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Suprasellar

Abstract

Months after they found it, they still couldn't figure out what it was. My mother consulted with a group of doctors at Johns Hopkins who told her that I won the award for longest debate over a brain tumor. I imagined them all gathered like ancient Roman astrologers staking out their claims about space. About stars. But instead of a star, it was my brain up on the screen. Its gray folds, tight around a mass sitting square in the middle of my brain. Perfectly spherical...

Cover Page Footnote

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Suprasellar

Nonfiction by Annalise Mabe

Months after they found it, they still couldn't figure out what it was. My mother consulted with a group of doctors at Johns Hopkins who told her that I won the award for longest debate over a brain tumor. I imagined them all gathered like ancient Roman astrologers staking out their claims about space. About stars. But instead of a star, it was my brain up on the screen. Its gray folds, tight around a mass sitting square in the middle of my brain. Perfectly spherical.

No one could agree because it didn't look like anything they knew.

"I want to take it out," someone said. "Let's see a piece of it."

But in the end they resolved not to touch it. Unless it started to grow.

*

I thought the word suprasellar sounded shiny. It sounded like it could mean *super*, *above*, or *spectacular*, like faraway galaxies or a superhero who could fly through space. A part of me wanted it to mean these things, but it actually just signifies a

location, like coordinates for a map. It doesn't actually mean anything. It's simply used to convey information, specifically about where a tumor may live.

*

It started with headaches. I'm not sure when exactly, but I remember climbing the wooden ladder to my loft bed at my father's house, my hair sopping wet from the shower, soaking into the neck of my t-shirt. I remember my father coming in to say goodnight, turning on my starry night light, patting me on my head that had been aching for hours, pulsing with a new pain. I remember that the pain lived behind my eyes and beneath my cheekbones, stretching tight around my skull, making me need the darkness like I needed water or sleep.

I faced the wall of my bedroom at his lakehouse before he turned off the lights, before the warm orange pulse grew bright and sharp beneath my face, branching out like bean sprouts, or the limbs of a constellation.

*

When I was little, I wondered whether my emotions had legs. I mean that, sometimes they felt so strong, it was as if they were growing into monstrous beings of their own. Sometimes I swore I could feel them. Strong muscly things, knotting in the pit of my stomach. Spreading out their arms like wings, the fringing tips reaching through all of my veins, even to my brain.

*

I wasn't worried about the brain tumor. It didn't scare me because I was eighteen and more concerned about losing my long hair if I had to have brain surgery. One neurosurgeon suggested we go through the nose, which I quickly agreed to, though it never happened.

I wanted to see it, too.

Eighteen is a galaxy of its own: intertwined like the nerve bundles, the brain folds, from which the tumor itself grew. I was with my friends, driving around at night, screaming lyrics with the windows down. Ordering food through the drive-thru. Stopping to wander on wood planks, through mangroves, to a dock on the lake. The water, so black it would swallow us if we fell in. We drank beer from green bottles pulled out of our backpacks. We lay on our backs, and we laughed, looking up at the stars, trying to keep track of the ones we counted and the ones still left to go.

*

Before the tumor, when the tumor was only a headache that doctors didn't know what to do with, there were many migraine pills. Some of them looked like candy: a small pink triangle, a blue enclosed capsule. I tried each one they gave me, often feeling the same effects. Simultaneously, my heart raced and I felt so sleepy. I wanted to close my eyes and sprint at the same time. To clean my room, to put every piece of it back in its place, and also to curl up in the bean bag chair in the corner. I was weary and strong. Weak and energetic. The inconsistency made me drunk, and quiet, waning with still watchful eyes, not wanting to move a muscle. Part of me loved the feeling of floating through hallways. Levitating. My head in a cloud. The other part was afraid, or curious, of what might happen if I couldn't come back down.

*

As I lay on the clean, robotic table of the MRI machine, the nurse adjusted a plastic cage around my head like a helmet, screwing me in with large radio-jockey headphones. She pressed a button, zooming me into the machine's belly.

"I'll be right in there," she said, pointing to a glass-walled room. I could no longer see her once I was inside, but I heard her voice, crackling through the headphones, soft over the classical music ebbing through the wires. I stared at the machine's spherical walls. Its insides. Loud shudders *onged* out, vibrating my skull like laser tag. Like taking off into outer space, the nurse my mission control in the safe-walled room.

The sharp utterances of the machine boomeranged around my head above the violins stringing quietly, the peaks shrill like the surges bolting through my head. I imagined I was leaving, landing in unknown territory.

The nurse slid me out for a contrast injection, swabbing the inside of my elbow, the skin so thin and nearly translucent. My body cringed at the prick and the pump of cold chemicals into my veins. She zoomed me back in, and this time I closed my eyes. I imagined the swirl of colors entering my bloodstream, a new type of neon that glowed in the dark. Bright and chalky and lifting me up.

*

One of the doctors said it could have been a suprasellar cistern filled with cerebrospinal fluid, or blood from a hemorrhage. A fall, or trauma to the head. Typically, these are shaped like a pentagon or like a six-pointed star, often likened to

the Star of David, in Hebrew, known as the Shield. Mine though, wasn't a star nor was it a symbolic shield. It wasn't ruled out as good or bad, but simply unknown.

*

The doctor's report was filled with words I didn't know: ventricles, midline structures, optic chiasm. Parts of my brain that held no meaning for me. Distant places that had lain dormant in me until then. I only understood the word *mass*. And I saw it on the scan. Perfectly spherical, like a gumball. I wondered what color it would be. A kid with a quarter, waiting for the ball to drop down the spiral of the machine, rolling into the palm of my open hand.

*

People can tell when I have a headache. What's wrong? They ask. Migraine? I guess, I say. My headaches were never classified as migraines, but sometimes I tell them yes, just to simplify things. People don't like things that can't be explained. People like for their brains to work less, for answers to come easy. Categories can be helpful. Cutting down on the brain energy used.

But some things cannot be parsed, strained, or separated.

There is no mental shortcut for what lives inside of me.

*

Often when I sat in the patient rooms, my mother and the doctors talked, static before me, a TV left on. I took to memorizing the anatomy posters, tracing my eyes over the veins and through the various organs in the belly. Nearly everything had a name, except for the brain. Here, all of the parts were the same gray, indistinguishable like a lump of clay. An emptiness still waiting to be explored or excavated.

*

I still don't know what lives in my brain, what it's made of, or where it came from. Sometimes it seems alien, or even non-existent. Distant and embedded within me at the same time. I know of its location. Its volume. That it sits on the pituitary, right under the intersection where the nerves of my eyeballs cross. I know that if it grows it can touch things, has the potential to render me blind.

I want to know it the same way I've come to know the landscape of my skin. I want to touch it, and to press it between my fingers. I wonder if it would pop or if it would be solid. If it will grow now, or soon, or never. If it will stay asleep, a hibernating star, a ticking time bomb between synaptic flashes, politely minding the gap.

I know that I can't know.

There are many things I cannot know.

I can imagine, though. Breaking it open, its insides flying out. A supernova exploding in silence. Or maybe like machinery, with chunking debris? A flash of light in the sky, a quickening across stars. My eyes widening, waiting for the stop of a hum.

Annalise Mabe is completing an MFA at the University of South Florida, where she writes nonfiction, poetry, and comics. Her work has been featured/is forthcoming in *Brevity*, *The Offing*, *The Rumpus*, *Word Riot*, *Hobart*, and was nominated by *The Boiler* for a 2016 Pushcart Prize. She reads creative nonfiction for *Sweet: A Literary Confection* and lives in Tampa, Florida, where she teaches composition and creative writing at USF.