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Hungry Cancer

by Jason Sullivan

She says radiation doesn't make her sick;
I know better. She eats a little less
at mealtimes, not finishing her carrots,
letting the soup go cold. I can understand
how food is not comforting: why eat
when something is eating her from the inside?

In six weeks the treatments will end.
My mother, whom I think of as wedding-
dress white, is being eaten by the big black.
Her cancer has come back, hiding
under her arms and in her glands,
knocking on the door, hungry like a beggar.

Her hair has always been brown, and short.
The first time around, a lady came and spoke
with her, saying nothing is wrong with losing
her hair. She gave my mother a wig, a lighter shade
of brown. They sipped coffee, stale and sad
as the conversation, brown like the wig.

Under my mother's eyes, the skin is tired,
flesh-colored and drooping. She stays awake
at night, staring at the white walls, the blue
comforter wrapped around her. She is hungry,
she wants the cancer gone. By dawn,
she has slept but is still tired.
She drinks coffee, with a pink packet of sugar.
It is Monday, the day of her treatment.

She didn't have to wear the wig the first time,
and probably won't this time either. She is
durable as denim. Fabric tears eventually,
and my mother is weary, but her threads
are strong, even when gnawed upon
by the teeth of cancer. Radiation doesn't
make her sick. It just chews on her like the cancer;
blood cells confused about this bitter meal.

