

## Synapse

I once held a human brain.

I was visiting a friend  
who studied neuroscience  
at Stanford. In his lab, he lifted a brain  
from a bucket of formaldehyde  
and set its wrinkled mass  
in the bowl of my latex palms.

Its clefts and recesses  
called out to be admired,  
opened up and fully known.  
What currents and chemistries  
once traveled these channels? What wisdom  
pulsed through this small space?  
How to calculate a surface integral,  
program in C, stitch a wound,  
or conduct a Mahler symphony?  
How to speak Wolof, mend a shoe,  
or construct a shelter out of snow?  
Had this brain, alive inside a body,  
traveled to China,  
suffered from Crohn's,  
danced to the beat of the djembe,  
or scolded rowdy grandchildren stomping mud  
across a newly scrubbed kitchen floor?  
At the end, did it linger,  
weakened by tumors or starvation,  
or did it know trauma and smoke, a sudden  
light then dark?

I slipped it back,  
among its companions,  
into the acrid solution.  
My friend pressed down the lid.  
I peeled off the thin gloves  
and dropped them, inside  
out, into the trash.

## Mid-Life

You have gray hairs in your beard  
and wrinkles at the corners of your eyes.

Our niece is getting married next week.  
We talk of having another child.

I have been learning to play the piano:  
it seemed impossible at first, though I dreamt

of effortless sonatas. Soon I could play scales  
and knew without looking

when to raise a finger to a sharp or flat.  
The first time I moved both hands

simultaneously in different directions,  
every note I played was wrong.

I must make time to practice every day,  
especially on these days which pass

whether or not we notice.  
*Has it already been fifteen years?*

When you speak, the waves of your voice  
touch the smallest bones in my body,

vibrating them like strings.

## Sing Me an Indian Song

In the early morning darkness of our room,  
sunlight merely edging the closed blinds,  
her unexpected voice, unexpectedly sweet,  
without demand or expectation, only hope,  
asked for something that, in our household,  
in her life, only I could give. I snuggled close  
and sang a *bhajan*, a devotional song, the song  
my family and I sang in the last moments that  
my father's body remained intact on this earth.  
I thought of my father while I sang in Malayalam  
for my youngest daughter, his namesake. Joy  
rushed toward me from every hidden corner.