Melancholera

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THE WINTER OF MYSTERIOUS STIFFNESS I LAY BURIED UNDER AN avalanche of blankets, staring lifelessly at the large color television my father hauled into my room before leaving for the office. Behind my eyes, something violent was scraping off the pink insulation that lined my skull. The friction sank down my neck like mercury lowering in a thermometer, turning me wooden, my spine straight as a coat rack. Schoolwork towered up from the floor in fragile spires, arranged by week. My mother was wearing wool slacks and a canary colored sweater I never saw her in again.

"There must be a name for this," she whispered, palming my forehead, bent around a stack of unfinished algebra. After licking my hair into place, she fireman-carried me to the car, where I was set lengthwise in the backseat and belted down like loose luggage.

Her eyes looked dumb and wet in the rearview mirror. My younger brother sobbed along, in tandem, his hands mimicking hers on the steering wheel. The windows clouded up. The upholstery hardened. A low-grade grief infected the entire station wagon, reminding us how contagious a body could be.

We sat in the emergency room surrounded by plants made of plastic, chairs painted in sunny preschool shades. Once the clipboards were filled out I was placed on a gurney and carted off. I felt planked, a thing nailed to itself. The pattern of ceiling titles whooshed overhead like frames of blank movie leader. I was funneled through the building, its white hollow corridors all emptied of echo,

washed out, nothing like the cluttered den of my illness, whatever it was named. Acts and postures gained clarity in rooms divided by curtain, humming with florescence. Conversations ended after only three words.

The examining room was cold, antiseptic, like a bank vault or autopsy lab with faded pastel posters stapled high along the walls. The shelves were full of props, cross-section models, a transparent bust containing lopsided, jigsaw organs. I sat on a leather table with paper sheets. My legs had grown stiff, my knees in need of oiling. The doctor tried folding me together but like an overstuffed suitcase my body refused to shut. They discussed me in silent glances, folded arms. My mother's shadow slanted over the opaque partition, diagonal and noirish, cast across the floor. So I could see both her and the vague suggestion of her all at once.

I was given my own room and a buzzer to ring the nurse's station. Through the wire-grilled window I could glimpse, late at night and during off-hours, the security guards leaning their hairy elbows on the desktop. Their flirtations carried down the hall and entered my room like the IV dripping fluid into my forearm, my forearm itself splinted to a sturdy board of Styrofoam with tape. A bag of clear liquid fed me from a metal pole. An ancient black and white television showed only static. My father began sleeping on a foldout couch under the caged window, assigned to twenty-four hour bedpan duty. The steaming receptacles passed from my hands to his to an enthusiastic nurse who congratulated us both on another hearty delivery. The deck of cards must have come from her.

"Cheer up," my father said as he go-fished around my bedspread for the king of spades. "A lot of boys your age would kill to be getting a spinal tap. Most people have to make up interesting things about their lives. Here you are getting one free of charge. Free to you, at least . . . And don't forget about all the school you're missing."

He leaned over the pond of playing cards and breathed out his words, almost inaudible, reeling me into his confidence.

"When I was a youth I did anything just to stay home. I feigned injuries. I invented illnesses. I was king of the absentee list. Captain Contagious, the other kids called me. The truant officer staked out my home. And funniest thing of all? Right now, years later, to be with you in this hospital? I have to call in sick to work."

The next morning I woke to find a vagrant Santa Claus fixing his sooty beard in the bathroom mirror, a sack of donated toys left on the couch where my father still snored. The gift—a plastic robot made cheaply overseas—was nothing compared to what I would receive a week later when Christmas properly arrived. The Salvation Army might as well have given me frankincense. Something as useless as myrrh.

