

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.

From *Constance* by Jane Kenyon, published by [Graywolf Press](#). © 1993 by Jane Kenyon. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/having-it-out-melancholy>