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poems  
by  
doctors

## A Technique for Operating on the Past

Maya Catherine Popa

My great-grandfather held a brain and studied it for signs of music.  
Like all the men in my family, he was a close reader and musician.

The day the KGB arrived to take him, his students misplaced  
the combination to the ether closet. I see him in the armamentarium

choosing between scalpels and scopes, escaping across  
the Carpathians in peasant's clothes. True, he did not love the state,

a symphony full of poorly written solos. But he could hold a brain  
more steady than any in the University, interrogate its perilous

longitudes, cardinal directions for taste and melancholy, yellow tulips,  
joy. I see him peeling back the hair, that quiet, necessary artifice,

to reveal a nesting doll of impulses, then reciting the cold, hard rain  
of these connections at conferences in Cambridge. A halo of stage

whispers as he came as close to candor with the mind as was possible.  
He understood the officer's parietal lobe where his punishment

waited to be articulated, its obstinacy illustrated in early phrenology  
by the silhouette of a ram. Always the doctor's burden to reason

with that which cannot easily be reasoned. I see him make the first  
incision, certain, gentle as a breaststroke in the Black Sea. He knew

how to tell the brain a story, listen when told one in return. Knew  
that engine of ephemera could be a sentencing, a silence or a song.

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