

Matindi

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Abstract

Matindi

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How does one adjust from a freeness of movement to a limitation of pain? There is vulnerability and honesty in the space between anger and acceptance, between sadness and rage, between dance and disease, between captivity and flying. Matindi is an experimental memoir that explores pain and illness through the lens of Filipino mythology and folk dance, set within some of the folk dances from the southern island of Mindanao, whose dances capture the movement of water, an epic battle between cats and hawks, spirits disguised as butterflies, allure, earthquake, to illustrate the challenges of showing your form in the face of adversity.

*Conceptual and abstract,  
some of the dances  
from Mindanao  
are rooted in*

*Folklore.*

*These dances capture the*

*character  
and  
movement*

*of*

*water,*

*wind,*

*animal,*

*forest,*

*mischief,*

*allure,*

*and*

*earthquake.*

### Tahing Baila

*Tahing* - fish; *Baila* - dance.

A dance depicting fish moving in the frantic waves of the ocean.

### Vinta

*Vinta* - Boat.

The dance highlights the skill of dancers who balance on top of bamboo that is resting on the shoulders of two other dancers. Dancers below the 'boat' hold fans and scarves to capture the movement of wind and ocean waves.

### Burong Talo

*Buro* - pickled, or foolish; *Talo* - lose.

Translation: Bitter defeat

A dance that depicts an epic battle between wildcats and hawks. Both predatory animals, their movements capture the strengths and vulnerabilities of their gracefully aggressive attacks.

### Asik

I don't have a direct translation for the word *Asik* except that searching online brought me to a list of Hindu names for boys. *Asik* is a boy's name, meaning "dagger" or "sharp."

A dance performed by a lady in waiting to the princess. The dance has been interpreted to perform before the princess, or as a slave girl, performing before a sultan.

This dance is traditionally performed before *Singkil*, in which the lady in waiting from this dance holds an umbrella over the princess.

### Singkil

*Singkil* - Bells.

Referring to the bells worn on the ankle of the princess, the bells represent the presence of mischievous spirits in the folk tale of this dance.

A dance in three parts, *Singkil* tells of a princess who was lured into the woods, chasing *diwates*- or 'mischievous spirits' disguised as butterflies. They caused an earthquake, and the princess shows her form and grace by fearlessly maneuvering through the chaos. She meets a prince in the woods, and they fall in love and get married. In the dance, the prince and princess demonstrate their skill stepping through a fast cadence of moving bamboo. There are several girls holding fans to symbolize the *diwates* disguised as butterflies.

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Matindi

## TAHING BAILA

It begins with  
A stillness in the dark.  
A posture and a pose  
That signals the music to begin.

The posture is  
A lean and turn at the waist  
With arms  
Outstretched.

The pose -  
An extension of  
Attitude and reverence.

It is a conversation.

Fish dancing  
In the blue scarves and  
Silver fans of rolling waves.

Waves playfully  
Twirling the fish,  
Who leap and spin and turn  
With every push.

Who can compete with the ocean?

The thick echo of gongs

The frantic pulse

Of deep-toned drums

Beneath the captivating melody of

The kulintang

And chaos waiting.

Everyone waits in

The stillness

In the dark.

For the kulintang

For the storyteller

For the voice and the pulse.

Everyone waits

To show their form.

They all wait

For Movement.

## Benched

I sat on a cold and damp adobe bench, facing the shore.  
Like all the benches along that boardwalk, this one was in memory of  
someone's loved one, who loved to watch the waves at sunrise.  
It was ten o'clock in the morning. The tide was high. The wind was blowing.  
Everyone walking by kept saying it was a great day to surf.

People-watching in my jeans and a hoodie didn't feel right.  
Sitting down, trying to appease my stiff joints, like a time-out on the other  
side of this short concrete barrier that separated the sand from the  
boardwalk; that separated the ocean from me.

It didn't feel right.  
That separation. That barrier. I couldn't even climb over it. Not because it  
was too high, but because I couldn't get my joints to cooperate.  
Because they say I belong on this side of the wall.  
Because I always need help now.

If I am my father's daughter,  
I would be up to my shoulders in Pacific Ocean waves  
With rocks for sand, with liquid ice for water, with a net to catch fish.  
With no fear.

I'd be standing tall against the waves.  
I'd have salt and wind dancing in my hair.  
I could slip and fall on the sand.  
I could just get back up and not care.

Because the ocean feels right.  
I'd be a fish right now.  
I'd be whole.

When your father is the son of a farmer, break time is not really break time- it's simply time to work on something else. When we moved into our new house with a dirt lot for a backyard, my dad assigned his four children to the "Rock Task Force," to spend our summer vacation digging out rocks from the dirt to help cover the irrigation system in the bigger picture of his landscape plan. Our summer vacation. I was seven or eight. We spent the bulk of those days sleeping in- down in the living room, where it was cooler in the mornings, gradually waking up and then watching Star Wars: A New Hope repeatedly on the VCR, until 4pm rolled around and then we worked as fast as we could before he got home at 5pm. We'd get a few large piles of rocks together to show we were super productive all day.

When your father is the son of a farmer, some words make no sense, like 'retirement' or 'vacation,' or even 'day off.' Retirement simply meant he now had two jobs instead of three. Vacation meant working remotely from his laptop in a hotel room.

Fishing with a farmer- or the son of a farmer- is exactly as leisurely and relaxing as it sounds. My father loved telling us about when he was a boy, how he and his dad had to wade through the sea at nightfall if they wanted to catch the good kind of octopus.

"You have to be fast," he'd say, because their tentacles are faster and horrific once they grab onto your face.

"That really happened!" he always laughed, and we always winced or screamed when he got to that part in the story.

Everything in his life was hard, and from a young age it seemed like he was always in charge or responsible for something or someone else. It was a lot of hard work poured into the farm. He constantly told us that we had it

easy, and we did. But we were still the children of a man whose father was a farmer, and as such, were subject to farmers' hours and work ethics when it came to summer weekend fishing "day-off" trips.

Our routine was to wake up at 4am, drive out a few hours to catch live bait (shrimp and prawns). Then we'd get to Aberdeen, and McDonald's was open by then, and we all woke up for Sausage McMuffin with eggs, a hash brown and some orange juice. Then we'd drive another few hours to the ocean, arriving by 8 or 9am at our destination, Kaleloch. Because he got motion sick easily and couldn't sit in a boat without feeling nauseous, the only way my dad could enjoy fishing was from a dock or at the ocean.

He allowed himself a break at noon- a functional break to eat so that he could still have energy to wade out and catch more fish in the afternoon. We'd try to head home by 5 or 6pm- and we were clearing out the RV by 9pm. He did all the driving, all the fishing, and all the unloading of gear and cleaning of fish. He bought our breakfast, bought our dinner, and if I asked, he'd fix me whatever sandwich he was making for himself from whatever items my mom packed. Every weekend of every summer that we went fishing - from the time I was fourteen until about twenty-five, this was the routine.

There was a parking lot at the top of a cliff side in Kaleloch, and a steep trail that led to some rocks and the ocean. If I was lucky, the tide would already be heading out. We've had a few days where it was necessary to time the waves rolling out, just to get to our camp.

We functioned like a crew- and he was our captain. We carried his buckets, his tackle box, his wading gear, and whatever bag my mom packed our

food in- as well as whatever we needed to preserve our sanity for the first three hours of the day. In the pre-tablet and mobile device world, that meant books, a Walkman, bubbles, magazines, a football, a shovel and a sandcastle bucket, a journal, matches, and a deck of cards.

Even though we made good use of our time- building a giant bonfire, trying to outrun waves, running the stretch of the rocky beach barefoot, we were there for one reason. After my dad filled up a bucket full of fish, one of us had to run it back up the steep trail to the RV and bring down another empty bucket. This task usually fell on my older siblings, which left me standing at the shore to have conversations with the ocean, like it was an oracle. The ocean's voice was a loud crash at my feet, agitated by a harsh wind winding up the waves. But I always thought it was a beautiful voice whose stories I could listen to all day.

Could I say the right thing to entice the waves and make them rush towards me?

Could I provoke them enough?

Sometimes I'd stand next to my dad and watch him fish, watch the ocean, watch the cloudy gray sky surprise us with a sunbreak here and there, and I'd wonder if there were any places prettier than this cold, harsh, gray perfection. My dad in his wader and fishing pole, me in my denim shorts and a hoodie - and tangled hair. If I asked a question, his answer was curt. His focus was on the line and concentrating on feeling a tug from the bait. We had countless unspoken conversations like that, standing there in silence. On occasion, he would try and get me enthused about learning how to hook the bait. I was okay if the bait was already dead, but it took me awhile to spear a live, squirmy, slippery shrimp onto a hook.

The tide started bringing in dark waves. They didn't look as grayish blue and transparent as earlier in the day. I walked out towards the tide and saw a sea lion bob its head up and down. Then I heard excitement in my dad's voice. *It's the smelt!* I had no idea what he was talking about. He set his fishing pole in its holder and walked with me into the waves. As the first wave crashed at my knees, he stuck his hands into the water and pulled up three small fish. They rolled in with the tide. I felt a bunch of finicky fins at my feet, but as the wave cleared, I saw nothing. Another tall wave hit me by surprise and knocked me down. Despite the freezing cold water, I laughed as I got up quickly, and I threw my hands in to try and snatch some fish.

"I caught two fish! I caught two fish!"

I ran and threw my two fish- my first ever catch- into the bucket, then ran back to the ocean. The tide was coming in and the waves were growing taller and more aggressive. Knee-deep and wading out, I dug my feet into the sand and stared at the waves head on. I was determined not to fall over. I spent a good forty-five minutes in the ocean, catching smelt. After a while, the ocean didn't feel like ice in my bones. The cold in my bones just became normal. But my father, worried that I would get sick from wading in the cold, sent me to a piece of driftwood by a fire my brother made. I spent the next hour trying to dry off in front of the bonfire, restless to get back in the water, but still overjoyed at my catch.

About ten minutes being out of the water, I felt cold. The adrenaline napping, my body felt a cool brush of wind pass, making my shoulders hug my ears. My fingers were pink and felt prickly every time I moved them. I

grabbed a small acrylic plaid blanket to warm myself. I was still damp from the ocean even though I had been sitting in front of a fire nearly as tall as me. Stretching my knees out I felt stiff and rubbed my shins- my legs had dried completely and all that was left was salt on my skin. I wanted to jump back into the waves, but the captain and crew had me benched. If you step out from the ocean too long, you go home shivering.

I went home damp, with salt attached to my knees, grazing my shoulders, hiding in my flip-flops.

I went home numb, clinging to a blanket with my sweatshirt hood over my tangled wet hair.

I went home cold, stiff fingers hiding in my sweater sleeves.

I went home sad, like I forgot to say goodbye.

I went home and dreamt of fish.

My dad's home office felt like a fortress. If we had to ask him for money, or to sign a permission slip, or worse- if he needed to talk to us about something (which usually meant we were in trouble), the tall file cabinets surrounding his desk looked like watch towers. He was always working silently in that space. We could never bother him there. But I always wanted to check in on my dad and make sure he was doing okay. When we'd take long road trips and everyone would fall asleep, I always sat on the cooler between the driver and passenger seat and would get my dad to talk about things he was interested in to keep him awake. I did that for everyone in my family. I never wanted them to feel alone.

I crossed into dad-territory just to see what he was up to. His corner had a lot of cool pocket knives, watches, coins that he collected, his shoe shine kit, and a lot of gadgets that made no sense to me. He didn't look up

to acknowledge me, but he knew I was there. He had a threading tool large enough for rope to be crafted. It's like he was hand-sewing a net. He handed me a smaller sized net that he had made for me. He showed me how to hold the net, and explained that the fish are small and roll in with the tide, so if you stick the net into one of the waves and pull it up, suddenly you've caught 8-10 small smelt. No bait needed. Game changer.

The following weekend, we woke up at 4am, packed up the gear, headed out to get bait, went to McDonald's, parked at the cliff side, and with two nets in hand, I ran down the trail, jumped over the rocks in my path, pushed ferns and leaves out of my way, with the ocean in view.

The ocean was grumpy that morning. I wondered why she was upset. The wind hit my face with cold, and the waves followed, prickling my ankles with their icy nails. Waves tumbled in loudly and the wind howled. My dad said it would be harsh, and told me to wait. I didn't want to wait, but she dragged my dad under once already today. My brother had go in after him and help him up to the campfire. As he sat by the fire, my dad checked the position of the sun and decided he could spare a break. The smelt only show up in the afternoon if we're lucky. I marched over to grab my net and I stood facing the ocean. I dug my feet in.

That day, I couldn't be pulled out of the water for any reason. No wader or weights to keep me anchored, no wet suit, out in the Pacific, no hesitation as I waded further in. I didn't care how cold it was, if I was numb to my core or if the waves started to push me away. It only meant I would wade deeper with my net, angled in front of my slightly crouched body like a weapon, ready to battle.

At last the ocean would answer my questions.

The net was an extension of me.

It was perfect and normal. It felt right.

Because the ocean is right.

I could be a fish right now. I could be whole.

I could slip and fall on the sand and just get back up and not care.

