

"The body I have and am is my most intimate point of entry into the world."

E. Kohak

Katie sits still in the yellowed waiting area near the others. She pretends to read one of the softcover mystery novels she plucked from the carousel. Katie is early for her appointment. She is often early. Fear does this to her. Fear of not being on time. Fear of making someone upset. Fear of failing to fulfill unspoken obligations.

Katie sees lines of heels making their way through the hallway. Some, quickly paced, others, shuffling. In whispered voices and sweat dampened sweaters, patients find their way to the elevators that take them further down the bowels of the hospital where extra radiation machines run without stopping. The machines need the colder temperatures of the basement otherwise they will overheat.

Katie tightens her body against the cold of the waiting room. Her arms move across her chest to ward off the chill. Protection. She startles. A technician calls her name. The sound of the voice, reminiscent of warm Scottish shortbread beside a morning mug of tea comes from a woman who stands relaxed at the entrance to the room. Katie looks up. Tea. Katie would rather be sipping tea than responding to the name. Her name.

She whispers to herself; Mary Kathleen.

Katie, to those who know me well.

She makes eye contact with the technician who smiles and moves to sit beside her. "Hi, I'm Sarah, can you tell me your name and your birthdate please?"

Mary Kathleen. January 20th.

This request for a birthdate pins her to her name. Her hesitation is not noticed and she answers. Politely. She is always polite. Katie knows this demand to do something unwanted. She will be rewarded. She will be the good patient.

She does not tell Sarah to call her Katie.

Sarah's slow, unhurried movements allow Katie a moment to notice some of the tension in her shoulders and she breathes out slowly. She takes in Sarah's gentle gaze and the careful way the chart is checked. Thoughts intrude into Katie's mind. They show themselves in colours of black and red and mud brown. The thoughts punctuate and truncate. She cannot brush aside history's spidery reach while trying to give Sarah attention.

Sarah explains the procedure. She looks at Katie and tilting her head, slows her presentation of the details. "It's a lot to take in and I'll explain it again when we are in the room". Katie holds the moment of pause between them. She knows she stands on the precipice of relationships to technicians and machines. She readies herself for the step into this unknown time and place.

Katie follows Sarah along the hallway after quickly donning the gown that will be hers for the course of treatment. She hangs the maroon, number-marked bag, now *her* number, in the corner a little distance from the others. She knows corners. She is learning this routine. She is good.

Sarah makes a few comments about the watery October sun and then stops beside a low, silver cabinet and asks, "Would you like a warm blanket?" This offering feels safe. Feels right. Katie smiles weakly and takes the blanket holding it near her uneasy stomach. She gathers her cold hands around herself and continues to follow Sarah.

Sarah and Katie walk through wide door. Katie notices the redness of the lights overhead. They seem filled with her fear. Katie hears a hum and does not see the machine until she rounds the corner. The machine's sky-blueness is startling. Metal. Unforgiving. She imagines how cold it must be to the touch.

Sarah asks Katie to lie on the table and place her arms above her head. She leans her hip on the table and swings her legs up. She glances behind her and takes one last look at the machine. Her head spins. She feels groundless but the blanket is still warm, and protects her from being exposed as Sarah opens the hospital gown. Sarah turns on the screens that hang from the wall at Katie's feet. The blanket is slowly removed and Sarah reads out a series of numbers as indelible ink marks are placed on her chest.

1.4 cm right off

medial tattoo.

0.7 cm post off

lateral tattoo.

Setting up to 88.3 centimeters,
move to 93.9 centimeters.

7.9 centimeters right and
93.5 centimeters

mid breast.

Katie feels completely lost in these numbers. She thinks of her birthdate. More numbers. Her head spins while the support technician double-checks the accuracy of the measurements. She checks the grid of laser—light-blue squares laying themselves on Katie's chest. Katie follows the technician's gaze and finds, encased in some of the squares, the permanent tattoo marks stamped into her skin in preparation for treatment. Katie thinks of the childhood game of battleship. This time she hopes for a direct hit.