The remaining school year passed without incident. My body returned to its normal elastic self, soft and pliable, flaring and forking in all the appropriate places. Every morning I woke healthy and new and my first hospital was little more than a hazy fever dream half-remembered, with only the plastic ID bracelet and complimentary deck of playing cards as evidence it occurred. The disease disappeared like the Japanese robot somewhere into my brother's room. With school out of session, I spent weeks cartwheeling shirtless around the backyard while my mother knelt in her garden, hands packed into a pair of farming gloves that matched her sundress, nipping and knifing dandelions in pastoral riot, resuscitating the begonias I had casually trampled.

It was early August when we first noticed the rash, which my father promptly misdiagnosed as sunburn. The solution, he proclaimed, was suntan lotion, longer sleeves. I was only allowed outside after dusk. But after two weeks the eczema remained, an unsightly splotch of color like fruit juice spilled down my shoulder. My mother called it a condition. My father and brother dared each other to touch it. I felt marked. Then the stiffness returned to my neck. From there it spread to my elbows and wrists and all my other angles, the joints of me swollen, my hinges jammed shut. My hospital has come back to haunt me, I thought. My mother whisked us to the emergency room, her hands still gloved in rococo flower print.

"Is it *you know what*?" she asked, the word lodged in her throat like a tennis ball. "Has he caught it again?"

The doctor shook his head, spelled out the new illness on an index card I quickly tore to pieces and scattered in an assortment of wastebaskets. I couldn't care less what it was called as I spent the beginning weeks of school confined to a hospital bed under close supervision. My body felt feeble and deflated, like a loose-fitting shirt someone else refused to wear. Sitting up became painful. Walking proved an

absolute hazard. There were days I thought sneezing would be the end of me. I adopted a fierce regimen of hourly sulking, aware that new friendships were currently being forged beneath soccer field bleachers, freshly cemented pals-for-life peering up the shadowy hollows of coeds' skirts. Meanwhile, I sat listening to my father read the telephone book in Elizabethan voice after he exhausted the children's shelf of the hospital library.

The field trip was my mother's suggestion. I was too sore to shake my head in protest, to flail around in embarrassed dissent, so I simply lay there, blinking, which she took for a yes. They bused over the next morning. I was waiting for my sponge bath when they appeared, huddled in the doorway, eighteen classmates carrying bagged lunches and disguised in surgical masks—a stipulation, I later learned, of the parent consent form. They eyed me as the doctors did, coolly regarding my stubborn body tenting up the teal blankets, notebooks instead of clipboards hugged to their chests. Like my parents they paced the bed's length. They tiptoed as if around land mines. No one knew where to sit. Eventually, the girls occupied themselves with the nurse's emergency buzzer, while the boys sat Indian-style on the floor, arguing between two channels of television static.

Upon returning to school in October I was greeted with a wounded hero's welcome. I was hoisted onto shoulders and paraded around the playground, the parking lot, through the hallways and into the faculty lounge, confetti shaking like dandruff from my hair. Teachers told me how much I was admired. The superintendent said I was an inspiration to other students, a model for his own ungrateful kids. The school board voted for the fall carnival to be held in my honor. Within weeks, the cafeteria was decorated in hand-painted banners, bunting, pennants, straw piñatas, laces of crepe paper that hung from the rafters. Donation cans were prominently displayed at local convenience stores, participating chains. A wheelbarrow was borrowed to transport six hundred dollars in nickels and pennies back to the principal's office. There were long hours of volunteer labor. Charity groups worked through their lunch breaks and weekends. The custodian's union nobly declined overtime pay. An ex-convict racked thirty straight hours of community service after being pinned to the gymnasium floor by a fallen ceiling tile. The disco ball, it was decided, would stay boxed until next year.

We had skeet ball alleys and celebrity dunking booths and square dancing for the elderly. In the hallways a beanbag throw was set up, a milk bottle ring toss, tables of psychic palm readers in the gym, a troupe of mimes that stayed mostly in the parking lot, smoking. A high-stakes raffle drained the accumulated allowances of my new best-pals-for-life. There was a petting zoo in the art lab that drew a hundred visitors and unfavorable notice from the fire warden. An amateur clown, later unmasked as the vice-principal, made deformed balloon animals that quickly lost their shape. Disappointed children sulked into the cafeteria corners, cradling mutant giraffes in their arms. A local newscaster nearly drowned in the dunking booth and later, dripping wet, he broadcast an on-location report about the elementary school festival held in a dying boy's honor. Rumors soon spread of a goat devouring the entire third grade's watercolors. The mimes were asked to leave. And through it all I moved slowly among classmates, my joints haunted by hospital, swollen with memory.

