**So, You Have Cancer and Need to Tell Your Kids**

Daniel Brennan

Guiyu is the last stop

for ten million

tons of

discarded lifetimes:

TVs, cell phones,

batteries.

The news says workers –

*workers,*

not *children*; labels are important,

for how else can we ignore them?

– are exposed to lead, cadium, and

brominated flame retardants;

ingesting the world’s

afterthoughts like

a hearty bowl of Cheerios.

Makeshift aluminum chimneys huff and puff

waste till the clouds wear poison like

a mourning shawl.

Workers (also called *families*)

setup shanty-shops

in their homes,

where hands with flesh

barely clinging to

fingers

sift and shift the

detritus into vats for melting.

Mechanical recycling is

expensive, so we send

our prayers to Guiyu. Guiyu

sends back a receipt.

One study found that

pregnant women

living near the

unsleeping

graveyard are carrying

both a baby and a future

reminder of how the

body is a culmination

of our sins, our greed.

A child, not even born,

wearing today’s

remnants and scraps as skin.

Yes, the world

belches out the bones it can’t digest and ships them away,

an export turning the

soil into a dirge. These quiet bodies are

shifting and reshaping. They are the

organisms whose cells are the

product of products

we no longer want. A composite of

molecular instability. A mosaic of waste and loss.

\*

It’s true, I first started this poem

when I learned of your cancer diagnosis,

I opened my computer,

my waste-in-the-making,

and thought I’d tell you

about the way my insides

cooked alive as I sat in my cramped twin bed.

The cold March morning

years before, reading

an email in which you

described how

the cancer was spreading from one feeble organ to the next.

It’s true; I meant to focus on how

the softest parts of my body, your body, anybody

can melt like old electronics

in a gasping chemical vat.

Why did your body have to change?

What sunless sky, choking on smoke-stack fumes,

demanded your cells

mutate and splinter?

What rust-rotten rivers and

inlets curdled in your stomach?

Beyond all else,

what right do you have to pass so slowly after a life of

half-wants and close-calls?

The air is thick with knowing how close to an ending

we’ve always been.

I watch you move from one room

to the next, every step a labor,

and I wonder how long

we’ve been waiting for that final scene

in which you ask your children’s forgiveness.

I promise, I promise; I intended this

poem to live beyond the

gadgets and techs

that have kept us in touch,

kept parts of us alive like a trusted lie.

In a city not our own,

they are melting a phone, just like mine,

as we speak,

dissolving the device meant to keep us

together even

when we’re better apart.

In a city across the world, they are dissolving

pieces of us.

We’ll bury ourselves over and over, I know this now. How can I not?

I meant to

tell you that all bodies

are fragile, even yours, even mine;

tell you that history still breathes through

your failing lungs; tell you that

nothing is gone for good. Can it be solace to know

that one day we’ll be close

again? Or a curse that we’ll both

bleed into the sky, the rivers, and the

aching earth in a city not our own, lifetimes away?