

S A R A H B L A K E

NAMED AFTER DEATH

The book cover features a dark, textured background with a pattern of dark green, wavy, concentric lines. Overlaid on this are several vertical, jagged, light green shapes that resemble stylized plants or abstract forms. In the bottom left corner, there is a white triangular logo containing the number 3 and the text 'BANANGO EDITIONS'.

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BANANGO
EDITIONS

Named After Death

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When I went to Texas to study poetry, my mother and grandfather were both diagnosed with brain tumors.

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Every fighter's got a plan until they get hit in the mouth.
—Mike Tyson

I Was Named After Death

At seven, I saw my great aunt in a coffin
after she'd forgotten my name
and given me her small Chinese dolls.

At the funerals of her
seven brothers and three sisters
the coffins were kept closed.

My mother didn't let us throw dirt
on their graves. And it is a terrible sound
that I was glad not to be closer to.

Death took a shape beside me
of a horse, and I grew, and it grew,
and though I am a small thing
it is a large thing. Its leg
the length of me.

Trotting around a room.

Breasts

When I don't wear a bra, my breasts
are in a constant state of falling.
This pulls on the one bridging vein,
forces it out of my chest, shows
how perfectly cylindrical it is.

Before this, there was every chance
my veins were flat,
and if that were true then what else.

In all likelihood, I will lose my breasts,
like so many women in my family.

The Shape of Plants

In New Jersey, there are woods. I walked through them and grass bent against my legs, I moved the branches with my hands, and all things felt loose beneath my feet. But in Texas, these *Agave americana* grow eight feet tall, right in peoples' yards, all their sharp tip spines visible from far away, and these potted plants at the corners of buildings have stiff leaves. What new power I find in my body in the north, in the snow, in the underbrush. I appreciate even the mud.

The Ear Opened Itself to Me

1.

My mother's brain tumor has taught me about the ear.
Not many websites have pictures that are not drawings.
Science is most clear in diagrams.

An acoustic neuroma grows as a mess on the eighth cranial nerve that takes impulses from the middle and inner ear to the brain.

It is taken for granted that two nerves will be lost in the operation. These communicate balance. The left side of the brain can manage but it takes days to stop the spinning, takes months to walk well.

The last time I walked with her she was kicking her right foot out.

2.

I had imagined the nerves as one-boned spines. The one photo I found showed them as raw meat. When I'm ripping the fat off my chicken, because I have no good knives, I often cut myself with my fingernails and think about salmonella. I often tear the meat and in the torn meat, columns, myofibrils, reveal how they reach out to each other. That's how they resemble the nerves. How many parts of the body resemble the muscles? The nerves are not the color of muscles, but of candied ginger which I've seen prettiest half dipped in white chocolate. But ginger makes my tongue burn. My mother, I remember, sat across the table, pulling air through a tight circle made with her lips, to see how cold it felt. We couldn't explain it. Her tongue gone numb. Soon her cheek. Soon the roof of her mouth.

3.

There is a forty percent chance that the nerve
that communicates hearing
will also be lost. This is based on the procedure
performed all over the country.

But just one man handles the last three hours
of the eight hour act,
when the nerves are cleaned. No one has died,
he tells my mother,
for him. Now the possibility is a threshold.

4.

Sometimes
I think of sinking

my mother's temporal
bone in the sea

because it is the densest
bone in the body.

I could time how
long it takes

to get where I can't
pull it back.

5.

An ear infection is also known as an otitis media.
Bacteria gets trapped in the eustachian tube.
The middle ear swells and turns red with swelling.

Abnormalities of the cochlea cause deafness.
Abnormalities of the external ear are common.
There are ten parts: helix, scapha, tragus . . .

6.

The inner ear has a room, the utricle—
the name of a fruit, too, the world's smallest,
one-seeded, indehiscent. The size of a grain of salt,
I could hide it in a crack in my tooth. I could hide
my mother's acoustic neuroma under my tongue
and think of it as a seed. It could bloom
into a sound.

The Operation

To help my mother's eyes,
small gold weights
might be placed
in her eyelids.

Naturally the eye
is always open.
It is an effort
that lets us sleep.

I imagine the pharaohs
may have had gold
in their eyelids, too—
some high sign of wealth.

The extra weight
relieving all the small muscles
of their expectations—

some new medicine
for the aches
in the dark temples
of these gods of men.

My mother and the bent-
bearded men sharing
this gold, blinking.

My mother's eye,
a blue beside
the pull of black.
Open, a queen of Egypt.

Closed, the eyes
of her failing nerves.

Flowers of New Jersey

In Princeton, there are rhododendron twenty feet tall and they bloom every year. They seemed common. They hide nothing—I can see through them when they move in the wind—they are not used, as the *Agave americana* are used in Mexico, as barriers.

I laced the fence in my back yard in New Jersey with a vine of clematis, delicate,
along it, small, purple flowers. I laugh looking at it now.

