

AFTER TASTE

by

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A Thesis

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Master of Fine Arts
George Mason University, 2015

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DEDICATION

This manuscript is for Dylan, who taught me about life, unfairness, and the relief that comes with acceptance.

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ABSTRACT

AFTER TASTE

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This collection of poetry discusses a female adult reflecting on her survival of an adult reproductive cancer that she suffered as a child, as well as her reflection of her adult female body. She struggles with the understanding of losing her ability to bear children due to uterine cancer prior to the age of understanding what it means to bear a child, as she also struggles with anorexia. The poems have two prominent characters, referred to as “I” and “she” by the speaker, who are essentially the same woman. The poems where the speaker speaks as herself (I) are more reflective of the author’s autobiographical representation of her experience with cancer treatment. The poems where the speaker references a “she” reflect more precisely on the main female character as an objectification. The mentioning of Eve refers to the biblical character. The manuscript discusses the idea of childbirth as a “curse” due to Eve’s inability to refuse the “fruit” when tempted by the serpent. The prominent female character (she or I) struggles with her understanding of her fate in relation to the fate of the first woman. Many references to water, whales and sharks stem from childhood experiences as well as dreams.

Crescendo

When someone hurts us
in a dream,
where do we feel

the pain? Do we measure,
in the same
place the symphonies

of pleasure? Why, when we
wake, do we often find
ourselves

unaware, chimera
fleeting, then relieved
by our reality.

We are furthest from
our desires when we see
them in our dreams; just

as we are closest to an emotion
when we can name what it is
not.

There's a quiet existence
in waking with a lover:

the tangle of limbs,
mineral skin,
humble breath.

Some women during sex
must imagine the ocean,

and some men during sex
must think about music.

You say you can't swim,
because no one ever taught you,
but dream every night
that you live by the water.

Dandelion Milk

I used to play with paper dolls;
dress them Victorian with cardstock hoop skirts
and velum lace petticoats.

 Their bodies came perforated
in a book and they all wore the same size corset
and bodice. I carried the dolls

and their paper-cutting clothes
in a large resealing plastic bag, their first contact
with imperfection. I did not

 mother my baby dolls, only
paper ones. I did not name them, I
knew not to. I would lie in a field of white,

watch the wind fill and swell my skirt, and let
the wind carry the dolls away with the seeds.

Awfully Lucky

"If you're going to have cancer, you got the one that you don't want, in the place where you want it."

—Doctor Michael Hopkins, August 2001

I stretch my legs across Highlights and Legos and consider the robin;

watch her carefully arrange calcified twigs
—a selective process—in the corner of the aviary.

She knows that it is time for her to create a haven;
her purpose, now, is to protect. This is foreign to me.

Yesterday they started referring to my organs
on a range of necessity; how vital they are

to my existence, and the one that I could do without.
Possessive, I cradled the part of me that I had barely

been given the chance to know, knowing, in the softest tissues
of my self, that in a week it would not be mine; it would not be

long to my body, and in its place would grow the void
of a person that I would never learn how to protect.

Emerging

It began with a separation between the light and the lifeless, a match struck and illuminated the cave of what was nothing.

The flame wavered and darkness commenced as a smoke stream filled that which was the day and the night. Water trickled

down sides of the cave as if falling, water from water, filtered and unfiltered rinsing mineral earth collecting in a koi pond bottom.

The newly formed walls of sandstone dried creating a sky light photosynthesized the green moss and aromatic seeds, fruit

yielding fruit the first third day; Spring. Summer commenced cracking earth from earth-cooling equinox finds a bright harvest Moon.

The orange globe fades to the glory of the stars; matchsticks without distance: unreachable chisels in the canopy of stone. Octopi,

sand sharks and orca chase man o' war out of the pond while Koi paced circles in the bottomless hole. The ceiling pinpricks grew

gaps from which His winged children emerged. But none could mirror his glory. The first fit of rage yielded hideous beautiful beasts

condemned to the yolk and the mercy of the sixth-day creature. *Trees for meat*, he whispered into his mirror. The jackal escaped

through the only way out.

Memory of a Wall, Sea World, June 2000

We purchased dead minnow-sized fish in paper cone cups for \$10 to throw over a fiberglass wall to the dolphins. I asked why we couldn't get closer; I yearned to run my fingers down the animals' satin bodies, which I imagined felt like the surface of just-set gelatin in the refrigerator. I read the signs, an image of a stick figure reaching into the tank and the dolphin approaching with teeth like a shark's. Heartbroken, I tossed my fish, paper cone and all, over the wall and into the water with the dolphins.

