

ZEBRA

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Bird Nest

there's a bird nest in my living room
i noticed it this morning
in the lampshade across from the frosted window
close to the floor, but not quite

it is made up of orange string from
the knitted pillows and black dog
hair from the rug, chipped paint
and yellowed sheet music from old carols

it looks close to bursting
some light is seeping through the
cracks and gaps and holes
searching for nearby spots to metastasize

there's only one egg now, but i feel
a second one coming

Symptom

I think it was in math
Junior year in January
In that poorly insulated room
Dave Matthews Band on the wall
Where I first took off my jacket
And rolled up my sleeves
Fought the urge to kick off my shoes
But did tie up my hair
I felt like a tea light
Burning on a pile of snow
Column sinking into the bank
A strange, persistent flame
“Are you okay?”
The girl sitting across from me
“Your face is really red,”
I left the classroom
Walked down the hallway
Turned right into the bathroom
No red splotches
Or patches or spots
My entire face the same shade
A sickly scarlet
Wrapped a scarf around my neck too
A fever hanging on me
Like a costume made of carpet
I remember wanting to escape
My body but my heartbeat
Was steady I crushed
The brown sheets of paper
Under the slow stream
Let them drip down my back
Walked back to class
Thought I left the heat behind me

Hoofbeats

*When you hear hoofbeats,
think of horses,
not zebras* — a medical
proverb from the
40s. Look for what's
right in front of you.
The solid colors, not the
stripes. The five mis-
diagnoses, the doctor
who'll do the biopsy
to prove the seventeen-
year-old girl is out of
her mind. She's anxious, she's
sad, maybe a nice boy
broke her heart. He'll
harness the horse, he'll
get the foolish girl out of his office.
I wish they would
have let me stay awake as he
cut into my liver.
I wish I could have placed my
hand on his as he
Held my tumor up to the light.

Diagnosis

The day the gastroenterologist
asked me *How did you get
here* was my first time in
that room in that hospital
in that city I told him *I
wasn't feeling good* he stared
and asked *What were you
feeling exactly* I tried to put it
in words I felt warm too warm
I felt like the sun was
worming its way out of me
and it came out like *Hot flashes
and diarrhea* he said *I see* I
wondered if he was lying he
asked me *How often* I didn't
say *Enough for people to
notice and tell me I look
sick* instead I said *Every other
day were the flashes
three times a day for the
other* he smiled at me and
said *It's amazing how fast
we found it* I wish sarcasm
was allowed in hospitals it's
all so serious I wanted to remind
him how he did not hear me when
the roots sunk deep how he only
listened when they came up for air
but I smiled back and said *Yes I'm
so lucky* he looked at my mom
and told me *You'll have a pet scan
on Friday* and continued to talk
about tests and tumors without
ever saying the c-word when we
left his room and stopped in
front of checkout aisle d I
asked my mom *Is there
cancer inside me* and heard

the secretary inhale

Ghost

the sick are omniscient we are outside
of our story i watch my mothers eyes
in the mirror when the strange man in a
white coat tells her something inside of
her daughter is trying to kill her i stare
from the window outside my grandmother's
house as my mother asks her to hold her
but consoles her shaking body
instead i wake up in the morning with
my mother standing outside her daughters room
contemplating her dying in her twin bed
knowing there is nothing she can do i stand
behind her as she makes binders of net cancer
information and doctor appointments and
big bird hospital stickers out of her grief i
read the eulogies she writes on purse napkins
while she waits for her daughter in the radiation
lobby i monitor her dreams of autumn funerals
bouquets of white lilies and tumors buried in
the ground i wish she knew i was infinite

Cancer (constellation)

carcinoid tumors light up like stars
orbiting organs burning in my
liver the heat of metastasis reaches the sky
the stars still visible i used to reach
for those celestial bodies hormones spill from the
clouds energy releases serotonin and gastrin
heat and light i remember the night my neighbor told me
the stars are the dead watching us facial flushing the
fusion of hydrogen into helium episodes of warmth
find refuge in the skies of fire blood vessels dilate the masses
explode and break down the body stars so far away
dead by the time they are found if we can see
them shine it must be too late in the machine
i shut my eyes hard until i see my ruby sky
wonder who gave malignancy its own constellation

