



POETRY | FALL 2022

Kali's Cancer Center: On the End of Life

By **Harini Sridhar**

Raktabija's boon awakens lucid dreams,
and unimaginable fears.
Each drop of his crimson blood
splatters on the floor
growing roots,
lion-toothed leaves,
and thousands of petals.
They forever multiply.

All, at once, a woman's world fractured.

Page Kali. STAT.

She arrives,
white coat, bloodshot eyes,
adorned with a garland of skulls.
Fluids drip down the scalpel in her pocket.
The bells on her ankles echo
the drums of the war beat.
Ferociously,
she grasps Raktabija's head,
draws a sword from her waist,
to sever the demon's head.
One stroke,
through the theater's crisp air.

A single drop of blood
falls to the floor.
That is all it takes
for Raktabija to return.

Kali tells us palliative care will give her the world.

She begins her six-month stretch
in a Harlem nursing facility,
trapped within four plain white walls,
listening closely to earth's rhythm.

I take her hands in mine.

We sway left to right,
she reminisces on what fun it was
to disco the night away
before becoming bound
to her wheelchair.

Before her husband passed away,
he was her world.
Now, the only moments she feels loved are when,
I brush her hair,
complimenting her curls
the way her husband did.

A week before her passing,
I keep her comfortable in bed,
almost hoping my efforts will save her.
Her experiences—of losing a husband, of blackness, of cancer—
all hold elements I can never fully comprehend.
I try anyway,
confronting the realities of dying,
a ubiquitous yet overlooked aspect of medicine.

Kali does not show up to cure her illness,
but I show up
to witness her final days,
and bring comfort,
its own form of healing
at the end of a life.

Author's note: In Hindu scripture, Raktabija is a demon and Kali is a goddess. Raktabija holds a special ability that allows him to multiply every time a drop of his blood falls to the ground, similar to the way a cancer cell multiplies exponentially. In this piece, I imagine the relationship between Raktabija and Kali as parallel to that of cancer and the oncologist.

Harini Sridhar is a second-year medical student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine, where she is a FIRST Scholar, pursuing a combined medical education and psychiatry residency program. Harini graduated with her M.S. in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University. As an Aseemkala Fellow, she is working on a collection of poems at the intersection of two worlds: the clinical and the spiritual.

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