Wonder Woman
By Ada Limón

Standing at the swell of the muddy Mississippi after the urgent care doctor had just said, *Well, sometimes shit happens*, I fell fast and hard for New Orleans all over again. Pain pills swirled in the purse along with a spell for later. It’s taken a while for me to admit, I am in a raging battle with my body, a spinal column thirty-five degrees bent, vertigo that comes and goes like a DC Comics villain nobody can kill. Invisible pain is both a blessing and a curse. *You always look so happy*, said a stranger once as I shifted to my good side grinning. But that day, alone on the riverbank, brass blaring from the Steamboat Natchez, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a girl, maybe half my age, dressed, for no apparent reason, as Wonder Woman. She strutted by in all her strength and glory, invincible, eternal, and when I stood to clap (because who wouldn’t have), she bowed and posed like she knew I needed a myth—a woman, by a river, indestructible.

The Elegance of Slow Poisoning
By Rebecca Christian

Chemotherapy terminology has it wrong. Taxotere sounds tame. Why not hemlock? Not Cytoxan, but deadly nightshade.

Agatha Christie had it right. For suspense you cannot surpass the elegance of slow poisoning.

One day the lips white as linen that wrapped the young cowboy, as cold as the clay.

The next the roof of the mouth as roughly textured as the saddle hide—
the nose running, the eyes glazed.

Then beloved coffee turned to river mud and blessed wine to vinegar by the treacherous tastebuds.

At night, the turncoat joints clamoring in the bedroom where the old lady whispers hush.

The hair in the drain in morbid swirls like that harvested from the departed and woven into mementos in Victorian times.

Not even a brow to raise at having given permission for this mayhem, this invasion of one’s own Normandy, the good cells up to their hips in water as deep as the bad.

When I Taught Her to Tie Her Shoes
By Penny Harter

A revelation, this student already in high school who didn't know how to tie her shoes.

I took her into the book-room, knowing what I needed to teach was perhaps more important than Shakespeare or grammar,

guided her hands through the looping, the pulling of the ends. After several tries, she got it, walked out of there empowered. How many things are like that—skills never mastered in childhood, simple tasks ignored, let go for years?

This morning, my head bald from chemotherapy, my feet farther away than they used to be as I bend to my own shoes, that student returns to teach me the meaning of life: to simply tie my the laces and walk out of myself into this sunny winter day.
Here Together
By W.S. Merwin

These days I can see us clinging to each other
as we are swept along by the current
I am clinging to you to keep you from
being swept away and you are clinging to me
we see the shores blurring past as we hold
each other in the rushing current
the daylight rushes unheard far above us
how long will we be swept along in the daylight
how long will we cling together in the night
and where will it carry us together

Why I’m (Almost) Glad I Had Cancer
By Rebecca Christian

I was startled when a young woman I know – a promising scientist -- said she is grateful
for her learning disabilities because they enable her to peer through a unique prism and
appreciate others who are different in other ways.

Similarly, I’m (almost) glad I had cancer because it profoundly changed my view of the
world. I don’t think of myself as a cancer “survivor,” because to me that has a
melodramatic ring. I simply did what anyone would do--find good doctors and do what
they told me to, which was to be cut, poisoned, and burned (surgery, chemotherapy and
radiation). Part of me remembers how nasty that was, but in a way I feel like it
happened to somebody else.

After all, the brain – or maybe it’s the spirit—has a wonderful amnesiac quality that
enables women to even consider getting pregnant again after they’ve been through
labor once. I have a hard time summoning up the details of my treatment seven years
ago unless I am talking to someone who is newly diagnosed and needs to hear not
platitudes but the voice of experience.

I had an aggressive tumor (some would say that fits my personality) that was detected
early, so I think of myself as not so much afflicted as spared. I am not a cancer “victim”
because breast cancer is frightfully common, and although I had no family history or risk
factors, I am, ahem, of a certain age. Recently I lunched with a foursome of women
contemporaries (early sixties), and three of us had gone through cancer. While I have
eluded the eternal footman for now, the experience keeps prompting me to beg the big
question: spared for what?
The illness caused me to make some difficult changes. I decided I had to let a longtime friendship go because it was taking too much out of me at a time when I had no reserves. Cancer also factored into my decision to retire a few years earlier than I had planned: Seize the day!

