

Reginald Duayne Betts

At the End of Life, A Secret

Everything measured. A man twists
a tuft of your hair out for no reason
other than you are naked, before him,
& he is bored with nakedness. Moments
ago, he was weighing your gallbladder
& then he was staring at the empty space
where your lungs were. Even dead, we still
insist you are an organ donor, as if something
other than taxes outlasts death. Your feet
are regular feet. Two of them, & there is no
mark to suggest you were an expert mathematician,
nothing that suggests that a woman loved
you when you died. From the time your body
was carted before him to the time your
dead body is being sent to the coffin,
every pound is accounted for, except 22 grams.
The man is a praying man & has figured
what it means. He says this is the soul, finally,
after the breath has gone. The soul: less than
\$4,000 worth of crack—22 grams—
all that moves you through this world.

Bastards of the Reagan Era

I. Countdown to Armageddon

The Farm, this collection of dying men,
Is home for just another night. And now,
October's rust. Snow piles upon the dead.
Snow flattens the scarlet leaves of maple trees.
And crickets rule the black of night with song,
Or if you're like me you call it the noise
That wakes you from what troubles sleep. The guard
And his flashlight against steel bars. His voice
As low and tired as mine; authority
A gavel drop gave him makes me listen,
And I strip before this man who knows me by
A number, and I'm lost in shouts, and when
The chain-link belt and buckle wrap my waist
These nails begin to scrape the skin off my palms.
My eyes still sleep, the cuffs the bastard I
Pretend don't exist put on my flesh bite
And Peanut, from three cages down, he stare
Transfixed like some mad bullfrog into this
Sally port's opaque. I almost say:
"Shook one's afraid of sleep," but think his bid
Enough to let the dogs of his anger
Loose on the world, after these nights in a cell
Become nothing but more nights in a cell.
Outside the hawk reminds my bones of blocks
That straightjacket me in these cuffs, how want