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In cross-section the midbrain
looks like Annette Funicello

in her mouseketeer's cap:
pale, angelic—except the eyebrows

plucked thin as parentheses,
blackest black: "Think you know me?"

Magnified 1,000×, the brows
resolve to cell bodies

packed with neuromelanin.
Substantia nigra, the black substance.

Even in Toontown's whitest white
are deeper pigments, inner Ethiopias.

A few cellular millimeters of brainspace,
but in rank, the ellipses of Saturn.

When the black substance pales, a gavel
falls; miter wearers, torch passers,
pall bearers, equally, indifferently,
shake. The man from Willits, California, shakes
and festinates. He says he has a wild crow for a pet.
He says he never backs down.

Today he will have 3 billion bits of gene code
injected into his brain.

He can watch from the mounted screen
as needles pierce his deep gray nuclei.

He has read the protocol,
asked intelligent questions, signed the forms.

A year ago he could write legibly, walk
reliably; his face showed great feeling.

He is hard to read now. The Informed Consent
displays his micrographic cipher. Yet I suspect

Black substance

the gene for *aromatic L-amino acid decarboxylase*
could as well be *an infusium of oak bark*

mixed with green vitriol,
useful in making ink.

I fidget, go over the brain scans, we make small talk.
But between us, something has ignited

like an envelope on coals. Our concealments converge,
we are married by mad longings—

his: to be the man he knew
before he was Parkinson's disease;

mine: to know the black substance,
to steal the throne.

* * * * *

The smell of drill on bone
is like rope burning.

A frame holds his head in place.
The flasks, pipettes, the surgeons' hands,
are steady. Gene copy
glides down stainless steel

into the left hemisphere,
then the right.

The left hand shakes five cycles per second,
the right, seven.

Why? His eyes rove in REM sleep now.
His hands grow still.

What is he dreaming?
What am I?

Here is the Alpha Goddess, Science;
here the ravening palsy, an old man with a crow.

I dream he can dance, dream
he can carry fire again.

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Black substance

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