

Limited Warranty

poems by

Judith Strasser

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Judith Strasser was the author of a memoir, *Black Eye: Escaping a Marriage, Writing a Life* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004) and two poetry collections, *Sand Island Succession: Poems of the Apostles* (Parallel Press, 2002) and *The Reason/Unreason Project*, which won the Lewis-Clark Press Expedition Award in 2006. Her non-fiction book, *Facing Fear: Meditations on Cancer and Politics, Courage and Hope* was published by Borderland Books in the spring of 2009. *Limited Warranty*, her final collection of poems, is posted here on her website on July 2009. Readers may download copies for personal use and post or reprint poems, with attribution, for non-commercial uses. (Literary executors, for commercial permissions: Robin Chapman & Jesse Lee Kercheval).

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I

Moth

I found it, dead, on the living room floor,
not, I think, killed by the cat because
it hadn't been mauled: its furry antennae,
intact, like delicate anthers; thready legs
tucked under four parchment wings.
It's a plain moth, back crossed only by wavery
lines like brown strokes inked by an elderly hand.
But I thought it might be a poem, so I took it
into the dining room and left it on the table.
It stayed there for days because it didn't speak to me,
yet how could I throw it out? It was too perfect
to toss in the kitchen trash; too fragile
for compost; too small for a funeral.

This morning, with company coming
to welcome the Jewish New Year, I clear the table
and carry the moth to my bedroom, cupped
in the palm of my hand. I set it on the white sheet.
It will be there after dinner, and later,
after *shul*, when I'm tired and want
to pull back the sheet, it will still be there,
like the the new year, delicate, small, intact.

I cannot imagine how we will negotiate night.

II

On Subsistence

“We’ll turn you into a carnivore yet,”
the hematologist grins, and I grin back
although what I’m thinking is how I got sick
after the sirloin my parents bought
for my tenth birthday dinner treat, and how
I’ve shunned steak for the past 50 years.

Also, how I’m re-visiting fat since the surgeon
prescribed “the Haagen-Daz diet” just before
cutting out most of my stomach, the tumor,
and eight lymph nodes. I’ve already lost
twenty pounds. And how I’m surprised
to get so little pleasure from eating whatever
I want, all the cheese, butter, cream, the donuts
I denied myself all those decades
of fending off pounds and arterial plaque.

Now the doctors fret about anemia,
and whether I’m wasting away. I stop
at the store after my clinic appointment,
stock up on Boursin, roast beef, a pint
of half-and-half, and hope--and hope that
one day some doc will look at my labs
and read me the heart attack riot act.

Badlands

i

Mudstone siltstone soft
eroded crumble of pinnacle
spire rill mounds of sulfur yellow
sunset blue no place to plow
or land a plane for all practical
purposes *bad* (though
used for target practice
during World War Two)

ii

The Cessna's single prop
strained west against
prevailing winds fuel low
and dropping--
airborne all the way
from Dayton Peering out
the window ten-thousand feet
down to corrugated landscape:
no apparent progress Worry
silenced the pilot Low sun
cast our shadow east Rapid City
not yet bright on the horizon

iii

And here I am again chemo
looming stomach mostly gone
tumor sown in a radiation field
over two decades ago

the price of raising my sons
writing a book feeling the cello vibrate
against my skin my heart

Mudstone siltstone unexploded ordnance
on the Badlands Bombing Range crumbling
mounds the softest the most
beautiful blues

Consolation

Three cheers for the drugs that made me ill,
that forced me onto my knees, retching, years
before the invention of the anti-nausea pill.
Hoorah for the drugs that meant I could mother
my two small boys, that gave me eyes to see my death,
strength to claim a life. Kudos for the killer
rays: combined with mustard gas, vincristine,
steroids, they gave me twenty-four years,

and if they induced the tumor that claimed
three-fourths of my stomach, what a small price
to pay. And whatever destroyed my libido,
drugs or radiation: hosannas to all that, too,
that granted freedom to do just as I please
whenever I wish, regardless of any *you*.

