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Ferragosto, and: Greece First, and: The Pediatrician, and:  
Fight Sounds, and: Winter: Two Mornings, and: The Under-Body

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## Bridget O'Bernstein

### Ferragosto

*After Plath*

The first time my body tried to kill me I was ten,  
wearing a white nightgown, calling through the window

for my mother out in the garden.  
Blood was coming out of my backside again,

and I didn't know what to do. The second time it happened,  
I was living in a family friend's empty apartment in Chelsea.

The man I loved was using drugs and kept calling,  
crying and shouting, and I couldn't stop answering the phone.

Actually, I couldn't breathe  
unless I was having sex with someone else,

and then I could breathe fine.  
After cheating, I knocked a soap dish off the ledge

of the bath, and it broke. My mind flashed to suicide  
and wouldn't let go.

The next time my body came for me, I was twenty-three  
in Carrara in late August. My legs dangled over a marble window ledge,

and at that height I could see the icy purple *glicine*  
scaling the stone houses and terra-cotta roofs.

Italy had emptied out in deep August,  
and I bore a gnawing hunger for a man

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I was convinced didn't love me—and he didn't,  
but I couldn't stop thinking about him all night,

alone in Italy,  
smoking and eating blades of sliced peach.

I couldn't live without the sporadic devotion that came  
from a man in love with someone else.

One hundred and eight in the evening in Milan,  
and I stood hungrily for hours

in front of Mantegna's *Dead Christ*,  
not just because his feet were so beautiful, so long,

but because I wanted to die, too,  
and Mantegna made it look good.

And at thirty, it happened again,  
when a Crohn's flare put me in the hospital for a week,

and I thought my body might succeed in the attempt,  
when I caught sight of myself in the ward mirror,

carved down from pain and hunger  
like a bicycle spoke.

It is natural to look to the body for causing the pain,  
though pain does not begin inside.

The body is the window the pain has flung  
to call through its sound.

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## Greece First

I.

Greece first,  
I was barely healthy,

and Athens was too hot for all three of us.  
I asked for ice cubes for my cola  
and they told me the ice didn't keep there.

At the wiry age of eleven, I pulled away  
from the embrace of my parents and  
still needed them.

I still wanted to be included,  
still wanted to be their girl, their focus,  
so I let my mother tug my sun hat down,  
then rolled my eyes on the Acropolis  
when she hugged me to her breast.

All of my journal entries were infused with irritation  
at my parents  
and began with *Why can't they just—*  
*Don't they understand I'm not a child?*  
Adolescence is an awful period—  
the longing for separation and grace  
while leaving the glistening net of childhood.

Men flung octopus over a line in Lesvos,  
and their rosy lavender legs swung in the dimming light.  
In photos, I cradle a stray kitten in my lap,  
both of us thin in the face and belly.

II.

Then Italy,  
there was a hair in my affogato in Siena  
but my mother had the rages that day,

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so I hid it and finished the dessert quietly,  
watching men on horses that pawed the white stones.

We stayed in an old hotel with a green-checked marble lobby.  
Then we bought cans of tomatoes and drove south,  
and my intestinal illness seemed to follow our car  
at a distance.

We drove to a port town where we could hear  
the boats' hollow songs from the house on the hill.  
In the kitchen, my father cut the foul-tasting medication  
and forced the pieces into small plastic capsules  
to dim the metallic taste.

Half the time my father was soft and loving,  
and half the time he was in a state of fight.  
In Florence, he entered a restaurant in a green silk vest  
and demanded a cappuccino at four in the afternoon,  
sneering at the waiter  
who had laughed at his request.

I could hear them fighting and jeering  
and my mother's pleading voice as I walked outside.  
I slipped into the square, hazy with heat, and I wove  
through stalls of linens with my eyes closed  
and hands outstretched.

We couldn't figure out how to order dinner,  
never getting it quite right—  
ending up repeatedly with barely enough food in three primi,  
or else primi and secondi for each person,  
the table groaning under swordfish and coiled meats  
and folds of tomato pasta.  
My father's eyes glittered with fear or anger  
about the bill or the waitress, about his own shame—  
I couldn't tell then, and I can't tell now.  
And I got sick no matter what we ate, weight falling  
off my frame like thin curtains.

