



::issue::04|03:.....

Love song

Carolyn Murphy

I

It was mid-September / winter was coming / when you became ill

Throwing up

Not eating much

You lay on the couch watching TV

The doctor said it was a virus

It was the week before I started the new job / I was glad to have you home

I started work at CCI

And you were still sick

Going to work sometimes

Mostly at home and throwing up

Winnie visited / on her way to Europe

She took you to a doctor's appointment

She was worried about you

I didn't understand illness / didn't want you to be sick / just wanted you well
again

But you kept throwing up / and you started to sway from side to side when you
walked / and your eyes stared vaguely into space

The ear nose and throat doctor said it was vertigo
He said do some exercises / go back to work / stop worrying
Come back in three weeks

Somehow we went to Adrian's wedding
In the country / three hours from Ottawa
It was autumn and cold
It started to snow while we were there
Small white flakes against the red and gold of the trees

You became quieter and quieter
Moving from bed to bathroom
From sleeping and staring into space
To shitting and throwing up

I tried to make you do the exercises
How would you get better if you didn't?
Sometimes you did them / to please me
Then you lay down again and closed your eyes

I cooked and cleaned and shopped
You rolled to one side of the bed and then the other / so I could change the
sheets
I went to work and came home to make your lunch
You lay on the bed and I lay next to you / watching your eyes

You didn't see me anymore / your eyes were dull and empty
I watched you recede a little more each day
I cried and asked you over and over to stay with me

By the end of October I was exhausted / longed for a holiday from illness
If only for a weekend
We did go to Kingston. A conference for work

You lay in bed in the guesthouse while I attended lectures

At the doctor's again / you were worse not better / he booked you in to see a
neurologist / there was nothing to worry about he said / just ruling out certain
things

We left for the hospital early

The appointment was at seven

You lay on the floor in the waiting room. There was no one else around

When we saw the neurologist you threw up in his wastepaper basket

He straightened the papers on his desk / looked at you over the rim of his glasses

He said he needed to ask you some questions / were you done throwing up?

Your eyes were unfocused / shifting from side to side

Your skin soft and dull

You hadn't shaved for days

But you answered his questions / and did all the tests

Touched your finger to your nose

Tried to walk a straight line

Let him watch the way your eyes rattled when you looked at one thing

He said it wasn't vertigo / it was something more central

He would talk to Imaging

See if he could get you a scan today

In Emergency / you lay sleeping on a stretcher

I sat next to you

They did the scan and we waited some more

You stayed asleep mostly

I watched the nurses

Looking for news

When it came the nurses swarmed and buzzed with it

They looked at us and shook their heads
And looked away again

No one said anything
The doctor didn't come
Eventually I asked the nurse
She looked at me / knowing
She said she'd call the doctor
He didn't come / he spoke to me on the phone

Richard has a brain tumour he said
I started to cry
You must have known he said defensively
He said arrangements had been made / he had to go

Something more central
Now I saw this meant a brain tumour
But when he said it I hadn't known
I'd had no idea

The nurse took me away
We left you sleeping / you still didn't know
She gave me tissues and water
She said call your family / have them come over
They're in Australia I said
I didn't know what to do
I couldn't remember anyone's number

I called your work and couldn't find Judit or Philippe
But found Jeff who came immediately

An ambulance took us to another hospital
I watched you / quiet on the ambulance stretcher
Wires and machines stuck to you

Being monitored by the paramedic
The beginning of your new life as a patient

I held your hand / willed you to stay alive
And as I watched unfamiliar roads snaking out behind us
I realised no one had told me where we were going

||

Jeff followed us to the new hospital / brought your clothes and shoes
I didn't want to take charge of your wallet
Such a simple thing
But I didn't know what to do with it / didn't want the responsibility
Jeff said Nancy and he would be back later
Someone would pick up our car

They lifted you from one stretcher to another and put a drip in your arm
You put your life in their hands easily
Grateful for the opportunity to let go
We waited in a tiny examination room
I curled up on a desk and tried to sleep
My head pulsing and hot