Sarah and the technician hold the sheet below Katie and push and pull her into the correct position. She lies still in this abnormal pose. "Mary Kathleen, remember to breath." She is taken by surprise. She notices her lungs swollen from the air held within. She notices that she had been thinking that there are some marks that stay hidden below the skin. She lets go of this feeling along with her breath. It will soon be over if she lies still and does as she is told.

Sarah pats the blanket lying on Katie's legs. She feels the pressure of Sarah's hand, the warmth of it coming through the blanket now getting cooler. Katie knows it is her leg beneath the blanket. It is not someone else's leg. It is not someone else's name and birthdate she is required to repeat. She wishes it were. "We have everything in place now Katie. Just breath normally. Stay very still."

Katie's is disciplined. She does not try to run but she does escape. She knows how to do this without anyone seeing. She knows how to find the smallest of spaces upon wall shelves and she can move there quickly; no need for the sound of the starter's gun.

I know how to move quickly.

She knows flight.

I know flight.

Katie cannot see any shelves upon which to land. Flight is easy but a resting spot is needed even for one with everlasting wings.

My wings remain at the ready.

The hum of the sky-blue machine and the flashing red lights speak to one another. Above her, glued to the ceiling, are the posters of cherry blossoms, quiet and calling.

"Mary Kathleen, please hold still" the technicians say once last time before leaving the room. "Breathe normally".

**...if the breath goes in but does not go out again,
or goes out but does not come in again, your life is over--
it is enough to change the mind.
It will startle you into being aware.¹**

Katie has heard these words before, at the age of 10; "just hold still".

I run

She trains her breath to slow.

**...it is enough to change the mind.
It will startle you into being aware.²**

Sarah leaves the room. Katie hears the soft tread of her footsteps recede. The bell chimes in bursts of two while the red light turns in silent assent. The large metal doors close. Silence, and the hum of the machine. She slows her breathing some more.

I slow my breathing.

1 Chah. 2001. P.144. Found in David Jardine's In Praise of Radiant Beings.

2 Chah. 2001. P.144 Found in David Jardine's In Praise of Radiant Beings.

A speaker clicks on and Sarah tells her, “the machine will move behind your head and stop before emitting the radiation. Then the machine will move to the other side and the sound of radiation will flow again”. The speaker clicks off. Silence. Then the procedure, just as Sarah has described it, takes place.

No one can become practiced in my stead.

“In each case mineness. 3

(Insert radiation sound here).

There is a dead quiet after the machine does its work and returns to its resting place. Katie feels battered not from the machine but from the impact of her memories of running and the lack of refuge.

The technicians return to check the machines and screens. They move with measured precision. They take a few more photos to send to the radiologist to make sure the beams are focused on the targeted area. Katie welcomes the kindness the technicians show but she is dizzy. Sarah glances over her shoulder at Katie and they make eye contact. They each smile slowly. Sarah asks, “everything ok?” Katie feels as though she is drenched in clay. Although the cherry blossoms speak of lightness, a heaviness remains on her chest. This heaviness keeps her still.

Stillness and activity are actually the same thing...

if there were no stillness to the old pond

there would be no sound as the frog jumps into the water.

The activity exists at the same moment as the non-activity,

they are the same thing.⁴

“You can release your arms Katie and sit up. We are finished for today”. Katie is relieved, pulls her arms from above her head and sits up feeling the stiffness of her shoulders. Sarah hands her an appointment card and points to the dates ahead. Katie is already expected to know how to navigate the radiation room and the hospital hallway. The technicians are moving about the room getting it ready for the next patient. Katie looks around. Her feet touch the floor. She tells herself that she must come to love this place, this machine, these people.

Katie is thankful for the green line that helps her find her way back to where her clothing hangs stuffed inside the drawstring bag. She feels comforted to find it still there. After stepping into one of the two small cubicles she pulls the curtain closed. The metal sounds of the rings against the curtain rod are sharp, piercing. Her body feels the closeness of the space and yet this feels safe after the feelings of vulnerability in the treatment room. She takes time to be alone with herself. Her self. Her body.

