

# THE PART ABOUT ROSES

Alexandra Nowakowski, PhD

Departments of Geriatrics and Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine

*—This poem is about the aftermath of being diagnosed with cystic fibrosis just before my 33rd birthday.*

You get used to things  
breaking down:  
computers, internal organs.  
Some days are just  
one big blue screen.

Gather up papers  
and medical bills inches deep  
for your tax returns.  
Give thanks for the rare things  
that come with refunds.

Some things in life  
are not so easy.

Children pronounce the name  
of my disease like  
pretty flowers.  
I get so many thorns.

Late nights spent waiting,  
memories prick me.  
Dive into a black screen  
starting over from scratch  
like I wish I could do  
with this pile of damaged goods.

I remember my father  
telling me how to become  
a famous scientist.  
The secret, he said,  
is to prove something  
everyone already knows.

Now I hand out Nobel prizes  
left and right for seeing  
the obvious.  
I have records and specimen jars  
and shit like roofing tar.

You get used to my stories,  
ugly details bound with humor  
so that I may not weep.  
And then so many questions.  
Will you die?  
Well, yes.  
But probably not soon.

I say it is a blessing.  
I say I am lucky.  
I am literally and figuratively  
full of shit.

After my diagnosis  
people got busy  
putting 65 roses  
on a grave that I  
forgot to dig.

Say the part about roses  
out loud—aha.  
I grow so tired of  
explaining things.

I was not meant for living,  
but missed that memo  
and tick on through tax years  
and death sentences  
and CT scans  
and ultrasounds  
and needle sticks  
and spirometry  
and piss tests  
and hopes that swell  
and wishes that burn.

Red pills sit like  
Sophocles villains  
in earplug boxes.  
I swallow them in droves,  
rattling.  
Digestion hangs around  
in a coat pocket.

I float on salty water,  
oceans I cannot clear.  
I suffer tidal waves,  
give each a name:  
Too Little and Too Late.

I pay my taxes and  
Uncle Sam pays back.  
I have never met  
this uncle, but I wonder  
if he wants me to live.  
Sometimes it is awfully  
hard to tell.

I talk on the telephone.  
Swim in tears that singe  
my fissured skin.  
I wade into cynicism like  
lapping waves, remember:  
all life is death and taxes.

Death is a slow drowning  
in cement overcoats  
of your own making.  
And life is a steep  
price to pay for 32 waves  
of incomplete data.

I boot the computer  
so I can file  
my taxes,  
itemize my losses.  
Another year of life  
in the books.

Fame carries the old  
hollow promises of youth.  
Good news wears shoes  
forged in concrete,  
the same despair  
my parents carried  
those years they knew—  
but could not prove—  
what was killing me.

*Dr. Alexandra “Xan”  
Nowakowski is an Assistant  
Professor in the Departments  
of Geriatrics and Behavioral  
Sciences & Social Medicine. They  
conduct a variety of research,  
teaching, and service activities  
focused on healthy and equitable  
aging with chronic disease. Dr.  
Nowakowski has also served as an  
external evaluator for the Florida  
Asthma Program for the past six  
years, and is the founder and  
co-editor of the trauma informed  
scholarship blog Write Where It  
Hurts.*