Where the Tiny Things Are: Feathered Essays
Nicole Walker

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Micromanagement

It was a chewing thing. Chewing up the scenery. Chewing up the fat. Chewing up all the gossip I’d been telling that girl. And, worse, it then turned into a swallowing thing. Peristalsis of the heart. A condition best left to lovers, not women, sitting at their kitchen table, blaming their second cup of coffee for making the heart noticeable. My computer blinked. Maybe this whole house’s electrical system has gone bad. Maybe it’s not my heart. But then the computer stayed on and my heart blinked aloud again. It should be a silent thing. Quiet. Not dramatic. Not a masticating, starving ham.

I blamed myself. The ham that had been really not ham. I bought the quarter-hog in an attempt to be good. Buy local. No antibiotics. Raised humanely. No nitrates. But let me tell you, a ham with no nitrates, or at least no cure, is no ham at all. It’s a fatty leg of pork and now my heart is making a lot of noise about itself.

It snowed that morning. I blame the snow. No one wants it to snow in April any more than they want overcooked pork on Easter. The snowflakes took the apple blossoms down with it and global warming makes it hard to eat locally anyhow. Winter delayed and then fell like a hammer.

I tried to explain to the triage nurse that it felt like my heart was swallowing itself. I could feel the aorta open up and gulp the blood. It felt like a hiccups. She didn’t blame me, even when I told her about the cup of
coffee, even when I told her about the pain in my ribs I had felt at 2:52 in the morning (pain level: 4) and didn’t drive through the snow to the ER right then. I almost told her about the ham but she interrupted me. “It sure is busy today. Usually, when it snows, no one comes in.”

“They should stay home,” I agreed. I agreed again. I didn’t want to be there either.

I was reading Pam Houston’s new book about listening more closely when people talk when the nurse with the probes came in, peeled off the back of the adhesive, and hooked me up to the monitors. As if I wasn’t electric enough.

“I never have time to read,” she said. “My daughter still sleeps with me. She’s four.”

“I don’t know how any of us get any sleep at night. I still sleep by my son.” Max was six months old. My heart was too young to go on the blink, wasn’t it?

“Ever since my husband moved out, she’s just wanted to be close.”

I pictured her four-year-old’s body taking the place of a man’s. How much more room she must have. How much colder the bed must be. I like it cold.

“How does the baby sleep?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s doing fine. Hasn’t noticed much that my husband has been gone at all.”
The metallic detectors did what they needed to, EKG detected me. I was in a spy novel. Then, with new stickers, she hooked me to the regular room monitors and I was no longer in a novel at all.

I blamed myself. It’s always the wine. It was red. I pictured the wine scouring my arteries. Cleaning them out like Drano down a sink clogged with bacon fat. But maybe not. Maybe wine gums more than cleans. But let me tell you, you’d have a glass of wine too after teaching a student who kept reminding you he also has a PhD and he thought that story we read for class was as rehashed and rehearsed and as unbelievable as a pile of eggs. “Writing is like cholesterol. It hinges things. Its purpose is to heal bad arteries but too much cholesterol shuts down the system,” I said to the class, which cut through the tension but didn’t heal anything.

Dawn, a different nurse, came in to draw blood. Her arms were masterpieces. “You work out?” I wasn’t hitting on her but I did like her biceps. “I can tell by your arms.”

“CrossFit,” she said.

I should have known. My good friend does CrossFit and even though I laughed when Dawn said CrossFit, because, well, there’s a certain over-the-toppedness there what with the over-unders and the medicine balls, but still, I asked where she went, what the schedule was.
“There’s a class at 10, 11, 12, 2, 4, 5 and I think 6.” CrossFitters are good proselytizers.

“Maybe it’s good for your heart,” I said.
She said, “It’s good for everything.”

When the doctor came in and said, “I don’t think you’re having a heart attack,” I reached over for my phone even though the sign said, “no cell phone use behind this door.” A text is not a cell and I had to tell someone I was getting out of there.

I neglected to mention the feeling of little tiny hands grasping the bottom of my rib cage. But he didn’t ask and the monitors didn’t tell and the nurse was giving me advice on how to catch the medicine ball for the first time. I had my shirt back on by the time he said, “Has work been particularly difficult lately?” There is, I know, no cure for life.

Sometimes, when I cough, the gurgling sensation stops. Sometimes, when I drink a glass of wine it stops. It never stops with coffee and although I went running on Wednesday, Friday, and Monday, I could not tell if my heart was hurting or if my neck was aching or if this is always how I feel when I run and therefore why I run so slowly, so briefly. Maybe my heart has been bad since the get-go and I am just finally learning that this is how a hungry heart sounds.