

****Please select a poem by September 13 and email Susan at alkiart@gmail.com the title and author of your selection.****

Read Between the Lines: Collage + Writing Art Show, a collaboration between Cancer Lifeline and the Northwest Collage Society

Members of the Northwest Collage Society will choose from poems submitted by two writing groups with Cancer Lifeline and then create original work inspired by the poem. An artists' opening will feature a wine and cheese reception with poetry readings by the authors. Artwork will be available for sale through Northwest Collage Society.

The show will run from November 21 through January 16 with viewing hours for the public Monday through Thursday from 11:00 am to 3:00 pm. Closed on November 28, December 24, 25, 26, 31 & January 1.

Glenda West

Bristol

Today, Bristol, would have been thirteen.
Who knew that cancer on a rib could
Push so hard on your chest wall that the
Cavity fills with fluid making the expansion
Of your lungs such an exhausting effort that
One would be reluctant to keep doing it.

That last miserable night when no one slept
Willing the breath to continue only to feel
Exposed and selfish in the morning light.
Trying to resolve that today might be the day
Even though it feels like death might be way
Beyond dignity.

Reflecting back to earlier in the week when
It was misdiagnosed as a lump on the lung
That would only require the removal of the
Lower lobe. How did something so simple
Become a death sentence in a few days,
Mere hours and too many minutes to count?

Running through the emotions that snap
Back on me like branches, I embrace the sting.
Push against the density that blinds me and
Emerge once again to "Do the right thing."

The taking of a life!

Glenda West

Burst

This was going to be an easy one
Heart tissue cut by the surgeon's blade
Easily repaired
Not so the jagged tissue
Torn by her tongue
Scattering precious jewels
A starburst pattern
Over their heads
Like fireworks
As the surgeon yelled,
"We have a bleeder!"

Glenda West

Donnelle

When my friend, Donnelle, dropped out of massage school
She offered to loan us her massage table. Stating,
“I don't need to look at this sign of failure any longer.”
The loan stretched out into years and then she died.

And the table became a reminder of her
Just like various other pieces of furniture
And paintings that she bestowed upon us
To keep or move along at our leisure.

The painting of the wilted daisies that hangs
In our living room was only meant to be
A temporary placeholder.

But it was hanging there four years ago
When she died and neither one of us had
The heart to take it down.

We realized that when she passed away
We didn't need to ask for anything to
Remember her by because she was already
Present in practically every room of our home.

We had been living with her all this time and
Never really noticed her presence
Until she was gone.

Glenda West

The Four Seeds

I remember the story of the four seeds.
The one that fell upon the path was a
Rootless, aimless slacker quickly eaten
Up by the world in the form of birds.

The seed that fell on rocky places in
Shallow soil was a burn out soon
Scorched to death by the sun for
Having shallow roots.

The seed that fell among the thorns
Was soon choked to death for keeping
Bad company among his thorny accomplices.

The seed that fell on good soil prospered
One hundred fold and joined the one percent.

I am in search of the fifth seed that fell into soil
Riddled with cancer but made the best of it,
Bore fruit and fed the entire village.

Lee Stelmach

Trauma

When in doubt, scream it out
Shout and holler
Take a shower
Pick a flower
Call a friend
Know it will end.

Judy Sloniker

SNOW

I remember one night when I was a child
walking with my Aunt Helen to visit a friend.

There was snow on the ground and it was
snowing lightly.

The moon was out, lighting our way.

I could hear the scrunch, scrunch
of our booted feet and see the prints
our feet made.

It seemed like a magical night!

Helen McDuffie

What I Know About My Heart

What happens when your heart breaks?
Not so much that you die, but a serious fracture that you're sure will never heal
And when it does, does the scar run deep and ragged?
Do the edges snag and pull so it takes your breath away
And renders it painful to gasp for air?
Does it feel as if it will always be this way?
And then, the edges begin to soften and beat in a rhythm of ease
To allow your spirit to breathe in life once again.

Barbara Chilcote

Years Go By

And my breast is still bandaged,
My arms are still strapped to the table,
in a cold, brightly lit room.
It's the last thing I remember,
until the wake up nurse calls my name
over and over.

Can you tell me where you are, she says?
Can you tell me what happened?
I could, I say,
because I know.
But I don't want to talk about it.

Barbara Chilcote

Eclipse

When we stood on the porch
and watched the blood moon eclipse,
sickness was as far away as the solar system.
Yours, mine, the someday sickness
which will take us with it
into distant galaxies.

Here, with the porch light turned off,
We look up at the sky
unaccustomed to it
because every day we are more aware of our footing,
its unpredictability.
We are now the old couple
who lives in the middle of the block.

Tonight, we look up and see
a glassy moon
shadowed by the earth
as it moves to cover all light
and make the velvet darkness.
But the moon does not bleed.
It holds the night,
and our human concerns
in its fading light.

