

EXHALATIONS

Winner of the Spring 2014 Austin Peay Dogwood Award

The McGill-Melzak Pain Questionnaire of 1972 gave brightness, dullness, incisive pressure, fear and punishment as just some of the categories used to capture the music of pain. Unlike the row of round faces that show a progression of smiles to tears that you can point to in an emergency room, this chart asked for the right words. The words they learned from the patients would sometimes fall into tight clusters when many conditions shared the same sensations of stabbing. Other words stood alone on the grid, like the emotional description of missing-limb pain: Cruel. It was an aggressive effort to throw a grid of meaning over chaotic, raw despair. The tone of cancer is: heavy, burning, gnawing, sharp, shooting, exhausting, unbearable. Looking at my father, his still breath, clenched fists, and closed eyes told me that the music was getting very loud. He had drifted way beyond waves he could manage. To navigate these new sensations we needed narcotics, which needed a doctor's note, which needed permission from my father, which required phone calls, which challenged his shallow, measured breathing. I went looking for my mother.

It is so cold. On the nights that are dangerous, the ice fog obscures the sky anyway, so it's not worth feeling your lungs freeze. Clearer nights are more tolerable, with the stillness of the ground, insulated with snow, absorbing the sting of the air.

The piercing stars we all recognize still look like white, sharp pinholes in the canopy, but there is no vacant patch of sky.

Look deeply into it, and the blackness loses its crispness and is a mess of glittering sand. I first saw a single beam, like a searchlight at a movie house, and wondered what could be so exciting in Moose Creek that someone would set up a light like that. I followed the pale, white beam with my eyes, and the shock of what I was seeing came to me when it didn't fade straight into the night sky. It arched like a rainbow over the northern horizon and anchored itself in the west. Then the beam split in two. There was no moment that I recognized that it did so. The light moves on the very edge of perception.

She was off-balance. She had just started curling her hair, with four or five stiff rows retreating from her brow. Her plan for the day was already plotted along a safe path. The blasts of experience have left scary shadows of real people, now dead, burned into the tender walls of her mind. She only walks on paths where shadows move as shadows should. In three hours, she will look at her watch and be ready to leave the house, at noon, when the shadows are smallest. Three hours, and then she will chat with the nurses and the doctor and spend more time talking with the pharmacist, all of them knowing better than most, but asking anyway. The temporal descriptions for pain are: flickering, quivering, pulsing, throbbing, beating, pounding. Each second struck out a painful rhythm, concentrated into a rumble that I could hear from my father's chair in the front room. When I pushed her off-balance, I wasn't angry. It was just that his pain was so loud. I took something from her that she was leaning on. I was getting his medicine.

Once that initial sensation of a ghostly presence ran its course, I wasn't that interested in the lights anymore. Remember that it is so cold. My mind had plenty of new tricks of the heavens to take in that first year. The sun skirted the southern horizon for two purple hours on a December day. In August, the northern horizon beat back the night with a gleaming twilight. Imagine it. Take a moment during the winter to look at the dark of the northern horizon and, with your mind, paint it brilliant, spin, and put the deep black and blue behind you. If all of your sensory fibers are running smartly, you should begin feeling extremely weird. Next to that, the auroras really weren't all that impressive. I felt like I was looking at a photograph of an aurora. My sense of place in proximity to the lights didn't move me. The lights themselves move without moving. I couldn't, especially when straining to sharpen my concentration to a point, even see it happen. I could look and look and slowly realize that the swirling pattern had straightened. All the while, so cold.

Picking up the prescription and getting it filled was like struggling through a play with no script. Try Kabuki, with those exaggerated tones, pealing high enough to bore holes through the top of the actor's head. The nurse at the doctor's office joked loudly, "You tell him he needs to come in here himself." The word "stinging" could describe her performance. At the pharmacy, a woman with long black hair helped me remember my father's birth year so I could take the pills home. It was the last hurdle, and I remembered that he was twenty when I was born, and I could pull together enough sense to figure it out while her face

urged me compassionately. It is not fair to do this to her, but someone has to play this role. She was so kind. I can tolerate the words formed with her voice better than my own. Let's kill the house lights. Put a spot on her. She will whisper-step up to me, her face a white, cruel mask with lacerating black and red lines. Her voice rings out hellishly, "I know your father, and I've never seen you. He's going to die and you'll sit at his funeral surrounded by strangers. And now you're the hero because you know how to drive a car and pick up medicine. Is that the extremely important thing you had to leave your home and your people to learn? It's proven so useful. Thank God for you."

Kristian Birkeland is credited with the first view of the aurora that pushed aside the haunting, dancing ancestors to make way for electrons blasted across space from the hot heart of the sun. He built a tiny world called the "terrella" and fired electrons at its magnetic field. In his little box, his little world did just as he'd hoped, but his was a fringe theory. In the world-sized world, his research went unrecognized in scientific communities. While other discoveries brought him success, the auroral ancestors retained their legends of skies that bleed, lights that fall like curtains, their impossible ringing sounds. Birkeland used a sleep aid called Veronal, and a double-dose killed him in Tokyo at the age of 49. It was also the insomnia, the paranoia, the strange lights and shadows in his mind that didn't appear to move properly. His last sensations would have been crushing, suffocating, terrifying, killing. During his northern expeditions, his guide, Clement Isaakson Haetta, arrived after a lethal storm that killed his colleagues. Haetta took the accident and the deaths as bad omens, urging Birkeland to leave the ven-

geful lights alone. He handed over a telegram from Birkeland's brother that read, "Father died this morning...please return."

She was amazing. She had all the answers to their questions and she never cried while doing things like picking out the casket. You're supposed to have a driver to the gravesite, but she drove all of us, careening over the face of the earth, spiraling through old roads that pulled her along. My sister and I left locks of our hair on his chest. She left coins for the ferryman. She said "ferryman" like he was someone she knew. She does not tiptoe around the shadows now. She wraps them around her, traveling straight into them. They are him. Thus veiled, she wandered through the crowds of mourners, leaving me alone with my motionless, cold father. When I placed my hands long enough on his folded hands, they felt warm. His freckles, now so much like mine, couldn't be concealed by the make-up, and I noticed for the first time in my life that he had the same widow's peak in his hair as mine. A couple of stubborn strands curled down on his forehead and I said, "I have that too." Correcting his hair, I had never touched him in such a way when he was alive. It seemed at any moment he would draw a breath, and I was frightened that he might. The fear that he could come back made him feel more gone. He loved the movie *You Can't Take It With You*. The truth is you take everything with you. I stared at him for a long time, but I didn't see him move at all. The shadow of him is punishing, grueling, cruel.

The kids were at a car party at the lake, not far from my house. I could hear their music, and I stepped out on the back deck, facing north. The aurora was brilliant, twinkling, deeply green. It was the strongest I'd seen. I could hear the kids chattering and joking around on the far side of the taiga. The ice on the lake made the occasional deep, groaning crackle. The lights moved in their usual, freakish way, and I could see my breath hovering around my face. I stared long enough to convince myself I was satisfied, that I had a good enough picture in my head. I turned to go back, and my body flinched and cowered. Something was falling, and I shook violently to get away, but it was too much falling everywhere. Light, pouring down upon me like a waterfall. As I slowly rose, the light was swept into a hurricane that glowed red, like a great breath had stirred it. I could see it all happening, moving rapidly, light hovering, rolling, falling, and the shimmering sound, like a whispered ringing. It was terrifying and more beautiful than I'll ever have the power to describe. I stopped breathing. From a black spot erupting into a flare of intense power, this light appeared, overwhelming, powerful, alive, creating no shadows.