The Ballerina’s Victory

So now I’ve come full circle.
365 days since the cancer.
I end where I began.
Forever changed by what I dreaded most.

In spite of everything,
the pain,
the horror,
the fear of one year ago,
Perhaps because of everything
I’m here today
to celebrate a wonderful, glorious,
sweet transformation:
I am victorious conquistador and
dancing ballerina
all in one!

I’ve crossed the chasm from there to here.
I’ve put behind what always was before.
Now I’m swimming instead of drowning.
No more elusive kite flying aimlessly in the sky.
Moored firmly to my spirit,
I am a special child of God.

I must tell you!
Reach out and shake you up!
Learn the lessons of the heart.

Be impatient
for life.
Be infectious for life.
Hug life.
Kiss life.
Tickle life.
Do life and be life.
NOW!

At the encouragement of her sister,
shortly after her diagnosis Lang started
writing poems that reflect different
aspects of her cancer experience. “I had
so many things I wanted to say about
this thing called cancer that hadn’t
been said before, and I felt that I
couldn’t rest until I had,” Lang says.
“It purged me. I felt like I was recovering
through writing because I had so
much emotion inside of me that I had
to get out.”

Lang found out about her cancer
on the day of her daughter’s senior
prom, when she received the results
from a routine mammography. “I
was in the middle of all these
happy things, and then the
whistle blows: ‘Hey, hey it’s

Continued on page 87
you. You’re the one out of nine. I could not believe it.” Her poem “Getting Fine Is Hard,” written more than a year later, expresses what she calls “the gut of it”:

It is grueling work saving one’s life.
Which option do I choose?
Which surgery?
Chemotherapy? Radiation?
Try dealing with that one.
Survivors understand: Getting fine is hard.

And the waiting for the test results:
Will the lymph nodes be positive or negative?
How far has the cancer spread?
How much longer do I have to wait?
How much more can I tolerate?
Survivors understand: Getting fine is hard.

Writing poetry helped liberate Lang from her feelings of despair and honor, but she also relied heavily on the patience and understanding of her husband, the support and concern of her family, and the caring and kindness shown by the staff at Saint Mary Regional Cancer Center, where she received her treatments. She realizes now how lucky she was that her cancer was detected early and was treatable. In a poem titled “Mammography,” Lang writes:

Where would I be without you?
Mammography, you are life saver,
gift giver,
messenger of hope to women, especially grateful me.

Lang’s first project as chair of the Cancer Society’s Public Issues Committee was to write letters urging then-President Bush to sign the Mammography Quality Standards Act, establishing minimum standards nationwide (he signed it on October 27). But Lang worries too about women who cannot afford mammography or have no insurance to cover cancer treatment. Her plans for the committee include lobbying President Clinton for a national healthcare plan that would “afford every woman the same opportunity to save her life.” Lang also wants to focus on convincing legislators to allocate more research money for cancer, especially for breast cancer.

Despite the pain and horror of her bout with cancer, Lang feels almost grateful for what it has taught her about life and for the chance she has to give something back to the world. “When I share my poetry with someone who has cancer, I relive the hope I felt when I became ‘normal’ again,” Lang says. “Even when everything is going wrong, I can think, You know, this is a lousy day, but I’m here to have this lousy day. And all of a sudden the problem becomes secondary, because at least I am still here to deal with it.”

AFTER CANCER
We are ballerinas
Dancing, reaching, soaring.
Gliding gracefully on the stage of life.
Doing our pirouettes,
standing tiptoe to reach for every new experience.

We do not ask for accolades.
We do not seek applause.
We simply want to whirl and twirl as never before
While there is time.

The world may laugh at us and it won’t understand the little secret that we share.

But never mind . . .
Don’t waste a minute
The orchestra is playing!
Let’s be on centerstage for our command performance.

Shine brightly!
Dance brilliantly!
The spotlight is upon us
And our time is now!

—Susan K. Hume