Below, we are the ones who bleed,
who look up
and know we are small,
far from any sickness,
large in the beauty within us,
luminous as any moon,
steady, as the heart's chant.

Judy Sloniker

Memories of Dad

For some reason, and at almost the last minute, I went into the bedroom and opened the top drawer of his chest, as if I were stealing, took one of the white handkerchiefs that lay there. I sniffed it and it had the familiar smell of the drawer.

Now, at home, I opened my drawer, picked it up and inhaled deeply--the smell of clean cotton, the faint odor of peppermint, the recollection of how everything was arranged neatly--the dark socks in one end, the box of church envelopes in the other, a tie clip and a pair of cuff links in a box, unworn. And I think of how he lived his life--simply, well-ordered disciplined, with love, gentleness, and humor.

Barb Chilcote

My Breast Surgeon

At our first meeting,
she wore a tight leopard print top,
Three inch heels,
Even her hair was intense,
long and wild around her face.

I saw her once
by the hospital elevators.
She had on a black leather jacket
and a Starbuck's cup
in her delicate, capable hand.
She looked like she'd climbed
off a motorcycle,
her hair tossed every which way
as if suddenly released
from a helmet.

By the time of the second surgery
I didn't care what she was wearing.
She held my hand
because I was scared.

She grew on me
like the scar she gave me.
We turned together from a fiery red gash
into the discolored and indefinite blur
of people who have more or less
forgotten each other.

When I notice her scar upon me
I am astonished
to see how we are still so closely bound.
Sisters of the flesh:
she the one who made the cut,
me the one who healed it.

Barbara Chilcote

Things That Will Obliterate Us

Cars, airplanes, accidents,

Knives in dark alleys,
Love, unexpressed.

Operating theaters
with their cold, deliberate light.

White militias,
One too many losses,
Stroke.

A wound which will not heal,
Poverty, our own and others,
Anxiety,
A small infection which spreads.

Hatred.
Cancer.
The nightly news
Moonless nights.

Global warming,
Ignorance,
Delusion,
Tooth decay.

Racheal V King

THE MOON SHE SPEAKS TO ME

At night as I emerge from shelter
My gaze moves to the sky.

Stars winking.
Moon glowing.

The Moon engages me.
The Moon She speaks to me.

My body sways to the cosmic rhythm
I struggle to stay on my feet

My upturned head pulls me backward
I cannot look or turn away.

The Moon She speaks to me
Of love, of quiet happiness.

I am satiated.
I can turn away.

She has spoken.

Racheal V King

The Massage

I very often start to cry
At the beginning of a massage.
It seems the masseuse is
magician
shaman.

Touching just the right spot
not just the release
of muscles knotted
of the twists
of the pebbles ingrained.

But to release the
disappointments
the losses,
the grief
the fears
held captive in my body.

I sometimes sob out loud
face down.
The world
hidden from view
as the specters fly away.

Breathe, she says
Let go.....

And we return to the corporal
For the release of
muscles knotted
twists untwined
the pebbles set free.

Plucking the sinews
taut as guitar strings.
Singing the songs of release.

Helen R. Haladyna

Chasing Phantoms

Colors swirl in kaleidoscopic fashion.
Images emerge; change; then, blur and recede.
Solid forms disintegrate into random multi-colored chips.
Changing scenes tease me; taunt me; then, elude me.
My dreams – – ephemeral mini-movies in my mind.

Judy Sloniker

SEEING YOU

I will see you in the spaces
between hangers in the closet
the space around the dust under the bed
the hiding place behind the cabinet
the closet full of clothes, with only a
crack of light shining in.

I will see you in the moonlight of the
first fallen snow,
your outline in the snow angel in the
back yard.

Yvonne O'Leary

Let The Emotions Fly

I am so lucky. Breast cancer touched me briefly. Since then I've fought so hard to feel only gratitude. I'm not so sure that I have even allowed myself to feel any other emotion around my diagnosis, except fear, which stopped me cold, made me practically unable to function for months.

I don't think that I am trying to forget that I had breast cancer, which would be near impossible since I no longer have my left breast. But I do feel that I need to be positive and grateful. It was only one month from my diagnosis to knowing the mastectomy had removed the cancer. Plus, I did not need any further treatment.

I don't want to feel my mortality so much closer than I've ever felt before. I don't want to cry or rage about what happened because it's over and I am so much more fortunate than others who have received the same dreaded breast cancer diagnosis.

Maybe it's time to feel everything. The rage, the sadness, the fear, and whatever else I have so tightly held in for three years now. Because cancer didn't just touch me, it flipped my life upside down. It made me numb and scared at the same time. It has changed my life in ways that I don't even think about because I feel so lucky.

Yes, I am very fortunate, but I feel a storm of emotions brewing. Maybe it's about damn time I let all that's been bottled up loose and free myself from trying to hold so much at bay.

