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Chrysanthemums

Jane Kenyon

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Two Poems · *Jane Kenyon*

CHRYSANTHEMUMS

The doctor averted his eyes
while the diagnosis fell on us
as if a wall of our house had suddenly
given way. We were speechless
all the way home. The light seemed strange.
He'd left his watch on the doctor's desk
and the next day we went back for it.

A weekend of fear and purging . . .
Determined to work, he packed his
dictaphone, a stack of letters,
and a roll of stamps. At last the day
of scalpels, blood, and gauze arrived.

Eyes closed, I lay on his bed waiting.
From the hallway I heard an old man
with his nurse, who was helping him to walk:
"That Howard Johnson's. It's nothing but
the same thing over and over again."
"That's right. It's nothing special."

Late in the afternoon I heard casters
and footsteps slowing down.
The attendants asked me to leave the room
while they moved him onto the bed,
and the door remained closed a long time.

Evening came . . .
While he dozed, fitfully, still stupefied
by anaesthetics, I tried to read,
my feet propped on the rails of the bed.
Odette's chrysanthemums were revealed to me,

ranks of them, in the house where Swann,
jealousy constricting his heart,
paid calls late at night.

And while I read, pausing again
and again to look at him, the smell
of chrysanthemums sent by friends
wavered from the window sill, mixing
with the smells of disinfected sheets
and drastic occasions.

He was too out of it
to press the button for medication.
Every eight minutes, when he could have
more, I pressed it, and the morphine dripped
from the vial in the locked box
into his arm. I made a hive
of eight minute cells
where he could sleep without pain,
or beyond caring about pain.

The most ordinary gestures seemed
cause for celebration, as if
he were a baby figuring out how
to roll over and push himself upright.
Over days the i.v.'s came out
and freedom came back to him—
walking, shaving, sitting
in a chair. Hazy with analgesics
he read *The Boston Globe*, and began
to talk on the phone.

He turned pale and stopped talking
while a sweating third year student
pulled out the staples, returning
three times to the obstinate one.

I brought him home, round-shouldered
and numbed up for the trip. He dozed
in the car, woke and looked
with astonishment at the hills, gold
and quince under October sun—a sight
so overwhelming that we began
to cry, he first, and then I.

CLIMB

From the porch of our house we can see
Mt. Kearsarge, the huge, blue-black
presence that tells us where we are,
and what the weather is going to be.
By night we see the red beacon
of the fire warden's tower, by day
the tower itself, a hut on stilts,
with windows on all sides, minute
in the distance.

Yesterday I climbed to the top
with a friend just home from the hospital.
She'd thought the second coming was at hand,
then found herself in a private
room, tastefully furnished, on a ward
she couldn't leave.

But yesterday we climbed,
our shirts wet with effort. We talked
and panted, stopped to look at the undersides
of sage and pink opalescent mushrooms,
and to touch the bright shoots of a balsam fir.
Near the mountain's top the trees are stunted
and misshapen by wind, their roots
exposed by rains and spring melts, and yet
they find purchase among rocks
and hold their own.