

from *Æther: an out-of-body lyric*

by *Catherine Graham*

Æther: According to ancient and medieval science, aether (Greek: αἰθήρ aithēr), also spelled æther or ether and also called quintessence, is the material that fills the region of the universe above the terrestrial sphere.

Æther: Primordial god of the upper air

Æther: a medium that in the wave theory of light permeates all space and transmits transverse waves

Æther: a liquid that burns easily, that is used to turn solid substances into liquid, and that was used in medicine in the past to prevent patients from feeling pain during operations

the æther: the air: the sky

It's not the hare's
scream that haunts, it's
the antecedent silence.

*

I am told to breathe in. "It isn't work—" I'm out
before I can shape the air into words.
They are slicing the skin at my breast,
faceless, blue-dressed figures hovering.

I open my eyes. Princess Margaret's white ceiling shines down. Tears—primal deep—
waiting to be released, accompany a renewed purity.
It is my mother.

A keeper of secrets. Her hair, red all her life, even after it grew back in.
They had to tell me. They couldn't keep that a secret. I was eleven.
We had recently moved to the quarry, the water-filled limestone pit.

"It's cancer, isn't it?" I said, squeezing
my schoolbooks tight to my new-budding chest.

They were sitting in the family room. Mom in her corner nook
on the sectional chesterfield,
her feet curled up, the black leather *Merck Manual*—
open beside the swan-neck curve of her athletic legs.
Dad in the Windsor chair, lovingly refinished by Mom's

determined hands, the chestnut spindles caught
the cloud-breaking light as he rested his head on his hands.
Like Mom he seemingly stared at the autumn-coloured carpet
sprinkled with breadcrumbs from last night's dinner.

They weren't surprised that I knew. None of us were.

Even me, though the reality of my knowing
became apparent only after I'd say those words.

Mom turned to me. "I'm sorry this had to happen to you."

But it didn't happen to me. It happened to you.

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This fortune-seeing inside dreams
beams yellow riddles, questions
scut exclamation points,
I can't be more than whom.

*

I was a shadow attached to mother's legs, always tugging. Inside my mind I floated, away from all eyes watching me. I was in their line of vision then, they were assessing me, taking me in, my long brown hair split into pigtails with mother-curved ringlets hanging like hounds' ears, my deep-set dark blue eyes, my wonky uneven ears and freckles. I could see I was not what they wanted to see. Where did this come from, this deep dislike of self? The beauty that never found me. The voice that never spoke.

And now I'm immersed in solipsism, puddle-wet with it.

I shall go on.

Your parents die and you become a writer, a poet.

There's my story in a nutshell.

We never had a cat but it got my tongue anyway.

Held it with its claws, the skin of its teeth.

Furred like a mouse toward the throat's abyss—

you know that's a lie.

All lies have a spine of truth.

It's how they stand up.

They say not to write in the first person. "I" is too much.

But I know, deep down, they know I is a tool, a construct.

They bully others to make their own path.

I is a water spider on a glassy lake

pushing past the inertia of pain.

The cedar tree outside the window is green

but the back leaves are rusting.

They hold on. They don't fall.

I need more animus—raw, male energy. To act without doubt, without overthinking. How draining doubt is. To be in the pool of how others perceive you. To melt into a wicked-witch puddle and wait for the sun to appear from behind dark clouds, dry you into air.

I told my friend I feel like a floating head.

And yet my head remains to think and overthink.

Damn it. Why can't I be the floating headless?

I once loved a boy who said he didn't love books. "Why read when you can live life instead?"

He liked to shoot duck and deer and listen to Willie Nelson.

Now I've made him sound like a redneck.

And yet he was also the boy-next-door, clean cut and caring. He only killed

during hunting season and ate what he killed. Antlered deer heads

hung on his parents' walls. This was normal in their house.

As normal and frequent as windows in ours.

The deer eyes held a frozen expression but not one of pain.

Fake eyes, forever in stare.

They were heads but they weren't floating.

An only child. "Aren't you lonely?" They look at you with pity, the black circles of their pupils expanding toward outer space. Lonely doesn't come from being alone. Lonely is the loss of self with others. I met a man who gave me that wisdom. It was his everlasting gift, along with nuggets like:

you'll never get published without me. You're a bitter barren woman.

*

He makes me into a noun.

I can't move.

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“Labelling a woman “bitter”, is like calling them “crazy”, it’s just another way to dismiss their feelings and whatever has happened to them as “all in her head.” No one wants the reputation of being a “bitter” woman, so this manipulates women into keeping silent and the perpetrator remains protected and their behaviour remains unchallenged.” I resonate with these words from an article by Sophie King in the *Medium*.

I never wanted children; he just assumed that I did.

He couldn’t see me at all.

Though in the beginning, I thought he could.

He had the eyes of a deer on a hunter’s cottage wall,

looking without seeing, seeing without feeling.

That deer turned wolf.

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I wipe your absence
with clean-stained hands.