Memory of a Fish, June 2000

Upstairs the stomping ceased and was replaced by steady walking; the show must have ended, which meant the whale would be returned to her holding tank for viewing. Patient, I waited, struggling to see through the water clouded like Alka Seltzer when a flash of obsidian black appeared three feet away from my outstretched hands before diving quickly to the bottom of the 30-foot deep tank. Children around me howled begging their parents to “make the fish come back.” A man with back sweat and 3 fat kids in too-tight clothing reached across the 3-foot barrier and started banging on the glass. No one stopped him. The whale remained on the bottom of the tank, sideways, her quartz-white underbelly facing the observation room. She looked unnaturally beautiful against the false cerulean water, her charcoal eyes empty, staring down the drain beside her oiled velvet head as if wishing she could escape through the sewers like a discarded goldfish. She didn’t move again. I stared at the giant mammal’s marble eyes throughout the show, her dorsal fin folded like the peak of a black merengue. I begged her telepathically to meet my eyes. I needed to know that she saw me. I needed to know that she forgave me.

A Shark in the Reservoir

As we reach the dilapidated
concrete barrier the shark
turns on her side to expose
the bloody underbelly;
her pectoral fin severed by whale
hunters' harpoons.

I slowly lower myself
into the water by means
of the slimy algae ladder,
and tread next to her.
She rubs her satin nose
against my leg like a feline.

I grab tightly to her
dorsal as she pulls us both
under, passing electric eels
and orcas we streamline
through the silence.

We are leaving breadcrumbs,
a maroon trail of blood—her teeth
dropping like lures, disappear
one by one.

I Have Always Believed in Heaven, I Have Always Talked to the Dead

I.

When I got home from dinner with my sister, Mackenzie's ashes were in a gift bag on my nightstand.

They had folded her tiny body into a small silken bag and placed them in a pet memorial box.

I don't know where to spread them.

I have always taken her with me.

II.

That night I dreamt that my grandfather died.

My parents, cousin, sister and I returned to the small blue house my grandparents lived in when I was a child.

Only he wasn't dead; he was alive.

We had his funeral and he attended, consoling the guests himself.

I cried tearlessly with my arms wrapped around him, and woke desperately trying to remember

the smell of his cologne.

The Big Dipper, Geauga Lake, July 2000

I. Wind

The roller car clacked as we climbed
the steep hill and the cooler than summer breeze
from the lake unstuck the tiny hairs from my neck. We squeezed
hands along with the tension of the splintered wood coaster, brittle with age.
With every lurch and tug of the gears I forced space
in between the safety bar and my throbbing
abdomen. I held my breath
and waited to fall.

II. Waves

Unsteadily we careened
down the shaky steel track
of the first hill. Cassie let go
of my hand to raise fingers
to the sky. I followed and tried
to hold my small frame in the seat,
but as we approached the second
climb inertia fought back as the wheels
began to slow. The small of my back
slammed hard into the blue plastic seat
as something warm and malignant burst
inside of me.

III. Swell

My vision went black
but after dozens of rides
I had memorized
the rise and fall of ripples
at the end. We rolled over

the smallest hills and with
each fluctuation of gravity
I felt the tumor like the moon
controlling the tidal waves inside me.

As the cart finally halted my vision
began to return and I looked to
Cassie to see her silent mouth moving,
the red of my blood soaked into her shorts.

Breakfast Before Sea World, July 2000

Potatoes and sausage
and talk of insurance,
I fork at my eggs
until the yolk bleeds
into my toast. A wet

something moves inside
me and the diner blurs.
I hurl myself into
the stall, warm black
pools between
my legs. The tiles

crash toward
my forehead.
The only sound
a whisper that I
think I am screaming

please get my mom, there's something wrong with me

The Fruit

"The Fruit, when ripe, is something longer and larger than the largest Orange; and exceeds, in the Delicacy of its Taste, the Fruit of every Tree."

—Rev. Hughes, 1750

I.

Grapefruit was "forbidden"
and misdiagnosed as a pithy
green sweet fruit with a healthy
albedo; the proud parents
sweet orange and *shaddock* or *pomelo*.

The flesh is segmented
and ranges in sweetness;
the striking insides vary in acid
and color. It has been suggested
that the fruit was created;

an intentional hybrid, however
botanists argue it was likely
a natural occurrence—
one way to admit that
they don't know how this happened.

II.

The technician spread the cold pink jelly and asked me to hold
my breath and count one

to fifteen. The probing and pressure ceased only
when the technician walked out of the room without

reason. She returned with the radiologist and pointed to the screen;
the doctor put his hand to his mouth and looked at the small fetal

position on the table, *Lack of bloodflow; 10 centimeters;
its bleeding; she needs surgery.*

I gave birth for the first
and only time to a shriveled,
stillborn grapefruit in July.

Curbing Her Apathy

She used to daydream
that he died. She
wears a plum dress, and

strangers pat her back
at his funeral. This is
the first time she sees him

in a suit: in his satin-lined
cedar. His cufflinks
monogram the hands

that would never again
clasp her neck. She
doesn't wear make-up

for fear that her mascara
will not run. In more elaborate
dreams, she wears a hat

with a mourning veil while
sitting next to his mother,
and the braiding scent

of incense. When it ends
she doesn't possess
the usual, casual fury

of death. It was not
heaven, but earth
that was lost.

She too desires
the knowledge
of paradise.