Life List

It was such a little thing, biking the lakeshore path,
only a mile or two but the long way back
from work: ten extra minutes, shade, rich aroma
of earth and algae instead of exhaust and sun-baked streets,
and then you'd be home, heating burritos for supper,
thrust into the swirl of homework and soccer practice,
hoping to have whatever your sons might need.

But that was hundreds of miles ago.
They're grown men, and you haven't worked
since the twentieth century, time receding
so fast, soon it will be mythic
like the medieval castle in England,
crenellated turrets, moat and drawbridge,
just like the ones in books you read
when you were nine or ten. That castle!
It was on your life list (you suddenly knew
you had one). Seeing it took you
one more step toward a happy death.

Today, after the second cancer, biking home
from the library, waves eroding the shore,
driven by some past storm, air redolent
of damp earth and algae, recalling those boys,
the job, that castle--you didn't know until you arrived
you thought you'd never bike this way again.

Fast Passage

for Klara Fenyo Bahcall

Practicing eighth notes, slowly
at first, varying rhythms, changing
the accented beat, fingers forever
pressing the same two cello strings,
muscles repeating the pattern,
neurons establishing memory
somewhere deep in the brain,
I think of my son at eighteen
who asked if I'd noticed how time
speeded up. Yes, I said. If you
think it's fast now, just you wait.

The composer calls for the tempo,
set by the first violin. And even
a *largo* yields to *accelerando*'s
demand. I feel now the weeks
as eighth notes, the days as less
than sixteenths. All you can do
is make time to play. Remember
to breathe. Take pleasure
in practice. Find friendship
in minutes, laughter in seconds,
music at whatever speed.

Head Transplant

the old one dangles vertebrae
 assorted arteries
 veins but bloodless

she cradles it in her arms
 turns it
 this way that

curious holds it until
 the nurse decides
 she's looked at it enough

she's in a hospital bed but
 they severed
 the head somewhere else

LA perhaps gimcrack stucco walls
 slab-of-concrete stairs
 swaying with every step

in the woods string quartets
 a week of not-quite-
 playing the notes

sitting straight-backed trying to
 breathe to keep
 the bow moving

skipping eighth notes
 losing the beat
 finding it by the lake

no way to know
 what the new head knows
 the dream mostly gone

just the head the nurse the white-sheeted bed
 the moving bow
 a sustained singing tone

whoever wants that old head
 can have it

Limited Warranty

The morning I dream the oncologist tells me
the cancer has spread
and I ask him *how much time do I have*
the friend-of-a-friend who's agreed
to drive me out of Yosemite, down to the airport,
CT scan, six-month oncology check-up,
visits our campsite to tell us plans have changed.

Two nights ago, she fell asleep at the wheel,
lost control of her car. It careened across
the mountain road--the knife-edge of a ridge--and
down the other side, rolled once or twice
until it was stopped by a Douglas fir.
It landed on the passenger side
(no passenger--at the last moment, her husband

decided to stay home). She climbed out
the driver's window and crawled up forty feet
to the road, flagged down a passing car.
She scratched her leg on the way, she has
a few bruises, otherwise she's fine. But her Subaru
is totaled, and I'll have to take the bus and train
as well as a plane to get to the clinic on time.

I want to write all this down, it seems so ironic,
such a lesson in life and death, but we're
above 8,000 feet, blue-green Tenaya Lake surrounded
by granite and fir, cool breeze scented with pine,
this breathtaking beautiful world, and the only paper
I find is a scrap that came with my friend's
new rubber boat: the back of the limited warranty.

Guinea Pigs

The oncologist calls to offer
the one slot left
in a chemotherapy trial

Hospital nights no hair
no guarantee maybe a chance
for more months

I remember Mel's pets
long-haired lively
eager to play

their high-pitched, excited cry
weep weep

Last Poem

Some day I will write
the last poem I ever write.
This is not that poem.
This is the poem about
last weekend's bike ride
on the Capital City Trail.
It was mid-September,
a beautiful blue-sky day
and balmy--warm enough
for my thinnest V-neck tee,
breezy so my sweat dried
right away. Cornstalks
whispered in the fields.
The trees had not yet turned.
All the yellow flowers glowed.
I'd had my second chemo treatment
but I felt perfectly well.
Ten miles into the ride,
above the Public Hunting Grounds,
we crested the steepest hill.
Black walnuts and fallen, split
apples littered the asphalt,
stained the trail-turned-
obstacle course. We steered
carefully past them and coasted
down to the shady glen.

