

## On the first day of anatomy lab

it is September. My hair is damp from a morning shower. The streets is a lexicon of leaves, the air just beginning to turn cold.

I learn all our donors are from Connecticut. I am given their ages on a typed list, not “70s” or “senior” but 71, 88, 89. The numbers are seemingly arbitrary but I like the precision. It brings a real weight to the bodies I will soon see, the sum of every moments they breathed.

The metal casing is hard to keep open. I press my knee into it to draw the locking mechanism into place but when I am done I see that a thin brown line no thicker than the width of my fingernail has stained my pants. I spit on it and rub the fabric, but it stays.

I unzip the white plastic, unwrap the canvas and tuck it behind my donor’s legs, knowing I will make sure his toes are covered once more at the end of class. We are told to just look today, to sketch and observe, yet I can’t help but touch.

His skin is hard and cold like the gray blocks of clay ceramicists use. His hands are bound post-mortem, and you can see the impressions his fingers have left on his belly. It reminds me of the fossils I’ve seen in museums of dinosaur eggshells or ferns in tar, and the footprints in the Ka’au desert, preserved from when Mauna Loa erupted. A professor exclaims and tells me they are “pitting indemedous” impressions, which can be noted at a Given Depth on a Point Scale, but I’m still thinking about Mauna Loa, the sprawling desert, and the hot volcanic ash that swept across a whole island in one day, taking families but keeping a trail of their footprints perfectly preserved. I later learn the word is “edematous,” but for now, I stroke his cheek and hold his hand, his fingertips stained yellow, and notice how his nail beds are big like mine.

We are encouraged to look at the donors on other tables. At Table 36 there is an Asian man with speckled skin and skin tags like my dad, clear serum pooling around his eyes that shine like tears. I see IVs and a central vein triple lumen line embedded in skin, vestigial structures still trying to revive life in a dead body. The embalming process makes things concrete. Lithified. Immortalizing wrinkles and folds of skin like non-laminar strata in sedimentary rock, I am with bodies that will soon join the earth, again lost in geologic time. Their morphologies are unfamiliar, stomachs too full or too hollow, fat held and told to halt, contorted to form an assemblage of small knolls in topographical maps of places I don’t know.

Class is soon over and I am sitting in the shuttle on my way home looking at the sketch of my donor— his large nostrils, barrel chest, and hands with nail beds as large as mine— wondering if he wore a quarter-zip sweater in September, and if his partner ever reminded him to wear a hat before he left for work because it was cold outside.