Within: Two

My body knew it was raining before I did.
We lie in bed, my arms around her stomach,

she swaddles me with her warmth, hands
clasp behind my chilled shoulders. I rest

my head on her chest, inhaling and exhaling
through the same struggling lungs. I think

to block the light, she pulls over the cool
lavender sheets up and covers her head.

I envelop her knees with my arms and squeeze,
fingers woven, stifling our breath. The air

becomes thicker and warm; breathing shallow. Feel
her stomach trying to digest nothing, I offer

her peppered egg whites and Irish tea.
She ignores me. Along with her sounds

of hunger. I uncoil our limbs, reach up
a hand and gently untwist a curl

she has wrapped in her fingers, while her
other hand discretely measures the size of

her waist. I let her go. Turn my back to her
again. She reaches for the glass of grapefruit

juice she has set on the nightstand, lifts it to
her lips as I close my eyes, and let her win again.

Elegy for a Shark—for Dylan

After "The Crocodile"

I. Diagnosis

What I wanted was to disappear.
When I'm alone in the water I can
fathom this is different. But not
really. No one is every really
alone in the water, and things are
usually as they seem. The stillness
numbs everything, and when I start
to see the daylight penetrating,
or when a sun ray tries to warm my breath
as I pull it through the molecules

I dive.
I prefer to be alone in this state.
I prefer to be here where I cannot drown.

II. Shark to Shark

Like me, you had a mother and a father.
You went to Catholic school, had the same gym
teacher, learned about osmosis and, like me,
your skin displays the scars of that place.

You dissected frogs with scalpels, tied fetal
pig limbs to the corners of the slicing basin
pulling out vital organs, and like me, learned
from the death of our prey.

Outside you were quiet.
You could swim by without notice
if it weren't for the glow of your teeth.

Though I was the opposite—never quiet—
your serenity intrigued me.
Every now and then I would try to swim
backward just to see if you would notice.

Did you notice? Do you notice now?

In New Jersey after the shark attacks of 1916
four people were injured and they don't know which
one of us it was. They started to hunt us,
killed our children
murdered baby whales
lowered steel nets to protect the summer
seaside economy.

Apparently one of the victims survived.

III. Projection

From The Philadelphia Public Ledger, 1916

How do we move on from these encounters with death?

*

“Despite the death [...] and the report that two sharks
having been caught

in that vicinity
recently,

I do not believe there is any reason why people should hesitate to go in
swimming.”

*

Did you eat them?

*

I did.

*

The children? They always put up a fight.

*

Children like you always believe they can win.

IV. Mine

When I was a child I had a shark-tooth necklace
and every summer we spent in Cape May my sister
and I would try to find one in the surf.

My grandfather used to tease us and say that
sharks were very protective of their teeth

—especially the ones that they lost. Two
years ago Elizabeth and I watched *Jaws* on a blow up
screen on the beach, drinking airplane
bottles of vodka,
sprawled on a towel while the sand dunes
misted minerals we found in our teeth for weeks.

The next and last day at the beach
we were happy to see rain.

V. Yours

When I got the call that you had died,
I lay curled, cradling the cordless phone in my hand.

You survived your surgery. You were on life support
for days. I remember the word *vegetable*.

I cried when I told my mom, I fell
face first. I wondered, with all my unknowing,
why not me.

My mother started to cry but she barely knew you.
She cried for his mother; she cried for the sadness
of her lucky living daughter.

I dug through photos of Niagara Falls in 8th grade,
cut your face from the photograph and framed it
next to mine.

*He was there for a moment with me,
I closed my eyes and dove deep.*

VI. Guilt

Imagine being born with a knife hanging over your head.
Maybe not a sharp one, but the type of blade that could
cause damage if fallen in—twisted the wrong way.
Some people live better knowing what they have to lose.

We're supposed to have a sense of mortality,
but the closer that we get
to the real possibility,
the less likely we are to believe.

Someday I'll stop searching for my teeth,
I'll watch children playing in the surf without hunger inside me.

Survivors imagine that there's a reason they're alive,
but there is no easing the guilt of surviving.

It is the gift we beg for,
the gift I gave up giving life for,
the life rope we all feel entitled to,

yet when I think of you, dear
Dylan,
it's still *sharper than any tooth*

Tissue Sheets

I passed out on the bathroom floor
at Bob Evan's on the way to Sea World.
My tooth had bit through the oral mucosa,
blood like iron, fusing loose skin
to the roof of my mouth. Papa said "sharks
can smell blood when it's miles away." I
protected my mouth from the daggers
it held. And sharks tend to smile
with all of their columns of teeth, and when
a tooth is lost there are back-up rows
to replace it. We went to a wig store;
I wanted it blond. The first day of eighth grade
my classmates thought I was dying. I closed
my eyes and saw whales breaching the water,
and great white sharks grinding their teeth
in their sleep. On Monday Mrs. Ames told
the room mothers I was pregnant, and that I got
that way from dancing slow in the basement
of a Catholic church three days before Christmas
too close to my boyfriend, "so close that he couldn't
get his car keys out of his pocket." We
didn't have keys. We were thirteen. My
mother was furious and I started to see
the whales again. I held my breath and felt as if
I had woken up underwater; unable to breathe
as Dylan touched my arm from the octopus
table and told me *you can have my kids*
if I ever accidentally get any. I closed
my eyes and prayed I was a shark, that behind
what was lost there were rows to replace it.
Sometimes at night I turn myself into a shark,
convinced that I might be because my wisdom
teeth are growing back. I think Dylan saved me.
I think he might be here. And *here comes the*
sun so maybe we swim under the water
and surface at Sea World. My teeth hurt
each time I wake: I grind them—a shark trait, I think.