Misfortune

When you eat in a restaurant
check out the clientele.
Someone there has cancer.
That's statistics for you.

In the oncology clinic
it's sometimes hard to know
who's waiting for treatment,
who's the grieving spouse.

The woman who swam/biked/ran
the triathlon in May
didn't have a clue
she'd be dead by Labor Day.

A miserable prognosis
isn't your bad luck.
Sooner or later
it's everybody's fate.

The minute you start chemo
people want to help.
They love you.
They're worried.

If you don't act like a patient
can they believe they're well?

The Woman I Almost Killed

was in the pedestrian walk
crossing from my left
and I was about to turn right
on red, and watching for cars
and whether because I was late

or something to do with the steroids
of my third chemotherapy treatment
I only caught sight of her
after I stepped on the gas.
I braked. Stopped. Inches

to spare. She shot me a look.
She was decades younger than I,
healthy, out for her daily
power walk. What can I say?
Just that we're both still here.

I Want to See How It All Turns Out

Not so much the war-- I believe
there will always be war--
or how many years before
palm trees thrive in Wisconsin
or even whether reality ever
becomes, once more, distinct
from the workings of our minds--

but will my sons vote
confidence in the future
and have children of their own,
and will they follow
the Jewish tradition
of honoring the dead
by giving one of those children
my name.

III

Day of Atonement

*B'rosh hashonah yikateyvun,
u-v'yom tzom kippur yechateymun....*

On Rosh Hashonah it is written,
on Yom Kippur it is decided
Who shall pass away in a timely end
and whose life shall be interrupted...

i

The last fall of her life
I took her to the countryside.
I've never seen the trees more beautiful
she said, and then again--her memory gone--
I've never seen the trees more beautiful.

We drove past blazing sumac, copper beech,
golden ash, maples a brilliant crown
against October's blue. *I've never seen*
the trees more beautiful. Tiresome refrain.

I parked in front of the neighbor's oaks,
crimson on the path to brittle brown.
Surely, I insisted, in more than eighty years
you have seen trees like these. She bent her head,
lost as though in thought. *I've never seen the trees*
more beautiful, she said again.

ii

The Days of Awe bloom warm and colorful
this year: impatiens flourish still, and zinnias;
roses in perfect form. Pewter storms
excite the sun-streaked autumn sky.

B'rosh hashonah, we chant
as the gates of heaven close
and somewhere it is written
who will live and who will die.

I scavenge pockets for crumpled tissue,
run my fingers through my hair.
It falls out in handfuls,
strands of silver, strands of brown.

Tomorrow I will shave my head,
drive home past the neighbor's crimson oaks.

I have never seen the trees more beautiful.

Night Storm

the mind after death I imagine
dark a void
we know before we are born

although it could be
that flash behind closed eyes
so brilliant it wakes us up

Immune Response

Somewhere I have read that after a pregnancy
a few fetal cells remain, and even decades later
migrate to the site of a mother's injury or disease.

My grown sons kiss the young women--not yet
mothers--with whom they share their lives,
hand their boarding passes to agents at the gates,
travel from both coasts, converge in the heartland
where I live, where they spent their childhoods.

I feel the fetal cells waking, moving through
my blood, surrounding the tumors, squeezing them
tight, paroxysms of self-defense and love.

Willow

Winter comes early this year.
Three weeks into October
wet flakes blot out headlights
on the country road; next morning
an inch of sleet-pocked white
crusts still-green city lawns,
mounds of uncollected leaves.

Apt; even appropriate.

