

Rock, Paper, Scissors

Malignant, not benign,
lymph nodes already invaded,
the start of a war:
she never enlisted.

The surgeon failed to find clean margins
as though she had transgressed,
written outside the lines
of her life.

At thirteen, no one I knew
had breast cancer. Her first Sunday morning
home from the hospital, she told me
what they had done to her.

Doctors do things like this?
Short sentences, jagged pauses,
deep breaths: I was numb,
she was forty-one.

Alone, scanning a catalogue from Saks,
staring at shapely young women modeling
black and white brassieres: wondered
if mine were big enough.

I grabbed a scissors from my desk drawer
cut out their breasts, one by one,
page after page.

Bloodletting

From the Greek *hystera*, *womb*,
her womb,
from the Greek ektomia, cut out,
of her.

Etymological roots grow,
twist, burrow, tighten their hold,
cannot explain or erase
a scalpel cutting.

When she dressed, I pretended
not to see the long new-moon
scar low on her belly. No memory
of hospital visits.

Decades later a handmade
“Welcome Home” card
recovered: one heart encircled,
pink crepe paper flowers.

She walked slowly out
of her bathrobe into tweed wool skirts,
color-coordinated cashmere sweater sets,
the fabric of normalcy, threads of denial.

A sacred space of origin,
cut out, medical waste.
A response in blood:
my menses stopped.

Separate Shores

A Sunday stroll with my father,
on Madison Avenue, not our usual route:
we never went to his office on weekends.

It smelled: medicinal alcohol used before shots.

My brother and I sat in black
Bauhaus waiting room chairs,
patients who did not know we were sick
with anxiety.

A small growth on her thyroid, two months
of radiation, out-patient procedure,
unrelated to her surgeries: no solid ground,
shorelines fickle, dunes eroding.

For my father, recurrence a tornado
of smashed dreams, shattering
personal hope, professional oaths:
do no harm, treat for cure.

I offered silence, asked no questions:
our pact. A new clause added
– without negotiation – this conversation
never happened.

I had joined the conspiracy.
Stranded on separate shores,
my mother and I played our assigned roles,
few scripted lines.

Bare Branches

There is a problem, with my mother's breathing:
a cavity – between lung and membrane –
filling up with fluid. My father is measured,
words rehearsed, trapped

between medical knowledge
and desperation: he cannot lie
about anatomical location, cannot name
its cause, its culmination.

Late September, green leaves glean
to gold, resign to brown, fall
to the ground: stems detach,
less oxygen released.

In a photo that autumn, she stands by the edge
of the pond at our country house,
tree branches bare. Her body at an angle:
she chooses not to face the camera.

She has reached the final stage,
shadows flicker, her face, her neck.
It is the only black and white
photograph I have of her.

Lost in Central Park

After my mother died

I could not say the word

dead: I had not seen her die.

It was possible she was still alive –

maybe hiding (unlike her),

or traveling abroad (she would have told me).

Had she wandered out of the hospital,

gotten lost in Central Park, too disoriented

to find her way home?

She could not have walked

out. The last time I saw her legs

they were not my mother's legs.

Muscles atrophied: small bundle of bones

loosely wrapped in a sagging skin sack.

I saw them by accident – her blanket slipped before

the nurse could catch it –

so thin, like twigs you could break

with your bare hands.

After she died, I tried to see her face,

but all I could see were her chicken bone legs:

they followed me

everywhere I went.