



**THIS BODY I HAVE
TRIED TO WRITE**

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MAYDAY Micro Chapbook Poetry Contest 2022

THIS BODY I HAVE TRIED TO WRITE

Published by M3 Books
An imprint of New American Press
www.newamericanpress.com

Winner of the 2022 MAYDAY Poetry Micro Chapbook Contest
www.maydaymagazine.com

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ISBN 9781941561300

Cover design by Trinh Mai
Additional design by NJ Smith

The poems in this collection were first published in the following journals: “Redbuds” in *Cider Press Review*; “For the Body as Murder Hornets” (as “To the Murder Hornets I Want to Say”) in *GASHER*; “Refrain” in *Parentheses Journal*; “It’s Okay” in *Radar Poetry*; “The First Restraint Was the Body” in *SWWIM Every Day*; “Mutilated Is the Word” in *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*; and “This Body I Have Tried to Write” in *The Shore*.

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THE FIRST RESTRAINT WAS
THE BODY,

how it could never
be horses or mist, its bone
vocabulary—
femur, clavicle, the turn
away & revert
back of *vertebra*—heavy
in the mouth. Cabal
of cells, speakeasies in the
velvet red of blood.
A secret door, secret knock,
the secret password
just out of earshot. How it
stepped out, looking for
some green field of anywhere
else. How, not horses
or mist, it returned again
& again, pulled you
to its blood & bone ache, held
you close, just would not let go.

THAT EPISODE OF 90210 WHEN BRENDA FINDS A LUMP

she, Kelly, & Donna do self-exams of their breasts, follow step-by-step instructions in an issue of some teen magazine on breast cancer awareness. Four years before my mother's first diagnosis, eight before her second. Four springs & one fall before I sit with her in the waiting room of the oncologist's office, study an arrangement of tiger lilies—orange, black-specked—my arm touching hers & the thought that the whole room is dandelion spores, might float away if not for tumor-thick blood. Brenda finds a lump 40 minutes before the kids at West Beverly take the SATs, 30 before Andrea removes her glasses in Steve's bedroom, before they make out on his bed. Twelve years before a poet friend & I sip beer & cheap wine at the Reno Room, talk mutations, our family histories, the possibility of getting tested when, over AC/DC, through the clank & bang of pool balls, my friend yells, *I don't want to know!* & I agree. 22 years before I repeat those words to my doctor, before my friend's second pregnancy, her diagnosis, chemo treatments, bilateral mastectomy. The snatching of her ovaries. 28 years before my fingers brush a sharp-edged stone beneath my skin, before I start doing this math, 29 before my body breaks up with me, sheds itself clean. 27 winters before my cousin's Stage 3, 31 before metastasis. Brenda finds a lump 30 summers before I meet my husband, 35 before my father slips from this life, 31 Februarys before the James Webb Space Telescope gets its first glimpse of galaxies more than 13.5 billion light-years from Earth, before it calibrates & calibrates out there in space to bring *before* into focus. Brenda finds a lump & is fine in the end. It's never spoken of again.

MUTILATED IS THE WORD

that fell from
my mother's mouth—
blade on the tongue—
after her mastectomy.
When my time came,
I said to the surgeon,

I'm not ready,
by which I meant
not for the blade
on the tongue

but the knife
my body would take
to itself, for that final
moment—uncinematic,
not in the rain, not
looking me in the eye,
just a shapeless voice
on the phone:

*This is where
it ends for us.*

IT'S OKAY

It's okay to be sad about the death of a boy
you haven't talked to since you were ten.
It's okay to dream of him as he never was:
a man. To want to thank him for the card
he left at your door all those winters ago—
your name in all caps, heart drawn around
it. It's okay you still don't know why
you saved it, why when you think of him,
you think of blue, how one day, everything
will be blue—a feeling instead of a thing,
soft open space where a sharp, technicolor
memory had once been. And it's okay
not to think of your father now, to shut him
out of this poem because it's just too hard.
Besides, you've got other scabs to pick
until you're nothing but split skin, red-raw.
Let's start with your body—its white blood
cells like tiny ghosts swarming your glands,
feeding on breath & tears. It's okay to call it
a broken thing, to hate living in this broke-
down place, to wash dishes with the knowledge
that less breath will come before last breath,
that your throat will turn to desert—all rock-
earth & bare. Not even your wildflower
words will grow there.

REDBUDS

On the ceiling of the examination room, a redbud reaches
across the sky—fuchsia-pink ruffled arms—& I want to ask

the ultrasound tech if all exam rooms look like this. She slides
a transducer over the mass & I ponder the possibility that

the tree is no redbud but its close cousin, Judas. This detail
seems important. The first time, when the doctor inserted

the needle, I winced—not from pain but subtraction, each
sharp click reducing me to specimen. I couldn't see the redbud

then. Instead, on my side, I watched the needle pierce a black
stone on the screen, wondered about its origins. Everything is

*of something, every rot, birthed from life, marrow of vibrant
green, bright lemon. I take refuge in etymologies, in the lore*

*of beginnings. Tender is from to reach, math—on the matter of
knowing, so I do tender math, try to solve for x . How much*

silver would it take for this body to betray itself again?
There's no proof to explain undoing, no elegant sequence,

but what I know is this: There are parts of me that want to be
more, different from what they are. They're reaching for

each other across my blood—arms outstretched like redbuds—
ready to take that silver & run.

