

## Poetry

*A selection of poems drawn from my work as a children's cancer doctor, and collected in my anthology, "Attending"*

A dedication to the Care Partners in the first Art for Health program in Antigonish, May, 2009:

### **The Milling Frolic (Guest Artist, Kolten MacDonnell)**



#### **Failte!**

In the work and play of the afternoon, sixteen sets of hands link up in the rhythm of the band that circles the trestle table, and feel together the cloth's softening beneath their kneading knuckles' drum. Some in the circle have lost this sense or that: his sound, her sight, her speech, his gait. but all can still touch, and be touched in turn, as hands and feet rat-a-tat-tat in freestyle scat, uniting in the frisk and frolic of the milling.

## *Begot*

Conceived early in life: sprightly sperm  
meets blushing ovum, one thing leading  
to another. Call it *psychoneuroimmunology*:  
going to the party with dad and  
coming home with mom. Two unicellular gametes  
(X and Y let's call them) toting up to one  
bicellular zygote: yours truly and glad to be here.

During the *blitzkrieg* it was: May 41,  
*Spitfire vs Messerschmitt*, quite a game of  
cricket over those two heads cuddled in bed  
in the upstairs-front: 23 Park Avenue, Golders Green,  
London, NW3, two gossamer twists entwining  
their DNA, as I set out on my sleep of replication,  
to dream *Rapunzel* dreams, to flip *de temps en temps*

the odd somersault like some premature astronaut,  
to tune into news from the front. Not good at first:  
Pearl Harbor, Bulgarian, Russian occupations,  
Rommel at Tripoli, gas 12 cents per, a new car up to  
850 bucks. Getting better: Roosevelt back for his  
third term, General Doolittle's B-17's over Tokyo,  
Dumbo opening in New York, Joe Louis ko-ing Buddy Baer.

While I fattened over Xmas, popped out to  
three-sisterly applause late February 42, four weeks  
behind Mohammed Ali and four ahead of  
Aretha Franklin: a twenty-five-trillion-cell blueprint  
all present and correct, until my foreskin-trimming  
on the kitchen table. I've perked up since, had  
my share of *psychoneuroimmuno*-whatever.

## *Leaving Mother*

We slipped, trampled, tripped  
on oak roots and knots, poked  
through a mat of burned-brown  
pine thorn and rotting conker,  
autumn damp in August; we little ones  
casting away the littler ones that  
flew at us, as if casting off spells  
that would lay orphanhood upon us.

Over us, arms arced in safety, a canopy  
of chestnut, elm, beech, mulberry,  
safe haven for solitary travelers: no tigers  
nor bears, nor signposts either; before we  
moved ahead oblivious, hoisted her  
four limbs between us, swung her with the  
abandon of children whose mother would  
never commit the treason of abandonment;

as she hid her knowing pain in  
chuckles, as her cheap print skirt  
rucked up, flashing on my 12-year-old sight  
astounding golden cami-knickers;  
then, tiring, stopped to rest while we  
rushed on upon the stolen steps  
of night thieves creeping away through  
the shades of the dying afternoon.

### *Children's Doctor*

I began by aligning bowed bones;  
learned the trick from a Casualty<sup>1</sup> nurse  
who lacked the license but took license anyway,  
there being no other mentor.

A vain and sloppy art it was:  
their pliant ulnas lined up straight whatever I did.  
So I learned another skill: cartooning stiffening casts,  
my clumsy craft surmounting puckers and whimpers.

Later we'd play, as I chased them  
over and under cribs for *H-and-P's*<sup>2</sup>:  
outrageously fit-to-bust, go-for-broke,  
sweet-as-nut playful they were.

So where do they go to, these young ones?  
And where do grown-ups come from?

<sup>1</sup> *English equivalent of ER*

<sup>2</sup> *History-taking and physical examinations*

## *Consensus and Consent*

Kyle's illness can we think be cured.  
But its refractoriness has stacked  
the odds against him, saying he's lucky  
to see his tenth birthday, his next  
he may honor in a more celestial place  
(wherever that may be). True, some more  
experimental (whatever that may mean)  
treatments await our testing.

Yesterday's conference brought us  
(two faculty and a fellow, three residents  
and three nurses, a social worker and two parents -  
an ethics committee *ad hoc*) consensus:  
our - and his - best course would be  
three weeks' therapy that (the fellow  
quoting from this month's literature)  
reportedly holds promise.

