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## poem

**Cancer Winter (excerpts)**

Marilyn Hacker

I woke up, and the surgeon said, 'You're cured.'  
 Strapped to the gurney, in the cotton gown  
 and pants I was wearing when they slid me down  
 onto the table, made news straps secure  
 while I stared at the hydra-headed O.R.  
 lamp, I took in the tall, confident, brown-  
 skinned man, and the ache I couldn't quite call pain  
 from where my right breast wasn't anymore  
 to my armpit. A not-yet-talking head,  
 I bit dry my lips. What else could he have said?  
 And then my love was there in a hospital coat;  
 then my old love, still young and very scared.  
 Then I, alone, graphed clock hands' asymptote  
 to noon, when I would be wheeled back upstairs.  
 (. . .)

The hand that held the cup next was my daughter's  
 – who would be holding shirts for me to wear,  
 sleeve out, for my bum arm. She'd wash my hair  
 (not falling yet), strew teenager's disorder  
 in the kitchen, help me out of the bathwater.  
 A dozen times, she looked at the long scar  
 studded with staples, where I'd suckled her,  
 and didn't turn. She took me / I brought her  
 to the surgeon's office, where she'd hold  
 my hand, while his sure hand, with its neat tool, snipped  
 the steel, as on a revised manuscript  
 radically rewritten since my star  
 turn nursing her without a 'nursing bra'  
 from small, firm breasts, a twenty-five-year-old's.

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Chosen by Femi Oyeboode.

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