

Unreal City,

I could be anywhere, I am far away from Maya, she is pumped with chemotherapy in ice-mittens, she is dreaming in a hospital room with bruised eyelids, any of it, instead I see my grandfather's toys, my grandfather's photographs, my grandfather's memories, instead I see every city every body as a palimpsest with palimpsest, I am a glutton for palimpsest, doesn't this history belong to me and I am dreaming, dreaming, contemplating, why not latch onto a place, any place, why not latch onto the last place, New York, the disappearance of my grandfather, we do, Cassel and I, and so, you see, these are not real objects but metaphors, see, can you see them, the metaphors, flocking like birds?

Fragments of Diagnosis

Sarah E. Roth

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“Each woman responds to the crisis that cancer brings to her life out of a whole pattern, which is the design of who she is and how her life had been lived.”

– Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*

“For whatever lies hidden behind in the inner parts of a house, however tortuous and secluded be the ways in between, may yet be all brought out through these involved passages by means of a number of mirrors and seen to be in the house.”

– Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*

My mother lifts her shirt to show me a constellation of scars. She traces a line that stretches from breastbone to pelvis. She guides my hand to the site of her port, where the skin is thin and raised. It is winter in Florida. We are standing in the kitchen. The sounds and scents of the neighborhood enter through the open window. In a rush of wind, my mother looks at me.

The moment could be after diagnosis, or between treatments, or among remissions, or in prognosis. She could be working or at leisure. I could be a student or something else altogether. The gesture would be similar, searching for the stakes of influence amid the event.

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How does one tell the story of diagnosis—tracing it through time, space, and the matter of related bodies? How might one document such a phenomenon? What forms can one find to give voice to it, and how might the substance of language push against these forms?
.....

In *The Illness Narratives*, Arthur Kleinman suggests that a patient may give voice to experience in the form of a narrative, looking at the past to describe key points of diagnosis, illness, and care. In this text, the patient speaks of a condition from the chair of a psychiatrist's office. A story has a beginning, middle, and end. Their voice has been taken, by illness and by medicine, and now it may be given back.

In *Moral Laboratories*, Cheryl Mattingly follows the experience of Andrena, the mother of a child diagnosed with terminal cancer. She joins Andrena at birthday parties and gatherings, schoolboard meetings, doctor's appointments, funerals. She traces branching narratives implicated in the story of her daughter's care. Mattingly dwells on moments of possibility—in which one could feel hope or despair, anger or forgiveness—in Andrena's evolving present.

In *Affliction*, Veena Das eschews narrative altogether. She follows networks of relations, institutions, and affects through which an illness lives. Story, in this text, emerges as from the plot of a garden. The story of an illness winds through life—through braided lives—as in an emergent stream.

Teaching Materials

In sixteenth-century France, Montaigne survived the loss of five of his six daughters, the death of his closest friend to the plague, and a lifetime of kidney stones.

“There is no place from which it may not come,” he writes in his *Essays*. “We may keep turning our heads ceaselessly this way and that, as in suspicious country.”

I

In 1999, I am seven years old, and my family decides to move across the country. Through the windows of our house, my mother looks across the Puget Sound and massages her left breast.

“I want to leave,” she says, to nobody in particular.

A sense of unease has settled over her in recent months. She gestures to the low, gray sky of the pacific northwest, where the evergreen trees press against the clouds. She has also noticed a nodule beneath the skin of her breast, about the size and shape of a raisin. One doctor tells her it is a benign cyst. Another informs her that she is seasonally affected. She suggests my mother quit her tennis league, or else take some time off from the clinic.

“You work too hard,” she says, chiding.

“I want to leave,” she says, to nobody in particular.

My mother insists that something is very wrong—physically wrong. Her colleague, a breast surgeon, scolds her. “You’re the worried well,” she says. And still, my parents will the office to their staff, sell the house, and drive southwards.

My sister and I ride in the backseat, watching the mountains flatten into plains, the plains stretch into clay, and the clay soften into sand.

We settle into a home in the suburbs of south Florida, and my mother sets out on a diagnostic odyssey. She visits a series of physicians in pursuit of a clear answer to this uncanny feeling. They respond in a chorus of negation.

“Good news for you,” the radiologist says. “The scan shows it’s nothing.”