I am a little nicer after discovering how kind people can be, from strangers to close friends. Also, cancer convinced me of what we all know but can’t quite feel in the gut until a near-miss—that one day, even precious little me, myself, and I will well and truly die. Thus I am a little more grateful, a little less likely to rant at bloody Mediacom on the telephone, a little more inclined to let buttinskis into my lane of traffic.

I am now more cautious, because being absolutely sure that you will one day lose your life makes it infinitely more precious. In iffy weather, I wear only shoes with good traction. As a pedestrian, I seldom dash across a street, even when there are no cars coming, until – just like the Grim Reaper will one day--the ghostly white “Walk” figure beckons me on. I didn’t go through chemotherapy to get run over.

I am also less vain. There is nothing like meeting your new husband’s ex-wife for the first time with very little hair, eyebrows or eyelashes to make you get over yourself. I also think that trauma bonding strengthened my young marriage. My husband and I were wed on a Saturday, and I started treatment the following Wednesday.

When my tresses started to appear on my pillow and swirl down the drain, I asked him to shave my head. As in the beautiful Leonard Cohen song, “Hallelujah,” he put me in a kitchen chair and cut my hair—that is, after pouring me a huge Scotch, lighting a candle, and starting Coltrane on the stereo. After my mane was buzzed off I looked into his eyes and saw nothing but love.

I believe it took cancer to make me live more fully. For that I am glad.

**Mysteries, Yes**  
**By Mary Oliver**

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the mouths of the lambs.  
How rivers and stones are forever in allegiance with gravity  
while we ourselves dream of rising.  
How two hands touch and the bonds will never be broken.  
How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say "Look!" and laugh in astonishment, and bow their heads.

The Peace of Wild Things
By Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Beloved Is Where We Begin
By Jan Richardson
(read in honor of Dr. Deming)

If you would enter into the wilderness, do not begin without a blessing.

Do not leave without hearing who you are: Beloved, named by the One who has traveled this path before you.
Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:
Beloved.
Beloved.
Beloved.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers
By Emily Dickinson

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

For the Hardest Days
By Clint Smith

Some evenings, after days when the world feels like it has poured all of its despair into me, when I am awash with burdens that rests atop my body like a burlap of jostling shadows,

I find a place to watch the sun set. I dig my feet into a soil that has rebirthed itself a million times over. I listen to the sound of leaves as they decide whether or not it is time to descend from their branches.

It is hard to describe the comfort one feels in sitting with something you trust will always be there, something you can count on to remain familiar when all else seems awry. How remarkable it is to know that so many have watched the same
sun set before you. How the wind can carry
pollen and drop it somewhere it has never been.
How the leaves have always become the soil
that then they become the leaves again. How maybe
we are not so different from the leaves.
How maybe we are also always being reborn
to be something more than we once were.

How maybe that’s what waking up each morning is.
A reminder that we are born
of the same atoms as every plant and bird
and mountains and ocean around us.

Let This Darkness Be a Bell Tower
By Rainer Maria Rilke
(translation by Joanna Macy)

Quiet friend who has come so far,
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.
Let this darkness be a bell tower
and you the bell. As you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.
Move back and forth into the change.
What is it like, such intensity of pain?
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night,
be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
the meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,
say to the silent earth: I flow.
To the rushing water, speak: I am.