All season I've welcomed the poison
that purples my veins, staves off
the dark even as night falls
ever earlier. The bleak sky
lowers with cloud. My shaved skull
pulls cold from the wind. I mourn
Indian summer, warm false promise

I know.

Still, I head out on my usual walk.
At the leafless willow that's marked
my journey through these years
I think of the shiny buds, remember
furry fat pussies that herald spring.
My job, it says, is to live
until the light grows strong.

No-Hair Benefits - I

It saves time in the shower.
It means not buying shampoo.
It spares me the cost of haircuts
not to mention the *angst*
at the mirror when someone
waves scissors my way.

People take notice.
They can't ignore disease.
I like the attention.
They tell me my head's
a perfect shape.
They say I look *edgy, glamorous, good*.
They think I have breast cancer
which offers better odds
and--really--I'd prefer.

No-Hair Benefits - II

I'm rushing down State Street,
not wanting to be late.
It's turned suddenly cold,
so I sport my hand-knit beret.
Static electrifies its motley mohair:
purples, reds, lavender.
Ahead, the sidewalk's blocked
by a clot of young black men.
They're joking around, oblivious.
Or willfully unaware. I squeeze
by, along the back of a bus shelter.
I don't brush anyone, but
I'm invading someone's space.
I don't apologize. I'm annoyed,
and in a hurry, too.

Now he's annoyed.
Or he wants to assert his presence,
his right to be just where he is.
"Is that your *hair*?" he sneers
as I pass. I turn around and grin.
"You want to see my hair?"
I whip off the beret. He's stunned
by my bald head. And then he grins.
"That's cool," he says. We laugh.
I tell the story for weeks.

Fourth Month of Weekly Chemo

So many people ask
how long this will go on
that I ask the oncologist.
*I assume, I say, until
we know it doesn't work
or the cancer goes
into remission or
the side effects get too bad.*

He nods. *Or you decide
you don't want it anymore.*

Vanity

Mine's in my eyebrows. Who knew?
Not I, until they mostly disappeared
leaving a few unruly wide-spaced threads
absent heft, direction, coherence,
leaving me to sketch random lines
on skin gross in the magnifying mirror.

Not even my aunt suspected, she
whose favorite passage from my memoir
refers to the *Weinstein eyebrows*
I observed across the table one long-past
Passover, as I faced a row of cousins,
all sporting thick expressive brows.
Eyebrows like the ones I had until
five months of chemo plucked me
to chicken skin.

Vanity's
a sin I never thought I had. At least
not about looks. My aunt: she's vain,
I might have said. A clothes horse, always
well-put-together, not-so-secretly pleased
that the last time we went somewhere,
someone confused us for mother and daughter--
me, the mother, her, the daughter, although
I'm in my 60s and she was nearly 81.
It had to be her face-lifts; I don't look that old.

My aunt, who's survived four cancers,
double my current count. Who inherited
Weinstein eyebrows, but plucks them
for beauty's sake. Whose mother--
my Nana--taught *you must suffer for beauty*.
Who would approve of my focus on eyebrows,
my late-life conversion to make-up.
Who would argue that vanity's good, at worst
a minor vice: proof of self-love, defense
against grief, slanted reflection, silvery wink,
arched and artful shield designed to keep us alive.

Scheduling Chemo

I'm hoping to go to Italy Christmas week,
I tell the oncologist..

What I mean is, I hope the friends
planning the trip can find a villa to rent.

You'll still feel fine, he says,
hearing the question I didn't ask.

You Could Get Hit by a Bus

It's amazing how often you hear this.
Today I sat in the chemo bay, taxol
infusing one of the few good veins
that remain in my battered right arm,
masking the pain with *Twenty-one Up*,
made for the BBC. A world-weary bird,
barely-grown daughter of privilege,
said she aimed to be happy. Smoke wafted up
from her fag. *What else is there?* she asked.
I mean you could get hit by a bus any day.

Last week at cancer support group
M told us how angry she got when a friend
said *Everyone dies. I could get hit by a bus
going home.* M--her stage-four lung cancer
quiet for now--asked the friend to trade odds.