"Did it hurt?" they asked, testing my shoulders and cheekbones, examining my palms for stigmata. "The news is saying you're dead."

"Reports of my life," I replied, "have been greatly exaggerated."

They swarmed around me, elbowing for a better look. Girls blushed the same crimson my rash had been. No one had ever heard of it.

"Whatever you do, don't pronounce it," I whispered, reeling them close. "Spell it out instead. Say the letters with me. L-U-P-U-S. Do you taste it already starting on your tongue?"

I won a comatose goldfish in a fishing game rigged in my favor and afterwards Missy Martone hustled me into the janitor's closet, where I showed her the proper way to play doctor and nurse. The school was overrun by a miniature stampede of Shetland ponies, paintbrushes clenched in their yellow, paint-stained teeth. It took the whole custodial crew—this time collecting time and a half—to scrub the trail of greenish hoof prints off the linoleum. The day must have ended but I can't remember when or how. I've since misplaced the newspaper clippings.

I survived the rest of fall semester with only a handful of visits to the school physician. She treated my paper cuts kindly, my chalk dust inhalation with a smile. She didn't say a word about the pen that

slipped through the soccer field bleachers and nearly put out my eye; she just gave me my choice of lollipops and sent me back to class. My recovery had been complete. When snow came as forecasted, my parents bundled me against pneumonia, freezer burn, frostbite. I felt unbearably sovereign as I stepped out of the house, into the winter, toboggan and younger brother in tow. We did the rolling knolls of golf courses, library steps glazed with ice, graded streets and impacted sidewalks, the deathly steep slope of a highway overpass. The bottoms of backyards were littered with shattered sleds and lost mittens. Stunned children staggered away from the wreckage, Christmas gifts in splinters, metal runners bent. The mucus on our scarves had to be chiseled off.

We stood at the edge of a freshly dug landfill, peering into the empty basin sunk low in the earth. A rabble of spectators gathered along the circumference betting lunch money, baseball card collections. Something rolled over inside me, a sound I had yet to give voice to, a tense and jittery feeling like fire ants swarming over my organs. Years and several bouts of diarrhea later the sensation would gradually coagulate, harden into the word *nerves*. My brother tucked himself together as I shoved us off, my arms singing with soreness, possibly sprained. Halfway downhill I noticed my internals swapping position, lungs traded for kidneys, stomach for spleen, miles of intestines lassoing liver, and all of it rising up to my mouth. It took a few minutes of darkness for my parts to rearrange themselves. When my eyes opened the ambulance scream was directly overhead as we tobogganed through traffic at velocities undreamed of.

My mother was straightening a strand of blinking lights strung over the emergency room doorway, wearing a grease-spotted apron that smelled of the sugar cookies cooling atop the oven at home. An attendant snapped a fresh bracelet around my wrist, where most boys wear watches. The intercom sparked and fizzed as if announcing the arrivals and departures of million-dollar aircraft. The terminal ward, I blearily thought. My brother met me with a bashful shrug, ashamed for having limped away from the crash intact when bones in both my legs were reduced to rock salt. The doctor promised to rebuild me with rods, screws, tinfoil if necessary. Modern medicine would make an Erector set of me. The white of the hospital walls contorted, contracted, compiled, condensed into

a crisis team of uniformed nurses helping me off with my pants. I would prove a miracle of science.

