

Poem For A Friend Growing Lighter and Lighter

Abe Louise Young

1. diagnosis: glioblastoma

Your left hand is a dead fish, your left leg a sunken anchor, your
left eye a black mussel

It forgets to move back to the margin to read the next line

You shave only the right side of your face, write only in a tiny column
on the far right edge of the page

Truly,

*I must emphasize, I ask you to
please empathize with me whole-
heartedly*

Oh yes, my friend, I do commit to you entirely,
to the best of my ability,
within the limits of our mutual fragility

2. questions for the surgeon

What are the colors of a neural network? When you sew, do you sing?
Are brains as singular as faces, do they twitch, grimace, get shy, look away?
Is it wet in there? Does it ever flood? How are we to trust your puncture
of the skull, your laser in the sea? Will you show us your scars?

3. questions for each other

How are you?

I'm on the barbs of stars

How are you?

A bug eating through the shirt someone draped on a stone saint

How are you?

Soft moldy orange with a white-to-green halo

How are you?

Sexual hopes redeem my fears

How are you?

Lamotrigine, Clonazepam, friendship and gliding

How are you?

Just like you—a septic tank covered in honeysuckle vines, leaking time

4) the math stage

Tomorrow, next week. Soon, later, afterward, immediately, you say, looking for options to multiply.

Only one arm, one leg
working and a galloping brain tumor
is a bastard equation.

You need no solving, no saving,
but salve me.

We do not say anything about forever, finally, lastly,
in conclusion, in summary, or all in all.

Let x still equal x .

5) –the anger stage

Friend, here is a remedy: imagine yourself already dead.
It's a pain reliever. Imagine the words
we'll say about your life, how sparkling your heart,
how you called your tumor *The Little Prince*.
Imagine the Hebrew songs we'll sing at your memorial
under cedar trees and Illinois sky, imagine our
teardrops falling one by one onto the grass so soft.
Six hundred people will attend and astonish your parents.
Listen to the words we'll speak. Hear your story.

Remember, to some people you were
a clear, unbreakable mirror: we saw
our souls in you
and knew that we were good.

6) –ICU

night sky bright black
little dipper silver
infomercial on mute
every room on the hall
full of lonely twin bed
breathing
little dipper pour it all together
into one bowl
stir in goodnight moon
slice of sweet melon

7) –the revelation stage

The speech therapist holds a paragraph up
about a boy who writes a grocery list,
then goes to the store for milk and hot dogs.
She reads it out in a chilling baby voice:

*So he got to the store and bought hot dogs—
but what did the boy forget? Hmmm? What
did he forget, Mr. Shefsky?*

You try hard to remember but can't.

*I'm a vegan, you say, that's why
I can't read this stupid thing.
Oh wait, I know—
the boy who went to the store?*

He forgot his mother

8) –biotech

‘A cluster of human nerve cells
has been grown
on a silicon chip,’

your caregiver reads lyrically from the *NYTimes Magazine*,
handing over your chemo pills

and you lurch up in the bed
to yell,

Fuck them.
Fuck them.

Yes, in the name of our medical dystopia
and your bald, angry, dapper, Victorian,
pee-in-a-bedpan self,
fuck them.

We will defend you
from everything unliving.
Silicon chips
have no right to congress
with human cells.

9) –duet

Can I tell you a secret?

Yes.

I'm wearing a diaper.

That's great. We should all wear diapers more often.

Are you talking about something else?

Like what?

Are you making a metaphor for the indestructible soul?

I don't know. Is your diaper uncomfortable?

No.

Then yes.

10) –balloon

On the phone to you in the Illinois nursing home,
I narrate my summer garden
in Texas

*Green lizard jumps on the hammock,
Oh yeah, big daddy!
He struts and pumps his orange balloon throat,
I'm male and I'm virile!*

*He's one big green phallus singing,
I've got what it takes, baby!
Then the black crow swoops down and whips him by the tail
into her craw*

You start to cry

*I'm sorry, I didn't—it's not an allegory
It's just a story with the wrong plot*

You are angry
I talked about virility
and killing
and you want to hang up

11) –transit

There's a full lunar eclipse and I'm outside your
new ICU to feel the difference in the light.

Two blind girls walk the garden path, whispering.
Their white canes trace faint crescent moons
into dirt and their soft shoe soles erase them.

12) –prize

You told the hospital chaplain

Here's how I feel about my spiritual life—

*Vultures, big witches,
ate all of a deer on the highway
but the bones and the heart*

*and now a golden mountain lion creeps down
for the prize*

13) –the end stage

You are the narrator
of this journey in an electric bed
on oars of your voice,
rowing your tumor
across the river. It's epic,
the act of dying. It can take
a damn long time.
I wish as payment
I could draw your fine
Sephardic profile in gold paint pen
on the palm of the bill collector.
Who's here?
Please hold my hand.
Your voice is the oars, the boat,
the weather, the light,
you are entirely
becoming

transparent,
slowly turning

into a cloud shawl
blowing in the doorway,

a sheen of sweat
without a body

14) –you left your body

There is no word
for how an immense ocean of freedom can become captured

& like oxygen, re-
leased

15) –birth certificate

I dip the paper in water.
Watch it swell.

Wood pulp cells fill.
The ink feathers.

An assertion
of your birth

becomes a murmur,
then defers.

The paper remembers
its mother.

Is there any more
reason for words?

16) –stone spiral

I drive far from the city
to the North woods,
build a fire, strip off
my clothes under the night sky,
open the urn,
pour fine powder palm to palm,
rub my body
with silky grit, stroke carbon
ash on my forehead, belly,
cheekbones, arms and legs,
bathe in it, you glow, you
taste like nothing
else I know, come,
let's wade into
the river now, breathe
deep, dive, let's go—