

Hulling the Heart

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*When I was 38, I suffered a SCAD (spontaneous coronary artery dissection) that travelled the length of two coronary arteries. I'm lucky to be here, and thank my surgeon, who realized what he was seeing when he looked at my angiogram (too often, doctors don't even know what a SCAD is). My SCAD caused two major heart attacks and led to an emergency triple bypass, which was necessary to save my life. This story, "Hulling the Heart," is based on this experience. At the time, I was working at a museum and had recently fallen in love with and given lectures on Hyman Bloom's painting *The Hull*, which is central to the story.*

Finally, in the early morning, the hospital room is quiet. She is thankful for this time when everything is still, and she is simply allowed to be. Relieved by the silence instead of the breezy hellos of nurses coming to check her blood pressure, give her medicine, ask if she's still nauseous, or if there's anything else she needs. And though she is afraid the way she is every time she wakes up here—since with each waking comes remembering, regathering, noticing the deep, new ache along her sternum—she tells herself she won't call out to her husband who sleeps across from her on the couch, tells herself she won't call out to him this time, because he needs to rest, tells herself *just listen to the heart monitor, just listen to its rhythm, just listen; you'll be OK.*

She is on the eighth floor. It is the fifth day. One wall of the room is almost entirely made of windows. Through the glass, she sees the city, the sky, the first bits of summer light. But she is a stranger here. Nothing is familiar. Not the buildings, not the signs, not even her own hands resting on her chest. There's nothing familiar at all except for the giant body she notices drifting up again in the clouds. It was the one she had dreamt of, the one who was there yesterday and the day before—the dead one with the cut-open torso, the woman from the painting.

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Created in 1952, *The Hull* was one of Hyman Bloom's corpse paintings. But a later one and different from the first bodies he'd gathered into pigment during the years before. Not at all like the large canvases of the 40s, in which the bodies were stationary, flat, lying on their backs or their stomachs, and seen by the viewer as if from above, the figures pressed up against the front of the picture's surface and surrounded or covered in dark, gestural, distancing swaths of cloth.

Though the early corpse paintings were unexpected and raw, at the same time, she would suggest to the crowd who'd come for the lecture, they were stiffer, less bold, and perhaps even tentative in comparison to *The Hull*. They were paintings that were easier to look at, images that allowed the viewer more distance. You could stay on the surface without being pulled in. Bloom was painting them from the exterior; depictions of decay and putrefaction were simply renderings of decomposition already present on the skins of the bodies themselves.

These early corpses were Bloom's first stories of the dead. But as the years passed, Bloom's relationship to his subject would change: his responses to their deaths, their shapes, his need—*for it was a need wasn't it?*—to paint them in their left-behind form would shift. By 1952, his representations were deeper, more insistent. By the time of *The Hull*, Bloom was cutting his corpses open.

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The woman's body continues to drift on the other side of the window. She watches it move across the horizon, the body pushing through a cluster of bruised clouds. For a moment there is only a leg, part of an arm, a sliver of white rib over the city before she emerges again on the other side. (She had decided the corpse was a woman: there were the small knees, the slightness of the arms, and the curve of the thighs as the legs splayed open and down the sides of the

autopsist's table.) The body then lingers for a moment—an undulating palimpsest over the city. It is a landscape covered in a dream.

But why just a dream? she asks silently to no one, *why not believe there is an actual body floating there?* for it seems just as likely, the chances of it happening just as great, as probable to her as the place she inhabits now—this strange world on the bed, connected to an IV, with oxygen tubes in her nose, where she is caught in a body turned heavy, almost-dead weight, as it sinks under itself and threatens to pull her down. She is nothing but body, she thinks, nothing but one physical process coiling around another, hunkered down inside its own rhythms as it moves in and out of sleep, in and out of pain, in and out of a medicated haze, in and out of wondering, did this really happen to me?

Later, it will occur to her one afternoon as she sits on the couch at home, how grave it was, how sick she'd felt, how close she'd come, and just how terrible it had been, and she will write in her notebook, *This might just be the worst thing I have ever been through ...* It will be a moment of emergence, an awareness of her near-calamity as she inches closer to the other side of shock, though she holds the event in abeyance, at that moment still only willing to commit to the phrase “might be.”

Through the window, on the sides of the buildings and over the roofs, she follows a memory of colors—oranges, greens, purples, reds, bright white in wide, fast, slippery brushstrokes—drifting for a moment before receding into the skyline. The painting of piled up flesh, a woman's body turned inside-out, moves slowly across the sky and around the corner of a building.

The corpse is floating over the now-unfamiliar landscape. Five days have passed, only five days, and yet the world on the other side of the window, the stone and concrete structures thrusting themselves into the sky beyond the hospital grounds, the trees, the telephone poles, the billboards past the interstate, are unknown to her now. Downtown is to the left (*or is it to the right?*) and home is to the right (*or is it to the left?*). She isn't sure, can no longer say.