It's Me

My first kiss
was on a ski lift
headed to a hill
above my ability.

I once showered
with a boy
at church camp
during choir practice.

I used to hide
hickeys
with curling iron burns
so I could claim them.

I no longer paint over
what I can't wear
outside my own skin, so

if you tell me
you love me accidentally
or automatically I will
forgive you.

Spectrophobia

"We are asleep. Our life is a dream. But we wake up, sometimes, just enough to know that we are dreaming."

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

She did not feel the birth,
 only the death. Stomach
full, she dreamt of wheat fields,

blood grapefruit,
 and immaculate conception.
This time her baby grew

while she slept. She chose not
 to fight the chimera, and swaddled
him in pale, worn scarves.

She swallows all fear and lucid
 knowledge. Strangers
tell her she's glowing.

The dream probes her memory
 of *"unnatural ways to carry
a baby"* before she wakes, empty and thin.

Tears of anger
turned sadness
turned longing
turned grey.

On Sunday she lit candles
 for healing, hand holding
her scar as she tried not to sleep.

Conization

“You will miscarry” strobed in my mind like bold red blinking lights for vacancy, “again and again and again.” Pacing I tried desperately to understand that of which I had no understanding. My relation to this organ. I had to choose—and this, I knew. I stopped walking to stare out the window and ran my tongue across the peaks of my teeth, forcing it into the cracks between until it bled. There is no emotion to name—no feeling words or pain level from one to ten. Children shrieked outside in the hospital courtyard and I realized in that moment that my voice was separate from theirs. I didn’t cry. The choice was, in essence, simple: live or die. The choice was, in essence, abandonment of hope or denial of the ripping to come.

Shells

Pull-apart plastic uteri and ovaries balanced
on the left end of the table. I yearned to dissect
the shiny slices of polyurethane anatomy, sprawl
them next to me and

make sense of their making.

I wouldn't be able to put them back together
in a way that would let them stand on their own.
I could steal the pieces; take them home and sleep with them
pressed cold against my abdomen until they were

accepted into my body.

My mother stared at a cruel chart of fetal
growth development, exhaled discretely through congestion. I think
If you cry I will splatter the eggshell walls with plastic ova.
I pulled my socks over my thighs as if I tugged them higher

I could re cover my body; burrow.

He knocks.
There is
no
halting
this intrusion

The Fault

It wasn't picking an apple
that cursed her; not the shame
of seeing or the knowledge
between the leaves. It was not

because she craved the forbidden,
but feared being alone in the void. Her pains
did not branch from

deception, from trust, or from
making love. There
were no children born
in paradise.

It wasn't temptation
that caused her to say,

*Here, my love,
try this.*

Suite 140

Tip-toed as if every inch
of padded carpet was the
single floorboard that would wake
her parents, she enters the
warm waiting room, an essence
of familiarity;
an air of confidence. Her
pixie-haired mother looking
like she had just come off
of chemo took an
exhausted sigh into an
over-stuffed armchair, leaned her
head back, squeezing her eyes closed,
waited for the forms that are
endless even though nothing
ever changes. She
jokes with the receptionist
and validates the parking
pass with a black stamp reading:
Oncology Patient: Flat Rate \$.50
while her mother appears to
pray. The girl sits and crosses
her legs like a lady in
her green plaid skirt, knee high socks,
Oxford collar, completing
each form for her mother, and
with an occasional glance
or squeeze to her hand pulls *The*
Crucible out of her plum
purple book bag and studies
it. Her eyes start to dart the
room reading each magazine
cover from "Survivor" to
"Relapse" to "Seniors Living
With Cancer." She lets her legs
fall open, stares at water
spots on the ceiling, pulls at
split ends on her bangs, doodles
with gel pens. A nurse with a
file opens the gray door

to the exam rooms and calls
a name. She lets her mother
sleep and walks to the
gray door, smiling sincerely.

Bloodwork

At sixteen years I thought I had AIDS
contracted from the blood transfusions.
It kept me awake.

I walked to the clinic on the concrete
end of town before I could
drive and took a number like waiting
for a quarter pound of provolone.

I checked “no” and “yes” boxes
next to the symptoms as the woman
behind the desk photocopied my
insurance.

