

Poetry Porch: Poetry

Venus at Twilight

By Joyce Wilson

1

As she lay dying, I was driving with
all the other drivers into the purpling dusk.
I don't like driving at night and worry about
driving in the dark. That night I worried about
her dying alone and in pain in the hospital dark.

The brightest star appeared in the firmament.
The twilight held, the colors warmed, and there
to my left, Manhattan switched on its lights, until
electric light from high-rise windows glowed
and matched the many headlights on the road.

Alone together, the drivers flew in line
and we were on our way. My phone lit up.
I didn't have to look at it. In time,
I'd stop and load the message from her son:
"Mom passed," it read, at 8:32 p.m.

2

She was the bright star of my busy week
although I often took her calls with dread.
By telephone, we fashioned ways to egg
each other on. Opinions strongly held
enlarged our differences, which was the point.

Our final conversation focused on
my worries, to which she listened, and then sighed
to indicate that she was getting tired.
"I think you should go see someone," she said,
and thus she had finessed the final word.

3

They say Venus is sister planet to Earth,
unique in size and weight, alike enough--
with central core, molten mantle, and crust--
to be in sync, as planets go, except
for moons: while Earth has one, Venus has none.

Named by the Babylonians, "Bright Queen
of Day," and by the Romans, "Goddess of
Beauty and Love," Venus survives on myth,
the closest and the brightest, morning and
the evening star, a constant shining light.

Yet studies show her surface is too hot
for growth, is hidden by sulphuric clouds
where water boiled off. She doesn't tilt
rotating on an axis as Earth does
and therefore will sustain one gray season.

*And something in that bright light shining now
must compensate for all she did not say
in service to that isolated place,
her given self accounted for, where she
alone could know the pain that she endured.*

4

For every sunny day, an afternoon
spent on the couch, with a book and a coke, a dog
or a cat, a movie, pillow, a cough. Flushed cheeks.
The nagging temperature that was appeased
with ice and ginger ale, ice cream, root beer.

The diagnosis at age twenty-three,
Hodgkin's Disease, as if she'd won a prize.
The doctors ordered chemotherapy
and radiation for the tumor in her chest.
The steroids and the prednisone brought on

the shingles, paranoid episodes.
She triumphed, thrived, was married, raised two boys,
then read about her chances on the Web,
all of which predicted early death,
around fifty. Then she was sixty-five.

5

Her husband left a fund of films to watch.
(He died in 'Ninety-four, more rotten luck.)
The Little Foxes unwound what we sought,
a family dynasty of stinkers, all
the fighting, inheritance, and cash,

the stricken face of Bette Davis framed
and looking down at young lovers who seized
the freedom and the happiness that she
would never know, but that we knew, and so
could rest assured that we were not THAT BAD.

We almost lost the ending of the film
when a storm came up and broadcast hail against
the skylight, drowning out the sound and sense
of dots connecting, characters in view,
the satisfaction that an ending had been reached.

6

The morning that she spent the day in bed
to finish reading *Tale of Two Cities*,
she was avoiding me, I thought, and asked
if she preferred the movie to the book,
and would she like to go out for a walk.

She turned her head to show that she had heard,
then, caught up in the maelstrom of her world,
said she did not feel well enough to go.
I looked outside the window where each year
heroic flowers die, and die to live.

Where was the Sidney Carton of my heart?
The day her house was closeted with air,
an ashtray full of stumped out cigarettes
gave me a turn. "Can I dump these?" I asked.
She shook her head, and I took out the trash.

7

A nurse suggested that she knew too much
about the ways of doctors, hospitals.
For always it was doctors' points of view:
Now tell me what is wrong. Where does it hurt?
Respond to questions carefully. Show me.

The bad relationships with good doctors,
or stubborn silence with the bad doctors,
rejection of articulate doctors,
exasperation with the silly joke.
She stubbornly refused to play the game.

*She might have chosen Venus as her star
and counted, as her portion of good health,
the body's happiness from exercise,
the comfort of a good night's precious sleep,
the pleasures that she never seemed to know.*

8

And then I found the film about the zone
in Chernobyl, condemned unfit, ignored,
a Sleeping Beauty world that had transformed
as radioactive winter drained its waste
and nature improvised another spring

beside the projects, gaping bedsprings, dolls
abandoned, windows broken, doors unlocked,
to be discovered twenty-five years on
where fallen timbers, underbrush, became
the perfect habitat for packs of wolves,

and prairies fostered wild untamed horses,
and catfish surfaced near the riverbank.
The nuclear aftermath was turned on end.
“That could be me, contaminant no more.”
She laughed. “Where is my Geiger counter now?”

“To see the wild horses run,” she cried.
And herds of bison, and families of wolves.”
She woke up in the middle of the night
out of breath and laughing. “If only I
felt better,” she announced the next morning.

9

It was the details in her anecdotes
that let us know how badly she was doing,
The mention of that worn out towel she kept
inside her car, so handy once to catch
the upchuck as she drove to work.

“My bosses think I’m driven by self-pity,”
She said. They wouldn’t let her quit, so she
would disappear, days at a time, and hope
the story of her cancer history
would someday give her credibility.

10

Relief came when she reached the perfect age
and could retire, fill out the forms, collect.
What happened to her friends happened to her.
But then her friends began to move away
to Florida, to live with relatives.

Housebound, she stayed, stubborn and alone.
“They can’t take my inertia,” she complained.
“And so they dropped me, just to get away.”
She sought companionship through online chats
and rescue lines, conspiracies and trials.

She finally changed her diet, lost some weight.
She must have stopped smoking. Her health improved
and things were going well for her until
the excess fluid started gathering
in all extremities, another sign.

11

Sign of the end? A doctor with a flair
advanced to take the case. He said, “You have
congestive heart failure,” which she denied.
“The first I’d heard of it,” she said. And why
accept her destiny? Why not escape?

He scheduled an appointment for new valves
which would involve a plane or two-day drive,
some tests, a round of surgery. At worst,
a risk. At best, a holiday she’d earned.
She wouldn’t fly, and so she planned the drive.

And then, she said, he made an odd request,
that she wear makeup, and perhaps a dress.
“Whatever do you think he meant?” she asked.
“Why should I travel in a stupid dress?”
More swellings, aspirations, lethargy.

12

Last night I dreamed we took a satellite
to Saturn. With its moons, all sixty-two
of them--some dense and rocky, some with geysers
spouting water everywhere--, and rings,
beautiful rings of swirling water chunks--

lovely mutable water, freezing and melting--
and streams of diamonds falling in cataracts
and spilling into the velvet bottomless deep,
the gaiety of Saturnalia
would be ours to borrow for the night.