

PATRICIA PENDER

Live from the Chemo Lounge

i. diagnosis

I confess that after the first shock had worn off I was strangely relieved to be diagnosed with cancer. It meant an end to striving. I was worried for my family, for my partner, and for my friends but for myself, to the extent that self can ever be extruded from these associations, it meant the promise of a well-earned rest. It was an unlooked for but welcome invitation to a party I'd fetishised like Gatsby languishing after whatshername's dock light, green across the midnight swathe of the Jersey Sound. Sweet Death, Kind Death. Stevie Smith's great lover. My new friend.

For those impatient or unfamiliar with the mindset of depression this may well sound grim, or melodramatic, or perhaps insufferably adolescent. It doesn't feel that way to me. Eighteen months after being diagnosed with breast cancer and undergoing a mastectomy, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explained herself to a new therapist: "[T]o feel the wish of not living! It's one of the oldest sensations I can remember."² For me, if it is not one of the oldest, it is certainly one of the most familiar. Generally, depression manifests itself for me in a desire, not to kill myself but to be already dead. I have felt this way more or less since I was sixteen. To commit suicide is too pointed, and would involve for my family the cruelty of repetition, the leaving of an overdetermined if incoherent message. To be already dead—well I wouldn't have to worry about that would I?

*Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning!*

*"Oh to be Nothing," said Eve, "ob for a
Cessation of consciousness
With no more impressions beating in
Of various experiences."³*

¹ Stevie Smith, "Not Waving but Drowning," *Not Waving but Drowning* (1957).

² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "A Dialogue on Love," *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1998).

³ Stevie Smith, "A Dream of Comparison (After reading Book Ten of Paradise Lost)," *Not Waving but Drowning* (1957).

And so my cancer became the source of a secret and well-swaddled satisfaction. I knew I wasn't going to be able to tell anyone how I felt, but I was imbued with a sense of calm that no one around me was anywhere near to feeling, that in fact I had never felt before myself. With the exception of my partner who reacted to the news by getting solidly and repeatedly stoned, professing no recollection of my ongoing medical appointments, accompanied by an unfailingly genial willingness to drive me to them, my friends and family were shocked and bewildered. As is entirely natural, but which also felt to me, even a few days after my diagnosis, somehow pre-scripted and at the same time extraneous. We had been dealt this hand and I, for one, was keen to play it.

*If I lie down upon my bed I must be here,
But if I lie down in my grave I may be elsewhere.⁴*

And the comfort that cancer offered me? It was astonishingly simple. I could stop working. Momentarily. I could pull out. Of everything. I could renege. I could default. I could fail. I could give up. Giving up—on my job, my deadlines, my commitments—was in fact what now passed for my core business. External expectations would henceforth be as naught. My health now *demand*ed I say no, nay, sorry, nope, not today, maybe not ever again. This carried the rush of novelty. It was intoxicating. It was the best bloody thing that had ever happened to me. And long, long overdue.

*My heart goes out to my Creator in love
Who gave me Death, as end and remedy.
All living creatures come to quiet Death
For him to eat up their activity
And give them nothing, which is what they want although
When they are living they do not think so.⁵*

In the introduction to her *Cancer Diaries* American poet Audre Lorde writes:

Each woman responds to the crisis that breast cancer brings to her life out of a whole pattern, which is the design of who she is and how her life has been lived. The weave of her everyday existence is the training ground for how she handles crisis.⁶

The design of who I am is largely (though not exhaustively) depressive, and my life has been lived by the lights of this disposition such that I experience the unexpected deadline of my death as a respite. At the same time, the weave of my everyday life as *The Girl Who Would Succeed* provides a

⁴ Stevie Smith, "If I Lie Down," *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942).

⁵ Stevie Smith, "My Heart Goes Out," *Not Waving but Drowning* (1957).