“Happy to tell you,” the pathologist says, “you’re clear.”

“You might have pseudo-tumor cerebra,” my father says, hesitating.

Meaning, it’s all in your head.

My parents begin work at a local hospital, my mother in the operating room and my father in the emergency room. She lessens the pain of others, and he attends to symptoms. The rhythm of their lives goes on. One day, though, my mother stops a nurse in the middle of the hallway. Who would she see, she asks, if she were concerned about breast cancer?

The nurse sends my mother to a surgeon down the hall, Dr. B.

on the examination table

For neither the first nor the last time, my mother strips off her white coat and dons a paper gown. She lies on the examination table. Dr. B. squeezes the nodule with his forceps fingers.

“I’m quite certain it’s nothing,” Dr. B. says. “We can take it out, though, if you’d like.”

My mother has little family history, he professes, and so few risk factors.

Yet when he sends for a second biopsy, the sample comes back malignant, an aggressive and triple-negative stage two breast cancer. He suggests a lumpectomy, radiation, and a full round of chemotherapy.

On her thirty-sixth birthday, Dr. B. removes my mother’s first tumor.

Dr. B's team suggests that my mother irradiate her breasts to reduce the cancer that might linger on in the tissue. But my mother fears the burns that often char the skin exposed to radiation. She has already lost some of her tissue to the tumor's removal. She wants to protect what remains. She calls the university cancer center to make another appointment.

In the outpatient wing, she learns of a test made available to determine if she carries a recently discovered mutation. Descending from Jewish and Eastern European immigrants, she is told, increases her chances of inheriting an altered gene. But only one of ten aunts have died of cancer, she thinks. She meets a genetic counselor, she takes the test.

Indeed, she is a carrier.

She undergoes a double-mastectomy, breast reconstruction, and chemotherapy.

a double-mastectomy, breast reconstruction, and chemotherapy

Here is some genetic math imbricated in the story of my mother's cancer. Humans hold 46 chromosomes in each somatic cell. The 46 chromosomes divide into 23 pairs. Chromosome 17 forms one of these pairs, two sister chromatids joined at a centromere. Chromosome 17 spans 81 million DNA building blocks, forming nearly 3% of all cellular DNA.

The role of *BRCA1*, a tumor suppression gene, is epigenetic. The gene codes for the correction of improper transcription. When *BRCA1* isn't functioning correctly, transcription and translation can go awry. One gene mistranscribed can become a bad cell. The bad cell can form a bad cluster of cells. The bad cluster of cells aggregate into a tumor, and then two: and quickly. Within the span of months, from January to May. Or perhaps within the span of minutes: on an afternoon in June. The materiality of cancer begins in the cell, in this speck of supercoiled chromatin and histone proteins, and the materiality of cancer is volatile.

As Tim Morton has written, science, when plumbed, can often seem stranger than before, not demystified. On *Montevideo*, the poet and critic Joyelle McSweeney has written about *bug time*: the high-speed evolution that occurs within populations of short-lived insects. Joyelle McSweeney invokes the Japanese rice hopper, which lives for fifty days. One human generation might be matched by one hundred and fifty generations of hoppers. In the span of so many births and deaths, hoppers mutate and evolve quickly and in spurts. In *Transfew Fat*, the poet Aase Berg has explored the time of a whale's blubber. "In granite grains fat," she writes, "In slow veins' years / Of patience in a way of / Being another time than / Human." This time is slow, the pace of "many thousand years / Of slowness."

materiality of cancer |

As a child, one of my favorite activities is to sidle up to my mother as she prepares for bed. She sits by a bathroom mirror, or stands by a window, her features gently reflected. Pressing my face against hers, feeling her contours against mine, I exult in our resemblance.

“Twins,” I say, smiling. “We’re just like twins.”

As she receives treatment, she takes leave from work. She walks me home from the bus stop, beaded locks refracting light onto the sidewalk.

“I want to wear a wig, too,” I say, tracing her scars and skin with my fingertips.

