

Cancer's journey

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SOCIETY OF CANCER-PATIENTS OF MACEDONIA-THRACE

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THESSALONIKI 2011

T. Mitta

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“Cancer’s journey”

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Dedicated

to the doctors who relieved my pains,

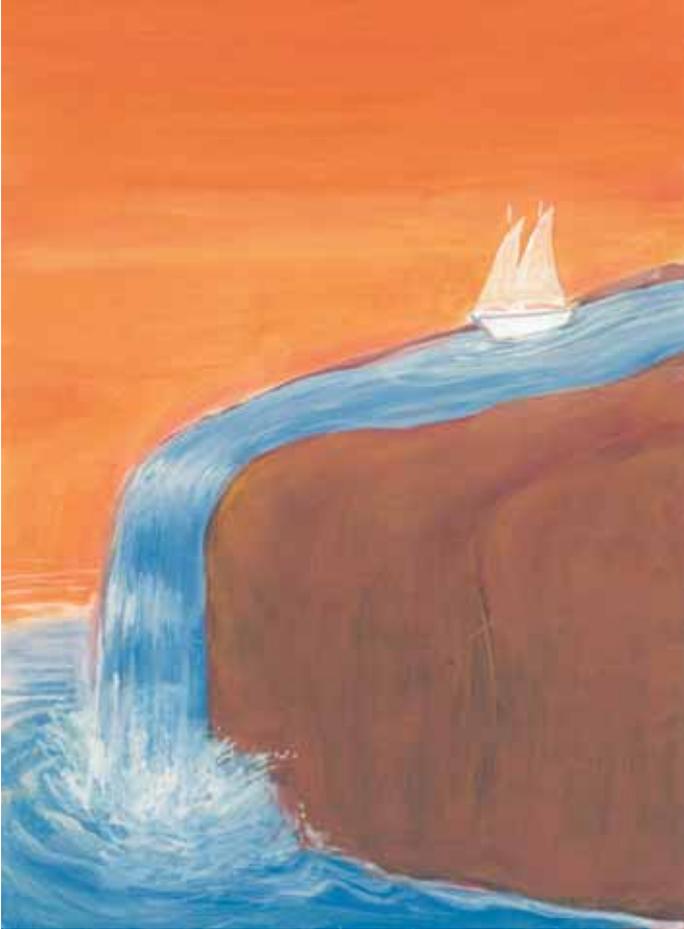
*to the nurses for the soothing moments
they offered to my body
– they called me “the hospital’s mascot” –*

to the friends that magnified the word love,

*to all my beloved ones, united like
a chain – we endured through time,*

to all the other patients who gave life ... to my time

A. Prologue





*I lived without a single thought
letting myself do as I ought
following the law that Nature finds,
and so I am most surprised to see
that death has dared to think of me,
when it never once came into my mind.¹*

Is it possible that a whole life can be compressed into a few verses?
And still, while reading them, I thought they were referring to me:

To a life that was happy, carefree. To a job, to a home –all settled.
To a whole life that was settled and was waiting for the waves to move
it back and forth, wherever the wind blows.

1. Mathurin Regnier (1573-1613) “Epitaph”, translated by Brian Cole (2007)
<http://colecizj.easyvserver.com/pfregepi.htm> , Greek translation by K. G. Karyotakis.

I was dancing a love dance with the wind. I enjoyed my body, my harmonious connection with life.

“Life moves forward”.

The operation that I was asked to undergo –total hysterectomy– didn’t get me off my track. The current keeps moving, I don’t know where to (life doesn’t let us know about its course). And I was following to the deep riverbed, where my feet couldn’t touch down, full of my love, full of the life that is love. You never touch the bottom of love; you never dry up from the life inside this love.

And I was really favoured. A new place, a new appointment gave shelter to my aspirations. The horizon stretched away, the boundaries were pushed away.

“I say, when somebody is happy, she looks far, far away...”.

B. Cancer:
the first hearing, the initial emotions





When suddenly a pain in my leg –maybe unrelated?– pins me down. The body has its own way to stop the flow of things. Pain interrupts this flow, exhausts it.

I begin the medical tests. And I feel anxiety, tiredness during the rest of the day which hangs upon me in an imperative manner and doesn't ask for any explanations or excuses. "*Disease is ignorance and the absence of soul in the body*". *How utterly ignorant we are of the body, which has its own flow...*

After two or three months they inform me: “It may be a malignant tumour”. They explain to me: “cancer”.

I don't speak. I only think that *life loses ground beneath my feet! Now I can see only near*. During a night, I felt as if a wall shut my gaze. And made everything seem smaller, the heart, her exaggerated thoughts, the plans, the whole world, which stood arbitrarily like a mere dot beneath my feet.

A huge pair of scissors cuts the thread of my life.

I am not dying. I haven't thought about it yet. What I am thinking about is life, the plans, the dreams that give meaning to this long thread that carries my existence. I am losing life, not as the opposite to death, but as the opposite to non-existence.

And what about my dreams? My job? The place that I have just restored to house my works? The new fashion show to which my whole life was dedicated...where will all these find their place in the minute tumour beneath my feet? Life is leaving, it is flowing beneath my feet... During a night –maybe forever.



Disease always comes uninvited, when nobody expects it.

I find myself trapped between life and death, between light and darkness, in an unknown place walking alone... It entered my life violently and it is stealing time, it is stealing my days, the hours, the nights, when I sleep alone without my wings.

“I added up my days”² and I haven’t found anything else but my pain in the confusion of stars...³ In the place where I used to count words, I now find infinite darkness smiling at me.

My life is threatened and I know that, but I don’t think about it. What I am now thinking of is my dreams which are threatened as well, the mind that has to overcome my body, to get out of it in order to balance somewhere between light and darkness, to drag all things there, hanging in the air, to a place where the whole existence is suspended uninvolved, invisible.

“How everything changed so dramatically, how the flow of things changed, the balance of thoughts, the succession of nights!”⁴ And why was there suddenly only night “in my confusion of plumage”, in the place where I used to listen to the hum of stars...?

