja14.00248