The nurse couldn't give me painkillers
They could only dispense drugs to patients
I left you for a few minutes and bought some Tylenol

When I knew it was morning in Sydney I found a phone and called your parents
They were waiting to hear from us

Richard has a brain tumour I said
Your mum gasped. She said she would fly over the next day

Your dad asked if it was in the brain stem
I didn't know
He said find out all you can and call back later

By evening they had a bed for you
In the neurological observation ward
There were nine other patients
Eight with brain tumours
And one man who'd fallen off his verandah and was now quadriplegic

Finally Dr Agbi came to talk to us
He was calm / explaining everything
Describing the parts of the brain
Showing us where the tumours were located
He wrote down words I could repeat to your father / his writing large and awkward

It was Wednesday. Still Wednesday
He said you would have a biopsy on Monday
Until then they would keep you under observation / stabilise your condition

That night Judit and Philippe came
And Jeff and Nancy
They were our family then

When I arrived home late that night the house was quiet and cool
The familiar space the first real comfort I had had all day
Philippe and Judit wanted me to go to their place
But I knew when I walked in the door that I needed to stay at home

I had a shower and ate something
Walked from room to room
The wooden boards reassuring under my feet

I called mum and dad
They had heard from your parents
I had hardly spoken to mum since we'd arrived in Canada
It was nice that night to hear in her voice that she loved me after all

Later I lay in bed in the darkness looking out the window
The criss-cross of tree branches black against the paler blue black of the sky
I cried myself to sleep
It was a relief to cry / at home / in our bed that smelled of you
I didn't change the sheets for days

In the morning Philippe and Judit came for breakfast
They brought chocolate croissants. I made coffee
Philippe had spoken to his mother who is a nurse
She said some brain tumours were really not so bad
We should be hopeful

Judit stayed with me all day
She drove our car
I was too skittery to drive

Along Main Street to the hospital / the landscape was stripped of colour
The trees soft grey lace against the bleached sky

Nancy came to the hospital too
She sat in the waiting room
Knitting
Her enormous handbag by her side

We sat all day / the four of us / waiting for news
Worried they were sending you for so many tests
Was there something they weren't telling us?
No one had mentioned tests the night before

On Friday afternoon Judit and I went back to the apartment
To prepare for the arrival of your mum and sister Rose
We made up beds and swept the floor
Nick and Eileen sent over a meal
Nancy had been shopping and stocked our fridge with food
There were six blocks of Lindt chocolate in the cupboard

That night Jeff took me to the airport
We met Ronnie and Rose
They both looked exhausted / but much calmer than I'd expected

At the hospital you were glad to see them
By then you were stable and looked better than you'd been in weeks

At home that night we ate Eileen's vegetarian pasta
We toasted Eileen and Nick and felt glad we were together
The next night your father would arrive
Before this I had only met your family a couple of times
And now I would be living with them

III

On Sunday night you signed a document / to give me power of attorney

We were all there

Ron and Ronnie and Rose

Philippe and Judit

Jeff and Nancy

You and me

Ron had talked to the head nurse

Now she turned a blind eye to the two visitors rule

Monday morning you had the biopsy

After you had gone in I saw Dr Agbi

Dressed in a surgical gown / his cap covered in bright yellow ducks

Skipping and jumping / his eyes laughing and excited

Getting into the lift

Ready to run a marathon. Ready to operate on you

He smiled at me as the lift doors closed between us

They cut into your head above the hairline / on the front left side

We spent the time at the shopping mall on Laurier

Your mum bought a white teddy bear

Rose and I looked at winter boots

You didn't open your eyes when we saw you afterward

Rose told you to squeeze my hand

So I would know you were conscious

They had shaved the front of your head

The remaining curls were matted with yellow disinfectant and dried blood

You didn't look good

But the doctor said it had gone well

By this time I knew it was cancer
There were three tumours in your brain
Your father said benign tumours wouldn't spread like that
We were hoping for lymphoma
The best of a bad lot
A small chance of cure / versus no chance

