Ulcerative Colitis

The horizon of my limbs is a symptom
of adagio entropy. There are two answers
to shrapnel, two origin stories: the war
and the warring. My skeleton, ravaged by ravens
glossy like scorched earth, diseased tissue.
What if I told you a colon is not a rhetorical
diapason, but an intestinal one? Not a curved limb,
waiting to be linked into, but a hook—
flesh caught like fish, my guts scaled.
  Torqued and raw: I am declining
my own pain, the declension of agony, my body
  a failing fierceness, a spectral musk.

In this cacophonous mutiny, I sanction my life,
  the muscularity of language, God thick like oil
in my throat as my scarred insides churn
  like the pixelated smile of a Venus flytrap,
home disgorged. I was sixteen when I learned never
to speak of my blood, my clotted ribs,
peristaltic light dawning on the mornings I forget
  I am going to die. The figs are bursting,
saccharine juice oozing down chins, staining fingertips.
  Amid dehiscence, I bow down to my unwritten elegy,
my unsung eulogy hibernating. In the warm milk
  of afternoon light, I hold a scalpel to my left temple
and pray in withering breath: pray to relinquish the narrative
  of my body, the shame of my body—
a loan I am trying to return. Where does this body
begin and where does this poem end?

When does the diagnosis evolve from scientific nomenclature
to life sentence? In whose hands do I belong,

where illness may recede like the ocean’s gums
upon an over-salted shore? Where is earth incumbent,

where is earth naked, where is earth an inflection of alchemy,
vertiginous psalm? In whose hands may I deny

the making of this body? In whose hands may I map
the cobbled pavements of my pulped intestines like Parisian streets?

Against whose palms may I press my feverish forehead
and susurrate like the weeping willows by the bank?

Between the cloying scent of clove and mineral tongue,
I thirst for the reckoning with amnesia, the memory of zipping

up my skin like a coat—to keep out the cold, to keep in the sloping
shoulders of fatigue. My body at the helm, the war is in my hands.
diseased

My body has become a felony—
steaming between red summers,
robbed of marrow, bones stew
with the zest grated from papery
eyelids. The rind of my skin
stumbles into cobblestones.
We sometimes forget how to travel
through our bodies—the maps, soaked
by rain of feverish fingertips, ink
bleeding into fibers. Wisps of dark
wafting into white the way fresh
blood oozes into the porcelain bowl,
pulp waltzing on water. Body
has folded itself inside out—
I’ve become a ewer, leaking insides
out like bathwater, ebbing and flowing
between lips. But as a lonely slug
searches for a new shell, I now
seek an urn, one that might shield
the scent of rotting flesh.
My intestines coil like rope—
hitches knotted by chipped nails
of the sailor without permission
from the captain. I crave the wheel,
yeans to sail my own body, even
if I will never reel in the waves
lapping on the shores of my guts.
Still humming like a pregnant bee,
salty breath stings open wounds
and I forget to teach my tongue
how to cry
her name is Anemia

The body is a vessel of ignominy—
words curl in my stomach like the roots

of baobabs. The body is like the bosom
of earth—a landscape of blood-red

summers and dented moons and carnivorous
flowers; a seasonal clock programmed

to blossom into April rainstorms and shed
its scales like a snake when autumn wind tickles

its throat; a seasonal clock programmed to hibernate
in the dead of winter. So when my veins fade

below the surface of my skin and my fingertips
turn icy-blue and the world spins around my scalp

when I stand up too quickly as if my neck
itself were celestial enough to trace out its orbit,

I wonder if my body is simply going to sleep.
Perhaps I am a tree—destined to pine away

with the December wind just to be born again
alongside the darling buds of May. In this cycle

of rhythmic naptime, I have discovered that health
is as fleeting as a zephyr—I must catch it between

clenched teeth while I still can. I have discovered
illness is like rainfall—there is beauty in surrendering

to the sky and its tears and becoming one
with the earth, with the body. My rain is crystal

clear and gentle as moonshine yet saturated
with the desperate need to cling to me, to claim

what belongs in the tunnels of my capillaries. My rain—
her name is Anemia. But she has brought me closer

© 2022 Medical Humanities & the Arts Symposium, Stanford School of Medicine, Flames in the Night: The Joy of Storytelling
to myself, to my body, to this earth—this earth
that is like a wound we keep scratching,
infiltrating,
hungry to know its limits. The way rain in eyes
become tears, become teardrops, become
raindrops,
I keep falling and opening and reopening and leaking,
blood seeping out of my body through the shaft of my colon,
emptying out of the ewer of my inflamed intestines—
I am capable of flooding this earth with my very being.
But now I am here: standing in the rain with eyes wide
open, arms open to the sky, inhaling the deluge
and waiting for spring.
A Battlefield of Marrow

My body is not a success story.

Instead, the landscape of my knotted muscles has been branded a battlefield of marrow:

wind and rain and hail, falling and flailing and flowing and fusing and finding home in the bosom of this earth.

At thirteen, I became mother to a war I was not yet ready to fight—an ongoing armed conflict that will go down in history as fulminant ulcerative colitis. Now, as stomach beats to the rhythm of colon’s drum, torso still steams with the ebb and flow of sunrise. If you listen closely, you might hear the concerto housed in the cage of these ribs.

Rays of light branch like veins and I forget where blood flows. The sun in my palms tastes like David Bowie on the radio and I’m trying to remember how to be lonely. The toilet has become my home. Every morning, I give birth to my insides. Shoulders slumping like overbaked sourdough, I turn myself inside out, spewing forth a tenderloin of intestines just perfectly medium rare. My stomach clenches the teeth of its bloody jaw and I exhale the inhale I just imbibed.

As my head blisters, white-hot like desert summers, I cup eyes to knees and collapse over legs—we hold tight and release.

Tight and release. With blurry pupils, I trace the octagons on the fading carpet beneath me—eight sides, eight seconds, eight breaths, tight and release. And then it comes—I ooze a dark, steady stream of burgundy wine, so sweet and so rich I almost can’t afford to part with it. Almost. But every morning, we part and re-part—too many sacred goodbyes. Every morning, I am awoken by a symphony of tambourines thudding against the soft skin of my swollen abdomen—ivory keys rising
and falling beneath the polished surface of my own planet
as if the limbs of a baby have sprouted in my womb.

I am pregnant—with none other than myself. I am in awe
of this life I have created—the juxtaposition of white ceramic

and vermillion ocean. It is time for me to weave together
a new story out of the twisted coils of my intestines,

out of the waves of this tired flesh. I must tame these tides
and quench the thirst of these parched seas. It is time to call

a truce and wave my white flag and find peace within my red body. Poem, you are my witness. This verse, my ceasefire—

I am claiming these words as my body’s healing weapons.