I'd be standing tall against the waves.

I'd have saltwater in my hair.

With rocks for sand, with liquid ice for water.

With a net to catch fish.

With no fear.

I would be up to my shoulders in Pacific Ocean waves...

If I am my father's daughter.

It didn't feel right.

That barrier.

I couldn't even climb over it.

I don't belong on this side just because I always need help now.

It was ten o'clock in the morning.

The tide was high. The wind was blowing.

Everyone walking by kept saying it was a great day to surf.

Facing the shore, I sat on a cold and damp adobe bench,  
in memory of a loved one.

## Only The Ants

My parents loved to talk about all of us kids at the dinner table. They loved to talk about how we interacted, our quirks, things we tried to say, languages we invented when we first began to speak to them, and how we were brought into this world. The day I was born became known as the one time my mother had to deliver a baby without an epidural.

There was a miscommunication due to the hour I was born, and the doctors changing shifts. My mother had three children before me, and felt like she had a good idea of when the epidural was supposed to happen. It never happened on the day I was born. This could explain why I was always such an energetic and loud child. I had an opinion about everything and I had to be tricked into silence and sitting still for even just one minute at the dinner table. There was always a prize if I could just be still and silent for one minute- candy, matchbox cars, bubbles, hair clips, small pretty things. By 57 seconds, I would ask, "HAS IT BEEN A MINUTE YET?"

I never won a prize.

I was always told that they ran a tight ship with my three older siblings... then I was born. They called me 'Gremlin' because I couldn't sit still for long. I tripped over my shoelaces and always got grass-stains only on the outfits my mom warned me to please be careful with. It was also because of a constant devilish smile to accompany a permanent wide-eyed, bent eyebrow look that they felt 'Gremlin' was an accurate term of endearment.

If I was running through the department store and one of my older siblings had to find me, they just had to follow the sound of my voice, even if I was on the other side of the store.

I used to yell at the neighbors' kids- all of them- younger or older than me, it didn't matter. If they were standing on our lawn I'd yell at them. If we were playing a game together and I thought something wrong happened, I'd yell at them. I yelled at the mailman, the grocery store clerk, the newspaper delivery boy. It wasn't all bad yelling. A lot of it was excitement around knowing about people who had jobs who I saw daily or weekly, who weren't related to me.

I was really LOUD. I didn't have a range of volume like everyone else. Barking loudly was my dialect, as if my mother gave birth to three Golden Labradors and one Pit Bull. I even followed my older siblings around like a dog and wanted to do whatever they were doing, be with them whenever any adventures happened. But I was too small, too young, and TOO loud.

Then one day at the dinner table-- or maybe it was in the car on the way to school, my dad felt prompted to remind us to listen to Ateng because she's the oldest and she's in charge. But the gremlin always had a question for everything.

"Well, who am I in charge of?"

He chuckled, then looked at me sternly.

"You are the youngest one here. You don't get to be in charge. You have to listen to ALL of us and do as WE say."

He gestured to everyone- my mom, my older sisters and my older brother.

"We can all yell at you, because we're older than you and we're in charge."

I tried to interject - but I got cut off, and felt the serious nature of this situation.

"Well who do I yell at?"

"You can't yell at anyone here. You're the youngest... You can only yell at the ants."

I didn't like this arrangement.

"They're smaller than you. You can only yell at them. You can't yell at anyone else."

"BUT --"

"ONLY the ants," he said firmly.

I spent that summer - every summer - looking for ants to yell at.



Madness is an incomplete truth.

She was a ripple

an echo

Of the ones who came before her

A fierce wind

A harsh rumbling

An electric pulse

A severe anger.

There was a distinction

And a sentence.

There should have been no room for error, no reason for mistakes.

Everything has something

Of a cause and effect.

Her mother understood birth and delivery.

Her mother had delivered three kids into the world.

Each time with assistance,

Each time with support.

She was born on a swing shift

Without the aid of an epidural

At the fault of two doctors

At the changing of the guard

A swerve of the late hour hand

She arrived on the sails of her mother's demons

And ascending anger

A singular red flame

With a single intention

Setting course for one target.

A glimmer, a firework

A shooting star. A fuse.

Movement is an incomplete truth.

There is form and posture in a shooting star.  
There is destruction in form and posture.  
There is brilliance in destruction

Even in the stillness,  
In the moments before it hits.

She came out screaming  
And kicking and reaching and crying  
And moving

A ripple

A shattering echo

Of those who came before her.

A super typhoon  
A volcano  
A waterfall,

One point of impact, causing larger echoes.

Unleashing screams  
A shattering pitch  
Breaking  
All the glass

In a single moment  
A force was born

With fiery dark eyes and wild dark hair.  
With wings outstretched and extended.  
With unsettled legs and stomping feet.  
With a hunger and a thirst.

She was

Brought into the world

On the fury of a poltergeist.

## Severe Rheumatoid Arthritis

*I didn't learn until long after his death that my grandfather had Rheumatoid Arthritis too.*

**It is not difficult to picture the typical severe rheumatoid arthritis patient:**

*Rheumatoid Arthritis is often called an' invisible' disease.  
It made me invisible nine years ago.*

**He or she has hours upon hours of morning stiffness,**

*Stretch. Walk. Warm layers. Stretch more. Hydrate.  
Maybe by noon I'll be 78% functional.*

**significant joint destruction on x-ray,**  
*My hands feel as deformed as they looked.*

**profound fatigue,**  
*Everything I'd like to do today  
will be put on hold.*

**difficulty getting out of bed in the morning,**  
*My joints don't wake up at the same time that I wake up.*

**significant anemia,**  
*"Your look tired today."  
"Are you eating enough?"*

*"You should go on a special anti-inflammatory diet."*

*"You just need to get some sunshine and fresh air."*

**a high sedimentation rate,**  
*"It's lower than your usual unusually-high. But it's still high..."*

**joint pain**

*joint pain joint pain joint pain joint pain joint pain joint pain*

**and swelling involving most of the joints.**

*Knees can't bend today. Try again tomorrow.*

*Shoulders can't function today. Try again tomorrow.*

*Life on hold today. Try again tomorrow.*

*The unpredictability of RA is such that  
there's no consistent treatment to offer.*

**Sometimes**

*When RA is severe it is more accurately referred to as a progressive disease.*

*Progressive*

**the anemia and weight loss are so significant that**

*Meaning the disease will continue to advance forward  
With destructive inflammation, causing  
Scar tissue buildup, loss of cartilage in joints, and joint deformity.*

**the severe rheumatoid arthritis patient is suspected of having a cancer.**

*While RA symptoms manifest primarily in the joints, anything can have a flare up: My liver, my asthma, behind my eyes, eczema or dry skin flaking as a result of the immune system acting up.*

**Severe rheumatoid arthritis patients often do not respond very well**

**to the stronger traditional drugs**

**such as methotrexate and Arava.**

*My rheumatologist and hepatologist are concerned about me getting a tattoo because my liver enzymes were too high at one point that I needed to be taken off everything- except prednisone - to calm it down. Now I'm on a lot of vitamin E, and the tattoo ban is still in effect.*

**Unfortunately, many will not be helped by Enbrel or Humira.**

*Over the last eight years, I have dated and broken up with*

*Orencia  
Rituxan  
Enbril  
Humira  
Remicade  
Sulfasalazine  
Methotrexate  
and Actemra.*

**Fortunately, newer biologics, such as Orencia, Rituxan and Actemra are approved for rheumatoid arthritis patients who fail the anti-tumor necrosis factor drugs (such as Enbrel, Humira, and Remicade).**

*I am currently on the most recently FDA approved biologic for Severe RA*

*The bottom line:*

*There are currently no other FDA-approved options if this one doesn't work.*

## I Want to Know

You always take your guitar with you wherever you go.

At least in my dreams you do.

In my dreams, you walk down a long dirt road, strumming your guitar to keep you company. You tell me to just listen. Cigarette in hand, you pick out a tune that you heard just moments ago. By that evening- or before I wake, you effortlessly play a beautiful lingering melody. Sometimes you're napping on a hammock, cradling your guitar, and maybe even mumbling your favorite tune. Tonight, you're on the steps before the front door, singing to grandma, begging her to let you in.

My memories of you don't belong to me. The line between your life and my imagination has dissolved somewhere between my dreams and the dinner stories of your one living son- my father- and your five daughters. I met you in this world when I was barely a year old, but I see you all the time through their memories. The stories of you are endless and great. It's as if I own the textbook of you.

Cockfights, cigarettes, Chuck Taylor Converse high tops, a bolo, and a hat. You rode proudly through town on horseback, and you were a tough businessman. You were very smart and worked hard to give your kids the education you didn't receive. You lived long enough to see them become engineers, teachers, doctors, and accountants. You knew the quickest, most merciful way to slaughter a pig, and you prepped every animal that sacrificed its life to put food on your table with care. My father was your right hand on the farm from an early age, and he talked all the time about wading in the

sea late at night to catch octopus, or having to convince a stubborn carabao to keep working under the hot sun. He talked about how great a chef you were, how you'd cook with ease for a barrio fiesta wedding. He told us all the time how you loved my brother and my sisters when they visited you, and that when I was nine months old that you were happy to keep me with you on the farm as well.

The first time I remembering seeing you, there was a stubborn look on your face, a pout hanging from your folded arms, and a machete in your hands. It's an aged photo, and your hair is just starting to gray- taken just before my dad left to live in the city and get a job. I run through the list of questions my dad would ask when he was younger, like why he couldn't go out with his friends after school, or if he had to finish the chores, or why he can't just take a moment to rest. The answer would be the same- your hands folded, and a stubborn glare on your face, expecting that he should know the answer, and stop wasting time talking.

It is now sunset, and I am nearly seven thousand miles from home, sitting on the front steps of the house you built six decades ago. I have seen and loved so many pictures of you sitting right here. Maybe it was to catch a glimpse of the setting sun, or to make sure my father was on the dirt road walking home at the exact time that he should be. Maybe it was for that perfect breeze that only hit the front steps. The sky is a hundred colors now. I can hear the boats coming in on the waves that push them home- the fishermen jumping into the water to pull their boats ashore. I see my father talking to a neighbor down the road, catching up on the last eighteen years. The neighbor gives him a live chicken and a bag full of mangoes.

A breeze kisses my cheek.

The house you built is beautiful, and stands rarely aged in excellent condition. I have heard stories about this place all my life, and I recognized it the moment our jeepney turned onto the dirt road. Situated across from a small school, there is no front door- only a front gate to mark the parameters of your land. The stairs lead right into a common area, with a giant bay window facing the trees where the chicken fly into and sleep at night, and then two rooms to the side. Downstairs there's a bamboo-woven hammock near the dining table- a thick rustic table that sat anywhere from eight to twenty people. And I had never seen an outdoor kitchen hut before- with one wall of knives, an open fire pit, and a wrought iron grill with burners underneath. I think of Grandma and how confined she always felt cooking in our kitchen. It wasn't small, but it also wasn't outdoors with a fire pit. All the stories I heard that involved cooking at this house just turned epic.

The south wall of the steps is covered in Sampaguita- their jasmine scent lingering to the outdoor kitchen, where on the table now is a feast of crab and whatever fish was caught that afternoon. They're all telling me to come and eat, and that if you were there, you'd spend all day cooking for me, peeling the shells off the crab and prawns, and making sure I was comfortable, happy.

In your company, I would be.

But it wasn't until after dinner that I really met you. Hand in hand with my younger cousins, we waded through a cold, dark maze of marked and unmarked tombstones, chanting an apologetic, "Please excuse us for disturbing you," in your native tongue, as we stepped over the other graves to get to you.

I remember the day I heard the news of your passing.  
I was late for school and my teacher intended to send me to detention.  
I told them you died that day, and they dismissed me.  
I remember my mom telling my dad the news. I remember my dad had no words.  
I remember my mom picking up the phone to make arrangements and fly home for your funeral.

I remember snippets.  
First, you had died. And then it was that they found you dead.  
And then you weren't even at home when you died. You were found on a road.  
I remember asking questions. I don't remember getting any answers.  
I remember reaching for a memory that's just you and me.  
There's no such memory.

I lost count of the turns we took between shadows, but after the maze through concrete, we found a small clearing and a wrought-iron gate monogrammed with our family name, guarding the family mausoleum. One of my aunts pulled out a key to unlock the gate, and we entered and filled the space around you. There I lit a candle by the stone that carried your name. A thousand thoughts ran through my mind, wondering what profound words I could say that could make you proud.

I want to know if you took your guitar everywhere you went.  
I want to know why you built your house on land that everyone thought was cursed.  
I want to know why you never came to visit us- why you always told him 'no' when your heart might have said 'yes.'  
I want to know why they never told us how you really died.

I searched- even the deepest corner of my brain. All the words in my head refused to put themselves into any kind of order.

Tomorrow, I witness my parents renew their vows in the church where twenty-five years ago, they were married. Tomorrow, I wear a dress cut specifically for me and I stand as a bridesmaid in their celebration. Tomorrow, I will meet a hundred people who have all carried a photo of me in their wallets since I was baby; people who all know my name and face; people I have never met but love. That's why our family is all here together and reunited for the next few weeks.