We planned to go out for dinner Friday night
With Philippe and Judit and Jeff and Nancy
To La Gazelle, your favourite restaurant
We had booked late so we could stay with you until the end of visiting

Though in the end we didn't go
We saw Dr Agbi who had news
Medulloblastoma
No cure
He would operate on Monday
A craniotomy
He called it debulking the tumour
There would be a five percent risk of quadriplegia or death

It was late November
He said you might not make Christmas without the operation

IV

The surgery took six hours
I didn't see you Monday morning
You went in early

I slept in / drew out the morning at home as long as possible
We arrived at the hospital in the afternoon

Hoping to see Dr Agbi

He came out to talk with us / said it had gone well

You would be in post op for a few hours

We should come back later

So we went shopping again / Bayshore mall this time

We wandered around

I bought new slippers for you / guessed your size

Rose and I still didn't have winter boots / everyone said it would start to snow soon

When we got back to the hospital you were in your room / going up in the lift
your dad tried to tell me how you would be / but nothing could have prepared
me for your drowned and bloated face

They had over-hydrated you before surgery / and you had been lying face down
for six hours while they cut a hole through your skull and pulled and poked and
prodded Removing tumour

Now all the fluid seemed to have collected in your face

I didn't recognise you

You looked dead / fished from the ocean after many days

You squeezed my hand

I watched Rose stroke your arm / talk to you / her voice soothing

I felt nauseous / needed to sit down

I moved to the chair near the door

Then I was lying on the ground by your bed

Wet and cold and empty

I couldn't stand up I felt so weak

Someone brought me a drink

My hand wouldn't grip the cup

Rose and one of the nurses took me to the bathroom and gave me a shower

I sat still and blank while they dressed me in hospital pyjamas, my shoes and coat

It was such a relief to give in / to let go

We stayed with you a little longer

Then the nurse said we should leave you to rest

Rose went to get the car

I sat in a wheelchair while your dad took me to the entrance

Back at the apartment Mum called

I told her you'd come through the operation well

I tried to tell her how I felt

People were chatting in the background

I couldn't explain how terrible you looked

How somehow I knew we'd lost something / that everything would be different now

I didn't know the words

V

When the nurse weighed you after three weeks in hospital you had lost 25 kilograms

I asked her to check your weight again

I thought it was a mistake

But when you got out of bed to go to the shower

I could see how thin you were

Your knees bulged out / your skin hung loose and limp on your bones

Holding onto a walking frame / a person either side

You lurched and jolted your way to the shower

You kept your eyes closed

And when you did open them your eyes wandered off in different directions
Your left side was weak and didn't work properly anymore
Your left hand shuddered and danced
You couldn't hold cutlery or a glass
Ataxia they said / a side effect of the surgery

At the end of August we had gone white water rafting
You had seemed well and we were happy
By the end of November you were barely able to walk or see or use your hands

VI

At home each night
Your sister Jenny staying now
Five people in a two-bedroom apartment
I felt selfish keeping our room to myself

But I needed the space
A corner of the apartment that was mine
The other bedroom had become your parents' room
Your sisters slept in the lounge room
Your dad and Jenny took over the kitchen

They only wanted to help
But I was too shy to say I wanted to cook / wanted to do the dishes / wanted to
shop
I was too slow for Ron who had everything organised before I got up each
morning

I longed for silence
And time to think
And for another TV so I could escape / alone in our room at night

VII

Waiting in the Imaging Department / you were having more tests
The attendant asked me to hold your file
Already you had a long history / a ring binder full of pages

There was a results section
Results of the biopsy
Probably medulloblastoma
And then the results of the craniotomy
My heart fluttered
We were still waiting for these results
The doctor had said nothing / but here they were in the file
I scanned through the words
Looking for hope
And there it was, the last line
Lymphoma
Send for more tests to confirm