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We got lost on the way to Rome, so a trip  
that should've taken three hours took ten.  
We kept our patience as long as we could,  
but we spoke next to no Italian,  
and a greasy pizza exploded down my father's blue button-down.  
We became increasingly giddy, laughing, or else we were shouting,  
trying to weave our way to the center of Rome.

It is confusing to try to remember because there were bad bits  
but much of my time with my parents was beautiful, too.

*III.*

The fever always came eventually,  
and stomach pain with it.  
I got sick again in the house in Santo Porto Stefano.  
Now I see how much of my life was illness—  
but then I didn't know what this, illness, was.

I became weak and unable to eat without pain,  
bedbound again in the back room of the house  
where the walls were dark red.  
I dreamt of the knights and swordsmen from my books,  
and the sicker I got, the more I seemed to be made of bones.

Sometimes I wandered out into the back garden to sit  
on the stones, which felt cool when I sat on them,  
the long nightgown gathered around my feet,  
my blood feverish.

Even though the illness was in my intestines, it seemed  
to be in my blood too, and in the night air.  
The sickness grew bigger than my body could hold,  
the bed became sick under me, the mossy flowers in the outside shower  
were sickness flowers.  
The stones felt cool until I walked on them,  
and then each one became a sickness stone.

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Even the moon, whose light kept me company when I awoke,  
    ill and exhausted,  
seemed to be getting dimmer.  
It was all tilting malevolently—the sickness touching  
everything—every dress, every red berry, the water,  
my father's hands.

IV.

The leaves of the olive tree by the back of the house were gray-green  
    and sounded like water running over stone.

The sounds regular bodies make are slight,  
    barely noticeable. They make a kind of sense—  
a dry cough, a hiccup,  
my father patting his mouth with a blue linen,  
the cat swallowing a bird,  
the brush bristles against my mother's scalp.

The sounds a sick body forgets to make, its organs,  
    they deafened me,  
like lapses in music.  
They filled the mountainside.

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## The Pediatrician

1.

As a little girl, I hated going to the pediatrician. I remember him sanitizing my arm with alcohol, and the way the nurse held me down while I squirmed. Did they do that to you? I don't remember why I think of the whole thing as cast in seed-yellow light like a German pornography film. Fat metal lights swung, and the doctor spat a little through mammoth gray teeth. *Hold still*, he said. *We can't help you unless you hold still for us, Bridget*. Wooden blocks in red, yellow, and blue lay scattered around the polyurethaned waiting room. Toddlers tripped over them and wailed, and the pretty nurse wore an old-fashioned nurse's dress and a white hat and white stockings with lace garters, or maybe I am just thinking of porn now, but the doctor was old with giant square glasses and a frightening tongue that disappeared and reappeared as he spoke to my parents over my head.

2.

For the first ten years of my life, this doctor gave me an exam. The doctor never knocked when he came in the room. *Up you go*, he said, and I climbed onto the table and slid off my leggings or overalls. In order to examine me, he'd have me put my knees up, my feet flat on the exam table, which crinkled under me. My parents, chatting with the doctor, sat in chairs to my right. He'd circle the table and lower his head to a place where I could no longer see him. When his face disappeared from view, I didn't know what he was doing. But whatever he was looking for could hardly be for me since I was four, then five, then six, and all the way until I was ten, and there wasn't anything up there, so I knew the exam wasn't for me. It was for him.

3.

The only other time I lay in this position was on a camping trip with my mother, squeezed into a crooked orange tent. We lay on our backs, our knees up and feet sticking out of the tent flap, comparing the shapes of our hands. And as I went for water, I felt the pillars of the dark trees, the sounds of car engines on a nearby road, and the sweetness of the going back in, being with my mother in a space meant for only one body.



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## Fight Sounds

The memory starts with a fight.  
My father remembers it one way, and I remember it another.

Hal said, *Nan walked ahead of us on the path to the beach  
and left us behind. It was just you and me.*

I said, *No, you pulled me aside,  
you said you wanted to show me the field poppies,  
and she was waiting for us to catch up.*

On the road, my mother and I were separated  
by my father.

Through the mint trees, the sun became orange starlight,  
like dime-store pearls flaking under a child's touch.

Hal picked up a big stick and used it to walk with.

When we made it to the beach, it was too dangerous to swim.  
I stamped my foot, but my parents said the water was too rough.

