

## Fierce Passage

Darlene Young

Today while researching ancestors, sifting through nested petals  
of records for names that belong to me, people  
who've left their bloody signatures in my genes,

I found Melissa, some sixth great-great of mine, tucked  
into a corner of a census under her husband's name,  
given one word to describe her vocation in life: *invalid*.

Besides her children, that one word is all she left behind.

I've been ill myself for four years—four and a half,  
really, but who's counting?—long enough  
that when I meet someone I wonder whether to tell them.

“You really don't know me,” I could say, “unless  
you know this one thing.” Instead I play  
with being a different person, one who is whole,

in the eyes of strangers, simply a human being, anyone.

After all, four years is hardly any time, not even a fifth of my life,  
is not my life. I don't want to see the lowered eyes, be filed

into that box. But no account of me is complete without  
an accounting of the days, long afternoons  
of people talking in other rooms, people outside

my window. I see them on talk shows where,  
though full of other problems, they have energy enough  
to jump around a stage, screaming. Daytime TV

is weight-loss ads, wrinkle creams, ask Dr. Oz.

Appearance matters. A toothpaste  
can change your life. It's a sin

to assume anything. Those pea-green, seasick days  
tell me this: we know nothing of each other.

We are all moving through some fierce  
defining passage. Everyone has come from somewhere.