-
2. “I added up my days yet did not find you / anywhere, ever, holding my hand / in the roar of precipices and my confusion of stars!”. Odysseus Elytis, *The Axion Esti*, translated and annotated by Edmund Keeley and George Savvidis, London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974, “The Passion”, D, p. 45.
 3. Odysseus Elytis, *The Axion Esti*, translated and annotated by Edmund Keeley and George Savvidis, London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974, “The Passion”, D, p. 45.
 4. “The world’s order has vanished”. Ovid, *Orpheus in the Underworld*, translated by M. M. Innes, London: Penguin, 1995, p. 3.

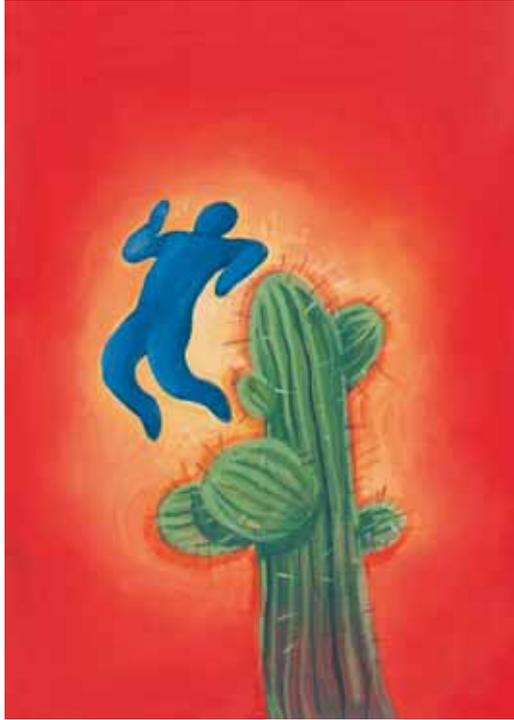


I am falling from life, I find myself outside in its void, where I control nothing.

Who has said that the opposite of dreams is death? The opposite is void, non-desire, not knowing anything and not longing for anything.

However, for all the other people around me, life, in one way or another, continues. I no longer know whether I will be able to stand up, to walk, whether I will be able to start all over again, with new plans.

“I am falling into the void!”



Cancer's journey is unknown, without (straight) lines, it doesn't drag our footsteps somewhere.

The unknown and the fear accompanying it overwhelm me. Thousands of thorns prick the body and lead the threat deep into the heart.

Among other things, I am trying to learn about the disease, I ask other patients. Nobody says its name. They are with me, they are hospitalised in the same hospital with a common disease, cancer –and still, on hearing this word the lips become frozen.



This ignorance transforms my fear into anguish: a figure closes in upon me, like the gallows⁵ that strangles me and immobilises my breath.

“Will I travel alone?”

5. The Greek word for ‘gallows’ is ‘anchoni’(=αγκόνη). According to the etymology of the word, it comes from the ancient Greek verb ‘ancho’(=to grab somebody’s throat, to strangle), which was preserved almost with no change in Latin [‘angst’, ‘angustia’, stenosis (constriction)]. Anguish emphasizes the constriction of breathing. It becomes corporal and expressed through the sense of being strangled (‘anchoni’= ‘gallows’). See Sigmund Freud’s, *Anguish. Lectures for the Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, translated by Lilie Papandreou, Athens: Patakis, 1996.



Like a seaman, tied to cancer's boat –where does life drag me? – I start wandering, “For how long? Where? When? ...”

Narrow, perplexed strings pull my winds: the wound, the disease, the inevitable, the inescapable and, at the same time, the trembling teeth, the fear, the expectation of acceptance.

Emotions give way to one another and they create ditches in my mind. My thoughts are totally disoriented. Blue waves inundate the world of my prison:

“Why me? I don’t want to die”. I want to live and escape from everything they have already planned for me. “Get me out of here”. I feel trapped in a suffocating place. In a place that deprives me of the freedom to determine my body, my choices, my life.

*Narrow cell of loneliness,
my heart, stop being in distress.⁶*

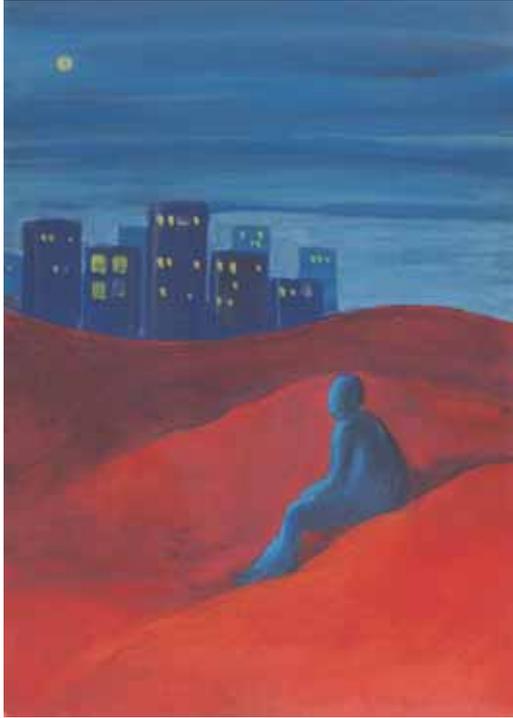
I hate this disease and all the things it does to me. It took me away from everything I loved most about life, my freedom to love life. “I want it to give my life back to me”.

And if, however, this happens to me in order to become a better person..., let it not happen now. “God and His angels rejoice ‘in need’”, you have said.⁷ Yes, but angels hide me from today.

“Some rest, to get out of the prison that crushes my faith in life. To get out of my world, to have some rest, dear God, infinitely...”

6. Mitta Persephone, *Unpublished*, 31.7.1994

7. K. Ioannidis, *The Venerable Father Porfyrios, Testimonies and Experiences*, Athens: Metamorphosis tou Sotiros, 1994.



“Will anyone take me?”