En route to the Rogel Cancer Center

i start to feel nauseous when there are twenty minutes left that's when my mom turns on the AC and turns down joni mitchell and starts talking about something to keep me there with her sometimes she rants about the tragedy of rory gilmore or other times she tells me about henri matisse and his big scissors while i start dreaming of cold showers and the luxury of freezing to death i could never manage long car rides the first enemy in my life was motion sickness sometimes i think it's worse than the cancer i keep spinning and spinning waiting to land on some planet which is when my mom starts planning our trip to outer space no one else would go with us but the two of us would like it up there it would be nice to look at something impossible instead of feeling it my mom is the worst driver in the world maybe it's not a good tactic for her to distract me because we always end up missing the first exit which means more time for nausea to rot in my stomach road closures will be the end of me forget the disease it's my inner ear that will kill me first the tumors are gonna be pissed i start to take off my shoes it's too hot in here my mom says she will speed up then she speeds up so i close my eyes until we get to the parking structure i open the car door when we are still moving but my mom doesn't yell at me shouting at someone in front of the cancer center would only be funny after the fact i can feel the nausea peel away from my skin it's nice to feel alive again i think before seeing my oncologist but first we have to figure out this stupid elevator with the floors re arranged so floor one is floor two and my mom presses the wrong button every goddamn time the nausea starts to zip me up again until the doors slide open to the correct waiting room i take a deep breath and walk over to the counter pass by the elderly patients who look at me funny yes i am also dying or maybe it's the pink hair either way i wish they would all leave me alone my mom reads me each question i have to answer am i pregnant am i depressed am i concerned am i a drug addict am i a spouse am i alive am i alive am i alive am i alive am i alive am i alive they are ready for me and i follow my mom back behind the hall and wish i could leave everything behind

Impressions

<i>Dominant DOTATATE-avid heterogeneous</i>	I decided to write my own eulogy
<i>Low attenuation mass in the left</i>	Of the moments I wanted to remember
<i>Hepatic lobe is compatible with</i>	The crooked dimples of my sibling
<i>Known metastatic neuroendocrine</i>	Sound of their squeaky laughter
<i>Tumor</i>	How I feel my grandfather standing next to
<i>Small adjacent DOTATATE-avid satellite</i>	Me when I face the edge of the water
<i>Lesion closely adjacent to the</i>	Sepia image of my mother reading
<i>Dominant mass</i>	Under the yellow kitchen light
<i>DOTATATE-avid gastrohepatic</i>	Watching midnight snowfalls
<i>Lymph node is compatible with</i>	The morning I watched my dad try to
<i>Nodal metastatic disease</i>	Save the life of our pet fish in the half-bathroom
<i>Foci of DOTATATE-avidity in the</i>	Portrait of the naked lady in my kitchen
<i>Region of the pancreatic head</i>	Taught me to love myself
<i>Is suggestive of</i>	When our eyes met in the rearview
<i>The primary tumor site</i>	Mirror and I realized I loved her

Battle

is / cancer / a / war
my / thoughts / are / staggered
too / much / time / in / the / hospital
do doctors / realize / what words
they / use / to / describe / disease

invade / occupy / conquer
no / one / ever / explains / to / me
how / cells / mu / tate / what / is
the / role / of my / D / N / A

it is / always / an / old man
who / sits / across from / me
and / tells / my / parents / how
i am / being / captured / seized
taken / over

the / war / was / declared / when
my / cells / received / instructions / to
multiply / army crawl / in / to / my
blood / stream

it / takes / two / to / fight / a / war
is it / a / true / battle / if / i am
unaware / of / my / body / being
over / whelmed / over / run

flags / stuck / in / my / liver / and
pancreas / and / lymph / nodes

cells / pile / like / dead / bodies
and / form / tumors

my / un / conscious / surrender

Flushing

When the heat came to visit me

I would surrender to its waves

Swallow the stream of serotonin

Let myself float away in its flush

Drown in a bridal-pink blush

The peaceful suffocation

Of drifting just beneath the surface

Watching the hormones ripple above

Asking the tides for my survival

This ocean has always been red

Melting in the heat of my bloodstream

Liver completely submerged

Treasure chest of precious tumors

Sinking to the bottom of me

Lymph nodes wrapped around like seaweed

Pancreas reflects the sunbeams

Algae grow on the organs

As I sink, sink, sink

Origin Story

Red crystals and orange jewels wrapped in silver wire hang from the low branches of the maple tree in my backyard. My mother wove them into the tree sometime before we moved into this house, before I was born. I can picture my mother underneath the tree, belly swollen with me, crystals shining in her pockets. I wonder if she could feel fire-colored stars blazing inside of me. Brilliant orbs pumping poison, a constellation of tumors already burning, a galaxy of malignancy. It is easier if I believe it was always part of me.

