

Constellation Rifts

i. Collisions

I don't even drink coffee but I was told over the phone, *look, you have cancer, can you come in?* I was standing in line at our café, so forever I'll remember the rapid pinball talk of workers manoeuvring through conversations and wit – coffee-bean aroma punctuating the air. I can see my hand pay for my blueberry muffin. *Of course, I can be there in twenty.* Wasn't I supposed to be sitting down? Not waiting in a space I often ate my sautéed mushrooms on toast.

ii. MRI

My head face down as the MRI is clanking away. Trying to count to one-hundred, or see myself floating in space – looking down at an Earthrise or imagine the Horsehead Nebula with its delicate folds of gas, cantering across space. But I think of Jocelyn Bell Burnell using radio waves to discover pulsars, how she interpreted composition, structure and motion. These magnetic fields and waves now assessing me. My breast images are lit up with jets from hypernova. At least, that's what I deduce.

iii. Scintimammography

After the injection, laying undressed, jagged – brittle but crisp and alert and the pain – twenty bees scurrying as if startled – stinging the nipple over and over and over. Weight radiates from chest to arm, from tender skin to lymph, thermal and liquescent sensations until everything cools and settles, zipped into the mind. Metallic mouth. Heaviness releases so the neck can move slightly – an aerial view focuses on contrasting screens of shadow-black and faux-phosphorescence. These lucent mini-supernovae, vital and living, brilliant dancers forming galaxies. The radiotracer, emitting gamma rays and swaddling tissue, grading as it details function, probing for signs of trouble. Gamma rays detected after collisions of two neutron stars – regular from cancer old self and new, tranquil and unquiet. Nothing is as before. This will guide the surgeon – excavating cuts, new stitches, mortal scars. An aperture, liminal lamps into darkness.

iv. Surgery

Debris of cuts. Pieces missing. Flattened and tied up. My skin abrading. I'm shedding. Displaced. On heavy medication, I can't manage thumbs to text friends but I order two pairs of zebra print shoes in the right size. I dream a ship passing my window on the second floor. All memories ripple, one universe, sideswipes another. Relief, as colossal as Jupiter.

v. Radiotherapy

Breath hold. So, they don't radiate your heart. Strapped in with arms set above. Micro movements so every angle is exact. Each morning at 8am Changing Room A. Same room, same gown, same footstep. Erasure evanescence. High-energy X-rays, protons and particles passing through with the buzz of stop/start/stop/start. A labyrinth waiting to finish. The metrical beat of marking a calendar. Hold. Breath. Release.

vi. After

How long is after? How far, the future? I dash to a boat then halt above cavernous Phthalo blue ocean, anticipating undisturbed moments, catching sight of the saddle-tail snapper. Irrepressible winds disrobing our hair. All the while laughing. Some days are that. Some, just sitting in the kitchen with a book. Our humbling molten existence. Our eyes, full of the Rosette Nebula. Our minds, often in the needlework of living, hurtling towards an inevitable end.