I flew thousands of miles to be right here. With you.

A calming wind taunts the candles we've lit, and the latch on the gate softly chants against its frame. Maybe there are no words. You have told me after all to just listen, but there is only silence in the sadness that has filled my emptiness. I close my eyes and listen.

I hear the wind, rustling through the mango trees,  
pushing empty water bottles against the gutter.

I hear whispers in Tagalog from my cousins,  
speaking superstition and ghost stories.

I hear my aunts making plans for tomorrow.

I hear very faintly a guitar.

I open my eyes.

Maybe it's in the neighborhood

On the other side of the wall.

I hear it clearly now-

The slow progression of low chords

Playing with a melody on the higher strings.

The tune is Sampaguita- one of my favorite folk songs.

The lyrics speak of a beautiful flower that is closed in daylight

And opens its fragrant petals only at night.

It's the first song I learned to play on the guitar.

It's the song that you play in my dreams.

VINTA

Slow

rise  
of drums  
A racing pulse  
The steady chaos of  
hypnotic gongs

and their echo

The wind moves

Making everything around her

Speak

She is a whisper

She is a roar

She is a caress

She is a crash

She finds a vessel

Gliding through the dark blue night

Rowing against the tide

Waves rising and waves tumbling

She whispers

Into billowing sails

The wind seeks conversation

To breath air into

She is forward movement, without direction- A twirl of the fan,  
a flick of the scarf

The poise is in the extension and the lean. The waves talk to the wind  
And the wind answers, combing the waves with her silver claws  
They disembark, and push their way to land. The waves  
Guide them to sand beneath their wet feet.

They have arrived.

## Butterflies

Do I captivate?

I lure you into the woods because of my charm.

Unlike anything you have seen while being held captive in your home.

Come chase me.

I flutter about your window

And there's something that catches your eye.

Maybe I am your dreams-

Free and fragile, beautiful and broken.

Maybe I am an adventure waiting to happen.

There is something beautiful and broken in all of us.

Maybe I'm just magic. Maybe you relate.

All the voices in your family tree tell you that

We are known for playing tricks.

But tonight the wind whispers at your neck,

Strands of your braided hair come undone.

Come chase me.

I lure you because it's in my nature.

I am not truly spun from

Silken, soft, stained-glass wing.

My intentions must be laced with malice.

You call me by another name when I am not

A dragonwolf in butterfly's wings.

I alone cause fire in the night and the earth to quake.

The wind is my voice, singing through.

The wind chimes, the hollow bamboo and the running river.

I lure you into the woods because now I make the bamboo trees fall -

I want to see you dance.

## Ballet Lessons

My parents put me in ballet classes at the age of six.

They singled me out.

They didn't do this with my older siblings.

It was a different space

For myself and ideas.

Space to think.

Not space to yell or scream.

I had never been alone with

My thoughts...

It meant a strange space

I didn't fully understand

An open space.

A solo space.

This was wrong.

It meant time away from the collective.

It meant missing cartoons.

I hated ballet classes at the age of six.

I hated missing Saturday morning cartoons.

Who would choose to miss Saturday morning cartoons? We had a good routine. There was a whole big room downstairs- a rec room, short for recreational, just FYI. I always thought it was a wreck room- a space to break toys, thrash them, send my sisters' Barbie dolls down in a wagon right into a wall, cause a landslide and push a Fisher-Price castle off the coffee table, which we did. It meant sitting with my heroes- my siblings- watching them eat cereal and react to the road runner outwitting Wile E Coyote, laughing at Woody Woodpecker, or that Wagner-inspired "What's Opera, doc?" episode where Bugs Bunny and Elmer J. Fudd danced a love scene together. I laughed every time Bugs Bunny put on the blonde wig as Broom Hilda, and Elmer J. Fudd fell for it.

"Oh Bwoom Hilda, you're so wovely!"

"Yes I know it - I can't help it!"

As long as my siblings were all happy then I was happy.

I didn't know or care what I wanted because I didn't need to know or care what I wanted if everyone else was happy. It was familial.

But Ballet was unfamiliar, a dance space in a leotard and tights; being told that there is this person called Grace in everything we do. I giggled and picked my nose at that comment- because I was the opposite of whomever Grace was.

My hero was the Tazmanian Devil.

Do you see how he spins? And growls? With such precision?

I bet he didn't go to ballet school.

Yet there I was, behaving, because I was taken out of the familiar peapod of my three older siblings in the wreck room.

"Jump over these shoeboxes," they said.

I miss Bugs Bunny.

Ballet classes meant all the negative things.

It meant sacrificing fun things and jumping over cardboard things instead.

It meant things I didn't understand and didn't want to.

Who cares about form and leaning?

It meant my older siblings talked about things they had in common.

But no one had ballet in common.

It meant silence.

It meant having to look at and focus on myself.

I hated (focusing on) myself.

Being singled out; Being told I just wanted attention.

I hated ballet.

I hated being taken away from things I love.

It meant I wasn't being loyal.

Like I betrayed the cartoons and the company of my siblings.

Like I picked ballet over them. But I didn't pick ballet.

Yes, I'm reaching over my head.

Yes, my elbows are behind my ears.

Yes, my toes are turned out and pointed and catching the waltz beat.

This is hard.

I just want French fries.

Why do I need to be here?

Ballet classes eventually became routine.

Sigh.

Fine.

Okay.

I liked the light in the studio.

There was something about the softness of the light touching the smooth wooden floor, making the surface warm to dance on. The floor was its own entity. It had a personality. It had some cracks and scratches, and maybe one hollow spot where jumping felt scary.

Some days I even liked the mirrors.

The mirrors made it difficult to hide from the teacher, from parents, from friends, from myself.

I always stood awkward. Standing up straight meant that my pot belly stuck out but my chin was still shyly pointed down. But the mirrors also multiplied the amount of light that came in from the windows, and also multiplied the number of people in the room.

Sometimes I tried to hide from myself.

Sometimes I found myself.

I loved the music.

There was a boy who played the piano for us, and the music seemed to match every step, every turn and every twirl I was instructed to make. The music followed me around, a shadow sewn at my heels. It liked my company, and I liked its voice. I wanted the music to follow me home.

The shoe boxes started to stack, and jumping became flying.

Aimless twirling became spinning with purpose.

Toes became pointed. Arms became frame.

Chin became un-shy. Posture became attitude.

Turning and extending an arm to the side-

This is the way a tree leans against the Autumn wind.

Dance is where I learned to be fearless.

It was different - a space for myself and ideas.

A space to think, to form opinions.

It was an open space, a solo space  
and it was all mine.

Dance is where I learned to be brave-

That scared feeling is always okay as long as you can be brave with it.

One step, one breath, one move, one lean, one spin.

Lean into it more to be scared less.

Lean until that one moment you are no longer thinking of the fear,

Or the heat of the spotlight, or the splinter you may have in your heel.

Lean until you are closer to the other side of whatever is beyond the ceiling  
or the floor.

Then smile.

A smile builds character.

It builds endurance and muscle.

A smile builds confidence and reminds you of the posture you keep and the  
story you are telling while you are telling it. A smile builds humility and  
the recognition of yourself as one star in a galaxy of stars. A smile builds  
suspense. A smile builds.

Then fly.

This is how I fly.

I haven't danced in almost a decade.

## Bakunawa

Eclipse Rising

Dragon rising

Fury Rising

Tales about the *Bakunawa* say that it is the cause of eclipses. During ancient times, Filipinos believe that there are seven moons created by Bathala to light up the sky. The *Bakunawa*, amazed by their beauty, would rise from the ocean and swallow the moons whole, angering Bathala and causing them to be mortal enemies.

To keep the moons from completely being swallowed by the *Bakunawa*, ancient Filipinos would go out of their homes with pans and pots, and would make noise in order to scare the Bakunawa into spitting out the moon back into the sky. Some of the people in the villages would play soothing sounds with their musical instruments, in hopes that the dragon would fall into a deep sleep. Thus, the brave men of the village hoped that while the dragon was hypnotized by the musical sounds they could somehow slay the dragon. Although the dragon was known as a "moon eater" it was also known as a "man eater"

In other versions of the stories Bakunawa was a beautiful diwata in the sea, some say she was a naga and was the most powerful. One night she saw the seven moon and was captivated by their beauty and longed to possess them. One of the embodiment of the moon descended to the sea to swim with the mermaids, it was Bulan a moon deity - the adolescent aspect of the moon, the boy moon did not noticed Bakunawa, thinking the boy had ignored her beauty to play with the mermaids enraged her. The following night she transformed herself into a dragon and devoured the moons. When she had swallowed the last moon the Supreme god intervened so she spit out the moon.

## Love is mighty

I had just visited the doctor's office to look at my lab work. My bloodwork revealed that I had Rheumatoid Arthritis and because it's likely that I had it for several months without treating it, it was severe. Hands on the steering wheel, I sat in the car in the clinic parking lot with the engine off, staring out the window. I lost track of time. I needed to find a rheumatologist and begin treatment right away. No one explained what kind of treatment I needed. My knees were the size of volleyballs and my feet hated every pair of 'comfort' or 'walking' shoes I wore. A nurse mentioned that there was fluid in the space between my joints, intensifying the pain on top of the joint inflammation, and that the fluid needed to be drained. She didn't explain the process or a timeframe for when it would happen. They just said my RA was severe and I needed to get in soon- and the soonest anyone could see me was in three weeks. What happens if I don't get treatment sooner? Exactly when could the inflammation have started? What does this mean now? Is it curable? I know it's progressive.

I didn't want to go anywhere until I had some answers, or was done crying- but both took too long and I only got more upset, so I just started the car and headed to my mom and dad's. But I didn't want to tell them the news- I had to process it myself first. I needed to calm down first. This was the longest I've gone without being able to stop my own crying.

When I pulled into the driveway, their car was gone. They were out running errands- good. I didn't know what to say to them anyway. My eyes were so puffy. Even if I had forced myself to stop crying, I still wouldn't have been able to hide from them. As I walked up the walkway and opened the

front door, there sat our fourteen-year old one-eyed Pekingese, Ponyak, in the middle of the hallway. Since our Black Lab Indy's recent passing, Ponyak's vigilance intensified. She always lounged at the living room bay window, waiting for people to bark at, or sat at the French doors facing the backyard- like a guard dog, or she'd guard her food in the laundry room. She was never just sitting in the middle of the hallway, yet, she sat there with perfect posture, looking like a majestic mini-dragon standing guard before a fortress gate. She looked like she was expecting me. I closed the door, threw my keys on the stairs, and said hi.

Nose twitching as if to try and sniff out where I'd been, she just sat there, scanning me with her one eye and waiting for me to make a move. So I walked into the living room and fell into my favorite blue round loveseat. My siblings and I used to migrate from our upstairs rooms to the downstairs living room in the mornings during summer break because the living room was cooler. No one wanted the loveseat because of its odd shape- but I loved it because it was unwanted. I didn't have to share with anyone.

Ponyak followed me, and sat right before the loveseat. Pekingese dogs are brachycephalic, with smooshed up faces like bull dogs. It means that they make a lot of noises that other dogs don't make. It makes for great conversation with the dog.

"It's not the best day today, Pon."

Snorting grumbling noise ending on an up-tone.

"I mean, I'm usually on top of things and two steps ahead..."

Shuffling of paws, sniffing noises, more grumbling and snorting.

"How did this happen?"

I heaved a heavy sigh and turned on my side.

Ponyak shuffled her paws back and forth, and growled.

I looked at her as if to ask her what she wants.

She just jumped up on the loveseat - something she NEVER did - and she sat on my lap.

I laughed because I had never seen this kind of behavior from her before. This was our guard dog- a furious, colossal dragon trapped inside the body of a dainty, cream-colored mini-lion, with rage in her heart, but no claws or sharp teeth to back it up. She hated her own cuddliness. She couldn't have weighed more than twelve pounds. The more affectionate dog in our family had been Indy, a ninety-pound Black Lab-Rottweiler who took a few years to realize she could bark at all; a dog who always got lost around the neighborhood and camped out on anyone's lawn, waiting for us to find her; a dog who sat on my lap whenever I sat to read a book; a dog who was scared of matches and the vacuum. Even though Indy looked more menacing to strangers when they walked by and glanced into our backyard, hers wasn't the unearthly demonic growling that they heard. They saw Indy, but heard Ponyak. They guarded our home together.

Today, Ponyak was different.

Ponyak let me pet her fluffy ears and run my fingers through her mighty mini Pekingese mane. I asked her with a shaky voice what she was doing. She looked right at me with her one eye and made a few more noises before bowing her head down and leaning into my chest for what I can only assume was an attempt at a hug.

I fell apart, cried and spent the next half-hour hugging my dog.

Then, as if a timer had gone off, she huffed and sneezed, jumped off my lap, sat her usual two feet away, and looked at me with her one eye and snarling pout, as if we had reached the threshold for her affection and now she must go back on guard. Her glare hinted that I tell no one that this ever happened.

"No would believe me anyway, Pon."

