

Best Words in the Best Order

By Susan Sample

Poetry is composed of "the *best* words in the best order," wrote Samuel Coleridge in 1827. When we write, we string words together like beads, ever mindful of color and shape, the powerful nuances of meaning each word conveys. *Fight* and *battle* are commonly used when we talk about illness and disease. But what do they suggest?

Now, I use the language of warriors
to battle the cancer in my body.

I speak of killing cells as ruthlessly
as I imagine any warrior slaughters the enemy."

Do we really want to wage war against our own body, our self? In the lines from "Dilemma" above, Ken Brewer struggled with the meaning of *warrior* and *pacifist*. "Since the Vietnam War, I have opposed / warfare of any kind." Yet, after his diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, Utah's second poet laureate found himself transformed by the power of medical language into someone he didn't want to be.

Think of words that you struggle with, that seem to have power over you. They can be negative forces as well as positive. Then select two and write each on a 3X5 card: one word that makes you angry and one word that inspires you. Put the cards aside.

Paul Hostovsky, a patient in remission from non-Hodgkins lymphoma, invites us to take control of our lives in his poem "Miracles":

You have to let go of everything—you can
start by letting go of these words, just let them
go. Let them fall through the air, skim
your knee, spill to the floor...

Pick up one of your 3X5 cards and look at the word. How do you hold the word? In your fist? Under your tongue? Between your toes? Beneath your heart? Describe how that feels.

Then, let go of the word. Where does it go? Can it be seen? Read? Is it in full light, shadow or darkness? What happens to the word? Does it evaporate like water? Melt? Turn to stone? Do you imagine the letters condensing? The word flying apart? Describe what happens to your body, your self as you let go of the word.

Brewer, Kenneth W. *Whale Song: A Poet's Journey into Cancer*. Salt Lake City: Dream Garden Press, 2007.

Hostovsky, Paul. "Miracles." In *The Cancer Poetry Project 2*. Ed. Karin B. Miller. Minneapolis: Tasora, 2013. 38-39.