I couldn’t comprehend how informing
the nurse of these irrelevancies would
prove helpful in finding the HIV, or how

any conclusion based on this type of
information is valid as a source for
anything? Everyone lies about his
or her sexual activity.

They called my name and I walked
behind the curtain. The nurse looked
surprised to see that I knew how to

pump my arm just right to get the vein
to pop up and spurt blood in the vile.
She shook her head condescendingly,

“you’re too young to be falling apart.”
I thought of the chart in her hand and
how she’s reading that I don’t smoke,

I don’t drink, there’s “no possibility”
of pregnancy. She was judging me.

I stole the National Geographic I was
reading and left my insurance card at the desk.

For Eve

The cool wind through the garden does nothing
for her shame, the soft breeze waters her open eyes.

She looks for Adam, now aware of her bare breasts,
the soft lining of her thighs, the spade-shaped leaf

that covers what she already knows of her lover. Her temptation
a weakness; her naked body a shame.

She is cursed with the novelty of the pain, while Adam
will eat from the ground for his trust in his wife. This

is how we are separated: *what have I done?*

Maybe she wanted to share the flesh with the serpent; not
ashamed of her softness, supple roundness, beauty. There is more

to a woman; we cannot assume it was wisdom she lacked.
Are the scrapings on my body set to replace her pain I'll never feel?

I choose to be pictured exceptional rather than exposed; rather than a fool.

When faced with the apple, I like to think that I'd have skinned
it with my teeth, rejected the flesh, and planted the seeds

for a new tree to grow.

Marrow

I.

He removes his coat, says
 comfort food, and tries to take
hers but she flinches
 at the thought of him
touching her body, pulls
 her scarf tight on her neck,
fingers, until the color of it
 throbs.

She's not a vegetarian
 this week, so *you have to try*
the burger, he tells her. She feels penetration
 of his blue iceberg eyes,
they press hard against her chest,
 steal oxygen and breathe
hatred with no meaning. She's silent
 -ly praying.

She holds herself, arms around
 the now-pulsing abdomen,
skim the menu for vegan, *do you ever eat*

bone marrow? You have to

slurp it like an oyster though, she knows
 he's never had an oyster. Eyes
fill from effort, damp bones throb from the
 cold.

II.

*It won't hurt so much as it will
feel like an immense amount
of pressure.* The doctor lays me
on my stomach, a nurse rubs
analgesic on the dimples of
my back. My parents hold
each other as my sister picks a
scab.

I focus on her fingernails,
the dirt underneath, shift
to the hands on the clock and the nurse
burns me with morphine
as it enters my blood. I twitch, hold
my breath, father rushing to tears.
The doctor looks up. *I'm ok, I smile, don't worry,
Daddy.*

The ever-moving seconds melt
from the 1 to the 2 to the 3 and I find
myself asking about Disney.

Can I make a wish since I'm dying?

*I want to see whales who don't live
in a bathtub.* I can't find my mom's eyes.
*Like dolphins, I say, like blue on the
ferry.*

III.

This is wrong; no one exists
with me in my Sea World. They
surround me on the table, two
nurses hold down my arms without
showing emotion. My dad paces with his fists
clenched, his forehead wrinkled
by confusion and pain and something like
fury.

My mother holds my head in her hands,
grinds her teeth to avoid breaking
down and is forcing a smile—looks straight
into my eyes. *Yes, baby, the whales, when
you're better we can go anywhere you want.*
Better. I consider. And then I'm screaming
bloody cancer as the cold, thick steel
penetrates

my hip bones. I feel the needle hollow, liquid
bone drawn from my body. *Why are you
doing this* I scream as loudly as I can,
but my voice cracks like my brittle
bones restrained by the nurses
against the hard table. *She needs more morphine*
my mother pleads, the nurses' eyebrows raise as the doctor
shakes

his head , *no no we are almost done here.*

Just close your eyes, baby.

better, better, better.

Apology

He arrives in her hospital room
and watches her breathe hard in
the pale light of the heart monitor.
As he crawls in next to her she folds around
herself protectively, aware of the rawness
of her skin. Opening her eyes to see him
she struggles to lift her hand to touch his hair,
but is tied to the bed by catheters and swollen lines.

I cannot live without you.

He lays his head on her concave chest,
heaving with the tension of sobs that can't
escape. His wet cheek pressed to the starchy cotton
of her gown, they make their silent promises
and watch the moon disappear behind blue clouds.

Of a Choice

For Brittany Maynard

I'd like to think of my room filled
with white lilies and orchids. A nurse

in stark linens charting my life as
friends flock my bedside from faraway places,

and cards pile up from relatives I'll never
touch again. I can imagine forcing my eyelids

open every morning, to see his face next to
mine on my pillow one last time; falling

asleep every night to the shape of his hand on my waist. I would

watch my young body willow in the mirror,
the veins in my hands turning bluer; hair growing thinner,

my breaths feeling shorter. I would

let my mother stroke my hair out of my eyes while I slept,
let my sister smoke casually,
let my father cry silently,
let my lover read me poetry. I would fight

every second until the last grain of sand fell,
I would beg him to hold me

until my fingers stopped squeezing.