Her tail curled- a partial wag - and she growled at me, which was her usual way of saying she had to do something now. Sometimes she was guarding me, sometimes she was demanding something. I was in a lot of pain, but I think she wanted to walk. I started to get up and ask if she wanted to walk. She ran to the kitchen drawer where her leash was and sat still in front of it, looking up at the drawer. I caught up to her, grabbed the leash and walked to the front door. She followed me down the hall.

"Wait," I said, and she sat down.

I put the leash on her, and opened the door.

## Unfinished Dance

I.

I have a baso on my head.  
It's a posture thing. A dance thing.  
Dance habit. Life habit.  
I can't not have a baso on my head.

That baso is skill and hard work and focus  
Things I still have. Things hidden in shards.  
Things that can't be taken away from me.

Itong baso sa akin. Itong sayaw sa akin.

Even in captivity. Even in exile.  
The baso stays.  
It refused to fall before the fall.  
It refuses still.  
A dance habit from a dance I am still dancing.

II.

One day when I was nineteen and  
Always smiling I walked into this room with  
Innocent intentions of only observing. Then someone said,  
"She knows a lot of Filipino folk dance, Auntie."

That's a lie.  
I didn't know a lot.  
But I was in love with it.

That's why i came here. But there was no time to explain myself.  
The 4 foot tall instructor placed a glass of water in the palm of my hand.  
She gestured with bold conviction and a fierce glare at my hair that the  
glass currently in my hand belongs on my head- and already I'm getting it  
wrong.

She was shaking her head at me like I was one of those know-it-alls.  
Ay susmariyosep!

I could only smile,  
Because that's how I was raised.  
But you should know I came here to learn.

I smiled. As the waltz music started,  
I followed the other girls with glasses on their heads.  
She yelled and clapped out the beat to keep us all on rhythm.

Some girls held their breath, which shook the glass on their heads.  
Most girls concealed their laughter, out of fear they'd get yelled at.  
Everyone was stiff, and fiddling around with trying to make the glass stay.  
One girl left crying. Never came back.  
All looking at me, waiting for the glass to drop so that they can assure me  
It happens all the time, especially the first time; that it's normal; that  
I'm normal,  
Mediocre, half-focused, half-practiced; only there to socialize.

Just breathe then. Shoulders down.

I can feel the weight of assumption and expectation. *Sino siya?*  
We had two homelands in common but i looked too different.

No product in my long, black, untrimmed un-styled hair,  
No dark lip liner and sheer gloss. *Sino ka?*  
No brand name anything- did she just come off a boat?  
No one talks about strict parents on a first meet.  
No one talks about curfews and how to break them  
And then lie and not get caught.  
Otherwise, we'd be buddies by now.

They all just watched eagerly, with heavy eyes.  
I know from broken memories that you're just wrong about me.  
For once, the teacher is focused on someone who isn't them.  
She's focused on me.  
Good.

Then pay attention because  
Here is where I'll show you *sino ako*  
Here is where I show you my form.  
Here is where you know nothing about me.

I watched them teach "step-waltz then turn," and I mimicked it.  
I memorized the sequence.  
The sooner I learned it, the sooner I practiced, the sooner I polished.  
Here's what the dance looks like  
With a glass on my head- and one in each hand.  
And when I finished, it was still on my head.  
Dahil sa disiplina. Because of my form.

Ngayon na. Isa pa. Sige.  
Ako ay may lahat ng araw.  
All. Day.

III.

Just like that one time on the bus  
An old man with his dog  
Walked passed my sister and me- and the dog sniffed her knee  
The old man said his dog didn't like 'coloreds'

We had a homeland in common, but we looked too different.  
Ano? Ano bang problema mo?

I had just gotten accepted into an English Creative Writing program.  
I wanted to insult his ignorance and correct his grammar.  
I wanted to take my baso and break it over his ulo.

I wanted to yell high above the hurt  
So he wouldn't know how much it hurt.

Ikaw. Wala kang alam!  
Instead I walked away with a baso sa ulo ko.

I never thought I'd learn about grace.  
A dance habit  
From a dance I'm still polishing.

IV.

Like that one time we stopped to eat at that one restaurant  
After spending a day at the ocean like we did every weekend  
Of every summer for over ten years. Because it was our tradition.

That one time they didn't know if a table was available 'for your kind'  
They didn't want to check, bother to check, care to check. Because we didn't  
matter.

They didn't know that I was born here in America.

I never knew my father knew this dance. I never knew rage could keep his  
glass still.

I waited for the dragon inside him to burn the place down and  
Turn his liquid molten glass into ice to make shards of arrows to pierce  
their skulls.

They wouldn't last a day where he came from.

Like that one time- or those hundred times- they pulled us over  
For allegedly speeding in a school zone.

They immediately asked my brother if he spoke any English. Every time.

They made him step out of the car. Every. Time.

To make sure he was patted down. To make sure they could find a reason. To  
make him wrong.

Do not test me.

Because there's a glass on my head

And you know nothing about me.

No. Ikaw. Mali ka. Ikaw ay mali.

Meron akong baso sa ulo ko.

Because I work hard. Because I craft my skill.

Kailan pa man.

This glass will never fall.

V.

Even in exile. Even in captivity.  
There is more to this smile than you know.  
The smile is a technique

To keep the glass balanced.  
To drown out the doubt  
Drown out the hate  
Drown out the ones who long to see me fall

When it's there I focus  
My posture my poise  
My grace my confidence  
My shoulders pressed down  
That's the zone.

I take one step and turn, then I spin with ease.  
The form can never be compromised.  
So always show them your form.

That glass is a story  
About celebration  
About harvest  
Ng Pagdiriwang  
Ng aking bayan  
It is me.

Merong akong baso sa ulo ko.  
And this glass will never fall.

Random dreams.

I dream about Justin Timberlake and Orlando Bloom at a house party, where they don't realize until it's too late that they ARE the menu for a group of vampires hosting the party. And I alone save them through a choreographed fight scene to some catchy music- like a flamenco remix of the Castlevania video game theme song.

Justin says, "Thanks, doll!" and dances away. Then Orlando introduces himself to me and asks if I can help him find his car in the parking lot, which resembled an elementary school parking lot. We walk in circles under a starless sky. Then he realizes that he parked down the hill.

Later that week, he sends me some kind of thank you.

After work, I'm at a bar during happy hour telling this to Jane Austen. Sipping a caipirinha, she argues that Orlando might be the deceiver with ulterior motive, but more that there is clearly something on my mind, and I need to just say it.

I say it.

This job sucks. This life sucks.

It's right but also not right. Something is not right.

True- I travel, they pay me to travel and build bridges, and I connect people and watch bridges get built. But then I come home and my bosses set all my bridges on fire. Then they set me on fire. Then they smile as they watch me burn--

I shift in bed, eyes half open, and run the 2am drill:

Turn neck left and right slowly

Push shoulders down

Twist wrists and hands to palms facing upward

Lift hands up slowly above head

Reach for pillow to adjust.

Nope, it's probably the knee.

Adjust hips, stretch legs from the heels.

Lumbar pillow under knee... Relief.

Breathe deep. Deeper.

Drift.

Sleep.

Dream...

I dream of the fire. Of being fired.

Fire doesn't build bridges. Fire doesn't create.

That's when the fire says I'm wrong.

*Step inside. What you've become is not the plan.*

Who is talking? I'm waking up...

*No... Stay here a little longer.*

*Don't you know anything about dragons? Especially the ones where you come from?*

*We set the night to ash. Complete darkness.*

*They fear eclipse because of us. We eat the moon because the light is brilliant. They don't need it- see how they misuse it. And you've swelled and dwelled in darkness too long... take the moon. Steal it. The darkness isn't bad- people fear reflection and darkness.*

*You've dwelled in it for years.*

Wake up...

*You are a night sky on the verge of an eclipse.*

*You are the darkness. You are our voice.*

Our voice?

*Tell them.*

I'm waking up now...

*No...*

*Tell them what it's like*

*To be set on fire, to burn slowly to ash, to roam the world a ghost,  
to feel the hurt in your bones until you're numb.*

*Tell them what it's like to be the dark, the invisible, the unwanted,  
the imperfect.*

*Then tell them what it's like to live.*

## BURONG TALO

There is grace in a predatory bird in flight  
There is grace in a pouncing wildcat  
There is beauty in conflict  
And then the drum sounds.

What is the posture of battle?  
To be stealthy and unseen.  
To be dynamic in your attack.  
To be crouched and bent.  
To break the other. To be unbroken.  
To destroy.

The gongs start  
When the fighting starts  
When steel touches steel  
When claw aims for wing  
When aggressions collide

If you want to know what the fight is saying  
Listen to the gongs  
And fight.

Aggressive and pointed  
Take it personal. Make it personal.  
Because you are under attack.

There is a pulse that takes over your pulse  
You become the battlefield.

Take care,  
For the unknown has revealed  
Its sharpened claw-

Ready  
To break your stride.

Flare up

Fists swollen  
Wrists swollen  
Knuckles swollen

Shoulders so swollen  
It hurts to put on clothes.

Elbows so swollen  
They can't bend or straighten.

Hips so swollen  
No sitting or turning  
Or sleeping or breathing.

Heels swollen  
Ankles swollen  
Knees swollen

Jaw so swollen I am silenced.

Neck so swollen  
I bow before the world.

Feet so swollen  
I don't feel the eggshells I walk on.

Eyes swollen. Tears induced.

Pain advances.  
Pain prevails.  
Pain surrounds.  
Pain raises its flag.  
Pain anthem and glory.

Pain-itis.

Pain it is.

Walking swollen

Driving swollen

Working swollen

Explaining swollen

Emotionally swollen

Rage swollen and suppressed by  
Everything swollen.

Life swollen.

Scar tissue ahead.

Curl swollen fists.

Compress swollen knuckles.

Hold swollen wrists.

Stand swollen knees up.

Hug swollen elbows.

Lull swollen shoulders to sleep.

Let induced tears fall from swollen eyes.

A flare up can last

An hour

A day

A few days

Weeks -

A flare up can last.

## Tikbalang

I had heard stories growing up  
about a beast with the body of a man  
And the head of a horse-  
called Tikbalang.

He slept in a specific type of tree,  
He was mischievous.

He was scary.

He wasn't a friend, but a fiend.

He made you lose your way at night  
So you couldn't find the road,  
or know which way you were going.

They joked and  
called my grandfather Tikbalang,  
because he napped in the same tree.

Joint Observation Report | Waking up

My eyes open.

Not because of the alarm that has been gradually sounding louder and louder- I slept through it for about twenty minutes- but because my left knee hates music, and sounds... and rain and cold weather- and sleep. She hates everything. My left knee is the pickiest person I know. My left knee can handle up to two hours of intense no-impact stress-free activity, and six hours of decent sleep, even though the rest of my body- primarily the joints- requires eight to ten hours of rest on average- and ten to twelve hours of sleep.

My left knee is a cat at 8am

who has been waiting to be fed since 6am.

Hey... Hey... Hey...

Hey.

Claws at door.

Scratches at sheets as pre-jumping on bed warning...

My knee twitches as I stretch it and lean it outward, looking for cushioning.

She wants cushion.

Hey... Hey... Claws to cheek -

Sharp pain on side of knee. HEY--

Ouch.

OKAY. I'm up.

I heard you.

Awake. I'm awake.

Ok, I'm getting up. Only, I am lodged between a cranky shoulder that didn't get any sleep last night and another cranky shoulder that needs stretching but also needs knots unknotted before stretching can happen. These two partied hard last night.

Personal trainers always have that bubbly positive attitude - the one that in theory promotes productivity, meeting goals, and praise as reward for good behavior.

Ok, joints! Here we go! We're getting up... The sooner, the better! This will only hurt for a few minutes, but then gradually, we'll all feel great!

I sit up and a sharp pain behind my left knee travels up to my left hip.

Left knee screams with anger.

I know, I know it sucks, but we're getting up. And we're walking to a hot shower! That's our favorite, right?

I am a personal trainer in this scenario which basically means, I hate myself. Every morning.

Please.

The hot water and steam makes all the joints smile. Even asthmatic lungs rejoice and breathe deep. I've gotten the toes and ankles awake, and they're working hard and persistently to appease left knee, and now impressionable right knee, who follows alpha-left knee's mood. No, I tell them, neither of you are dying or even hurting that much.

Then I tell them to stop whining.

Getting dressed

It's just jeans. We like jeans, don't we? Remember that job that had the strict dress code? We hated dress shirts and nylons, pencil skirts and heels. Jeans! I'm just lifting my legs into a pair of jeans and shaking myself into them. We took a hot shower- wake up!

My fingers wake up at different times.

Thumbs are the early risers, followed by pinkies, then pointing and index finger. Middle fingers hate the cold, the early morning, everything.

They hate everything.

Cue my hands.

As a unit, my hands are basically useless until about 10am. My hands can't get a grip on anything. My hands hate jeans. Everything is done with contention or a sigh or a whine or a 'do we have to?' Washing face, brushing teeth, brushing hair. It's all a group effort. Hungover shoulders won't let useless hands reach the back of my head. So, whatever grisly partially-flattened, partially-fluffy hairdo I have is what I'm rocking today.

Go to hell all of you.