II

My mother finds a community of other women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer. They hold court in living rooms, where the light slants onto their laps, their couches and La-Z-Boys carefully arranged for one another. They show my mother how to tie a scarf, how to pick the right wig. They walk the perimeter of the neighborhood together, they walk for a cure, and they walk into survivorship. Scarves and wigs are tucked away in closets. Time spent as a victim is grieved and left in the past. The surgical scars are hidden, *unheimlich*, from sight.

hidden

Over time, the family tree changes in shape and size. One cousin is quietly treated for breast cancer and slips into survivorship. Another, it becomes known, has struggled with ovarian cancer for years. An aunt develops pancreatic cancer and quickly passes away. A great-uncle is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and enrolls in a clinical trial. Knowledge travels through the family's hidden channels. It is whispered at brunches and reunions, fortuitous airport pickups.

unheimlich

from sight

hidden

Meanwhile, we grow older, my sister and I. We go to college and read books. We fall in and out of love. She falls into medicine, I fall into literature. We visit and leave. We learn about the histories of our cities. We become angry with histories. We fight our ways into adulthood.

unheimlich

It is an ongoing bet between us, who will inherit the mutation, and we know our chances. Fifty fifty, like a two-sided anything, a building whose interior is unknown.

In school, I wonder if I should drink from polymerized cups, take oral contraceptives, use ordinary shampoo, drink coffee, avoid nickel and wood dust, stay shaded in the sun, smoke cigarettes, walk away from smoke, sleep long nights. If I should get tested, and when.

from sight

In *The Bright Hour*, Nina Riggs sets out to write a memoir about her metastatic breast cancer. She writes as she receives treatment, and the book is shaped by the contours of her illness. Familial influence enters into the story, too, at times is foregrounded at the heart of her prose. Her mother is treated for an advanced blood cancer and enters into Hospice care. Her son is diagnosed with diabetes. Nina cares for her mother and for her son, and she writes through their shared *who will inherit* experiences. Care is a bridge across which their shared pain and pleasure travels.

Nina is also the great-great-great granddaughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In this, she grapples with a different kind of inheritance. Emerson's words weave through her own, and his instructions for how to live. She visits the Cape in the summers, when the cousins gather. She recalls her mother, having recently joined the Emerson family, looking out the window at the Sound as Emerson's great-grandson held forth, pulling out a cigarette and lighting up.

"I believe she relished the silence in the room and the shock on my grandfather's face for forty years," Nina writes. "The slightest smirk on RWE's face in the portrait over the mantel suggests that the Concord Sage himself has still not recovered. *Always do what you are afraid to do.*" Emerson's words inflect Nina's memories of her mother and extended family. It is as if she has inherited them, like it or not, and she must contend with their significance.

In *The Illness Narratives*, Arthur Kleinman suggests that a patient may give voice to experience in the form of a narrative, looking at the past to describe key points of diagnosis, illness, and care. In this text, the patient speaks from the chair of a psychiatrist's office. Her story has a beginning, middle, and end. Her voice has been taken, by illness and by medicine, and now it may be given back.

When her mother passes away, Nina's family scatters her ashes in the ocean. "Here is the path to the gravestone like a trick map," she writes. "Like a prank, like an incomplete thought. Here the dip in the lawn where the groom found the bride, here the fever of remembering, here the work we do that we love to do." The stories within *The Bright Hour* emerge like bits of thread, weaving among one another until their various ends, most of which are cut short. The text is a kind of enactment: the contemporary and the historical unfold in a present tense.

"Here lay my baby in my mother's lap," Nina writes, "drifting through his dream of the whine of an outboard. Here on the porch, the sweet globe of a plum. Here the tooth that pierces the peel like a door burst open, like a flood, like an afterlife."

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Teaching Materials

III

In the middle of the country, I join a community of writers. When I search for a voice, I hear my mother's and I wonder what it means. The community of writers discusses voyage and introspection, love and obsession, madness and abjection and the return of the real, ecology without nature, whales and punk. The community of writers reads the work of the community of writers. The community reads Bolaño, Sebald, Redonnet, Jaeggy, Aira, Di Giorgio, Dante, Acker, Ballard, Cervantes, Berg, Robertson, Göransson, and Tillman. The community becomes so involved in this work, the world beyond feels far away, or is otherwise sculpted by the letters that line the interior.

