784 Grams

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