Chrysanthemums

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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.