I am waiting for the biopsy. I feel lonely and alienated. All this happen for someone else, someone else is in my body and lies awake to watch what is happening.

Pain, our only common companion, binds us together, reminds us of the presence of a threat upon our existence. I am in pain and I am waiting.

Someone pushed life's button and immobilised me in no place, in infinity, in the air circulating around us, which is nothing and everything.

I am everywhere and nowhere. Agonising, nightmarish thoughts are spreading like crazy and at times they gather in a small dot in the mind: cancer.

I am suspended on the brink of a threat: "*Will they be able to catch up with me, to hold me before I fall into the void? Will anyone come close enough to raise me up before it's too late?*" My body –the one who is inside my body. To be able to raise it up before it's too late.

C. Biopsy:
the succession of emotions





The doctor told me: “osteosarcoma”. Which means? “Cancer”, the accursed, incurable disease, a misadventure, something “outside us”. The only thing I can understand is that “cancer means death”.

Why weren't you there to talk to me, to touch my hand, to tell me that all paths in life have two sides? We would follow together the thread of life, the prize won by the ones who believe in it.

“Life is the best prize”⁸ and at that time I wanted you to sing it to me, to give it away as a present to my children. I could see them move away under my wings and I was losing my counterbalance.

“Who will support whom now? Who will talk to them so that they won’t be afraid? Who will protect them?”

I am looking for a miracle, the one lost in the flood of people around me. Everything is spinning. All resistance disintegrates in the mayhem of my mind. I feel this disintegration being in the centre of a centrifugal force. Everything avoids the burden of pain coming from inside –that’s the place where pain lies hidden.

Who will help me, who will understand me, who will stand by my side until the end, who will dedicate little time to listen to me, even once a week, a smile, little drops of a vanishing life?

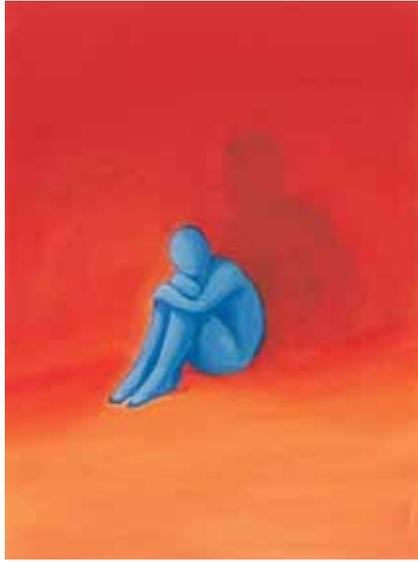
8. “το ζην γαρ, ω παι, πάντος ήδιστον γέρας...”, Sophocles, Extracts. See *Ancient Greek heritage (5): Ancient Greek sayings (III): The sayings of tragedians*, Athens 1985, p. 82.



A large part of my leg is removed during the operation. A new, artificial limb will take its place. “You will be able to move quite well, don’t be afraid”, the doctor says.

However, I am not thinking about the words. I am in pain. I grip pain with my hands, like a force spinning the thread of my life in the drought.

My throat is parched, and swallows my thorny thoughts...



Who talked about the body, away from all complaints and big thoughts? “*There isn’t bigger pain than that of the body*”, he said, “*nothing deeper, holier than a tortured body*”⁹, and he was right, dear God.

Pain closed in upon me, stifling me. I stay all by myself in an infinite void, your absence.¹⁰

9. “...They say that no pain can be equivalent to moral pain. This is what the sage and the books say. However, if you go out at the crossroads and ask the martyrs, the ones whose bodies have been tortured in the din of death –and it’s so easy to find them, our era has taken pains and filled people with martyrs– if you ask them, you will find out that there is nothing, nothing deeper and holier than a tortured body...”. Ilias Venezis, *The Number 31328*, Athens: Estia, 1978 (11), Writer’s Prologue to the second edition (Athens 1945), p. 13.

10. “No one is on your side in this. You need a friend, Lady Andromache”, Euripides, *1 Medea, Hecuba, Andromache, The Bacchae*, translated and edited by David R. Slavitt and Palmer Bovie, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988, v. 77, p. 164.



“Take me! Don’t leave me waiting for the sky’s folds, where the winds carry us –where there are no borderlines, look, in cancer land.

Take me now when I lift huge waves, the pain accompanying my body”.



The treatment begins urgently. Within a few days my hair starts falling. They tell me, comfortingly, that the medicine becomes effective, the treatment-bomb that kills cancer. A forgotten sense of being alive is fading away –*everything on me is fading away and is being humiliated!*

My solid enemy keeps rising –not the disease– but humiliation.

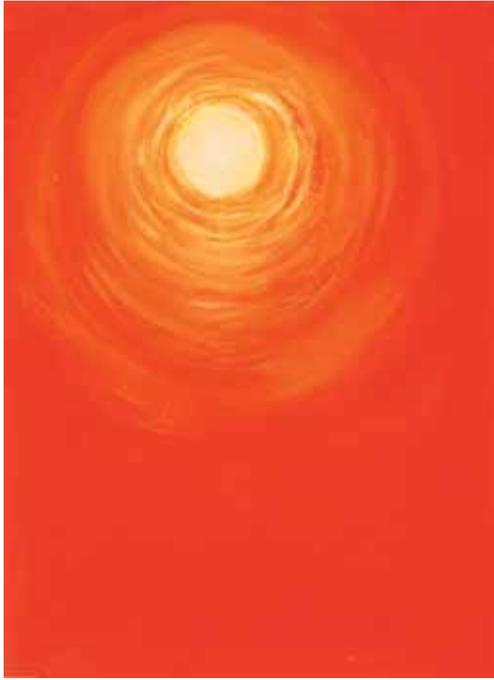
To fight against it, against the threat spreading insidiously in the eyes of my fellow beings, in the surprise of the companions, in the compassion of the proud ones.

To struggle –and to ignore– in a path that seems to be hollow. To be lost in the hollowness of time¹¹ that contains me.

