Chemotherapy Love Poem (Painted Bride Quarterly)

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CHEMOTHERAPY LOVE POEM

I’ve tried everything, every sort of exorcism,
which gets me thinking what we need is a kind
of chemotherapy for the heart, an extreme medicine for sure,
reserved only for those with no hope, whose longing
has ravaged every organ system of their body.
I can see them now, the terminally love-sick arriving
jet-lagged from all points of the globe, their swollen hearts
heavy as sod, only to be greeted by a lot of forms to fill out—
though these read like confessions by the time you are through
(we all ask for more paper). Then conferences
with the doctors and there, too you must describe your love,
what did he look like, why did she leave, on and on
you spill your guts out--funny how they really seem to listen
and as they listen they are mixing just the right combination
of poisons to target your particular strain of infatuation.
Finally it’s time to roll up your sleeve, begin the I.V.
and so flood your heart to its toxic brink of non-feeling.
Oh, maybe you’ll have a vague memory of having loved,
say, your mother, or you might mouth “no” under your breath
if you witness a bunch of thugs beating with baseball bats
an only slightly nerdier version of your brother, but basically
by the final treatment you are numb. Numb to all
you ever loved: the oboe, diner mashed potatoes, NHL hat tricks,
Van Morrison, Nancy Wilson cause she sounds like Jimmy Scott,
Jimmy Scott cause he sounds like Nancy Wilson, Surrealism,
ice cream on waffles, Alaska (though you’ve never been there),
New York (even though you have), Ferris wheels, blue spruce,
green herons, runway models, cream of wheat, of course poetry—
especially Stevens, Neruda, O’Hara, all moody bodies
of water, a fish your daughter named Mr. Window,
a slug your son named Sluggie, Dr. Zhivago, Edward Scissorhands,
old porches with hanging swings, and your favorite lovers
now clumped with the ones you merely tolerated
calculating how to let them down easy, not to mention the one
that broke you down, brought you to this state, this madness—
you can look at her now like you’re looking at a used wedge of lemon
from someone’s ice tea or mess of lobster and that’s when you know
you’re cured though at the follow-up visit you can’t exactly thank
them with a heart-felt shake, they know that, still you go through
the motions, you ask when the rest will come back.
That’s when they tell you about the hair of cancer patients,
how it returns, so the complexion, so too your dry, ash-white heart
will fill itself up again—one day you’ll kiss the flowers and the snow
and maybe even the dust in the road (though now if you wake up at night
don’t be surprised if you’re thinking about the price of store brand tuna
in 6 1/4 oz. cans). Give it time they say and they want to make sure
you aren’t driving yet, they tell you as you’re signing one more release
that patients have been known not to stop for pedestrians, not even
when they hit them, they say those are the ones we really cured.
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