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## The Museum Heart

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Medicalarium  
Alberto Rios

1.

Medicine has the x-ray; literature has the poem.

2.

Our innate desire to climb is exposed easily enough in these last, science centuries. After a first serious illness, an x-ray of the chest reveals whether or not we have pneumonia—but more importantly, shows us the rungs of a secret ladder.

3.

“Pneumonia” has in it the troubling cognates *new*, *moan*, and, more colloquially, *inya*, or “in you.” The word may have its studied etymology, as most words do, but sometimes a word stops acting like a word, sheds the middleman routine, drops its lawyerly stance, and escorts us straightaway to the raw moment. There is no dictionary for the real words of this world.

4.

A moan, a plaint, a sigh, a whimper, a lament; crying, wailing, groaning, whining; screaming at the top of your lungs, crying till you’re all cried out, at wit’s end, beyond the pale. We have so many ways to say *Something’s not right*. The pains, the diseases, the coughing, the fast breathing and accelerated heartbeats: We don’t want to know this, but it’s all the same thing. We simply give it many names.

5.

*Coma* and *comma*. They are easy to mix up. Curiously, using only one “m” is for the greater slowing, two for the lesser. In this case, more is not more. It is like this with so many things. The equation, the equivalent, the equal, the common sense: so often they fail us.

6.

A liver does what a liver does, a heart beats, the lungs inflate and deflate. But there are secret places on the human body, with secret words for them. Raphe line. Lunula. Dimples of Venus. Philtrum. Diastema. Linea nigra. What is the clandestine work of the furtive place? So many of them. The spaces between eyelashes and toes, the vein maps on our thighs and fists, the wires at our wrists and the cords at the backs of our ankles. What is the greater effort of the disguised, the pursuits of the private and the personal of the body? What are the verbs of these things, not simply their nouns? Perhaps they gather like hair when we are young and full of them, then thin as we grow older, until suddenly we find ourselves sitting for a medical exam, and all our secrets one after another are given over just like that, written down, checked off a list.

7.

On a human head, dreams coming up from inside us crest where our hair thins, dreams rising in their submarine way to spy for a moment on the world outside. It is no bald spot, rather the wake of dreams gone back down, the evidence of their having been. Night after night, it happens again: All that hair, but among the strands, the tired reeds and swamp of this shore, the submarine rises, then, out of it, a hand, then a forearm, leveraging itself just onto the skin's shore. It is a brilliant attempt, but leaves some damage, dream as a third arm, we never quite able to lift ourselves out of ourselves.

8.

A book is as big as a page times two or three hundred. Which way you hold it, which way you see it, this is its magic measure. We describe a book as being 8½ by 11, or standard size, or paperback size, or folio. We don't say that it's three inches big, or four inches thick. The brave face that it puts to the world, this is the measure taken. And yet, once opened, the book has stories to tell, whole lifetimes hidden in there. In surgery, the body, itself once opened, is also the definition of plot. What, we wonder, will happen next?

9.

Medicine has the patient; literature has the reader.

10.

Both the reader and patient are vested in, and changed by, the outcome of the plot. In a book, the protagonist is usually the hero. If it is a detective novel, a crime happens. The detective looks for clues, puts them together, and solves the case. In a medical paradigm, an illness or an accident happens. The doctor protagonist, as in the novel, is the detective who puts all the clues together and cures the patient. Sherlock Holmes is who we remember, or Jonas Salk. The better they are, the better our chances as readers and patients. Let us be the hero-makers. Let the doctors and the detectives be those characters. Let us be incidental to the story, and ourselves live long, happy, non-fiction lives. Let us be cardboard characters who do not need further development. Let us escape. Let the doctors and the detectives and the plots and plans be memorable fiction, so that when we close the book, we can sigh and move on with our lives.

## The Museum Heart

Alberto Rios

*We, each of us, keep what we remember in our hearts.*

*We, all of us, keep what we remember in museums.*

*In this way, museums beat inside us.*

What we have seen and been fed,  
What we have smelled and then wanted,  
What hair we have touched  
And what hands have touched our own;  
What fires have burned red,  
What rifles-fire echoes still,  
What blue mountains rise  
On the horizon's orange and gray spine;  
What day-moon mornings, what June-beetled evenings,  
Simple heat moving, finally, into simple coolness,  
A single long drink of good water,  
My mother's yes, your father's chin.

What we remember,  
What we have remembered to keep,  
Where we put what we keep:  
Sometimes in buildings we find  
Pieces of the heart.  
Sometimes in a heart we find  
The shelter of a building.