

Hereafter



When I greet your ghost, it will be smiling
A high five waiting to happen
A smirk sneaking past the nurses' station
Your elbows on the counter, a litany of dad jokes

You will be foraging for grape juice on other wards
Polishing off chocolate milkshakes for meals
Boycotting hospital socks in support of slippers
Staring out the window over the park, or maybe past it

When I greet your ghost, it will be telling tall tales
A picture you took of a white deer in the woods
A happy accident gone too soon
A witnessed weekend spent elsewhere

You said we were never meant to be here; this must be a mistake
I, too, felt we were an impossible pairing
Your shortness of breath, a leukemia
The dawn of my career, the twilight of yours

When I greet your ghost, it will be on a conference call
Pretending it isn't sick, muting itself over another lost lunch
Wearing your illness awkwardly, like a child in dress clothes
Trying your best to cover up, to cloak your cancer with optimism

But even in your best disguise, we knew
We knew because we'd seen it before
We knew because it lingered over us like a laden fog
Sitting uneasy in the corner of the room, a promise nobody wanted to keep

When your cancer came back, we knew
It did not knock gently
But stumbled unchecked through the doorway
An impatient guest, angry and unbridled

This time it was a cough and a seizure and a panicked phone call
It was in the brain and in the lungs and in the hidden corners of your body
It lit up like a firecracker racing to outshine you
This time there would be no remission

Five years later, your ghost follows me and watches me play doctor
I hear it in sharp inhales and slow exhales
In rubs and crackles and wheezes
In belly laughs and opening snaps

I see it in white cells scattered across slides
In swollen feet and scaly, cracked skin
In clumps of hair and stifled tears.
Mostly, I feel it when my hard, uncertain exterior is disarmed

I greet your ghost in passing fragments; never on schedule, always on time
I want to tell it: you should be wearing hospital socks so you don't fall
I want to tell it: you would be proud of your daughters
I want to tell it: I owe you a chocolate shake

I want to thank you for teaching me still,
Until we meet again

—Alex Sievert

Illustration by Jim M'Guinness

Mr. Sievert is a second-year medical student at the Oregon Health & Science University. His poem tied for first place in the 2019 *The Pharos* Poetry Award competition. Mr. Sievert's E-mail address is sievert@ohsu.edu.