Where's the goddamn leave-in hair serum and contour crème?

Idaw:  
The omen of battle

It was  
A folkdance centered on  
Finding the Idaw bird the morning before a battle.

If a tribe found the bird in the wild  
It was a sign that  
They would  
Win.

More commonly known as 'itotoro,'  
The Idaw bird has a twin  
In the spirit world.

This idea  
That twins can be  
Of the same bloodline  
But not of the same world.  
There is a connection that defies  
What is tangible.  
Is the connection necessary?

When warriors send their enemies  
To their final breath

The Idaw is there  
To watch them depart  
And to let its twin know  
To receive their company.

## The Battle at Langka

I was seventeen when my family went to the Philippines to witness my parents renew their vows in the church they got married in twenty-five years prior. This silver wedding celebration was my first trip back since I was a baby. We spent some time with both sides of the family, the house on Ermin Garcia Street in Metro Manila, and then a few hours south to the farm where my father grew up.

One day, driving back into the city from my father's province, my aunt asked the driver to pull over. She had noticed a giant langka (jackfruit) that could be harvested on the side of the road. We pulled over and my aunt and her cousin went out to climb the tree and retrieve the fruit. There was an overly ripe section of the fruit that they severed, but it was a sliver compared to the rest of the fruit, which could easily feed twenty people. It took two people to lift the jackfruit into the back of the van, where they situated it just behind and under where my sister and I were sitting. My sister was thirsty and hot from the humidity and tried to sleep the rest of the ride home. I have a very fond memory of my godmother fanning me to sleep at night when I was a child, and I looked around the van. I saw some newspapers in the seat in front of me. I grabbed one of the papers, folded it and started fanning my sister- maybe the air circulation would help her sleep.

I looked out the window and saw a bird fly overhead.

The van started back up and we were steadily wading through slow traffic on our way back to our hotel. During that time, I formed a fanning system. I'd fan my sister sitting on my left for twenty minutes- which got her to fall asleep; then my sister on my right asked to be fanned, so I fanned her for a little. When she drifted off, I fanned myself and maybe stopped for a few minutes until one of my sisters started fidgeting uncomfortably, so I fanned them again until they stopped. On occasion, I'd scan the rest of the van to see if I could fan some air their way.

Suddenly, I felt something move across my elbow and shrugged my shoulder- maybe it was just the hot sticky air. Then I felt something on my wrist so I looked down. It was a tiny black ant, racing towards my shoulder. An ant! I smacked my wrist instantly with the newspaper fan and flattened the ant, whose legs were now stuck to the newspaper fan. I wiped the bug guts that were on my arm on my sister's shirt. I looked behind me at the back seat, down at the langka we just plucked from the tree. A family of ants- probably the ones who had snacked on the overly-ripe portion we had discarded- had hitched a ride with us, and began their ascent onto our seat. My eyes widened. We had at least two hours of traffic ahead of us. I looked around. Everyone was fast asleep. It was just me and the ants in the backseat. Another ant was already climbing up the backside of the seat, inches ahead of the others. I squinted at it and flicked it back down.

"Try again!" I whispered.

I edged forward on the seat, newspaper at the ready, fanning my sister until I caught peripheral ant-movement. I noticed two ants crawling on my sister's arm. I tried to shake her awake, but she was out. I smacked her arm swiftly with the newspaper. She didn't wake up. I noticed a few ants on

her knees, so I smacked them dead and tried to shake their bodies off the fan. It seemed every twenty seconds I'd spot an ant on one of my sisters and I'd flatten them, crush them, or send them flying. Any ants attempting to crawl on me personally met a deadly palm squish or elbow smash. I was shocked at how everyone slept through this sneak attack. I started to feel a little exhausted from the heat, but then I spotted an ant with ninja-like skills speed his way up my sister's arm. I snatched the newspaper fan and hit her in the shoulder, but missed! The ant disappeared around her neck. I desperately scanned her neck for movement and saw him sneak around just as I hit the back of her head. I couldn't let this one get away. I took a deep breath and waited calmly for the ant to resurface. Just as he turned the corner from her chin and began to climb towards her eye, I lifted my newspaper fan and struck him down off her face and killed him dead. I smiled.

My mom woke up in the front seat, looked back and saw me hitting my sister's face with a newspaper, and in the sternest tone, demanded an explanation.

All I could say in my defense:

"THERE'S ANTS BACK HERE!!!!!"

## Joint Observation Report | Still waking up

### Breakfast

All kitchens and resources and abilities are closed until 10am. Sorry. I mean, those scones look nice. But they're in a container that needs hands to open. Prednisone needs to be taken with food. I found some M&Ms. Boom. Down it with water. This will kick in strong in about twenty minutes.

### Coffee

Thank you pre-set auto drip alarm-setting coffee maker that allows me to set the coffee timer for right now the night before when everything is functioning or on the tail end of winding down. Thank you arms for also thinking ahead that it'll be a literal and emotion pain to reach up for a mug in the morning- and bonus points for picking a lightweight one.

Can't open the almond milk jar. Damn. That's what I kept forgetting to do last night. This must suffice. Shut up shoulders. I am drinking this coffee. I know you hurt. Just give me a second. Coffee is a super power. Now all of my joints think they are well-oiled and warmed up and ready to jump into the morning. They are exactly the opposite. They all scream when I begin the stretching routine. The hands have fallen numb and asleep from the stretching. The shoulders have stabilized, but now the knees are gaining anxiety about putting on shoes.

Lazy ass hands can't tie shoelaces until after 10am!

Please pick the slip-ons. Please.

Cue the hands again.

The hands. They hate both elbows.

On several occasions, the hands have filed reports to the HR department on how sluggish and swollen the elbows have become and how they agitate the shoulders, the wrists, and the mellowest unit of their team, all of my fingers.

On several occasions, HR has had to explain how firing and terminating the elbows would literally sever ties to the shoulders that my hands seem to admire so much.

The elbows are just overwhelmed and stressed by the workload right now.

Please have patience

And by the way, if we're addressing productivity, why can't you wake up before 10am? None of us are judging you, even though I am hungry and starving and drinking unsweetened coffee no cream in the morning. Even though turning two knobs to get out of the house is impossible without a battle cry or scream of some sort, and opening the car door takes two hands instead of one.

Joint Observation Report | How I drive

This is how I drive.

Opening the car door takes two hands. Some days it requires two hands and weight-shifting pulley action. I don't even remember when I managed enough energy, strength and momentum to throw a messenger bag on myself. Walk around to passenger door and place messenger bag on seat. We can't put it on the floor. Everyone will complain if we do.

Ok, wrists, your workout begins now.

It's gonna be ok. I promise to breathe.

I promise to talk us through it. Grip the key and turn.

Turn it enough to start the engine.

It's an awkward position and two hands can't do it, so right hand, right wrist, we need you to focus. Turn. Turn it. Just a little harder, okay, right wrist? I'm sorry. Has anyone ever told you how hyper-sensitive you are?

Fingers don't bend at knuckles. The stretching helped everyone except for the hands, that by law just don't start working until 10am. Ok. Rest for a minute. I'm going to pull out the secret weapon: compression fingerless gloves. Same drill- enthusiastic thumbs are first to revive, followed by pinkies, then index and pointing finger.

Middle finger hates driving. Wants everyone to know. Refuses to bend.

I drive to work flipping the bird to everyone who looks my way.

Because it's not yet ten o'clock.

## Last Time

The first time I was in Washington D.C. was the summer I turned fourteen.

I had left 8<sup>th</sup> grade a legend, then entered high school invisible.

We went to D.C. with my dad for a conference he had to attend, and planned to visit family friends in New York for a short family vacation afterwards.

My family laughed at how excited I was by having my own seat with my own tray table and my own seat pockets. I left a library book in that seat pocket and accrued overdue fines. My parents had to buy the book from the library after we returned.

Mid-flight, I was French-braiding my hair in my seat and one of the flight attendants started talking to me about how pretty my braid was. She asked if I could put her hair back in a braid. I said yes, and followed her to the back area where all the drinks and snacks were.

An hour later, my parents found me with all of the flight attendants in the back, French-braiding everyone's hair at their requests. I waved bye to them as I walked back to my seat, and they all smiled and waved back.

Later, sitting in my seat reading a book, one of the flight attendants came out and gave me a blanket and some slippers, some extra cookies, and a soda to say thank you.

I made a boy two seats over a little jealous because he wanted soda. I didn't want my soda, so I gave him mine. His mom wondered where he got it from.

When we landed, we waited hours for our rental car in the most humid heat I had ever experienced.

I memorized the car rental center's automated recording about checking the entire car and trunk for valuables - as well as under the seat and in every compartment - before returning the keys, while trying to fan myself with a magazine.

The hotel - everywhere indoors - blasted A/C- so it was either too hot or too cold.

We walked for miles and miles in humid heat through air-conditioned museum after museum.

It was hot, and I formed an opinion about asphalt. It made me miss trees and home.

But we went to a place where you could personalize your own dog tags. My hero was the greatest warrior of all the Zentraedi, from the cartoon Robotech. My tags read:

First Officer Miriya Parina  
Quadrano Leader, Zentraedi Air Force  
DOB: *(I gave her my birthdate.)*

Abraham Lincoln's memorial was the largest statue I had ever seen.

The Vietnam memorial was the longest, darkest wall of names I'd seen. It sank my heart, I couldn't explain it, and I spent what felt like hours trying to read and memorize names off the wall.

The last time I was in DC, I stayed at the Watergate hotel.

Anytime I gave that name to a cab driver  
or someone locally who was dropping me off, they said

"Oh wow."

"You're at the Watergate hotel..."

"Watch out for scandal."

I laughed gracefully every time.

I was almost certain that I was clear of any scandal.

Because I was jet-setting

To San Francisco, Honolulu, Tucson, DC, Maui,

Every four or six weeks,

Thriving in a career

That I loved every minute of it

Outside of the

Swollen elbows, swollen knees

And stiffness in my shoulders

I couldn't explain.

The last time I was in DC, I was an Alumni Director

I connected with alumni in the DC area to tell them all the great things happening with their alma mater.

I interviewed some alumni for potential online profile features for our alumni website, while setting up the next regional destination meeting, all from my hotel room, a café down the street, or a park bench.

The world was my office.

San Francisco, Honolulu, Tucson, DC, Maui

every four or six weeks.

I loved every minute of it.

I saw less of my family,

Less of my friends, less of my marriage, less of myself

But I walked into work every morning

Where I was told to believe in

The greater good.

There was enough work to

Be so busy

That I couldn't

Sit still long enough to

Really wonder about

Being tired by noon, shoulders heavy, feeling stiff, pain in my heels.

The last time I was in D.C. a shadow of scandal followed me home.

I met less with the Executive board.

I lost access to talk to them.

They built walls around me and questioned everything.

It took them eight months to set a trap

Of impossible metrics and unreasonable conversation

To diminish all of the programs I created

And my credibility.

On my last day

I chose termination

They had me escorted from the building

They refused me access to my office

To my computer, to close up shop,

To let my team know I was no longer on their team.

I said goodbye to no one.

I explained myself to no one.

No one would look at me.

No one felt like they could talk to me.

I became a ghost.

The last time I was in DC was

The last time I felt fearless.

The last time I wore heels.

The last time my body didn't break under stress.

The last time I found myself lost.

The last time I believed in anything.

The last time I was in DC

I drank coffee at

7am

9am

2pm

5pm

6:40pm

And

with my dessert at 9:30pm

Overwhelmed.

Because of non-stop meetings for the greater good.

Because of heavy exhaustion, inflammation, and intense pain everywhere that I couldn't explain.

Because of the disease I inherited

Hiding in my veins, running through my veins-

That I had yet to meet.

Things that are waiting for me

Books to read, movies to watch  
A carpet to replace, a kitchen to renovate

Tikbalang

A new group of dance students  
who have heard stories about my tone  
Collaborating with writers on projects

A vacation, a getaway, a winery  
A fast car, snowboarding  
Losing my eyesight  
A dance studio  
Knee surgery  
A house on the water  
Complete joint deterioration

Tikbalang

Getting published, getting recognition  
Getting wrist surgery, hip surgery,  
Back surgery, shoulder surgery

All the things in my DNA -  
Lupus, Vasculitis, Polymyocitis,  
Rheumatoid Arthritis,  
High blood pressure, high cholesterol,  
Diabetes, depression,  
Pain.

All of it.  
Living is waiting for me.

Tikbalang  
is waiting for me.

## Joint Observation Report | Sleep

Sleep.

Shoulders are eager to fall back onto pillows.

Hips are usually pretty in line and responsible. I rely on them to veto most of the whining that my joints have during the night. Hips run on auto pilot. If right knee is restless, hips shift entire body to

Opposite side so that right knee is resting on top of some comforter.

Multi-tasking and anticipating that left elbow will start whining (because it's always right knee and left elbow, or left knee and right elbow who like to tag team), hips have found extra blanket cushion for left elbow in the 2am body-turn.

Hips retire to breakroom.

They have at least forty minutes before someone wakes us up again.

Try to sleep.

Then I can dream.