The writers and I run along the path that winds through the city, following the East Race River along the banks as it leads downtown. We pass the winters like this, our shoes silent on the surface of the piling snow.

the recurrence of images from our own past, obsessive affections vainly struggle,” Harold Bloom writes one of the prime antagonists that psychoanalysis could

As I learn to write, I focus on the encounter between the world and the mind, the image that impresses the imagination. In the mornings, I run along the trail. I take a series of photos, following the changes in morning light, the branches that hang across the path, the thinness of the air from season to season. In and through training, I become infatuated with fiction and fictionalizing, poetry and poesis. Literature sickness, the fictional literary critic Montaña calls it in *Montaña's Malady*. The movement of the water is a kind of meditation, and I so want to render it in prose, but my words cannot quite meet the flickering of the light on its surface.

In the summer,

midway through my years in Indiana, I spend some months in Washington, D.C. Perched on a dock, sun slanting onto the sails of a sequence of boats, I learn that a bright spot has appeared on a scan of my mother's ovaries. On this day, my mother will have a sample taken for biopsy. One month later, she will have scheduled a bilateral salpingo oophorectomy. One month after that, opened up for surgery, she will be found to have an array of small tumors, speckling the

Kenosis: His stance appears to be that of his precursor, but the meaning of the stance is undone; the stance is emptied of its priority. How are we aided in our difficult enterprise by this idea of a self-emptying that seeks to defend against the father, yet radically undoes the son?

ovaries and the intestines. This is when I learn about the existence of the omentum. It is the fatty tissue that surrounds the guts, holding them in a taut embrace. It, too, will be found marked, will be removed, along with the uterus, ovaries, and a sliver of intestine. She will be given too much anaesthetic, and then not enough. She will stop breathing for a moment, and then she will breathe again, and then she will be discharged. I will schedule a flight home, and everything will change, for a while.

of his precursor, but the meaning of the stance is undone;
how are we aided in our difficult enterprise by this idea
against the father, yet radically undoes the son?

And so begins eight months of omentum surgery, Taxol chemotherapy, appendix surgery, icy mittens, intraperitoneal fluid, cooling caps, cooling cones, nausea, anti-nausea drugs, neuropathy, incontinence, audiobooks, insomnia, mindfulness education, hospital beds, intubation tubes, IP ports, needles, the adoption of a therapy dog, chins in excess, long walks, short walks, tears of frustration, hearing loss, memory loss, and trips to the ocean.

And so begins an era of intimacy and distance. I am visiting, I am too close, I am writing, I am too far away, I am asking the wrong questions, I have a novel to complete, I have a sadness to immerse myself in, I have a melancholy to flee from, I have expectations to fulfill, I have art to consume, I have art to create, I have a wound to open, and close, and re-open, and close, and re-open, and articulate what emerges.

precursor, but the meaning of the stance is undone;
we aided in our difficult enterprise by this idea
against the father, yet radically undoes the son?

Years earlier, the poet Mary Oliver is diagnosed with lung cancer and writes “The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac.” She describes diagnosis as a sequence of phenomena. Illness, discovery and treatment are not one matter but many. Cancer is the hunter and his rifle, the fox and the serpent. All “move in a stillness / hungry, careful, intent.” When the hunters walk along the forest floor in silence, and the fox, and the serpent, she questions, why would cancer behave any differently. Why would it be any less animal, any more detectable, than these creatures.

open

close

re-open

close

re-open

articulate

emerges |

Why should I have been surprised?
Hunters walk the forest
without a sound.
The hunter, strapped to his rifle,
the fox on his feet of silk,
the serpent on his empire of muscles—
all move in a stillness,
hungry, careful, intent.
Just as the cancer
entered the forest of my body,
without a sound.

open

close

re-open

close

re-open

articulate

emerges |

Between semesters,

as my mother undergoes the eighth round of this treatment, I visit home. My parents and I have corresponded on phone calls and email threads about how I might help in the hospital. I would organize the snacks, change the Elasto-Gel Cold Caps, and keep my mother company in Witt 616. Steroids will pulse through her IV and Taxol through her port. I will maneuver her wheelchair through the hospital. I arrive equipped with an old copy of *Don Quixote*.