I finished the winter in traction. Racked with guilt and boredom, my brother held a bedside vigil over Christmas vacation, adjusting the television volume and using a spatula to soothe the itches prickling my mortared legs. I received three hundred hand-drawn cards from South Brunswick Elementary after it was discovered there wasn't enough money in the school budget to finance any more field trips. My donation fund, they said, had dried up overnight. The principal resigned in disgrace, his pockets heavy and jingling on his way out the emergency exit. In the interim, I learned how to walk on crutches and the pits of my arms grew sore, darkened like damage fruit. A physical therapist with a thin mustache stitched above his lip called me Sport, Champ and King, on alternating days. The nurses and custodial crew smuggled me junk food in pillowcases, laundry baskets. Lance the night watchman fashioned a nameplate—CHIEF—out of cardboard and raw macaroni that hung uneven on my doorknob. Sickly, contagious strangers passed freely in and out of my room, visiting at all hours, admiring the homemade Get Well cards propped along my windowsill, cards ornate with glitter and glue, the waxy crayon lettering melting in the April sun.

My farewell party was held in the supply closet, among open boxes of bandages and the controlled substance vault. Cafeteria workers crushed out their cigarettes and shook my hand in the loading dock, while floors above us, in psychiatric ward windows, my doctors waved goodbye, their faces slivered by metal safety bars. I arrived home exhausted, ten pounds overweight, dragging a backpack full of stolen hospital linen behind me as I trudged up to my room.

I watched the weeks pass in bed, a length of tubing taped like an IV to my arm, my brother checking my pulse on the hour.

A tape machine received two Christmases previous was positioned on my uppermost bookshelf, playing intercom announcements recorded off a popular soap opera in which tragically handsome brain surgeons fell in love while working thirty-six hour shifts, unable to repair their own drowsy, tortured hearts.

When calling my mother I addressed her as nurse. She winced in that white blouse she wore, not having taken to the bedpan idea.

It was the Summer of Lethargy and Malaise.

At night, fears of leg atrophy echoed through our house's air conditioning vents. I knew before they announced it. When my parents came upstairs to tell me to pack my suitcase, I was already stooped over the toilet, retching violently, my fingers stuck down my throat.

Three weeks, I was told.

"Three weeks in the scenic mountains, camping and cavorting across the rustic wilds of central New Jersey, arts and crafts and wood carving and canoeing, singalongs and boondoggle bracelets and the lake they stock with real live fish and others your own age for three whole weeks you'll be begging to stay and then you can come home, we promise."

My father's station wagon disappeared down the dirt road, sending up clouds the color of dysentery. I waved him farewell and then dashed for the fence but my legs were too weak to run. And the fence turned out to be electrified.

According to the camp literature, children were grouped by age and interest, but that didn't explain how I came to share a musty olive-green army tent with a perpetual bed-wetter named Salvador. Never in all my hospitals had a roommate been forced upon me. Now I was spending my summer vacation bunked beside a neurotic ten-year-old whose asshole snored as loud as his mouth did, who didn't wet the bed so much as flood it. A pair of florescent headphone mufflers swiped from the firing range were clamped over my ears at night. Between his bouts of inarticulate weeping and the long distance phone calls he placed to his parents—collect—we hardly had time to talk. How sad, I thought, an only child. The other inmates proved equally insufferable and most afternoons I spent alone in the forest, examining the veiny designs of exotic leafage and climbing the skewed limbs of trees broken by lightening, all the while listening to the faint, breezy sounds of teenage councilors hollering my name. When the search parties found me I faked a seizure and ended up in the infirmary building, a bucolic log cabin located next to the mess hall, where I was first in line for dinner every evening.

"All that hospital attention has spoiled you," the camp doctor said between bites of bran muffin, my chart spread across his desk. "Is it really a 'g' in meningitis and a not a 'j'?"

I cringed at hearing the M-word; my spine stiffened with every syllable. But the word and its weight must have slipped out my

mouth while I slept. When I woke the following morning, my arms and legs were covered in some kind of acne, burning as if cut and lathered with gasoline.

"This," the doctor said, "is why we wear pants and long sleeves and never roll around in poison oak."