I've said it myself. Everyone dies. No one
knows when. You could get hit by a bus.
These are unhappy matters of fact. They don't
make me angry. Not like the off-hand cliché
that's pissed me off since my thirties, since
the year I fought Hodgkin's disease.
It's the one people use when they're hanging out,
chilling; glad to be *killing time*.

Open

Worse than death, Thanksgiving with family
who pay no attention to you, thinking perhaps
that since you have cancer, you're tired
and happy stretched out on the couch,
reading Lemony Snicket, a library book
borrowed for a guest, the little girl who's sure
to be bored by the grown-ups' talk.

They ask you no questions, make the pies
without your help, disdain your every attempt
to enter the flow of *what's new?*
Maybe they're practicing for the time--
it could be as soon as next year--you won't
be around to ignore. How will it feel
for them? Harder than this, your absence
an eternal presence no one sees fit to mention.

Or--let's be honest--maybe it's you. Maybe
you've gotten greedy, accustomed to non-stop
cards, calls, visits, e-mails, flowers
from worried friends. You no longer know
how to live with family, how to respect
the thorny fence your sister erects around her
turf, how to give thanks for the three-way love
your two sons and sister share. Just when
you thought you'd grown beyond the vise
of sibling rivalry, it squeezes your
tiny stomach, forces you out of her house.

It's a relief to walk out the door, to head through
a steady drizzle to the empty shopping street,
all the stores shut tight except a Middle Eastern café.
The owner stands under the awning. He urges:
Please come in. All food today is free. You enter,
though turkey's in the oven and there's no way
you can eat. You ask if he has any tea. He pours
tepid coffee into a cardboard cup. You open up
your notebook, pick up your pen to cry.

Cheat

One evening at cancer support group
J, his lymphoma incurable, his children
still in their teens, says he tries not to worry
whether he'll live to see their kids.
The next day I read of a poet who wished
not to be cheated of old age. But how much
of a cheat is that? Nana, who lived
to ninety-two, spent her last five years
wishing that she were dead. Each spring,
as we kissed goodbye, she said she hoped
never to see us again. My sons, her great-
grandsons, wondered what they had done.

They weren't to blame. She couldn't see
to read, or even to watch TV; couldn't walk
to the corner store; had outlived her husband
and all her friends. There was nothing wrong
with her mind. Unlike my mother-in-law,
who spent the minutes from eighty until
her death at eighty-five staring out a window,
repeating each sentence over and over until
I wished she'd shut up and die. Would she
have preferred to be cheated of old age? Impossible
to say; still, it seems likely. In her sixties,
she was one of the smartest people I knew.

Old age, another poet wrote, *is the greatest bummer
and pisser of all times.... Ask anyone over eighty*.
Even my artist friend, her sculpture better than ever,
her reputation growing, newly in love at eighty-two,
recites a never-ending litany of every ache and pain.
Would I want another twenty years? Maybe
not. But to die at sixty-two or -three, in less than
fifteen months? That's obscene. I choose to live
to sixty-five. And I choose to see my sons
have children, too.

Scaling La Torre del Mangia

more than
100 meters
400 steps
my lung spots
no more
an issue
than drops
of rain
on Piazza
del Campo

Tuscan Viper

brown spiral pencil-thin
 curled
in a rocky depression
 on the trail
past the pig enclosure

 animal scat?
wild boar's tail?

the book at the villa
 warns
very poisonous
requires immediate
 treatment
 at the Siena
 emergency room

cold somnolent
 waiting for sun
which might come out
 before
I have to step over
 again

Negative, Positive

The mule driver squats in a shed full of empty amphorae--
Pompeii's ancient vegetable market. Head bowed,
knees drawn up to his chest, he clasps his hands
in prayer, despair. His expression's blank, his face
featureless plaster roughened by ash. He is all
rough plaster, cast from negative space, the hole
that remained when flesh, entombed in ash, decayed
near a cavity that held the bones of a mule.

