

Innumerable

Joseph Gascho, MD

Eight days
after they had cut into my chest,
put me on a bypass pump,
excised a valve
consumed by Staph,
stitched a new one in
I read what they had
said about the scan of my head
two weeks before.
“Innumerable”
I read,
“Septic emboli”
I read,
“to both cerebral hemispheres.”

I could read.
I could understand
“cerebral hemispheres.”
I could comprehend
“emboli innumerable.”

I could.

Incredible.

Editor's Note

Poetry in a Head CT

Rafael Campo, MD, MA

Sometimes poetry that responds to illness doesn't have to be all that dire. By engaging in imaginative wordplay, the poet of “Innumerable”¹ describes a potentially frightful medical story lightheartedly. (Not that he entirely disregards the gravity of his heart condition and its complications—after all, “they had cut into my chest,” he states sharply in the second line.) “I read what they had/said about the scan of my head,” he goes on, the cadenced feel of the poem's syntax and rhymes evoking the thrown emboli the imaging has revealed (arising from his just-replaced infected heart valve). The poet's bemusement at imagining his own scan, and his somehow intact ability to understand its implications despite what it shows, is revelatory and almost joyful, and becomes an expression of hope and healing. The poem's time inversions and the ‘anagram-adjacent’ relationship in the poem's stuttering reference to “innumerable,” “emboli,” and “incredible” are a textual illustration of the likely jumbled yet beguiling nature of the TIA-like symptoms the emboli may have caused—and of the wonder at what words arranged poetically on the page, like emboli on a CT scan, or perhaps like stars in the night sky, can make us feel.

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