“Come, we will enter the labyrinth and we will get lost. Where all things get lost. Where all things get deeper and lost in pain. We will get lost together. Let’s get lost and don’t leave me alone...”



11. Maro Vamvounaki, *Many happy returns, my darling (Hronia polla glykia mou)*, Athens: Filippotis, 1996 (11).



I am searching for some pure light, a corner in the landscape of loneliness, where the proximity of sun burns.

“Could someone be so kind as to show me the way?”. My strength to walk gets lost beneath the warm breath. I can’t do anything on my own. My life is hidden like a small stone and it is carried by two hands of love in the fair landscape of my difficulty.

I am the small stone, a passive passenger in the boat of life. *“Where do my hands start and end? How far can the feet walk and how far can I extend my body, imprint in the fair clay?”*

Passive passenger –and I need to see this journey as my own. *“Please, this is my life, let me roll it for a while, flow, through my hands... It’s me and I need to see it”.*



I am walking on a stretched rope.

Somewhere in its ends I feel the presence of my beloved ones who hold it so that I won't fall. "*Hold onto it. Support me and don't let me fall, where I don't know anything, where I can't see anything, near the colours of the horizon, where "memory kills me"*".¹²

"*I didn't bend death*".¹³ Let's bend it together in a set of acrobatic tricks that tests the strength of our bonds.

12. "Memory kills me", Odysseus Elytis, *The Axion Esti*, translated and annotated by Edmund Keeley and George Savvidis, London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974, "The Passion", H, p. 81.

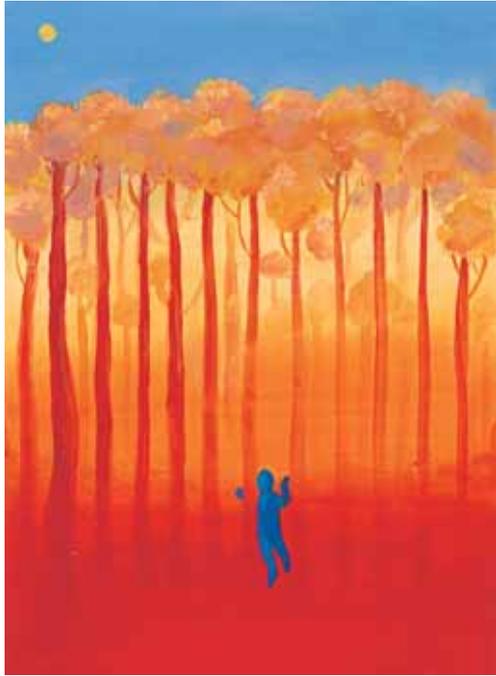
13. "Alone I discouraged death", Odysseus Elytis, *The Axion Esti*, translated and annotated by Edmund Keeley and George Savvidis, London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974, "The Passion", C, p. 47.

Love me now when I am suspended with arms stretched out and I seek the burden of my presence. Love me like a day struggling to hold on in the air's leaves. That is how my life flows, in a thread.

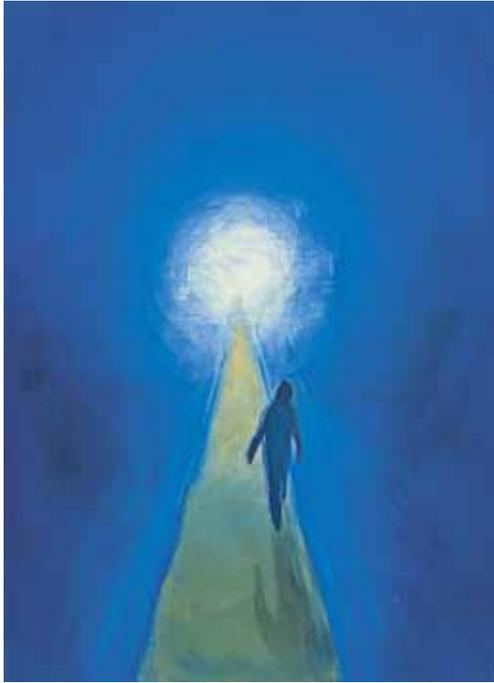




“I am falling...”. And when I go down, black nails touch me, the body’s pains. I sleep in a low room, which at night confines me and makes me smaller; my body is a dot, a dot for every prick flowing inside me. I sleep in a grave.



I gradually begin to surrender. I retire myself into the thing that has inundated me like rain. I hide into a forest consisting of huge, towering trees. What are all these figures, supple figures, like my longings, lost in the sky? The trees are all my overwhelming emotions. And I am lost in their fruitfulness. I am lost in a world of abysmal desires, in the growth of the soul which hides the beginning and the end. There is nothing else but an immense blossoming, a forest –like a sea of thoughts around me, like wreckage.



Cancer is a road with no return. I don't look back. There is no turning back, only moving forward. There are no meetings, crossroads, reciprocal thoughts. And a new pain, a relapse, creates by itself a new beginning, a one-way road looking ahead.

There is only one thought in my mind: *"Look ahead, my heart, ahead!"*. And when there is no light, I create it by myself with the soul's eyes which were made to look ahead.

“I say, I am going downhill”, and the others are scared. But for me, this descent is a rapid thought which brings me closer to a way out of this solitary road, whose end is the beginning of life. I begin to see daylight, counting bargaining: “*Less pain and I’ll be a good girl!*”.

I exchange my dreams for hollow steps on the cobbled road of loneliness, days of treatment and the pain which makes teeth grind, with little light to the end of my azure day. They say that the shadow is azure.

“Who painted, thus, my world azure, where I hold, as a way out, Ariadne’s thread, your love?”



Life goes on. Everything has its tempo and it is the tempo of life.
“I will start from scratch, I will walk, I will fight”.

From the room’s big window I can see the stone hill which lends size to my eyes. At night the “lights of anticipation”¹⁴ rise from the tops –every night unhurriedly with my prayer, every morning with my breath.