⁶ Audre Lorde, "Introduction," *The Cancer Diaries* (1980).

training ground for handling crisis—with resilience, with grit—that I will now rebel against for perhaps the first time in my life. Or maybe it's not grit *per se* that is the ground of my rebellion, but grit summoned against the self in the service of the institution—be it the demands of my department, the escalating KPIs of my faculty, the strategic priorities of my university, or the increasingly neoliberal principles of higher learning

I will say NO for the first
time I will withdraw
my consent

—

When I ring Human Resources I discover that I have accrued 142 days of sick leave, having been employed for ten years without ever taking a day off. I need to factor this into my

diagnosis

ii. treatment

the shark bite is what my partner calls the scar where my right breast used to be. Cup size H would you believe. I wonder what they did with it

given its size I thought I'd at least lose some weight when they removed it but the hospital food was so bad I put it all back on in a week. Either that or the bathroom scales were dodgy

Mum took me bra shopping to a specialist boutique purposefully named *You Really Are Beautiful!*

the fake boob you put in your mastectomy bra is called a form. A form for swimming is made from silicone and resembles a large jelly fish

the best temporary forms are made from memory foam (mammary foam). But there's a special delight in receiving a hand-knitted pair from your McGrath Breast Care Nurse TM. Why a pair?

if you need to weight them down a bit, you can try
a) sinkers b) sandbags⁷

*

⁷ Trisha Pender, "shark bite" in Cassandra Atherton ed, *Scars: an anthology of microlit* (Spineless Wonder, 2020), p. 65.

the chemo nurses in the day treatment centre are gorgeous. Caitlin with the face of Drew Barrymore and the same husky chuckle. Nancy whippy and slight like a greyhound. She has a young son she worries about and I don't think she eats properly. They are both of them smart, funny, super friendly and seemingly unflappable. They are beyond busy. I immediately love them

my veins are the silly kind that make it almost impossible to set up a cannula. The first go takes four tries. There is talk of my getting a port but we all hope I won't need that I get special treatment—a brusque informal solidarity—because I don't fuss and because I'm too young for this apparently. I appreciate the new chronological perspective. My school friend Jane trying IVF two years earlier was labelled geriatric

*

I dress up for chemo days. Not outfits exactly, just things I feel good in. I figure I might not get a lot of chances to feel good about myself in the near future and for the first time in ages this carries freight. Compliments come from many quarters and I smile my judicious acceptance. Courteous chivalry from the senior gentleman suffering bowel cancer in Bay 3. A discerning appreciation of my jewellery from the senior registrar. My sister in Fiji has sent me a fork bent into a bracelet. My mum in Sydney a necklace made of upcycled car tyres. I happily share their provenance. I wear them like amulets.

*

Of course the side effects are serious.
I'm not that deep in denial. FEC-D is a doozy.

You may feel sick (nausea) or be sick (vomit).
You may find that food loses its taste or tastes different.
You may get bowel motions (stools, poo) that are more frequent or more liquid.
You may also get bloating, cramping or pain.
After being out in the sun you may develop a rash like a bad sunburn.
Your skin may become red, swollen and blistered.
You may have:

- Bleeding gums
- Mouth ulcers
- A white coating on your tongue
- Pain in the mouth or throat
- Difficulty eating or swallowing

Epirubicin
(*epi-ROO-bi-sin*)

Fluorouracil
(*Flure-oh-YOOR-a-sill*)

Cyclophosphamide
(*SYE-kloe-FOS-fa-mide*)

photosensitivity

mucositis

You may get:

- Eye pain
- Red, sore or swollen eyes
- Blurred vision
- Watery or gritty eyes
- Changes in your eyesight
- Sensitivity to sunlight
- You may feel very tired, have no energy, sleep a lot, and not be able to do normal activities or things you enjoy
- You may feel dizzy, light-headed, tired and appear more pale than usual
- Your hair may start to fall out from your head and body
- You may notice that you are unable to concentrate, feel unusually disorganised or tired (lethargic) and have trouble with your memory
- You may get:
 - Chest pain or tightness
 - Shortness of breath
 - Swelling of your ankles
 - An abnormal heartbeat
- You may get:
 - Hot flushes or night sweats
 - Mood changes
 - Vaginal dryness
 - Irregular or no periods
- You may also:
 - Have trouble sleeping
 - Find sex painful or lose interest in sex⁸

fatigue

anaemia

alopecia

chemo brain

heart problems

menopausal symptoms

Other side effects are less well documented. You may:

find yourself searching for James Taylor songs on Spotify

be unable to tolerate works of fiction

feel guilty because you are not at work

spend a lot of time plotting your return to work

worry less about your parents

attract randoms keen to share the tragedy

discover some friends are as staunch as you always suspected

upgrade your iphone

on a payment plan

that might outlast you

⁸ eviQ, Patient information—Breast cancer adjuvant—FEC (fluorouracil, epirubicin, cyclophosphamide) (part 1 of FEC-D)

