

WHOLISTIC HEALING PUBLICATIONS

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POETRY

Ric Masten
Words & one-liners

END LINE



More than windmills to tilt with...

I've always been
 a yin/yang — front /back — clear/blur
 up/down — life/death kind of guy
 my own peculiar duality being
 philosopher slash hypochondriac

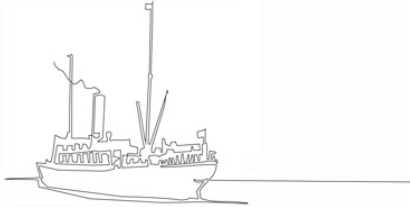
win win characteristics
 when you've been diagnosed
 with a life threatening disease

finally the hypochondriac
 has more than windmills to tilt with
 the philosopher arming himself
 with exactly the proper petard
 an explosive statement
 found in an e-mail message
 beneath the signature
 of a cancer combatant's name
 a perfect end line wily and wise
 quote: I ask God:
 "How much time do I have before I die?"
 "Enough to make a difference."
 God replies
 +++

AFTERWORD — Although I have posted END LINE before (four years ago), after what I have recently been through it needed to be aired again.

When I was first diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer the very first email I received on the subject came from a stranger, a fellow PCa traverer, who's mother was a friend of mine and had written her son telling him about my situation. This would have been nine and a half years ago. I remember the message was one of encouragement but the sentence under his signature knocked me for a loop. It was just what I needed to hear. And although I am a non-theist the end line has become my mantra - something I strive to live up to even when the odds seem to be against me.

DEMENTIA



Almost imperceptibly the ship began to move
away...

when I was 19
my parents went around the world
leaving
from the San Francisco marina on a freighter
with passenger accommodations
back in those days
when the gang plank had been raised
and the ship was ready to depart
the passengers
would line up at the rail looking down
throwing serpentine
colorful paper streamers

to friends and family on the pier below
we would hold tight to one end
while those we hold dear
held on to their end
of these
slender fragile ribbons
then slowly
almost imperceptibly
the ship began to move away
the paper connections
snapping
one by one
as the steamer headed out into the bay

after fifty five years together
my cancer is incurable
and your memory is fading
which makes me acutely aware
of time circling the drain
running out of the clock
wondering whether
the love of my life
will slip over the horizon
before I am forced to leave the dock
+++

AFTERWORD — I have been putting off writing DEMENTIA for about six months. Usually when bad things happen they immediately become inspirations, grist for my "poetic observation" mill. As you know I have raked a lot of chestnuts out of the advance prostate cancer fire. But when Billie Barbara was diagnosed with the beginnings of dementia I froze.

So far only her short-term memory seems to be effected. Her long-term memory is fine. I mean, she still can remember every thing I ever did wrong for fifty-five years. It's just that she doesn't remember what day it is or who she just talked to on the phone, that sort of thing. And I can't let annoyance creep into my voice when she doesn't remember or I have to answer the same questions again, or it upsets her. This poem is the only one I have written that Billie will never see.

I must have started working on this piece twenty five times but my fear wouldn't let me keep at it. I told a few people about the memory that seemed to explain how I felt, and after I returned home from the hospital I knew it had to be written and the words simply poured out of me in about thirty minutes. Billie Barbara and I don't have much to say to each other these days but we tell each other we love each other all the time and hold hands in bed when we go to sleep. .

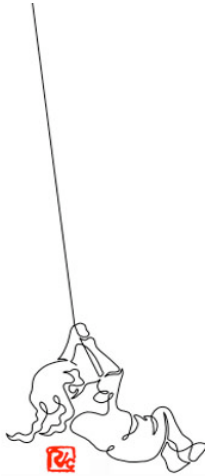
Years ago, a wonderful old couple lived close to us in the Carmel Highlands — Ephraim and Rosa. When Ephraim died at 84 Rosa was in early stages of Alzheimer's, for over a year she would wake each morning and ask for Ephraim only to be told he had died. For over a year she lost her husband every morning – all the more reason for me not to leave the dock before Billie Barbara slips away.

FOLLOW-UP to DEMENTIA - This particular piece brought in far and away the most response that any poem has received during these nine years of posting weekly WORDS AND ONE-LINERS. A dear friend, Paul Sawyer, took the time to send me a snail mail hand written message and a poem telling me that he would never speak to me again if I didn't read DEMENTIA and the "Afterword" to Billie Barbara.

"Shit man," he said, "Don't you know a love poem when you write one?" So I read it to Billie and we both held on to each other and shed many tears. Thanks Paul!

ON THE MOUNTAIN

"'Sky flying' — Watch me Grandpa!"



last summer whenever possible
my visiting granddaughter Cara
would worm her tiny hand into mine
and like Hansel and Gretel
we'd strike out from the house
up the "Barking dog trail"
to the "Creaky swings"
don't you love the labels
little children put on things?
and after a few "Sky flying"
"Watch me Grandpa!"s
it was on to the "Sneaky table"
where hidden in the shade
beneath a giant live oak tree
we would split
the forbidden can of Coke I brought
"Damn it Dad her teeth will rot!"

rested and refreshed
we then ascend the "Slidey steep"
to check the water level in the "Water keep"
to lift the lid and take a peek
then down the trail in single file we go
through the "Witchy woods"
all the way to Arizona which is what
my spouse has dubbed the shack
she uses as her dream shop and studio
Grandma it seems
also has a knack for naming things
"If anyone calls tell them I'm in Arizona."
next stop — the family memorial garden

where we solemnly commune
with the trees Kim and Emil have become
chanting softly as we pass
"From ashes to ashes to flowering plum."

then wending our way
along a stretch of "Dusty dirt"
we search for yesterdays footprints
covering them with todays
"Backward walking" sometimes
"To fool our enemies and friends."

and always during the final leg
of this backyard expedition
my companion lags behind
little Miss Slowpoke gathering specimens
repeating after me the name
of every trail side shrub and tree
eucalyptus — sticky monkey
lilac — sage — madrone
and "Don't touch that it's poison oak!"
then suddenly: "We're home!"

last summer Cara and I collected
and polished these moments
leaving them along the path like pebbles
to be used in the distant future
the way a whiff of cigar smoke
brings my grandfather back to poke about
in the garden with his walking stick
the way my grandmothers face
magically appears
at the taste of peppermint
her watchful presence close at hand
whenever I shake sand from something
that has been to the beach

I know that on some faraway tomorrow
a sip of Cola on a hot day —
a pinch of sage —
the creaking sound a rope swing makes
these things with Cara's help
will bring me back to life again
and thankful as I am
for such life extending crumbs

sadly I also know that the cigar smoke
and peppermint trick
can only be done by me —
in a couple of generations it all becomes
a banquet for the crows
+++

.....AFTERWORD — What gets this Grandpa is that the five-year-old in this poem is graduating from Princeton this Spring. She is also finishing her first novel. She is an eager student, a fine artist, a skilled varsity saber fencer, and an extraordinary chef. When I ask her what she is going to do next year she hasn't the foggiest idea. That's my granddaughter, so please pardon me for bragging just a bit.

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