

Constellation Syndrome

By Sophie L. Schott

when I say *ventilate*
do you think fresh air,
full lungs, the feeling of
ocean spray on youthful faces,
caution flung to the wind, the
way love fills cavernous spaces?
maybe you imagine exquisite sighs,
simple breaths, and humanness—
anything other than the heaving
machines in your little brother.

when I say *cardiopulmonary resuscitation*
do you think sacred resurrection,
a divine allegory, a return to normalcy?
maybe you imagine heroics, harmlessness,
the throb of hope-infused chest compressions—
anything other than the blue bruises splintered

over the broken ribs of your little brother.

when I say *extracorporeal membrane oxygenation*
do you think soldiers, sergeants, corporals, armies
of antibodies and lymphocytes embattled in
the fight to pump, circulate, and oxygenate
the body of your little brother? maybe,
as you look to your weeping mother,
you imagine that “the good guys”
always win the war.

when I say *central line*
do you think clinical expediency,
clarity, help offered immediately?
maybe you imagine vibrancy,
volume, his voracious appetite for life—

anything other than the pale apparition pressed
between those yellow printed hospital sheets,
your infant son.

when I say *neurology consult*
do you think curiosity, Saturday afternoon spent
at the science museum with your two young sons?
maybe you imagine the static buzz of
electrical exhibits, the bright eyes
of your boys crouched before
neon models of the brain—
anything other than this visceral pain

when I say *palliative care team*
do you think pillow pallets on the living room floor,
secrets giggled at sleepovers, and playful requests for
more?
maybe you imagine one more melting cinnamon roll,
two
more yawning bedtime stories, five more minutes—
anything other than time to close this chapter.

when I say *progressing towards brain death*
do you think progress, preschool, pediatric
check-ups? maybe you imagine elementary
school crushes, middle school mood-swings,
high school sporting teams. you ask for more.
one more scan,
two more monitors,
five more minutes—
anything but this.

when the neurologist arrives,
he sits beside the hospital bed
where your infant son puffs and flits.
he holds your hand, asks:
“So, what do you know?”
as you answer, he leans close,
bears witness, in silence attends
to your affliction. he tells you that
our work is not done, assures you:
“We will carry the burden of medicine,
if you will carry the burden of love.”

when we declared brain death,
you sat beside him and listened
to the rumble of the disconnected
ventilator, the dull whirl when we discontinued
extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, the thwap
as the respiratory therapist detached
your son's central line

when we declared brain death,
you sat beside him, whispered
"constellation syndrome."
left us to wonder what element of these
two words burrowed deep in you, the phrase
you first whispered when the neurologist asked
"So, what do you know?"

you know astronomy in reverse, narrowed
focus, life seen through the telescope of sickness.
you witnessed the heart of your son beating, broken,
immodest and open beneath the florescent beams of
operation.

you wondered at the constellation of complications
that burned in the preamble of his death, the bright
stars
that blinked on the surface of those medical machines
that tethered your son to the temporal like bands
that bind astronauts to the surface of spaceships
suspended above the earth.

when I write *constellation syndrome*,
do you think exploration, the examination of life
beyond the confines of biochemistry? maybe you
imagine humanity, the restoration of belonging,
the beat beneath all human poetry. you ask
what gives life meaning? as you watch
your infant son progress into brain death

when you say *constellation syndrome*,
I begin to comprehend the method and meaning of
medicine: to ask before assumption, to explore more
before I imagine that I understand.

when you say *constellation syndrome*,
I listen before I hurtle into orbits of thought,
ask for the narrative that you imagine
rather than feign omniscience.

when you whisper *constellation syndrome*,
I hear his final exhale. I think fresh air, full lungs,
the feeling of ocean spray on youthful faces,
how love fills cavernous spaces.

About the Author



Sophie L. Schott is a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, where she studies the intersection of medicine, history, and the humanities in the Liberal Arts Honors Program. The thrust of her research to date focuses on the application of historical knowledge to prevent future ethical violations in medicine and scientific research. Schott writes poetry to probe at the multidimensional meaning of her academic pursuits and explore how the humanities might ameliorate some of the indelicacies of illness and human suffering. After completing her undergraduate degrees in History and Humanities, Schott aspires to pursue a career as a physician and bioethicist.