

It's not the hare's
scream that haunts, it's
the silence that follows.



I am told to breathe in. "It isn't work –" I'm out
before I can shape the air into words.
They are slicing the skin at my breast,
faceless, blue-dressed figures hovering.

I open my eyes. Princess Margaret's white ceiling shines down. Tears – primal deep –
waiting to be released, accompany a renewed purity.

My mother is a keeper of secrets. Her hair, red all her life, even after
it grew back in. They had to tell me. I was eleven.
We had recently moved to the quarry.

"It's cancer, isn't it?" I said, holding
my school books tight to my chest.
They weren't surprised that I knew,
though the reality of my knowing
became apparent only after I'd said those words.

Mom turned to me. "I'm sorry this had to happen to you."



This fortune-seeing inside dreams
beams yellow riddles, questions
scut exclamation points,
I can't be more than whom.



I was a shadow attached to mother's legs, always tugging. Inside my mind I floated, away from all eyes watching me. I was in their line of vision then, they were assessing me, taking me in, my long brown hair split into pigtails with mother-curled ringlets hanging like hound's ears, my deep-set dark blue eyes, my wonky uneven ears and freckles. I could see I was not what they wanted to see. Where did this come from, this deep dislike of self? The beauty that spoke never found me.

Your parents die and you become a writer.
I shall go on.

We never had a cat, but it did get my tongue.
Held it with its claws, the skin of its teeth –

You know that's a lie.
Many lies have a spine of truth.
It's how they stand up.

They say not to write in the first person. *I* is too much.
They bully others to make their own path.
But I know, deep down, they know *I* is a construct.

I is a water spider on a glassy lake
pushing past the inaction of pain.

The cedar tree outside the window is green
but the back leaves are rusting.
They hold on. They don't fall.

I need more animus – raw, male energy. To act without doubt, without overthinking.
How draining doubt is. To be in the pool of how others perceive you. To melt into a
wicked-witch puddle and wait for the sun to appear from behind dark clouds, dry you
into air.

I told my friend I feel like a floating head.

And yet my head remains to think and overthink.
Damn it. Why can't I be the floating headless?

I once loved a boy who said he didn't love books.
“Why read when you can live life instead?”
He liked to shoot duck and deer and listen to Willie Nelson.
Now I've painted his neck red.
And yet he was also clean-cut and caring. He only hunted
in season and ate what he killed. Antlered deer heads
hung on his parents' walls. This was normal in their house.
As normal and frequent as windows in ours.
The deer eyes held a frozen expression but not one of pain.

Fake eyes, forever in stare.

They were heads but they weren't floating.

An only child. “Aren't you lonely?” They look at you with pity, the black circles of their
pupils expanding toward outer space. Lonely doesn't come from being alone. Lonely
is the loss of self with others. I once lived with a man who gave me that wisdom. It
was his everlasting gift: “You'll never get published without me. You're a bitter barren
woman.”



He makes me into a noun.
I can't move.



“Labelling a woman ‘bitter,’ is like calling them ‘crazy,’ it’s just another way to dismiss their feelings and whatever has happened to them as ‘all in her head.’ . . . No one wants the reputation of being a ‘bitter’ woman, so this manipulates women into keeping silent and the perpetrator remains protected and their behaviour remains unchallenged.”

– Sophie King, “How the concept of forgiveness is used to gaslight women,” *Medium*

I resonate with these words.

I never wanted children; he just assumed that I did.

He couldn't see me at all.

Though in the beginning, I thought he could.

He had the eyes of a deer on a hunter's wall,
looking without seeing, seeing without feeling.
That deer turned wolf.



I wipe your absence
with clean-stained hands.



You have to work hard to get mean words out of your system. *Bitter barren woman.* Bones heal. You are led through a tour of mending. Time accompanies you. Next thing you know, you're it in a game of tag, home free in a game of hide-and-seek.

and worry the first time I lay on my side in the half-lit ultrasound room, a pillow tucked behind me for support. When the technician pushed the cold hard device over the sensitive breast skin, the insides of my jellied breast appeared on the black and white screen as a strange subterranean world, a lunar landscape. During this time I learned words like *fibroadenoma*. Friendly words. All encounters with lumps were benign.