Mardie Holden

“Things have to fall apart for them to fall together”

This candy wrapper speaks to me today.
My edges are crumbling. My core is melting.
I tread gingerly through fields of loss.
Five deaths in five months.
Each passing leaves a hole in my heart.
I try to wrap a safety net around my living sister
And my friend who has lost cognition.
I want to keep them safe. And whole.
I want to heal my sadness.

Meanwhile, I pull weeds and plant seeds in my garden,
The taking out and putting in is a metaphor.
I talk to the plants, as I talk to my departed friends.
I add compost and water in hope of keeping the garden alive.
I cry and smile over photos, songs, crafts and other treasures,
Grateful for the laughter, adventures, and lessons we shared.
Keeping memories alive.

I realize that each of these friends was an
Exceptional model of creative, authentic living.
They spoke their truths, walked their unique paths unabashedly.
Their inspiration helps pull me back together
So that I, too can live my intended, whole life.

Mardie Holden

Autumn

No matter where your memory goes,
you must notice the sunshine on fallen leaves,
the dew on grass and sparkles on a spider's web,
the fog slowly rising to reveal a blue sky.
The mystery of why the sky is blue
is a question that can engage my mind.
I know I've heard the explanation in times past,
But that was then.

The important time is now.
Right now, I love the briskness of the air,
The elusiveness of the mountains,
the brightness of the sun.
I practice noticing and listening,
so that these pleasures of the moment
will return to my awareness effortlessly,
even if my mind has taken rest.
This is my practice in the autumn of my life.

Mardie Holden

Threads

There is above me an embroidery hoop, loose threads hanging down, holding memories and promises.

Some are knotted around my childhood, the summers on the islands with my favorite toys and friends, or camping at the side of a river where I was “Queen of the Mountain” if I could beat my sisters to the top of a giant rock. The desire to belong to their world.

The childhood threads are pastel. Some pale blue, some tan as the sands, some pink. Those hold the memories of playing house, imagining the family I would nurture one day, living my fantasy life.

The threads representing my young adulthood are knotted many times over, this way and that, winding through college, dating, marriage and dating again. These knots hold rocks and pieces of wood. They represent a bumpy path as well as the grounding and solace of nature.

Threads holding my recent life are intertwined, bright colors, rich textures, strong fibers. Friendships that deepen with each experience and loss. Arthritis, cancer, the passing of people dear to me. These threads are varied in length, but have universal strength and remain attached to my core.

Filmy threads hold my future. In certain lights I can see the shimmer and glow of iridescence, promising that there is a future I now see “through a glass darkly,” but later with clarity. Maybe this embroidery hoop represents the halo that is always mine, even when I’m stumbling through these hazy days.

Writing for the Moment Group Poem

Calibration

Chaos reigns
In this desert rose time of our lives
full of castigation and calibration
bouncing between closing up shop
and not wanting to go gentle into the night...
Or just unaware.

Wondering, how long will this
brilliant red pump keep pulsing?
Is there time for one more full breath,
even if the hematocrit is incompatible with life?
Sixty-five beats per minute
a shy friend who doesn't interrupt.

How can people die when we still have plans?
Sorting memories like possessions into boxes with dividers
Still zest in this old jalopy.
So let us get down on our knees twice a day
to appreciate our heart time,
sixty-five beats per minute
in full symphony.

Inspired by responses to "Heart Time" by Leslie Anne McIlroy

Writing for the Moment Group Poem

The Art of Phlebotomy

Not all who are trained to poke
can hear the music.
They don't allow the dance
of vein and melody
the finesse of setting
needle on a record.
Even a two-step debridement,
like life, requires a gentle confidence.

Every needle should have its voice,
its song,
connecting to the flow of the living.
*Tell me about your veins,
and I can be queen of the record player.*
Big stick or child-sized needle
no slow lane in the skin.
No music lost when the hand is sure,
Let the dance party of life play over and over again.

Inspired by "I Hope My Nurses Remember Playing Records" by Anya Krugovoy Silver

Sylvia Byrne Pollack

Higher Education

When you matriculate into this life,
signing up for courses like *Daughter 101*,
Sister, Wife, Basic Mothering, then
advanced seminars in *Living with Pain*,
Perfecting the Imposter Syndrome, and
Poetry 999, don't expect to get A's in
all of them. A gentlewoman's C is
perfectly respectable: You showed up,
you tried, you persisted. It turns out
it's not about how many trophies or
blue ribbons you take home. At the end
of the day, there's only the seeking,
the courage to ask. Take the received
wisdom out of its shrink-wrapped package,
sprinkle it over your head in a baptism
of sorts. A blessing to know you can only
do what you can do. This much and
no more required. Don't pick a fight
with what is. Reality wins every time.