Blessed
By Jan Richardson

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

From Mind Wanting More
By Holly J. Hughes

...But the mind always
wants more than it has—
one more bright day of sun,
one more clear night in bed
with the moon; one more hour
to get the words right; one
more chance for the heart in hiding
to emerge from its thicket
in dried grasses—as if this quiet day
with its tentative light weren't enough,
as if joy weren't strewn all around.
That's Why We've Added the Blue
By Herb Wagner
(From A Man’s Pink)

We’ve added some blue to the sea of pink
To ensure that all men will pause and think
Breast cancer’s a disease that affects men too
And that’s why we’ve added the blue

Breast cancer awareness and breast self exam
Are not just for a woman there also for a man
A Man’s Pink teaches us to pause and think
And that’s why we’ve added the blue

To increase survivor rates we’re striving to proclaim
The third week of October as awareness week for men
Increasing awareness allows us to survive
And that’s why we’ve added the blue

We’ve added some blue to the sea of pink
To ensure that all men will pause and think
Breast cancer’s a disease that affects men too
And that’s why we’ve added the blue

For Joel at 94
By Mark Nepo

They say that miners in South America
strap small lamps around their chest, that
this works better than light coming
from the center of your head.

They say the head can be fooled,
but the heart can’t turn without
the body. This makes me think of you
digging your way through your long life,
lighting everything with your heart.

It’s a good way to live. And when we
sit at the end of the day, our hearts
illumine the day and we see each other
in its radiance. I can tell, it reminds you
of many circles you’ve been a part of.
It’s a good way to measure time.

To make our way on Earth
By the light coming from our heart—
This is what you’ve taught us.

It is any wonder that what you
touch, including us, glows.

A Poem for Autumn: Grace
By Wendell Berry

The woods are shining this morning.
Red, gold and green, the leaves
lie on the ground, or fall,
or hang full of light in the air still.
Perfect in its rise and in its fall, it takes
the place it has been coming to forever.
It has not hastened here, or lagged.
See how surely it has sought itself,
its roots passing lordly through the earth.
See how without confusion it is
all that it is, and how flawless
its grace is. Running or walking, the way
is the same. Be still. Be still.
“He moves your bones, and the way is clear.

Poem of the One World
By Mary Oliver

This morning
the beautiful white heron
was floating along above the water

and then into the sky of this
the one world
we all belong to

where everything
sooner or later
is a part of everything else
which thought made me feel
for a little while
quite beautiful myself

**Prescription for the Disillusioned**
*By Rebecca del Rio*

Come new to this day.
Remove the rigid overcoat of experience,
the notion of knowing,
the beliefs that cloud your vision.

Leave behind the stories of your life.
Spit out the sour taste of unmet expectation.
Let the stale scent of what-ifs waft back into the swamp
of your useless fears.

Arrive curious, without the armor of certainty,
the plans and planned results of the life you've imagined.
Live the life that chooses you,
new every breath, every blink of your astonished eyes.

**When I Am Among the Trees**
*By Mary Oliver*

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their branches.
and call out, “Stay awhile.”
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, “It’s simple,” they say,
“and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine."

Tom Dancer's Gift of a Whitebark Pinecone
By Mary Oliver

You never know
What opportunity
Is going to travel to you,
Or through you.

Once a friend gave me
A small pine cone-
One of a few
He found in the scat

Of a grizzly
In Utah maybe,
Or Wyoming.
I took it home

And did what I supposed
He was sure I would do-
I ate it,
Thinking

How it had traveled
Through that rough
And holy body.
It was crisp and sweet.

It was almost a prayer
Without words.

My gratitude, Tom Dancer,
For this gift of the world
I adore so much
And want to belong to.
And thank you too, great bear”
We Want to Believe We Can Live Forever  
By Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

And if I can't live forever,  
then let me make the most  
of this sliver of eternity,  
these slender days I've been given  
in the ongoing story.  
Let me be recklessly curious  
about what I will never know—  
driven to dance with the secrets  
of galaxy and spruce cone.  
Just this morning, I wondered  
what wake will I leave behind?  
Let me be relentlessly kind.  
Let me find peace  
with the imperfect self.  
Let me find love  
for the imperfect world.  
In my smallest moment,  
let me lean into enormity.  
If I can't live forever,  
let me at least believe in forever  
and love the world  
accordingly.

Introduction to Poetry  
By Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive.  
I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out  
or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for the light switch.  
I want them to water-ski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the
But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

**Forget About Enlightenment**

*By John Welwood*

Forget about enlightenment.
Sit down wherever you are
And listen to the wind singing in your veins.
Feel the love, the longing, the fear in your bones.
Open your heart to who you are, right now,
Not who you would like to be,
Not the saint you are striving to become,
But the being right here before you, inside you, around you.
All of you is holy.
You are already more and less
Than whatever you can know.
Breathe out,
Touch in,
Let go.