She felt, she'd whispered to him the night before that she was traveling in a distant land. Yes, this is how she feels exactly, as she walks slowly, still unstable, step by slow, precarious step, down the hall each morning past the nurses' station, past women older than her smiling, encouraging her, saying "Look at you; look how good you're doing!" as small, infirm shuffles became major accomplishments, when just last week she had no reason to notice her steps at all.

It's as if she were traveling in some far off place where the faces you think you recognize are ones you don't know, the clothes you wear are familiar but ill fitting, and you never walk far because you realize how quickly, how easily, you could simply lose your way.

A bird flies past the window, its black wings nearly grazing the surface of the glass before gliding through the woman's shoulder. The body disappears around a corner. She closes her eyes again.

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In the gallery, standing to the side of *The Hull* so as not to block their view, she faced the group who'd come for the talk. She spoke of the sensation she'd had when she'd spent time in front of the work, which was the uneasiness of realizing that this too would someday be her, but rather than turning away, she asked them, might the painting offer the possibility to grab mortality by the collar and stare it in the face? This is what Bloom was offering, she suggested—to his viewers, to himself—a meditation on death that didn't stay on the surface, but peeled back the layers of everyday living, of people going about their business, their plans, their hopes, and their wants, straight down to the biological honesty teeming beneath.

The woman in the black jacket nodded, understanding, and when she asked them about the painting's beauty, there wasn't anyone in the group who disagreed. Yes, it was a split-in-two body before them; yes, it was a woman cut from stem to stern become a painted mass of dead, collapsing flesh; and yes, the

corpse was a map of last wounds, but it was beautiful, striking, even in its grotesqueness, for, of course, a few of them did see the body that way. But grotesque or not, the colors of it, the iridescence of it, the rhythms of its brushstrokes, revealed a figure—a life—still vibrating in its echoes.

Unexpectedly, the more she studied the painting, the more she noticed that the corpse was more alive to her than the autopsist's hands. The gloved hands were firm and unwavering on the left side of the painting; and though the right hand held a knife that became one of the strongest vertical lines in the work, its intent was almost laughable to her one night after she had stared at it for almost an hour, almost laughable in the midst of the woman's quivering flesh, since the hand, too, was nothing more than part of someone who would eventually succumb to the same fate. It was the corpse, she realized, not the hands, even as the left fingers clung to the ribs the autopsist had excised out of the body, that commanded all the attention. The hands functioned as counterweights, arrows really, that had the effect of pushing the viewer's gaze back into the body's wound.

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A mechanical voice suddenly disrupts the morning's silence. She is startled by the code red being announced over and over on the intercom and by the sound of footsteps rushing past her door. Somewhere on the ward, in a room just like hers, she knows there is a heart patient—young, old, man, or woman, alone or with family, who knows?—who may be dying. Or is already there. She imagines a stopped heart. Frozen lungs. She turns back to the window, and pulls the blankets over her ears.

The body of the woman flickers in the sky, and the woman on the bed presses her fingers into her scabbed-over breastbone.

She'd tried to find the words to share the intensity of his painting, though ultimately the best she could do was to invite them to keep looking. And damaged now, embedded in the aftermath of her own new slice, she keeps thinking of that night, of the desire she had for them to see it, and the days before when she challenged herself to stand in front of the work for at least half an hour. Give it at least that much time, she'd decided, to open herself in response, to allow her eye, her mind, to wander through and touch the woman on the table. And as she'd traced the edges of the body with her eyes, she'd become aware of herself continually falling back into the center, past the flayed skin into the moving, undulating mass of entrails, stomach, muscle, blood, and always away from the autopsist's hands.

The autopsist's hands—

Gloved. Steady. Precise.

They were death poised and ready.

But there was an irony about them. Since they too wouldn't always be steady. Or precise.

She runs her fingers along her wound. In the mirror, when she saw the angry, swollen line of congealed blood and surgical glue for the first time, she thought, this is what it would look like if I were attacked. Stabbed or mauled as she walked alone down a street at night. Stabbed by a stranger and left for dead, but lucky enough to have been found. Not that she was cut from stem to stern like the woman on Bloom's table, but there it was: an eyesore, a gash, a new dwelling place for her body.

Yes, a new dwelling place for her body, when just last week at this exact moment she must have been either waking up or making coffee or simply staring

through the window over the kitchen sink at the trees and the cars on the road below.

Just a week before, though it felt like much longer, there she'd been, simply waking to the day ahead with no idea that now—how many days had it been?—she would be here on the other side of such an unexpected event.

