
June 2022

784 Grams

Stephanie A. Kurzenhauser
Western Michigan University

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784 Grams

By Stephanie A. Kurzenhauser

Abstract: This poem elucidates my experience of grief and loss in response to breast cancer and a bilateral mastectomy without reconstruction.

784 Grams

I'll try on the fuchsia one first.
My daughter has always told me I look so pretty
wearing it, the thin shoulder straps descending to a
flowered bodice with puckered stitching cradling
my breasts.
The liberation of a summer dress uncloaking skin
and body,
reflecting the beauty of womanhood in mirrors or in
the beseeching eyes of a beloved.

Keeping my eyes pinched closed,
I ease the cotton fabric over my head and pull it
down. The dress is on.
Suddenly, I feel like I'm at a hair salon,
the chair about to be spun around for a climactic
reveal. Turning my body and opening my gaze,
I realize I'm stiffly holding the reservoir of my
breath.

I survey what I see before me, willing the breath's
return.
My first inhalation is sharp and cold, followed by a
hot, long exhalation - a novella in each respiration.
I'll need a big cardboard box.

I could ask my daughter if she'd like any of the
clothing.
She usually loves to wear my things
but maybe these would feel like prickly bursae against
her skin,
or make her cry.
Donation is probably the best bet.

I raise my hands up to my chest, the emptiness
billowing out.
Pressing against bony sternum and upper ribs, my
palms compress
pockets of air
with whole universes of grief inside them.

My 329 gram left breast and 455 gram right breast
were fixed in formalin and delivered to the pathologist,
histologic type and tumor size

carefully assessed and recorded with precision.
Were any words of solemnity or prayer uttered in
the lab that day?

My fingers trace the raised surfaces of the scars, and
I can see the pulsing of my heart.
The incision lines are a soft red in color, close to
Crayola's "Madder Lake" hue that was retired from
the portfolio in 1935 and long since forgotten.