Once I Was A Fish

The chimes start in  
To signal my brain  
Wind and vertigo  
I never learned to swim

Once I was a fish  
Some things are simply  
Inherent and second nature.

Did you catch me running through a  
maze?  
Dreams move just like ocean waves

My tribe is a school of a thousand fish  
One collective eye with countless  
voices

You were talking in your sleep last  
night...  
Something about butterflies and  
The day you were born:

Laborless love.  
Lovers laboring.  
Love's labors- won.

I came into this world on  
The fury of a poltergeist

My sadness and rage  
Are one and the same.

Your words are an ocean  
Elusive. Powerful. Calming.  
Salty. Rigid. Refined.  
Smooth.

The ocean is languid  
The ocean is language  
The ocean is the sky is the ocean  
Mimicking  
The sky's tears are  
Fury and felicity

The ocean is your words.  
Once I was a fish breathing you in.

Joint Observation Report | Dream

Dream.

I dream of Dance.

The music talks to me under a moonless night.

In the darkness I hear the melody. I try to capture it through movement-

Before the words and familiar language actually process.

I hear a guitar lamenting, a playful flute, angry or protective drums;

I forget the music was sewn at my heels and followed me home.

I forget how to move.

I hear the space between the violin and the piano bassline- or the ache between a piano's heartbreak and the anger of a guitar strum- the space between instruments, where emptiness pulls at heartstrings.

I create movement in those spaces. Not everyone moves at the same time.

They move at different times- in sync with different musical sounds.

They represent the sound.

I dream in full movement- there is nothing that confines me.

I did run into the woods, chasing after butterflies.

I knew they had to be something more.

Suddenly the darkness is lit with lanterns from fisherman coming home from a day at sea, catching fish for their village. I was that villager, standing at the shore with an oil lamp in hand. I would not fail them- my father, my brother, my grandfather, my husband. The light from my lantern would guide them home.

The dance is Pandanggo sa Ilaw - a dance of Light.

Our celebration is a waltz, and the catch is plentiful, and life is care-free. One celebration - one simple life; today we lived, and will do it again tomorrow.

Sharp pain in elbow reaches up to my shoulder.

Hips act fast to roll to opposite side and stiff fingers bat at pillow to readjust its position..

They'll do it again at 2am.

Try.

Try to sleep.

Try to dream.

A dream is a ghost that wants to be tangible.

A ghost is a dream that wants to be tangible.

**ASIK**

Bow in reverence.

Bow in silence.

Bow.

After

The drums have announced

The gongs warn of

A magic that

C O M M A N D S

With quiet grace

With pointed toe

And delicate arms

Led by twirling wrists.

A magic that leans

Her sharpened poise

Turning from her

Hips and waist

She is precise

And unbroken in form

Fluid in resistance

Like the tide being

Pulled back in

Suppressed potential

Sentenced to bow

Ornamental

Hidden

In her sheath

She is

A curved

Blade

Waiting

To taste

Freedom.

Cicatrix

She set me on fire that I may always  
Remember the day I woke her.

She set me ablaze  
Heat under my shoulders  
Through my elbows  
Pulsing in my hips  
Consuming my knees  
Burn under my feet  
Walking on hot coals.

I cried so hard  
Every day  
I fell asleep  
Drowning  
In the salt of my tears

Reaching blindly  
Frantically for armor  
It was hiding in the music all this time.

*C'mon Torpedo, do your worst.*

I made a playlist of songs  
To ride into battle.

It tapped into my anger  
*Get me right in the heart*

And my frustration  
*Blow me up till you see my ghost*

And my unwillingness  
To let anyone there see me cry.

I refused the pain a voice.  
I came prepared with war paint.

*I will not lay down in the road*  
High heels and power suits.

*I will not make it easy.*  
I curled my hair, I glossed my lips deep red.

*I don't got no saints or saviors.*  
I know how to perform- I've danced for years.

*This is guerilla and I will fight this war.*

But I lied.

I couldn't hide the undiagnosed

That slowed my gait  
Matted my hair,  
Made smiling painful

The undiagnosed

That delighted in watching me  
Lose my grip and the ability to  
Hold things

The undiagnosed

That induced them to tell me  
I look more and more  
Haggard and incapable.

If you ever want to wake the sleeping dragon,

Tell it a lie.

I told a hundred lies

This is (not) where I belong  
This is (not) what I was meant to do  
This is (not) me

No.

This is a battlefield.

This is toxic.

This is unstable.

This is war.

This is me getting us out of here.

She set me on fire  
That I may always  
Remember the day I woke her.

*Song: "Torpedo," - by Jillette Johnson*

Vignettes of Rainfall

1.

Downpour

You wanted to live forever  
Your dark eyes confided in me once.

I followed you  
Because you were fire  
And my hands were cold.

Remember when we spent our aimless days at the park-  
Drawing chalk murals in the empty wading pool

Everyday.  
And everyday the rain would come down.  
Everyday. Until spring.

You didn't draw.  
You just watched me draw.  
You used to call me Misery.

You talked about getting outta here.  
You needed the vast world to break your heart.

I drew you a map in the empty pool  
And a haiku as a path from point A to B:

*After they faded  
I still saw your fireworks  
Breathe fearless magic.*

Standing in the downpour,  
we watched the rain destroy what we made.

That was the last time  
you begged the muse inside me not to die.

2.

Flash Flood

Hot rain fills the air  
Drums like a pulse  
Unsettled energy  
Hot breeze through the night

We lost track of time  
Locked out of your room-  
Your cold hands on my shoulders  
At my waist  
Throwing back shots  
Playing with my hair

You taught me how to hustle someone in pool  
How to wink over my shoulder at the bouncer  
How to look and drink like twenty-two.

Hot rain fills the air  
Trumpets blaring, drums like a pulse  
Amaretto on the rocks  
Coffee and whiskey  
Humidity and you  
Clinging to my clothes  
Clinging to my skin  
Whispering at my neck  
Cole Porter told you  
We were delightful  
We were delicious  
It was Delovely  
And the night was young.

Every street corner a saint's name  
Every street corner a sinner's game

You were a song to sing  
To scream, to dream  
To forget to linger

To taste one more time.  
Amaretto on the rocks  
Coffee and whiskey  
You and me  
A pulse and a melody  
Hot rain fills the air  
Bathing us in fire.

3.

Torrent

We sat in the bar In silence For hours	I can ask you anything right now. You know you can.
Because the vodka Because the bourbon Because she said She wasn't coming back	<i>(I'd never drive you to this.)</i> <i>(I've always run to rescue you.)</i> <i>(I've always run.) (To you.)</i>
And you can't drive home- So I can't quit you.	I want to leave. I need to leave.  All I want You hold me
You don't Know how to Tell me What to do	Hold me Hold me  Hold me Tighter.
You staggered to the jukebox Music, you said. <i>Don't play that song.</i> You love this song.	I can't stay here. This isn't real
This isn't good for you For me But we said We'd wait out the rain here-	Because the vodka Because the bourbon  Because you'll wake up tomorrow
Dance with me, you said.  You tell me you're fine.	Because you don't know How to walk away Because I don't know How to walk away
You move my arms Around your neck	Because your arms Wrapped around me tighter
Your hot hands find The small of my back	Because the sound of rainfall Slams fists into metal rooftops; Burning the pulse inside me.
You pull me in- head hanging low Chin resting against my shoulder. You close your eyes.	We said we'd wait out the rain- And I just can't quit you.

4.

Petrichor

It's in the sky, it chatters on the sidewalk  
It tickles my ears and hangs off my eyelashes.  
It blurs my sight.  
Beautiful rain.

They say the rain makes everything better-  
Touches leaves and petals;  
Feeds the trees and the ground;  
Turns the dry landscape green-

It happens when warm moist air cools  
And condensation occurs...  
Atmospheric water vapor-  
Heavy enough to fall under gravity.

Dance me in the rainfall  
Until we're singing in it  
Until we've found harbor in the woods  
Until the rain turns into perfume

Lingering in our hair  
On our skin  
For days

The taste of memory  
Clinging to my eyelashes.

The rain drops

Feeding the trees and the ground  
Touching the grass, leaves and petals.

Turning the air into perfume.

Tickling my ears  
Blurring my sight.

I'll do my crying here.

əm'breɪlə/

**noun: umbrella; plural noun: umbrellas**

Origin

early 17th century: from Italian *ombrella*, diminutive of *ombra* 'shade,' from Latin *umbra* (see [umbra](#)).

1.

a device consisting of a circular canopy of cloth on a folding metal frame supported by a central rod, used as protection against rain or sometimes sun.

2.

a protecting force or influence.

3.

a thing that includes or contains many different elements or parts.  
"an umbrella organization"

4.

**ZOOLOGY**

the gelatinous disk of a jellyfish, which it contracts and expands to move through the water.

5.

**DANCE**

"Asik" is the dance of a servant girl, getting dressed and preparing for a ceremony involving the princess she serves. Other descriptions of the dance say she is preparing to present herself to a sultan; The dance commonly introduces another dance called "Singkil," which tells the story about a princess who is lured into the woods by wicked spirits disguised as butterflies. Once they lure her into the wild, they cause an earthquake and she runs through, dodging the falling bamboo and refusing to show the spirits her fear, facing them with grace and poise instead. And then a prince finds her, rescues her, and marries her. Always following behind the princess is her loyal servant girl, holding an umbrella over her head, as the princess sneaks out of the palace, into the woods, and through the earthquake.

## Umbrella Girl

I want to be the one  
who holds the umbrella

The one who is always a half-step behind,  
Ready to catch, to shield, to protect.

Even if they told me she is not a bodyguard.  
Even if they told me she is just a servant, a slave  
She is my superhero.

What other words do you have  
That can't contain or capture her spirit?

Look at her form, the way she leans  
Her calm, her cool, collected charm

The way she steps  
Silent but sharp

Leaning with conviction and pride  
Fluidity of arms wading through an ocean  
They expand and extend with every lean

Her fearlessness  
Silent but sharp

A captive in servitude  
She has seen worse than you.  
She has been through worse.

Asik is the "Slave Girl" Dance

In which the slave girl dances to win the favor of her master.

In which the slave girl is dressing to appease her Sultan master.

In which the slave girl dances and poses in doll-like motions.

In which the slave girl puts on makeup to become enticing.

In which the slave girl performs

To soften his heart.

In which Sultans and Rajahs

Had such privilege

To be enticed and softened.

In which movement was meant to hypnotize and seduce.

In which movement in ornate dress, scented hair, coy makeup and allure

Kept her alive

Kept her slavery alive

A servant in captivity

A captive in servitude

Being kept alive

To soften and entice.

Do I captivate you?

Delicate cloth hanging over metal bars

She is a dragon in butterfly's clothing

Italian in origin, it arrived in our land

By way of the Chinese.

The word in our language for it

Is rooted in Indonesian.

Its fabric is vibrant and silky,

Woven by indentured hands.

I cannot change her captivity.

It matters that the truth is hard.

It doesn't change the strength I see.

She could be a Titan Goddess, Wonder Woman.

Always a half-step ahead and off beat

Always pushing her skill and form a little more.

Maybe when she dances she is free.

To Indy, 1994-2008

You were six weeks old in the back of a truck when I first met you, sleeping on a red blanket in a small cardboard box. Though you appeared asleep, your tail was still wagging. You might've been too excited to sleep. I reached into the box to rub your little ear, and you immediately perked up and playfully grabbed my hand with your jaw, sitting up attentively. The thumping from your propeller puppy-tail slammed against the box. Knowing that we'd soon be losing Sam, our loyal little Terrier-Daschund mutt, we were all reluctant to get too attached to you as 'the replacement dog.' But it didn't take long before we became inseparable.

Because you were the only black lab in a litter of Labrador puppies, your former owners considered you an omen. That's how you landed in the hands of my father, whose client wanted to be rid of you. We often joked that we saved you from a butcher in Chinatown. But, in fact, we did save you from a butcher in Chinatown. Your naming ceremony was quite the controversy in our family and we wanted to capture you perfectly. We finally found common ground- through movies- and well, as the movie goes (said Sean Connery to Harrison Ford), "We named the dog Indiana."

We used to read together. You weren't a big fan of Nabokov, and Chekov was ok, but you took long naps on my lap while I read Calvin and Hobbes. You were also curious, more than any cat I knew. You were curious about my viola when you weren't afraid of the noise it made. You were curious about everything that made a noise, like the blender, the stairs, the front door, the tree branches that hit the window, garlic frying in a pan, my favorite fleece Chuck Taylors that you thoroughly chewed through, and the vacuum- until we turned the vacuum on, and you tried to bark it away. You really

didn't like matches or fire, and you tried to tackle the snow before it hit the ground. When you discovered that you had a tail, you chased it in circles until you caught it. This took several weeks, but you eventually caught it.

You always fell asleep on my lap when you were a puppy- and this didn't change when you grew to be the size of a prize-winning pony. I didn't mind though. You knew me the best. We had a lot in common, you and I- thick black hair, clumsy over-sized paws, big hips, and a passion for food. You sat with me while I studied. You got me outside to walk. You were there through my musical composer-aspirations phase, my Broadway-dancer phase, my college years, and even my stuck-in-a-9-to-5-no-where-near-my-actual-degree phase. Your attentive ears probably heard more than you wanted to on the subject of my finances, relationships, and moving out.

