Yesterday, I held someone’s head in my hands. The container said her name was Alice, but to me, she looked like a man; her hair was buzzed and her mouth hung half open. The loose endothelium of her carotid artery dangled from her severed neck, sliced exactly down the middle. The skin and fat encasing her skull twisted under my palms, distorting her face as I poked smoothly across her brainstem to the cerebellum’s delicate shoots of arbor vitae with one gloved fingertip. Moving on, I cradled her spinal column, an ancient xylophone chunked with soft vertebrae that spelled out osteomalacia for anyone willing to notice. Her nerves poured out, rolling themselves every which way from a loose, communal bundle like limp spaghetti between my fingers. I sketched structures and calculated measurements in silence, out of respect for the macabre hunks of flesh on the table that, in union, become a person. Submerging pieces of Alice back in the cloudy solution from whence she came made my flesh crawl, and I stripped off my gloves in favor of new ones that hadn’t stroked death.

*     *     *

On graph paper, everything falls perfectly into place. Continuous functions stream thinly across well-defined domains, spanning infinite vector spaces in the universal language of purists: mathematics. I like working under absolute constraints; ambiguity has no place on a Cartesian plane and no place with me. The liberal arts wrinkle my rationale with their gray areas and half-truths, but mathematics is unequivocal. You can’t argue with multiplication. It’s there, and it’s right, whether you choose to accept it or not. QED.

I take comfort in knowing that you and I are quantifiable, built from overlapping integer ratios. I am ion concentrations and constants of proportionality, the emergent property of my biology. You are regulated
metabolic pathways and graphs of activation energy, and your mother’s concern is the ice cold product of evolution. QED.

Sometimes, though, I am convinced there is something else.

Other times, I am convinced that there isn’t.

*     *     *

Today I walk briskly to Room 521 after the overhead flashes red numbers into our unit, stretching the gray gloves over my fingers as I prepare the supplies for intubation. I see the sheath of white tile that frames the adjacent room, and through the window I observe a tornado of commotion from behind the soundproof glass. In the eye of the storm, a woman lies prone on the stark, cold table, entirely exposed and swimming in green waves of surgical cloth. The middle of her is a pathetic balloon, as if someone had blown one breath into her and decided it wasn’t worth the trouble. I watch as they slash their way inside much too roughly, rummaging around as if searching for a safety pin in a junk drawer. They push and tear the mush of red flesh; the clock has no sympathy. Finally, a purple flower blooms from the seething mass, its trembling stalk sick in unfinished vulnerability. Its petals stretch wide, flailing wildly as it is plucked from its safe and natural haven and prematurely transplanted into the incubator next to me. Everyone crowds around, wrapping, pricking, tubing, yelling and calculating, and I take a moment to touch the center of all the attention, a miniature person that can fit between my fingers. One pound, two ounces, twenty-three weeks gestation. She is an unnatural blue-violet, and as I struggle to copy the numbers for which I am responsible, I realize I am charting her decline.

Their hands tremble as they pump harder, cramming plastic tubes into every possible opening—baptizing her veins in cloudy solution, suctioning through her bronchi, constricting her vessels with epinephrine, and administering positive airway pressure: my textbook come to life. *Apgar zero. Twenty over sixteen,* I scribble. *Eighteen percent. 200 bpm. Sixty. Asystole.* Thirty excruciating, irreversible seconds of nothing, and then the graph trends upward, barely. The monitors pulse and scream again around the silent thing, and its dime-sized heart manages to resume its flutter, pushing a little more blood through its veins. I stand still, out of respect for what might have become a person.
It doesn’t move.

Time of death, seven forty-two.

Scanning the room, my eyes fall upon its father, forlorn and worried in the corner, fresh from his wife’s side. He is dressed in a gaudy, yellow body-substance isolation gown that drowns his thin frame, calling my eyes to the death grip between his shaking hands. The mother is wheeled in on her hospital bed, half-sedated, a sprawling grin of newly sewn sutures puckering across her stomach.

“It’s a miracle,” she mouths through the drugs, and her eyes roll back in her head like one deranged. Half-conscious, she doesn’t cry, and I watch color flood her cheeks as it drains from my own. The father in the corner flits to her side and breaks down into great, racking sobs that wring the feeling from my soul. The tingling numbness lingers in my joints as he hides his face in his hospital gown, a passionate demonstration of relief I know will be short-lived.

Out of habit, I step back to allow everyone room to fawn over the child, anticipating the familiar chorus of “She’s beautiful,” but it never comes.

It won’t come.

*Bronchopulmonary dysplasia with hypoxic brain damage.* I force my fingers to etch the damning words onto my record, shaping each ominous letter in clearly legible longhand. *Severe risk including but not limited to necrotizing enterocolitis, intraventricular hemorrhage, hyperbilirubinemia, patent ductus arteriosus and periventricular leukomalacia, compounded by probable sequelae...*

I keep my mind busy collecting information for the paperwork, not allowing it to string together my thoughts and use them as thread to embroider the shroud.

“How do you have a name in mind?” I am obligated to ask the mother.

“Alice,” she chokes, smiling, and I strip off my gloves in favor of new ones.

* * *

Slamming my car door, I turn in the soft evening light to see my little sister charging toward me like a miniature, pigtailed rhinoceros. “Jessie!” she screams and leaps into my arms, euphoric at my presence. I’m
only home to grab a spare USB cable, but against my better judgment I feel myself smile and yield to her enthusiasm, letting her lead me through long-winded tales of kindergarten exploits punctuated by scribbled art demonstrations and off-key musical renditions. My innate empiricism sounds its alarms, reminding me of the lengthy to-do list that waits on my counter, but I sense a familiar resistance in my veins, intangible and fierce. The cold push of facts defers to something stronger, a capacity for resonance that can’t be measured by a mathematical formula—nothing I can lay out on a dissecting table, but more real than anything that I can. Somehow, against all reason, it’s more important just to listen.