He slid mittens over my hands to dull the scratching and coated me with calamine lotion, a velvet jumpsuit his wife refused to let him wear. The flaky pink swells resembled my lupus. The itching was so bad all I could do was scream, but the doctor cured that by plugging my mouth with plush velour. At first, the tick bite hidden in the crook of my elbow went unnoticed, its surrounding blaze of scarlet lost in the swollen rash of the rest of me. On the third day, we found it.

"Lime spelled like the fruit, right?" the doctor asked, thumbing through the dictionary as he doctored my chart. I didn't know whether to laugh or cheer so I settled on a finely calibrated shriek. The last thing I saw as we drove off was Salvador's pudgy frame stuffed into the only phone booth in camp, the inchoate drizzle of words as he asked his parents what they were having for dinner and could he come home soon.

They pumped me full of penicillin. A male nurse, mouth fringed in goatee, explained the seriousness of the disease if gone untreated. He spoke slowly, cautiously, as if I had also gone deaf.

"Haven't you ever heard of lockjaw? Imagine sucking all your meals through a tube. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, paste. Imagine communicating in a coded language of moans and grunts. Your tongue always smacking the back cave of clenched teeth. Articulating yourself how? In dry chipping farts, that's how. Your words all wired together. Lyme disease is many things, friend, but none of them are pretty."

In a rich baritone he explained the rest of my life to me, pausing and over-pronouncing for dramatic effect, making shadow puppet gestures of his hands. I felt the symptoms develop as he spoke them, as if his words were funneling into my body and germinating the ailments there. Yes, Lyme disease. Tell me more. Suggestions became seeds and myself a fertile garden, growing its own death. I felt woozy with the language. I wanted him to keep going but it was too late. He had explained me to sleep.

My mother spent the night on the couch, still wearing her gabar-

dine nightgown while my father lay curled in a fetal shape at her feet. The room appeared nearly identical to my former hospital's, from the blinds to the bedding, from floor to ceiling tile. Even the attendants recalled the other staff members in their pale blue-green dress and spotless tennis shoes. I couldn't breathe from the joy of it. I didn't care there were no sinking balloons, no stuffed toys I collected in doubles, the windowsill empty of homemade cards in various states of decomposition. It was the room which mattered and I felt myself again. How long I had been away. My eyes went wide and damp when I noticed the bracelet snapped around my puffy, scarlet wrist.

I buzzed in the new nurse, to properly introduce myself.

The Lyme disease cleared, my joints unclogged, I began spending my after-school hours in the public library, reading medical encyclopedias, casebook studies of rare and infectious diseases. The pictures were splotchy at best, so grainy and unfocused it was difficult to tell infirmary and poor aesthetics apart. A thumbnail scratch in emulsion resembled a stitched-up abdomen. The reddish lesions of psoriasis looked like a symptom of overexposed film. So I concentrated on the text. Not the descriptions or definitions, nor the early warning signs or common causes or firsthand accounts. But simply the names. *Tuberculosis* told me more than "age, sex, nutrition, and physical constitution seem to play a determining part in individual susceptibility and the severity of infection." The sound of *cholera* echoed louder through my limbs than "acute bacterial infection of the small intestine." Somehow each name sheathed its every ailment. As if every word was a body sick with itself. *Scoliosis* slouched its way to the dinner table. *Rickets* creaked and cracked. In the vacant quiet of dusty archives, I repeated the words as I reread them, begging them into being with my one-inch library voice. Surely *botulism* was no further away than my throat. I said *measles* and *mumps* and waited for my skin to turn. *Halitosis* hung heavy on my breath.

But they were only words, after all, inky cryptograms on paper, auditory tremors of voice. Words did me little good on the soccer field where I played defensive wing, itching the sweat beneath my shin-guards and stomping daisies, rebuilding my leg mass as the doctor advised. Words were not there to save me like the overzealous forward who dug his cleats into my back during an illegal slide-tackle.

