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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

8<sup>th</sup> 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.