**What You Missed That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade**

*By Brad Aaron Modlin*

Mrs. Nelson explained how to stand still and listen
to the wind, how to find meaning in pumping gas,
how peeling potatoes can be a form of prayer. She took
questions on how not to feel lost in the dark.

After lunch she distributed worksheets
that covered ways to remember your grandfather's
voice. Then the class discussed falling asleep
without feeling you had forgotten to do something else—
something important—and how to believe
the house you wake in is your home. This prompted

Mrs. Nelson to draw a chalkboard diagram detailing
how to chant the Psalms during cigarette breaks,

and how not to squirm for sound when your own thoughts
are all you hear; also, that you have enough.

The English lesson was that I am
is a complete sentence.

And just before the afternoon bell, she made the math equation
look easy. The one that proves that hundreds of questions,

and feeling cold, and all those nights spent looking
for whatever it was you lost, and one person

add up to something.

All Bread
By Margaret Atwood

All bread is made of wood,
cow dung, packed brown moss,
the bodies of dead animals, the teeth
and backbones, what is left
after the ravens. This dirt
flows through the stems into the grain,
into the arm, nine strokes
of the axe, skin from a tree,
good water which is the first
gift, four hours.

Live burial under a moist cloth,
a silver dish, the row
of white famine bellies
swollen and taut in the oven,
lungfuls of warm breath stopped
in the heat from an old sun.
Good bread has the salt taste of your hands after nine strokes of the axe, the salt taste of your mouth, it smells of its own small death, of the deaths before and after.

Lift these ashes into your mouth, your blood; to know what you devour is to consecrate it, almost. All bread must be broken so it can be shared. Together we eat this earth.

**Guidelines**  
**By Rhina Espaillat**

Here’s what you need to do, since time began: find something—diamond-rare or carbon-cheap, it’s all the same—and love it all you can. It should be something close—a field, a man, a line of verse, a mouth, a child asleep—that feels like the world’s heart since time began. Don’t measure much or lay things out or scan; don’t save yourself for later, you won’t keep; spend yourself now on loving all you can. It’s going to hurt. That was the risk you ran with your first breath; you knew the price was steep, that loss is what there is, since time began subtracting from your balance. That’s the plan, too late to quibble now, you’re in too deep. Just love what you still have, while you still can. Don’t count on schemes, it’s far too short a span from the first sowing till they come to reap. One way alone to count, since time began: love something, love it hard, now, while you can.
You Are That
By Danna Faulds

Throw off the bonds of your conditioning and fear and celebrate the wonder of being here. Experience this moment as it is, connected by breath and essence to the whole. You couldn’t be separate if you tried.

Live this day as if the earth exhales blessings in your direction, as if trees speak their deepest secrets in your ear, as if bird songs can lift you outside your ordinary state of mind and bring you into truth.

Be the creative juice flowing through the universe. Be compassion in action and wholeness in motion. Be silence and stillness, the ocean of love so palpable that not one cell of you disputes the truth that you are that.

The Facts of Life
By Padraig O’Tuama

That you were born and you will die.

That you will sometimes love enough and sometimes not.

That you will lie if only to yourself.

That you will get tired.

That you will learn most from the situations you did not choose.

That there will be some things that move you more than you can say.

That you will live that you must be loved.

That you will avoid questions most urgently in need of your attention.
That you began as the fusion of a sperm and an egg of two people who once were strangers and may well still be.

That life isn’t fair.
That life is sometimes good and sometimes better than good.

That life is often not so good.

That life is real and if you can survive it, well, survive it well with love and art

and meaning given where meaning’s scarce.

That you will learn to live with regret. That you will learn to live with respect. That the structures that constrict you may not be permanently constraining. That you will probably be okay.

That you must accept change before you die but you will die anyway.

So you might as well live and you might as well love. You might as well love. You might as well love.