

## Poems on Illness and Aging

*You may use these poems as prompts. Simply write whatever comes out after reading each one. See where it takes you.*

Older, Younger, Both

BY JOYCE SUTPHEN

I feel older, younger, both  
at once. Every time I win,  
I lose. Every time I count,  
I forget and must begin again.

I must begin again, and again I  
must begin. Every time I lose,  
I win and must begin again.

Everything I plan must wait, and  
having to wait has made me old, and  
the older I get, the more I wait, and everything  
I'm waiting for has already been planned.

I feel sadder, wiser, neither  
together. Everything is almost  
true, and almost true is everywhere.  
I feel sadder, wiser, neither at once.

I end in beginning, in ending I find  
that beginning is the first thing to do.  
I stop when I start, but my heart keeps on beating,  
so I must go on starting in spite of the stopping.

I must stop my stopping and start to start—  
I can end at the beginning or begin at the end.  
I feel older, younger, both at once.

[The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac](#) by Mary Oliver (audio)

At the Cancer Clinic  
by Ted Kooser

She is being helped toward the open door  
that leads to the examining rooms  
by two young women I take to be her sisters.  
Each bends to the weight of an arm  
and steps with the straight, tough bearing  
of courage. At what must seem to be  
a great distance, a nurse holds the door,  
smiling and calling encouragement.  
How patient she is in the crisp white sails  
of her clothes. The sick woman  
peers from under her funny knit cap  
to watch each foot swing scuffing forward  
and take its turn under her weight.  
There is no restlessness or impatience  
or anger anywhere in sight. Grace  
fills the clean mold of this moment  
and all the shuffling magazines grow still.

An Old Man's Winter Night  
by Robert Frost

All out of doors looked darkly in at him  
Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,  
That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.  
What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze  
Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.  
What kept him from remembering what it was  
That brought him to that creaking room was age.  
He stood with barrels round him—at a loss.

And having scared the cellar under him  
In clomping there, he scared it once again  
In clomping off;—and scared the outer night,  
Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar  
Of trees and crack of branches, common things,  
But nothing so like beating on a box.  
A light he was to no one but himself  
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,  
A quiet light, and then not even that.  
He consigned to the moon,—such as she was,  
So late-arising,—to the broken moon  
As better than the sun in any case  
For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,  
His icicles along the wall to keep;  
And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt  
Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,  
And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.  
One aged man—one man—can't fill a house,  
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,  
It's thus he does it of a winter night.

In View of the Fact  
by A. R. Ammons

The people of my time are passing away: my  
wife is baking for a funeral, a 60-year-old who

died suddenly, when the phone rings, and it's  
Ruth we care so much about in intensive care:

it was once weddings that came so thick and  
fast, and then, first babies, such a hullabaloo:

now, it's this that and the other and somebody  
else gone or on the brink: well, we never

thought we would live forever (although we did)  
and now it looks like we won't: some of us

are losing a leg to diabetes, some don't know  
what they went downstairs for, some know that

a hired watchful person is around, some like  
to touch the cane tip into something steady,

so nice: we have already lost so many,  
brushed the loss of ourselves ourselves: our

address books for so long a slow scramble now  
are palimpsests, scribbles and scratches: our

index cards for Christmases, birthdays,  
Halloweens drop clean away into sympathies:

at the same time we are getting used to so  
many leaving, we are hanging on with a grip

to the ones left: we are not giving up on the  
congestive heart failure or brain tumors, on

the nice old men left in empty houses or on  
the widows who decide to travel a lot: we

think the sun may shine someday when we'll  
drink wine together and think of what used to

be: until we die we will remember every  
single thing, recall every word, love every

loss: then we will, as we must, leave it to  
others to love, love that can grow brighter

and deeper till the very end, gaining strength

and getting more precious all the way. . . .

Fourth Wall Arpeggio  
by A. Van Jordan

[Audio version](#)

Lately, my friends ask me, out of love,  
have I written about my mother,  
who suffers under the storm of Alzheimer's disease,  
and I tell them, "I don't write about my family,  
never directly, at least." To write this poem seems so

out of character for me, but it's not about my mother,  
as much as it's about how, as a son, the disease  
measures the changing rituals of family.  
And 28 lines—all I've provided myself—seems so  
anemic. Now, I barely have 18 lines left for a love

I don't have the vigor to describe. Reticence is a disease  
I've suffered from throughout my life. Without family,  
I don't know what it means to live as myself, and, so,  
I hide in the reflection of others, which, after all, others love:  
people care more about themselves than a friend's mother.

I mean, how does one explain to someone who's not family  
how you now see the patterns into which a parent would sew  
a quilt to lay over a child, the child neither hip to love  
nor Hayden's "austere and lonely offices"? My mother's  
silence seems like indifference except I know the disease,

which changes our relationship, the parent and child; I sow  
healing from my memory of how she taught me to love,  
not knowing her movement through a day as a mother,  
as someone whose sole gig was to keep me alive, free of disease  
and, whenever possible, embarrassment. But now, family

means playing the parent; I'm still just a son, writing about love,  
but, lowering my eyes from the trauma, I lift her body, her disease,  
for a shower, straining under all the love she sowed.

Source: Poetry (November 2023)



# *The Stare*

*W*ith a basin of warm water and a towel  
I am shaving my father  
late on a summer afternoon  
as he sits in a chair in blue striped pajamas

screwing up his face this way and that  
to make room for the razor,  
as someone passes with a tray,  
as someone else sobs in a corner.

It is impossible to remember  
a closeness such as this,  
impossible to know too  
whether the object of his vivid staring is

the wavering tree tops,  
his pale reflection in the window,  
or maybe just a splinter of light,  
a pinpoint caught in the very glass itself.

*Billy Collins*  
*Billy Collins*

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**The Poetry Center  
of Chicago**

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