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## What Comes After Transplantation

*Deirdre Hennings*

### Life after Transplant

*Inspired by Tyebimba Jess*

Tetchy at the wheel, you blare the horn  
as you yell expletives  
goaded by GVHD, after an SUV cuts us off

disgusted by my dawdling, fed up with  
side effects (eyes stinging, mouth enflamed)  
Why can't I see you need some fun?

Finally at the Director's Guild  
squinting at *Variety*, don't look at me so  
for an apology you know you won't get—

At home, mollified by the film, you're calmer  
when a tiny puffball hops in the elevator, spins,  
bumps your sore leg, you totter and shriek,

stagger to our door and spit  
*You should have stopped it! I almost fell!*  
You pitch your body on our bed,

cry out your terror of never walking again,  
your career over,  
no way to help you do what you do best.

I cringe when the car peels out  
I'd rather not be here  
you're so moody again, so often angry now—

whatever I'd promised, long forgotten—and  
worse, I resent agreeing to see such a silly film  
like *Diary of a Teenage Girl*.

In the lobby I see old Max, never  
glum, always a wink, never an excuse—  
some joke—but when lights decline, I find you.

\* \* \*

I'm finally able to smile at such cuteness  
dancing in delight! But when the Pekinese jumps  
I shrink as you scream

in front of a stranger,  
as if I could control a 3-month-old puppy,  
as if I am to blame for all hurt,

as if I could prevent another disaster  
I feel chained  
no way out except going it alone.

You sob when another thought strikes:  
Sex gone too? No more  
“You’re macho man, put my ass to sleep?” or  
not yet, not now. No waiting ‘til Shavuot,  
see if God notices! You must fix  
what’s broken:

you limp to the living room,  
put on a record  
we hug and sway to Bernstein’s lyrics:

*We’ll do the best we know.  
We’ll build our house and chop our wood  
and make our garden grow.*

Can’t afford to move, not in LA,  
can’t start over. Not as if  
I’ll meet another wunderkind like you  
to encourage me, help me, love me  
so much. Instead, I choose to rub  
your heart, then

I go to the kitchen to start dinner,  
grateful to see you smile  
and I think of the old Ruth Etting song:

*I wanna be loved by you  
just you and nobody else but you  
I wanna be loved by you alone*

*Note:* Contrapuntal poems offer two opposing voices presented in mirror images of one another, to be read left column first, then right column, then reading both voices together across the page.

## Immunocompromised

You're more susceptible than a newborn;  
one snuffle and you're back in the ER.

So, I must wear a mask 24/7 in the house  
Lysol each faucet after every touch,  
come trotting like a servant  
no matter how tired  
sleep separately  
watch fear  
crater  
us

yet keep up our spirits by acting  
as if I am quite at home.

But I *am*  
at home. *You*  
are still here, still  
make me squeal in delight  
our smiles melting irascibility,  
your attempts to stem your outbursts  
my balm in Gilead, your body my hot box  
against the cold, your shining eyes the guidewire I need

to keep walking this line as I whistle  
through the bars of our new cage.

## The Premiere

He can barely hobble  
hip so painful (dying bone  
caused by too much prednisone)  
that surgery is days away. How  
can he convince the world tonight  
that he still has his old bounce?  
His film shot months ago  
when movement was no problem.  
Now he can barely  
get out of a car.

My arm supports him as we mince  
past churning search lights  
toward laughing crowds of people half our age  
who flounce as if life is truly wonderful  
and so it becomes:  
everything about him lengthens—gait, height, smile—  
as we stroll down the red carpet, cool,  
ebullient as cameras flash.

He walks into the great domed movie palace  
escorting *me* now, past so many knees, to my seat.  
Later at dinner, I watch him work the room  
gliding from producer to matinee idol,  
drink in hand  
laughing  
steady  
tall.

Next morning, his desk  
chair is in the hall, abandoned  
where he left it trying not to fall  
just to get to bed.

## Love, Tripwired

Only thirty days of him  
taking prednisone  
and I'm hollow  
as an empty tin can.

Mere eating goads him to fury  
and anything I try only gets me stung.  
You can't fight fair or reason with a wasp.

Is the only way to save myself to leave?  
I start to research a new apartment.

Wait. In better days he listened,  
made me laugh, loved me full.  
That man was here just days ago. Surely  
with luck he might return?

So I steel myself  
coerce myself to           blink  
past his latest ravings           beat  
down my rising gorge           believe  
a better change comes if I can just           be  
like Lawrence of Arabia,  
his finger in the candle:  
          Of course it hurts.  
The trick is—somehow—  
not to mind it.

## Caregiving

Is being buried alive by your sandstorm what worries me  
so—

or the emptiness  
once your wind is gone, the sand is still?

## About the Poet

Deirdre Hennings' poems appear in Yale's *The Perch*, *Litro/UK*,  
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