FOR THE BODY AS MURDER HORNETS

Who among us hasn't wanted
to kill the sweetest thing? Lick
smoke & nut from our teeth, then rush
that hive to take what's ours, gorge
on sticky spoils? We are only rust-gold
& bright for so long, thorax
of wing & unclaimed sky. And we're
so tired of sucking the sap, bark-
parched lips making do with
sugar scraps. And we've got
so many mouths to feed. They burrow
inside the dark of our spleen, open
tiny, pincer-like jaws. Who hasn't felt
that aching maw begging
more, more? And who wouldn't
risk it—thick, winged vibration,
fire-heat of slick abdomen—to be
the danger again, a threat, red-
hot harm burning alive
in the eye of the swarm?

REFRAIN

In my mother's mouth, *refrain* becomes *restrain* & this is not a slip of anything. When I say I *loved* my father, let the *d* of past tense

slap the back of my teeth, I see the limitations of time, by which I mean our construction of time, by which I mean *body*, by which

I mean mine. When the doctor asks about the cancer, how I handled the news & I say *I wasn't surprised*, I mean *Tumor, I've been*

waiting for you my whole life. When my mother says *restrain*, she means *refrain* & somehow, they are the same—this fast-binding, drawing

together of threads over & over. And I know now we are never going back to anything—not even if we found a way to travel

faster than the speed of light, like in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which, according to my college physics professor, would catapult us

into past. Not even then. The light would be different, bent. So, months after my father's death, when I tell my husband I feel

the devastation of fans when the Beatles broke up & how the pain of *no more* hollows my gut, knives the bone of my chest,

what I mean is *I'm never going to see my father again*, by which I mean *I am never going to* *again*.

FOR THE BODY AS HAL 9000

That I should look
into the hot red light
of you, listen when
you admit you've made
some poor decisions,
believe when you say
you can give me *normal*
again, that you still have
confidence in the mission.
So sing me "Daisy Bell,"
tell me you're half-crazy
all for the love of me, how
this bicycle seat was built
for two.

METASTASIS

Someone I love is dying & that is why I'm at Home Depot, in the grout aisle, unable to choose between

charcoal & platinum, trying to decide if marked space between tiles is what I want. Our lives are a series

of black gaps. Someone I love is dying & this is what I say to myself, not knowing what it means. Today,

a Ukrainian woman told Russian soldiers to fill their pockets with seeds, so sunflowers would grow

from their dead bodies & this is hope somehow like paper cranes that dangle from the ceiling of the Todd

Cancer Pavilion, where bald & breastless women wait to be called. And I want to know, when did cranes

stop being birds? When is a thing no longer itself? 3000 miles from here, in the Living Museum

at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in Queens, patients paint their demons, twist torment into wire

sculpture in the old kitchen hall-now-art-studio—across the street from Hillside Diner, a stainless-steel

lunch car I spent Saturday mornings as a child. Silver dollar pancakes, blueberry compote, my father's

BLTs. Someone I love is dying & the sharp chalk of dinner mints spooned from the register's shiny tin

bowl swirls on my tongue, where I turn the word *metastasis*, fold & crease it into a poem & I wonder if this

is what the Greeks meant by *transformation*. I tell myself it doesn't matter how things become other, that the dark

space between is nothing more than some *before* now lost to us, that there is only *what is*: Hillside Diner is a Denny's.

Paper cranes are not birds. There are flowers in bone

just waiting to bloom.

THIS BODY I HAVE TRIED TO WRITE,

this betrayal, to trace its roots in my blood,
through the labyrinth of my mother's
genome. And I have tried to write myself
into memory, traverse its dark gray terrain
to find myself again. To classify my grief.
Call it *fish*, thread a needle, stitch the label
into its fat greasy scales. To write my cousin's
cancer into a beautiful life, a horse running
on shattered ankle, striking white of bone
fragments in dirt. I've tried to turn bad cells
to ghosts, starve them of milk & honey
offerings of myself. And capture butterflies
like in that 6th grade science project, how I
took scissors to the *Audubon Guide*, how precise
the curve of my hand as I made my way
around their wings. How I mounted their
bodies, contained them, pressed glass against
burnt siennas, icy blues. How I named them:
swallowtail, *red admiral*, *mourning cloak*. An exercise
in precision, I thought it would always be
that way—clean white space, a place for each
gold-winged thing: which beast carried poison,
what beauty could kill, & which rose from the two
wild daffodils in my childhood yard into the sky
like a black-flecked flame ready to burn
anything in its path.

NOTES

“For the Body as HAL 9000” contains variations on dialogue from *2001: A Space Odyssey* and on lyrics from Harry Dacre’s “Daisy Bell.”

“Metastasis” contains a variation on the opening line of Dorianne Laux’s “Abschieds Symphony.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the editors of the following journals in which these poems first appeared, sometimes in other forms:

Cider Press Review: “Redbuds”

GASHER: “For the Body as Murder Hornets” (as “To the Murder Hornets I Want to Say”)

Parentheses Journal: “Refrain”

Radar Poetry: “It’s Okay”

SWWIM Every Day: “The First Restraint Was the Body,”

The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts: “Mutilated Is the Word”

The Shore: “This Body I Have Tried to Write,”

Thank you to the Arts Council for Long Beach for providing me with funding to complete this project.

Finally, deepest gratitude to Emily Blair, Jessi Jarrin, Mark Olague, Oceana Callum, and Aaron (always my first reader). These poems just would not be where they are without their generous feedback and encouragement.