We live in vigilance after watching our mothers die.
Those twin sexual organs that hold milk for babies
and desire for others carry a terror for us.

We succumb to having them flattened like pancakes on mammogram plates.

We suck in our breath through wincing of pain
and ignore the metallic buzzing of the taking image.

Our breasts don't belong to us then.

Squeezed and handled with efficient gloved hands,
moulded like Play-Doh.

At night we dream they're hacked off.

“We need to do a biopsy.”

I make the dead move like dolls with beating hearts and strings from marionettes. They live inside the folds of my notebooks. My strings become their strings – free will? No. The dead lead me to the next scene. The dead are here. It's a miracle! My parents are more than fading remnants from a dream. They are in continuing conversations.



Leaves spit at my face.



Oliver Sacks gave me a power cord.
He handed it over to me like a gift and said,
“Make electric with it.”
This happened after he died.
Earlier that day I heard his voice on the radio,
a previously taped interview aired
as an acknowledgement of his death.
Did he know about my floating head?
Maybe that’s why he gifted me the power cord –
to connect me to him like an umbilical cord.
And to think Oliver Sacks gave it to me,
some anonymous Canadian poet still writing
poems about her dead parents.



If I jump into pain
will it hurt me?



Parents die in the world
but they never die in their children.
And yet a distance remains, edged with abstraction.
This changed under the spell of anaesthesia.

Feathers, forever falling from birds.

Feathers become my talismans
during my months of cancer treatment.

City streets, sidewalks, parking lots –
feathers from sparrows, seagulls, pigeons.

Pigeons wedged in a flower-ring scrum pecking madly for bread.

The machine-gun stutter of the cardinal.

And I remember these words from my first creative writing teacher:

“Your subject matter chooses you.”

Death chose me.



Ghosts have no substance,
require no sustenance, walk
through water, stone.



When we lived in suburban Grimsby, during sleepovers at my best friend’s house, I often heard a siren fire through the night. *Don’t let it be our house. Don’t let it be my parents.* My small body tenses beneath the sheets as the fire engine’s wailing closes in and then . . . relief – it’s somebody else’s terror.

And now birds.

These creatures with wings
that fascinated my mother become a feathered bridge.



Be as small as a hole
for birds to fly through.



One night while waiting for a date
for my second surgery . . .
waiting is harder than knowing –
the surgeon didn't get clean margins –
he needed to go back in –
I fall asleep.

I'm alone in the house looking out at the quarry
when a flock of mallards fly by. One flaps
through the half-open window.
She beats her wings in the cage of trapped space,
knocks against the family-room walls.
I reach for her panic.
Cupping her breast, I guide her out –

Wide awake, I feel her pillow-soft imprint on my palms,
the ghost-ness of her breast feathers.

A bird in house.

I enter my own cage
of panic.
Isn't that an omen?

But I guided her out. I saved her.

I recall the figure-ground illusion: faces/vase.
When you see two faces, you can't see the vase.
The mind only perceives one image at a time.

Bird in house. Bird out of house.

Omen? Gift?



Water falls to where the heart aches,
a ladder slowly lifts,
and the birds the birds
hurl themselves up –



In my journal I write this sentence: *I'm walking down the street when a feather floats into my line of vision.* An hour later I'm walking down the street to see my therapist when a feather floats in front of me, wind-lingering before it touches ground.

My words have come to life. What does it mean?

My therapist tells me a story about Jung. He was working with a patient who dreamt about a scarab beetle. The patient, having told Jung about it, was resisting deeper meaning when a brittle tapping came from the window.

A beetle trying to fly through glass.

A feather floats into my line of vision.

We see the connection
as a sign of affirmation.



You are called into a crowd of feathers.