Did he ever, just once, Brittany, beg you to stay?

I don't know what to make of this.
I don't know what to think.

But I do know that you are stronger than me.

Meet-Cute Envoi

I said *I love you*—

when you're driving,
and with your eyebrows
leaping like violin bows,
face flushing from cowlick
to temples, thumb and forefinger
stroking the dark tendril
slightly curling from the habit,
you put your free hand on
my thigh and tell me

me, too

with a breathy,
coffee smile.

Feminine

She begins on the shin
 bone, fingertips circling
kneecap before landing
 tight on tendon connecting
hamstring to calf.

The water runs only hot
 as steam curls the loose
strands lying free,
 parallel to earlobes.
Arm lifted high above

head she runs another
 finger from elbow to rib
-cage , caresses the feathering
 follicles. She drops
blade into the steam, and cuts

off the flow; she chooses
 a scented soap. Clenching
the *sage and eucalyptus*,
 she dips hand into water:
swirls the bar that leaves a fog

before sinking to the bottom.
 Arms on the sides, she
lowers herself in slowly,
 flooding the crux
between her navel and her thighs.

She sinks beneath
 the oil beading atop
her private sea, and thinks
 how he calls her beautiful

as if she were a delicacy.

412 West Main Street

The burning river starts to run itself rusted.
I gaze over the bridge that faces the once
blue water; the once real fall that is now
replaced with pumps and cogs and fish belly bones.

Two blocks up is the gray house, the fire
escape to the second floor rusted to wood
like a piercing not yet healed. The broken backyard hammock
hangs between trees by its threads—it is woven

of fish netting and boat rope; held together
with zip ties and yarn. I wonder about this bridge.
I consider the feeling of crossing over it, lying
on my back; the sun

-warmed rock holding me like a bone shelf
as if it remembered me. Remembered when I ran
here for shelter before. As if memories were real.
As if I could return to them without him; cut him

out of the pictures of my mind and not feel the absence
of *a home* that this place once gave me.
I wanted to face him. I wish I could have conquered
this place on my own, broken it down like the home

we never had, the bare-bones house of cards,
the empty boxes never unpacked.

I have left. I have nothing of his to return.

Adult Dream of Sea World with my Sister

We took a shuttle under the lake to a strip of land separated from us by water.

The tunnel we went through was covered in small greenish and white tiles that you might imagine to be the lining of an old pool.

There were windows but I couldn't see out of them; people blocked them or I was too short.

My sister wanted to go parasailing but I said no; she said "the feeling you get up there is just magnificent." I wasn't interested.

Once we got to the "island" where Sea World existed we were all sort of dumped into this wading pool that had a fake orca in it, a smiling cartoonish blow-up pool toy.

Most of the whale and dolphin trainers were female and looked like they were too old for their age, but pretty.

As if they had ruined their skin with cigarettes and amphetamines.

One very pretty and un-ruined trainer told us she would take us to the whale show after her break.

There was a countdown sounding "10, 9, 8..." in a robotic female voice.

Another passenger from the shuttle said "she better hurry... she needs to get back now."

The whale is going to jump, and we are going to miss it."

I never saw the real whales or dolphins but I could smell them.

I knew we were wading in the same water.

Epiphenomena

Scar tissue adheres organs
after the cancer is removed.
The tumor is gone, it leaves

laces behind. Body pith
strings together her insides
not meant to touch.

The treatment for adhesion
is to open her abdomen.
Cut it out, they say, and hope

it doesn't form more. More
often than not it comes back
harder to saw through.

The scar tissue grows
scar tissue, binding her organs
to the lining of her body, and pulls.

It is composed of rigid fingers whose
fibers braid themselves into ropes.
She can live for weeks with

no pain, sometimes months.
She's heard years. She starts
to forget the lattice is there

until the day when
a normal movement in a
healthy direction after a

detoxing diet and 5 months
of abstinence brings her to
her knees and it's back,

fused again. Cut her open, scrape
the cobwebs, bask in the warmth
and the blood and let her feel
healed again.

Concentration on the Left

Breath becomes a process. Slowly I
draw it from my pelvic bone to my clavicle; try to
steady my shaking gasps. Feet
flex and toes curl. My exhale is shallow,
bottoming out my lungs as if the air was lost inside me.

I open my eyes to secure the position of my feet
on the mat and try not to think about cigarettes
and starving and my other favorite toxins. I
inhale, dropping right hand to the mat, the left one

extending to the *sky*. Eyes fixed forward and not on the pain.

Ear is flush with right arm, right foot is planted. The windows
fog with breath as the familiar jilt of the folded tissue
tracks constricts my abdomen.
I gaze upward. I balance my breathing, relax my toes which

flex; I feel my left leg gliding slowly into an unnaturally

comfortable extension. Toe points
involuntarily from muscle memory.

Hold. Inhale. Focus on the lucidity
of breath and the healing of stillness until I feel

release.