She notices the hanger and bag again. In the privacy of this curtained room she takes time to feel the cloth covered hanger. She runs her fingers along the bumpiness of the baby blue and yellow cotton strings warming the cold metal. She notices

3 Heidegger. 1962, p. 68, “*in each case mineness [Jemeinigkeit].*” Found in David Jardine’s *In Praise of Radiant Beings*.

4 <http://openpoetry.com/BashoMatsuo>. Found in David Jardine’s *In Praise of Radiant Beings*.

the bag is soft. The cotton must be many years old, softened from all the hands that have synched the drawstring closed. This hanger and this bag are hers for a time. She feels a desire to write "Katie" on the bag, softening the weight of the numbers that identify her. But she does not dare. Instead she pulls the black turtleneck over her head and continues to dress. She places the gown in the bag for tomorrow and opening the curtain, walks over to the cupboard to hang the bag with the others.

Katie stands in front of the row of hangers and dark-coloured bags and looks down the hallway. She slowly notices, as though for the first time, the other colours of lines that direct patients to various parts of the hospital. Red, orange and blue sit beside the green line. She tracks the colours and notices where they separate ways. She does not feel adventurous. She will follow the green line. Her line.

There are no stairs for patients in the hospital and Katie is forced to take the elevator. A group of people are already standing in front of the doors. Both the "up" and "down" buttons have been pressed. Katie looks up at the little lights that tell her the location of the elevator car. She also notices that, staring back at her from the doors are the faces of former patients. A word describes the facial expression of each. Worried. Frightened. Confident. Frustrated. Relieved. She is sure these are meant to help her know that she is not alone; that she may have all or none of these feelings. She is meant to know that feelings are to be noticed. Expressed. Explored. She is glad the elevator arrives so that she does not have to think these thoughts. The elevator voice mirrors a false cheeriness as it tells her, "Second floor. Going down."

The elevator comes to the main floor and Katie exits with the others toward the double doors. These doors slide to allow her passage. Katie wonders if this mechanism is a form of care as many people appear too weak to push open big doors. She looks up, feels the forced air, and dismisses the hand sanitizer machines standing soldier-like at the door. She is glad to be outside. She feels like Katie again rather than Mary Kathleen and a birthdate. She closes her coat, her fingers feel the hard, plastic button against the wool button holes. She tilts her head to the side and then looks down at her feet. They are clad in her worn black, lace-up boots. Fashionable and functional. She knows that when her feet are comfortable the rest will follow. Quietly, to herself, she asks, "I wonder how long I have to walk and bake bread and sing and sip tea with friends". She thinks of the rest she will need once she has walked home today.

As Katie makes her way up the small flight of steps to the sidewalk outside the hospital she notices the inserts of her shoes. She can't remember noticing these before. She feels the cushioning wool of the shoe lining. She looks up and turns toward home and as she walks she hears herself repeating the childhood line "step on a crack, break your mother's back." She feels the old pang of guilt at that line. She often wondered, as a young girl, if other girls stepped on the cracks just to test the rhyme's accuracy. She brushes it aside and hopes the rest of the walk home won't trouble her.

Katie stops at the end of the street. It doesn't matter that she never remembers the proper name printed on the street sign. Proper names like the ones on birth certificates and hospital charts have no place here on this cool afternoon that grows open as she walks. As she plans her route home she senses all the histories, relations and possibilities of her life. She giggles and drops her head. She realizes the flip flopping of her emotions over the last two hours. She wonders what facial expression she would bear if her photo were on the doors of the elevators she will use for the next 6 weeks. She stares at the sidewalk and the boots. She says, under her breath, "so boots, home?" She feels the gentle tug of the left foot and within a second is moving westward along the street.