This cast is no more alive than the shadow
of someone who waited one August morning
on the steps of Hiroshima's Sumitomo Bank--
steps I saw at the Peace Museum--his dark image
caught by the fireball on glare-bleached stone;
and yet no less a survivor than the shadow toes
of Miyoko, 13, etched on the foot-bed
of her pine sandal, the *geta* her mother found.

My own slow death, my tumor, induced by radiation
carries me from shadows to plaster, flesh to bone,
atomic flash to volcanic ash; deposits me next to
the mule, unremarkable beast of burden, never-cast
negative, persistent--even stubborn--solace
for self-important mortals: his driver, the archaeologists,
me.

Shift

What can you do
face to face with death
other than fight like hell
and when the time is right
lie down?

Meanwhile, the moon
waxes and wanes;
scientists say water
flowed on Mars
within the past five years;
politicians shift their gaze
from hopeless chaos,
promise to settle us
in space (a blessing
you will not have to suffer).

Past a certain point
it makes no difference
what you wish.
The moon waxes, wanes.
Can you mark the moment
when the shadow arrives?

It Could Be My Last New Year's Eve

The night begins in the perfect romance
of a twelfth-century French Gothic abbey.
San Galgano, roofless but restored,
each graceful arch picked out by floodlights
and--centered in the rose window's stone filigree--
luminous, two nights from full, the moon.

We move on to an eight-course, three-
hour meal: antipasti, truffles in crepes,
capon, cinghiale, champagne to begin
and end.... I nibble off others' plates,
their chargers steadfast below a procession
of soup bowls, saucers, dinnerware
I, with my surgically-altered stomach,
can only wish I could use. It might be
my last New Year's Eve, but I can
mostly keep it together. At midnight
everyone rushes to the piazza
to set off Roman candles and dance
to karaoke in front of the small-town bar.
A cauldron of *vin brulé* hangs from a tripod
over an open fire; a flushed and jolly
Italian ladles the wine into plastic cups,
insisting that we drink. A grandpa waltzes
a toddler in her smocked red velvet dress,
my son and his girlfriend salsa into
the future, her parents--jitterbug fools--
astound a gaggle of local youths.

It's when an elderly couple begins their
stately fox-trot--she in mink and heels,
he in trendy rust (matching slacks, cabled
sweater tied 'round his neck)--that I notice
the time. It's 2:15 am, what could be
my last New Year's day. I collapse
against a stone wall. The dancers twirl.
The moon has disappeared.

IV

Cold Snap

I am too plain-spoken
too close to the bone
of truth
to make of death
anything fresh
or beautiful

Still, walking
through breath-thief air
under the deep
sunny winter-blue sky
I cannot bring myself
to rumple
the smooth-spread comforter
of snow
disrupt
the perfect crystalline
dream

My Dead Appear in a Dream

Not all the dead--my father
has been replaced by a man
who cares for Mother. She attends
the concert in a wheelchair
she never had. Her caretaker--
that strange man--is delighted
to bring her along.

 Poppy's
not in the dream. But Nana's
her brisk, no-nonsense self.
She buys, in a lobby shop
off the second balcony,
a cotton tie-dyed robe
with strings at the neck
like a hospital gown.
I recognize that balcony:
it's Syria Mosque in Pittsburgh,
demolished in 1994.
I ushered there in high school
for Ray Charles and Ella Fitzgerald.

Nana's robe matches the training pants
a toddler--my sister? my niece?--
has just pulled on. Whoever
that child is, she's with us still.
Just like the concert hall,
resurrected in Cheswick,
fifteen miles north of Pittsburgh,
listed on the Internet as a wedding
reception venue. Just like Ray
and Ella, on their record labels.
Just like Mother, Nana, the caretaker.

Just like me, creator, avatar, curator
of the dream.

767, ORD-->LAX

locked in our belts
since Chicago snow over
hard-frozen ground

the Rockies miles below
so bumpy the wing
flexes
not inches
five feet

how much stress
can we take?

someone in every seat
big news if we go down

I might prefer
this disaster

but no such luck
Grand Canyon Vegas
the LA River constrained
its channel concrete

five days of sandals and beach
then back to the chemo bay

Hopeful...

