

# BODY IN FLIGHT

by

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This master's thesis is a collection of poetry focusing on the emotional and behavioral responses of a woman whose perception of life is considerably twisted by her chances at inheriting cancer and certain romantic proclivities and preferences. In this collection, the narrator considers her potentially quite young death by cancer, pursues an alternative lifestyle, and cautiously considers the lives of any children she may have.

This collection is heavily "of the body" in that it speaks of issues such as death and love through the physical. This is intended as a representation of how the speaker has coped with her lack of control. This collection, however, would be incomplete to simply have a woman face death and decide to (alternatively enough) live her life to the fullest. More so, it seeks to consider questions of that life: How does a woman face imminent death when she knows the only reason she will die is because she was born female? How, then, does she relate to her body? How does it affect relationships with her mother and lovers?

Perhaps some of the answers (and further questions) lie in the fact that she embraces polyamory, engages in multiple coexisting, intimate relationships, within which there is little time to waste on jealousy or pettiness. These poems trace the relationship of a person to her body and watch as she negotiates that body with others.



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Masters of English

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: PERCEPTION .....	1
On the Death of my Grandmother by Rare and Aggressive Ovarian Cancer .....	2
Use Cocoa Butter .....	3
Monarch, Regina – The Spring Queen .....	4
After Mastectomy, Mother says <i>Slice off your breasts while they're still breasts</i> ....	5
Regards .....	6
My Dream after Learning that I Could Have Breast Cancer and Have thusly Joined My Mother, Her Mother, and All Our Mothers Before .....	7
CHAPTER 2: INTERNALIZATION .....	8
Shoebox of Our Mother .....	9
Note to Self .....	11
French Braid Headband .....	12
Domestication .....	13
Faulty Logic .....	14
Treading Water at Age Eight .....	15
Letters .....	16
CHAPTER 3: RESUSCITATION .....	17
We Began by Hurling our Bodies Together .....	18
Keepsake .....	19
Answer .....	20
Definition Polyamory.....	21
My Haddock eyes are Yellow-Globe Beautiful.....	22
Etymology Polyamory .....	23
If Dust Motes, Then... ..	24

Snap, Shift .....	25
Breath, My Darlings.....	26
Like Milkweed Calling .....	28
CHAPTER 4: INHERITANCE .....	29
Rational Conversation.....	30
On the Subject of a Daughter .....	31
Heirloom from My Grandmother.....	32
Tiger Lilies and Plums .....	33
To Name Her Rynn.....	34
CREDITS .....	35

## PERCEPTION



## **On the Death of My Grandmother by Rare and Aggressive Ovarian Cancer**

She grins up at me,  
scent of shit  
pinning us to her bedside,  
my sisters, mother, and I.

She gums at us,  
*Chicka dee dee dee*

Mother turns to me.  
*This is the way it goes.*  
*It eats us,*  
*brain and all.*

## Use Cocoa Butter

Great Aunt Netti says *You go on,  
butter your mother's belly. She bore you  
and all your weight.  
Least you can do.*

My aunt brings the bottle.  
When I ignore it, mother extends  
her hand then lifts her shirt.

Distended bulk – pushing  
stretch marks, shiny pink flares  
against the once softness of her.

The rent-apart gut of a woman  
who lived all womanhood through.

## **Monarch, Regina – The Spring Queen**

If I could be a single cell  
in a butterfly's golden wing,  
I would like to call it heaven

and, knowing this, refuse  
the winds which shift  
my sisters and me, our very

mitochondria jilted.

**After Mastectomy, Mother Says *Slice off your breasts while they're still breasts.***

Too rare and aggressive,

they'll say,

this accident of apoptosis,

misshapen chest,

chokehold in the middle

of your large intestine.

Daughter,

Knowing what waits is like taking

comfort in the throaty, heated sting

of vomit before expulsion.

## Regards

Her mouth gapes wide  
enough for nesting  
birds, while drool winds down  
her cheeks. Hair side-swept  
hours ago remains wrestled  
back and away,  
the parchment-like bed sheets  
tucked around and up her neck.

Outside, the steam of the city  
landscapes another May morning;  
I tug at the hem of my blouse.

When she wakes, I feel I must say it,  
as dying or maybe dying  
is always the time.

Yet in this case of *I Forgive You*,  
she answers in one big squawking  
*Fuck You*, the drool and the sheets  
and the birds somehow  
never having done  
any good at all.

