

Of Old Age, In Our Sleep

Although there is no God, let us not leave off praying;
for words in solemn order may yet prove to be a charm.
Sickness swarms around us, scheming harm,
plotting our ruin behind our back.
Let us pray we may escape attack.

We do not fear to die, to ebb away.
What we fear is endless days
of torture,
forced intimacy
with a body that is not our own;
carnal knowledge
of our cunning abuser, our disease,
who fears no medicine
and hears no pleas.

Let us not leave off praying.
Let us keep our dream close to our heart:
that life is too high-principled
to linger when it should depart.

Yes, let us not leave off praying.
Not for God our soul to keep
but just to die, of old age, in our sleep.

Old Bird, Not Very Well

By the side of the road she stands:
old bird, not very well.
Will she cross? – Yes, perhaps,
in a bit, when the tiredness
passes.

I walk as if on eggshell,
to delay the flit of her wings.
But closer by, step by step, then eye to eye,
I see there will be no such thing.
This bird is waiting
patiently to die.

I am in awe of seeing a bird like this,
standing upright *in extremis*.
We think of birds in two states only:
dead already; death-defying.
Feathered carnage, or still flying.
Finding her, I know I've stumbled
on a moment in a million:
a moment even ornithologists
may never witness:
an old bird, on the point of dying.
Humbled, I intrude on her distress,
her mute, attentive helplessness.

I sit with her a while,
a hundred times her size.
My shoe-heel comes to rest
inches from her breathing breast.

My shadow lassos her personal space:
all that remains of her domain.
Yesterday, the unbounded sky; today
only a fringe of dirt
for massive cars to pass.
One loose feather, scarcely bigger than her eye,
flaps, passive, as they rustle by.
She keeps eerily still,
on the very edge
of no longer being a sparrow.
On the brink
of no longer thinking
birdy thoughts.

Lucky

In late '88, not knowing how lucky I was,
I met a woman who would die of cancer.
I looked into her eyes, and did not see
the dark blood that would fill them when
the platelets were all spent.
All I saw was hazel irises, keen intelligence,
a lick of mascara on the lashes she would lose.
I thrilled to the laugh that pain would quell,
admired the slender neck before it swelled,
and, when she gave herself to me,
I laid my cheek against a cleavage
not yet scarred by venous catheters.
Tenderly I stroked the hair
which was, at that stage, still her own.
I spread her legs, put weight upon her ribcage,
without a worry this might break her bones.
I'd gaze, enchanted, at her naked back, the locus
for the biopsies to come.
Hurrying to meet her in the street,
I'd smile with simple pleasure just to glimpse
my darling who would gladly swallow
pesticide for her future drug regime.
I ran the last few steps to hug her,
squeezing her arms, laying on the pressure,
innocent of the bruises
this might inflict one day.
Hand in hand we walked, and I was proud
to have this destined cancer victim by my side.
I kissed her mouth and tasted only
sweet, untainted Yes.

She was lucky too, back then in '88.
As long as she would live, she loved my body,
ignorant of what it held, and what it holds
in store for me. The skin she fondled
took pity, withheld from her its vilest secrets,
withholds them still (for now),
maintains the smooth façade
on which, on our first night, she shyly laid
her palms, her lips, her breast, her brow.

[indecipherable] kappa

The best doctor in our area
went into the woods one day
and blew his head off.

We were never told
why he did it; his funeral
was in a church, and the papers
were discreet.

A ginger-haired bear of a man,
all Scottish brawn and whiskers,
he liked you. He liked you a lot.
I think he was a little in love with you,
as so many men were.

There was a twinkle in his eye
when he'd bare your thigh
for the pethidine shot
in those halcyon days when migraine
was your big disease.

I wish his rendezvous with you
had pleased him even more.
I wish his ardour had been more profound.
I wish he'd stuck around to be the one
who diagnosed you.

I somehow doubt he would have sent
you home from the local clinic
clutching a scrap of paper scrawled with
[indecipherable] kappa,
immunoglobulin [spelling error],
and a tip to go to Google and explore
what 'multiple myeloma' meant.

We followed that prescription
to the letter, sick with terror.
The words, as far as we could tell,
meant death, in agony, and soon.
Which just goes to show
it matters who one's doctor is
on a given afternoon,
and that the best doctor in our area
should perhaps have been on better
medication.

Tests

You tell your children
you're having some tests.
They're familiar with tests.

You tell them
you're having examinations.
They understand examinations.

You say
you're waiting on results.
They know about results.

You are having tests, examinations, waiting
for results, for a piece of paper stating
how you fared.

You're under pressure not to fail.
You are studying survival.
You are ill-prepared.

His Hands Were Shaking

His hands were shaking.
The haematologist
who lifted up your dress
and took the sample from your spine.
Also, he blinks too often.
You want to tell him: Look, this blinking
isn't helping. Either close your eyes
or keep them open.
It would be nice to think
his tremble was distress
at causing pain to one
so beautiful and in her prime,
and not from drink.

In time, when these appointments grow routine,
you'll pray the secretarial roulette
assigns you to a different member of the team.
In time, the trembling blinker will retire,
vanish unannounced and overnight,
and you will never have to sit him down
and say, Hey, listen, I've been thinking
about the shaking and the blinking,
and maybe you and I
are just not right
for each other.