I read it again and again
Lymphoma
Not medulloblastoma
Suddenly you had a future after all

Back upstairs I told your family what I'd read
Rose laughed at my spying
We weren't supposed to read the hospital file
We started to hope again

That night Dr Agbi confirmed what I had read
They'd been waiting for more tests / didn't want to get our hopes up

But it was true
You might be cured
A one to two percent chance Ron said
We held onto that hope

VIII

You came home for one night before you were transferred to Oncology
The doctor was not sure it was worth the effort
Getting you home and back for just one night
But when I asked you, you didn't hesitate
You wanted to come home

You sat on the edge of the bed
Your body slumped to one side
While I dressed you in your winter clothes

I wheeled you to the entrance
Jenny was waiting with the car
We drove home and parked behind the building
The back entrance was at ground level
Inside was a small flight of stairs
The physiotherapist had spent days teaching you how to walk up stairs
One step at a time / your father behind you while I was in front

Inside you wanted to go straight to bed
We tried to keep you up / wanted to see you enjoying yourself
But you were too tired
The exertion of travelling home the most active you'd been in weeks

For dinner Ron made a special meal
Your place at the table set from that day forward

You found it hard to eat / food spilled everywhere / you hadn't sat at a table for weeks

But you enjoyed the meal / at home / in our apartment

It was a relief that night to curl up together

To remember how it felt to be alone with you

To remember it was our apartment / our home

The next day we had to take you back

The holiday over too quickly

At the hospital we sat in the waiting room

A bed in Oncology not available for another hour

You lay sleeping on one of the couches / in pain / only wanting to get into bed

One of the priests came to talk to you

Told you to cheer up

Christ's ordeal was worse than yours he said

Your silence proof to him you were indulging yourself

Jenny and I angry / glaring at him / wanting him to go away

IX

There were days and days of preparation before chemotherapy started

Tense jittery days / full of fear

Was the tumour growing again?

No reassurance from the doctors who stood with their backs to you

Shifting from one foot to the other as they explained each new delay

The thought of you in hospital, alone, pushing me out of bed each day

Keeping me by your side till late

Back and forth day after day
Running on adrenalin
Longing for a day off but unable to bear the thought of not seeing you
Not being by your side
Even though it slowly became clear you did not remember me
Your face blank when I walked into the room

I watched you slip into the ease of childhood relationships
You turned to your parents and little sister when you needed something
Rose gone home again by now
I hoped you would ask for me sometimes
Ask me to help you eat your meal
Ask me to get you a drink of water

The only reassurance / the way you clutched the Carolyn bear
A present from Philippe and Judit before they left for France

You lay dull and listless in the bed / hardly speaking / eyes closed
I waited anxiously / getting more nervous with each day's delay

The only relief came when the snow finally started to fall
At first it was just a few inches
And then one night it snowed and snowed and snowed
Soft white flakes that drifted slowly down
Making everything white and cold and quiet
A heavy beautiful silence

It was still snowing in the morning
When Jenny and I raced outside
To run and laugh and fall into the thigh deep snow where our driveway used to
be
Our happy faces smiling and red with cold

At the end of that week / late in the afternoon / it was an awful relief when the
bright yellow fluid finally started to flow into your veins
The beginning of ten weeks of chemotherapy

X

You came home for five days at Christmas
I asked Clau and Marcio to come for Christmas lunch
I went shopping and bought presents for your family
And for you and me to give each other
Jenny said she would prepare the meal

Winnie was visiting again
She and I went out to a place on Laurier to buy a Christmas tree
The trees were stacked up against the fence in the yard of an empty gas station
Inside a man and woman and three children sat watching TV
The tree we wanted was ten dollars and covered in snow
Its shape perfectly regular / like all the television Christmas trees I'd ever seen

The man came outside to help us load it in the boot
At home we stood it in the lounge room
The snow on the tree quickly melting / making puddles on the wooden floor

