

Artist's Statement

by Laura Passin

My mother donated her body to science.

Research is supposed to rely on consent.

I do not have her consent to write about her, because by the time I knew I would want it, it was no longer possible for her to give it. It is not right to do this, but it is the only thing I know how to do.

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Perhaps it is obvious, in a piece on poetry and illness, to quote Susan Sontag; still, I am in her debt:

Illness is the night side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

(from *Illness as Metaphor*)

I have lived most of my life as a person with an uneasy awareness of my dual citizenship. My older brother, who appears in several of the poems you will read, was born with multiple unusual physical and cognitive features. He is, according to every way "normal health" is usually measured, disabled. Yet when I was growing up, he never got sick: I was the child who needed constant antibiotics, painkillers, surgery; he was an athlete while I was brought down by severe headaches and recurrent infections. Which of us lived in the kingdom of the sick? The well?

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My mother has been dead for eight years. Before that, she was very ill with neurodegenerative disease (which caused dementia as well as physical disability) for nearly a decade. One of the

effects of her dementia was the neurological condition called aphasia: she lost the ability to speak. Dementia can make a person seem to disappear, but aphasia can make a person strangely visible: I had to learn to read my mother's face, her body, as she was losing control over both. There was no other way to meet her where she was.

I do not claim to speak for my mother or my brother. But I can't pretend that I haven't spent years of my life acting as their interpreters, crossing the border of "that other place."

These poems are, in fact, interpretations, and not just of other people. Poetry is also my act of interpretation for myself: this is what I think it meant, to be well when others were ill. To be a caregiver to the person who raised me. To stand with one foot in both kingdoms, not certain in which one my center of gravity leans.

Poems

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For Science

The brain in blues and greens that hovers
on the *New York Times*
might not be yours;

the caption calls it “Patient 36,”
anonymized and scanned for science.

Hard to track the people turned
to data—

not something they mentioned
when we signed the forms, that you’d ascend
to namelessness—

but who’s left to object?

When I touched your cold
forehead, combed again
your tangled hair,

I drew
a quiet line

where they would open you.

My Brother on His Birthday

He is 37,

5'9",

113 lb,

IQ 64.

4 months in the hospital in 1997:

the bill was more than my college tuition.

When he was born

Mom thought he was a cat.

The doctors buzzing, *see*

the dimples, the floweret

heels, miniature skull:

hopeless.

I send him notebooks

to draw his obsessions:

Otis elevators, crooked

wheels, pulleys,

penciled engines—

countless versions

of the same blueprint,

levitation and descent.

L-DOPA Lazarus

My mother broke
the silence of dying,

came back
a few moments

to speak
of the other side.

She keened
and babbled,

cried terrible
nonsense.

We learned
what mattered

of the afterlife:
you need

another tongue
to tell it.

Research

1.

In your other life, you were
a scientist. You gave cancer

to white mice and dyed
their innards bright

to see death on its race
through the body's maze.

You told me once you tried not
to love them, but it didn't work:

they wanted names.
We never had pets.

2.

They will shave your head,
cut through your skull,

and remove your brain.
They will dissect

and place under a microscope
the slices of your thoughts:

numbers in a lab book,
one corpse among thousands.

You give your body to the future,
which forgets, already,

your name.

Cogito

You prove and disprove
Descartes: the mind is not
the body, and it is.
It must be, because your brain's
refusal to let dopamine wash
over the right cells
is what breaks your mind.
Chemistry is what makes you
not you anymore.

But the mind must not be
the body, because your body,
fragile, hunched, silver,
longs to live. Your feet still grope
across pavement, feeling
each step for its goodness
as a spider tests the strands
of its web, standing solid
on the tilting air.

Diagnosis

Eat this, not that. Take two of these white pills
before each meal (three after). We will need
your blood in vials, buckets, till we fill
our quota. You can spare it. Stop, don't read
that chart: it's not for you to know. But yes,
go on and ask your questions. Quickly now.
The doctor is a busy man. Confess
your aches and pains, that's a good girl. Now down
the hatch with this. It's time to pose for X-
rays, CAT scans, and all the latest fancy
screens. Hush. Lie still. Try not to think of sex
or wine or all the ways your body danced
without you knowing it might end. Just close
your eyes. This body is the one you chose.

Migraine Diary

The jaw of the world
 unhinges.

I am the abyss
 inside the atoms

of this wall,
 which hates me

and fears my touch.
 The pins which hold

the world's skin
 clatter on the floor,

where once I walked.
 The earth turns.

My bones detach
 and say their final wishes:

Tell me. Leave me.

Home Care

In the hospital bed, your arms lock
to prop yourself up.

Now the scissors:

your face goes grim.

I'm cutting your hair.

I've never done this, for anyone:

I can't even cut straight lines
in paper. School valentines
shrank when I tried

to fix asymmetries,
tiny hearts cracked
from folding.

I hold up the mirror.
You look in as though it's a window.
A frightened woman stares

from its other side.
You don't know how
to make her hair grow back.

Portrait of My Brother in Obsolete Diagnoses

Half-wit.

Moron.

Idiot.

Feeble.

Slow.

Deformed.

Retard.

Mongoloid.

Cripple.

Failure

to

thrive.

Memento Mori

To be a symbol is not

this wheelchair's

job :

I could tell
a true story

but why ruin
the picture already
in your mind

In the next room
is a bottle of morphine :

you cannot know that

if I choose not to tell you

what has been erased
how

I will not fill it