

# NOTES FROM THE DRY COUNTRY

POEMS BY

ELLEN ARONOFSKY COLE

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*The country of the innumerable dead was empty. No tree or blade of grass grew in the stony earth under the unsetting stars. "I am thirsty," Arren said, and his companion answered, "Here they drink dust."*

*Ursula K. LeGuin, The Farthest Shore*



I

# Excision

## 1. The Cancer

I've named my breasts  
Titania and Peas-blossom  
my sister said

Peas-blossom is never any trouble  
but Titania is a real drama queen  
hogging all the attention

she hasn't even noticed  
how she's become entangled  
in Bottom's arms

how he keeps sucking down  
grapes belching  
his spittle smeared across her chest

he doesn't know  
he's about to be  
excised

## 2. Who will not die

Aunt Norma said if you dream  
of a child someone will die

but in my dream  
the baby was small and shy as quail

unnamed  
her heart beat like the sun

Grandpa's ghost toasted us  
with apricot schnapps

Grandma Celia fed us hot apple slices  
bedded on fat yellow noodles

My cousin Tom snapped pictures  
like he did years ago at our wedding  
Brian, his white wedding suit  
dusted with sugar

tipping cake into my mouth,  
Tom focusing on fingers, lips

everything extraneous  
cut out

### 3. Everything is a knife

The phone slashes my ears  
Your voice drips out the earpiece  
My tongue lies in my mouth  
thick as a tumor  
I would pull it out before I tell you this news

But words grow in my belly  
quick as fungus  
climb my bones  
I cannot keep them still

I am like the maiden in a fairy tale  
when I open my mouth birds fly out  
I try to call them back  
but they have flown to a dry country

where neither blood nor water flows

# Lightheaded

as I so often am  
when leukemia fevers sweep over me  
I fail to notice when I begin to rise,  
feet bidding the floor good-bye,

I say, *Brian*, but you,  
your eyes shut,  
Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*  
whispering in your earphones,

do not see me wink out the window  
like lamp light, the lawn glittered  
with glow-worms, echoed above  
by the stern slow music of stars.

I blow northeast carried  
by prevailing winds, pass  
like fair weather into morning,  
drift over Newfoundland.

The sea is frozen into strange shapes,  
waves solidified. Spray arcs like mermen  
caught in the arctic air, the sky's blue bell  
pinched into a funnel, soars above my head.

A young bull seal, his head bashed in,  
half-eaten fish held in his mouth, floats  
above me. Seal and fish turn their eyes  
upward where light tubes into the unknown.

My hair flaps like a mariner's flag.  
My mouth, agape, still holds your name.

# Guano

*after Anton Chekhov*

Once there were three sisters  
who all had cancer.  
The eldest two had leukemia,  
the youngest a small malignancy  
in her right breast.  
The odds against this happening  
were astronomical.

Of course they weren't all sick  
at the same time. Sharon  
had a quick lumpectomy  
and four short months of chemo.  
Barbara was diagnosed and  
died twenty-five years ago.  
*Terrible luck*, Ellen said.  
*Doctors can cure that now.*

Moscow was not far  
but the girls didn't know.  
Outside an unusual July snow  
dropped thirty-six inches  
on the Russian countryside  
and a drift of seagulls  
blew in from the north.

## The Scream

*At that moment, among the trees nearby, a horn rang out. It rent the night like fire on a hilltop. "Awake! Fear! Fire! Foe! Awake!"*

J. R.R. Tolkien

She woke and screamed,  
Her head rang like a horn,  
clanged like a warning bell,  
pealed *Fire! Fear! Foe!*  
She burrowed under covers  
but screams pumped out.  
Daughters sheltered against the wall.  
Screams caught the chandelier,  
sent it spinning.  
Her neighbors sat up in their beds,  
smashed their heads on walls.  
Her parrot broke its beak against cage bars.  
Her husband cupped her face,  
said *hush*.  
She whimpered.  
Everything was ice.

## Shadow Sister

She was born when I was born,  
was with me in the womb  
and dropped unseen  
from between my mother's legs  
when the doctor slid me from the birth canal  
and held me for my first breath.

She walked with me when I  
was twelve and my puppy Count Down  
was hit by a car, releasing  
his shadow pup to run free.  
*Why do things die?* I asked my father.  
He said, *Don't worry about it, Sweetness.*

But I kept dreaming about the fish  
I caught in Miller's Pond and put  
in an old aquarium, how they floated  
belly-up after a few days  
casting their small shadows  
on the glass floor.

And I know she is here with me,  
my precise shape and size,  
pacing the cancer ward,  
peering out the window at the gulls  
and snow geese gathered  
in the parking lot below.

## In the Lobby at Johns Hopkins

I see a baby with no face.  
Her eyes are lidless.  
Her nose, a hole.  
Her mouth, a lipless gash.

Her father tenderly wipes her chin.  
Her hands, furred like flower  
buds, push through the sleeves  
of her pink fleece sweater.

I can't forget her. I'm in the infusion  
chair. Tubes snake my arms.  
I dream of owl babies. They perch  
on IV poles, crowd onto cots,

fill the halls. Doctors rush by.  
The owlets neither eat nor sleep.  
They have no feathers.  
They do not blink.

## Fear Mice Make a Movie

*What is your birth date?* asks the nurse  
*April 16, 1950* I say

She checks the barcode on the IV bag  
Fear Mouse looses itself from my stomach  
runs up my spine

If I die will I be razored out of the picture  
fluttering like a sliver of celluloid  
to the cutting room floor  
that date disappearing altogether

Slik-slak  
Another Fear Mouse runs up my spine  
Another

Hamster Heart jogs in his wheel  
Beats 110 times per minute

Fear Mice slip on their ruffled skirts  
Sing *Girls, do you know that you'll die*  
*Never ask me why why*

They link arms kick Their high heels puncture  
precise circles inside my skull

Hamster Heart beats 200 times per minute

Fear Mice turn their backs flip up their skirts  
They kick up plastic snippets  
Time confetti fills the air  
1956 I have measles on my birthday  
1980 Brian and I marry  
2009 Doctor Gore says *you couldn't find 100 people*  
*who have the same disease as you*

Fear Mice sing  
*You will die-eee I-ee die-ee die-eee*

Hamster Heart slips out of his wheel  
Beats 50 times per minute

Fear Mice grasp each other's shoulders  
Sway  
Hum Brahms Lullaby

Hamster Heart beats 10 times per minute  
Hamster Heart shuts his eyes

Slik-slak  
April 16 disappears from time.

## Cancer Blues

Doctor, Doctor, I'm feeling wrong.  
Doc, I'm feeling something's wrong.  
Gonna come see you, won't be long.

Something's growing that shouldn't be there.  
Something's growing that never was there.  
Cut it out, it's given' me a scare.

Chemo's making me sick as a dog.  
Damn poison makes me sick as a dog.  
Tummy's jumping like a love-sick frog.

Walking slow with Mama's cane.  
Well, I'm walking slow with Mama's cane.  
Doctor, cut me open again.

I'm getting stringy, getting thin.  
Yeah, getting stringy, getting thin.  
Need some clothes they can bury me in.