

## MICHAEL MARTONE\*

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### WALLS OF WORDS

While grading papers, Hank Lazer hides out from distraction, he thinks, in the library's government documents and legal reference room. The strategy doesn't quite work, and he finds himself willingly distracted by the volumes of the Alabama Legal Code shelved in the cases around him. Killing time, so to speak, he makes a killing, again so to speak, with what he discovers in the tomes. This is a happy accident, and one he marks as the genesis of the "Law-Poems." In my own case in my own past, I had the same desire to find a similar deserted retreat to attend to my own set of onerous papers. The same impulse, however, happened to lead me to a different library. The library surrounding me was a medical one, the shelves filled with human anatomies, epidemical case studies, pharmacological indices, manuals for surgery, and diagnostic flow charts. Every text, it seemed, was layered with those transparent pages that allowed you to strip away the skin, the blood vessels, the muscle, the organs, down to the final cross section of bone.

It turns out that I am one of those guys who faint in the doctor's office. I get queasy in the presence of all things medicinal, and I imagine that was part of my motivation for using that particular library. I knew browsing in those books about the sick would make me sick, and, hence, I thought I could avoid my goofing off. All the better then to stay on task. Avoidance therapy derived from abhorrence to words such as "therapy." Contusion. Laceration. Hemorrhage. Arterial. Sub dermal. Melanoma. Defibrillate. Still. Still, I was drawn to those words, the ones I knew hid there. The long prefixed and suffixed Latinates, the inflected and Anglo-fied Greek. In the end, I couldn't turn away even as my stomach turned. I collaged passage after strange passage, juxtaposing the dissection of a human body, say, with the strip tease performed by lovers as they fell into bed. I got a kick from the kick back of the syndrome. These abstract things, these words, had real power.

I couldn't help myself, my blood pressure collapsing as I copied out the words. Typing a few moments ago the words above—contusion, laceration, hemorrhage—I could sense that flutter in my pulse, my god, PULSE. The word pulse itself scattering my pulse. I like to think of Hank steeping there in the law library, steeping in the same way, steeping in the presence of this wall of words, this language. Language

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\* Professor of English, University of Alabama.

that somehow chimes, rhymes with the body's own wiring, but also, in its abundance, overwhelms the perception. That is to say that the language's power (a power that in my case is able to actually collapse me, move me so involuntarily) has already been inscribed, embedded, encoded in my own make-up. You can't make this up. It is already in there.

It turns out there is a name (of course) for what ails me. The Vasal Vagal Syndrome. A Doctor Vogel noted the unexplained excitation of the vagus nerve during what appears to be rather benign conditions, mild stimulations. The vagus nerve. Dig this bit of prose:

The longest of the cranial nerves, passing through the neck and thorax into the abdomen and supplying sensation to part of the ear, the tongue, the larynx, and the pharynx, motor impulses to the vocal cords, and motor and secretory impulses to the abdominal and thoracic viscera. Also called pneumogastric nerve. The wandering nerve from Latin.

Typing that nearly put me under the table. But note, this nerve (the nerve my doctor called, when I asked her about it, a very interesting piece of linguine) is, well, intimately wired not only to the gut but also to the seats of, well, language itself—the tongue, the ear, the vocal chords. What is set up for me is this feedback loop, this reverb. Hearing the words, saying the words concerned with this very apparatus of hearing and saying and feeling literally connects to the organic apparatus of hearing and saying and feeling.

Even when we read silently our vocal cords form the architecture of sounding the words. A sentence such as "I scraped the fat, black scabs" (taken from a Dr. Richard Selzer essay, "Four Views of the Discus Thrower") invokes in its assonance the repetition of hard Aaahs, the gag provoked by looking down the throat. The gag in the sentence produces a gag reflex in us. It reinforces the meaning of the words with the coding meant to stimulate the vagus. Read it and it will make you sick. A neat trick. But not so simply just a trick because it speaks to the way the human body is tricked out.

These fiduciary languages, these secret codes of medicine and law, stumbled upon in deserted reading rooms reek of a power only grasped, for the uninitiated, in the periphery, the underlying neural nets. There is something in there, something other than what it seems to say. For me it is this maintenance of the illusion of precision, this apparent stripping away of emotion from language. It is the use of these ostensibly "dead" languages to fix meaning for all time, a fool's errand. But this language is dead and it's not dead. Its genetic coding still viable and teeming inside the husks the boilerplate hides. Hides indeed.