

MEDICINE CIRCLE

GEORGE BASCOM

CARPE DIEM

Something has left me feeling diffident,
apologetic. Like a country bumpkin
who has lost his way among
the city-bred sophisticates. Something —
maybe this damned cancer —
has me asking pardon for myself.

Perhaps it
is the certainty that someday, near or not so near,
this prostate will catch up with me,
will lay me low and of no earthly use
to anyone. I am bashful at once,
an onlooker at the affairs
which the not-yet condemned
conduct so cheerfully. I know
what to expect. My God, I've
cared for dozens in this drill.
I know, and yet a vagrant cheerfulness
sings out amid the gloom. And feeling
fine right now –
no pain, no weakness, no fatigue –
I skip down the stairs
like a mountain goat.

I WITH MY DEATH

I with my death discharge of all standing debts.
I lie me down beyond all hopes and harms.
This final all-engrossing loss offsets
the carnage of my violence and charms.
No hushed confessional the ashes here,
no therapeutic couch or conference hall,
no facile friend nor self-absolving prayer,
no verdict furnished with a gavel fall.
This sober settlement of my expense,

this last requital now of man and God
once made in coin of failing heart and sense
will let me settle debt-free to the sod.

For some offenses breathe with every breath
And are unpayable except by death.

METASTATIC DISEASE

I feel
like the butt of a bad joke,
the victim of
a humorless and unrelenting
prankster.
This joke has gone on too long.
I want to shout, "Give it up.
Nobody is laughing."

POST OP

She was trying to bounce back
from several operations which
might — or might not — have done the job.
She had a crippled girl, unsteady spouse, a son
with problems, too. She
was depressed, worried that the cancer might
recur and mercilessly
take her off.

I thought the prospect
of a miserable death
accounted for her joylessness.
It was, God knows, reason enough to put
grim lines around her mouth. But,
no, it was leaving her husband and kids
that got to her. Tears ran down her cheeks,
her face dissolved. What would they do
without her?

She lit up the landscape of hell
with her love.

SEMINAR AT BRECKENRIDGE

The peaks are frozen gold
above the gritty streets. Boots
grate briskly on the way
to lectures about lungs.
The holy heights
cry down to use, but inside under tinted glass
we file like mourners
to the conference room.

NOCTURNE

I understand —
I'm running out of time for
triviality and cleverness.
Dying takes some thought.
At night, lying behind closed lids
and in the soft safe comfort
of the bed and God,
I find a peace that seems
to lead on toward timelessness;
toward — can it be so? — a state
where space and eons do not matter,
where the beginning and end
are close as now
and part of it.

DEI GRATIA

I did my job.
Looking back, reviewing all,
I'd not change much.
Oh, I would have stopped by oftener, I guess,
to answer questions from the kids —
maybe put to rest some fears about — oh,
contagion or the dark undertain working out of death.
We did control her pain and after several days
at last subdued the awful nausea.
I held her hand one night
and while she wept, managed
not to say a lot of damn fool things.
I pronounced her when she died,

said what I should,
drove home.

At the funeral,
impatient and annoyed,
I found the parking lot was full,
the church filled to the rafters.
I didn't know so many knew her,
hadn't thought so many cared.
High in the balcony and numb,
I mused and drowsed through hymn and prayer
while far below from time to time
one of her daughters broke into sobs that
ricocheted from cross to organ pipes.
Halfway through the eulogy
between the salvos of her grief,
politely open-eyed, respectably erect,
I felt a sudden sting.
My eyes filled without warning
and as I blinked against the tears,
I thought, "Thank God!"

INCURABLE

Like weathered barn in fading fog
death out there grows steadily more clear.
The dogged feet go on to
an inexorable detente.
Hope is a little fire
That flickers with uncertain light
Beneath a boundless sky.
And I beside it drift
through night and day between
the peace of stone-deep rest
and aching wakefulness.

DEPARTMENTAL FUNCTION

It was a faculty affair
all intelligence and wit
sherry balancing
on slender stemmed bon mots
laughter rising like the fragrance
of rare flowers
and everywhere horn rims clashing
like the crash of antlered elk.

MEDICINE CIRCLE

Then it was 1933

And we were climbing a great
grassy hill — Hurd's Hill —
above the claim my father
knew as his home from 1904-1912.
From thirteen to twenty-one
he helped farm that place.
Summer and fierce winter
it was home to him
(and still was home although
the buildings were long gone).
He and friends had sledded
down the long steep hillside
we were climbing in the sun.
Atop the hill he led us
to a medicine circle of round glacial stones,
red and blue, set carefully,
still undisturbed. We
stood there silently, and
now I think of that dark
figure sitting there in hope,
seeking visions from beyond,
word from the Great Spirit.

And now it is 1993

And I am climbing the great
hill of life, worn and
in some pain, nearing
the summit where I shall
place my own small

ring of memories like stones.
Around me in a perfect circle
I shall place the sight and
touch of those I
love beyond all life.
And I shall place the
memories of paths and skies
and mountains, trees,
and animals, floods, and
flowers, music, laughter,
snow and lovely words: all
worn smooth by years of
handling and love. And
journey done, all striving
past, in no great haste —
for now with no time left
there is now time for
every needful thing —
I shall seat myself
and wait on Him
in Whom each hour and breath
begins.