

The A-Z of Vital Signs

Ali Giles

Airway

In the beginning there was forty years of nothing, or nearly nothing. Faltering stops and vague starts, mini peaks and troughs, but nothing seismic. The pressure in his chest was all those forty years of plainly existing perhaps.

Then Amaunet.

He didn't understand what it was at first; thought it just another symptom of his faulty heart until he heard her laughing at the nurses' station. High and free as a bird, and he sailing up and away with it.

You are beautiful he said.

He was curious as to how she'd respond, but of course he didn't say that at all.

"Take air in through the nose," Amaunet said, "and exhale through the mouth."

Breathing...

Sometimes Amaunet came quietly in to reassure him. Her calm economy in adjusting pillows and this tube or that, her small neat hands (ringless), her clean soap smell. These little things were intimacies only lovers should share. They were small kindnesses, but they were meant just for him.

He whispered to her, "You have fixed my heart."

She made a soft tsking sound and smiled. But she let him take her hand and looked back at him, her eyes unknowable in the subdued lighting from the corridor.

Circulation

For forty-five minutes every day he watched his wife as he would a recently unearthed old family video.

Where did it go? Ten years of feelings and switching them off one by one as easily as a light switch when he left a room.

Because of a smile, a clean soap smell.

In Greek mythology, Amaunet's name meant Goddess of Air.

"I'm scared," his wife said, "scared of what might happen when you're home."

Amaunet also meant 'that which is hidden'.

Defibrillation

He waited outside the hospital for two and a half hours, but Amaunet refused to go with him for coffee so he bought two to go.

"You know this is wrong."

"Yet here we are."

"And where is 'here'?"

"...I don't know."

He lay back on the grass when she'd gone and laid his hand on his chest. Thought about the changes in his body, how everything inside had shifted and made way for the new. The slow bump of his heart, re-set, like something pushing from inside against his hand.