

POETRY | FALL 2012

Lamentations of Cancer.

By Janell Ball

verse one.

i came home to groceries all over the counters. ice cream starting to melt. bags all over the floor. no messages. after hours my dad's shaky voice. soon after- my body with your body. the side rails up. shoulder to shoulder we don't stop crying. the nurse that sat down at the end of your bed and cried with us. you never remember her now. bad test results, over and over. surgery. sisters driving without music for twelve straight hours. because nothing should be associated with this. dad saying-it should have been me again and again.

people deliver food. cards. flowers we can't have in the icu. the cat eats them all. we start calling the bay window upstairs the salad bar. i almost vomit after seeing you out of surgery. the real battle begins. you don't want to come home. you don't want to begin. we are angry. we don't sleep. we undo all the plans we made. in our hearts. in the places we hope so much it worries our souls sometimes. we undo them all and open our hands. cancel the babies you'd hold. the boyfriends you'd approve. we wake up and remember all over again what's happening and don't brush our teeth. forget to comb our hair or if we washed it in the shower yet or not.

verse two.

my hand on the scissors, catching light from the may sun. i tell you once more, it's okay i can do it. your last piece of matted hair being cut, the smooth skin shivered on your scalp. your palms over your eyes. mother's day. words lined up on a card. red small scab from radiation. the bottom line of strength. the doubt of it all. edging around the parts we can't fathom. my passing over of some sort of muddled strength that rebounds from your chest and back

into my body where it sits unproductive.

i can't stay at home all day. i don't know where to go. my friends aren't sure how to talk to me. my faith is broken and shattered. my anger drives me to run harder, longer. to not eat enough. to feel sick. to stare at my naked chest in the mirror every night to find my heart beat. you stop walking, you're too tired. you stop eating. we buy hats. people make hats. there are so many hats. all the time. all around the house.

verse three.

clinical trial. when they call and it ends we ask the visitors to please leave. we sit down, lined up on the couch. holding onto hands. angry. tired. brother-in-law makes every one a fried egg sandwich. we drive to holland. take pictures. the pain we pull out of our smiles sharply. we eat ice cream. walk the pier. watch boats go through the inlet to lake macatawa. the feeling of last times increasing sudden and sure. the neighbors cry with us. walk silently across the yard. wait for us to emerge. we hug them tightly. you won't get out of bed in the morning. we write notes and words, draw pictures, hang them all over the walls of your room, the kitchen, they wrap around the living room and porch.

i drive home. get into his bed. fleeting comfort. fatalistic views not sustaining. he lies awake all night. i sleep harder than i have in months. he's confused in the morning. gave away too much of himself. now i carry different weight. may never be comfortable with my own burden when asked to share it in intimacy. i fear (still) i am too much for the next one. when i move away there is loud crying. nose so full i can't breath or swallow. every one in the house can hear my earth filled weeping. my face pushed so hard into a pillow. my sisters staying with me. telling me to walk so my nose clears up. rubbing my back. crying with me. worried. not sure if i should stay. but i stay. i make bad grades. make good friends. we buy a kitten from a shelter and name her lunchbox lucy.

verse four.

second surgery. a second clinical trial. chemotherapy weekly by iv and large amounts of pills every day. the side effects are blinding. controlling. your time. The way you move. the way you do things for other people. dad begins to question your longstanding and famous ability to empathize. your cognition. i see your left foot dragging. your slow movements getting slower. the depression setting in harder. your anxiety preoccupying everything. and i realize i've been gone. busy. and i miss how you were. how we were together. i'm angry you're not the same. wondering where you've gone. you stare straight ahead at the coffee shop. forget to ask me about things we always talk about.

my patience is low. my tolerance lower. my anger again. coming up and starting to rise. we go and get my hair cut. buy a new dress. pierce my nose. you think i am brave. that your faith should be enough to get you through this. you want me to help you unbutton your pants. i don't believe you. remember you doing this yourself. i bring you new underwear in the bathroom (twice). cook you rice. i can do this. i can do all these things. but i can't seem to make you stronger. to speak life; bring you justice. to make you see how brave you are. that the only reason i am brave is because you are braver than i am. this is where we are now. here in this place. we are watching basketball. the spartans win unexpectedly. dad can't believe it.

Janell Ball has spent a number of years working on a community health project at a homeless shelter for women and children in Atlanta, GA. The project is a garden for mental wellness initiative that includes nutrition, cooking, mental health activities and gardening techniques. She is affiliated with Emory University Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing and Community Advanced Practice Nurses.

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