One Part of His Brain

differentiates his hand from a fork.
When a tumor overwhelms this part
he sticks his hand in his pizza.
He throws away all his belts.

When my grandmother cracked her skull open,
she said numbers and letters for weeks
until she died. These units of thought
must lie in the strongest part of the brain.
I appreciate this, but it is not beautiful.

The image of my grandfather's belts
in a trash can also is not beautiful.

In what way can I show my grandfather
his own hand? From years of running
a wax paper company he has no fingerprints,
just like a fork, like every fork
in the whole goddamn world.

My Grandfather Can No Longer Dress Himself

My period stopped after a day. I've become
obsessed with half of my left eyebrow because the hairs
stick out. Fuss, fuss, I'll pull them out. I feel
unsettled. How much uterine lining is left in me?
Maybe tomorrow the hairs will not stick out, maybe
some baby will need that lining. Cute little baby dumpling,
named Pelmeni after my Russian great-grandparents,
because it is their tenth son who is dying. Baby, baby,
baby dumpling. Fire in the belly, cooks the baby,
eat the baby, yum yum baby dumpling. Soft, smooth
baby eyebrows. Pel-mel, kick the belly, big, big belly
that's no damn good at reading the chemicals, estrogen,
progesterone, adrenaline, belly stopper/starters.
No more ladylike eyebrows for me, I'm all crazy-lady
now, crazy-baby lady-woman, falling out of bed,
busy doing things, folding pasta over and making little
fork patterns for Pelly, putting clear gel on with a mascara
wand for my shiny eyebrows, looking all pretty,
stopping all the men going, *That lady's not stressing*
She got eyes like the fucking Queen of Egypt. Yeah,
pretty lady me, listening for babies in her belly, for hairs
planning something, waiting for her grandfather
to say, *Goodbye, baby, I loved you all the time*.

My Grandfather Is No Longer a Man

A great river passes through him:
his words are rounded like stones
and his lips are heavy with water.

His small eyes were always a blue
that had no place on a man, a blue
of an acid lake, a lake on the great
rise of a volcano.

Yes, I can see
my grandfather lain down; I see
photographers in helicopters
focusing on him, the man who
stopped being a man, the man

who became a god, a god tied
to a mountain, filled with a river,
his eyes ablaze, his words spilling
out of him, piling up around him,
burying him, as one would a man.

I Am the Woman Farthest from Him

My grandfather is farsighted so he can
read the television,
he can yell to us, in the hall, in our whispers,
by our names and every time is a time
we remark later to the cousins calling on the phone.

From the television he thinks we're at war,
a different war,
Obama Obama O bombings
in the Battle of New Hampshire.
He believes he is seeing the bombings,
on the screen bursting, and looks forward
to tomorrow to watch.
A new effect of war.

On a worse day, my grandfather asks,
is that my girl, when Giuliani's wife is on CNN.
And why not answer yes?

The way he says it is straight out
of the 1940s and I want to call her a dame
or a doll and I want to be one, too,
meeting my grandfather on a bus where
he flips a coin with his brother
over who gets to ask me out,

and then I am my mother's mother,
leaning over to get my bra on,
staying home, making dinners,
until I hit my mother with a hairbrush
and I run back into myself, where my grandfather
is so small and the bed is as much
him as he is.

The Century Plant

Once I confused ball moss for a tree in bloom. I hear
the *Agave americana* blooms, reaching
thirty feet in two months, a stalk with small, yellow flowers
at the top. I'm glad I haven't seen them
because the plant dies. I would, too, if I let anything bud,
like that, straight from my heart,
if I let it grow, as a sweet thing, good to eat.

That a hundred years pass before it blooms, is a human
imposition. It only takes ten years
in the Texas sun. And I would write that lie myself.

The Tumors

We scrolled through them
 and I stood, seeing in light:
 his blood nothing, his organs
soft and grey, his cysts a lighter
 grey, his tumors white white white.
 I started just below the liver
looking down into him and pulled
 up from there. This was the derivative
 of him, the area beneath the curve
of his chest and stomach, this
 was the infinite thinness required
 to calculate such a depth.

I was comfortable with knots
 in the fifth dimension, in the n th
 in some problems, and a knot
sounds like a tumor. Does
 the tumor move through time
 and space in a way I could plot,
memorize, make in the air
 with my arms? I count
 the cross-overs of knots
to distinguish one from another,
 but the tumor, tighter and tighter,
 is something that can only
show up as a burst in his lung,
 in his brain—the doctor,
 talking fast, I understand.

The doctor does not show him
 the softness of his liver
 and so the softness of my liver,
which I could hold, the softness
 understood by the light. The doctor
 says his lung would collapse

at the touch of a needle because
 the lung is not really a lung
 anymore because the branches
scarred into little balls as if
 blossoming and those the buds
 and those the fruits of his life
tucked away in his lungs
 and maybe the tumor is bracing
 the lung open, maybe the tumor
is a star that will implode
 and bring him into itself, and that
 is the way to die, leaving
nothing behind but light.

