



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Now I Lay Me Down to Fight* by Katy Bowser Hutson.

Text ©2023 by Katherine Jane Hutson. Art by Jodi Hays. Used by permission.

Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com



BEGINNING

*M*ake no mistake: without treatment, this is fatal.” In order to save my life, my oncologist made it quite clear that without her help, this was how I would die. There was no optimistic assurance that I was going to live. That’s one thing I had that most people don’t have: knowledge of how I would die. Maybe.

Cancer is a memento mori. I’ve had a sturdy stare down with death, which changed me. To the best of my knowledge, I don’t have cancer now. But if you’ve had cancer, you know you’re never free of it. Not really. I often tell people that I feel like Frodo Baggins after he’s been wounded by a wraith—the hurt will always be with me. Or maybe like the apostle Paul, with the thorn in his flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7). That feels a bit holier. There was a point, after all, when a person literally could put their finger in the wound in my side. Although it wasn’t advisable.

Five years down the road, I still have lots of souvenirs from treatment. My torso is a battlefield of scars. I can’t quite

Beginning

feel the tips of my toes, a parting shot from chemo. The skin on my chest is still fused to my breastbone in places. The surgeon had to sever nerves in order to remove lymph nodes under my arm, so my son likes to run his finger down the back of my arm where I can't quite feel to figure out where the feeling starts and give me the heebie-jeebies. And I just get tired easily.

I wrote these thoughts for me, to survive. To fling out the fear and sadness onto a page where I could look at them and have more control and understanding. Where I could admit them and yell them and pray them. I hope they help you, too. I wouldn't presume to know the ways cancer wounds others, any more than I'd presume to know how to treat it. But sorrow shared is half sorrow, right? And joy shared is double joy. Strangely, joy can even thread itself through terrible things. I'll go as far as to say that some joys can only be known in sorrow.



FUMBLE FINGERED

Written a few days before diagnosis

This world doesn't work well for us
God spins it just fine,
But we are fumble fingered.
The cells are broken deep down.

We fuss with fixing spaceships with chopsticks
And numb our nerves
With pixels and ethers.

PREPARATION

*Written the day before diagnosis, while
attending the Martha's Vineyard Institute
of Creative Writing*

I go home tomorrow, leave Martha's Vineyard
Where I sleep till I wake
Catbirds and mourning doves sing at 4:30 a.m.
Go sleep, go sleep
Here no heavy little blond hot water lies across my trunk,
Cheek to cheek
Just breathing my waking breath.
“Hey mama. I cuddle you.”
Then the honey haired six year old stumbles in
Rubbing the sleep out, complaining it's bright
The fighting begins, jockeying for the cuddliest spot on
mama.
The three year old hits the six year old,
The six year old howls indignantly

Three chickens wait—two taffeta black sheened girls
Golden Little Miss Muffin who doesn't know she's
beautiful
I am their dealer, doling out oats and mealworms
My husband who sits with me by the fire out back at night:
He has the most words at the end of the day.

I've made habits these past five days
I wake, make coffee, drink it, dress
Walk my brain and body a mile to the bus
Past privileged sheep and high-born horses
Round the rocky curve where
Three centuries or so of ghosts
Whose headstones are wind and rain worn
Eroding like salty shores
Easily erased from current memory
I've been etching something this week, more ephemeral
Than the final tributes to Athea, Isadora, Adelaide and all
those Mayhews.
I am wrangling words into a daisychain
To garland my daughter's brain
To whisper in her perfect ear
When she's leaning her bony shoulder in my ribs
Cheek on my chest
"Mama, tell me about Jack and Eliza"
I'll unzip my suitcase and bring her home a seashell and a
story.

MEETING MY ONCOLOGIST

Waiting waiting in the room of a doctor
The very good recommended doctor
As cancer is in my body
I wait for her, my general, to tell me the lay of
The battlefield.
Hello, so thankful to meet you:
Can you save my life?
If ever a first impression felt important.
All of the previous stories we both have.
Do you know?
How many battles waging?
How many fronts lost?
Can we rally?
Can we retaliate?
Can we win the day?
Do I live?
This beige room has no clues.

I looked her up
She digs deep into new questions.
She has children.
She looks kind.

Words, I know.
I know people.
Not cells much.
Not treasonous cells.
Not heroic cells.
But I know the fall, and the overcome.
A low timpani roll rising to crescendo.
We are past the cymbals and trumpets
In the long, certain denouement
Fraught with casualties
Foes getting in punches on the run.

EN ROUTE TO CANAAN/JERICHO

Cancer and its accompanying stats
Can lead a person into the foolish wrestling match
Of a negotiation with God.
If I beat the thirty-three percent odds of dying
in the next three years,
Can I stick around to finish teaching my children?
How about writing my book?
How about to travel with Kenny?
Can I forgo my “high chance of recurrence”
And be there when my community needs me to speak bravely
Or create sacrificially?
Or hold my daughter’s hand?

Body, soul, listen up:
This is the same damned deal as before.
You’ve always had a death sentence.
You’ve always had the same odds.
You didn’t know what they were,
But now someone has given you some vague lottery ticket
pulled from a front car tire,
Pulpy and pitted.
But, for all you know,
you could still get hit by a drunk driver,
Struck by lightning
Fall dead of an aneurysm

Your cells could still go singingly along in symphony
til one hundred
and ten
Blissfully barely blinking through benign decades,
Blessedly bearing burdens you have enough for at every turn.
Which will embolden your prose,
Which will sharpen your sight,
Which will add pique to your poems,
Which will add intensity to your touch,
Kindness, forthrightness to your mouth,
Empathy to your eyes?
Which will draw love out of you?

Apparently: this poisonous path.
Bare me, bear me, Lord.
Pie Jesu, parry with this pilgrim
I hereby give up this particular thumb-wrestle
I am laid on my back
It was never any different since you took me in hand:
Every hair on my head, every hair broken off.
I have always malfunctioned in a malignant mire
And you have always raised me, wiped me, breathed in me,
Strapped me on the back of a donkey and taken me to the
Four Seasons
With medical miracle makers for my wounds.
You stuffed a million bucks in my pocket
And said you'd come back for me in a bit:
Order the room service.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/now-i-lay-me-down-to-fight