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The Soft Animal of Your Body: Seven Attempts to Explain Chronic Illness to Myself and to You

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THE SOFT ANIMAL OF YOUR BODY

(SEVEN ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN CHRONIC ILLNESS TO MYSELF AND TO YOU)

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A Studio Arts Senior Project by June Naureckas

8th December, 2018

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

If I knew how to explain vision loss or chronic pain, I wouldn't have started this senior project.

How do I communicate the knowledge that my body is slowly failing me, that even the best treatments aren't guaranteed to work? With whom do I have to speak with to be heard and understood? I've previously attempted dictionary definitions, disability accommodation letters from the Bard Learning Commons, repeatedly cancelling plans with friends until they stop inviting me to things, and passive-aggressive conversations with my neurologist. None of these efforts have worked out so far as effective means of communication, but neither has wordless screaming, so I feel compelled to keep trying.

The project is composed of eight pairs of one poem and one visual element - paintings, drawings, or ceramic sculpture. Each pair of works looks at chronic illness (mine, specifically) as experienced – or not experienced – through a different human organ or organ system. I don't think I could literally vivisect myself and survive the process. This body of work is my earnest attempt at doing the next best thing.

I wrote the first poem for the project on February 28, 2017. The title, "Self-Caregiver Fatigue" refers to the current trendiness of "self-care" as an industry as well as the sense of burnout or even resentment that can develop in a healthy adult caring for their sick relative. The relative can be a drain on financial and emotional resources as well as often being unhappy and ungrateful regardless of the quality of the care they receive; in a lot of ways it would be weirder if caregiver fatigue *wasn't* a common occurrence.

In Studio 16 of Bard UBS, in Kingston Neurology, alone in my room at three in the morning: I am my own miserable arthritic grandmother, my own resentful adult daughter. I pretend to be grateful for the opportunity to live; I pretend to be grateful for the responsibility to keep myself alive. I pretend that the awful task of giving voice to sickness can even be begun.

BITTERNESS IS THE LAST TASTE A CHILD LEARNS TO ACCEPT (CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM)

Please be advised:

This presentation does not contain any

Strobing images,

High-contrast projections,

nor any other triggers for photosensitivity

or epilepsy.

(Just wanted to show some

Common fucking decency

and let you know beforehand).

SITUATIONAL NEEDLEPHOBIA
(INTEGUMENTARY)

What is the difference? Tattoos and blood draws and
shots for my headaches and inoculations.

Why do I think that the depth of the needle will
turn it from friend to some cruel violation?

I could claim that skin, then blood vessels, then muscles
are each deeper in me, each needs more protection.

But I'm not so clever; some animal in me
just knows something's wrong with me if an injection

slides past the skin. I have trained myself not to flinch
at neurotoxin – don't want to look cowardly!

Epoch's worth of ingrained survival instinct thrown
out to pretend that I've still got some agency.

SELF-CAREGIVER FATIGUE
(PERIPHERAL NERVOUS SYSTEM)

i am my skin my eyes my spine
i am a thousand creeping fibers
i am a font of blood and blood and fluid.

if I should drink the ocean down
would I become a thing entire?
Would I knit back together clean and pure?

Oh line my eyes and heart with salt!
Oh let me sink into the earth
And bid myself farewell before I do it.

Magnesium below my tongue
To line the paths my soul to walk
And wrap me in a form mundane and sure.

Oh build for me a self from dirt
And rocks: still, steady restful things
And teach my skin how not to hurt,
Blood not to rush, nerves not to sing.

GET WELL SOON
(MUSCULOSKELETAL)

What will you do when
their suffering lasts longer
than your sympathy?

PIKUACH NEFESH
(ALIMENTARY)

A commandment-not-to-do
Almost always comes second to
The mitzvah to preserve life
With three hard exceptions:
Adultery and incest
Idolatry
Murder (killing in self-defense is fine, though,
And so is cannibalism
Provided you didn't murder the person you're eating)

It is better to eat trayf than to starve
Better to give your child formula
If you cannot nurse
Better to donate your organs
Than to let them be wasted
(so long as the doctors know
Whose organs they will become
Before they are removed from your body)

“And I gave them my statutes, and showed them my
Judgements, which if a man do,
He shall even live in them.”

And the rabbis say
If he shall live in them
Then he should not die in them

And so:

I did not fast on Yom Kippur

I will not fast next Yom Kippur

I do not stand for the standing prayer

But I will eat apples

And honey in the New Year

And give praise to a God

Who wants me alive.

YOUR HIV TEST CAME BACK NEGATIVE
(GENITOURINARY)

This is a poem written for mine own eyes
(I pray the Lord it not be seen or touched);
For the daily scrapes and the daily cry,
For mouthwash bloody gums and worn toothbrush.

A poem for the teenage pregnancy scare
(in past twelve months: sex with high-risk partners?),
A benediction sung for mine own ears
(sex without contraceptive barriers?).

Here ghosts of the ability to hope:
My secret hope that they died and it hurt,
That childish prayer of stop no please I won't,
A heart-held hope to be returned to dirt.

Drip blood by drops into that plastic well
And hear those best-belov'd of syllables.

HAVE YOU TRIED TURNING YOUR BODY OFF AND ON AGAIN?
(CARDIOPULMONARY: LUNGS)

It's not my lungs' fault I've no oxygen,
It's not my heart's fault that it can't pump blood.
Transplanted, it would beat steady and good,
(But that's an untenable solution).

Do I blame my lungs for hearing my brain?
They tell you to forgive your body's quirks,
Commend it for its necessary work
(But my lungs don't stop working if I faint)

Can I learn how to separate my brain
Conceptually from my sparking nerves?
Does not an imprisoned soul suffer worse
Than if mind and brain form a tattered whole?

And so the mournful cry goes ever thus –
For cancer, senses lost, autoimmune –
From hospice bed and GP's waiting room:
"We've met the enemy and they are us!"

CLOSE ENOUGH
(CARDIOPULMONARY: HEART)

I have always been interested
in the human organs,
the heart the lungs the liver the brain the seat
of life the seat of the soul.
How do our bodies function and how well?
How worthwhile is decay after life?
How worthwhile is decay after rebirth?
If I if you if he is
if they are we are barely
functioning machines,
winding down slow and steady,
how do we thank the parts of ourselves that remain?
How do we thank the parts of us that cling to function
by teeth and tendons and arteries?
If I am a barely
functioning machine
I must learn to appreciate steadfast
old reliable
heart.

Please feel free to
touch the heart, pick up the heart,
put things inside the heart.
Consider the heart as a container.
Consider the heart as an adaptive,
self-directed machine.
Consider the heart as an accident of nature.
Admonish the heart for what it fails to do.
Thank the heart for what it does.