My mother is fragile, curled under the blankets, wearing frozen mittens on her hands and frozen booties on her feet. The cooling cap is strapped to her chin with a maxi pad and frozen to -30°C. Her lips are blue. She shivers relentlessly. And I can't find the thermometer. I can't find the right words of comfort to say to her. Steering her wheelchair, I can't figure out how to unlock the wheels, and I knock it, her limbs, against the walls, the closing elevator doors. I duck away from 616 to breathe in the corridor. I am child, really, needing more from my mother than I am able to provide.

open

close

re-open

close

re-open

articulate

emerges |

open

close

re-open

“I learn to mistrust my steps everywhere,” Montaigne writes, “and I take care to control them.”

close

re-open

articulate

emerges |

In the mornings, we walk through and around the neighborhood. The days after the hospital are good days. Steroids pump through her Remission is a visible horizon. Later, we the same circuit under each mid-morning shoes, parallel eyes and shoulders. We crumbs for ducks. My mother adjusts her “How do I look?” she says. “Very well,” I

We often hold hands, or link arms, talk about treatment, but she does like to writing, a shared future and a shared past. years?” and, “How many babies will you happy you were, sailing through a pod of remember *twins*?” and, “What is your favorite memory of me?” and, “How are you doing?” and, “Have you come to terms with my death?”

open

close

re-open

close

re-open

articulate

emerges |

system, fortifying her muscles. push through her bad days. We walk sun, wearing matching running amble along the lake, trailing hat, pulls chapstick from her pocket. say, grinning.

to steady her gait. She doesn't like to talk. She asks about roommates, “Will you own a house in fifteen have?” and, “Do you remember how orca whales?” and, “Do you

As we walk past the brick Autumn Woods sign, beneath Spanish moss and past houses—blue plaster shotgun, beige plaster camelback, taupe plaster shotgun—memories pool between us. We dredge them to cover ourselves. We drape them along the lake, along our neighbors’ doorsteps, along all these suburban posts and awnings, all these oaks and willows, our shoulders parallel in stride. We weave them together and trail them from the soles of our feet.

open

close

re-open

close

re-open

articulate

emerges |

Chemo takes effect, and my mother's limbs grow heavy. She loses appetite as her tongue turns to metal. We walk, and we speak, and when we aren't walking, she curls on the back patio, under a blanket, cradling her gut. I sit next to her, eating fajitas, and oatmeal, and turkey, and squash, and hummus. My father comes and goes, working early and late shifts in the hospital.

open

close

re-open

close

re-open

articulate

emerges |

“How are your projects coming along?” my mother asks me. Maybe her eyes are glassy. Maybe she is sipping from a juice box. Maybe she wears pajamas. Maybe she wears a bathing suit.

“I still haven’t started them,” I say.

“Why not?” she asks me.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’ll start today.”

“Curl up next to me,” she says.

“Okay,” I say. “But then I won’t be writing.”

“JK Rowling can write anywhere,” she says. “Why don’t you come write next to me?”

“I need quiet,” I say.

“I can’t wait to read it,” she says. “Your book.”

open

close

re-open

close

re-open

articulate

emerges |

Maybe she thumbs a ukulele. Maybe she reads a trashy romance. Maybe she flicks through articles on her iPad. Maybe it is morning or maybe it is afternoon. The sounds of the backyard will be the same: languid chirping, a dog barking in the distance, the murmuring of neighbors. It will smell like sweat and grass, hibiscus and trimmings. It will be another memory. I will want to hug her and to escape, to cry and to remain stone-faced, to write and to not speak a word.

open

close

re-open

close

re-open

articulate

emerges |

open

close

re-open

“The questions is,” writes Mary Oliver, “what will it be like, after the last day?”

close

re-open

articulate

emerges |

Maybe she thumbs a ukulele.

to cry and to remain stone-faced,

Maybe she reads a trashy romance.

to write and to not speak a word.

Maybe she flicks through articles

Maybe it is morning

The sounds of the backyard

or maybe it is afternoon.

languid chirping,

will be the same:

the murmuring of neighbors.

Will I float
into the sky
or will I fray
within the earth or a river—
remembering nothing?
How desperate I would be
if I couldn't remember
the sun rising, if I couldn't
remember trees, rivers; if I couldn't
even remember, beloved,
your beloved name.

a dog barking in the distance,

It will be another memory.

