

## Weyman Chan / AT WORK

1.

Man on a crash cart, moaning

as the elevator shuts.

Paramedics restrain him. Man sneezes so hard  
his nose breaks.

No, just a coil of white fleshy  
round worm. It curls  
once about his philtrum and lip,  
and falls asleep.

2.

Patient, shaved-head electrodes,  
his powder-blue gown open at the spine,  
shows off his intelligence, says,

“Don’t worry, Ma. I’ll make it. The yoga helps.”

I see a Zen koan in the sagged skin above his ass. A cross  
or leash around his neck, pulls him . . .

“Shooters!”

He waves at me, his face suddenly animated. He’s pointing  
to the beaker in my hand.

“No,” I tell him. “Urine.”

3.

Keats's "few, sad, last grey hairs"  
on an old man's head. They say that one hair is left on the shaven crown  
of a dying Moslem, so that Mohammed can draw him up to heaven.  
They say that mandrake root pulled from earth, cries out.  
At midnight, my daughter's fever spikes.  
I close my eyes and dream. Semen  
on my fingertips awakens me, confused  
by these prostrations, intimations  
of life's detachment, though you can't trust any higher institution  
that debits mercy, credits despair.

4.

Next day at work, I close myself into darkness. Press the button that flows  
75 thousand volts into a tungsten filament, stripping electrons from its  
surface. At thirty thousand magnifications, I look for Herpes virus.  
Cytomegalovirus. Rule out Candida.

Icosahedral, spherical or filamentous, they re-write our cells in a field of  
green light. Illness crystallized. Short wavelengths of electron light  
allow me to see what visual light can't. I used to think that the day-to-  
day perceptions seen through flesh and veins were experiential. But the  
truth is, we're like dragons thrown as shadows on the wall.

The real world is smaller than we are. A Chinese lantern emanates my thoughts and form outward, until I catch myself blurred and magnified, as diffuse as consciousness bending myths around a lit life.

"Home sweet home," she whispers, wheeled into Palliative Care, her chart binder tucked behind her knees. In her voice, cold dead leverage of pneumonia.

5.

Small, happy  
hanging habañeras  
on the sill at home in half-light  
do not need surgery after they're picked.

They are reminding me of what shouldn't  
be eaten after midnight, primal as a cut finger  
but also whispering like thin Buddhas:  
transcend, anastomose this desire to have  
with the desire to have not. This is  
common knowledge  
with any bell pepper at midnight.

6.

Systems beyond our control—  
lady walks in pregnant;  
rolls out emptied and rid of it.  
My reason for watching is,  
to protect a way of healing  
crouched in metaphor—needle pokes, test tubes, touch-and-go  
respirations that efface the smiling bedpan.  
Our angel of measurements.

7.

Small. Indispensable. Shady half-lives.  
Cancers flare and retreat. Candles come and go  
and no one hears the flame snuff out.  
It's the orderly, ordinary hush of hearing  
each expanse in breath and wondering who  
put cells in there to cradle-catch the air.

Why atmosphere pushes down  
to hypnotize the runner with exhaustion. This  
body      this sometimes falcon-like  
fall from recovery and then to believe  
with all the science of your heart  
that all we have is this body: to believe  
that lightning and storms, dart frogs and excoriations  
that bend leaves at night, and our children,  
our progeny of longing, are born from and follow  
the footprint of all we have: this body

8.

Skeletons and systems are like the moon,  
almost featureless, almost rising into plain feature.

Jazz clouds play lightly across its pink-eye,  
forest fire up north, I guess. It's been a dry October,  
one year exactly since my wife's mother died. Her gravid  
white eyes in a bruised face, I've nearly forgotten.

Cellularity of each moment. I touch my wife's hand and  
know I belong to her. Cell greets cell. We forget  
how cold air spreads out our breaths into uncertainty  
and when we speak, this warm intent  
gets crenellated, forked by the tongue  
into words, half-truths that bypass  
the inner life. Just  
the limbs catch fire: be careful of your heart. Even a good heart  
can throw a clot, unleash emboli  
like time's arrow



9.

Productive criteria, says Dr. Graves. His sister-in-law's daughters were carrying fresh persimmons when the bombs fell on Iraq. "Epidemiology relies on productive criteria."

The science of sickness spreading, pandemics and such require exactitude. Violin-fingers.

Superimposed on Dr. Graves' tall body is the accident of being American and the accident of a world getting too small for our genome.

Accidental meetings in the dark-hearted forests of Africa.

It's an old doomsday story, despite the beautiful day, beautiful clouds outside. The sky is *us* out there.

Why am I talking to Dr. Graves?

Maybe I want to re-live my own usefulness.

"Am I moral?" is the first question that pops up.

I was under cover of hedges. Ambushed that pro-Nazi kid just in front of the candy store. Hit him in the face for not believing how many Jews died. Right in front of Mr. Ergang's candy store. Mr. Ergang had been with the Hitler Youth, age thirteen, saluting the Führer himself. Mr. Ergang came out of the store, laughing. Put his hands on both our shoulders and led us into his store for free Hershey Kisses.

10.

Protect everyone if you can. Protect only yourself if you can.  
At work, another elevator ride. Another dying, diabetic smile.

Eschatology is dead. Time circles the sun and the sun  
circles around our body of touch, thrust, memory, grace.

Old dialectics like good and evil  
stay with me. Nowhere to go but here

between the whites of my own eyes —  
arc of life blading through winter into spring.

The expectation and reality of possessing nothing  
cut like a rare dull glow when I look for,

then find at the edge of my sight, Pleiades.  
I know it's Pleiades by how it appears and disappears

through the retina's blind spot: dark heaven  
gives symmetry to our faith.