Katie thinks about time as she walks. Looking at her watch she realizes that, up to now, time has been a series of events; "onethingaftertheother". She tilts her head. She thinks that just yesterday she ran from one place to the next in preparation for this first radiation appointment. She recalls a children's book, Mr. Gotta Go. "Where did he *have to go*?" She guesses this is the point of the memory. Walking more slowly now, she notices that the trees have not yet lost all their leaves and that the sidewalk tilts a little. She is a little disconcerted. She wonders if she is still a little dizzy from the radiation treatment. Katie wonders if she should sit but she cannot find a bench.

Katie realizes she has walked several blocks before she almost bumps into a woman who too is about to cross the street. Katie looks at the woman's face. The other woman returns the gaze. Gentle but not personal somehow. Two women. Two women with places to go. This moment of contact with a stranger makes Katie notice herself in the weightiness of her coat and the blackness of her boots. She notices her heart beat and then the sound of cars and people. A brief moment. The other woman looks away and steps off the curb.

Katie notices this way of listening and thinking. She senses her vulnerability. Confusion. Discomfort. An unsettled feeling grows in her. She questions, "do I know this body?" She used to know her body as a little girl. The smell of the ocean, rising from the harbour below, reminds her of this. The salt air brings with it the memories of the childhood game of dropping little sticks in the water to see where they might go. Some floated so far she lost track of them while others haphazardly stuck to weeds or rocks. Sometimes waves took them down under the surface, out of sight. She used to feel the tug of the waves then. She and the water were connected. Yearningly, she notices that she has neither paid attention to her body or the ocean. She has been too busy lately; head down as she shops, head down as she kneads the bread. Head down.

Katie feels humble these days. She notices where she has trivialized things. Cancer helps her see these lackadaisical ways. Cancer helps her notice the ocean, the sounds of cars and the soft tread of her feet on the sidewalk. In her smallness she sends a call for love out onto the salty air.

Katie thinks of the various ways this word, love, has be spoken. She unhinges the word from lies and false notions. She removes the latches that bind it solely to romance. She loosens the laces that have kept love locked away. This is not an easy task. Staying with this work is just that; work. She knows now the need to give up of wanting love to be something else. It is the work of letting love be itself rather than tangling it up in expectation, regulation and speculation.

She is glad she is almost near home. The fullness of the day and the heaviness in her legs tell her that it is time to rest.

I need to rest.

She imagines her back against the grey cotton fabric of the swivel rocking chair by the window.

I love that chair.

The chair that provides a space to gaze out upon the lavender not yet withered and brown.

I love this time of year.

I love this lavender

The chair that will provide the support for the wholehearted work she wants to do.

I have so much work to do.

She reaches for the lock,

I reach for the lock.

presses the latch,

I press the latch

and opens the door.

Katie is home.

I am home.

Feb 7, 2017

The Podium (narrative)

She takes her time as she places the steel rod a few inches behind the start line. The sounds from the other children on the track have faded. This is her ritual and she takes time with the process. She used to measure the distance between the white line and the rod with her hand before pressing its pins securely into the ground. Now she knows the distance by heart. The steel blocks for her feet are cold and heavy. She places them in the required slots and steps back into them. Left foot first. Then the right. She rests her knee on the red ground. It is bumpy and the surface digs a pattern into her knee. She remembers when this used to be unpleasant but she is used to it now. She has learned to work with discomfort, even pain.

She imagines the push forward as she rests her thumbs behind the white line. She relaxes and makes a couple of practice starts taking herself a few strides down the track. The marshal asks all the girls to take to their blocks. She does as she is told. She kneels and slowly gets herself ready. She feels her heart beating regularly. She fills her lungs and then releases the air. She shakes off the chill of this cloudy day and settles her tense shoulders, rotating them before placing her fingers just behind the white line. Her head hangs loosely toward the earth.

The precision of this practice of white lines, steel blocks and starter's calls takes her mind off the ache. She feels all legs. Legs and desire to run and keep running. She rarely thinks about the thin tape across the finish line. It is running that matters.

