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For the Eleventh MRI: Breathing

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2022 Vassar Miller Poetry Award

**For the Eleventh MRI: Breathing
by Jessica Bowdoin**

I lie in this cusp,
this curve of cold, and float between
(eggshells, pale-painted magnets),
a lone body tucked-in by paper sheets.

They roll me out, gloved hands
that tighten slack. They align
their skeleton over mine;
a thermoplastic ribcage coils
over asymmetry, over meat and fat,
the jagged bones of body, to immobilize
a broken spine. Roll back,
roll back inside this shell and listen.

Rasp—a radio, intermittent: the technician taps
tongue into microphone. Tells me:
Be breathless! Refuse lungs.
Even when lips spasm,
corral in your laughter. Stifle reverberations
of oxygen and carbon molecules held
in swollen cheeks. Now, breathe—
a set rhythm, only, in ten second holds.
Control—the diaphragm-driven timpani

of oxygen, the definite clarity
of radio waves that penetrate
everything but bone
to create this imagery.

And, if I can't hold air,
will my lungs make sheet music?

Will the molecules, freed, turn
into pixels of black splatter that blur
on film, like the speckle and grain
of old movies?

Will these illegible, celluloid bubbles
of dirty and dotted slush nest between bones
and scar tissue and sinew to become
dots and brushstrokes of something, almost
Pollock-worthy? Perhaps

this shell gives birth
to this body's oxygen,
and delivers a canvas of silver bromide,
and this metamorphosis, it derides
the idea of accuracy. Brokenness

has more potential as art in a gallery
than any form of accurate,
any film of radiographic
truth.