

THE NAMING OF CANCER

I sit within this six-bed ward, tracing
his veins while he and his companions
blossom with epitaphs. One man erupts
Kaposi lesions on his shrunken skin.
Others stagger, emblazoned with fresh colours
(retinoblastoma, spreading white ice within an eye), or fade
behind negatives – non-Hodgkin lymphoma swallows
the boy across the aisle.

Leukaemia, myeloma, syndromes and types
slashed across charts, scribbled by
harried consultants, shakingly typed
into every search engine invented by man.
Bodies, signified, renamed for the signs
of their hidden geography.

This boy alive beneath my fingers was named
for his grandfather, who wore numbers
along his arm but never spoke
about the camps. He only shrugged and said,
the evil of men cannot touch the soul.
All his life, he refused to visit doctors.
When he died, we had nothing
to tell others, when they asked
the name of why he died.