**My Dream after Learning I Could Have Breast Cancer and Have thusly Joined My Mother, Her Mother and All Our Mothers Before**

The girls in fireplaces

don't burn

or char

or hot-white metal glow.

They drop

their chops

and bleat for apples, innocence, okra, new teeth.

Heads haloed in singed

black-blue-shine hair, curled and full.

Their soot-smooth palms still,

steal me, lift me

from sandals,

set my feet to flames,

tease my hair to ash-blonde frizz.

Together there, we clamp our jaws shut.

Our baying stops.

The cracks of a homestead blaze

consume, harmonize our dance,

make frantic the ways we become

one another, toe-to-toe-

to-smoke-to-ash.

## INTERNALIZATION

## Shoebox of Our Mother

1.  
She would not shave it off.  
Preferred to lose it slowly,  
*naturally*.

2.  
We collected her hairs,  
frail and split and golden,  
from the corners  
of yellowed linoleum.

We clutched in our fists  
fragile treasures only  
proteins wide.

My nine-year-old sister and I  
scuttled for our mother's  
lost locks beneath  
cabinetry and counters.

We sought strands  
stuck in hinges  
of a triple-layer-painted door  
(cantaloupe, stem of orchid,  
then merlot).

We found them there,  
and around chair legs,  
couch cushions,  
under mother-bed,  
pieces floating  
away as she slept.

3.  
We tied them up in ribbon,  
kept hidden in a shoebox.

4.  
After months, though,  
she gave in, shaved,  
put on a wig,  
and we stopped collecting.



5.

On the first day she wore it,  
we took out the shoebox,  
released the knots of ribbon,  
ran our hands through  
the strands one last time,  
and threw the box  
in the neighbor's burn barrel.

## Note to Self

I'd tell you that dripping with sarcasm isn't a good look,  
but it wouldn't do you any good  
to step out of the rain if you're already soaked.

Remember the wasp nest slung low,  
feeding into the air-conditioning unit  
in Grammy and Pap Pap's bedroom window?

How you knew my phobia spiked  
at your prodding, that the hive,  
bigger than my head, papier-mâché'd itself

bigger each night, bees like nightmarish  
kindergarteners, not knowing where  
the lines are meant to keep them,  
their combs, in and out?

How the rock you tossed  
hooked so far wide that I knew  
you'd meant you were scared.

I should tell you to step out of the rain before it rains,  
but I won't. I want you weighted before the tilt  
trips you sideways and surprised.

No, can't tell you  
soaked wings cannot fly.

## French Braid Headband

When I was young, I fell  
to your hands  
only after tantrums.

I pinched my eyes  
against the scalp-tight pull,  
no matter your practiced hands,  
the gentle ways you coaxed  
the morning to slow.  
I flinched as I heard the hair  
tighten against itself, as you hid  
your sins in the braid.

I knew, even then, how much  
it cost you to use me.  
I could see it in your reflection,  
the fog receding from the mirror,  
your brow-line cascading from  
tightened to loose.

Then your eyes,  
as though startled,  
jumping to mild guilt,  
as I squirmed.

Sometimes you'd curl the back,  
bounce my dishwater blonde ringlets  
on my shoulders, knowing by lunch  
they'd fall limp and gangly.

Right, left, middle,  
across my head,  
an inherited crown  
of *Lovely, yes, except*

*this strand here.*

## Domestication

I'm unable to feel guilty for loving  
to cook for you, sister,

the snapping sound  
of ground beef sizzling  
in the green skillet, or  
mostly-static radio cracking  
to be heard over the browning,  
the whirring hood.

Now, I can't mind your need  
for organics or warm wheat bread  
with each meal. I love  
to slip back into my apron,  
now that it fits.

But you should know that  
this is probably because it began  
with spoon-feeding our littlest sister  
who refused the vegetables  
of vegetable soup.

Remember how, for her,  
we were scooping mountains  
of parmesan cheese for taste,  
making planes from spoons,  
*open up the hatch,*  
*just eat already?*

These moves for our mother, too.  
Me with her solid foods,  
with spoons, with *just a few more bites*  
and *please*.  
You, so precise  
with her glass of water,  
with straw to her lips,  
with waiting.

## Faulty Logic

In the late-August dusk of  
upstate New York,

cousin Madeline and I  
lit citronella candles  
along the rust-iron railing of

cul-de-sac suburbia  
where she lived.