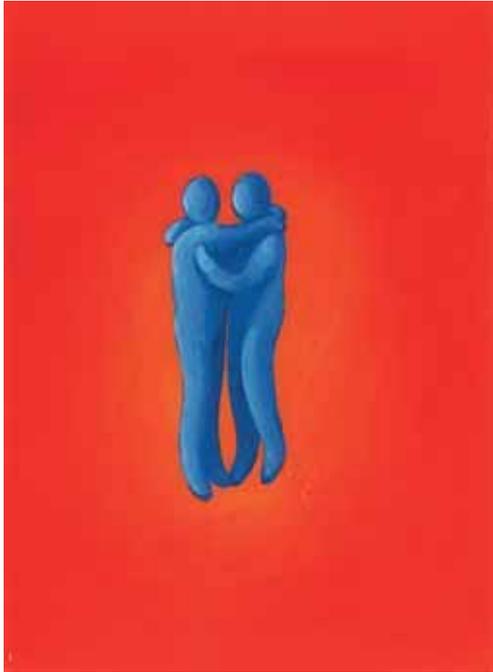
14. Th. Fragkopoulos, *“The rebellious Christ”*. (“O epanastatimenos Christos”), in *Anthology of Modern Greek Poetry*, edited by Spyros Kokkinis, Athens: I.D. Kollaros, 2000 (in Greek).

Suddenly my eyes fill with sunrise: “*I will walk, I will be up and about and someday I will touch that top with my fingers... –Just help me to get well*”.

My eyes are filled with tears. The moon sets, the new day comes and the familiar succession unites all this inside me in a verse:

*“I am looking at the sun and I live for today,
I can see the moon and I hope for tomorrow”.*¹⁵

15. Mitta Persephone, *Unpublished*, May 1988.



I saw you. You touched me. A magic touch which transforms pain into strength, tear into the will to live.

You came as a friend and you broke through the limits like the wind; like a fresh morning breeze you stirred “the strands of my life”¹⁶, dead branches that blossomed. You came and your name was Vassilis, Ilias, Sotiris, Linda, that coloured nurse and innumerable others; my memory is too tired to draw out all names from its burning depths. You came as a friend who touched me, kissed me, encouraged me.

16. G. Meraklis, *Homer's Odyssey*, Patakis 1996.

You came as life that smiled at me with optimism from the corner of the room. You came as a precious promise that had to be reciprocated: *“I will live! I will live for all of you who believe in me”*.

You were the relative, the husband, the sister who stayed awake all night at my pillow. You were the daughter, the son, who lent their youth. *“Their youth, sacrificed in the altar of hope, is cut like a leaf given to me”*.

You were the doctor, the nurse who stood by my touch like a companion.

I will live for all of you, innumerable others, who are so many like the skin’s pores, like a breath of life, like ditches where, hot like blood, the flow of love is poured.

“The patient is always in need of a magic touch”, a doctor, who has been a patient himself, has said.¹⁷ Human beings are always in need of a magic touch. The belief that they are not alone, that they fight for a common cause, in which all, like links of a well-joined chain, take part.

17. Rob Buckman, “Possibilities and limitations of complementary therapies”, presentation at the BACUP conference “Cancer Care, More than medicine”, Brighton, 10-12.10.1996.

An embrace, a smile is much better than the biggest dose of medicine in the blood. It is the first medicine that goes straight to the heart.¹⁸ Do you remember the words of that patient? “Prevention and therapy are offspring of the mind”.

“So, come and help me where I am most in pain. Keep me alive with the life growing in your eyes, with loans of hope, with the freshness growing above you, high, in a magic touch”.

“The miracle resembles the scent of lemon blossoms in the noisy exhaust-gas of the city”.¹⁹ The miracle is the scent giving me life’s fruits. In the purity of my landscape, in utter loneliness, when body, soul and spirit become one to turn the enemy away, I saw the lemon trees blossoming near the street. I smelled their blossom on a hot day with the scent of pain. When you came and talked to me about God.

18 “The soul is cured by certain incantations: beautiful speeches (‘τοις καλοῖς λόγοις’). When these are found in the soul, then we can strengthen the rest of the body quite easily” (Plato, *Charmides* IV 155b-157b).

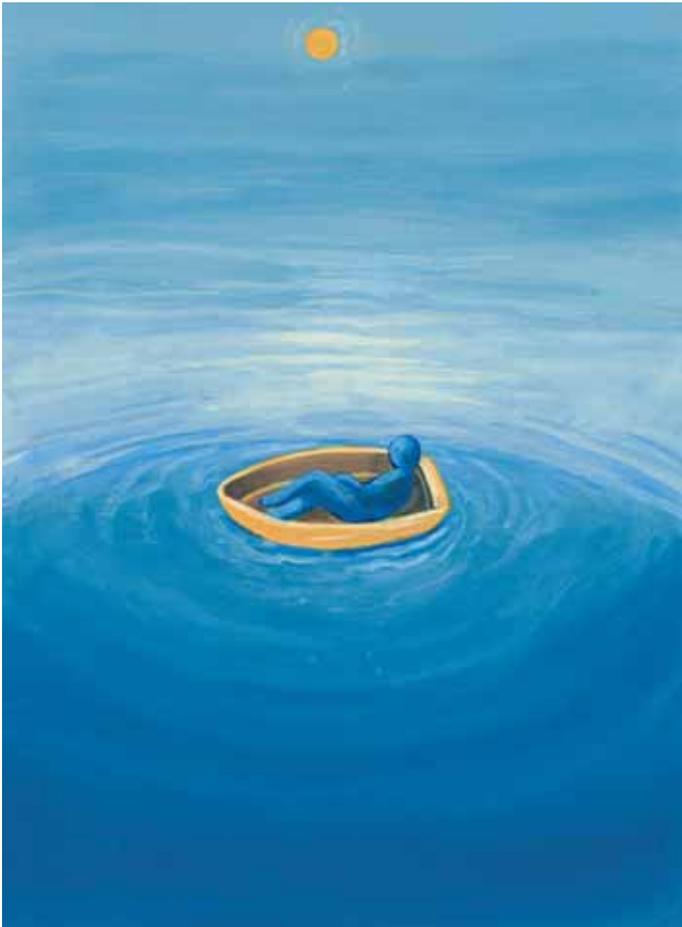
19. Maro Vamvounaki, *Many happy returns, my darling* (*Hronia Polla glykia mou*), Athens: Filippotis, 1996 (11).