Who needs words when we have competitive sports? I wondered, as my parents stripped off their matching orange jerseys in the emergency room.

"It's like trying to sew a water balloon together," the doctor warned before surgery. When I awoke—groggy with anesthesia, without a spleen to speak of—my brother was rooted to my bedside and it was there he stayed for weeks, before school and after, studying me up close, like a gargoyle perched on my mattress. It was his only sanctuary, he said. The more sadistic children at school had taken an interest in him.

This was the year they began prying me apart, piece by piece like a carburetor in some auto-shop demonstration. Whole cavities were carved out of my body, the empty spaces filled only with their own ghosts, caked shut. I became a waking memory. A person in the past tense.

"Who even gets tonsillitis anymore?" my father wondered between spells of taut silence, shuffling through the medical bills that were stacking up after we reached our insurance cap during the Great Spring of Dizziness and Dementia. My mother spent the weekends scanning the classifieds, night school course books she hid behind cooking magazines. After a disastrous false start in retail she found her true calling as an emergency medical technician and the navy blue jumpsuit looked absolutely fetching on her. My brother began wearing sunglasses to disguise the bruises underling his eyes. The karate classes just weren't working.

I sat in bed with a roll of bandages scarfed around my neck, slurping down a bowl of melted Neapolitan ice cream after having my thyroid removed. Get-well cards stapled around the room like once colorful eye charts were bleached whitish, unreadable. They arrived like IV drips, slow and sparsely spaced. I no longer received them by the armload. The most recent sat atop the television, store-bought and displaying a tombstone for my gallstones, signed "Your Caring Classmates," in my mother's bubbly hand. I buzzed the nurse to see if she was listening. I switched between the only two television channels until my thumb wore out. After a brief midday nap, a young man strolled into my room and straddled a chair without speaking, disarmingly nonchalant. He was a former resident, he said, a fellow lifer, and we traded hospital stories for over an hour. I showed him my

stitches. He taught me how to enunciate *mononucleosis*. But it was soon dinnertime and away he went. I was left alone to relish my floppy, quivering cubes of gelatin, my pale palace of sickness and less-than-basic cable.

My parents made a concerted effort to heal me back to health. To break me from the habit of my hospitals. They lacquered the furniture with disinfectant. My mother wore sterilized gloves when preparing our meals. The same day he mortgaged the house, my father invested in an impressive set of leather-bound encyclopedias, hoping to better diagnose any mysterious ailments. He walked the rooms with a volume under each arm.

"Listen, damn it, I can treat him myself," he said. "But three thousand dollars and the stupid thing doesn't say if it's sclerosis with a 'c' or a 'k.'"

I duct-taped sofa cushions to my torso when sparring with my brother but our roughhousing was strictly supervised and soon grew dull, insipid, and we shucked off the padding and just watched television instead. The neighbors stared at us through binoculars, opera glasses, convinced we must be contagious after the mailman spied me wearing a surgical mask indoors. We listened for wiretaps. I was shunted to school in the family station wagon with the windows up, crouched low like a president fleeing assassination. I walked the hallways and was no longer remembered. Students asked what town I moved from and did they all dress like idiots there.

We learned the hard way you cannot treat rabies at home.

My hospital room had taken on my own scent. Like a baseball glove or sport coat, it was lived into, broken around the shape of the wearer. A die my body had cast. The night watchman cut off the macaroni sign and stenciled my full name on the door. In competition, my parents painted my home bedroom the same pale hue as my hospital's and when I stayed there I slept on a bed of newspaper and plastic and got sick off the fumes. My mother in her ambulance circled the block for a parking space. My brother could barely hold the vomit bucket up to my mouth, he had grown so frail. He had peanut brittle for bones, tiny marbles for eyes, and his skin was like saran wrap shrunken tight against his skull. When he returned a month later—at the same time as my meningitis—he looked like the survivor of some genocidal atrocity. He was the picture children are shown when

they refuse vitamins, Christian Scientists whose limbs heal at odd angles.