Candles that didn't work  
on us or mosquito the tension  
of my mother telling her mother  
*Shut up. Deal.*

My cousin slapped me  
for what my mother said to hers.

Her palm was the insect's static buzz  
with the last tock of the clock  
before the chime on the hour.

## **Treading Water at Age Eight**

I am a fish.  
That's what mother always said.

The halogen spotlight, glinting through the surface tension  
of an in-ground pool, summer of 1996. The only type of green  
light that isn't terrifying at midnight, when I am eight years old  
and sneaking. Because I cannot jump (it would wake the neighbors),  
I ease in, slow toes, bony ankles, stick thighs.

The light bends my body;  
ripples curve me, out, full.

The waist is the most difficult, I admit,  
something infinitely colder about water  
rising above the waist. Then, shoulders and neck.

I think it is like pain, but not quite,  
impatiently wonder how long until  
my chest is no longer flat, hips  
curved by more than water and light.

Languid ripples hazily brush at the concrete sides  
of the pool while I try to breathe, move, tread.

## Letters

I.

Mother,

Did you know that Sirius  
is a binary star, that they,  
through gravitation, attract & orbit.

Sometimes, I feel I've consumed  
the blazes of them both.

Suspended between them,  
I'm warm and infinite.

II.

Daughter,

Do not come calling stars again.

You know I'm unready  
for even an old light.

## RESUSCITATION



## **We Began by Hurling our Bodies Together**

Took a walk  
down the promenade,  
made love in a tunnel slide,  
carved our names  
in squiggles on picnic tables.

Let go when the dark loosed  
jean buttons from loops,  
pulled hazel fire from your eyes.

Then, I never kissed the best I could.  
My brains weren't worth much either.

You called me on it.

## Keepsake

Dangling  
like the pierced earlobe  
of a dried and shriveled head,  
a kindle-ready oak leaf,  
punctured by hemp  
bracelet weavings he'd  
twined in the early AM of his  
trip back from Atlanta.

First gift.

*I got you this.* Light and butterfly,  
like he hadn't meant to mean anything by it,  
a gesture to capsulize the kinks  
shifting between us.

Since then,  
since the lilac smacking of our bodies and brains began,  
I've been collecting leaves from everywhere we go.

I string them on the hemp-loop  
I hang them from my rear-view mirror.

## Answer

Because it starts with a right-ways smirk, a raised eyebrow, and a humorous *Hey, there's a bed over there and that's, you know, where we usually do it,*

this vertigo of play-aggression spills from granite kitchen counters, over the back of the couch. Moving, all eagerness and pink-cheeked tension, it

is into our bedroom without even the patience to take off our shirts. All lay me down on lavender quilt and black cotton sheets taking turns as

the one in control until we have to stop playing the Let's See Who Can Wait Longest game. Me, giggling because we both know that I'm always

first to give in. And when I tell you that the facts of the matter are like octopi in living rooms, and ask how you'd mop the ink-stains (if given an extra hand and

time enough) you respond in furrowed brows. This is only because we've just finished making love and

I'm not supposed to ask ridiculous metaphor questions so soon. You keep the silence and let my thoughts disintegrate,

unafraid of offending me because you didn't understand. But still, I saw the small quirking nervousness nestled in gaps of your lips, a shy-side question perforating the brightest green parts

of your irises. I ask, *What's the matter*, and wait while you consider voicing yourself. Then, your anxiety-laced inquiry, *Why do you laugh when we make*

*Love?*

**Definition: Polyamory**

Preparing three coffee mugs  
the morning after  
my darlings and I try to make a baby for the first time.

One mug with a splash of whole milk,  
another black,  
mine with sugar, hazelnut cream.

## **My Haddock Eyes are Yellow-Globe-Beautiful**

They tease my opal underbelly,  
grazing, light-lip flutters and  
maroon swells, luring the ocean  
blood swarming beneath  
the surface of my scales.

My darlings, moving from belly  
to my salty jaw, then slicing as two  
pink hooks in my mouth.

Insistence of their fingers,  
rubs away the Devil's Thumbprint  
above my pectoral fin,  
fans out my gills until they dissolve.  
My new-lunged breath comes in bursts.

They make me human,  
their wrinkled knuckles,  
their sudden lemon&grass  
scent together.

I breathe for when my darlings made me  
human, the moment when I  
somehow kept  
my haddock eyes.

## **Etymology Polyamory**

Polyphilia

would be better

or, perhaps, multiamory.

