Chemotherapy Lounge

*"I don't understand this, I only turned my back for a few seconds.
All our money was in there."*

"Up next: Daydreaming about sex and why its good for you."

The televisions talk for us,
fill the endless spaces.
There is no understanding
only tacit treatment of cancer patients
who are all alike.
Lined up in recliner chairs,
at times almost fifty of us.

"Welcome back. We're talking about how to have house guests and enjoy them."

"What makes your adrenaline rush? What makes it pump?"

The faintly metallic odor of noxious drugs,
the sour-sweet overlay of vomit permeates everything,
even the carpet.
Trapped in our seats,
plugged to poles we sit for hours.
Poisoning takes time.

*"It was to be a yearly lease but I let him have it month to month.
Then he wanted me to pay for the utilities.
I said, 'Do you want me to fix your breakfast, too?'"*

*"Let's get together for dinner and finalize the details about the wedding."
"Sorry, Roxanne, not tonight."
"But darling, why?"*

The nurse has on a felt pumpkin hat for Halloween.
She sits heavily on a stool by my side,
drops ten or so filled syringes in her lap.
All of this will go into my body.

"So, how've you been?" she asks without looking at me.
I feign sleep, try to shut out noise and small talk.
Neither one of us is really here.
Magenta Adriamycin crawls up the tubing to the port
just above my bra.

*"Tanya, welcome to our show. Tell us why things haven't been going so well
between you and Roger."*

*"Storms will fire up north, expect some wind damage,
it'll juice up down south with heavy rain."*

The taste of the drug hits me
 as it disappears down the port in my chest.
 My tongue itches.
 I whisper, "I'm so sick."
 A reflex pat on the arm,
 an emesis basin and towel in reply.

"Now your clothes can smell like you just hung them out to dry in the sunshine."

"When are you going to tell him the baby isn't his?"

What I need is a large breasted woman—
 pale, yellow house dress
 worn, blue plaid apron.
 I catch the scent of Vel soap
 as she enfolds me on her old porch glider.
 Bridal wreath in full bloom shades us
 as we rock back and forth.

She rubs my back with a depth of compassion I can collapse in,
 never bottom out
 while she softly repeats,
 "What a terrible thing to happen to you, honey.
 What a terrible thing."

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—Judge's Comments—

Chemotherapy Lounge is a wonderful poem, giving us a glimpse into a woman's experience as she receives her dose of "poison." In the chemo lounge, televisions mumble in the background. The author has used snippets of TV talk to heighten the patient's sense of loss ("Daydreaming about sex and why it is good for you") and to serve as metaphor for the betrayal of cancer ("I don't understand this, I only turned my back for a few seconds"). In the foreground are the patient's observations and physical sensations, and here the writing is so specific that as readers we can also taste the chemo as it enters her body; we too see the nurse who wears a pumpkin hat for Halloween, a caregiver hiding behind her disguise. This author manages, in very few lines, to convey the depth of a patient's suffering. The nurse gives the patient a "reflex pat on the arm" and moves on, leaving her to conjure an imaginary "large breasted woman" who might hold her, rock her, rub her back with the bottomless "depth of compassion" the nurse has failed to give. This poem says, how profound is a patient's longing for compassion! This poem teaches us the human response to suffering: to stop for a moment, hold a frightened patient and say to them the poem's final lines: "What a terrible thing to happen to you, honey. / What a terrible thing."