You are there so that I can lean on you for a while and get some rest. My thought, sleepless flame, relaxes upon you.

Don't leave, just hold me now when my breath can no longer sustain me. Hold me like an embrace, like a breath, and give me rest.

D. My life
in the long-term





At the end of the journey the seaman gets some rest.

The journey always has an end. I can now look back with the return ticket that purifies the vision. *“I am well again, I am healthy and I make plans for a new life”*.

The past, an open part in me, keeps the priorities. I leave the thoughts, the images, the experiences flow in it.

Now I know that I have experienced important, unique things. I have acquired eyes able to see the world around me with purity: people on their knees with canes –how many I couldn't see before?" – all of them are now revealed before my eyes. The world is revealed before my eyes with true colours.

I give out my soul in pieces, small fires, and I create bonds. "*When we share our experiences, we create bonds*", you've said. I am now getting paid in these terms with magic visions from the horizons of love.

I am now communicating with new patients. I give strength to those who begin the journey and I invite them: "*Come, take my strength, in full sail, and follow me in the trails determined for me by others*". Strength shared by those passing by here, victors and defeated, patients like me, everyone added up in the breathless wind. A magic word.

"Victors, take my words and add them up, blow them like hope, ahead".



*“...I can see through Your eyes,
I can hear through Your ears,
follow your path
and you will find me in front of you”.*²⁰

I found you there bright, open, guiding me. And back, on the beach, during the hardest moments of pain, I saw the writing of my bitterness, lonely steps. *“I’ll never leave you, you’ve said, and I’ll be by your side, walking close along your choices”.*²¹

20. Mitta Persephone, *Unpublished*, June 1989.

21. Extract from the poem of an unknown poet of the Brazilian tradition “Prayer to God”.

My letters talked about the hardest moments of pain, when I needed you most. You came with angel's wings and you embraced me, above all degradation. It was You and you have changed everything. You baptised everything in your light, in purity.

“The wings were filled with the sparkle of the Eastern light, today that my soul is celebrating its rebirth...”





And I saw the family ties, links of a well-joined chain of love, around me. A lively dance celebrating love.

“Don’t leave. Stay like that, offspring outstretched in the wind’s direction, stay in my soul’s direction which grows tenderly”.



Cancer has been a stop . It hasn't been my whole life.

I continue the course of life following the rails which have been predetermined beyond my will, with my will as a navigator. *“I will travel and I will be ahead. My soul, always ahead!”*

Landscapes, alternations of light and shadow, pass by before my eyes and I know that the final colour is always grey. This is what remains as nebula, as cleansing of all pain, of all experience. Its stops, every violent, painful break, bring only humiliation: *“It’s cruel to stop. It’s even crueler, though, not to make it”*.

I have travelled and I have rested my pain on every stop.

And now I know. In everything, good and weak, there is a law pulling the strings of our existence. Something above and beyond our will or cruelty: our need to come out stronger, even when already crushed.

“Strength perfects in sickness...” The strength that learns from pain and moves on. The strength which makes us hollow in the surrounding mystery of life.



“Three kinds of souls, three prayers:

- 1) I am a bow in your hands, Lord. Draw me, lest I rot.*
- 2) Do not overdraw me, Lord. I shall break.*
- 3) Overdraw me, Lord, and who cares if I break!”²²*

22. Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco, an autobiographical novel*, translated by P.A. Bien, London: Faber & Faber, 1973, p.16.



“To accept and overcome your problem is bravery, to support your fellow-being so as to overcome her own problem is heroism, and to struggle not to happen to others what happened to you is divine”.

Georgios Blatzas

*Assoc. Prof. Surg. A. U. TH.
Director A' Surgical/Oncological
Department of “Theageneion”
Anti-Cancer Hospital of Thessaloniki*

*“Truth is like a medicine
and has its own formula”*

“The patient’s right to be informed”

Thessaloniki 1994

P. Mitta

There are bank accounts for those who would like to support the voluntary work of S.C.M.T.:

National Bank of Greece account No.: 223/296210-19

Eurobank account No. : 0026.0232.57.0100310655

“CANCER, SO WHAT?”

This is what we say, naturally and unassumingly, in the **Society of Cancer-Patients of Macedonia-Thrace** (S.C.M.T.) on hearing this disease. Without overlooking the gravity of the situation, we cope with cancer with lots of realism and patience, with no fear, prejudice and complaints, just like the way we would cope with anaemia, diabetes or any other disease.

The paths of the disease can be complicated. However, they become much more difficult when truth is hushed up either by doctors or relatives. What literally kills is **lying**. Whereas, the **truth**, that is, being fully aware of the situation a patient finds herself in, gives courage and strength to cope with the disease, while ensuring proper communication with the social environment.

This is the truth voiced by the members of S.C.M.T. since the year of its establishment (1991). The whole effort seems to be successful. The ‘establishment’ of cancer –the whole prejudice accompanying this disease– is the biggest opponent of our Society. The Society aspires to demolish this prejudice.

Another fundamental objective of our Society is the improvement of the conditions in the Oncological Hospital Clinics of our city, always in cooperation with all the available authorities. The lack of a **Hostel** for cancer patients and their companions coming from the periphery in the two biggest urban centres of the country (Thessaloniki, Athens), has been first traced by S.C.M.T.. Since then, a marathon has been initiated by the Society. The state, the Panhellenic Anti-Cancer Association and other authorities have been notified about the need for the establishment of a hostel. Thus, in 1994, the foundation stone of the first hostel for cancer patients in Greece has been laid in Thessaloniki. This project has not started yet; nevertheless, we believe in its prompt completion.