Your work had sent a box of Christmas decorations
Each person adding an item to the gift box
I decorated the tree while you sat blankly on the couch
Waiting for permission to go back to bed

Christmas morning it was minus twenty / the sky a deep blue
Out the window of the apartment it looked like summer
Except for the snow

Ronnie and I went for a walk by the river

I pulled my scarf up over my nose to stay warm
The river was frozen and thick with snow

We walked through the park
The snow up to our knees
Our steps criss-crossing with all the other steps already imprinted in the white

XI

Each night at home I looked after you / looked forward to being alone with you
But you hardly slept at all
Constantly awake / agitated and tense
You asked over and over
Where am I?
What's happening?

What should I do?

All night and all day

You needed to urinate every five or ten minutes
And wet the bed two or three times every night
Nancy and I went shopping on Laurier / to buy more sheets
Pure cotton
White and pale green
And five pairs of boxer shorts
We washed load after load of sheets every day

Each morning I longed for the sound of your father getting up
Knowing that he would take you to have breakfast
Leaving me to sleep

XII

When you went back to hospital
We took turns visiting you
Your dad and Jenny there each morning
I arrived at two and stayed until eleven
Your mum came late and spent the nights with you

You needed someone all the time now and there were not enough nurses
Ronnie somehow able to stay up all night / sleep during the day
Always able to go on / tireless
Driven to save her eldest son

Looking after you had become our job
We were shift workers
Clocking on and off
Familiar with the staff / the hospital routine / where the supplies were kept

The next week when you were home again
Mick and Glenda were visiting
They had booked into the guesthouse around the corner
But each night your parents stayed at the guesthouse
And your brother stayed with you

The first night in your parents' room I woke every ten minutes
Sharp and alert. Expecting to help you
But after that I slept
Forever grateful to your brother and Glenda for arriving when they did
Fresh and eager to help
Letting us rest

After they left I did nights again

But after only a few days I was exhausted
Not sleeping at night / unable to sleep during the day
I found myself at four in the morning
Angry / pleading
Telling you not to go to the toilet / you'd just been

I didn't take you and minutes later you wet yourself
When I realised the incontinence pants had not been enough
That the sheets were wet too
I cried at the thought of changing the sheets for the third time that night
I just wanted to sleep
I'm sorry you said
Over and over

But I was too tired to care for you properly
So I woke Jenny / asked her to stay with you / so I could sleep

She stayed with you until morning
The next night we did the same / half the night each
In the morning
Both exhausted
We went out to buy the paper / left you with Ron and Ronnie
We had to get out of the apartment

We sat in the café around the corner
Drinking coffee
Eating toast
Slumped in the armchairs
Enjoying the bland piped music

You had told both of us you couldn't do this anymore / couldn't keep going
We tried to convince you that you could / you had to
But we were both fearful you wouldn't survive

XIII

At the hospital that week
We told the doctor how ill you were
He reduced the dose of chemotherapy that went into your brain
And prescribed codeine

The codeine was our saviour
You slept
Sometimes for a few hours at a time
And half way through the night you could have more codeine
So we could sleep some more

By late January we were used to the routine
Jenny and I did the night shifts at home
Your mum did the nights in hospital
Your dad kept the house running
We were coping and there were only two more weeks of chemotherapy

But then you became ill
It was a Saturday afternoon
You were due to come home the next morning
Walking into your hospital room / ready to start my shift
Your dad and Jenny there / ready to go home
Your dad telling me how you'd been that morning
You suddenly became distressed
Your face red and bloated

The Oncologist walked in / doing his afternoon rounds
Ron and Dr Gertler seemed to know immediately
You had an infection
Septicaemia or meningitis

Dr Gertler took blood samples and fluid samples from your brain
He put you on antibiotics

Ron and Jenny didn't go home
We sat with you all afternoon / watched you get worse and worse
The nurse checked your blood pressure every ten minutes
By six when your mum arrived there were three nurses
In and out of the room / watching your blood pressure drop lower and lower