Southerly 79.3: The Way We Live Now

join a women's financial literacy group
start counting calories on a food tracker app
evangelise the benefits of the food tracker app
ponder the properties of carbohydrate
develop an aversion to preservatives
a passion for pickles
become a little obsessed with food, honestly
develop roid rage from the anti-nausea meds
find another app to slow that shit down
it could happen to anyone
you might buy two potted geraniums for your front porch
not realising there is no longer money in the bank
for such luxuries
your growing fascination
with the trend of indoor plants
so retro
would then have to compete with the good sense
you are painstakingly gaining
at the financial literacy seminar
both of your parents might offer you money but
you'd want to discuss that with your therapist
it's certainly not cheap being sick
but there might be hidden clauses
in a certain way though, you might never again
be as free
to take the cash

there are other side effects more obscure, more surprising
like inexplicably losing the word “bathmat”
along with your pubic hair
or
conducting intensive market research
on burkinis
only to discover
they are not necessarily
UV resistant
you might find yourself rehearsing youtube videos
of your feet dancing to the bee gees
live from the chemo lounge
or
your therapist might inform you
that of all her clients
you are currently
the least depressed

iii. prognosis

Jenny Diski has said that “Sullen rudeness is a possible option handed over to us canceres.”⁹ But she is a self-confessed pouter. Funny with it, but still pouty. For myself I prefer Sedgwick’s approach:

“I kind of did beautifully with it. I bounced back from the mastectomy, and when it turned out there was some lymph node involvement too, I tolerated six months of chemotherapy without too many side effects.

⁹ Jenny Diski, “A Diagnosis,” *London Review of Books*, 11 September 2014.

You know, I *hated* it, and it completely wore me down, but...¹⁰

I am familiar with the impulse to reassure people that yes, some parts of this experience have been very bad. In a way this is what they want to hear. I tell them about my peripheral neuropathy; that I still can't feel my feet properly and possibly never will. That I experience severe twitching in my legs for about two hours *every fucking night* before I can fall asleep. These tidbits are paradoxically reassuring. They are familiar reports from the frontline of the battle against breast cancer, where chemotherapy is, as Susan Sontag reminds us, a form of chemical warfare conducted with poison.¹¹

But I can also relate embarrassingly well to Sedgwick's pride in her performance of *The Stellar Cancer Patient*. I too am preternaturally, precociously, good at this. At one point I am telling friends how well I am doing dealing with my disease—there is the aforementioned food tracker, the absolute cessation of all university-related work, the conversion of my study into something my partner refers to as *The Gymoffice*, where I admit to doing the odd arm curl—and Kate quips that next I will be training for triathlons. I refute this with some fervour: never never never. But I know what she means. I'm starting to sound like someone Oprah would like to have a chat with. If I keep this up, Ellen might fly me to L.A. But I do have a secret weapon against turning myself into exactly this much of a cultural cliché: never never never will I attempt to take up jogging unless they take the other breast.

*

In a piece she wrote for the *London Review of Books*, Jenny Diski responds to her oncologist's diagnosis of inoperable cancer by joking with her partner about starting a meth lab. But suddenly she's second guessing herself: does everyone now allude to *Breaking Bad* at this juncture in proceedings?

¹⁰ Sedgwick, "A Dialogue on Love."

¹¹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (1978).

“I was mortified at the thought that before I’d properly started out on the cancer road, I’d committed my first platitude. I was already a predictable cancer patient.”¹²

I realise that if I pursue the Stellar Patient cliché much further, I run the risk of becoming estranged from my more lucid and happily intransigent self. Inevitably—this fate is also a cliché. But how to avoid it?

Courting cliché does not seem to threaten the same degradation to Audre Lorde in 1980 that it does to Jenny Diski in 2014. As a black lesbian feminist poet—one of the first to publish about the gendered dimensions of breast cancer from a personal perspective—Lorde looks cliché in the eye and says *I dare you*.

