

# Having it Out with Melancholy

Jane Kenyon, 1947 - 1995

*If many remedies are prescribed for an illness, you may be certain that the illness has no cure.*

A. P. CHEKHOV *The Cherry Orchard*

## 1 FROM THE NURSERY

When I was born, you waited  
behind a pile of linen in the nursery,  
and when we were alone, you lay down  
on top of me, pressing  
the bile of desolation into every pore.

And from that day on  
everything under the sun and moon  
made me sad -- even the yellow  
wooden beads that slid and spun  
along a spindle on my crib.

You taught me to exist without gratitude.

You ruined my manners toward God:

“We’re here simply to wait for death;  
the pleasures of earth are overrated.”

I only appeared to belong to my mother,  
to live among blocks and cotton undershirts  
with snaps; among red tin lunch boxes  
and report cards in ugly brown slipcases.  
I was already yours -- the anti-urge,  
the mutilator of souls.

## 2 BOTTLES

Elavil, Ludiomil, Doxepin,  
Norpramin, Prozac, Lithium, Xanax,  
Wellbutrin, Parnate, Nardil, Zoloft.  
The coated ones smell sweet or have  
no smell; the powdery ones smell  
like the chemistry lab at school  
that made me hold my breath.

## 3 SUGGESTION FROM A FRIEND

You wouldn't be so depressed  
if you really believed in God.

#### 4 OFTEN

Often I go to bed as soon after dinner  
as seems adult  
(I mean I try to wait for dark)  
in order to push away  
from the massive pain in sleep's  
frail wicker coracle.

#### 5 ONCE THERE WAS LIGHT

Once, in my early thirties, I saw  
that I was a speck of light in the great  
river of light that undulates through time.

I was floating with the whole  
human family. We were all colors -- those  
who are living now, those who have died,  
those who are not yet born. For a few

moments I floated, completely calm,  
and I no longer hated having to exist.

Like a crow who smells hot blood  
you came flying to pull me out  
of the glowing stream.

“I’ll hold you up. I never let my dear  
ones drown!” After that, I wept for days.

## 6 IN AND OUT

The dog searches until he finds me  
upstairs, lies down with a clatter  
of elbows, puts his head on my foot.

Sometimes the sound of his breathing  
saves my life -- in and out, in  
and out; a pause, a long sigh. . . .

## 7 PARDON

A piece of burned meat  
wears my clothes, speaks  
in my voice, dispatches obligations  
haltingly, or not at all.

It is tired of trying  
to be stouthearted, tired  
beyond measure.

We move on to the monoamine  
oxidase inhibitors. Day and night  
I feel as if I had drunk six cups  
of coffee, but the pain stops  
abruptly. With the wonder  
and bitterness of someone pardoned  
for a crime she did not commit  
I come back to marriage and friends,  
to pink fringed hollyhocks; come back  
to my desk, books, and chair.

## 8 CREDO

Pharmaceutical wonders are at work  
but I believe only in this moment  
of well-being. Unholy ghost,  
you are certain to come again.

Coarse, mean, you'll put your feet  
on the coffee table, lean back,  
and turn me into someone who can't  
take the trouble to speak; someone  
who can't sleep, or who does nothing  
but sleep; can't read, or call  
for an appointment for help.

There is nothing I can do  
against your coming.

*When I awake, I am still with thee.*

## 9 WOOD THRUSH

High on Nardil and June light

I wake at four,

waiting greedily for the first

note of the wood thrush. Easeful air

presses through the screen

with the wild, complex song

of the bird, and I am overcome

by ordinary contentment.

What hurt me so terribly

all my life until this moment?

How I love the small, swiftly

beating heart of the bird

singing in the great maples;

its bright, unequivocal eye.

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