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Primavera

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April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

— T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*¹

She was a wraith, a walking ghost, condemned to wander the face of the planet hungry for air. In her early 30s, she floated in, veiled in the diaphanous attire of a teenage waif, her consciousness thinly attached. A Quattrocento nymph sorely in need of a warm West Wind. Is it fair to call it depression, the condition of a person wasted to the point of standing at death's door? Depression, strictly speaking, the reason she sought treatment, is a diagnostic category that applies to the living. Neither living nor dead, she occupied that tenuous space between the two, the breath of life a mere suggestion on her lips. Once she had dwelt among the living in a well-to-do neighborhood of the city, two doting parents and an adoring older, though vexed, stepsister. The girl had run with a pack of party girls and had risked the occasional romance of youth. The frailty of her body could not hold her back. She drank in life with a preternatural gusto that seemed as if it might outstrip her death sentence. Now she was silently saying

goodbye to all that. The condition of her flesh had reasserted its dominion.

Cystic fibrosis is an autosomal recessive disorder whose silent gene is present in one out of every twenty-five persons of Northern European ancestry. Dorothy Hansine Andersen, judged most unladylike by her American medical peers, named the condition in 1938² based on the gross pathology of the affected pancreas. However, it was lung disease that killed the girl, that kills most CFers. Ironically, it was lung disease that killed Dr. Andersen at 61 after a life of hiking, canoeing and carpentry. But the disease that afflicted the girl had entered the awareness of physicians as early as the 18th century in Germany and Switzerland with the clinical admonition, “Woe to the child who tastes salty from a kiss on the brow, for he is cursed and soon must die.”³

Death by the age of fifty awaits the afflicted in even the wealthiest countries. More often it comes sooner. A temporary lifting of the curse has been conjured by multidisciplinary clinics overseeing diet and the use of digestive enzymes, proactive treatment of airway infections, wise deployment of ergonomic breathing and energy conservation techniques, and regular visits for pulmonary physical therapy. A handful of orphan drugs have helped a few patients as has oxygen therapy and occasional surgical intervention. Gene therapy has so far proved disappointing.

Shortly after her first psychiatric consultation, the girl's number came up, a warm wind from the West. Pittsburgh to be precise. In essence, she won the lottery for double lung transplantation and

was whisked away to the city of dreams-come-true. It worked for a while. Her post-op course was a rough go, typical for such big surgeries, for which only a few lucky CFers qualify at all. The required immunosuppressive therapy is a bear for patients, both in terms of the requisite strict adherence to protocol and medication, and a plethora of side effects. All of these strictures faded from view when the girl made her triumphal return home, the once wilting nymph now in full flower. Her family and friends were ecstatic. She was Lazarus back from the dead, very much alive. Maybe a bit of Job as well as Lazarus, the unreality of redemption from extreme loss.

The girl returned to the vagaries of youthful existence in all its ecstasies and sorrows, in all its inconsistencies and surprises. All told, she was granted a two-year reprieve, two years to fly outside the cage of her inevitably fatal illness. Then the door slammed shut again. The graft did not hold. The girl was buried amidst great mourning and bewilderment, the conundrum of her living and her dying hermetically sealed against further interrogation. Her stepsister, who had lived in the shadow of her sister's illness most of her life, took up the mantle of depression herself and wore it unceasingly for the ensuing several years. The girl's flight into health cut short by a zealous immune system, she returned to the breath from whence she came, no more to walk the narrow strand between Venus and Mercury, first blush, and transit.

Notes

1. Eliot, T.S. 1922. The wasteland. *The Criterion*, 1.
2. Andersen, D.H. 1938. Cystic fibrosis of the pancreas and its relation to celiac disease. *Am J Dis Child*, 56, 344–399.
3. Yu E. & Sharma, S. 2022, August 8. Cystic Fibrosis. In *StatPearls* [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing.

About the Author

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