Polyamory –

etymologically back-

wards. Divided root

words – greek *poly*

is not to be coupled with

latin *amor*.

### **If Dust Motes, Then...**

Then, whose hand would raise  
hairs up my white arms?  
Whose five o'clock shadow to scratch  
my cheeks and neck so deeply?

If, gently, the fit of my hips slips  
exactly into place, there  
between, cupped and cradled?  
If, later, bird's nest of my hair  
for them to burrow in?

Then, come quiet to settle us,  
come warmth to keep us,  
come dust motes in sunbeams  
to sing us the evening's peace again.

## **Snap, Shift**

Through our window,  
the bold shine of a cold  
December afternoon  
silhouettes my  
fair Mexican darling.

His image divines  
the pads of his fingers  
across the cheek  
of our other third.

Air sharpens inward –  
theirs for each other,  
mine for how bodies  
begin themselves.

The snap of a branch  
in silent winter snowfall.

My back to the wall  
outside the door, turned  
away after glimpsing.  
Stay to listen,  
just a moment longer,  
then shuffle away.



## Breath, my Darlings

when drowned and ringed

round the eyes with

pin-prick petechiae. when

in the case of finally seeing

that connection

between the throat

and lung tree, a

failure when

fully drowned

down and under,

when.

when you glimpse

that last person

you'll ever need

and you know

you can't have them, too.

the same when

as being born, the same

contracting dark purple tunnel.

no, not the same as in birth,

not towards light

and not away,

but a bright orange crinkle,

a sunset, caught, paused.

you, a slice of butterfly wing

rendered thinner by the apricot sky,

this, the last movement,

one orange against another,

blending

with the slow of breath,

*when.*

## **Like Milkweed Calling**

Darlings, you wouldn't  
want my garden's tomatoes  
right now. They're still orange.

That's not to say that  
orange isn't a tasty tone:  
but in tomatoes

early sunset skin  
spells a hasty harvesting  
for the three of us.

I need one more week  
for the pale skin to deepen  
to a ripened rouge.

Then, we'll gather them.  
Then, we'll feast till full.

# INHERITANCE

## Rational Conversation

At two in the morning, I  
remember how much I want  
to make a child in a year or three.

I turn over in bed,  
shift the maroon sheets,  
lightly scratch his back,  
spoon him, and speak.

*If I hit thirty-two, probably,  
it will be too late.*

*If it is too late,  
I will hate you.*

To him,  
it is as though I've spoken  
through water into dreams.

*We're young.  
Don't worry.  
That will be a different place in our lives.  
Different, but soon.*

## **On the Subject of a Daughter**

I didn't know that cotton fields shook  
until last week when they bloomed,  
the winds picking through their tumbles.

Breezes channeling rows, between  
stick and bramble – cool-sweeping the sweat  
from behind my knees, too.

Bursting the white from burnt bolls,  
cotton phoenixing itself alive  
in the used-over-again soil.

At the edge of the field, the road  
radiates heat. There, my daughter,  
her body beckoning.

Yes, October swells.

## **Heirloom from my Grandmother**

I could pawn it for a chance,  
for bottles of Serophene.  
I could sell the opal ring  
he bought her on their  
wedding anniversary,  
an heirloom she later gave to  
me, knowing it was too big  
for even my thumbs.

She'd have sold it too, if she had to,  
if, like us, their fertility danced  
like two brittle skeletons  
trying to buy their way out of falling.

## **Tiger Lilies and Plum**

Three smudge-skin plums will lean  
into the wooden sides of the bowl  
like three finger-printed new moons.

In her high chair, my daughter will work,  
line up piles of neck-bent  
tiger lilies, pound petals,  
abandon the vase to the cat,  
and claim *pretty, momma, pretty*.

Through the window slats,  
sunrise will stripe her fruits,  
make her plums  
not moons,  
but breakfast.



## **To Name Her Rynn**

You won't know her  
until you've seen her knee-  
deep in snow banks,

a thin, yellow maxi skirt  
hiked up to her thighs,  
high black boots and  
teal thermal leggings  
riding beneath the pick-ups.

Arms wide, mouth  
upward, open, she  
praises the silence.

Pagan goddess of springtime  
wishing herself the vicar  
of winter, cold queen  
of the quiet, clean white.

If she moves, the whirl  
of her yellow skirt  
puffs the powder  
like passing clouds,  
like new breath.

## CREDITS

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