Janet Hasselblad

When I think about my heart

When I think about my heart, I realize I don't think about it very often. I do think about my kidney. Solo. And I think about my kidneys, all five of them. Each kidney has a story. The two originals story is probably one of fortitude, endurance and struggle. They lost their battle after 16+ years, but they're still a part of me and I feel compassion, not bitterness.

The next kidney was almost 50 when I got it. It had spent all the time previous living inside my mom, and doing very well, thank you. Mom was the first to run to the bathroom when we got home from church, calling dibs before the car had come to a full stop in front of the house. It became part of the family stories. After the transplant we'd joke about who was going to make it to the bathroom faster, she or I, after all, I'd been given a very eager kidney. I'm very proud to have a part of mom inside me. The night before the surgery we held hands across the floor from our white-sheeted beds at Swedish Hospital. I'd arranged to have flowers delivered with a thank you card I'd made for her when she woke up in recovery.

Two and a half years later I felt terrible that her/my kidney didn't last long. I still feel I was partially responsible. But, I did get a lot of mileage out of that kidney. It allowed me to finish college without dialysis, do my Therapeutic Recreation internship in NYC, work at Cascade Meadows summer camp after a five year hiatus, and travel to Great Britain for a month with my British camp friend Tim.

The next kidney was flown to Seattle from Nashville. It was only 19, and seven years younger than I was at the time I got it. I was totally shocked and overwhelmed when Dr. Kelly came to the Northwest Kidney Center to tell me. I'd just had a hysterectomy one week before, another surgery so soon didn't seem like a great idea. Dr. Kelly calmly explained to me that the kidney was a "perfect match." Because it was from Nashville, I told people that I didn't "tinkle," I "tankled." After that transplant, I was free once again. I traveled and camped, had lots of energy and for all intents and purposes was indeed "normal."

The fifth kidney residing in me, came with a liver. When I think about my newest kidney, I think about my liver. In fact, I think about my liver a lot more than my kidney, but don't tell my nephrologist. My poor heart. Not neglected really, but with all the excitement and drama in other parts of my body, it's not an organ I think about as much.

My other heart though – the one that sings, has been broken, and has been resilient from day one, that heart has many stories to tell. Another day.

Janet Hasselblad

Sticks

The first time I put my own needles in I had an audience of 4 or 5 NYC doctors observing from a very close distance. When I'd gotten to the Kidney Center that afternoon one of the nurses cautiously approached me and with an apologetic tone, asked if I would mind if a group of doctors visiting from NY watched while I did my own sticks for the first time by myself.

I hated to disappoint anyone and doctors from NYC, well that's fancy. It seemed like an honor and an opportunity, but added greatly to my anxiety. The doctors said that none of their kidney patients did their own sticks and were impressed that I was willing to do my own at the age of 17.

After thoroughly cleaning the puncture site of my fistula with alco-wipes, the blood pressure cuff was pumped up a few notches to raise the vein for better access. First come the Xylocaine sticks. Just a small prick beneath the skin and a brief stinging injection of the numbing solution. And then, the moment of truth. The nurse by my side was whispering words of reassurance and support into my ear as I grasped the butterfly wings of the needle, its' length an inch and a half and the diameter of a stir stick. With the nurse close by, the world faded away as I concentrated with every fiber of my being.

First, the arterial line, and with the needle angled downward and a firm poke, I broke the skin and slid it horizontally through the vessel toward my heart. My breath had stopped momentarily and before I knew it, the nurse had slipped the tape into place and it was time for the venous stick. I couldn't stop or I might lose my momentum and start thinking too much about what I was doing. The next one, required the same amount of concentration; but like a distance runner with the end in sight, I too was nearing the finish line.

After the second stick was taped, cuff removed, the blood lines unclamped the the blood pump humming, I finally looked up. There to my surprise were the NYC doctors and most of the Kidney Center staff smiling broadly. Then a burst of spontaneous applause.

Janet Hasselblad

Fiftieth Birthday

What is it that keeps us going? Okay, own it, what is it that keeps me going? I remember a long time ago, when my first nephrologist said I probably wouldn't experience complete kidney failure and therefore start on dialysis until I was 50. At the age of 16, 50 was so unfathomable I couldn't comprehend what the misguided, delusional doctor was saying. But I cried anyway. Nine months later, still 16, I was dialyzing 3x/week while my friends and most of the world were not thinking about mortality.

Now, here I am, with 50 in my rear view mirror and 55 coming in a few months, and I'm relieved I never gave up. I'm glad I "soldiered" on in spite of it all. I've loved and lost. I've married and survived that travesty, and then finally married again, yes, fallen in love with a kind soul who takes care of me so well. So well.

What keeps me going is an endless supply of hope and the knowledge that I have already survived what could have been unsurvivable. Now, when the dark veil falls over me and the nights are long and painful, I know, with the deepest knowing possible, that this too shall pass. It has before and it will again. There is hope and belief in the promise of morning. In the dawning of a new day.