Eve in the Sculpture Garden on New Year's Day

We rake our feet through the gravel
surrounding the marble
building guarded by the *Gates of Hell*.
We approach her and I stop and stare
longer than I intended; longer than I realize
I was reading her face.

Her right arm shields her breasts
from our view, left hand partially covers
her face and ear.
Eyes closed.
The statue's figure is *feminine*, thighs
supple. I think,

you already knew what you were not supposed to see.

The bronze gathers in coils at her abdomen.
You point to her and ask me

What is that supposed to be?

Shielding her body and blinding herself to our gaze
that? I say,
 that
 is the curse.

Results

Tuesday, 11 AM

Today is Tuesday, which means that tomorrow is Wednesday, which means they should be calling me on Monday, right? They said five business days, but I don't know if that includes Tuesday, and does that include Monday? I feel like technically a "business week" is five days long, but I don't know if the reviewing process starts the day of the testing or if it starts the next morning. It was before lunchtime, so if blood banks work anything like regular banks, I feel like the "transition" should be reviewed by noon; meaning I would get my money in five business days at noon from Tuesday, which means they should be calling me on Monday to tell me that everything's okay. . .

* * *

Next Tuesday, 1 PM

Didn't I check that little box that says, "yes, you can leave me a voicemail with my test results and I won't sue you because no one listens to my voicemails except for me"? Why did they leave me yet *another* voicemail to call them back only to listen to "all operators are currently assisting other patients, please remain on the line and your call will be answered in the order it was received" as if I'm calling Comcast or Allstate or Amazon or the DMV? How many patients does my doctor have? How many cylinders of blood spin through the centrifuge per day? How many times am I going to have to listen to this muffled muzak version of Vivaldi's *Spring* on repeat before I get talk to a nurse or a medical technician or a receptionist or a human?

* * *

34 minutes later

CLOSED for lunch? How is the office closed for lunch from 1:30-3:15 and how can they slip out of the office while I'm stuck here on hold with Vivaldi whom—might I add—I used to be quite fond of (just like I used to be quite fond of Tuesday). And whomever decided that "no news is good news" clearly never waited for bad news, or received a phone call relaying good news. NO news is NO news and I'm checking and unchecking the other boxes in my mind; and no, I haven't noticed weight loss and yes I'm still taking my medication and vitamins daily, and no there has been no change in my diet or exercise habits, and yes I DO OCCASIONALLY DRINK ALCOHOL. It has been SIX BUSINESS DAYS PEOPLE and you know what, Inova, I'm sure I wouldn't be "experiencing insomnia" if someone would just call me and verify that there is, in fact, nothing at all wrong with my body.

Overheard Between Pentagon and Arlington Cemetery

I.

"This is how most stories end in the hospital. Not with crash carts and sirens and electric shocks to the chest, but with an empty room, a crisp white bed, silence."

— Jacob M. Appel

I hate to be the one to call you but, man, I hope you're sitting down
ok grab some captain or something, man, 'cause this is brutal, man, brutal
dad died last night, brother
cancer, I guess
No
No, man, no one knew
No
No, man, he was alone
He couldn't pay the bills so he stopped it. stopped it three months ago.
No, man, no one knew. shame, isn't it? ida helped that bastard out
ain't nobody should die alone, ain't nobody...
he was in a lot, bro, I hate to tell you but it hurt
I love you. tell momma I'll send the check tomorrow

II.

"America's health care system is neither healthy, caring, nor a system."

— Walter Cronkite

OK but this is the third time
my daughter can't pay this
I can't pay this!
no ive already spoken with Cigna
don't you have a payment plan?
im gonna lose my house over this
cobra is an abomination they're criminals
you all should be ashamed of the work that you do
I hope sleeping don't come easy

Womb

You do not die because you don't have a uterus.
She still had ovaries, egg cells and hormones

—but wouldn't have a baby. Another woman donated her womb.
I would donate my uterus. Please, take it I don't want it.

I don't think you completely know of what you speak. It was pain
—fully obvious to me that I'll never reproduce. *"Just adopt"*

does not begin to address the emotional struggle.
Adoption is difficult, complex, expensive. They are not really
yours. *She'll need to have the womb removed. This seems like a lot
just to experience pregnancy. Incredibly selfish.*

Confront your emotions, not your disability.
Part of her body is not functioning properly.

Certain things should not be borrowed: toothbrushes, wombs.
There are greater things this helped her work through.

Why insist on biological offspring? *vanity? A selfish desire
ahead of common sense?*

I have no desire to carry a baby.

Megalodon

My cousin conjured the prehistoric creature—
her confidence by rum, and increased
by the belief of its extinction.

Show yourself! she screamed while the salted
waves beat our legs and raked the sand
into shelves under the moon.

The Pliocene she-monster glided soundlessly
past the jetty, her scarred dorsal lipping
the sectile water surface.

She approached black sails that thwapped in frigid
mid-night gusts, the ship alive with arm-wrestled
fists clenching gold-plated coins.

