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## In the Mouth of the Wolf: Cancer and Its Contingencies

*Steven Gore*

We feel his ivory teeth, we feel his head shake, we feel his warm drool and the rhythmic trot of his lean legs and padded feet. We smell gamey breath blowing from his wet nose and through his teeth, and we breathe musty dust rising from the trail ...

... and look sideways at the world passing by.

We puzzle over whether the wolf has the sort of mind that can change, whether he prefers some of us over others, whether he gives virtue its due, whether he will reward our mindfulness or our courage in the face of death by releasing his grip and pursuing, instead, more deserving prey.

But then we watch other wolves carry away those far more mindful and courageous than ourselves, while casting only disinterested glances at the petty, oblivious, and cowardly.

We ask ourselves: can the wolf hear our prayers and oaths and offers? And if he can hear, will he listen? And if he listens, will he reward our faithfulness and our devotion by returning us to the life from which he snatched us? And will he

then kneel before us and massage away the teeth marks in our flesh and deliver to us the apology the Hebrew God owed to Job?

But then we watch other wolves dine on the reborn and the unrepentant alike, on the humble and the proud, on the holy and the profane, and they do so in buildings that are not churches, but are sometimes named for saints. And within those walls, where prayers to the infinite fail to resonate against the machines of medicine, we see the wolves' victims humbled by the limits of the possible.

We conclude, in the end, that the wolf—our wolf now—is simply a mindless creature who knows nothing of fairness or piety. We decide he's an instinctual being who must—must—by force of nature flinch at the sight of the swooping eagle aiming for his throat or the hunter aiming for his heart, and then drop us to the forest floor and slink away cowering and defeated.

But then we watch other wolves rise up in defiance, standing with their paws down on the throats of their victims and howling skyward. And we hear a chorus of their hungry brethren on the cliff edge above and see them silhouetted against the dying light, pacing and prowling and peering down into the shadowed valley, depriving all who pass there of comfort and all who remain there of peace.

In time, we come to understand that these fantasies of barter and release and escape contain no truth, for the wolf is our wolf, and he must feed on us or die. And until he kills us, or dies along with us at the hands of another, he cannot let us go.

Pity the poor wolf, if you must—not as a being with hopes and fears and will—but only as you’d pity any other act or thing of nature: a grassy slope stripped by a landslide, a redwood uprooted by the wind, a storm that failed to reach its destructive perfection.

But don’t pity us, the prey, for although we feel the ivory teeth against our flesh and the head shake and the warm drool and the rhythmic trot of his lean legs and padded feet, we also sometimes feel the irony of his whiskers’ tickle ...  
... and learn from a world turned sideways.

Steven Gore, a writer in the San Francisco Bay Area, was diagnosed with lymphoma in 2000 and was in treatment from 2009 until 2011. His sixth novel, *Night is the Hunter*, will be published in February, 2015 (HarperCollins).  
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