

RITUALS IN  
TRANSFIGURED TIME  
(AFTER MAYA DEREN)

*By Mary Cappello*

I decided to write about the mystifications surrounding cancer. I didn't think it would be useful—and I wanted it to be useful—to tell yet one more story in the first person of how someone learned that she or he had cancer, wept, struggled, was comforted, suffered, took courage . . . though mine was also that story. A narrative, it seemed to me, would be less useful than an idea.

—From Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors*

body bore no trace of him, except for a youthfulness unsuited to the coffin in which he lay. If called upon to describe how he had been in life, I would note his smile, his embrace, his gait, and, in every case, apply the word, “robust.” I wasn't supposed to be there because he wasn't supposed to die—who even knew he had been ill? I was the one who had had cancer; he was the one who showed his love one day by looking me squarely in the face and telling me that I wasn't going to die. “Not you, not you,” he had emphasized, “this cancer won't take you,” and it was as if he hoped to single me out for immortality; as if he wished to grant me the gift of immunity, to jettison me to a special sphere, to spare me from what he knew we shared: “our common lot.” Unbeknownst to us, the ground was shifting; we were together and we were apart in ways we could not imagine, on the same course, and on a separate course; we were together in time, and each in our own time, because as he told me this neither of us knew that he had cancer too, and that his cancer would outpace mine, speeding him to the end of a life, while I continued to galumph along.

Perhaps the more alive a person is, the less he resembles himself in death.

Recently I found myself in a place where I wasn't supposed to be.

I was kneeling in a dark cubby-hole of a room beside the dead body of a friend and colleague. Was he so un-recognizable because I'd never seen him sleeping, or because, in dying, he had truly taken leave of his body, as must we all? His

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When I think of cancer's time—whether it takes its time or, as the expression goes, “runs rampant,” I find myself wondering whether its stasis, mutations or growth are in sync with the rhythms of my heartbeat and my breathing, or if it steps to the beat of a different drummer,

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entirely its own. We speak of cancer's course, and we suppose it can be halted, sometimes temporarily, other times for good, but can we really say that we know when or how a first cancer cell forms? Where it begins? How it started? I can wax poetic about a friendship: it started with a love of words; it started by applying the same magnifying glass to a ramshackle copy of the OED; it started with a walk inside the campus greenhouse when we should have been attending a department meeting; it started with our hands clasped behind our backs, wed at the hips by a love of monkish contemplation, but I can't claim to know how a cancer began.

I think cancer defies narrative, but that doesn't mean it is beyond our ken. It's just that the modes available to us for making things cohere don't suit it, try as we might to make them fit. Maybe what scientific breakthroughs come down to, in some way, shape or form, is a willingness to entertain a different story, or to dispense with narrative conventions altogether. I feel this way, too, about the forms that writing, or art, can take in cancer's wake.

**There's the when and where of diagnosis, and there's the feeling that time is both longer and shorter than any diagnosis.**

There's time as we knew it—merely a matter of habituated conformity to a pat assurance of day leading into night leading into day, and there's life lived post-diagnosis as a series of eves, what I call “eve-time.”

A treatment trajectory leaves us each with a tally: in my case, for the treatment of breast cancer, four surgeries, four dose-dense rounds of chemotherapy, seven weeks of radiation five days a week, five years of a combination Tamoxifen and Aromatase Inhibitors divided by two. That's one way of telling it, this neatly quantifying grid; I turn to my art to tell it differently.

The standard treatment for breast cancer puts a woman into a fairly predictable set of ritualized routines; we're put through a set of "paces" much like a work-horse, or a wild thing that is being forcibly tamed. Following my treatment for breast cancer, I structured a book around the standard narrative trajectory (diagnosis, surgery, chemotherapy, radiation), but I was driven by a desire to find unexpected realms of thought inside of each. The book that I wrote only appears to unfold in four clearly delineated parts, but what goes on inside of these frames is unexpected.

Reading Barbara Ehrenreich's essay, "Welcome to Cancerland," confirmed my sense that my desire to disrupt the various ritualized routines, both

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medical and cultural, I was being made to enter—to, in effect, create counter-rituals—could have political import. Ehrenreich goes so far as to suggest that a cult or a religion has grown up around breast cancer in this country—with the cancer kitsch as amulets, and personal tales following the arc of seventeenth century conversion narratives starting with the crisis, followed by the ordeal, and ending with redemption or "survivorship."

