

THROUGH THIS RAIN

Poetry by

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Through This Rain

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The Old

Halloween night, Aunt Aletha,
lungs riddled with cancer,
falls off the side of her bed
and cries out in pain.
Eighty-four years old,
recent recipient
of a replacement hip,
she lies, uncomplaining,
while two paramedics
try time and again
to start an intravenous
in her fragile arms.
Emergency service
at the local hospital
is closed temporarily
so she rides thirty rough miles
in the speeding ambulance
and waits among masked
H1N1 patients in the city.
X-rays show no new damage,
other than obvious bruising
around her metal parts,
so they ship her back
to Perrin's Marina Villa.
In the morning she jokes
with us, despite her pain.
Later, my friend Pete and I
visit her huge old house,
rich in family history.
We pore over dozens
of hand-written journals,
more than a lifetime of days,
pages cracked and yellow,
that speak of weather, and ships,
cargos and destinations long gone,
year upon year of ordinary living
reduced to flowing cursive lines.
We exchange poetry books,
and I open a new single malt.
We toast the smooth and bitter
of our swiftly passing days,
savor the glow, the aftertaste ...

Aletha

I see her there on the floor,
light as last summer's leaves,
arms and legs parchment wrapped twigs,
eyes alert, focused and resigned,
her voice clear, aware and as intelligent
as when I first knew this hard-smoking aunt,
who never wasted a word, or a moment,
on complaints, or idle gossip.
Hers was never an easy life,
but an existence full of good humor,
frank, practical, getting things done.
When her air force husband died
after many years of fighting M.S.,
she told me how much harder life
had suddenly become for her,
and I didn't understand. All that care,
all that looking after, and worry, and now
she was at long-last free of it all.
But here in her room at Perrin's,
waiting for the ambulance ride,
I'm seeing my own life in new ways,
and that of this woman, who has raised
her family, tended her invalid husband.
Her care of them was THE act of love,
and when they had gone away,
and she was left all on her own,
her house became an empty cave
full of ghosts, silence, and pictures of ghosts,
emptied even of the memory of echoes.
Her treasure the echo of remembered voices
in her active and impatient mind.

Growing Backwards

This afternoon at 2:00,
I take my Aunt Aletha
to see Doctor Johnston.
Her children live
many miles from here,
in another province,
and Aletha's car
sits unused outside Perrin's
Marina Villa,
the senior's village,
where she lives
in a small room.
Soon after she moved there,
dehydrated, she became confused,
demented, they called it,
and her children worried
about the car keys she carries
in her carefully guarded purse.
They can't be here
to drive her to the doctor,
who will decide
if she can keep them,
and so I will go,
pretend I don't know.
I've been here before,
years ago with my mother,
and I already mourn
what we both will lose,
this afternoon at Doctor J's.

Early Morning Phone Call

We're packing our bags for Saint John.
We'd written a different screenplay than this
a few short weeks ago: another grandchild
laughter and joy, abundant celebration.
Instead, our son called and his love is covered
in warm blankets in the hospital, labor has begun
and it's premature. He has little hope
and we are going there to console or to grieve.
Zahra, their first, has been anticipating the new
like all first children do with mixed emotions,
and her parents are devastated at this latest news.
They've been warned to expect the worst,
and we want to uncover all the love that's underneath
the present burning in our guts and minds,
and open up our eyes to the joy that awaits.

Saint John's Wort

We start out in driving rain,
mixed with snow,
gale force winds,
water pooled on pavement,
hydroplaning a concern
to add to our worries.
Son's wife about to miscarry,
(a long-sought-after second child).
She is in hospital in Saint John,
and we will see to Zahra,
much beloved first grandchild,
and allow Andrew to visit
with Melanie in the hospital.
We arrive safely and greet
one another, chins held high,
to try and not alarm the child
who clings to her Poppa's legs.
And for ourselves, disappointed,
we need to brew up protection,
to fight those bitter juices
that have invaded our bellies.
After Poppa leaves and Zahra is at play,
we think of Tipton's Weed,
St. John's Wort, hypericum,
herbal relief that solves nothing
but temporary anxiety, panic
spurred by the inevitable,
the unchangeable, a familiar part
of the mixed formula that is life.
The sun shines bright outside,
the storm has had its day,
and Zahra has gone to the park,
to write happy words in chalk,
where her grandmother is drinking in
her wort of healing, frequent laughter.