"Anorexia," the nurses gossiped, once his skeleton danced itself to the elevator. "He just wants the attention."

With every visit he grew thinner and thinner, as if he were evaporating, until all that remained was a shirt and chinos, barely bodied. When he died from a twelve-day hunger strike staged in his middle school cafeteria I wasn't told until a week after they discharged me. No one wanted my vertigo to worsen. I soon came down with something else and that's how the years went.

I grew in fits.

The Summer and Autumn and Spring of Cold Sweats and Cramps. Five days a week I was examined on a closed-circuit television system they only fired up for the most extreme cases. The results had to be triple-checked. My doctor sat us down in his office, bracing us for the worst.

"Lovesick. I'm afraid this one may be terminal," he told my parents with a wink. "Two aspirin and ten years should clear it right up."

Nurse Welten blushed wildly in the doorway, still cradling the flowers I had stuffed beneath her door. Late at night, laughter rang through the hospital, as she and the other nurses loudly soliloquized the love poems I wrote on dinner napkins, passed to them crumpled, the only way I could communicate. My voice had broken. It cracked into girlish registers. Who knew what it would do to my words?

Mysterious patches of hair were found topping my privates like peat moss. A team of experts was choppered in from Our Lady of Insurmountable Suffering, brutish academics schooled in shock therapy, hypnosis, and female nurses only entered my room in pairs. My sheets had to be laundered daily. A straitjacket was borrowed from the psych ward after I discovered my bathroom door had a lock on it, that my body spurted a salty white substance when abused.

The fits were frantic. An acupuncture specialist from Indonesia said I would never be cured.

They were always waiting for me in parking lots, slumped over curbside in the shadows of imperial shopping centers. Anemic, brooding girls starved for drama, their denim jeans acid-washed, their wrists healing nicely. All I had to do was lift my shirt and ask them to play

connect the scars. They charted the whole ruined length of me, every damaged inch, my body like some failed science fair project drawing sympathetic nods from the judges. They fingered the gouges and gashes on my chest. They traced the deep ruts and welts and surveyed my every weal. The laceration that marked my appendicitis as if it were buried treasure. The stitches on my lower back where once I had a spleen.

"Touch two scars," I told them, "any two scars will do. Draw a line straight through me with your hands. In one incision, out the other. Can you imagine the line? Do you actually see it? It's the only thing holding me in one piece."

They peeled off their clothes like dirty field dressings.

I used the words blithely, with a great deal of carelessness, with little respect for their histories or mine. I whored my hospitals to everyone in earshot. A conversation didn't pass without me mentioning my malaria, bragging about the whooping cough I could never quite shake. Telemarketers phoned the house and listened to me lecture at length on diphtheria. Cholera. Scarlet fever. Rheumatism. Arthritis. Insomnia at such a young age. Mothers juggled their infants from one shoulder to the other, politely excusing themselves as they switched checkout lanes. A drive-thru cashier shuttered his window as I pulled up my car.

But the more I tried to force them out, the greater the words resisted, like traffic they congested, bottlenecked inside my windpipe, never to make it out alive. I talked my diseases to death. Language suddenly seemed a quarantine of sorts, a way of wrangling up the ailments, circling wagons around infection, fencing my fevers in. We name the thing and somehow we're safe from it. By incessantly repeating the words I was combating their effects, providing antigens against which my body reinforced itself. My doctor checked me over while two nurses trucked in my files on a handcart.

"Nope, not leprosy. No trace of lymphoma. Not even laryngitis. You're clean as a washcloth. Congratulations. You're checking out."

"But my skin, doesn't it look pasty? And my left leg seems shorter than my right. I haven't been coughing lately. That can't be a good sign."

He grimaced, then jotted the word *hypochondria* on my chart and sent me home content. But even that wouldn't last. I sulked around

my one-bedroom apartment, tripping over takeout cartons and aluminum tv dinner trays, unable to feel anything. My reflection was aged, unshaven, smeared by toothpaste and mold in the bathroom mirror. I flossed blood from between my teeth and felt my forehead, checking the temperature, playing nurse.