In her dreams she'd felt herself slipping off the edge of a cliff and falling into her bleeding wound. Each night, as she walked along, the path would grow increasingly narrow and twisted. The light was dim. To her right was the same rock face—jagged, damp—and inches to the left there was nothing but a sharp drop. As she walked, the dirt turned into mud, and every time, she slipped on tree roots that reminded her of fingers, and before she could catch herself, she was falling once again.

Two days after surgery, she'd seen her own heart. She was still processing everything that had happened and the image didn't seem like it could possibly be hers. The surgeon had taken photos with his phone during the operation, and there it was before her—its yellow surface with purple-gray, its glossy wet sheen, its surrounding muscles sinewy and pushed back taut that should have been tight over the ribs—and she saw and realized the colors were familiar. The heart could belong to anyone, but it was hers. And its colors were the same as the painting. That was the first night she dreamed about *The Hull*.

The woman in *The Hull* came to her like the others. In addition to nightmares of falling, the visions she'd had during the days and nights after surgery were deep, sensual images of bodies—faces, hands, mouths, feet, knees, fingers, ears—naked bodies intertwining, embracing, twisting around one another, kissing, copulating, coming together, writhing alone, engulfing each other in their motions, moving rhythmically and appearing before her as if on a screen. In the dreams she had the ability to touch the bodies and drag them with her fingers as she exchanged one scene for another and became part of their underlying, shared rhythm.

They were dark, shadowy, cobalt blue, and violet traced along the edges with grays, whites, and salmon pinks. They were the musculature pulsing of

Michelangelo's sculpture *Centaurs*. They were rawness, flesh, an agitated, overflowing mass.

Sometimes the bodies twisted to a distant beat, which grew louder and more distinct until she realized it was a pulse. It was her own heartbeat pounding its presence into the world of sleep, its four-chambered muscularity unraveling itself into the scene. One night, she caught a glimpse of its beating—dark, crimson, an opening and closing mouth, a gaping wound—and before she could catch herself, she was slipping off the precipice and falling into her own heart. When she landed, she realized she was lying inside the corpse.

It made sense, complete sense, she thought on waking from the dream, for Bloom's painted body—so visceral and alive—to appear with the others there. The corpse was one of them. And they were in sync with her. Her body and theirs joined in continuous, shared motion.

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As Bloom painted, he would eventually begin tearing his corpses apart. In 1944, there was his painting of a severed leg. Along with his trips to the Kenmore Morgue, he studied old medical treatises and volumes on war injuries written for medical students. During the late 1940s and early 1950s he began focusing on autopsies and dissections. In *The Hull*, the body was finally opened, its entrails spilling out, the physical interior exposed. In *The Cauldron*, painted that same year, Bloom once again offered the body from a bird's eye perspective, but unlike the early corpse paintings, the figure in *The Cauldron* was severed in two and the viewer invited to look directly into a cavern from which organs had already been removed and at the pan of blood positioned above the corpse's head. By 1953, in *The Anatomist*, the scientist's hands, no longer holding a knife, are inside the open body as they prepare to take it apart. Importantly, it isn't clear if the anatomist is wearing any gloves.



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As the light in the room grows brighter, she hears her husband stirring on the couch; she knows the nurse will be here soon, followed by the man who brings in breakfast, and that another day at the hospital will begin. There will be the walks, the breathing exercises, everyone's worry, and the heavy haze of it all. She watches the corpse moving closer to the window and considers the painting's title.

First as a noun: *hull, as the frame or body of a ship or boat exclusive of masts, yards, sails, and rigging*. She imagines the hull of a ship—gray, arced, slowly parting through dark water and fog to become a signal or beacon for someone lost along the shore—and she looks for an echo of that shape in the figure as it drifts now between the trees.

She thinks next of *hull, meaning shell or as the outer covering of a fruit or seed*, with its implication that the falling-apart corpse on the table is but an external layer and the idea that something still burns beyond the boundaries of the flesh itself.

She touches the cut along her chest, and finally considers hull as a verb.

To hull, peel back, open, cut away, she whispers. And here is where she stops, the tips of her fingers pressing hard into her sternum. It was necessary, she realizes as she feels the pain of her wound, for him to open the bodies the way he had, because what choice did he have as his urgency to see inside, his need to peel his subject open, to look as far as he could, and to open himself to the demands of his subject grew?

And she too had hulled. She considers this, remembers her eyes hulling, remembers her desire to see even further, to reach deeper into the exposed flesh, to find more, know more, see more, even though it was impossible, as she follows the body in the sky with her eyes. The body that is flickering now—growing darker, lighter, darker, lighter, lighter, now even lighter—and moving faster, bumping against the buildings, winding through the streets, picking up

speed, rising over the rooftops, over the trees, up to the clouds, through the clouds, until there is nothing left, nothing there, nothing there at all.