...S always said when I asked
How are you? And because it wasn't the answer
anyone expects, it always reminded me no,
things weren't *fine*: decades before,
her young son died a suicide the same year
her famous scientist husband suffered
a medical crisis--burst aneurysm, massive stroke,
something that took him to the brilliant brink
of death. Ever since, he'd depended on S
to help him dress and eat. He spent his days
perfecting his theory of angels: all the world's
eons of dead, suffused by that radiant light
beyond the tunnel that nearly swallowed him whole--
a reservoir of souls waiting for God
to grant them to babies yet to be born.

I could say that--*hopeful*--when people ask
how I am. It's true, but it's more than they
want to know, so many months into chemo.
The scan says the taxol is holding the tumors
at bay. They haven't shrunk; they haven't grown.
We don't even speak of remission, the doctor
and I, much less the miracle cure my sons
wish I would find. But I've lived two years
with this cancer; I'm headed to the Galapagos;
the baby who'll get my soul is not yet a gleam
in its parents' eyes. How am I doing?
Just fine.

Do Not Struggle to be Vertical

instruction on the use of life jackets
posted on the Galápagos tour boat Tip-Top II

I am the first one up the cone of Bartolomé Island,
moonscape of red-brown basalt, nothing but clinkers
and ash, lizards, a scatter of drought-hardy plants.

This is no triumph. Other than Darwin, our guide,
who can't be much more than thirty, my ship-mates
are elderly; some, overweight. I am the one who

insists that we snorkel--sliding, feet first, off
the *panga* into clear water to dive on green turtles,
hawkfish, sting rays, reef sharks. I lead the kayak

excursion, paddling upwind toward cliffs softened
by fur seals. None of this is a struggle. Since it's not
I wonder, headed down to the boat past slow, panting

teens in the next group of tourists, how can I be sick?
And yet, if not for the past seven months on chemo,
sweating survival, I wouldn't have come to these islands;

wouldn't have snorkeled with sea lions, wouldn't
have known the current that pulled me out to sea,
wouldn't have gripped the line tied to the speeding

panga, wouldn't have let myself be swept alongside,
wouldn't have kicked my flippers away from
the churning prop, wouldn't have climbed the tuff cone,

wouldn't even be here.

Evolution

In the beginning--

(all things begin, although
we can't say exactly how--)

something nicked the DNA, cocked
a chromosome askew, scrambled the protean code

was it a virus her mother caught
or something the child ate residue
of DDT on a lunchbox apple
in 1955 fallout
from atomic tests steel mill pollutants
in Pittsburgh's air when she was growing up

or simply an errant gene--hers being
a cancer family:

father, uncle, grandfather
little sister, aunt

whatever -- it took decades to manifest

most damaged cells doomed
not to divide
a few somehow adapting, doing
what is essential, passing the code
mistakes and all
on to their progeny

cell generations forming
the rubbery lymph node on her neck
the shadow lurking
on the x-ray of her chest

In the fullness of time

(all things evolve)

the fossil record tells us
fish crawled onto land

on South Plaza Island
prickly-pears grew tall plated trunks
defense against land iguanas

medical journals traced
evolving treatments: leeches to antibiotics
back to leeches again

some things change faster than others:
bacteria malignant cells
technology medicine

radiation, scientists learned, kills whatever
divides most rapidly

headline: RESEARCHERS DISCOVER
CURE FOR HODGKIN'S DISEASE

and no matter if in the process
they nick more DNA

Evolution's like leapfrog

(or catch-me-if-you-can)

in the Galápagos Darwin's finches
play endless games of King of the Mountain
species forming surviving failing
spurred by crises: drought years floods

selection events ruthless
as a radiation beam

and it's all a function of time--
not geologic eons
as Charles Darwin thought

a matter of years for finches
days or weeks for cells

longer--decades--for damaged cells
to be fruitful and multiply

Which brings us to this moment

(the still-evolving scene)

a tumor excised from
dead center
of the radiation field

errant cells

escape

lodge in the lungs
divide and grow resistant--
mutation, again--
to chemotherapy

*The rapidly growing cells--
a microbiologist says--
it behooves them to avoid
being killed*