You loved to play fetch. I learned early on that taking you to Greenlake wasn't a good idea. There's ducks everywhere, and you enjoyed attempting to fetch them. While thankful that we didn't bring ducks home for dinner on various occasions, we knew that your need to run and retrieve things was simply in your DNA. It was then that you became best friends with Ball, and took your red rubber ball EVERYWHERE. But those early days at Greenlake and trying to keep you from snatching up those ducks- and squirrels, and any other critters by their necks- was when I learned just how fast you could run, and in turn, how fast I could run after you.

You crossed your paws like any proper lady lab should, but you never learned how to sit properly. I'm almost certain my mother would faint or slap me for not sitting with my knees shut together. It just became part of your impeccable charm. And as huge and intimidating you may have seemed, it took you a few years before you realized that you had a bark. That is definitely something we had in common. Even after learning this, you hardly

ever barked, except when the occasional fire truck siren sounded, or fireworks nearby had scared you. The language you spoke- It was all in the tail you wagged.

On occasion you managed to escape the backyard to trot around the neighborhood, and you rarely found your way home. It wasn't always your fault though. The houses of Blue Ridge do look the same, so any green lawn with a view of the Olympics felt like home to you, especially if there was a party in the house you thought was your home. Strangers always welcomed you into the party, and you went willingly, wagging your tail, waiting for someone to call us up to tell us that they've met the sweetest girl who just wandered into the house and is getting to know everyone. You always seemed happy when I picked you up to take you home, and you trotted back like a royal celebrity. I felt like you knew where home really was, but maybe there was just so much more to see out there in the world. You always had this smiling side-glance when you looked at me from the corner of your eye, as if to tell me, "I can't promise this won't happen again."

For one as happy and friendly as you were, we were all so sad to learn of the tumor in your shoulder. You really fought to hide it in the early signs, because all you wanted to do was play and make us happy. Maybe your gait slowed down when you ran after things. Getting up took a little more effort, and we never knew that those moments you were sitting still was because of an unknown pain that kept you from moving. We had always imagined or hoped you would simply just fall asleep peacefully in your old age, with a grayed but satisfied smile. We had almost put you through surgery, but the tumor had already started to spread towards your lungs. After thirteen long years, you let us know that it was your time to go, and even in your final moments, you showed us your fighting spirit, teaching me perseverance and dealing with what life throws at you.

In your final days, you were well taken care of, watching NCIS and Law and Order marathons every day in your red blanket, eating the best hot dog and sandwich meat treats, being as comfortable as possible, and receiving the attention you needed. Even though you no longer ran after Ball, we made sure your faithful companion was always at your paw, and when you napped, with your chin resting on Ball, we knew you were dreaming of better times.

Your final car ride was comfortable. Wrapped in a plush soft blanket, the drive was short. We carried you because your hind legs started to lose function.

As you panted short breaths, I kept you in my arms as the shots were administered, and held you as your breathing slowed, and your eyes drifted gently. I held you even after your body felt cold.

It was the hardest thing I have ever done, but it was the least I could do for all the times you held me together. You lived a long life, and a good life, and I want to thank you for always being there at the end of my day, when work was awful, and traffic sucked, and the car was making noise, and my feet hurt, and the world won't stop. I will fondly remember your cold wet nose- warmer than any fire could provide, your floppy ears that took in a lot of venting, your gentle gigantic but comforting paws, and your welcoming, wagging, sea-otter-bat of a tail.

Most importantly, I will always remember that you were the best dog that a family could ask for, and regardless of any burglars you'd let into our house because you aren't a guard dog, or any strangers you were so elated to meet that you couldn't control your bladder, I know what it means to be loved unconditionally.

We said that we saved you from the butcher that day.

It was really you who saved me.

Bent and broken

There is a humility to being broken. And a rage.  
Somewhere between laughter and tears there is an  
Unsettled and imbalanced disconnected blue wire- or red wire-  
Longing to reconnect to complete the countdown.

Why did you cut me? When does it end?  
I used to be on fire. Now I am four seconds away from- nothing.

There is an anger to being broken. And a sadness.  
And at times a familiar shell of the word 'happiness.'  
It's really a phantom shell.  
It doesn't belong. It doesn't exist. Things get redefined.  
Four seconds. Now an eternity.

There is an unreliability to being broken. And a limitation.  
It depends on any given hour of any given day. It depends on the pain.  
Where the pain is and where the swelling is.  
Because they divide and conquer.  
Sometimes four seconds. Sometimes an eternity.

There is a perfect technique to the dance. And a lean.  
My body is naturally bent and broken.  
It has been.  
For three thousand, one-hundred and forty-two days.  
You might say I've mastered it.

SINGKIL

Part 1

It began with a lure  
A L L U R E

She chased them into the woods  
Paused in her steps to watch their delicate wings  
Perched on a flower, fanning the wind  
Deciding whether or not to soar.

Poised in her step, she imitated them  
Their twirl, their glide, their lean

She stomps  
Extending and offering her hand to greet them

She stomps  
For they aren't really butterflies  
But diwates

She stomps  
Bells on her ankles  
They were spirits Sewn at her heels

Attitude pointed.  
Now she is luring them.

Unafraid as the bamboo falls  
As the bamboo sounds  
As the wind whispers, as the bells chime

She is unafraid.  
Their dark mischief  
Makes the earth move  
So she can watch  
The butterflies dance

She is alluring and unafraid

She stomps

She stomps

She stomps

The earth answers

Now she moves with defiant grace  
And the butterflies follow.

## Hinterland

It was a cocoon— or a hammock.  
It was neither of those words.

It carried another name  
Without translation  
Like my pain.

They just wanted me to heal and take it easy.

It was an uyayi, a duyan.  
It swung and solaced me like a hammock  
Sturdy reeds of rattan and bamboo  
Woven intricate and tenderly into a giant cocoon.

It was my cocoon.  
If I could hibernate there until my disease disappeared  
Maybe I'd emerge a butterfly. But they need to know it'll never go away.

How do you tackle something intangible?  
How do you fight what you can't see?  
I was battling angry ghosts in an invisible war.

I didn't emerge free from the weight of anger.  
I didn't emerge a butterfly.  
I didn't emerge.

I disappeared and submerged  
Into the comfort of  
Words without translation.

No one looked for me. No one could find me.  
I was under three blankets in the duyan  
Watching the stars at night.

The uyayi was my hinterland.

Then one night a comet danced across the sky

Forced me to stand

And try again.

## The Enemy of My Enemy

In elementary school, I was a bit of an outsider. I became friends with guys because I wasn't 'girly' enough for the other girls to want to hang out with me. I didn't have bangs or any kind of hairstyle, I didn't know what lip-gloss was, and I hated nail polish. I folded paper airplanes, I liked the library, and I preferred the violence of dodge ball to holding hands with boys. I had a good arm and good aim. If it wasn't right to the head I sought out the liver. We didn't play dodge ball enough.

A late-bloomer, I favored Legos over Barbie; I wanted to be Robin Hood or a spy. I used to daydream and write short stories about a girl who had Robin Hood-like adventures, or was a girl who travelled the world incognito, fighting all the bad guys. The adventures this girl had were amazing. She was the exact opposite of my life.

In seventh grade, girls started picking boyfriends in our class to hold hands with on the playground during recess. Not my scene. I went to see what the sixth grade boys were up to- still slightly unsure about girls- even a little scared of us- there was no threat of hand-holding, and I was conversational enough in speaking "boy" that most days we had okay-conversations.

With the sixth grade boys there was always some kind of competition for the best snack anyone's mom packed for lunch. I didn't care for competitions. It was entertaining to watch them wrestle each other for fruit snacks, or burp the loudest for trading cards, but today it was Chuck's lunch. His mom

packed gummy bears- the real kind- not the cheaper imitation that all the other moms bought. I loved real gummy bears so much. To claim the gummy bears, the boys would run the length of our dirt field, which was a small baseball field behind the school. Chuck was challenging the fastest boy runner to try and out-run him. I watched as some of the boys tried to play it cool and not jump to the challenge. I stepped up and let them all know that those gummy bears were mine. Then I asked them which guy I'd get to out-run for them.

They all laughed, but I meant what I said. I love gummy bears. And I'm a fast runner.

Chuck ignored me, and facing the boys, said that he was the fastest runner. Then Neil stepped up to challenge. I hated Neil. Jon shook his head and said he'd challenge Neil and then Chuck. I chimed in and said that I will claim the winner of that challenge and beat him. Chuck and Neil cackled at me with commentary, arms folded in protest.

"What? Are you for real?"

"You can't run in a skirt."

"There are no other girls to race!"

"The other girls are over there!"

"What's wrong with you?"

"We're pretty damn fast!"

"Dumb girl. This'll be easy."

My older siblings hard-wired me - from the first day of first grade - to sustain a heavy amount of scrutiny and interrogation. They sat me down and

told me that folks- especially during recess on the playground - can be some real dicks, and you just have to be patient and ignore them. Ok. Dicks- totally. Patient- no problem. But I refused to ignore them today.

Jon outran Neil. Easily. Jon was the faster runner, and Neil wasn't a runner at all. He was a talker who picked fights he couldn't fight. Neil was also an annoying but easy target in dodge ball. Stupid Neil. Jon won the gummy bears that belonged to me. And he was pretty fast, but I'm faster. It's too bad too. Jon was the nicer kid. It would've been more glorious to beat Chuck or Neil, who were both jerks.

I heard the laughter and the jeering, and when Neil yelled, "Go!" I flew. I saw Jon in the corner of my eye but as I picked up my pace I heard only the wind as I reached the end of the field, turned around and ran back. I even had a few seconds to catch my breath and smooth out my skirt at the finish line as everyone waited to cheer for Jon. No one cheered for me.

When Jon lost to me, he was a poor sport about it and pushed me to the ground. He said I ran like a girl, and the boys behind him roared with laughter. First off, I beat him. Also, how else would I run? That made no sense at all- but it didn't sound friendly, so I got up, walked over to him, and kicked him in the balls. All the other boys winced as Jon crouched over, gasping for air.

"Do I kick like a girl too?" I yelled.

I felt invincible in that brief glorious moment, but then I saw how much pain he was in and I immediately felt bad. Jon wasn't a bad guy- not a jerk like the others. But he shouldn't have pushed me. Jon apologized for

the push and that underhanded comment. I apologized too. He tried to smile back through the wincing. But his attention focused on Neil when Neil started pointing and laughing at him. It seemed Jon also hated Neil!

Neil always walked around thinking he was better than everyone, and he sucked at everything imaginable. If we knew the word 'douchebag' existed back then, that's precisely what we would've called him. Stupid Neil. He just kept laughing at Jon, which made me stop laughing, because why would I ever find myself on the same side as Neil? When Neil started calling Jon names, I thought that was mean. I looked up from Jon to meet Neil's eyes, and he started to back away. Everyone's eyes widened.

"Dude, she outran Jon. She runs faster than you," his friends were saying.

He started shaking his head and ran. I started jogging after him, because stupid Neil can't run fast. He ran as fast as he could, around the dirt field, and I'd gain on him just to scare him. No one else was around, but I'm pretty sure I heard him scream out of fear. He ran back to where the boys were. I had never seen Neil so scared. He stopped to catch his breath. I stopped running after him. My siblings may have been right - just ignore him. He wasn't worth it. I turned to walk away. But then Neil muttered, "Dumb bitch."

A low gasp filled the playground and all the boys got silent.

I turned around.

I walked right over to Neil

And I kicked him in the balls.

Everyone winced as Neil bent over in pain.

Jon smiled at me.

That was the day Jon and I became best friends.

## Birds

He is mischief. She is sass.  
They are clever tricksters  
Who just want to eat your crops.

He is guarded  
But grinning.

She is regal and sneaky  
At the same time.

What is it like to hop on air?  
Or suspend from the ground without fear of colliding or falling?

They dance above our crops;  
They laugh at the bamboo traps we've set.  
They casually soar through,  
Careless and without intention.

They spin in the moment  
While we are rooted in the ground

Anchored by our wingless feet,  
Tending to the earth's harvest.

They can always fly away  
To feel the wind at their backs,  
Under their bellies, ruffle their feathers,  
Elevating them.

They can stretch out their wings for arms  
And just glide.  
They are free to do so.

Whether or not they intend, they always appear to be smiling,  
As if they know something we don't know.

They are smarts and swagger,  
Beauty and intellect.  
Bonnie and Clyde.

They communicate without speaking.  
They are partnership.

They are what we long to be.  
Do they ever wonder how we could live fearless without wings?

## The Mighty Pekingese

My dog's eye is the reason you won't get a Christmas gift this year.

Maybe a Christmas card with a pic of my one-eyed dog in a Pirate costume and a Santa hat... According to the Canine Ophthalmologist and the Eye Surgical Specialist, my Pekingese dog, Ponyak, would develop an inferiority complex if she feels lacking in any manner. Meaning, if we didn't spend the money to put a prosthetic eye into her empty socket, she would feel the absence of her eyeball within days and could fall into a lethargic pattern.