Finally they moved you to intensive care
They said we couldn't go with you / perhaps we could visit later
Your white blood count was low because of the chemotherapy
Your dad said you might not make it to morning
Months of stress and fear and love suddenly compressed into this one night
By morning the fight might be over / lost
We sat in your room in the Oncology ward / waiting

After an hour Ronnie and I went to find you
You were in a dark room full of equipment and beeps
A nurse to watch over you
Annoyed by every sound / you were angry and wakeful
Delirious
Constantly pulling at the monitoring devices

We sat on either side of your bed
Trying to help you rest / unable to be anywhere but by your side
Holding your hands so you wouldn't remove the tubes that ran all over your
body
I sang to you / song after song / and convinced you to sing too
Bob Marley tunes / the only thing that kept you calm

XIV

You stayed four nights in intensive care
Four long days and nights
In a dark room with no windows

On the second night your brother arrived
Jenny had been in Ottawa for two months / but needed to go home
Bob had arrived to replace her

When you moved back to Oncology
It was like going home. Back to your private room
With chairs and a bathroom
And a view of trees and snow

Dr Gertler said you would stay in hospital now / until the end of treatment
Two weeks of antibiotics and then one more round of chemotherapy

We fell into the shift work routine we had already established
Your dad with you each morning / Bob and I each afternoon / your mum
overnight

Bob brought your guitar to the hospital and each day he played songs for you
The two of you singing while I knitted
The same songs over and over every day

You pressed the call button whenever you got the chance
We tried to stop you bothering the nurses since we were there to help you
But you liked to call them / wanted to talk / wanted to know what they were
doing
Lorna the only nurse that seemed to understand
She came into your room laughing / making you laugh
What the hell do you want now she would say?

One afternoon we took you down to the hospital cafeteria
For afternoon tea
You wanted to go
But the minute we had your wheelchair pulled up to the table / your IMED
machine plugged into the wall / you wanted to go back
The unfamiliar space / humming with people and noise / too much for you
We ordered coffee and biscuits and ate them quickly
Then took you back to your room

Each day of that last month we walked to the hospital
When I stepped out the front door and felt the crunch of the snow beneath my
feet
The cold air grabbing at my skin
I was glad that it was winter while you were sick
Glad that the weather provided so much surprise / so much to wonder at / so
much fun
I loved the snow and the cold
And I needed the distraction
Needed to enjoy myself despite everything / because of everything

It was an hour's walk
Along Main Street
Past the Green Door / sometimes we stopped there for lunch
Across the Rideau River / still frozen
Everything white and grey / a monochromatic landscape
I had never known there were so many shades of grey
Or that they could be so beautiful

I started to knit you a sweater the week you went into hospital
Something to do during the long hours of waiting
Annita and Steve visited the night I started knitting
When I held up the two rows I had done and said it was a sweater for you
Annita laughed
But I kept knitting every day
To take my mind off things
To lose myself in the feeling of the wool between my fingers
And the sight of the rows and rows of accumulating stitches

I knitted when we waited for results
I knitted when the catheter in your shoulder started bleeding and the blood
soaked cloths were piling up on the bed despite the doctors efforts to stop the
flow
'It isn't really a lot of blood' your dad kept saying as the nurse went back and
forth with new supplies

My knitting was a lifeline
If I kept knitting and finished the sweater / then you would have to survive to
wear it

I finished it the week you were discharged
Three months of knitting
It was too big for you and a little lopsided
But I had finished it
And you were out of hospital

When we went up to Montebello a few days later
You sat in the back of the car wearing the sweater
Singing along with Louis Armstrong on the radio
'What a wonderful world'

Copyright Carolyn Murphy 2003

rubric journal of creative writing.

enquiries rubric@unsw.edu.au

publisher UNSW school of english
english@unsw.edu.au

rubric is an online journal of creative writing
and textual/hypertextual/media experimentation
edited and published quarterly by students
of UNSW and hosted by the
school of english.