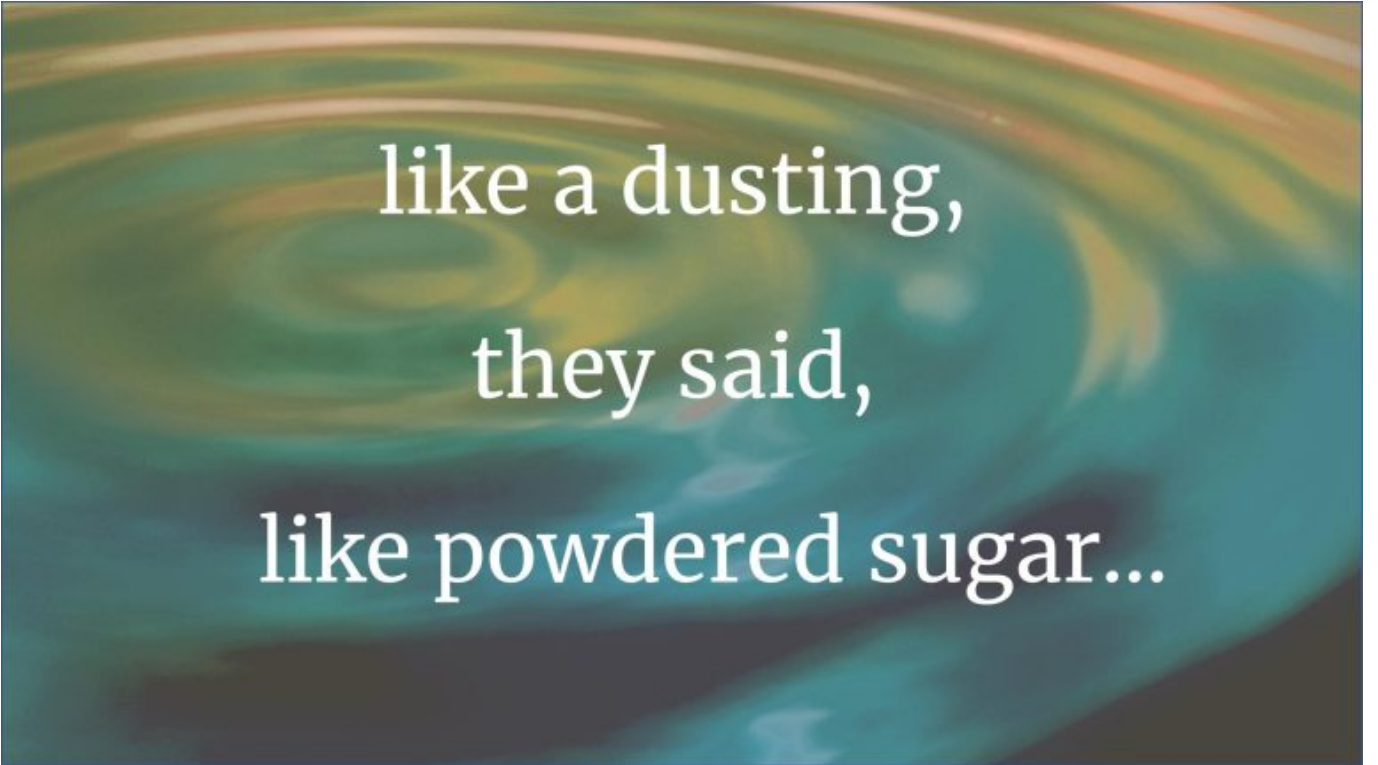


BRCA1

Category: Poems

written by Julie List | October 6, 2023



like a dusting,
they said,
like powdered sugar...

“Am I going to die?”

Little sister, in recovery, hair splayed behind her like wings,
eyes round.

“No,” I say, “they’ll fix it.”

Twelve years ago.

She was 47, then.

In the Nineties, before the
gene test,
our mother had breast, then
two years later, ovarian.
Ileostomy,
the indignity of the bag.
Still, the proliferation of cells,
like a dusting,
they said,
like powdered sugar,
everywhere in the abdomen.
At 65, our mother still resplendent,
smooth skin,
red toenail polish,
tanned legs.
Sucking on ice chips.
Each day, “descending one level
into Dante’s *Inferno*,”
she’d said.

An English major to the end.

"Where do you want your ashes spread, Mom?"

"Somewhere beautiful."

Thrown from a balcony over Central Park.

Sprinkled in the Canal outside her home in Venice, California.

Strewn in the Long Island Sound, in the town

where she raised my sister and me, alone.

And yes,

some ashes are still in my closet, more than

twenty years later.

I like having her there.

Twelve years ago,

an elective hysterectomy.

Her surgeon,

in the hallway,

"Your sister's got ovarian cancer."

I hate him so much for telling me

in the hallway,

not looking at me.

I didn't lie to her.

She didn't die, not right away.

Debulked, the ugliest word in medicine.

Nuked—okay, chemotherapy.

Lost her glorious, dark hair,

The only thing she truly loved about herself.

Radiation.

Immunotherapy.

Kidneys, cruel on creatinine.

Lungs rebelled.

Eyes dried from Sjögren's syndrome

and no matter how desperate,

no tears would come.

Twelve years stage IV recurrent ovarian cancer.

Then it spread,

red putrid blisters doubling daily on the host

of her skin,

covering one breast, her chest and arm.

Even the undertaker said

he'd never seen cancer like that.

She waited for me to die.

Jerky movements, wild eyes, terrified, gurgling.

I could not calm her.

Not a nurse, nor a doctor,

I'd given her what they gave us:

morphine,

dilaudid,

atropine.

Still the struggle,
I'm not going: a kid having a tantrum because
she didn't want to go to school.
Then, with a thrust like a flying steel girder,
she kicked me, hard, in the stomach.

I remembered the lorazepam drops
and with it came the realization:
I could protect her no longer.

Just a few days before,
she had patted the bed next to her
for me to lie beside her,
as I had with our mother.
A love only three women could understand:
Female; unbreakable; undying—or so they'd said.
The three of us occupying our own sphere.

Now my sister's ashes are in my closet
with our mother's.
The two with the BRCA gene mutation.
I tested negative.
I am a lone planet,
spinning pointlessly in a galaxy
without them.