

Sleeper Cells

For Randy Kottenbrook

The Child is father of the Man

—William Wordsworth,
“My Heart Leaps Up”



*That very first day (and
always)
Your smile was generous
Filling the room
Overwhelming, essential
Like mountains, oceans, air
You were Life personified!*

*A spongy mass
With rapid growth
In the upper eyelid
A small imperfection
Appearing innocent
As an adolescent blemish*

*Diagnosis cancer
A word that evokes fear
A word after which
No others are perceived
A sucker punch
To the solar plexus*

*What genetic defect
What environmental
exposure
What combination of events
(Nature and nurture)
Was responsible for
This bodily debacle?*

*Prognosis measured
In mitoses per high powered
field*

*Disorderly maturation
Anaplastic features
An odious visage
In stained glass*

*How barbaric was radiation
Cooking all in its path
A temporizing microwave
Slow roasting tumor and
flesh
Into charcoal blocks
That crumbled like clay
dreams?*

*And what poison cocktail
Can we conjure up
To stave off the inevitable?
Whither the smart bomb
The cellular Scud missile
To repel this terrorist sleeper
cell?*

*And if the battle is won
But the battlefield decimated
Soft tissue damage
With functional
consequences
What quality of life
Is a life worth living?*

*And if the battle is lost
Cancer cells proliferating
With reckless abandon
Uncontrolled, chaotic
A mirror to the universe
Deep pool of the unknown*

*My heart grows angry
And my soul cries out
Resolute in this microscopic
struggle*

*You were the boy
Who looked cancer
In the face
And never blinked
Embracing your last days
With eyes wide open*

*On that vivid night
Leaving the Schottenstein
Center
(The Buckeyes lost)
After a firm embrace
I kissed your forehead
And we said goodbye*

*I turned back
With sudden urgency
And you turned back too
Your exenterated right orbit
A quintessential wink
Saying “It’s okay.”*

*Our three eyes met
For the last time
A mischievous smile
On your battle-scarred face
As if you knew something
I did not*

*My gaze fixed
In your direction
As you blended
Into the darkness
Suddenly you were gone
And the world was empty*

*Will you remember me?
Your question echoed*

*As I drove alone
In my thoughts
Across Ohio farm lands
To witness
The finality
Of your burial*

*The white formica casket
Was inscribed
With heartfelt messages
In black sharpie marker
As if you were coming home
From summer camp*

*Images rose from the cold
Rain-soaked grass
The loving husband
The doting father
That you will never
Get to be*

How could I not be changed?

*I will not forget
Your inner strength
Your sense of adventure
Your promise to become
A cancer researcher
If you survived*

*The burden is ours
To fulfill your promise*

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The photograph of Dr. Katz and Randy was taken by Tracy Kottenbrook, Randy’s mother.