

If brains could talk

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Rows of shelved brains
Shuddered in blind horror as
One was taken down for dissection.

They would have turned to each other,
To commiserate and console,
But they had no heads to turn,
No tongues to speak.

A recently departed obsessed over his hideous miscalculation;
Faced with filling out an advance directive,
He had ignored the telltale warnings of nausea and dread.
Dead is dead, he hammered his wife and family
Until he was seduced by his own bravado.

A neighbor sought temporary relief in absurdist philosophies,
Another in the slippery ironies of Zen koans.

Most were preoccupied with old memories,
Editing spools of recall into the final cut
That could withstand perpetual showings.

Yet no strategy could cancel out their overriding regret:
They had sneered at eternity.
Now, trapped in a formaldehyde afterlife,
They were desperate to let others know.

Call the doctor,
Someone mused,
It's his job to listen to his patients.

The young neurologist picked up the brain,
Felt its solidity in his hands.
"A person once resided here,"
He said to the circle of residents.
"Be respectful."

We're here,
Please.

Listen to Dr. Burton read this poem, available on the iPad® and Android™ devices.

As the neurologist made the first cut,
He was puzzled by his unexpected turn of mind.
He readily admitted dreading
His first solo brain dissection,
But overhearing pickled brains
Thinking away in their glass jars,
Reaching out to him,
Low murmurs begging him to notice them?

He placed the detached section of frontal lobe on a metal tray,
Handed it to the residents to examine.

“Take a moment and listen to this brain slice.”
“Does it have a story to tell,
A lesson to teach,
A life to be understood?”

“Undoubtedly a Republican,” said one resident,
Fingering an area of slight cortical atrophy.
“The anterior reaches of reason and skepticism have rotted away.”

“This degree of atrophy can be normal for age,”
The neurologist corrected the resident,
As though reassuring the brain that it was still okay.

“What should I be hearing?” a second resident asked.
“It’s just meat.”

The neurologist wanted to say
Wailing,
Screaming,
Moaning,
But instead he said,
“Singing.”

We’re not singing,
We’re asking you to hear us as we are.
And hear our lesson:
We failed to consider the impossible.

“I hear sadness,” a third resident said,
Her eyes moist.

“Very good.”
He nodded at the woman,
Then made a second cut.

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