It will smell like sweat and grass,

I will want to hug her

hibiscus and trimmings.

and to escape,

In the Unreal City,

which could be anywhere, I am far away from Maya, she is pumped with chemicals, she is encased in ice-mittens, she is dreaming in a taupe room with bruised eyelids, and I cannot see any of it, instead I see my grandfather's toys, my grandfather's photographs, my grandfather's memories, instead I see every city every body as a palimpsest, I stuff my eyes with palimpsest, I am a glutton for palimpsest, doesn't this history belong to all of us, instead I am dreaming, dreaming, contemplating, why not latch onto a place, you know, a real place, why not latch onto the last place, New York, the disappearance place, and so then we do, Cassel and I, and so, you see, these are not real objects but metaphors, don't you see, can you see them, the metaphors, flocking like birds?

When I return to Indiana in the fall, I begin work on a new novel. It follows the experiences of an archival researcher who, in working to unearth the artifacts of her missing grandfather, is far away from her ailing mother. In these years, I experience an interminable flux between the familial and the textual. When I am home, the intimacy between my mother and I is never enough. When I am away, it is painful. When I am writing, I need to feel longing. When I feel a longing, I am in pain. Writing becomes a vessel through which this flux acts. Writing of and with the body. Is this what everyone is talking about, I wonder, this writing the body.

IV

The eight months of Taxol chemotherapy is effective. My mother passes into remission. The forest of my family becomes quiet again. It is always beneath the surface, all of it. Moving away from Indiana and forward to Washington D.C. for good, I leave the novel behind. I work at a nonprofit. In this new reality, I begin to think of my own risk of cancer. Reaching out to the Children's National Medical Center from the office, I make an appointment.

When I see a genetic counselor, we discuss the history of my family. She is young and blonde, wears a tweed suit, and holds a pen and paper in hand. Together we craft a family tree. On my mother's side, the pedigree is labeled first. The cancer that runs through her lineage can be easily traced. We are Ashkenazi and from Eastern Europe. Latvia, the Ukraine. Several of her mother's sisters have had ovarian cancer. On my father's side, there is cancer, too, but in distant branches. As the counselor taps pen against paper, I think of the other things that could be written of on this tree: coal gathered and shoveled in the belly of a naval ship, postpartum depression, life beneath the exhaust of the local paper factory, overdoses, suicides.

Where does risk live, I wonder, as we calculate mine.

“What is potential,” Agamben says, “is the not-yet actual.”

I'm sitting in a park outside Children's National Medical Center. My chest rises and falls. The sky is between seasons. My mother is now between one diagnosis and the next. My father is holding his breath. The counselor is ordering a Myriad testing kit to be sent to my apartment. I will drain my spit into a tube and mail it to Salt Lake City. When I receive the results, I will prepare to return to graduate school. When I sit across from the counselor and the oncologist, I will fold my hands neatly in my lap. When I receive the results, I will receive an inheritance.

Where does risk live?

And the years that follow will follow. I will receive disclosure, and my sister will receive hers. We will perform acts of reframing and analysis. One of us will have survivor's guilt. The other will be seen, as in, the doctor will see you now. One of us will have a variant of unknown significance. One of us will read as much as possible. One of us will always be reading. The house will be inhabited by objects of treatment. The objects will be emptied and stacked in the corners of the house. The TV room will fill with a bedstand, open windows, new fabric on the couches, new molding on the doors to the backyard, new curtains, shifting in each wind.

“What is potential,” Agamben writes, “is the not-yet actual.”

In a dream, I fill the house with mirrors. When I pass them, I see a body that is both mine and not mine. A port emerges from the chest. A constellation of scars is painted on the surface of the skin. Light pools in from the windows, refracts into the eyes, and obscures the vision.

On a walk, I press my back against a tree with tumors at its roots. I close my eyes and breathe in the earth. A gull flies overhead and I sink to my heels, sitting on loose ground.

At times it seems her diagnoses and my disclosure are of the same substance. The influence is there, in the genetic material, but we are separate, too. The diagnoses are divisible. In my head I make a list. Breast, ovarian, ovarian, ovarian. Even with the ovaries gone, it is ovarian cancer when it returns. Eventually the chemotherapy is for treatment and prevention, prevention or maybe treatment, prevention until treatment is proven to be needed. We assess the efficacy of each treatment by drawing blood. The blood test is imprecise. Imaging is better, but not ever certain. "I don't scan well," she says. The right thing to do is in flux. We follow the movement of the numbers closely. They are our guide as they move with the drugs, rising and falling with each ruptured cancer cell, each notice of lysis. Remission is no longer a word we use.