Resting into the movement of her breathing, she waits for the crack of the starter's gun. In that quiet she senses him watching her from the stands. She feels his desire to claim her. Here, in this place, he hides his greed. He hides his greed while she hides her pain.

On your mark.

Get set.

Crack!

She propels herself out of the blocks. Her head fills with the idea of speed. She will run fast. Fast enough to become invisible. It will take practice.

In seconds her chest feels the brush of the tape. The muffled sound of seven other pairs of feet stretch across the finish line. It takes less than half a minute. Freedom. The training is worth it. In that time she is carried away from the hurt.

She must shorten her stride. Stay in her lane. Her wildly beating heart begins to slow. She moves along the track wishing herself away from his stare. Away from the one who collects children like trophies.

Some people long to stand on the top step of the three-leveled podium. They could take her place and she could keep running.

Podium

She presses the pins
of the rod
into the red, spongy track.
and readies the blocks.

Control.
Precise measurements.

Cold steel supports her.
Skin accepts the tracks texture
embedded in her knees.

Control
dulls the pain.

Lungs fill
and release.
Shoulders rotate.
Fingertips tremble
against the white line.

Her head hangs loosely toward the earth.

It is running that matters.

In the quiet
she knows she is being watched.
His greed.
Her paralysis.

Crack!

She propels herself out of the blocks.
She is running
She is speed
She is almost

invisible.

Later,
she collects her medal.

He collects his trophy.

Some people long to stand on the podium.
They could take her place.

She could keep running.

AND what would happen if I played with the narrative and made a poem out of the order?
What would happen if you did?
I'm doing it at a dinner gathering this weekend.



Skin Speaks

The painter readies her paints
10 disks of colour against the worn, wooden floor.

Sponges, beside warm,
water-filled containers, lay dry
So unlike the skin
--the living canvas
Whose story the brushes will hear.

Her body reacts to the tiny tip of the brush
listening its way toward her neck

White lines beside the scar.
The spinal cord mark
opening,
guiding the story

As she and the brush become acquainted
her back settles into the painting

She breathes in
long and deep
and then out again
through her nose.

Resting her face on her hand
she makes her own silent images--
remembers the two flights of school stairs
remembers pulling her legs up, with her hands,
reteaching her brain the task

Across the water, just beyond her head,
white smoke rises from the sawmill.
The hum of machines, 24 hours a day
echo the pulsating cycle of blood through her veins

Crows flutter-land, in the now bare trees
while skin
calls out the lines and circles of colour

Sky peeks out of the midday clouds
and the story continues to be revealed.

As the painter,
Sits up straight.
Breathes out
And makes her colour choice--Sky blue

Of course.

The story is not only told by the skin
The sky tells it too
And the river that makes its way westward

It is all connected.
Her body knows this.

And she rests on the flow of her breath.

Undoing silence

Closeted there
28 buttons
black threaded
25 years
bagged, secreted
safer zippered
this way.
the weight
of it
hanging a
narrow column
off of
narrow shoulders
two-eyed buttons
waiting blind
waiting light,
the warmth
of skin.

Through year after year of hiccups, laughter, banter, *mum?*, feet slapping floors, bat cracks,
thunderous rubbery balls, skip-skip-skipping stones side-armed across cool lakes, spatula scrapes on
cookie trays, fever moans, Yellow Duck's bathwater splash, piano's G minor, car keys and midnight
latch clicks, the candle heat of children's birthdays, year after year.

What is in the air today that calls me to remember after all these years?

Not until now
when each of those
28 black buttons
have been undone
by your tender touch
do I understand its call
to know time
not as a series of nows
but as

space

into which I may release.

Listening to you⁵

You
sitting against the sky
the trees bare
the water

Looking differently
dialogue not argument

Free
Free to change position

Eating plain-old, sunny side up
eggs and laughing about
spicy ginger tea

Sharing angst
Knowing you know and opening
No rush or have tos but
Want to
Need to

The sheets still warm

Each day we rediscover
the beauty
the hold it has on us

Making us in its image
remaking itself