What keeps me going? Becoming wiser and letting go of old bad habits and beliefs. That don't serve me anymore. I look forward to getting older, not only because the alternative is very unpleasant, but also because I anticipate that wisdom will multiply and by the time I'm a shriveled purple-wearing crone, they'll wheel me to the top of my own mountain and the youngsters will seek me out for the wisdom I'll dispense for a small fee (because I can.)

Janet Hasselblad

What I Didn't Know

I didn't know the broken parts
that I tried to hide and
pretend weren't there
would be my salvation.

I didn't know that a day would come
when I would stand tall
and not just 'admit' my brokenness
but speak out about it and encourage others through my telling.

Inspiration in the broken places
The cracks that the dandelion breaks through
Its yellow head as bright as the sun
Shining its weediness as proud as any rose.

I tried to hide my hearing impairment
My scars from dialysis and transplants and all the other surgeries.
I tried to keep quiet my fear about dying young
My worry that liver disease would beat me.

But after all – I couldn't,
I couldn't hide any longer.
And as I let the truth out, unwillingly at first
I found strength. Truth set me free.

Yes, I'm different. I've had my struggles
Haven't we all?
Don't we often view our “issues” as mortal flaws? Or even moral flaws.
They aren't.

Who ever promised that life would be without challenges?
No one.
Yet we seem surprised when we encounter them.
Some get more than our fair share – but that's life.

We were also given, by grace, the ability to move through
and then beyond.
Our hearts are strong.
Our minds are strong.
Our souls do know courage.
And today I know that things are exactly as they should be.
Unpredictable.

Cathy Doser

Get Your Affairs In Order

The Doctor stood next to her bed, and spoke
"I'm sorry to tell you this, but you should get your affairs in order."
She had already had the shock of someone telling her,
"You Have Cancer."
And with that came the assumption that the declaration was a Death Sentence.
But now, she had a Doctor telling her that was true. He said that she had anywhere from
24 hours to 5 weeks.
And that hit her. The finality. That he was declaring, with his expert opinion, that she was
about to Die soon.
Not that she hadn't thought of the finality of Life, and its bookend of Death,
It's just that she hadn't thought, at "mid-life" it was about to happen.
And she looked back on her life, the good and the bad, the ups and the downs,
And thought, is that all there is?
And no, damn it, that wasn't all that there was!
She rallied all of her energy, and her chutzpah, and her ornery-ness, and fought back,
Against the death force that was working on her.
And the memories of all of the Loved Ones came back, and that was very powerful,
seeing all that she had done with her life.
And it powered her to keep on fighting.
Seeing all of the people she had in her life, and the relationships she had.
How she had affected all of these people, in a good way.
She knew she wasn't done with that.
She kept of fighting.
And she won.

Cathy Doser

Straight and Thin

I look at my fingers, all straight and thin
And I'm reminded of my Mother's fingers
Of how she had suffered through Rheumatoid Arthritis,
And how rings didn't come off of those fingers
As easy as they once had.
And I'm reminded of the hard life that she had,
Growing up through the Depression and World War II,
And how that had brought about the person she was,
Of the easy kind person she had become
Of the great recipes she had taught me,
Of the love she had shown me,
Of how I should become a Loving, Caring Woman,
Those were the things I remembered when I looked at my fingers

Tracy Peltier

Secret With Five Senses

Over the edge the power meets horizontal
Rainbow smoke wafting the visible sound waves
Hear the continuous thunder in the base plunge
Feel the cold tingle amidst the sun.

Heat blows
the scent of roasting pine needle carpet
precedes the sun through the giant trees.

Notice the taste of warm.
Dust stirred up by my own footsteps.
Breathe as the trees exhale.

Alison Eckels

I am ready for a writing nap

I am ready for a writing nap,
ready to drift above my body,
let words and phrases trickle down
to where I may reach for them later on.
Isn't that how we do our work?
Our nighttime sleep and dreams offer us respite
from our bodies and their limits .
In sleep and dreams we know
how to fly.
We visit possibilities.
We leave behind us the dreams we do not want to visit
in the light of day.
Other adventures outside our bodies
offer us seeds of hope.
We bring back a few screenshots,
some short videos.
We startle with joy when we recognize
these happening in broad daylight.
Sleep is like a garden bed at rest.
Right now I delight in my garden's summer bounty.
Later in the year I will put it to bed
with some kind of cover
and let it rest and dream of spring again.

Alison Eckels

Let go of counting

Let go of counting.
Let counting be
for the stars in the sky – uncountable;
the grains of sand,
the waves of the ocean,
the tall grasses that bend in the wind.
Let me count all the way
to the number One.
We are One.
And we are individual.
We are One
and not the same.
We are One, most of all,
When we know our connection is Love

Alison Eckels

Summer Afternoon

I could stand still for an hour, invite you to stand beside me, and gaze across the lawn next to the Mayhew Parsonage.