On the other hand, the cancer-patient herself is in great need of psychological support. (It has been scientifically proved that the patient’s good psychological condition positively affects the total development of the disease in all stages.) This is the reason why the Society has taken pains to create the **groups of ‘psychological support’**. These groups first began in 1994 with the

participation of specialised psychologists, as well as members of the Society. These groups have been very successful. Hopefully, they will continue their meetings with bigger participation in Hospitals.

S.C.M.T. thinks that the information about cancer is of vital importance. This is why **information, prevention and quality of life** are interdependent. The realisation of such interdependence stimulates the members of the Society to take part in conferences about cancer in Greece and abroad. They organise talks-lectures in cooperation with specialised doctors in various places and in the mass media. They distribute free pamphlets including information on different forms of cancer. The scope of our activities also includes the effort to cooperate with specialised doctors in the schools of the city in order to give students firsthand information about issues concerning health and prevention, for example the dangerous consequences of smoking, as well as the necessity of professional consciousness. We have also contacted the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, the Associations of Teachers of Secondary Education, as well as the Municipality of Thessaloniki. The outcome, however, has not been spectacular. Despite that, the Society will continue its efforts.

The activities of our Society do not stop at this point. There are others as well, based on European and American standards, which aim to reduce the pain of the cancer- patient, and which will take place whenever necessary.

And all this for what?

Because the Society of Cancer-Patients of Macedonia-Thrace **loves, feels compassion and empathy** towards the cancer-patient, since all its members are patients (cancer- patients) who are more active than healthy people. Our mission will not stop until only when the patient of the remotest village of Macedonia, Thrace or any other place in Greece becomes the focus of everyone's attention in the national health system, when her smile becomes a reality in her lips and ... in her heart!

Persephone Mitta

COMMENTS

My grandmother, from my mother's side, Magdalene G. Smyrniou, from Vitolia, had worked as a teacher at the School for the Blind, at "Ampepion Melathron", Kallithea Athens, during the first decade of the century. So, during the 1950's, she bewitched me with fairy tales, some of which derived from her previous employment at the School: *Little Prokopis didn't want to eat aubergines. –I don't want to eat aubergines, he would yell whenever this food was cooked. One day, they tell him, –Eat potatoes casserole, little Prokopis, and he ate them. – Little Prokopis, did you like the potatoes? –Yes, I really liked them, he told them. –They weren't potatoes, little Prokopis, they were aubergines. – I don't want to eat aubergines!, little Prokopis started yelling and crying once again.* Uncle Vassilis, brother of the wife of my grandmother's brother, was blind and he worked as a shoe mender. He was meek, sweet-tempered, smiling, and I loved him. At the end of the decade, the news arrived at our house that "Olga Karozi died of the disease". Fat and coming from Vitolia, my grandmother's best friend, she always kept me an apple or fondant.

I have had an even more intimate experience with cancer. It's unnecessary to get into further details, but I would just like to say that my relationship with this sensitive area has not been occasional. Last year, through the "Cultural Capital", I associated with the Society of Cancer-Patients of Macedonia-Thrace. I have been impressed by the outspokenness of the president. Her aura, the bold view of life, when she came like a Santa Claus at the Vasilissis Olgas offices last January. Her manners, whenever she honoured us with her speeches during poetic events. In an era full of peasants, we are in need of a genuinely bourgeois presence like hers.

I have been even more affected by the multidimensional activities of the Society: verses, choir, painting, sewing. Active people who are aware of the value of life and who are more careful with it.

The joint event of the Organisation of European Cultural Capital "Thessaloniki '97" with the Society honours both, and much more the "Cultural Capital". Personally, I would like to remain a friend (if not a member, later, who knows) of the Society of Cancer-Patients and I will continue my relationship even after the current *annus mirabilis*.

17 September 1997

Mimis Souliotis

Professor of Literature

Department of Education (Florina)

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

I was lucky –and I really mean it– to get to know Persephone Mitta in the small, humble, but humane and I think scientifically accurate Oncological Hospital “Agiou Anargyroi”. She herself was not lucky since she had been sick and she was agonisingly searching for a Hospital in order to follow the treatment recommended in the USA. You could immediately recognise the person who had been embittered, disappointed, but, in the end, the person-fighter who has decided to fight and win. During treatment I and my colleagues started getting closer to her and watching with admiration her struggle, her resistance to adversities and side-effects and, of course, the torture of a Thessaloniki inhabitant being sick in Athens.

Persephone was cured! And, of course, her gushing personality did not allow her to limit herself to the satisfaction that she, despite difficulties, was cured. She felt that she had to make publicly known that all patients can and must fight and tame the wild beast. This is how she began her struggle in other fronts, trying to encourage cancer- patients, to assert better nursing conditions, or to cooperate with the doctors and the nursing staff of Oncological Hospitals and Oncological Departments of General Hospitals.

Persephone has now been unquestionably recognised as a model of fighter, not only for her own personal battle, but also for all those cancer-stricken who try to recover from the sudden blow of the disease, the family’s, the society’s and the state’s weakness to support and hospitalise.

In “Cancer’s Journey” Persephone describes the emotions created by the realisation of her problem and by the application of treatment. Then, she describes her emotional world, once she completes her treatment and feels that she is standing on her feet again.

One discovers a torrent of emotions and thoughts and, in spite of the storm, an infinite love and nostalgia for life. The initial anger and disappointment are gradually set aside and give their way to tenacity and the desire to fight and live. And, in the end, like David beating Goliath, she is calm, serene and determined to pass the flame of life to other patients so that they can stand on their feet, too. The representation of the succession of her emotions in drawings is soul-stirring and unique.

I would like to thank you, Persephone, for having the chance to get to know you, to learn and be taught so many things by the way you coped with your disease and through your life. Keep on travelling.

Dimosthenis Skarlos

Pathologist – Oncologist

Professor of the University of Athens

Director B' Oncological Clinic

Errikos Dynan Hospital

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The Society of Cancer-Patients of Macedonia Thrace is a voluntary aid organisation with cancer-patients as its members. It is situated at 65 Egnatias Street, Thessaloniki (central office) and at 96 Agiou Dimitriou Street (the meeting-place).

