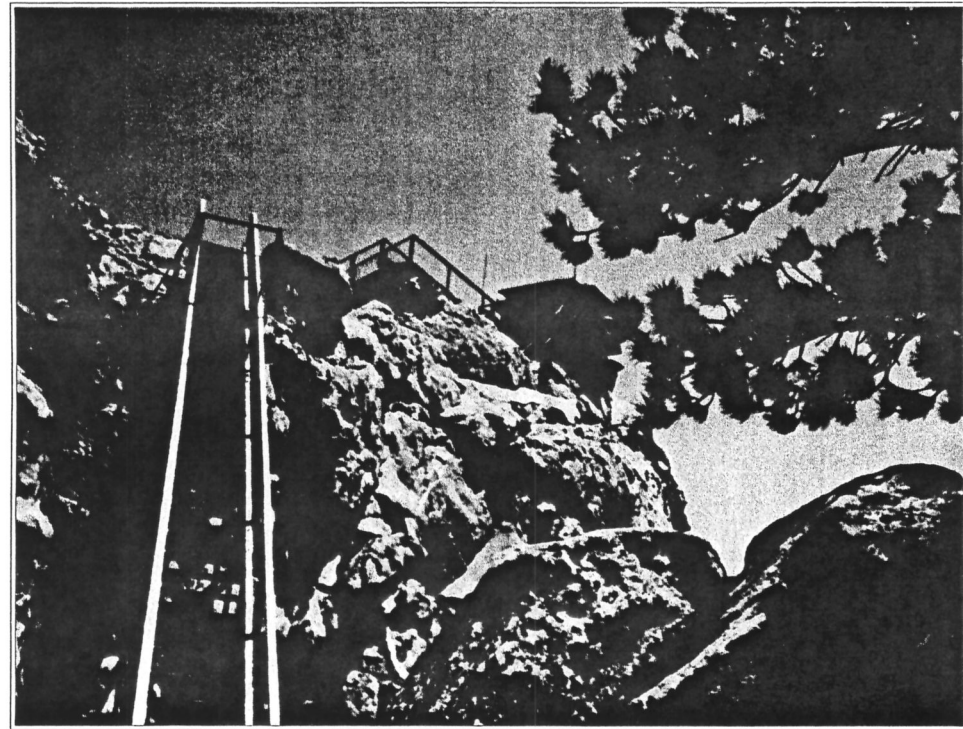


Drowning

When my grandmother died
My mother's grief knew no bounds
It raged and roiled
An angry current
Overrunning its banks
Spilling inarticulate and destructive
From bedroom to living-room
A soggy flood of feeling
Knocking over tables and chairs
The way my grandmother did
When she was drunk
Each one of my mother's tears
Perfectly transparent
Like a drop of the vodka
My grandmother drank neatly
Straight from the bottle
She hid in the chandelier

We always visited early
I would wait in her garden
Among the chipped plaster fish
While the sound of shattering glass
And weeping voices dissolved
Into the careful clink of ice-cubes
Once, framed by pale light
My grandmother ran naked in the rain
Her sad breasts flapping
Until my father
Who liked dry land
Better than the uncertain expanse
Of alcoholic seas
Caught her up and wrung the water
From her seaweed hair

When my grandmother died I watched
As the river of my mother's grief
Muddy, vicious, turbulent



*Jim Moore, Resident Physician, Department of Internal Medicine, UCL
Fire Loo!*

Its pale fish floating belly-up
Flooded beyond our shipshape house
Into the streets of our quiet green neighborhood
(Who knows what lay beneath its leafy calm?)
Sweeping away cars, trees,
Domestic pets, small children
First it smelled sweet, like bourbon
Then it smelled sour, like gin
Sometimes, out of the tide
A hand reached up for help
Small water-logged fingers
Barely breaking the surface

*Johanna Shapiro, Ph.D.
Department of Family Medicine*

Living with Cancer

Johanna Shapiro, Ph.D., Department of Family Medicine

What I wonder about
What I worry about
Is that we really didn't talk about it
Enough
Or really at all
Only obliquely
The way light bounces off a mirror
At an angle
The way eyes inadvertently
Slant from an ugly face
All our conversations on the subject
Dribbled away
"Let's wait and see"
"I just don't know"
We told each other

We'd been friends
For more than fifteen years
So of course we talked about everything
Why our children
Didn't get married
Or were they going to marry
The wrong people
Would they ever find themselves?
Were we ever going to find ourselves?
How sex was with our husbands
And how sex was without our husbands
Was it too late to start a new career
Was it too late to be a different person?

And of course we did talk
About the big C
Since her husband was a doctor
She a Ph.D., and I a professor
We were very mature
About the whole thing
Oh yes, we definitely talked cancer
First breast, then ovarian,
Later still lung mets, liver mets,
Brain mets

We learned the lingo of chemo
Wordsmiths both, we grew to love the sound
Of words that really are horrible
Although they did good for awhile
Bought time, postponed the inevitable

But we never really talked about
The big D
Yes, that big D -
The grim reaper, the bogeyman,
The ultimate emptiness,
Death, death, death

And because I'd read about
Women with cancer
And talked to other friends who had cancer
And even taught Adrienne Rich's poem
About the guilt she felt
For never having talked to her lover about
Her cancer, I knew we should talk not only about
Cancer, I knew we should talk about... death

At least once,
Just to show we could do it

Give us credit - we tried
Once or twice, half-heartedly
We'd sidle up to it
The path greased with chemo and platitudes
Slippery with anxiety and dread
And all at once we'd bump up against
A mountain so mighty, so fearsome
It'd make our teeth shake
It was one thing to live with cancer -
We'd grown used to that -
But dying with cancer
Well, that was a different story
We couldn't find our way into it
Up it, over it, through it

In the end, we never did talk about the big D
Death never entered our lexicon
In any guise - cruel hatchetman
Welcome liberator
No, he just didn't show up
Although we both sensed him
Lurking on the premises

Oh well - we never let him in
Maybe we weren't brave enough
Or maybe we just didn't have time enough
For Mr. Death

We did a lot of laughing though
Planned jail-break escapes from her hospital room
That we never quite pulled off
But that would have made us famous
Bought funny hats when her hair fell out
That looked a lot better on her
Than they did on me
Wrote each other letters about
How much suffering sucks
And where are the big answers
The answers you can count on
When you really need them?
We cried a lot too - pretty much about
The same things

When she fell into a coma
We still hadn't had the big D conversation
And I knew Adrienne Rich would be
Disappointed in me
So after she'd been in a coma about
A month, and I knew we'd never talk anymore about
Our children, or which type of bagel
We liked best with black coffee
Whether our husbands cried in the same
Kinds of movies
And how to travel to Nepal when you're old
We ended up talking about death

It was kind of a one-sided conversation
But that's how she wanted it
I didn't say much and
She didn't say anything at all
I told her what a great friend she'd been
What a cherished wife and beloved mother
A woman valued above rubies
Was how I put it, finally finding a
Big answer that seemed to serve
I told her it was time to go, time to let go
Without fear, uncertainty, recrimination
Nothing left here that needed to be done
Time to move on.

And she did
End of conversation.