I like to say that the book I wrote isn't "about" cancer, but that I was writing *from* it. Here are the things that cancer at the turn of the century is asking me to notice and here is what it doesn't want me to notice. Here is the thinking that becomes necessary and possible in the context of treatment for breast cancer. I've wondered, for example, what "awareness" could really mean in the phrase "breast cancer awareness month." I want to incite a range of meanings, and to recast "awareness" as a many-splendored (even if discomfiting) thing: then, the "awareness" in "breast cancer awareness" could require our being appalled by the environmental disaster we've created and its consequent epidemic; it might refer to senses being heightened because you're suddenly on full alert; it could have in mind the way one's sensory apparatus is re-routed during chemo, when some faculties feel overly attuned and

others strangely dulled; it could, couldn't it, refer to seeing something with piercing clarity, the awareness that art makes possible. Is this the sort of "awareness" that "breast cancer awareness" month is after?

## But that's not the day I mark each year.

Standing in line with a stranger to board a plane, I noticed she sported a bag advertising the breast cancer drug I was currently on, and we got talking. She worked for a pharmaceutical company, but

hadn't, herself, had cancer. It was October, and at a certain point she blurted with glee, "This is *your* month!" making me feel that I had suddenly won a Miss America Pageant I hadn't known I'd entered. This is *my* month? My cancer month! It's a cancer-time-of-year. It's true that October is my birthday month, but have I mentioned how suspicious I am of birthdays? And how I think each of us should get to have not one life but many lives in the course of the one, and with it, many birth-days?

I have said that when I wrote *Called Back*, I aimed to interrupt a ritual, but that doesn't mean I wish to do away with ritual. Writing is its own ritual trace, and I had hoped, following experimental filmmaker Maya Deren, to create my own "ritual in transfigured time." Every year, in fact, I also ritualize my relationship to having had cancer. I don't "mark the day" I discovered my lump, though time had played a curious part in that discovery. I happened to be sitting up in bed reading. It was the middle of the afternoon, and I was in a wonderfully relaxed position. One hand held my page in place, while the other did something it never does: it rested blithely upon my upper right breast. At that moment, in early May of 2007, I felt something that seemed unusual, and that no regular mammogram had ever caught. What I felt was a clearly defined lump. I was on sabbatical that year: it was a year of turning one kind of time off and another kind of time on; I was moving to the beat of a different timer for a spell. I was living off a particular grid of ritualized routine, newly narrating my days. But that's not the day I mark each year.

Each year, strange to say, I "celebrate" the day that I received the news of my diagnosis. It was a magnificently beautiful day, and I'd suggested to close friends that we go to Blithewold Gardens in Bristol, Rhode Island, with pizza and wine. Each year on June 5<sup>th</sup>, my partner, Jean, and two close friends and I travel to a public garden we've never been to before,

and walk there. One year it was raining on June 5<sup>th</sup>, so we went to see the glass flowers inside Harvard's Natural History Museum. Marking the day this way isn't about triumph; it's about acknowledging the fact of a matter. On this day I was told "x"—a life-changing "x"—and I choose each year to mark that telling with a "y." It's the "y" that's significant.

At a "breast cancer awareness rally" I once attended—that worst of all possible genres—"survivors" were each given a pink rose, one petal of which was literally stamped in black ink with the rally's sponsor, REMAX. You can't make this sort of dystopic shit up. The moment we make flowers into symbols, we efface them; the moment we conflate flowers and women's bodies, we erase them.

**I return to gardens to begin again, but at a pace  
an unknown gardener charts for me. I move to  
the rhythm of her idea; I marvel at flowers-as-  
such, growing unconstrained, wildly rioting, glad  
for the day that is thereby re-made, patiently  
cultivated, world without end, Amen.**

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Mary Cappello's literary nonfiction and experimental prose has appeared in *Salmagundi*, *The Georgia Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Seattle Review*, *Interim*, *American Letters and Commentary*, *Hotel Amerika*, and many other publications. She is the author of four books, including *Called Back: My Reply to Cancer, My Return to Life*, which earned her a ForeWord Book of the Year Award and an Independent Publishers Award, and her most recent book, *Swallow: Foreign Bodies, Their Ingestion, Inspiration, and the Curious Doctor Who Extracted Them*. Additional awards include the Richard Beale Davis Prize, a Fulbright Fellowship that led her to teach at Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow, the 2011 Guggenheim Fellowship in Nonfiction, the Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize from the Center of Documentary Studies at Duke, and the Bechtel Prize for Educating the Imagination. Cappello teaches English and creative writing at the University of Rhode Island.