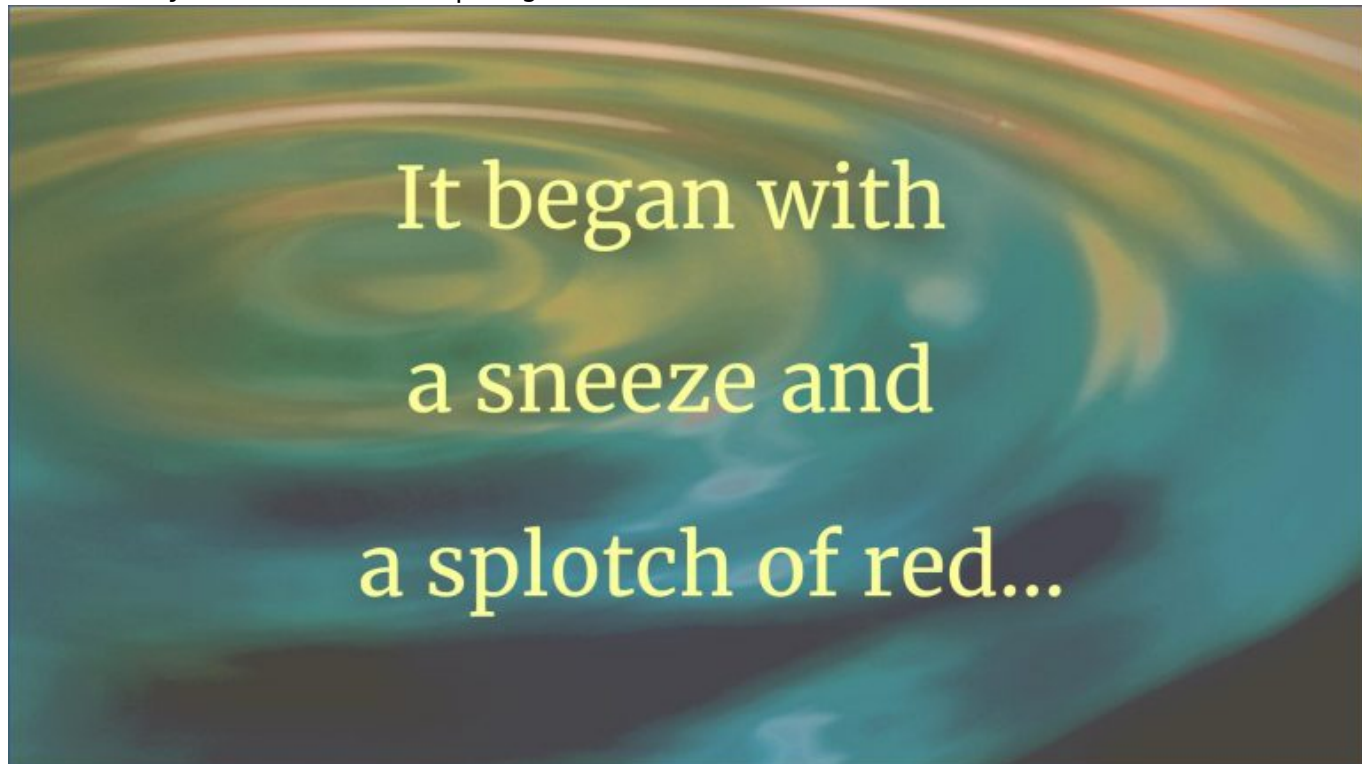


Womb in Waiting

Category: Poems

written by Carol Barrett | August 20, 2021



“Yes, death will make the poem end.” – Danielle Chapman

i History

Fact: my mother had a hysterectomy at age 80.
Fact: she had birthed six children, miscarried one.
Fact: she told us she did not need those parts anymore.
Fact: she was diagnosed with breast cancer at 94.
Fact: her sister was diagnosed at 98.
Fact: my aunt chose a mastectomy, lived to 103.

ii The Sneeze

No dainty kerchief-dabbing punctuation, no,
a plethora of exclamation points discharging
all at once. Afterword, I noticed an oval splotch
of red mixed with urine. Thought I'd burst a capillary:
behold the evidence of allergic violence.

iii Contamination

My doctor gave this diagnosis no credence, ordered
lab work to rule out urinary-tract involvement.
We would take it from there. Three tries.
The first cup, insufficient. The second, contaminating
skin cells obfuscating a reliable reading. The third,

at last, came back negative. I was relieved, *nothing wrong*, returned to my sneeze theory of hemorrhage.

iv Ultrasound

Again the doctor dismissed my breathy reasoning, fifteen years post-menopausal. That bleeding had to be vaginal, she insisted, ordered a uterine sonogram. Perhaps tucked in the folds like a tulip in wet grass, a polyp, cherry bright, burgeoning. The technician did a couple a day, the probe in her hand like a butter knife in a jar of peanut butter. She called it her *wand*, and after gooing it up, went fishing on her river of sound waves, my cervix bruised from her pole. I asked to see the thing when it was over: white plastic, enlarged head, multiple slots to emit sonorous waves, bounce back along the walls of the uterus, round the contours of ovaries, slide back out.

v Results

Two days I waited to hear the news. No lumps, no tumors, but the uterine lining, too thick, too evolved since delivery of my daughter, a patch of weeds, where once a garden, carefully tended, bank clear, smooth, a thin layer of peat.

vi Prep

Next step, she would take a slip, send it off for dyes and assay, enter my waiting womb through the cervix, a pencil-size tool she declined to name. It would be *a little uncomfortable*. Something would soften the closed door, my pain meds to help her through. Someone would need to bring me, take me home. With uterine cancer, the only option, hysterectomy. (*Oh, think of the weight you will lose, my sister says.*) With pre-cancerous cells, we would watch and wait, repeating the ultrasound like the rhythm of menses, to measure endometrial thickness. *There are things we can do*. This is how she avoids helplessness, I think. I do not yet know what to avoid.

vii Biopsy

I have never known such pain.
Like a fast train my screams
tunnel through the clinic.
My doctor: *slow your breathing down*.

No more. No more.

viii Wait

It's like being pregnant. Never quite sure when it will end: with all the research, obstetricians still cannot pinpoint birth. My daughter was six weeks premature. My nephew, twelve. They took in this world from the clear bed of incubators, blankets tucked around them like clamshells, tiny hats on their heads no bigger than hollyhocks. A month or three until they could go home, dishwasher churning like the sea at sunset, away from the constant clamor of ICU, night nurses playing rock music to keep themselves alert. There is no joy in the present waiting. The best that can come – a life of repeat sonograms, the slick wand of medicine deciding my fate.

ix Finale

I cannot ask my mother what it was like, nor my aunt. Nor what it is like, there, fresh cut grass underfoot, their mother calling them in for supper, apron billowing in the salty breeze.