Should We Go Home For Now

This morning's light
crept softly through our window
from a soft grey sky.
Zahra woke and played quietly
in the room she shares
with *Dora the Explorer*,
most of the extra space
claimed by her pretend friend's
castles and belongings,
pinks and pastels
wash the sharp edges
somewhat from her life.
She is singing now,
still thinks there will be
a new baby in the house.
The parents wait in hospital,
where they have been told
not to hope for happy outcomes,
but Zahra has been spared
such hard news for now.
Today the doctor comes
and they will form a plan,
and we will then decide
to stay here for a while
and be what help we can,
or head for home and wait,
do what must be done back there,
worry from a distance,
and when the end of time
arrives for all of this,
to bring our love back here.

The Slippery Nature of Isms

We are still in Saint John
waiting for word from the hospital.
Zahra has been dropped off
at Prince Charles School,
and we've slipped away
from our responsibilities
for a few moments.

We're sitting at Cora's Restaurant
where they serve great breakfasts,
and I've ordered porridge,
and multi-grain toast,
Sandra, a strawberry Panini,
with lots of whipped cream,
and we both have coffee.
Then cousin Philip phones from home,
Prince Edward Island,
and tells us Aunt Aletha
is in the hospital again.

She fell twice since we left.

We tell him why we are here,
about losing our grandson.

There is silence on his end.

He didn't know, of course,
that we weren't home,
or about our problems here.

He says they'll pray for us.

I thank him, don't mention how prayer
is something I don't often do these days.

My childhood was a blur of isms,
and like Aletha most of them have slipped,
and fallen, and I can't get to them from here.

This Is a Love Song for Henry Andrew

This is a love poem
for my grandson, Henry Andrew,
who was born last night
and lived, I suppose,
for a few moments,
outside the comfort
of his loving mother's womb.
And this is a poem of love,
for my thoughtful son Andrew,
and his lovely, and intelligent wife Mel,
who hoped and dreamed of this birth
for several dozens of long months.
And this is a love poem for Zahra,
who wanted a baby, a sister or brother,
to play a thousand games with her,
and to sing, and run and laugh with her,
on weekend mornings, and weekdays,
after school is done all winter long,
and fifteen loving summers in the sun.
And this is a song of love
for my sensitive and dreamy wife Sandra,
who has loved every child she has ever met,
and every child who has ever lived,
even the short-lived babies of dreams
who weigh less than a dozen ounces,
and have hand and footprints
no larger than the nails on her fingers.

Our Recent Emergencies

Recently our happiness found itself
sandwiched between two tragedies:
top slice, a miscarried, yearned for, child,
bottom slice, a beloved, aging aunt,
whose lung cancer branched into her brain.
The bitter sandwich made palatable,
and sometimes fleetingly delectable,
as we played and laughed with, and at
the antics of our blissful granddaughter,
who wanted a new baby to play with,
as yet oblivious to the tense drama
that occupied her grieving parents,
and had brought us, upset, to their home.
A sandwich garnished by visits to my aunt,
who we'd never gotten to know well
in all the years she'd lived nearby.
And we learned how sweet and kind,
she is, and she'd become our forthright friend.
All this has emerged, from a dual emergency,
a pair of misfortunes, beginning as crisis,
one now ended in tragedy, the second
sure to end the same, in the coming weeks.
Time will bring its standard remedies:
the young marrieds will likely try again,
and perhaps there'll yet be a child or two.
If not, their family will grow in love
for the merry child they have, and one another.
With my cousins, we will weep to see Aletha go,
and she will help us through it all,
in each and every way she can. Memories
will wet and sting our eyes a little while,
and even these will turn more sweet
and fleeting as months and years go by.