It is a summer afternoon in Colorado. Over the years, this town has become her favorite place. We meet here between semesters and rotations and when my father opens the sliding door, we can hear the sound of a nearby creek, the rustling of trees. The four of us walk to the elevator, pool into the car, and drive into the mountains, our backpacks full of snack bars and water bottles. We approach the trailhead with hesitation, as if we need to remember through practice how to explore a place as a family. We form a line on the trail, stopping only when one of us is out of breath, or when a view catches the eye. Looking across the water, past the spot where a gathering of beavers have left the remains of their den, a glacier is encased in rock. Some hikers further along the trail shout that it is preserved like this, summer after summer, kept cold by the shelter that, to me, looks like any other rock.

V

My mother lifts her shirt to show me a constellation of scars. She traces a line that stretches from breastbone to pelvis. She guides my hand to the site of her port, where the skin is thin and raised. It is winter in Florida. We are standing in the kitchen. The sounds and scents of the neighborhood enter through the open window. In a rush of wind, my mother looks at me.

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In a dream, I fill the house with mirrors. When I pass them, I see a body that is both mine and not mine. A port emerges from my chest. Her scars are painted on the surface of my skin. Light pools in from the windows, refracts into my eyes, and obscures my vision.

On a walk, I press my back against a tree with tumors at its roots. I close my eyes and breathe in the earth. A gull flies overhead and I sink to my heels, sitting on loose ground.

When I return to Indiana in the fall, I begin work on a new novel. It follows the experiences of an archival researcher who, in working to unearth the artifacts of her missing grandfather, is far away from her ailing mother. In these years, I experience an interminable flux between the familial and the textual. When I am home, the intimacy between my mother and I is never enough. When I am away, it is painful. When I am writing, I need to feel longing. When I feel a longing, I am in pain. Writing becomes a vessel through which this flux acts. Writing of and with the body. Is this what everyone is talking about, I wonder, this writing the body

“What is **potential**,” Agamben says, “is the not-yet actual.” Sitting in a park outside Children’s National Medical Center, **I** write this in my journal. The counselor will order a testing kit to be sent to my apartment. **I will** drain my spit into a tube and mail it to Salt Lake City. When I receive the results, **I will be** preparing to return to graduate school. Sitting across from the counselor and an oncologist, **I will fold** my hands **neatly in** my lap.

The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac

by Mary Oliver

1.

Why should I have been surprised?
Hunters walk the forest
without a sound.
The hunter, strapped to his rifle,
the fox **on** his feet of silk,
the serpent on his empire of muscles—
all move in a **stillness**,
hungry, careful, **intent**.
Just as the cancer
entered the forest of my **body**,
without a **sound**.

2.

The question is,
what will it be like
after the last day?
Will I float
into the **sky**
or **will I** fray
within the earth or a river—
remembering nothing?
How desperate I would be
if I couldn't remember
the sun rising, if I couldn't
remember trees, rivers; if I couldn't
even remember, beloved,
your beloved name.

3.

I know, you never intended to be in this world.
But you're in it all the same.
so why not get started immediately.
I mean, **belonging** to it.
There is so much to admire, to weep over.
And to write music or poems about.
Bless the feet that take you to and fro.
Bless the eyes and the listening ears.
Bless the tongue, **the marvel** of taste.
Bless touching.

You could live a hundred years, it's happened.
Or not.
I am speaking from the fortunate platform
of many years,
none of which, I think, I ever wasted.
Do you need a prod?
Do you need a little darkness to get you going?

Let me be urgent as a knife, then,
and remind you of Keats,
so single of purpose and thinking, for a while,
he had a lifetime.

4.

Late yesterday afternoon, **in** the heat,
all the **fragile** blue flowers in bloom
in the shrubs in the yard next door had
tumbled from the shrubs and lay
wrinkled and fading in the grass. But
this morning the shrubs were full of
the blue flowers again. There wasn't
a single one on the grass. **How**, I
wondered, did they roll back up to
the branches, that **fiercely wanting**
as we all do, just a little more of
life?

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