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You have to work hard to get mean words out of your system. Bitter barren woman and things like that. *Sticks and stones will break your bones but names will never hurt you.* What a load of crap. Bones heal. Broken bones lead you to the emergency room. Yes, they make you cry and wail. But despite the knife-stabbing pain, you are led the way out: casts and bandages, crutches or slings. To TLC. To lollipops and ice cream! To your favourite show on TV. You are led through a tour of mend. Time accompanies you. Next thing you know, you’re climbing trees and doing handstands and cartwheels, outrunning *It* in tag; you are home-free in a game of Hide-n-Seek.

Names pierce through skin into soul.

You need to believe in magic to heal what they do.

When those “aren’t you lonely without a sibling?” types visit, they discover you have your own bathroom. And look how big your bedroom is! So many toys. Can I borrow your Malibu Barbie? Wait. How about the new one with growing hair. Yes, you can take her.

Later, in the girl’s mauve bedroom, you work up the courage to ask for it back. She pulls it out from beneath her mauve-painted bed, the mauve bedspread ringed with mauve eyelet, and shoves it at you: “Here!”

Holding your Barbie, you notice one leg is warped. She’s not the same. She’s mangled. What did you do to her? What do you mean? What are you saying I did? She’s standing up now, looking down at you and your leg-mangled Barbie. She looks as tall as a parent, her hand on her hip.

In your mind you see your own finger wagging back at you:

I told you not to lend it to her.

She’s jealous of what you have.

She wants to steal your pleasure, your pretty hair-growing Barbie.

While running your hand along your Barbie’s leg,
you feel a pin puncture, a hole in the smooth plastic.

No amount of doctoring will heal this.

Your prize doll is a cripple.

Years later when your novel has been rejected by every publisher
your agent contacted, you think:

That hurt became a quarry. Quarry is a noun and a verb. Quarry is my book. I quarry your quarry. Your quarry I quarry. Quarry comes from the Latin word *cor*: Heart. My heart was quarried. We quarry your heart. That's what all those rejections did, they quarried me. But not swiftly. Instead they ignited cancer cells. The cancer cells (yes, we all have them) inside my left breast.

They were mad that I allowed my soul to be hurt by all those rejections.

They took that heart-breaking energy and fed on it.

We'll show her.

This is how she treats us?

We expand. We multiply.

A scar is a fossil—ridges,
edges of a dead-sea animal.

I'd gotten out of the monthly habit of checking. The anxiety over *Quarry* made my period stop, my reminder for self-examination. After self-checking for years, I'd had my scares with lumps, especially having breasts with dense tissue. I remember the panic and worry the first time I lay on my side in the half-lit ultrasound room, a pillow tucked behind me for support. When the technician pushed the cold hard device over the sensitive breast skin, the insides of my jellied breast appeared on the black and white screen as a strange subterranean world, a lunar landscape. During this time I learned words like *fibroadenoma*. Friendly words. All encounters with lumps were benign.

We live in vigilance after watching our mothers die.

Those twin sexual organs that hold milk for babies
and desire for men carry a terror for us.

We succumb to having them flattened like pancakes on mammogram plates.

We suck in our breath through wincing of pain
and ignore the metallic-buzzing of the taking image.

Our breasts don't belong to us then.

Smooshed and squeezed and handled with efficient gloved hands,
molded like Play-Do.

At night we dream they're hacked off.

We need to do a biopsy.

I make the dead move like dolls with beating hearts, strings from marionettes. They live inside the folds of my notebooks. My strings became their strings—free will?—No. The dead lead me to the next scene. The dead are here. It's a miracle! My parents are more than fading remnants from a dream. They are in continuing conversations.

You send the manuscript off to your agent in full first-day-of-school-shiny-clothes glow. Your parents live inside it. See? But they don't see. Black scratches over fields of white paper. Tombstones up close. You're not supposed to talk about rejections. Success is where it's at. You are a WINNER. Only then as WINNER do you REVEAL your story. I was rejected fifty times for that prize-winning book! Or: I had to start all over again and I did and NOW look at me! They never SHARE their stories when they are in the pit. That's when they hide. Only when that quarry is filled back up

with a big shiny YES do they share their stories. They walk over their pain. They touch the silver lining.

There are only so many of these stories you can take.

So the day came and the word *cancer*
entered my life from within.

It popped out like a jack-in-the-box.

I'm sorry this had to happen to you.

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<https://medium.com/@kingsophiesworld/how-the-concept-of-forgiveness-is-used-to-gaslight-women-8d6e4a04e07e>

Catherine Graham is an award-winning Toronto-based writer. Her sixth poetry collection, *The Celery Forest*, was named a CBC Best Book of the Year, appears on the CBC Books Ultimate Canadian Poetry List and was a finalist for the Fred Cogswell Award for Excellence in Poetry. Her debut novel *Quarry* won an Independent Publisher Book Awards gold medal for fiction, “The Very Best!” Book Awards for Best Fiction and was a finalist for the Sarton Women’s Book Award for Contemporary Fiction and the Fred Kerner Book Award. She teaches creative writing at the University of Toronto where she won an Excellence in Teaching Award and is a previous winner of the Toronto International Festival of Authors’ Poetry *NOW* competition. *Aether: an out-of-body lyric* will be published fall, 2020 with Wolsak and Wynn. Visit her at www.catherinegraham.com Follow her on Instagram and Twitter @catgrahampoet