Melancholera, I thought, rolling the diagnosis over in my mouth, tasting the words impacted together. Dissonance rested uneasily on the tongue, the language warped, temporarily renewed, at once familiar and far away. I let this mutated strain thread itself through my organs, shackling them like inmates together, terminal wards of the state. My body a life sentence.

I wrapped myself in blankets, wool sweaters and socks, and held my head in the oven until my temperature rose.

It was a happy ending, at the time. After forging my academic record I was accepted into my fifth college of choice, a state-run affair with low standards and even lower tuition, situated far downstate, in the vestigial tail of southern New Jersey. I paid my way by volunteering three nights a week at the school of medicine, where they strapped me to a steel table and suction-cupped wires to my forehead, feeding me a steady diet of experimental drugs. Caffeine-addicted science students observed my EKG blipping across monitor screens, my pulse scrawled in long computer printouts. The story of my life was encoded in geometrically tempered angles I could never make full sense of. Soon I was staying over every night. A grad student researching perceptual dysfunction let me take her to the movies and reach my hand underneath her lab coat. We married two semesters later, a month after she received her doctorate and I dropped out with only six credits to my name.

We sequestered ourselves in the suburbs. Most days I spent alone in the basement, alone in the backyard, all by myself in the attic, the shed, the broom closet, locked in the bathroom until my wife and neighbors talked me out. The problem, they said through the door, was that I didn't have anything to keep me occupied.

Our son grew slowly, disappointingly at first. Jailed inside his crib, portly fingers mushed through the bars, he looked like the leftover materials an artisan tries desperately to find a place for in a work long completed, already sold and shipped away. He learned to cry along

with the wailing sirens outside. I taught him to cough on command. Somewhere, buried beneath the baby fat, there may have been promise.

Regarding myself before the mirror I realize: mine is a body shaped by sickness. The suture and clamp marks, incisions and etches, the traces of surgery that once perforated my skin look like blueprints left by a drafting instrument. My person is a fabric pattern with its dotted lines showing where to cut. I am all landing strip. Just look at my neck, a neck forever conjoined to my torso and my torso my waist and waist to legs and the stitches like railroad tracks that connect it all, plotting my course, every inch a healed wound stinging vaguely with memory and the memories in caucus, holding the various histories of me together. The staple holes specking my belly have long scabbed over and resemble freckles. Pox marks, both chicken and small, that I scratched into scars congeal around a relief map of tissue damage. I wear skin blemishes and lesions like the leopard does spots. There is no other way to see me. I have been ordered and interpreted through infirmary, illness.

"But also recovery, don't forget recovery," my wife insists, kissing the baby goodbye and locking us both in the house as she leaves for work; a violation, I believe, of some fire code or another.

When she's feeling especially generous, my wife indulges my love of carnivals, festivals, all things circus-like. We sit up in the nosebleeds, shaking colored flashlights at pacing lions. We stroll around freak show exhibits and laugh at the fortunetellers sniffing our palms. Every third Sunday of the month she lets me bring the bullwhip to bed.

"Remember me?" I ask, my hands and feet bound to bedpost, reciting the eulogy my bankrupt father—Captain Contagious himself—wrote for me when I was in the fifth grade. "I am the bravest little boy who ever died."

I still have the collection of ID bracelets I began amassing early on in the Autumn of Shallow Breathing. Every visit brought a new number to my wrist, wrapped loosely in translucent plastic. I had petitioned for a permanent band, a number I could always go by, the way other children wore nicknames and team numbers, but my words fell on deaf, stethoscoped ears. A permanent bracelet, the doctors said,

would imply that I was incurable. So at the legal age of seventeen I had my social security number tattooed across my wrist, although no hospital ever officially recognized it. The black ink gradually faded to a bruised shade of purple that still peeks out my shirt cuff, upside down so it looks like gibberish, another faint lifeline begging to be read.