For the House

Is this when the neighbors,
curious and unafraid,

call for the ambulance
and fire engine,

to flood the house and rid us
of all of this

and grow something new,
a mold, mushrooms,

things that will take
the dead in

the way we take in the sun?

Returning from the Funeral

Outside the train, a man
is collecting wood, stepping
on the elbows of the fallen
branches, pulling the short end
up with his gloved hand. Familiar.
Familiar snap. Everything
an interruption to the woods
or a part of them. New Jersey
tightens fast around the tracks.

For the Body

Even in the coffin, I could not say
if my grandfather were dead.
I would've said so if not for my mother
already saying it, into my ear.
I said, *I'm sure he's dead*, so we could
bury him. But if it weren't for knowing
his blood had been replaced
with formaldehyde, I would've said
he could be alive again. It seemed
so obvious, at the sight of him then.

The Tumors Grew in Me As Well

I cried over them, spent money on them—
bought an ear piece for my cell phone.

And I felt the tumors in other ways,
how tumors do, pressing up against
what they are not *of*, passing newly
something through the nerves.

I grew afraid of the moment of resolve.

The woman left living—her resolve.
The man left—his. Not my grandfather's.

His death is not a response.

We buried him
with the tumors still inside him.
How could we?

Agave Americana

As a child in South Jersey, I wanted to be, always,
under a weeping willow.

But how can I admire the Agave americana?

I imagine, if the leaves of the great Agave americana could move,
could open, an Aphrodite would be born—
from the old bed of an ocean.

An Aphrodite for the West. A woman alone.

Like Bird, Like Body, Like Grace

I think you want it all more beautiful.
What can I do for you? *Is* there a bird?
Is the bird like another more beautiful bird? Is the human body
like a lamb's bleat? Is there an invitation
from the girl's naked body to see her
also as the grief of me?

I don't think you want to hear that the water falls like grace
but perhaps the horse is always
in the field for you. The morning passing
in the sun, sketches of starfish,
a broken egg in the sink, all waiting.

But in the still growing field of corn, stalks only up to my ribs,
my grief, ten feet tall, wanders. A haunting thing.
The clouds could be described as the falling laugh of him,
but what then?

For Those Who Want It Ugly

The horses I saw at the farm, teasing their muscles, looked
unable to control themselves
and still the flies will never leave them alone.
They came to the fence for carrots I'd forgotten back at the house.
I wanted to kill every fly, slap the horses' muscles until they fell flat.

Another fly, now in the closet at work. He seems impossible
so in a moment of frivolity I thought he was born from my leg.
I remember the maggots
on the cloth instead of the meat in Redi's experiment of 1668
and the final success of Pasteur in 1859. Two hundred years to prove
life does not come from non-life. But what about life coming
from what might be called a deformed life.
Something grows.

My mother asks if I cut the apples too quickly, I tell her
I worry more about losing
my finger than she worries about me losing my finger.
But I do rush, anxious to get the apples in the oven. And I do worry.
And the flies return to me even in winter, and my life continues
misshapen. My voice is ugly. The space between us
is sometimes ugly, too. And so many last memories of him,
if you could call them that.

Push

Why their collection?

The insects. Perhaps
it is their birth.

They pass

one over another
on the blades of grass.

Today, together,

have we come to yellow?
Always now

I hear of it.
Two doves appeared.

Blame

is in the flowers.
Mercy, too. I don't

know how to ask for them.

The Earth turns again, backwards
in one way, seven ways,

a way for each of us.

Sometimes I Think I'm Finished

What would 10,000 birds look like?

What would they look like in flight?

The Chinese poets say 10,000 for infinity.

Flying by me in my sleep they do

seem to go on forever.

They seem like symbols

or one symbol. And they could be likened

to the passing of my grandfather

if I could see them passing and not also be moving.

Sometimes

I come across his handwriting in the house.

Loss

I'm consumed by the beaded lines running down
a wedding dress. And pleased by the lack
of red in my life, and I'm liking more the browns.
The passed down images of the Chinese poets
that mean also death or noble or homesick or heaven
distract me. But I can't write about drinking wine
because I don't drink wine. The old American
male poets find they can now write about pussy
in a way that is considered mature
but I see right through them and their overuse
of the word *wetness* and their unending
love. I would like to see the rings
they bought their wives. A whole book
of the engagement rings of poets.
I should imagine climbing a mountain,
or crossing a river, or watching the lone goose.
The stones are cold. The loss of him
seems to go on forever because it does.
My life continues to come in and not come out,
and I imagine my wedding. And I imagine
my wetness on the night of my wedding.
I allow myself to think of things beyond him
and I am flooded by them.

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Sarah Blake is the author of *Mr. West*, an unauthorized lyric biography of Kanye West, out from Wesleyan University Press. *Berfrois* published her epic poem, *The Starship*, in illustrated installments online. Blake's other poems appear in the *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. In 2013, she was awarded an NEA fellowship for poetry. She lives outside of Philadelphia with her husband and son.