

The Witness

Yoshiko Iwai

I. I watch you. You come in to see Dr. H because you are in pain. Pain of the muscles, the bones, the skin, the organs you do not know the names of, something deeper in your heart, something you cannot say at all. I witness each of you, as he goes to call you in, one by one. Sometimes you come with people. Sometimes they are your children, your parents, your lover, a friend, a co-worker.

II. When you come in and say “cancer is eating my rib”, I don’t know what you mean. I don’t have cancer in my body, not yet at least, so all I can do is imagine. You hold your rib cage with your hand, even though you are overweight with too much skin to feel your rib. You press your hand on your gut and repeat “cancer is eating my rib”. Dr. H places his hand over yours while he asks about your medication and progress. I cannot tell if his touch is comforting to you or making you more aware of your pain—you mask it well. When you say you don’t like the fentanyl patch because you sweat too much, he says he could give you a morphine pump. He seems reasonable, his tone and posture are confident. But you say no.

III. Sometimes, you are stubborn. Everything Dr. H says is wrong, everything your husband says is wrong, my gaze is wrong, the world is wrong and your body is wrong. I feel your anger hitting the walls, his white coat—he receives your fury. You are more persistent than the others. You ask during every silence, “then why don’t I feel better?” like you’ve been indicted. You complain of nausea and pain, discomfort in your own skin, you do not shift in your seat unless to tell your husband to shut up. You briefly relax when Dr. H mentions Harry Potter. I watch you two talk about the books, the movie, the play your husband is taking you to this weekend. Dr. H knows your buttons, he pushes them carefully. But you retract faster than you sneeze, you say you don’t want to wear gloves and a mask, or lug around your oxygen tank on a date to the theater. “You’ve made progress” he says like a mantra. Maybe you’ll listen next time.

IV. Sometimes, you are funny. You are friends with Dr. H. When you walk in, you hug like fraternity brothers, I forget you have terminal cancer because you slap his back like we’re all watching a football game. You ask about his wife and kids, you ask about the radiators in his new house, you talk politics and I watch the white hospital walls fade away. Dr. H shows you a picture of the flat tire on his new car and you ask if it’s a Beamer. I laugh in the corner because I was thinking the same, maybe a Mercedes or a Porsche. He did already show us his Gucci wallet. You tell him about the persisting nausea like an afterthought. You talk about your hospitalization with pneumonia like you almost forgot.

V. Other times, you don’t speak English at all. I watch Dr. H change gears, switching between English and Spanish the way I switch from coffee to water. He helps you sit down because

your legs are too weak to carry your own weight. He touches your arms, noting the edema that has left them like bat wings. You say your bones hurt. It's the only English in the conversation, the only thing I understand. "My bones hurt," you say and put your hands on your hips, your knees, your thighs. He offers marijuana pills to restore your appetite and make you stronger. He focuses on the quality of your life and you smile at his attentiveness.

VI. I watch each of you, come in and out of the office, of Dr. H's life, and mine. I watch the pain you carry in your bodies. I watch the support of your families. I watch Dr. H receive your pain, your loneliness, your hope. I watch like one day, I could do the same.

Yoshiko Iwai is a writer and dancer from Japan, living in New York City. She is a master's candidate at Columbia University for her MFA in Creative Nonfiction and MS in Narrative Medicine. She graduated from the University of Michigan with a BFA in Dance and BS in Neuroscience and was also an editor/writer for The Michigan Daily. At Michigan, she was the recipient of the Earl V. Moore Award for Excellence in Dance and the Hopwood Nonfiction Award. At Columbia, she is a Chair's Fellow for the Graduate Writing Program and teaches creative writing in prison facilities as a member of Columbia Artist/Teachers.

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