We may have just returned from the Town Dock and come up past the Pagoda Tree, or we have arrived at the same place by walking downhill from my mother's house.

We can stand on the sidewalk there on South Water Street and look out at the harbor, hear the music of the rigging slapping the masts of many sailboats.

Right in front of us, and along our walk to this spot there are pink roses cascading over white picket fences.

Salt water close enough for me to inhale its smell, rigging shaping the music in my ears, taste of clean air, again I notice pink roses over a white picket fence, green grass and blue water: I clasp my hands with joy at being here.

Lee Stelmach

ISOLATION

Isolation has become a comfortable second skin.
Alone in bed, no upsets, no surprises
I am in total control. The room is dark while I
watch endless movies.

Don't have to speak to anyone or answer the phone.
I am alone and liking it too much.

No fresh air, no breezes, it's deadening my being.

Late last night, I think if I don't leave the house, I will never get out,
not caring is dangerous.

So I make a plan, I have made so many plans and failed. This time it's critical,
I have to get to the cancer lifeline group for support.
No longer alone, satisfied by sharing, being heard and listening.
There's a new peaceful feeling.

Ileany Fields

How Deep is that Water?

I try to come up for air
But the weights on my feet are there
An overwhelming comfort in the dark deep
I find myself lulled into a breathless sleep

I am jolted awake by a whirlpool of emotion
Which puts my body in motion
I Scissor kick the weights off
And an undercurrent of love carries me off

Ileany Fields

Chinese Acrobat

Walking a tight rope everyday
Some days it requires no thought at all
Perfect balance going about my business

A plate is soon added to the mix
Then a cup and a bowl for the evening meal
Topped with the cat next door

Like a Chinese acrobat
One foot in front of the other in perfect balance

Then I wake up

Haystack Rock
by Richard Strickland June 3 2019

You stood as a monolith strong.
We thought that your life would be long —

A bulwark of solid basalt,
And seeming immune to assault,

The massive rock everyone seeks,
As timeless as mountainous peaks.

And everyone flocked to your side,
Regardless of flood or ebb tide,

Exploding with life all around,
And anchoring us to the ground

To center our wandering hearts
Like gravity, holding all parts.

As kites soar on breezes above,
You lifted our spirits with love.

The Haystack endures to this day.
Not you — cancer took you away.

Disease made your body its host
And left us with only your ghost.

And we all are left wondering why
As we search for your soul in the sky.

We're all here where you came as a child
And we channel your love of the wild.

Here you brought us when you were a dad
And we all were exceedingly glad.

All we see has been stamped with your brand

Like the prints of your feet in wet sand.

Now we're here at the edge of the land,
Where the natural vista is grand.

We all once were a family band,
But we now lonely pinnacles stand.

To the west and the sunset we face.
To the surf and the current we brace.

We must weather the tireless sea
That just nibbles away endlessly

At all things that we try to preserve.
It's not fair, it's not what we deserve.

The wind and the sun and the rain
All work their way into the grain

Of our mineral structure and tear
Our firm bodies apart with their wear.

They open up fissures and cracks;
The elements never relax.

We all try to ignore the foreboding,
But we know that it all is eroding.

While so solid the continent seems,
It's only that way in our dreams.

Someday soon we will never be more
Than just part of the eternal shore.

Yet know nothing is ever destroyed
And oblivion we will avoid.

It's our fate to be one with the beach,
So we never will be out of reach.

Somewhere far in the bowels of Earth,
Feel the rumbling — new mountains at birth.

The solid ground open is torn
And a new generation is born.

And whether a girl or a boy,
Life brings us the gift of new joy.

I wrote this poem to read at a ceremony to scatter the ashes of my late brother-in-law Eric Shields with his widow, 2 daughters, and 2 grandsons at Cannon Beach, Oregon. His parents took him there frequently as a child, and it was one of his favorite places to spend time and take his family as a Dad.

<https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/seattletimes/obituary.aspx?n=eric-robert-shields&pid=190949375>

True Dreaming
Not once. No, not once. Many times.
A familiar script.

Anxiety jars open the door to my dreamscape.
Unbidden, unwelcome, a guest of sorts.
Out of sorts.
A trickle of unease. A frisson of tension. An elevation in pulse.

“Look inward,” she invites.

I gaze inward and see my blood coursing through me. The stuff of life. My
life’s blood.

“Look more closely,” she whispers.

My mouth dries. My stomach tenses. “This can’t be good.” I think.
I gaze more intently, seeking.... seeking...what exactly?

“It’s simple math,” she croons. “Multiplication and division.”

I have never been fond of math.

I see them now. The angular shapes merrily multiplying and dividing.
They are beautifully disturbing...an invasive geometry.
“Not simple math.” I think.

