Editor’s Note: The author writes, “Physicians speak a language that is not understood by many patients. Even the name of an illness may terrify the patient. This poem describes how a patient may interpret the words in a common diagnosis, paroxysmal atrial fibrillation. Such misinterpretation may adversely affect treatment and cause undue anxiety. I am a non-invasive cardiologist on faculty at Penn State University College of Medicine. I have a joint appointment in the Humanities Department and teach first and second year humanities classes.”

Paroxysmal atrial fibrillation

Not one word
in the name of this crazy pounding
that starts boom

just like that
in the middle of my chest
in the middle of the night
or at 2 p.m. and
flies up through my neck to
my jaws and has me thinking
I will drop dead

not one word
in its name
that even a person who went to college
would know. They talk about
the upper chamber and all I can remember
is the porcelain potty Grandma
used in the upstairs bedroom

when she was 85 and couldn’t
make it down the steps, the one
mama emptied every morning. They
talk about fluttering

and it makes me think of the chicken bodies
jumping all over the back yard
after papa cut off their heads. And why
can’t they just say “every now and then”?

They say don’t worry, the
rat poison (they call it warfarin)
will keep the blood from clotting
and the diltiazem will stop the heart
from going too fast.

But when they call something
a name like this
it must be bad.

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