As I carried Ponyak out of the room, she wasn't her cheerful self... The vet stitched her eyelid shut to keep any infection from happening; they couldn't save the eye. Even her snorting growling noises started to have a bit of a down-tone to them. And when I'd ask if she wanted to go for a walk, she just sighed and rolled to her side, looking out at the window with her eyelid sewn shut, sinking into her eye socket. She knew there was something missing, something big, like an eclipse descended on half of her world, and there was nothing she could do about it. To keep my dog from an inferiority complex, depression, and deep sadness, this prosthetic eye would solve those problems for only two thousand dollars.

And yet, not even this incident could keep Ponyak down for long.

Returning home- post-prosthetic eye surgery, numb and a little woozy, and with an Elizabethan "collar of shame" cone to allow her eye to heal, the Mighty Pekingese ran around the house in a chaotic whirl, panting and looking for her water bowl.

That first day, the giant cone around her neck was the most embarrassing form of punishment for the one week she had to wear it, and she felt beside herself, maybe not herself at all, and was the quietest we had ever heard- no barking or growling, probably angry that we had to help her find the water bowl and that we couldn't walk her that day because she was zig-zagging and woozy from a lot of meds.

But then she slept.

She bounced back the next morning, sitting at the kitchen's French doors that gave her a full view of the backyard. That is where we found her most mornings- guarding the parameter. That morning was no different- except that she did it with a cone around her head. And when I asked if she wanted to go for a walk, she got up, dragging the oversized cone against the floor, and headed towards the drawer where she knew her leash was kept.

A week later, she graced us with her opinionated growling. She saw a cat outside in the backyard from the French doors, looming around Indy's dog house, and she barked and rammed the cone into the window.

The only real problem after the Cone of Shame embargo was lifted was adjusting her depth perception from two eyes to one eye, or where walls really are and how to avoid always accidentally ramming right into them.

Any yet, not even that could keep Ponyak down for long.

What You Might've Been

There are waves in the distance that never come in.  
Waves that wind and stretch into sky and crash into brilliance against the  
sun. Movement like dance. Surreal as stars.  
Too real to be true. Too good to be real. Too soon.

To the deferred dream that never made it.  
To the dream that was shot down before it could be considered.

Don't think I never tried.

To the ones who never came out kicking and screaming,  
To the ones who were never mini-versions of the DNA in their veins:

Engineer-farmers

Who played the guitar and cooked for barrios,

Nurse-auditors

Who sang with perfect pitch and played piano by ear,

Immigrant-rockstar-hard working ass kickers

Grandmothers

Who learned another language in another land

So that they could connect with and reprimand their grandchildren,

Novelists, graffiti-graphic artists, poets,

Dancers, writers

Stubborn, angry, hard-headed, generous,

Musically-inclined,

Knife-throwing,

Accident prone,

Kind

Full of heart

Full of pain

Full of illness

Full.

Don't think I never gave you a name.

Fiona Michael Bridgit Ligaya Madeline Sophia Danielle  
Cabrini Francesca Gerald Douglas Neva  
Cresencio Apolinario Maria Librada Aurora Borealis  
Ramirez Benitez Madlambayan Mariano Stewart  
Shelleigh Steinhauer Moraleja Hackett.

Tiyanak, baboy, tabatoy, Channa,  
Amarita, darling, cutie pie, sticky-hands, germy,  
Ining, Otoy.  
Anak.

I never knew you were a thought.  
I never knew you had already left until the doctor told me  
You hung on for five weeks, on several occasions, but couldn't stay  
Because of the medicine I take  
So that I can function and feel  
More like a normal human.

Some things do not translate, cannot translate, refuse to translate.  
Some waves never reach the shore.

In the distance, they form a line  
Constantly crashing on other waves  
Rolling farther away from  
The sand I sink my feet into.

A fragment a moment a memory a tangent  
A strand

Of what could have been  
Or should have been.

Don't think I never cared.

## Captivity

Captivity offers little perspective.

They say there is always a sliver of hope somewhere. It doesn't belong to you.

Sentiments like hopes and dreams simply don't thrive in the space between a rogue immune system and the will of destructive medication.

They took over one day, slowly warping me inside out.

Captivity brings things to a halt.

Every ambition I ever had - off the table. In fact, let's just burn the table.

Every notion about snowboarding, kayaking, dancing, - walking two blocks for a cup of coffee, holding a small box for extended periods of time, sitting down, meeting a friend for lunch, bending elbows and straightening arms, breathing deep, breathing shallow, breathing -

It all changed.

Captivity forces reflection.

I inherited you. I didn't ask for it. It's been dormant in my blood, a sleeping dragon all this time. A dragon unleashed inside my grandfather and my father. Eventually it will consume me. Bakunawa was a dragon- a sea serpent with massive wings who'd fly into the night sky to eat the moon. They say she is the reason for an eclipse when it happens. She ate six of Bathala's moons. She was unrelenting in her pursuit for the seventh. But it is the only moon we have left.

Captivity imposes.

My grandfather went down in our history books as a man who drank a lot. I lived nearly three decades before learning of his diagnosis, which is the same disease seeped in the blood that courses through my veins. I lived nearly three decades believing he loved to drink and gamble and beg forgiveness and get into fist fights. No. The pain. His life was hijacked. That is the one story we have in common.

Captivity.

I ran into the woods.

Chasing butterflies.

I ran into the woods chasing dreams that didn't belong to me.

Life becomes pain.

Pain lessens tolerance for things like flowers blooming, the weather...

Interaction with people.

"Your attitude will take you far during your treatment."

"You are such a positive person. I doubt you'll fully feel the impact."

"You didn't ask for this, but you are handling it so well."

"It's still possible to accomplish... some things."

Please just... Shut up.

Pain becomes a companion.

Pain just wants attention, demanding time with you, cuddling.

Pain is a relentless lover with a longing and a hunger and a thirst.

You learn of thresholds and limitations.

You find yourself in a room in which you slept for three days straight.

There's no more patience or attention to give because of the pain.

No time to consider ethics or philosophy. Ruminates on pain.

There's only time to move - tentatively, slowly, with pain.

Move forward. Without hesitation. If you stop, you die.

Most hated question on earth:

Can you rate your pain (on a scale from 1-10) today?

Don't numbers exist beyond ten?

The pain has been eating away at my soul; I hardly recognize what's real and what's missing.

Three thousand, one-hundred and forty-two days.

You try to sleep and forget that like a persistent debt collector, pain will visit again tomorrow.

Life becomes warfare.

It becomes pages of disclosures about all the bad things that may happen if you take this pill. It becomes routine lab work- making sure there is a vein that will cooperate when blood is drawn. It becomes ambassadorship between RBCs, WBCs, AST, ALT, CBC/PLT/DIFF, CRP, SED, and which symptoms means a deficiency in one or all. It becomes reading brochures thoroughly on the list of every possible side effect you may have.

It's needing to be pre-medicated before the medication- with something steroidal and caffeinated, then also Benadryl, since you may likely have a reaction.

It's speaking with pharmacists and making sure you understand what will happen: *"Biologic sounds scary, but they aren't." "You have cells in your body that are dysfunctional." "Where some biologics simply suppress the message of attack that the rogue cells are receiving, this new biologic will seek out and destroy any rogue cells with the 'attack' message in your immune system, because your rogue immune system doesn't know how to not attack you."* *"Yes, it's basically shooting the messenger." "It'll wipeout all the rogue T-cells, except for the ones hiding deep in the marrow- those cells will begin to regenerate. It takes six months. So we'll come back and take them all out again in six months."*

You never thought you'd see the words "seek and destroy" on a medicine bottle.

Warfare becomes me.

It becomes making sure all the pills with pages of disclosure truly talk to each other and don't kill me instantly in the process...

Because it's ok to kill me slowly.

Life becomes anger.

You get mad at everything because it's the only thing you can handle feeling besides pain. You are on your seventh treatment, because you had a reaction to the other six. You run hotter than usual because of swollen joints.

You may as well be a bonfire.

You sit and watch closure refuse to close itself.

You wear a medal of St. Michael because dammit you're going to fight.

You're going to draw a sword and shove it down the serpent's throat.

You are going to bring judgment day to your immune system and take them all down. You're going to go into battle with an archangel!

You realize you've channeled God's greatest, most relentless warrior to fight your battle. You start to feel his rage pulsing through your body.

You don't care.

You are sick of explaining that your immune system is just a jerk.

And the medicine is an even bigger asshole.

It makes you want to scream. Everything makes you want to scream.

You scream in the morning at your joints. You scream at jars in the kitchen and bottles of water for being difficult to open. You scream at chairs - or your knees for their unwillingness to cooperate. You scream in the car.

Then you fix your make up. Fucking crying and screaming is all you know.

You cry because you were so good at everything. And so reliable.

Well, crying is what you're good at now. And swearing. Stop crying, dammit.

You wear makeup now. It seems to make people leave you alone when you at least look decent.

You hide behind a mask so that people don't notice, don't ask, don't approach.

BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW HOW TO NOT SCREAM.

Life becomes math.

Is it rational or even acceptable  
functioning 40% of the time on medicine  
that works 80% of the time as opposed to having  
10% daily function?  
Are you in the 8% that reacts to everything?  
Then the odds change.

If you stop everything you've ever known...

Irrational.

Maybe the stress factor dropping  
can add 5% to your 20% ability to function  
We can add a fraction of a fraction when  
the medicine doesn't work...

Or we just increase your steroidal dosage-  
The one that *may* cause  
Irreversible high cholesterol  
High blood pressure  
Gestational diabetes,  
Thin the skin  
Thin the hair  
Thin the blood  
Attacks morale and motivation  
Replaces with

And causes sugar cravings.

How about 98% bullshit?

Life becomes surrender.

You beg for the medicine to work at even 25% today.

You just want to stand up- physically. Without assistance. Or crying.

You try not to cry when your husband dresses you and brushes your hair in the morning.

You ask your joints to be kind today.

You let everyone pour salt on your invisible wounds.

They don't know where your real wounds are anyway.

You try to smile when people tell you that you don't "look" sick. And for months you may roam the earth like a ghost or shell of your former self.

You find new places to dwell to avoid running into people who only want to know the gossip.

All you want to do is scream. But you are too tired from the pain.

By morning, your immune system will attack again with full force.

By morning, my immune system will attack again with full force.

You will answer all the questions and give all the names.

I will answer all the questions. I will give all the names.

You will tell us all the dates, times and locations of all the things you've ever done or wanted to do- and you will never do them again.

I will never do them again.

Life becomes a gamble.

I roll the dice once.

I learn the hard way that  
I can't sit in a room full of  
coughing people without getting sick.

I find myself delirious with a 105-grade fever.

I end up in the emergency room because  
I can't run after false dreams on swollen joints.

I need to get a spinal tap because  
that is the only place that can tell us if it's  
Bacterial meningitis or viral meningitis.

One is ok.

The other could mean amputation, an induced coma, or death.

I am advised to hold very still while two nurses are already  
Holding me down on my side so that I don't move.  
Somehow, amidst the delirium, my clouded body listens.

I feel pressure against my spine.

I feel a puncture at the base.

I hear voices.

Medicine makes me giggle, despite this panic of feeling paralyzed.

I dream in their arms.

I wake to vases of flowers and visitors wearing masks,  
because anything can make me sick right now.

I am hospitalized.

Life becomes nomadic.

Go where it's warm.

Go where it's healthy.

Go wherever anything or anyone else wants you to go.

I used to thrive on the idea of home and belonging.

I have become a pawn somewhere between the civil unrest of my immune system  
and the martial law of immuno-suppressants.

My loyalty is to pain.

I go where it will pain less.

Physically. Emotionally.

Just keep moving, anywhere the space will receive you;

Anywhere you can remain invisible.

I no longer know the word 'destination.'

Walk more.

Through the pain.

To lessen the pain.

I never knew my smallest toes could ache so intensely,  
or that my calves could feel stiff like stone.

Just move to stay ahead of that shadow looming over -

The persistent dark that wants me to

Stop for a moment,

Stop and rest,

Stop and dwell on what I am not,

Stop and give up.

I just keep moving.

Aimlessly.

Life becomes illusion.

I find relics of a person I used to be.

I wonder when I died.

I run aimlessly after the things that once identified me.

They were insignificant, minor details, but they were what made me.

I mourn the death of that person I used to be.

I know it wasn't the real me.

I resort to sitting in a chair in front of the dance class, verbally breaking down a dance move.

I verbally correct technique with the only loud, angry tone that I have.

I command attention and I make them listen.

I refuse to quit, even though I have lost movement, skill, technique, religion, hope, light, faith...

Things that may have meant something to the shell I harbored.

I just want to dance again.

I might be alive somewhere.

So I conjure another life.

I crawl and I search.

I find a way to breathe, to interact.

I climb and I search.

I conjure new dreams from thin air, thin ice, thin body.

I fight the pain.

I thicken up my skin.

I stand up in the morning.

I become life.

Captivity.

Three thousand, one-hundred and forty-two days

And counting.

Wading.

Wading into the deep blue.

Wading into the eye of the storm.

Waiting.

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