The scene shifts. I am at a doctor’s office, thrumming with trepidation.
The doctor pats my knee in a nauseatingly avuncular fashion and offers
banal reassurance.

“Nothing serious. Hate to give you the bad news, but you are in good
health.”
Smarmy bastard.

Shame awakens.

Unbidden, unwelcome, a familiar companion.
“You are a complainer,” she admonishes. “Weak. Whiny. Overly dramatic.”

Shame and Anxiety are dance partners. Tango queens.

Time passes. I feel unwell.

The scene changes. I am being examined by a group of doctors.

“Blood cancer,” they say. “Advanced cancer,” they say.
“Incurable,” they say. “Treatable,” they say. “We must treat now,” they say.
“No guarantees,” they say. “Could go badly,” they say.
“Stay optimistic,” they say.

I awake sweaty. Heart beating fast. Blood pumping vigorously.
I gradually reorient to my surroundings.
My comfy bed. My husband’s warm body next to me. The weight of the
blankets.
“Just a dream,” I think. “Just a dream.”

In 2017 I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a blood cancer.
I knew as soon as the doctor found enlarged lymph nodes that I had
lymphoma.

“Unlikely anything serious,” they said.
“Indolent lymphoma,” they said. “Fast growing,” they said.
“Incurable,” they said. “Advanced cancer,” they said. “Treatable,” they said.
“Be grateful,” they said. “Could be a lot worse,” they said. “Easy
treatment,” they said.
“Watch and Wait,” they said. “Treat now,” they said.
“Long and reliable remissions,” they said. “Unreliable remissions,” they
said.

A trickle of unease, a river of disease. Uncertainty and contradiction,
malignant multiplication and division no longer restricted to my
dreamscapes.

“True dreaming,” my shaman friend said.

“Not the dream I would have chosen.” I said.
She smiled and hugged me.

It is 2019. I am in remission.
My treatment was not easy, and I experienced unforeseen and very
challenging complications.

I was sick nearly a year.
I still fatigue easily.
I have been assured that at some point my cancer will return.

Anxiety and Shame still visit me.
I try to honor their truth and treat them kindly.
I am weary of battle metaphors.

Inner-Authority, Compassion, Gratitude, Humor, Creativity.
These are my most beloved medicine women.

Healing, I have discovered, is indeed a journey.
A journey of self-discovery and recovery.

Who knew, for instance, that I was a true dreamer?

Marrow
Richard Strickland

Neanderthals would break the bones
Of animals they killed
And suck out all the juices from
The crevices they filled.

Marrow's where the blood is born
And it can go awry,
Start cranking out defective cells
Don't know the reason why.

I love you marrow, don't you see—
So why did you betray?
Whatever did I do to you?
Whatever did I say?

They say that radiation can
Cause you to make mistakes.
Your DNA gets all messed up,
The Double Helix breaks.

I need you, marrow, and I know
The chemicals they used
Caused you distress, they wiped you out—
No doubt you feel abused.

Fight back, my marrow, soldier on!
You know you both have wealth
And strength to draw upon while we
Restore you back to health.

Somewhere there inside my leg,
And also in my arm,
You're growing back to normal now
And saving me from harm.

An Ode to Dr. Press
Richard Strickland
March 2018

He'd burst into the room,
With energy he'd zoom—
A full-sized man of power,
Career fully in flower.

A top doc in the nation,
A cause for celebration.
If he can't make you well,
There's nothing left to tell.

Let me give him a plug:
He gave the magic drug.
He broke the evil spell
That was my deathly knell.

He always was on time,
His manner was sublime.
He always was my friend
Right to the very end.

Nobody worked so hard
Blood cancer to discard.
He worked like twenty men.
He reached his peak and then—

Befell the dreaded blight,
And he was forced to fight
Into the cancer ward.
As lived, died by the sword.

A tumor in his brain—
It must have caused such pain!
His doctors tried to treat,
But all led to defeat.

As I was up about,

He was emptied out.
It's easy to opine
He gave his life for mine—

And those of many more
Who had slow death in store.
Our lives had greater length
As he was sapped of strength.

We met before he passed,
So very near the last
Time he could take a swim—
That man was barely him.

He wandered in the lane,
Not sure he knew my name.
But he was kicking on
Till energy was gone.

If life on Earth were fair.
Instead of losing hair,
He'd carry on apace,
And I'd die in his place.

He made me fully free,
He made the cancer flee.
How can I him repay?
I write this ode today.

Dr. Oliver Press (University of Washington Medical Center, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Seattle Cancer Care Alliance) was a social friend, a fellow lap-swimmer whom I got to know at the local public pool. When I was diagnosed with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia and it came time to be treated by chemotherapy, “Ollie” was assigned as my oncologist. I have been in full remission for four years. Dr. Press died of a form of brain cancer in September, 2017. I saw him for the last time at the pool in June 2017. I live with the irony that the man who arrested my cancer died of cancer himself.