Through activities and the voluntary work of its members and friends (e.g. gatherings, talks, groups offering aid and entertainment to patients etc.), we try to support cancer-patients and inform the public.

This initiative also includes the publication and free distribution of a series of pamphlets concerning cancer. For further information about the events and activities organised by our Society, please contact us at 2310241911 (office).

EPILOGUE

The publishing activity of the Society of Cancer-Patients of Macedonia-Thrace is enriched by another pamphlet. Our publications have always had a fundamental motive: to inform the public about cancer prevention, as well as to ensure quality development for every citizen of the Greek society.

The present publication, however, constitutes a very special piece of writing. Lively, based on personal experience and dynamic, it reflects the emotions and needs of the cancer-patient throughout treatment and rehabilitation, with the most true, genuinely poetic manner.

We welcome the written work of Mrs Mitta Persephone, President of the Society of Cancer-Patients of Macedonia-Thrace. She has put her heart and soul into this booklet for each one of us.

We would also like to thank Mrs Mitta Triantafyllia, Art Historian, for her contribution to the publication and for her well-done drawings that decorated it so beautifully.

S.C.M.T.

S.C.M.T. GROUPS

The adjustment to the changes brought about by cancer becomes easier for the cancer-patients, as well as for their families, when they receive useful information and support services.

The following is what the Board of the Society of Cancer-Patients of Macedonia-Thrace has organised during the winter periods since 1992:

GROUP SESSIONS

- 1) A closed group for the psychological support of cancer-patients.
- 2) An open group for the psychological support of cancer-patients.
- 3) A group for the psychological support of the cancer-patient's family.
- 4) Open discussion groups (coffee time).
- 5) Bible study class.
- 6) Self-consciousness class.
- 7) Sophrology class.
- 8) Drama therapy class.
- 9) Drama class.
- 10) Theatrical game class.
- 11) Music class.
- 12) Music therapy class.
- 13) Traditional Greek dances class.
- 14) Choir class.
- 15) Drawing class.
- 16) Aromatherapy class.
- 17) Physiotherapy - stress management class.
- 18) Orthostatic exercises class.
- 19) Sewing class.
- 20) English – Italian class.
- 21) Volunteer training class.
- 22) History class.
- 23) Decoration class.
- 24) Lymphatic Massage.
- 25) Patient to Patient session. Psychologist to Patient session.

Cooperation with a psychologist from the United States 2-3 times a year.

The above classes have been organised for all those cancer patients who believe that life goes on in spite of cancer. The participation in these activities is free.

PUBLICATIONS OF S.C.M.T.

S.C.M.T., in its effort to make the public aware of how valuable and useful the information - prevention of cancer is, has developed an important publishing activity since 1993.

It is a series of publications consisting of fifty (50) informative pamphlets, forty two (42) of which have been diligently translated from similar publications of the National Cancer Institute of the United States of America (N.C.I.). The remaining eight (8) have been written by Society members and undertaken by volunteers and friends.

These pamphlets, which are distributed for free, offer the reader useful information about each kind of cancer, as well as valuable general instructions and advice.

Below, one can find the titles of the pamphlets in a chronological order, according to their publication by the Society of Cancer- Patients of Macedonia-Thrace since 1993.

Titles of pamphlets:

1. "Discussing cancer with a child".
2. "Post-operative exercises for women with mastectomy".
3. "A guide for self-nursing after a lung operation".
4. "I quit smoking", (*Information and useful advice on how to quit smoking*).
5. "Chemotherapy and you" (*Four steps for helping patients*).
6. "What you should know about skin cancer".
7. "What you should know about bone cancer".
8. "What you should know about uterus cancer".
9. "What you should know about moles and deformed moles".
10. "What you should know about Hodgkin lymphomas".
11. "What you should know about mouth cancer".
12. "What you should know about Hodgkin's disease".
13. "What you should know about myelomatosis".
14. "What you should know about testicles cancer".
15. "What you should know about melanoma".
16. "What you should know about brain cancer".
17. "What you should know about prostate cancer".
18. "What you should know about intestine cancer".
19. "Immunity system – How it works".
20. "When someone in the family has cancer".
21. "Give life time" (*Psychological support for cancer-patients and their families*).
22. "Advice on the eating habits of cancer-patients".
23. "When cancer recurs. A new challenge".
24. "Questions and answers about pain control".

25. "Chemotherapy and you" (*A self-help guide during treatment*).
26. "Radiotherapy and you" (*A self-help guide during treatment*).
27. "What you should know about stomach cancer".
28. "What you should know about leukaemia".
29. "What you should know about cervix uteri cancer".
30. "What you should know about pancreas cancer".
31. "Looking ahead" (*A guide for cancer-patients who have been cured*).
32. "What you should know about cancer".
33. "I can survive".
34. "Sexuality and cancer" (*For the male cancer-patient and his partner*).
35. "Sexuality and cancer" (*For the female cancer-patient and her partner*).
36. "A guide for bone marrow transplant. Help among friends".
37. "Answers about liver cancer".
38. "Talking to a child about death".
39. "Cancer's journey".
40. "Coping with fatigue during and after treatment".
41. "What you should know about clinic tests".
42. "What happened to you, happened to me as well".
43. "Breast anaplasty surgery. A personal choice".
44. "What you should know about larynx cancer".
45. "Cancer, so what?" (*Short stories by Society members*).
46. "Our poems" (*A collection of poems written by Society members*).
47. "I can survive" (English translation).
48. "Cancer and family".
49. "Cancer's journey" (English translation).
50. "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger".
51. "Benefactors - Donors - Grantors - Volunteers. 20 years of love, sacrifice, support".
52. "How much strength is hidden in a child" (*Short stories written by children suffering from cancer*).
53. "Medical mistakes". Enough is enough!

Yours, the President
P. Mitta

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