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poems
by
doctors

Cancer of the Vulva

Ron Charach

It was born of defective immunity
coupled with a bout of HPV gone wild.
The result was triple-threat surgery:
two external bags and *pelvic exoneration*.

The family grieved for their poet daughter,
pleading to save her clitoris, all privacy long gone,
but after surgery and radiation, there remained
the threat of fistulas, and worse.

In lieu of passion, pain killers flowed.
Send no Mapplethorpe flowers . . .

At the change of dressings, she looked up
and told the nurse, as if seeking a less vulnerable sister,
“Who will even look at me now?”
On the departure of the night nurse, she takes up a pen.
Before she leaves the hospital, she gives me this poem:

CA VULVA
*These pouting lower lips, now stripped from their cords
Were gateways to encounters, desire its own reward.
Drop them in a post-op bucket, close what remains like a purse;
May the long road to sexless survival replace any lyrical verse.
No more will a throb in my body open the gates of my heart;
All the unrehearsed recitations will fall flat as sensation departs.
Pare away at this bestial cancer, pare away at the seat of my lust,
Whet your knife on your surgical training, and continue to do what you must.
But be still about ‘positive outcomes’; make no effort to cheer me in vain,
Give me nothing but long, pregnant silence, and narcotics to cope with the pain.
For I will awake from my slumber remembering all that I miss,
The slow rise of desperate excitement, the fire-in-the-genitals kiss.*

Ron Charach took his medical degree at the University of Manitoba, Canada. He trained in psychiatry in Toronto and New York, and has lived in Toronto since 1980. Dr Charach is the author of nine books of poetry and the non-fiction book *Cowboys and Bleeding Hearts: Essays on Violence, Health and Identity*. This poem is from his new volume of poetry *Forgetting the Holocaust*, published in Calgary, Alberta, by Frontenac House (2011) © Ron Charach.

Chosen by Femi Oyeboode.

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