What is essential: living to pass the code
on to progeny

She passed through menopause
many years ago. Her children grown,
her (broken?) genes passed on, malignant
cells mutating for the sake of *their* progeny

she has come
to see herself
as a kind of evolution machine:

Evolution at home

racing

evolving medicine

Note: italicized quotations are from *The Beak of the Finch* by Jonathan Weiner

You've suffered so much, he says

and I know what he means--the seventeen years
I lived with the bully who blackened my eye;
my cancers, the one I survived, thanks to the cure
that caused this one that's likely to kill me--
but *suffer*?

My sons are grown, alive and well;
I've never seen them starved, bellies swelled
with the blight of drought and poverty.
I've never waved them off to war.
I've never been raped or, like my sister, attacked
and left to crawl her bloodied way out of a city park.
My house stands high and dry
on land that's never been flooded.
It hasn't burned to the ground, been crushed
by tornados, invaded by burglars.
I haven't had to tape the windows against
the threat of shattered glass: no one shoots rockets
or throws grenades at me.
My neighbors clear my walk of snow;
I don't fear genocide.

No, I won't live forever, maybe not even a year, but
isn't that also true of the famous journalist
who died this week in a three-car crash?
He was perfectly well and still working into his seventies.
I think of the kid who survived:
a J-school grad student, honored to drive
the writer to his scheduled interview.

Talk about *suffering*.

Beethoven's Tuning Fork

How would it sing, struck
against the knee, held
to his forté-piano's
fine-grained sounding board?

It lies mute in its fitted case,
slim, two-pronged, metal
cold across the sea-green velvet
that lines the varnished box.

How would it sing, struck
against the knee, held
to his teeth, vibrating
through his jaw to the anvil

of his ear? This, scholars say,
is how he heard, after
he went deaf. Though that
must have been some other

tuning fork. This one
he gave to his dear friend
(before their falling out)
George Augustus Bridgewater,

black prodigy who premiered
the Kreutzer Sonata
and improvised the cadenza
to Beethoven's delight.

How would it sing, struck
against the knee, held
to the violin's bridge?
And how did those others

hear it--Bolton, Waddington,
Balderstone, unknown amateurs--
to whom the tuning fork passed?
I want to hear it sing

as it did for Gustav Holst,
for Ralph Vaughn Williams
before his widow gave it
to the British Library

where it lies in its casket,
mute.

At home, I discover
the Sound Archive Internet link.

Struck, the tuning fork rings:
a clear B-flat
twenty-seven seconds
before the sound dies out.

I click “play” over and over.
Beethoven’s tuning fork sings.

V

Spring

My job since fall has been to live
until the light grew strong. I did; it has.
These days I walk through a redbud riot,
the maples' lacy new-leaf haze, a promise
of renewal that mocks my every step.

Nine months: the average life
with metastatic gastric cancer.
I should rejoice.
Who doesn't crave "above average,"
especially at something like this?
Instead, I'm crabby, depressed.
This is the half-way point; survival extends
to a year and a half;
it's all downhill from here.

I note every twinge and ache; bite the heads
off friends who miss my poetry readings.
They ask when they'll have another chance.
Nothing's scheduled, I snap. I don't say *never*;
I'm sure I'll never read again. Or the other thing
I think: *why write?* I won't have time
to revise, much less market a book.

Why this faith in statistics? *I'm a person, not a number--*
I said that once, two years ago, to my oncologist.
But the last time I saw him, he told me the tumors were growing
and prescribed a different drug. Now, absent evidence,
but hyper-aware of the mean, the prognosis,
the looming CT scan, I figure the chemo will not work.

Still, pink tulips bloom just outside my door,
planted by a neighbor who waited until
I'd left the house so I'd be surprised this spring.
It's churlish to think that pity prompted her kindness.
And just plain wrong to predict that these beauties,
dropping petals in the heat, will never astonish again.