

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!

The image of a ballerina comes up frequently in Judy Lang's poetry. She and her friend Rosemarie, another cancer survivor, use it as a code name to remind each other of what they almost lost and how much they have gained.

"When I got my life back, I realized that I had a treasure unlike any other, and I don't want to waste a minute of it," says Lang. And she doesn't. Her battle with breast cancer lasted from her diagnosis on May 16, 1991, until the last radiation treatment on August 19, 1991—"dates I'll never forget," she says. Since then, she has become active with the American Cancer Society in Bucks County, PA, where she lives. Lang has revived the society's Public Issues Committee (which advocates for legislative reform), gives demonstrations on breast self-examination, and shares her poetry at fund-raising and educational events.

I'm bursting inside!
Can't you understand?

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.

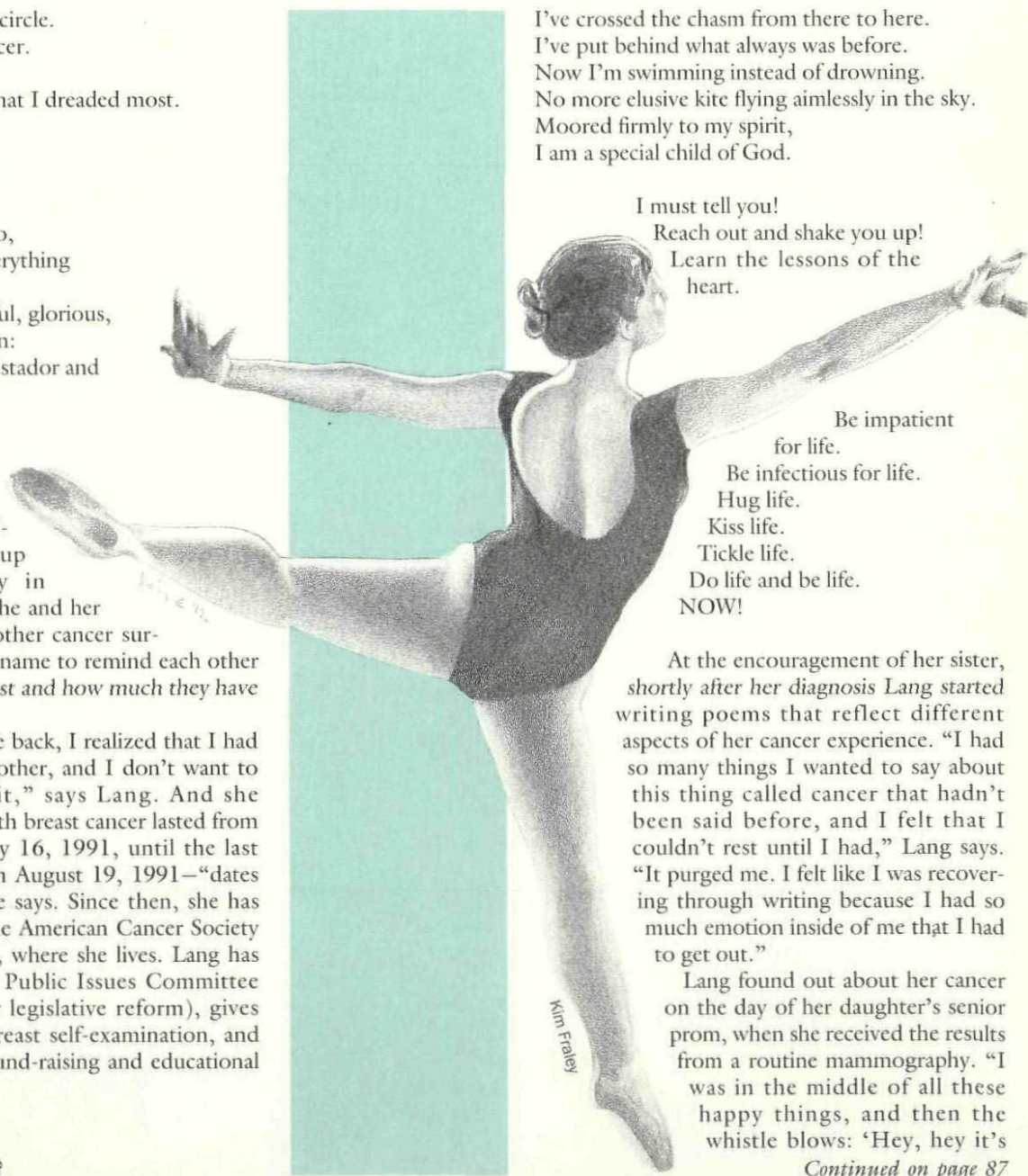
I must tell you!
Reach out and shake you up!
Learn the lessons of the heart.

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 horror, 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 can-

cer 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

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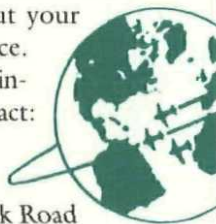
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