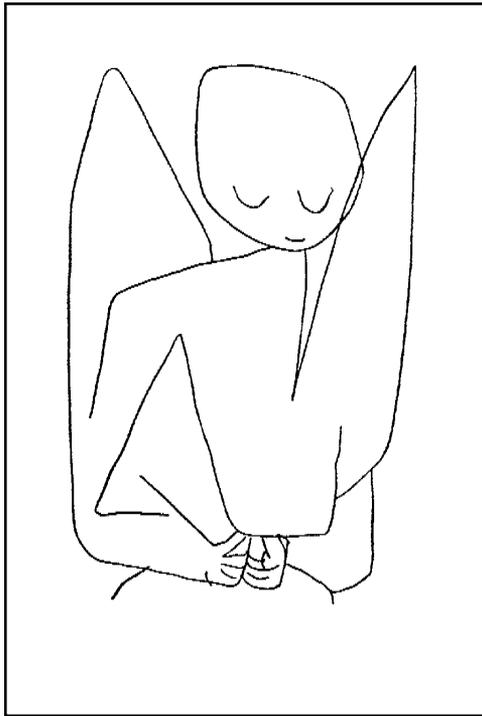


A Small Book on Cancer



*Selected from the Pages of
Poetry East
Edited by Richard Jones*

C A N C E R

“If it were not for hopes, the heart would break.”

—Thomas Fuller

At the Cancer Clinic

She is being helped toward the open door
that leads to the examining rooms
by two young women I take to be her sisters.
Each bends to the weight of an arm
and steps with the straight, tough bearing
of courage. At what must seem to be
a great distance, a nurse holds the door,
smiling and calling encouragement.
How patient she is in the crisp white sails
of her clothes. The sick woman
peers from under her funny knit cap
to watch each foot swing scuffing forward
and take its turn under her weight.
There is no restlessness or impatience
or anger anywhere in sight. Grace
fills the clean mold of this moment
and all the shuffling magazines grow still.

Against Happiness

When the Dalai Lama first heard
the bombs falling on Tibet,
he whispered to a monk,
“They have stolen our silence.”

Today, at the clinic,
again the big radiation machine
whirred above my head.

But later, my doctor,
who is beautiful,
placed her delicate fingers
around my throat,
like so many butterfly wings.

I knew then it was time
to abandon my elaborate theories
of happiness and to be,
instead, the butterfly.

In the Grand Scheme of Things

I only understood
just how grand

when after
your last

painful operation
you'd said it

like usual
with a half-grin

only this time
for my sake

When I Could Eat Again

That first small bite of toast
was acres of wheat, golden

oars clashing against a niagara
of wind. And the spoonful

of applesauce on my tongue was tart
as an orchard that belonged to me,

the bee's honey and the bee's sting.
In the vase beside my bed,

a susurra of blossoms held
to pinkness, soft things,

every one mindful of its cut stem,
drinking that reprieve.

Transformations

Have you sometimes listened
to the steps of your mother
walking around the whole house
during the night,
without putting the lights on,
knowing her way in the dark by heart,
quite quietly,
step by step,
as drop by drop
from a leaking roof?
How she runs her fingers on the walls,
to make out the features
of her passed life,
turned into a house.

Promise

You can bet the farm that after I die
I'll come back to visit in a wren's song,
in autumn's flaming colors, in the first snow
fall of the year. I'll be floating behind
the words of my grandchildren long
after I'm gone. I'll grow
in those tomato plants you place in the sun;
I'll ride on the wings of a sparrow hawk;
I'll stand with you, alone in the basement,
crying
when you're sure your life has begun
to unravel at the seams. Remember this:
talk
to me, I'm there. That voice in your heart,
quietly speaking beneath the flood
of your busy life,
is mine. Listen, you can hear it. Just start.

Contributors

Ted Kooser
“At the Cancer Clinic”
Poetry East #79

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“When to Sing”
Poetry East #80

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“Against Happiness”
Poetry East #60

Mike White
“In the Grand Scheme
of Things”
Poetry East #60

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“When I Could Eat Again”
Poetry East #67

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“Transformations”
Translated from the Bulgarian
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Poetry East #82

David James
“Promise”
Poetry East #66

*At Poetry East,
we believe in words. We
believe poetry is the highest
art. A poem clarifies our deep
humanity, though its grace remains
a mystery. Poems illuminate the world
we live in—a slow dance in the kitchen,
birds in flight, a loved one's death, silence
in an empty room. As you read these
seven poems, we hope you will read
with fresh eyes and full hearts. Poetry
opens a door, inviting you into its
home. Here, come a little closer,
these are for you.*

Artistic Director: A.M. Prentice