Kyle, consulted today, and glad to be asked  
about testing such *terra incognita*,  
and *infirmia*, says: *No, I want to stay home.*  
So be it. He has, we all concede, reached  
the age of consent (whenever that might be).  
We feel, all in all, taking everything  
under consideration, relief that we've  
happened upon a decision.

## *Waiting*

Dominic rests on his airbubble cot,  
awaiting life's flight from its earthly beat.  
He has wearied of searching the way to exist,  
of the tubes that fuse to the bag and the pump,  
these faceless monitors of the clock  
that count his mortal minutes out.

We caregivers charter our critical route  
between a stark place and a brittle rock,  
while his body lays open its faltering stock  
in freefalling spin from heart to gut,  
disgorging its wherewithal and prop  
with which we fumble to hold it up.

His father's run missing in the wood

to nurse his gun and suckle his guilt,  
while his mother stretches her vigil out  
not letting her mind embrace it yet,  
beholds in his eye the guttering life  
that still will not douse its callow light.

For what does he linger? Till this spark  
has no more tinder to keep him lit?  
Or the organ-dead conspire to draw  
his soul to the dark? Or will he wait  
till this woman who bends so close above  
can finally offer his spirit up?

### ***Protective Isolation***

*(I remember every patient who's occupied that room:*

*---ICU nurse)*

These sterile layers of air encase her, tenuous as thoughts  
that spark poems. On this parchment she pens an epiphany,  
to lay a cloth of flesh upon her sanctum's barrenness.

Her muse: have her predecessors healed and borne off their  
mortal burden? Or does their presence still share in this  
meager space with her, hosts and guests, a lingering assembly

of ghosts that take their turn unraveling the drama  
of this poem she lives? Can then her muse reform these  
shadows, fragments of the universal mind, to substance?

She feels these shades curled with her about her pillows, lifting  
the pain, easing it around the edge of this cool draft, blowing it  
clear with the motes that swirl away beneath her door.

### *Elegy*

You're newly dead, *sans* wig, seventeen-year-old virgin whom  
I'd loved. Your face is almond wax, preamble to gelling and decay.

Your mother clasps my hand as I kiss your bald head. She has been  
engrossed with the new baby, you with beating the odds: the

isolation of illness estranging you, although cancer is family business.  
At first, learning it had recurred, you were steadfast: *No more chemo.*

But, sensing the creeping loss of bladder and legs, bit-by-bit  
you'd come around, readied yourself for ablation, for the chance at life.

As the fight ignited you'd stayed wigged and cool, mind set.  
Until it ended, and you'd said goodbye to me. You had spoken

little to me before, but they told me you liked my silences, trusted me,  
my faith there was some purpose to this wasted resource of a life.

### *Cell Shed*

I lean in among the plastic tubes besetting you,  
my breath voluntary, yours urged.

Our cells mingle each with the other's,  
spilling in spindrift of air-water-ice between mouths.

You, going, dying, take my life to rest.  
I, living, left, draw in, exhale your seed.

## *Joy*

Five AM: they call me through July-night-end rain  
to head-pounding pulse-falling Dan, of the  
platelets long dead, and no Asian donor in town  
better than a *C-match*<sup>1</sup> save sister Joy, of the  
six-year-old veins too frail for sixteen-gauges.

And his last knowing act, as blood floods his  
ventricles on CAT scan and the seizures begin,  
is to sing solace to mom, dad, nurse, me,  
Joy and himself, into the rising dawn. Joy  
watches the stifling of maternal sobs

(woman of Xian, inured against public sorrow)  
but, unschooled in this, cries her own holy water,  
while clutching mom's hand for last rites,  
while painting my portrait in the passage,  
while breakfasting on scrambled egg, choco-milk,

while asking in her thrush's voice:

*Why must my brother die? Is he an angel yet?*  
*Are you my friend now?* So Nurse Sonnie asks:  
*Do you want to say goodbye?* She: *Can I hear him*  
*with the stethoscope?* But her daddy grasps her,

bears her back, nor do these parents touch their  
fading son farewell, for fear they trap his soul  
in our world. Instead, she says goodbye to me,  
paint from her portrait sticky on the pulp of  
each finger as the elevator shuts between us.