<https://www.fredhutch.org/en/news/center-news/2017/10/oliver-press->

obituary.html

<http://www.aacr.org/Membership/Pages/press-oliver-obituary.aspx#.WrmTI2bMwWq>

War

The toxic cure struggles to separate my parasitic growth from my host vessel. One poison attempting to mitigate the other with no antidote in sight. My body the battlefield for the civil war that rages inside of me. There will be the taking of no prisoners. Where flesh upon flesh kills it's own in an attempt to seek survival. With survivor's guilt as the only victory to all that has been spoiled by the taking up of arms against one's self.

—Glenda West

Dear Body
Janice Holkup
2018.12.14

Dear Body,
You are how I know myself
Who I am.
But I am more
than the physical—
or am I?

I can reflect on you
and experience you.
Am I only you?

I know as you change
I change.

Body chemistry is an
amazing feature/power you possess.
My feelings and perceptions/reflections
are strongly influenced/controlled?
by hormones.

You are both my inside
and my outside.

Today and yesterday
I look in the mirror,
sometimes shocked
by who/what I see.

Who is the older woman
I see in the mirror—
not me yet me?

I see other older people—
then when I look in the mirror
I see them in myself.

When you breath your last
breath, the breath of life/-
my life?
Who/what/where will I be?

Who I was
is not who I am
or who I will be.

My Chemotherapy
Richard Strickland

I have a cancer of the blood
Leukemia by name.
The test came back and like a thud
My life was not the same.

Leukemic cells don't function right,
They just get in the way.
They multiply just like a blight
And healthy cells can't stay.

The major drugs that docs inject
to treat my malady
Are intravenous and connect
To work inside of me.

The biggest job was done by three—
I took them all together.
I had big tubes stick out of me.
It seemed to last forever.

This whole procedure brings to mind
The spider and the fly:
Long bouts of meds are all aligned,
You take them, or you die.

The first was called Rituximab.
It takes your white blood cells,
And like epoxy makes a grab
To glue them into gels.

Rituxin is another name
This magic drug is called.
The blood effect is just the same,
White cells are quickly balled

Like popcorn treats in sticky clumps
And flushed into your pee.
The problem is they cause some bumps
When reaching your kidney.

So that is why a drug comes next
Called Allopurinol.
This drug keeps you from being vexed

By filling up with gall.

My kidneys were contented then,
But I broke out in hives.
I hope it won't occur again
If I should have nine lives.

The clumping cells can also give
You fever and a chill.
To head that off and help you live,
You take another pill.

This one is a common one
You know as Benadryl.
Of many pills under the sun
This one won't make you ill.

Just drowsy, which is just as well—
You have a lot to deal
With while you go through chemo hell,
So sleep has its appeal.

With Benadryl there is a friend,
Another simple med—
It's Tylenol the nurses send
To ease your pain in bed.

That brings us to the second drug
Leukemias require
Fludarabine in a big slug
Will light your blood on fire.

It slows the growth of cancer cells—
Eventually they're dead.
But as they die your body swells—
Good thing that you're in bed.

Fludarabine is not enough,
They've got to give you more.
Just when you think you're really tough,
More drugs come through the door.

The next is Cyclophosphamide,
Or Cytosan for short.
By now you know to just abide,
It's too late to abort.

It kills all cells as they divide—
Cancer cells grow faster.
Leukemic cells may try to hide;
For them it's a disaster.

And this one makes your hair fall out
In clumps upon the floor.
You wear a cap to go about—
A look that you abhor.

Nausea comes with this too,
But luckily you can
Make the symptoms mostly shoo
With pills they call Zofran.

And just in case the Zofran fails,
There is scopolamine.
And if as yet your body ails,
Why not try compazine?

But drugs can't really make you whole,
Your body will rebel.
Your friend will be the toilet bowl
In nauseated hell.

And if anxiety should strike,
There's always Ativan.
If pressure in my blood would spike,
I'd down it like a man.

There's one last drug that I would take—
Some call it Mary Jane.
It offered me a mental break
When I was in such pain.

What was it like to go through this?
I wish that I could speak.
But I was out, and I would miss
The most part of a week.

When I awoke, I'd lost ten pounds
And had no appetite.
And mental fog like baying hounds
Pursued me in my fright.

The second week about the same,
The third held some relief,
And by the time the fourth week came,
I'd tolerate some beef.

The cycle came around again—
I went through it six times,
Like deja vu reminded when
I make these silly rhymes.

I really loved each chemo day
Just as I love my wife.
And just like her I have to say
It really saved my life.

Together all these drugs are now
Called chemotherapy.
Someday soon (I don't know how)
We hope that we will see

No toxic side effects because
Immunotherapy
Will engineer our body's buzz
Through genes to set us free.

When that day comes we'll celebrate
Our victory over cancer.
The feast and music will be great
And I will be a dancer.