Surgery

Translucent figure. Naked skeleton. Closed curtains. Countdown. Four needles sink deep. Eyes shut. Fingers uncurl. Halo. Goodbye, mom. Start at the chest. Take a deep breath. Muscles stretch. Sacred heart. Vital parts. Guarded soul. Slight sting. Rubber core. Scaled breasts. Red wings. Eyelids flutter. Oxygen check. Wait. Continue. Burn synchronizes with the song. Infantile hallucinations. Cancer caught. Left lobe. Lymph nodes. Pancreas. Cradled eggs. Hollow nest. Sewn shut. Floating away. Insides adjust. Palms open. White ceiling. Dry breeze. Conscious dreaming. One window. Six trees. Cracked hands. Starch sheets. First wave. Second wave. Third. Asleep. To endings. Comfortable sadness. Heart rate monitors. Closed doors. Pain scale. Dried tears. Soft knocking. Six. Exhalation.

Nirvana

I.

i never heard
my father cry he
did not burn with
me or my mother
he continued to
go to work when
i set our house
on fire and he
walked straight
to his room when
he came back home
footprints in the ash
i wanted him to hold
my hand i wanted
him to make it
go away like how
he used to do when
i skid my knee or
twisted my ankle
or fell off my bike
my father used to
be everything but
once the diagnosis
was confirmed he
started closing the
door and playing
music i could not
enter any part of him
i wanted him to turn
it down or off or
keep it on and shout
over the lyrics that
he loved me it's
not fair that he
shut down when
my body did

II.

i spent six nights
in the hospital
after surgery with
no control over my
body it needed help
with everything i
couldnt breathe on
my own or stay
conscious i would
wake up for seconds
at a time to see my
father to the left of
me with his head
phones on and eyes
closed and wished
he would look at
me just once my
mother was there too
she was always cry
ing one time i woke
up and they were both
gone it was just me
and those headphones
still playing music
i closed my eyes and
begged my body to
give me one moment
awake and listened to
nirvana escape into
the room *frances
farmer will have
her revenge on
seattle* was the
same song he had
been playing since
june and in that
hospital room it
sounded like every
thing he did not

say to me

Dreams, Post-diagnosis

I dream of cutting out my organs. I dream of becoming a tree.
I dream of plunging my hand down my throat and pulling the
tumors out one by one. I dream of my father playing
the drums his lip curled. I dream of the four needles floating
in my bloodstream. I dream of muscle spasms and hernias
dropping like apples. I dream of my dreams on rainy
days. In the morning I dream of my doctor's blank faces staring
at me in my bathroom mirror. At night I dream of their words.
There is little research on this disease. I dreamed of the past
tense. I dreamed I made mistakes. That God placed the tumors in
me with soft touches. I heard her wishing me dead. I dreamed
with the disease under my pillow caressing my cheek.
When I dreamed I felt cancer watching me. I dreamed of
violent metastasis. Of giving birth to tumors. I hovered over my
body when I dreamed. I watched cancer make me its treasure
map. I felt the X on my liver. I never want to dream in a red
coffin. Let me dream next to my grandparents. I will sleep
next to them in the ground.

Three Years

three years cancer free body still adjusting
left my mind in that room watching the
trees healthy but no one will look at me
kids dont get sick when the tumors leave they
forget how my body tried to kill me
i call my dad every morning wait for
his voice to reach me sometimes he is still
asleep so i place my hands on my liver
and listen for my heartbeat wonder
if organs feel grief how do i take care
of me craters of resentment empty
he responds to my call with a text message
says to me you are paying emotional bills
the price of malignancy

This Sickness

what part of me is this sickness
is it all of me or just the part of me
that is this sickness in the morning i
feel this sickness blooming in my
stomach like bouquets of tumors
sprouting and growing faced toward
my lungs and breathing in their air
like sun rays is this sickness
photosynthesizing my blood to make
its food to make it strong to turn me
green but instead of making oxygen
this sickness makes byproducts of
bile and poisoned blood and broken
hearts i'm sorry mom
i don't like how this sickness wears
my face and turns others to stone
when they look into my eyes this
sickness is contagious it enters
rooms before i do to let people know
that this sickness is coming and they
can avoid it if they smile and tell me
how healthy i look they don't know

how this sickness spreads like spilled
milk seeping and sinking underneath
my skin expiring with my body's
chemicals this sickness starts
syndromes and symptoms that fold
into myself like flowers welting with
stems shivering and petals falling
this sickness will kill me this
sickness will not this sickness loves
me this sickness loves me not this
sickness is hiding it is playing my
favorite childhood game waiting for
the shock of being discovered of
being found and this sickness has
stopped counting so all i can do is
hold my breath and
wait