I often work with students on a one-on-one basis with their poems. They read their draft aloud and I sit with their work, think it through with all the knowledge and experience and intuition from my years of writing and studying the craft, and when ready, I share my thoughts and insights. Try cutting the first line. The last line isn't needed, see? Can you be more precise with this image? The poetic logic is here except for the last stanza. A student I work with tells me she's been diagnosed with breast cancer. So many of us on this journey. She gives me a copy of her latest poem. I follow along as she reads aloud:

"A bird flies through an open window.

It flaps from wall to wall,
searching for the way out. I reach
to cup its panic – warm and plump
and thickly feathered – I guide
it to the open window –
it flies away becoming sky."

She sees the expression on my face.

"You could feel those breast feathers on your hand."

She nods. "How did you know?"



We are both buried by bird shadow.



A bird flies through an open window.
A woman with breast cancer dreams
of a bird flying through an open window.
She cups the breast, feels the pump of its panic
through the palms of her hands. She guides the bird out –

She wakes and thinks: *Omen? Gift?*

Before my coming out of æther, I talked to my mother.

She never answered but I talked anyway.

How can you be gone more years than my being here?

How can that be when there hasn't been a day

in which you haven't entered my mind

as insight, revelation or memory,

hovering like a patch of scuttering clouds.

To hear your voice. To smell your scent.

But without the base coat of your skin,

to mix with Chanel N°5, no scent of you.

Mom, we are having a conversation

in our silences.



Silence is a kind of flight.



Nobody tells you that you own your own power. What's alive inside your core is there to be sucked away. Leaking testicle of a balloon, skin-sagged on the carpet. Pump it back up. But how? All you have is shadow.



The hare waits
for more hurt
to bruise up.



Dad was always groomed to perfection before leaving the house for work. Pressed dress shirt and pants, matching dress socks, polished dress shoes, cufflinks gold-gleaming, his salt and pepper hair blow-dried to match the male model on the Dry Look aerosol can, all strands sprayed into frozen protection (even the wind couldn't move them). No nose hairs or stubble bristle, his cheeks smooth, no doubt tingling from aftershave. The double-clicking of his black leather briefcase after that last gulp of Taster's Choice coffee in his favourite mug: *Tennis Players Never Die They Just Lose Their Balls*.

"Ladies, I'm off!" Into his freshly polished blue Caddy, still gleaming from the weekly car wash, the shoulder strap from his seat belt resting loosely across his six-foot-six frame to give the illusion of the buckle's click, then a swift one-handed reverse out of the carport, tire-crunch over gravel, while sucking Halls or Roloids, a salesman in salesman's armour on his way to battle.



What storm is this solving the goldfish.



She came as light – darkness, a backdrop for her glow.
She moved with the slow speed of her walker
(before wheels were added to them) the constant
up-and-down rhythm.

He could hear
the scraping.
He was in bed,
the door wide open –

and saw the approaching light.

They say sightings happen
during the span of three days after death.

The soul, if you believe in the soul
as a form of energy, is released

from the body like the remaining warmth
after a television's switched off.

The nest inside the heat.

Rest your hand there
and you'll feel it.

The aftermath of alive
before it goes cold.

“Russ, is that you?”

The urge to run to her –

He bolted up –
But his legs wouldn't
move –

locked by invisible chains
he couldn't battle their grip and weight.

Russ.

The light hovered.

I was jealous of his sighting.

Now I don't have to be.

I shift my legs on the stretcher.

"You're here but I can't see you."

"This is better than light, honey, you know that."

"If I'd known that cancer would bring me to you —"

"Then this wouldn't be a gift, would it? It would be an expectation.

You couldn't know."

"Don't leave me. You won't, will you?"

"I can never leave you. I am your scars."

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Through air
she slips
into the eye
of a fanning peacock.

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Beep and pause of the monitor,
murmur of voices behind the nurses' station,
and a patient feels no pain
while lying on a stretcher
floating in the fluid of Mother.

To know so little about my birth —
only the day, month, year.

Breech? Caesarean? Bottle-fed? Breast?

At a craft fair a man sells necklaces with the phases
of the moon linked to birthdates. I give him what information I can.
Did Mom see the gibbous moon during the drive to Henderson Hospital?