Twelve

We spent twelve minutes
in the hospital room
visiting Aunt Aletha.
We arrived and found
signs posted warning us
not to take a step inside,
without gowns, and gloves.
We don those, and masks,
look like Halloween surgeons,
see uncertainty, panic and fear
in her cancer drained eyes.
My memories flood back:
thoughts of mother's
final months, difficult days
leading to the endless vigils
before her drawn out parting,
twelve short years ago.
Aletha tears at a gauze bandage
tied across a plastic intravenous port
she's been anxious to yank out,
as we explained a dozen times
she should not do, she'd bleed
and it would hurt her,
as nurses probed her rolling veins,
when they struggled to fix her up.
But she could not stop herself,
her frown set in pure frustration.
A dozen years she's lived alone,
and today's lively mixed-up roommate
thrives on constant, mindless
chatter my aunt cannot shut out.
What remains of earthbound time
now confused and rather pointless
as she is packed and ready to leave.
She is a woman of simple religion,
and her long-dead husband waits
with a dozen of her siblings
in a place she has yearned for,
these many dozen days and nights,
and she is and has always been,
an impatient, and practical woman.

Waking Aunt Aletha

This morning cousin Nancy
finds her mother Aletha sleeping,
as my funny, palliative aunt does
so much, these past few weeks.
She hadn't touched her breakfast,
and even when she is awake
the spark has gone from her eyes.
One of them is permanently dilated,
systems are clearly shutting down.
Nancy and the ever-cheerful doctor
wear yellow throw-away gowns,
blue gauze masks, and rubber gloves,
as they stand beside the dozing woman
in her rumpled bed. Her bruised legs
bare, she has removed her sweat pants,
part of some demented scheme
to finally free herself from this place.
Lung cancer has spread to her brain
and affecting how she thinks and feels.
Doctor Johnston's bright voice calls,
"Aletha, can you hear me? It's me,
Doctor Johnston. Are you awake?"
She repeats herself several times more,
smiles patiently at the worried Nancy.
Finally, Aletha stirs in her bed
but her fading eyes stay closed tight.
"I'm dead," she says matter-of-factly.
Next morning she appears to be sleeping
as daughter Nancy looks at her.
Then, "Take me to the graveyard," she says.
Why would we do that? Nancy asks, unnerved.
"Figure it out for yourself," then she chuckles.
Death comes peacefully a few long days later,
her family gathers with much tears and laughter.

Through This Rain

Through this cloak of rain,
I can see the sunshine,
and the blue of sky.
Through the dark of night,
I see the moist of morning.
Through the days of dying
I can see new life emerge
in the dreams of children,
and my grandchild's song.
The created earth
is a bittersweet blend
of all sides of things,
which have their place
in an underlying plan.
There is joy in everything,
even in the pain
that warns of hot stoves,
and freezing feet,
the onset of illness
in need of succor,
that warns of time's end,
and stirs the living
to value each precious moment,
every gift that life affords,
until the tearful joys
of sharing in a dear one's leaving,
cocooned in total love.

Renewing November

It's Friday the thirteenth
and I'm thinking about
renewing November.
Up to now the focus
has been on autumn,
on the closing down
of things, falling leaves,
the final steps and falls
of a long and decent life,
the miscarriage of a longed for child.
Yesterday I mulched
great yellowed drifts
of faded fallen leaves,
now turned to fragments
lost among the yet green lawn.
The morning sun blinds and warms
from a clear blue firmament.
This day began with trumpets,
a mighty flock of southbound geese
saluting a glorious sunrise.
Sandra is reading happily
beside the dozing white cat
and we will head out shortly,
aware that every season
has its seasons, every shadow
is the herald of a warming sun.