

Health Poems - Cancer

New Words	Elaine Trevitt
Macmillan	Pat Winslow
9 o'clock	Frances Boyle
Dignity	Rosie Garland
Cancer	Anne Caldwell
But For Screening	Jim White

1. NEW WORDS

Today's new word is *omentectomy*
spread-eagled in barely legible handwriting
as if hiding from the truth of itself
on the consent form that I have not yet signed.

These days words are sneaking up on me
dropped off tongues in difficult conversations
so you begin to get used to them
lymph nodes, solid, spread, lymphadonectomy

Or they might be thrown at you
like a cricket ball with a high spin
staging surgery, chemotherapy.

They lure you onto the internet, these words
where you find other words
and you have to be very careful with some of them
for they may get out of hand...

Others are sly
they slide off a name badge into your lap,
when you are concentrating on something else
Macmillan Nurse

Or they escape out of the corner of a surgeon's mouth
as he's leaving the room, when he doesn't notice
but you notice, and he's been so careful with the words so far
he has let them out slowly and has called them in again.

But these ones have escaped
you watch them drop to the floor with a soft thud
and you wish to trample them underfoot, kill them right there

These are the ones that should not be allowed
debulking surgery
which means, let's speak plainly now
making the best out of a bad job.

And then the letter comes
the first mention of the word
malignancy.

2. MACMILLAN

His breath comes like city traffic.
Stop-start buses, trembling taxis.
It's been gridlock since yesterday.
He won't last much longer.

Cancer's white. Sheets, sky,
the net curtains she pulls aside
to undo the window latch,
her plastic apron, rubber boots.

But not pain. Real pain's colourless.
Like the scouring agent they drip fed
into his veins. Much good that did.
Much good it ever does.

What colour's death?
Nobody talks about it.
It must be like walking backwards.
Which makes her think of its opposite.

Does it hurt to be born,
to tear yourself from nothing into being?
Does it hurt to enter your own skin?
It's a wonder we ever recover.

When his breathing stops,
his eyes go vivid blue with shock.
It's like he was never more alive than this.
She sees him leave. It happens a lot.

A bright flash, a phosphorescence
darting to the far corner of the room.
You feel their absence like a presence.
After a while that goes, too.

Sadness comes with little things.
Purses, wallets, reading glasses.
There's tenderness in the final wash,
the gift of water, the soft towel.

To be silent with the dead
is to be alone with yourself,
it's accepting that what matters most
was always going to be meaningless.

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3. 9 o'clock

ultra
sound
s c a n
in the outer
galaxy of my
right breast
a large black hole
of fear stares back
'large lump at 9 o'clock'
the notes say ultra sound
scan in the hidden universe
of my belly all those years ago
gel baby cells divide and grow
three fully grown ultra sound scan
through the milky way of my right breast
life sucking infants forged pathways of pain
via cabbage leaves and blocked ducts ultra sound
scan through the uncharted territory of my right
breast a lover navigates gently to discover its form
the well-trammelled path of my left husband's left
hand ultra sound scan in the starry space of my
right breast the needle punctures i hold my breath
and watch its journey break through and suck
my black hole of fear away ultra sound scan
in a plastic tube the contents of my right
breast syringe swollen yellow fluid
lobule gone a single tear
from my right eye



4. Dignity

Throwing up over the consultant
when he asks you how you're feeling.
Throwing up
so hard it comes out of your nose.
Acquiring the skill of throwing up accurately.

Farting.
Discovering that chemo farts are more powerful than semtex
and can clear a room just as effectively.

Saying, *I don't need a zimmer frame to get to the bathroom!*
Then falling into a chemical waste bin
and getting a two-inch scar on your forehead.

Getting out of bed and showing the whole ward
and their relatives your knickers
except you aren't wearing any.

Fainting.
Coming round on the bathroom floor
wringing wet, stark naked and stretched out
under the eyes of seven nurses who've had to kick the door down.

Tolerating strangers who whisper *you're so brave*.
Resisting the urge to deck them.

Going bald.
Watching your tits shrivel to the size of peanuts
and your arse go flat as a burst paper bag.

Remaining polite
when the close friend drops off the face of the earth
when you tell him your diagnosis.
Remaining polite
when the same close friend reappears when you are better
and acts like nothing's happened.
Remaining polite
when people cross a room
in case you talk to them about *it*.

Wearing long sleeves in June
To cover up the scarlet tracklines
chemotherapy has etched from wrist to elbow.
Rolling up those sleeves to show them off as battle scars.
Learning to stare back.
Wearing a feeding tube up your nose.
Learning to stare back.

Refusing to wear the prescription wig
that makes you look like you've got cancer.
Refusing to wear the cheerful floral scarf
that makes you look like you've got cancer.

Standing up, falling over.
Standing up, falling over.
Standing up, hanging onto the arm of the sofa, the edge of the table,
grabbing at furniture in a dot-to-dot of small stages.
Waddling to the kitchen on a toddler's unsteady legs.

Making a cup of tea unaided
for the first time in three months.

Standing up
and saying *I've got cancer*
without need, without self-pity.
Standing up
and saying *I'm clear*.

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5. Cancer

You were a storm-proof rig when we were bairns,
framed by sunlight. Two brogued-feet
planted on the lawn like footings on a sea bed.
Your love was a flaming plume of gas
and when you cradled us, we snoozed
to the lub-dub, lub-dub of your heartbeat.

Then you were diagnosed. Given a few weeks.
We were packed off to an aunt. Skin flaked
from your forearms. You corroded
from the inside out. Nurses tended
a mass of tubes, careful as mechanics,
calibrating flow. Like the spillage
of *The Amoco Cadiz* or *Exxon Valdez*,
the lymphatic truth was seeping out.

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6. BUT FOR SCREENING

I received a big envelope from bowel cancer screening
When I opened it and read, I found the real meaning:
It had a little sealed pack inside that told me what to do
I had to take a sample from 3 times that I had a poo.

I sealed them in another envelope and send it away.
A letter came back quickly, within a couple of days.
When I read the results, I was really shocked to see
The test was abnormal and I would need a colonoscopy.

The procedure is quite painless and everyone was charming.
But what the camera found was something quite alarming.
It showed a small tumour. I thought that I was dreaming
But how big would it have grown without my bowel screening.

Now I've had my operation and I'm so glad that it's over
Because they caught my cancer early I don't need a Stoma
So when they send that envelope. Don't throw it in the bin
Please do your 3 poo samples and quickly send them in

Only one in ten are abnormal, and I was one of these.
Please do your samples and put your families mind at ease.
I'm on the road to recovery with the rest of my life left to live
Please do the test! It beats the hell out of the alternative.

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