

Running Out of Metaphors

Category: Poems

written by Howard Stein | December 5, 2008

Howard F. Stein

His rapidly metastasizing cancer
was not his only problem:
He was not only running out
of life, he was running out of metaphors.
Metaphors had sustained him
for the four months since
they discovered the spot.
He started out
losing weight as "The Incredible
Shrinking Man"; then he became
Gregor Samsa for a while;
briefly he was the consumptive Violetta,
soon followed by Ivan Ilych.
He even remembered Susan Sontag
and Solzhenitsyn and so railed
at his wasting. He leaped
from metaphor to metaphor the way
a stone skips over water. He asked
all the questions everyone asks,
but felt no comfort from
the answers.
Companions and kin beset him
like Job's friends. He graciously refused
their unctuous offerings, their leaden words.
Thinking could no longer save him.
His only balm now was his love for his son.
He had at last found something that had no metaphor:
This time, love would have to be enough.

About the poet:

Howard F. Stein PhD, a psychoanalytic and medical anthropologist, is a professor in the Department of Family and Preventive Medicine at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City, where he has taught for nearly thirty-one years. A poet as well as a researcher and scholar, he has published five books of poetry, including *Theme and Variations*, published by Finishing Line Press (www.finishinglinepress.com). In 2006 he was nominated for Oklahoma Poet Laureate.

About the poem:

"As patients, family members and health care professionals, we are constantly 'making sense' out of disease and illness. These meanings often take the form of metaphors, one of many figures of speech that speak of likeness,

resemblance and identity. Long a teacher of physician-patient relationships, I 'imagined' myself into one of our cases and through writing the poem came to realize that through metaphor we can bring life and death near—or push them away. Metaphor can shut out as well as let in. When my poetic protagonist had exhausted his literary imagination, what remained was his deep love for his son, a relationship he would soon lose in dying.”

Poetry editors:

Judy Schaefer and Johanna Shapiro