We curled in the sand under damp beach towels
while the lone nautical mother circled
the lull of the pirates.

The Moment She Realized it Was Beautiful

"I choose to love this time for once/with all my intelligence"

—Adrienne Rich

She drapes her thin body in black satin and organizes
candlelight to soften her face; her flaws.

tries to make her angelic hips protrude, push as if to
break through her skin like canvass pulled taut on its frame.

bends at the hips creating the formation of vertebrae on her back; her
shoulder blades rise to the surface like dorsal wings.

winds her hair so tightly around her fingers that it works into a knot, and
dabs scented oils on her wrists and eyelids.

crosses legs one way, the left over the right, slightly bending her knees so
that they appear longer; matte in the candlelight.

pulls the cabernet-colored lace high on her hips, checks her fingernails for
dirt, tosses her hair over her shoulders.

walks to the mirror and stops, eyes lined with charcoal, lips glossy in the
soft light.

Her waist is impeccable.

She shifts to view her body from the side, judging the size of her midsection
with her hands.

Runs her hand over her pelvis, brushing the scar; the familiar white
crescent, the once-wounded valley now numb; the fibrous tissue hiding
behind satin and lace

She allows the fabric to fall from her shoulders

and stands under the light.

She Stored Everything

An Erasure using *Women Without Men* by Shahrnush Parsipur, 1989

The parts of her wanted to separate from each other;
separate slowly. In winter she was nourished by dew,
but the cold didn't stop moving.
Planted on frozen ground, rains tore her half naked eyes.

Growing, the tiny leaves of her fingers drew up the earth,
listened to the roots, running water broke.

She saw the green waterfall; she learned the water's song.
The ice—her body—was breaking. Her eyes opened up,
the drops absorbed in her.
She could see the fish.

A mountain of wind blew her into the water,
and traveled the water, all over the world.

NOTES

In “Crescendo”:

1. “When someone hurts us in a dream, where do we feel the pain?” is similar to and inspired by Elisa Gabbert’s “When something hurts in a dream, where do you feel the pain?” on page 30 of her book *The Self Unstable*.

2. “Some men making love must think about music” is similar to and inspired by Elisa Gabbert’s “But some men during sex must think about music” on page 74 of her book *The Self Unstable*.

3. “You say you can’t swim because no one ever taught you, but dream every night that you live by the water.” is similar to an inspired by Beth Ann Fennelly’s line “You say you can’t swim, but dream each night of the ocean.” in her poem “Come to Krakow”.

In “Curbing Her Apathy”:

4. “She too desires the knowledge of Paradise” is similar to and inspired by Louise Gluck’s line “I too desire knowledge of paradise” from her poem “The Jacob’s Ladder”

In “Elegy for a Shark—For Dylan”

5. This poem is written after John Longenbach’s “The Crocodile.”

6. Part III, Projection, quotes from Philadelphia Public Ledger, 1916, written by James M. Meehan

In “It’s Me”

7. “I used to hide hickeys with curling iron burns so I could claim them” is similar to and inspired by Beth Ann Fennelly’s line “(Intimacy linked to pain—I covered my eighth-grade hickeys with curling iron burns)” from her poem “Le Hotel Terminus Notebooks”.

8. “If you tell me you love me accidentally or automatically I will forgive you” is similar to and inspired by Elisa Gabbert’s “If you tell me you love me, accidentally or automatically, I will always forgive you” on page 78 of her book *The Self Unstable*.

In “Conization”

9. Conization is defined by the National Cancer Institute as “a procedure in which a cone-shaped piece of abnormal tissue is removed from the cervix...Conization may be used to check for cervical cancer or to treat cervical cancer conditions.” Women who have undergone conization have an increased risk of miscarriage or preterm delivery.

In “Of A Choice”

10. Brittany Maynard was an American woman who, after finding out that she had terminal brain cancer, decided to end her own life at the age of 29 via “death with dignity”.

In “412 West Main Street”

11. “as if it remembered me” was inspired by Mary Oliver’s line “I thought the earth remembered me” from her poem “Sleeping in the Forest”.

In “Overheard Between Pentagon and Arlington Cemetery”

12. Jacob M. Appel is an American author, bioethicist, physician, lawyer and social critique.

In “Womb”

13. “Womb” consists of text collected from “A First: Uterine Transplant Gives Parents A Healthy Baby”, by Johan Wingborg, AP Writer, 4 October 2014. Additional text pulled from the discussion board comments following the online piece.

14. “She Stored Everything” is an erasure of the second edition of Sharnush Parsipur’s novel *Women Without Men*, published by The Feminist Press at CUNY on January 10, 2012.

BIOGRAPHY

Courtney Cook earned a Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in writing from Kent State University in 2009. She was the Outreach Coordinator for the Sally Merten Writers In The Schools Program during her first year as a Master of Fine Arts student, and worked as a teaching assistant at George Mason University her second and third years. She will receive her Master's degree in Creative Writing in May 2015.