*It's like Site Point, Hal said, with the undertow,  
looking at Nan for confirmation, who nodded.  
Relief. Suddenly they were on the same side again.*

She said, *It was so rough we could barely get out.  
And Hal said, No, no, that's not how it went.  
It was more fun than that,  
and more dangerous.*

We pitched camp among the hot yellow rocks.  
At home my parents used opera music  
to drown out the fight sounds.

On the beach, they tried to use the wind as cover,  
but everything floated down to me anyway.

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*She's too sick for this*  
*But you're making it worse*

I burned a little and covered my face  
with a lifted hand.

The shirt I wore fit me loosely  
like a nightgown hung on a pipe.

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**Winter: Two Mornings**

*for Greg*

Sap and loose needles stuck to your neck and shoulders  
while you carried the tree

back to the apartment and refused my help,  
your breath heavy,

so I could see small bright flashes of your tongue.

I liked the vision of you  
underneath the girdled tree,

as though being a man was the same as suffering alone  
under a large weight.

In the night, when my insides seized,

I heard sounds from the kitchen  
of you breaking ice apart  
for me to hold in my mouth.

You didn't comfort me in the way doctors had tried  
when I was a child,

my belly lit up red with the sickness  
like a holiday cake studded  
with cherries.

Instead we sat upright in your bed and agreed  
that probably I wouldn't die that night.

You watched me quietly, unhurrying,  
so I saw that even if the pain stayed, you would stay, too,

---

and at some point, you said,  
as though to the room,

I won't let you die.

Days later, on Christmas morning,  
on a walk by myself for ground coffee,

the moment returned to me,  
when I approached a bush thick with birds  
on an empty street,

not as they flocked from the bush in fright  
like dark arrows,

but as they swarmed back into it  
to be together—all at once.

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## The Under-Body

When I first got sick  
my best friend Tessa turned to her mother  
in front of me and asked,  
    Will she die?

I washed the embarrassed body under the shower water  
Even the cool sheets at night hurt

Red lizards licked the stones, then darted away from me  
    like switchblades in the light

Flowers tumbled, organ blue,  
    around the outdoor shower

The body is a painful metaphor for the self

We stayed in the rented house five weeks  
Papa began to teach me French verbs  
in preparation for middle school

I wrote out the conjugations carefully  
in a blue notebook:

*I have / I have to / I have to live*

In the shower, berries, orange flowers that broke off  
in my hands, and fell to the stone in pieces  
I couldn't hold them

The body held the ache the best it could,  
    like the house held the flowers  
    and the mountain held the house

## BRIDGET O'BERNSTEIN



I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease just before I turned eleven, a time when most people's bodies feel kind of perilous anyway, when shape and the way clothes fit and normality all start to feel disproportionately important. I had a frail adolescent body in persistent physical pain, and I had doctors who didn't know a lot about how to treat it or how to treat it carefully. For most of my life, I couldn't write about it—it felt too grotesque or private—until a flare I had last summer put me in the hospital again. I realized that if I didn't embrace what was happening as though it were a small child, I might not survive the psychological strain of living with chronic illness.

Crohn's disease is one that disrespects the boundaries of the body; the intestines swell, they become scarred and can tear, blockages occur where they shouldn't, passages (tracts/fissures) that aren't meant to be there can even form between organs. I've become curious about the boundaries within relationships and families that may echo these physical processes, as well as how I attempted to escape the horror of an adolescent diagnosis through my relationships with men. As a teenager, I became focused primarily on getting men to fear and desire me. This was a natural overcorrection for the time I'd spent feeling physically ill, underdeveloped, and monstrous. Being desired felt like the antidote to my illness. Several of these poems are set in Greece and Italy during a trip my family and I took less than a year after I was diagnosed. But I went back to Italy in my late teens and twenties and had flares there, so I guess Italy has seen a lot of my sickness, or else my sick body has seen a lot of Italy.

I am affected by Olds, Howe, Glück, Stanford, Levis—the image, the line, the word, the feeling, the family, the injury, the healing—is there healing? I think so. I'm starting to speak about illness. These poems are proof of that happening.

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Bridget O’Bernstein is a poet from Brooklyn and received her MFA in poetry from Syracuse University. Her manuscript *Several American Flowers* won the Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship and is forthcoming. In 2019, she won the Indiana Review Poetry Prize and was a finalist for the Ruth Stone Poetry Prize and the American Literary Review Poetry Prize. Her poems can be found in the *Iowa Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *New Ohio Review*, among others. She is a 2022 MSW candidate and works at an outpatient hematology and oncology practice.