The Night Side

*Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.*

Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 1977

Li-Ching was born in Chingdao, China, in 1936 and came to the United States in 1966, where she received a master’s degree in classic Chinese literature. In 2004, she returned to her original home in Chingdao to establish a school, but while there developed a cough and shortness of breath. Chest radiography and computed tomography revealed two lung lesions. She returned to the United States for further work-up and treatment with a presumed diagnosis of lung cancer.

While undergoing evaluation, Li-Ching spoke about her feelings of confronting illness with close friend, Barbara Riverwoman, who incorporated her thoughts into this poem.

Talking with Li-ching

December 13, 2004

What’s wrong with dirt?  
(To the hospital chaplain)  
No, I don’t believe.  
Yes, I am ready.

Mmm, the sweet, acid taste  
Of this blackberry.  
Ah, the blue of the sky this winter day,  
The whiteness of that cloud,

(A chuckle erupts  
From some inner region  
Spanning two continents,  
And forty years of earnest labor  
On behalf of illiterate Chinese peasants.)

Omnipresent  
This Good Earth,  
Filled with It,  
I am,  
Sustained by It,  
Running gladly over It  
For seventy years,  
I have been held by It,  
Transformed by It,  
Loved by It,  
And now, perhaps,  
It is time  
For a Change.
Will I become a willow?
Shall I become a shallow stream?
Might I become a mighty wave?
May I become a mayfly?
I laugh at the Infinite Possibilities.

Blackberry juice drips down my chin,
My mother is gone
Who long ago
Would have tenderly wiped it clean.
Am I not ready to plunge
Where beloved others have gone?

I have watched Angels plow and sow
In aching rain and searing heat,
Coaxing Life from this Ground,
And I have knelt down beside the tender sprouts,
And wondered at how This could come from That.

And, no, I do not need a God.
But, ah yes, Kindness.
If you could help me turn over
So I can breathe a little easier.

Lung cancer, stage four,
Asian, non-smoking woman.
They know so little.
We know so little.

Well, I have tasted wildness
In many forms.
Now it strikes deep,
Into the place
Where I breathe.
The ultimate
Is out of my control,
Isn’t it!

Oh, yes, I would have liked
To stay forever.
But the Earth is solid underneath my feet.
And it is beckoning.
And somehow, miraculously,
I am not afraid.

After extensive work-up at Fox Chase Cancer Center and the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Li-Ching’s biopsies showed tuberculosis rather than cancer, and she is now undergoing anti-tuberculous therapy. Her experience with the other citizenship remains a beacon for us all.