

A POEM: THROUGH THE EYES OF A STROKE SURVIVOR

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I squat in the sun admiring my garden while my favorite *Nón lá* protects my bald head

The vibrant colors give me purpose looking at my rose bed

I hardly notice the sweat beads trickling down my neck as I grin

Then a tear rolls down, the smells of soil and foliage paint a picture of my kin

I blink but the colors fade

I blink again and now everything loses shade

My words are mush as my wife stares, her eyes wide

I reach for my shovel but my body refuses to obey

My senses escape with every control I had, and my world turns gray

I awaken but can hardly deem myself alive

Several voices, two, maybe four or five

Unfamiliar voices uttering unusual words:

“infarct, right MCA, increased density” is all I hear

Everything looks foggy, and the unknown creates confusion and fear

Eyes open and for the first time I am aware

A young woman wearing a white coat gives me a kind stare

“Can you please tell me your name?” she says slowly and carefully

Trying to understand, I immediately recognize the word “name”

I muster up strength to speak but what comes out puts me to shame

My name is Minh Chau is what I wanted to say

But I forget how to form the words so in bed I just lay

Time passes and I feel alone

My body does not feel like my own

A different doctor comes in every time

I don't understand, I just want someone to tell me I'm fine

“You had a stroke sir, a large nonhemorrhagic infarct”

The language barrier or knowledge gap whichever one

I just smile, the best response I've given, and the encounter is done.

November 22, 2018

Apparently years have passed but I've lost track

All I know is that who I was is no longer and what I lack

I was once the man of my household

Now my kids take turn feeding me and I do as I'm told

My identity was left behind the moment I set foot in America, so many years ago

Rebuilding a new life meant re-inventing a new name to show

A foreigner to the nation but the same man to my family

Battling through the crisis so my children won't face the same agony

Just like that, from a single clot

All of me that was created and rebuilt is lost

My mind paces back and forth with each passing moment

But the inability for my body to do so is a disappointment

The left side of my world has been forgotten

Even with therapy my progress smells rotten

All the while the right side of my canvas remains painted with all the colors of my roses

A reminder of the life I still have, and a chapter of my book I'm reading that suddenly closes

"Turn to your left, dad, look who's here to see you!" I hear in my native tongue

I turn to my left to see my grandchildren smiling

Yéyé and Gunggung is a role I am having a hard time reconciling

I hear them greet me this way just as they have been taught

All the frustration leaves as they remind me of all the love that can never be bought

A thick gait belt hugs my waist as I shuffle to join my family at the dinner table

I am using every bit of energy I have to walk as my son holds me stable

He reminds me to lean my body weight to the left as I forget that side exists once again

So I turn my head slowly and catch a glimpse out the glass door

My garden stares back at me, desolate and colorless, the silence screams to my core.

September 18, 2021

Flooded with familiar dreams

Of my earlier years it seems

Confused expressions face me and I can tell

The things I say are starting to sound disoriented but I don't dwell

Because I've never been happier as my reality intertwines with the past

So much so that I just want to make this feeling last

My family cheers me on

To each of my little strides no matter how long

I wear a stylish bib, hand-made with grit by my wife

Smiling through it all, finally embracing this new life

I sit at the head of the table surrounded by my people

Today we celebrate life and I think of all things that make mine colorful

I stare at the food: *nước mắm*, *Nem nướng*, *com cháy*, *rau răm*, the list doesn't end

What once activated my taste buds still brings together family and friends

My daughter feeds me my first bite and the food tastes bland
But the food is not what makes my life vibrant it's much more grand
I scan the room to see everyone savoring their meal and laughing
I remind myself to keep chewing and multitasking

I am struck with an explosion of flavors that makes me smile
The realization makes me stop and pause for a while
Fixated on the faces, I start drooling and everyone turns to see
Each and every one of them makes my life worth celebrating, happy birthday to me.

November 7, 2021

A tube is advanced and there is a lump in my throat
The pain is fleeting and my body is afloat
Light escapes my view like before but this time it feels right
My body lays limp yet it feels strong enough to take flight

So many voices are echoing at a distance
All scared and prepared together in an instance
I want to console them but my voice box is sealed shut
My time is ending I feel it in my gut

At last I hear three voices with clarity
My two sons and only daughter, their tones ring with familiarity

I hold onto every single word they are saying

Like a dream that I'm too scared of not remembering

The voices stop with a brief moment of terror as if I'm already forgetting the dream

When suddenly a smell of my garden tickles my amygdala and adrenaline rushes through my
bloodstream

A tear rolls down and the scent confirms that I do not lay in isolation

My three beautiful roses, so vivid and so brilliant, I've permanently planted my foundation.