<sup>1</sup>*Matching for blood donor compatibility*

### *Breaking News*

In the cancer clinic people brush us as we seek  
the sanctuary of an empty room and visit death together.

Hi: (let me speak only to sentence-end not,  
anxious and artless, beyond, as if longer could delay it);

As my mouth opens abandon-memories chill me,  
and your real and present anger: (I'll smile, stay light, not dodge;

You deserve that I look you in the eye):  
Karen, dying's fine, I say (to myself: what do I know?)

As you, knowing death too well, assuage me;  
you fear not dying but doing it (who wouldn't?) in diapers.

So off you go, share your final glimmerings out;  
your grad-school money will pay the funeral

Save for a last letting-go-round Disney;  
you'll binge too on allotting your two-decades' treasures

(death like life being costly: justly so,  
two such precious things). You're shy telling Josh:

I still (presumptuously) love you; in time you'll  
ride, in morphine-trails, your last carousel.

### *Candor*

At eight years old, the cancer running rampage,  
Joe perches on my office sofa edge  
thigh-to-thigh with mom  
(who has enjoined me: *Square with him*).

But I beat about the bush a bit,  
then come at last to it: Joey:  
you're going to die, go to heaven -  
words lost in his howl, like a wolf's,

the hurling of his body into  
the yellow print dress's recesses.  
Three minutes at least of this, this keening,  
as we eye each other panicked:



*whatever else was right to do this wasn't it.*  
Then, as instantly, on a long-drawn-in  
breath's end, he stops, swivels out, flicks a look,  
spots tears on cheeks of mom, dad, nurse, me,

determines he's grieved enough: time to  
lighten up, knowing me at other times a joker,  
a wearer of odd socks, funny noses. He spies  
memos, charts, photocopies, journals,

jetsam of an urgent life, bespattering my carpet,  
and becomes the stand-up comic,  
offers his own joke: *Didn't your mom*  
*teach you to pick up after yourself?*

### ***Flowers and Soldiers***

An ill-timed final frost felled my March azalea regiments;  
a happening no more rational than the child's death.

Last night they'd paraded, stems erect, my guard of rose and crimson,  
shedding their wind-jarred petal-deck to mark my frontier posts.

Like this chosen child they'd shimmered shortly in an early sun.  
Now my nursery box brims with their brave residue.

Their soldier paint has run to rust in the crevices of cedar chip,  
they who left without notice, unwilling that age should wrinkle them.

### *Rx*

So you want to be healthier?  
Try falling head-over-heels  
in love with yourself; check yourself  
in the mirror and just ask yourself:  
*How did I get to be so gorgeous?*

Try giggling at nothing in particular,  
and for no special reason that you  
or anyone else can figure out,  
except that your mother told you  
not to. Do this *prn*<sup>1</sup> with unlimited refills.

Hang out with children some,  
the younger the better, and best of all

ones for whom you're not  
*accountable*. Let them call the shots  
on what you all get up to.

Be downright wild, woolly and  
*irresponsible* for a spell: rolling  
downhill in the park in the rain  
in your best suit might just cut it,  
in company with similarly suited ones.

Have a tantrum in your car,  
complete with extravagantly irreverent  
gesticulations and Groucho's nose  
in place; they'll be quick to shunt you  
to the front at the stoplight.

Try more naps, expressly at  
the downhill point of your day;  
and how about doing nothing at all  
for ten minutes *bid*<sup>2</sup> or *tid*,<sup>3</sup>  
and doing it slowly?

Have you doodled with  
paint and silly putty lately?  
Fiddled in puddles, chattered in rain?  
I'd be glad to write you a prescription.  
Can't harm, might help.

<sup>1</sup>*as needed*; <sup>2</sup>*twice daily*; <sup>3</sup>*thrice daily*

## *Dying*

Time to let your life out for a billow:  
to gust your antic rainbow kite at death,  
making it less drab, less bland, less dead;

time to dose yourself a physic of mirth,  
mania, momentousness, my dear one;  
to leave the work of living for the play of dying;

time to turn handstands into your closing with it,  
to bounce on it with bow and curtsy, clasp  
its hands in yours, swirl it into the *sarabande*,

so your play may end in merrily ever after:  
comedy's as vital a thing as tragedy.