
POETRY | SPRING 2017

Love Compounded

By Mary Oak

I.

Her first doctor gave synthetic hormones to arrest bone loss of aging, then her second doctor terminated such ‘therapy’ too late, when a biopsy revealed a direct correlation between HRT and the strain of breast cancer taking over her cells. But etiology aside, it was caught in early stages, thanks to SBE: Self-Breast Exam.

Then her third doctor: the oncology surgeon, amputated, my mother said she didn’t mind losing a breast, “I have no need of it.” I wondered where her breast went and how it felt to be lopsided so.

But we didn’t speak of such things, only how she’d chosen not to wear a prosthetic breast and how effective newly discovered tamoxifen was supposed to be. The pioneer drug based on the chemical composition of Yew trees, like the two that grew as hedges on either side of the front walk of our Mt. Airy home where I was mostly raised without her. Squishy red berries. Poison, beware.

II.

Five years later her bones became the new site. Still breast cancer but without the breast, taking root at the skeletal level: vertebrae, sacrum, femur now spreading to her scalp. Not boils but estrogen-positive cankers erupting in a myriad of metastases.

III.

Within six months my Amazon mom shrunk frail to crone, fragile-petite, always heavy, robust flesh dwindled down to wisp. Gone as well: the weight of grudges that burdened me for decades. Scars of neglect dissolved in arriving at essence. Complexities simplified, lessened and shed. Thwarted before, Love compounded in the light of her leaving for good.

IV

Her fourth doctor prescribed infusions to kill off errant cells. Another miracle drug, we were told. A “Mediport” shunt inserted above her heart made this weekly procedure easier - a whole day’s air journey away from me, she drove to her treatments an hour each way by herself, proud to be mobile, to find the shortcuts en route, even though she had difficulty walking.

Of the cancer clinic, she spoke only about how other patients there were “so much worse off than me.”

V

Oh, but she was just one crab-infested in our carcinogenic world,
where cells mutate, spread, proliferate -- mimicking civilization's sprawl
taking,

 taking over,
overtaking
Earth's body.

She was just one of a multitude in the battle, surrendering
to inevitable unbecoming, beyond any doctor's reach.

No magic, no cure, only soothing ways to cross the illuminated threshold
lifting out of suffering's sear, lifting beyond struggle to another sphere.

Mary Oak is author of “Heart’s Oratorio: One Woman’s Journey through Love, Death and Modern Medicine” (Goldenstone Press). She teaches creative writing and works as a writing guide in Seattle. She holds degrees in Mythopoetics and Sacred Ecology and a MFA in Creative Writing.

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