

All I Need: A Dramatic Poem

by Evelyn Hooven (April 2016)

Here, a woman in her mid-fifties meditates:

Jane's off to the cemetery

Again, with her flowers,

Each day a different color.

She was wondering this morning

About blue—

What there might be

Besides hydrangea,

Certain casts of violet.

She places her bouquet

And then. . . Grandma, she asks

Through the grave,

What shall I do about Ethan?

No more marriage

But keeps on leaving messages.

Should I, no matter what

Have this baby?

Lovely girl, comes an answer

She imagines,

It's for you to decipher—

Only you can know

How brave, how willing

To wait, sort, hold out. . . .

Would *my mother* say that?

Whatever Jane wants to hear

She wants from her grandmother.

Why won't she,

Why won't she *yet*,

Ask me?

I just kind of failed

My stress test.

I can't take this,

Doctor. Keep going,

Push yourself,

You'll rest after.

Lasted six minutes—

It should have been

(There's a formula) nine,

Was breathless, rubbing

My knees where cartilage once tore.

You're de-conditioned,
Need a treadmill,
Here's a prescription,
It's tax-deductible.
I still can't afford it,
Maybe by spring. . . .

He died a few days
Short of our anniversary,
Just before spring.
Jane never goes to *his* grave. . . .

Come with me to my stress test?
It's a *distress* test. . . . No. . . .
Maybe it is, but made
More so when she said
We could place a personals ad:
Widow, past middle age,
Right breast lumpectomied,
Possible left chest disturbance,
Somewhat overweight, seeks Prince;
Her grieving family also needs him.

Prince must be kindly,
Preferably tall and handsome—
Charm would be a plus. . . .

Okay, I'm inadequate, a disaster,
And insults might ease
Her *inconsolable* grief,
But mine gets worse.

It's like that—spiritual:

Sometimes I feel

Like I'm all alone

Sometimes I feel

Like a motherless child. . . .

If we're both undone

By losses

We should sing this one

Together—

Sometimes I feel

Like I'm almost gone—

A long wa-ay from home. . . .

The cemetery's a long way,

Where, day after day,
You bring your yellow
Or pink, striped or lily-
Of-the-valley offerings;
I forgot this morning—
Did you remember?—
Delphinium's another blue. . . .

Look her in the eye,
My friend advises, say
You haven't *any idea*
How much you mean to me.
Do this on a daily basis.
Sounds over the top—
Would seem phony from me. . . .
I'm not a-fortress
But every day—even speechless—
I do love you.
Can't that be good enough?
My mother would say
I'll always care
Even after I'm dead,

Don't ask me how.

But when Jane says

I'm not too young

To have seen a *lot*,

Something in me clenches up.

My own response used to be

Like a doll's, eyelashes

Thick and false, a wig

Even in August, head scarves

That came untied

And make-up (never did

Well with camouflage)

I couldn't manage.

I was protecting you

And even in the midst

Of my protecting you

From the shock of a chemo-bald

Mother comes your I'm an old-

Young, have seen a *lot*. . . .

What is enough?

A lady in my support group
Had a special wig made up
Pre-treatment—much
Of her own long hair; then,
When the falling out in clumps began,
She went to a spa 'til it was finished.
She wore long dresses, silk head-
Scarves to match, for formal,
Testimonial, patrimonial
Parties or however
Society women fill their calendar.
I remember her
In the hospital ladies' room
Arranging herself; she said,
What I really can't stomach is—
They do lovely things these days
With accessories, styles
For wigs in such fun colors.
When my hair grows back
I won't care about style
As long as it's on my head.
If there's a next time, I said,

I'll spare them vanity-type

Insurance and wear. . . .

We began to complete

Each other's thought

So from here I can't remember

Just who said what:

If there's a next time we'll wear

Substantial kerchiefs

Like workers in the fields.

We know people out there

In perfect health

Who have days when they're blue,

Anti-social

Or closed for repair,

But when you have cancer

How do you feel?

Oh, positive every day,

Positive, all day long.

We look at each other—

Then laughter—

That's the last time I saw her. . . .

Once there were sayings and posters

Baskets of cards and ribbons—

I remember a design

On a covered teacup—

Flaxen-haired girl

With a silvery watering vessel:

Every day, said the teacup

Lid, is lovely when you're doing

What you love. . . . No one,

Hardly-Ever-Land

Seemed to promise,

Will be disheveled,

Neglected, ill; no shoelace

Frayed or button missing. . . .

I remember my handkerchief

Pinned to my collar,

Relying on it,

Though, sometimes,

When I needed it most,

I'd notice it must

Have fallen, and the pin,
Sometimes open,
Seemed like the injuring
Spinning wheel
In the fairy tale. . . .

I don't go to the cemetery often,
Mama, because you're always here.

Was your cup half full?

Now mine's half empty.

You'd make do with half a loaf,

Is mine the half that's missing?

I wish I could believe more

In your-mottoes-now

That I could use some.

ONE DAY AT A TIME-how

Many *could* there be?

But I know what you mean.

ROME WASN'T BUILT IN A DAY

And WHEN IN ROME, DO. . . .

Will I ever get to Rome?

By now Jane will be leaving
The cemetery. This week she's given
Her classes an assignment
(Thinking short must mean
Easy for children)
To write Haiku;
I decide to try.

It comes out not of the Moonlight-
Tremor-Branches persuasion.
I call it at first *Home*,
Then cross that out:

Terrain, be mother
My harbor, salvation, all
I need—we vanish.

When I read it out
I wonder about this "*all I need*"—
What-where-with-whom,
A journalist's question—
Or could it be a philosopher's?

And *Home's* not our own house
Where we each grew up,
Where I came as a toddler
That summer after
How many assassinations—
There, my mother
Was reunited with her old photos
And albums, especially the one
Of Queen Elizabeth's
Coronation.
No one could explain
The comfort she took in that.

I wish I could feel
(We're none of us built to last)
A sense, in a way that's my own,
Of succession:
That one's dead,
Long live this one.
Am I, Jane, the one
Who mustn't let us vanish?
Could matriarchs be made

Of stuff like this?

Evelyn Hooven graduated from Mount Holyoke College and received her M.A. from Yale University, where she also studied at The Yale School of Drama. A member of the Dramatists' Guild, she has had presentations of her verse dramas at several theatrical venues, including *The Maxwell Anderson Playwrights Series* in Greenwich, CT (after a state-wide competition) and *The Poet's Theatre* in Cambridge, MA (result of a national competition). Her poems and translations from the French have appeared in *ART TIMES*, *Chelsea*, *The Literary Review*, *THE SHOp: A Magazine of Poetry* (in Ireland), *The Tribeca Poetry Review*, *Vallum* (in Montreal), and other journals, and her literary criticism in Oxford University's *Essays in Criticism*.

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