Contraindications

You may experience
necrosis of the jaw, the collapse
of your spine, the disintegration
of your skeleton, ruptures
in the brain, cardiac arrest,
ulcers in the guts, haemorrhaging
sores, embolisms, cataracts . . .

But let's not jump the gun. Relax.
It may never happen!
The following are far more common:
moon face, vomiting, exhaustion,
puffy ankles, night sweats,
rashes, diarrhoea, going bald,
fluid retention, abdominal distension,
'moderate discomfort' (also known as 'pain'),
extremes of hot and cold,
prematurely growing old,
other gripes too numerous to mention.

You may also, if you're vigilant, detect
psychiatric side-effects.
A mood diary may be beneficial.
At certain stages of the cycle
you may find yourself getting tearful
for no apparent reason.

Change Of Life

In our former lives, B.C.,
all sorts of issues seemed to matter –
like minor wastes of money, and a scarcity
of storage space.
Never the canniest shopper,
you'd managed to amass
at least two hundred menstrual pads –
and you were fifty-two.
We did the maths, and made a bet
on whether you would ever get
through all those pricey towelettes.

Now, at fifty-three,
you've started chemotherapy,
and this, in turn, has caused
a swift, ferocious menopause,
or, as our forebears might have said:
'the change of life'.

Suddenly, it's over: the love affair
you once maintained with turtle necks,
mock polo necks, artful layers,
blouses, tailored outfits, fancy collars . . .
Your chest needs air.
A dozen times a day, you grab
the V-necks of your newly-purchased tops
and pull them down, revealing your brassiere.
Panting, you expose your mottled, sweaty flesh.
Our banter shifts: a different tease.
You shameless exhibitionist!

You floozy! Just as well I don't require
a wife who keeps herself demure.
In fact, if you're so hot, my dear,
why not remove the lot?

You stretch beneath me, sexy still,
your clothes cast down next to the drawers
where those superfluous pads are stashed.
We take our time. An hour or more.
Halfway, you briefly, indiscreetly pause
to take a pill.

Prints

Like a pet that comes in wet and muddy,
fur matted with adventure, you return,
bright-eyed and wild, from your nocturnal jaunt.
'Load the pictures in,' you say,
handing me your camera, cold as frost.
You've been haunting Invergordon's shore,
photographing the rigs at Nigg.
I slot the memory card into a USB.
(Your work's all digital now, and done at home.
At hefty cost, you print your own giclées.
You can't be arsed with darkrooms or with labs.
Your trusty Topcon's in a cardboard box somewhere;
You've thrown your dusty chemicals away.)
'Call me when they're in,' you say, and scoot
to the kitchen, footmarks trailing from your boots.

The images are blurry. They were bound to be –
hand-held, no tripod, in the wuthering night.
That's how you want it. Twenty years ago,
you travelled with a swag of gear
and strove to get exposures right.
Now you're chasing arcs of feral light,
smears and shadows, eerie and mysterious.
You're ready to evolve. You're getting serious.

Onscreen, umpteen skies and oil rigs manifest
before us as you sip your drink. You note
the ones that might be worth the paper and the ink.

Then you begin to print. Most likely until dawn.
In your world, Art is never virtual.
It's physical, a thing; it can be held,
you are compelled to make it real.
By morning, there'll be rejects cluttering the floor
and you will ask me which, of several contenders,
is ideal. We'll be agreed. This is 'the one'.
The one which, when you're gone, will bear the seal
of your approval.

If someone, passing by, observed us chatting,
they'd think we're making no big deal of this.
A few prints shifted to one side, an omelette, a kiss.

Right There On The Floor

In our twenty-six years together,
we did some mighty intimate stuff.
But I don't believe we ever
pushed it further than the time
you sat stripped to the waist
on a chair in our bedroom,
me standing behind you
with scissors in my hand,
you looking straight ahead
at the Edinburgh rooftops
saying 'Do it. Just do it.'
And those locks of limp dark hair
that still remained, plastered
to your pale and chemo-blasted skull –
I took them in my fingers, lifted them,
and meticulously
de-sexed you.

Remission

You have achieved zero.

We celebrate with a lunchtime special
at the Thai, on the way home from the hospital.

You order Tom Kha Gai because
your red cell distribution width
is now 15 (as near to normal
as makes no difference).

You choose the crispy fish because
your lymphocytes are 1.6.

The waitress pours your jasmine tea
because your neutrophils are 3.

We pay extra for some greens
because your glomerular filtration rate
is more than 60 ml per minute
(admittedly an estimate).

We share banana fritters because
your albumin is 40 grams per litre.

Brand new hair – ink-black and curly –
springs forth because your creatinine
stands at 69 micromoles.

After dessert, we order coffee.

Let everything settle.

Your paraproteins
are immeasurably small.

You have achieved zero.

Which is to say, the cancer in your marrow
is now so shrunken and discreet
that numbers cannot quantify it.

When it's time to pay,
the waitress brings her gadget,
looks ostentatiously away
as you press the secret buttons.
She tears off the sales receipt,
'For Your Records'. Absent-minded,
you add it to the mulch in your handbag,
too busy re-reading your biochemistry,
coffee stone-cold as you meditate
on phosphates, gamma-glutamyl transferase,
magnesium, calcium, sodium, potassium,
and that momentous zero,
that conditional nothing,
which, after months of eating poison,
you have achieved.