“And yes, I am completely self-referenced right now because it is the only translation I can trust.”¹³

Lorde writes:

“Living a self-conscious life, under the pressure of time, I work with the consciousness of death at my shoulder, not constantly, but often enough to leave a mark upon all of my life’s decisions and actions. And it does not matter whether death comes next week or thirty years from now; this consciousness gives my life another breadth. It helps shape the words I speak, the ways I love, my politic of action, the strength of my vision and purpose, the depth of my appreciation for living.”¹⁴

“I must tend my cancer with at least as much care as I tend the compost, particularly now when it seems so beside the point.”¹⁵

“I try
but I can’t think
of one aspect
of having cancer,
start to finish,
that isn’t
an act in a pantomime
in which
my participation is
guaranteed
however I believe
I choose to play each scene.
I have been given this role.
(There, see?
Instant victim.)
I have no choice
but to perform
and to be embarrassed
to death.”¹⁶

¹² Diski, “A Diagnosis.”

¹³ Lorde, *Cancer Diaries*.

¹⁴ Lorde, *Cancer Diaries*.

¹⁵ Lorde, *Cancer Diaries*.

¹⁶ Diski, “A Diagnosis.”

The pressure of time. Lush like a weighted blanket. The accumulation of all those tiny glass balls bringing comfort to sufferers of anxiety, ADHD, and a range of other afflictions. I am cocooned in the pressure of time even though I don't know how much of it I have. No one is willing to say. I guess because they might be wrong. Then sued. Seriously. Who would have the energy?

The last set of scans I had after chemo showed no new cancer. The cancer that I had in my breast, in the lymph nodes of my armpit, in a small tumour in my spine, these have already been excised by surgeons. You can't see any cancer on my scans right now. "So they're clear?" I pose the question to my oncologist. "We don't use that language" is her reply. This delights and irks me in equal measure: her vocabulary is nothing if not discriminating; I thought *I* was the language police. "We don't have many studies on people like you," she adds. A fact that troubles any prognosis. But still, as if in partial reparation, I have a people?

My hypothetical and (I assume) unjustly understudied tribe would all be Stage 4, after which one actually runs out of stages. The words that doctors (are legally required to?) use—strategically, like an incision, and thereafter seldom, so that you wonder if you maybe imagined them—incurable; terminal. Because the breast cancer travelled to my spine, I am metastatic. Or maybe it's my cancer that's metastatic. It's not a matter of if but when.

And yet. Thanks to my recent shucking off the skins of alcohol and nicotine I am physically healthier than I've ever been, apart from a few high school years spent as She Who Would Be Sports Captain. Mentally, as my therapist assures me, I am unusually un-depressed. I think I am maybe even a little under-depressed. I attempt the odd arm curl. My eyebrows are growing back. I am, in short, tending myself with more care than I have ever expended on the compost, which has always been my partner's province really, and so not exactly the challenge it could be. But any self-tending is better than none, which is precisely how much I was doing while I was working.

Of course it's not working per se but working like a manically-driven drone programmed to respond predictably and vigorously to a constant incitement to overachieve that's the problem. A problem that the deadline of my death, however open-ended, operates on brilliantly, almost surgically, irrevocably. Doing cancer beautifully, as Eve Sedgwick aspired to, is certainly another opportunity to prove myself a swat, but it is worlds better than performing the very model of the modern academic, a subject uncertainly rewarded for consuming itself. I had enough eating me.

"I am an anachronism, a sport, like the bee that was never meant to fly. Science said so. I am not supposed to exist. I carry death around in my body like a condemnation. But I do live. The bee flies. There must be some way to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it."¹⁷

¹⁷ Lorde, *Cancer Diaries*.

*In my dreams they are always waving their hands and saying goodbye,
And they give me the stirrup cup and I smile as I drink,
I am glad the journey is set, I am glad I am going,
I am glad, I am glad, that my friends don't know what I think.¹⁸*

*

In her *Cancer Diaries*, Audre Lorde writes that she wanted “the old me back, bad as before.” In “A Dialogue on Love,” Eve Sedgwick tells her therapist that this is exactly what she *doesn't* want. “If I can fit the pieces of this self back together again at all,” she writes, “I don't want them to be the way they were. Not because I thought I could be better defended, either: what I wanted to be was realer.”¹⁹

If cliché is inescapable—and it is: none of this is new, the search for insight in the face of death is of course a cliché—then what cancer has offered me is an opportunity that feels unique but that isn't at all—a chance to embrace the corniness of my reclamation of agency, in all its obvious belatedness, but also, importantly, in its not-toolateness.

¹⁸ Stevie Smith, “In My Dreams,” *Tender Only to One* (1938).

¹⁹ Sedgwick, “A Dialogue on Love.”