

(This piece appeared in *Under the Sun, 20* (Summer 2003), pgs. 166-174, and was reprinted in *Shadowboxing: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction* by Kristen Iversen, 2003.)

The Waiting is the Hardest Part:
A Meditation on Breasts and Mortality

The first thing always is to lie back. Antiseptic paper crinkles, and my breasts fall to my sides as if resigned. My doctor's fingertips probe my right breast, circle and press, circle and press. Guilt floods me; I'm always too frightened to attempt such thoroughness each month in the shower. I can't search my body for something I don't want to find.

I watch my doctor's eyes, try to read them. I've always wondered how her face might change if she found something. Today, I see. Her eyes sweep up to the fluorescent light as though to avoid the spot on my breast where her fingers have stopped.

"Hm," she says.

I want to leap out of my body—this body of breasts and bones and brains—and float out of the high window into the heaven of my bed with its homemade quilt and my lover warming me.

"Here, feel this," she says, lifting my hand to the spot I least want to touch on my whole body. I imagine this probing might jar errant cells, which break loose and run scattershot through my body.

I pretend to feel the lump. I can't feel anything right now. Only fear. In a hopeful, yet skewed attempt, my thoughts surface the names of my friends who paved the way: Susannah, Marie, Melinda, Joan, Catherine. All alive and well. And two who aren't: Jan. Aunt Edrie.

"This may be just a premenstrual breast, but I need to be sure," she says. A piece of her brown hair, woven with gray strands, has escaped her ponytail and is grazing her cheek. Dr. McFinney always looks a bit disheveled, as though she wears her hectic life-with-two-year-old-twins-and-a-medical-practice on her wrinkled sleeve.

She tells me I need to come back in ten days. If the lump has disappeared or changed, it's benign.

At home I kneel on the bedroom floor and bury my face in my cat's gray fur. Her pleasure purrs up. She is always so present, responding immediately to everything: my touch, a patch of sun on the carpet, a sparrow jumping on the other side of the window. Compared to a human life, hers is on the fast track. Does she see everything differently from the dimension of cat years? Are her perceptions as different from mine as mine are from a redwood tree whose lingering years swirl slowly inside?

An echo of my doctor's touch rushes back. My right breast burns, the bright spot on a mammography, the embers of a campfire. I envy solid redwood existence and my cat's nine lives. Everything is a likely poison. My three daily cups of coffee. The pipes in our 100-year-old house. The fruit I didn't wash. My mother's genes. The four times I dropped acid. And all those hangovers and second-hand smoke. Months of living mainly on Top Ramen and Doritos. Ten years on the pill. Even an old chestnut: An underwater kick to my budding breast at age eleven in the public pool. Why did I think I'd somehow

escape? No one does. Life is a summer swimming pool where you're kicked by a rowdy kid, then you get cancer, then you die.

Ten days, I tell Annie, my lover, that night in bed. She's lightly touching my bare back and reading a book, coincidentally, by Rachel Carson. Carson's evocations on the poisoned earth are fitting, but they seem too large right now for my little life. I'm trying to be like my cat, purring to Annie's touch, being here in this bed as though I have, in fact, flown from the exam room and landed in my life's homemade quilt.

But I can't sustain a sense of being present. A loop tape of the doctor giving me two different versions of the news plays over and over. My heart beats like an old film reel flapping around and around after the film has ended but no one is there to turn off the projector.

Dr. McFinney has two different looks in each version in my mind's eye. In the first version, her tall body slopes into the room, with knotted hair and wrinkled white coat. Coffee on her breath and eyes averted, she tells me I have cancer and that furthermore I'm pre-menopausal so I should take every precaution, including a mastectomy, radiation, and chemo and that furthermore with a maternal aunt who died of breast cancer I shouldn't hold out much hope. I feel this scene in my body—my legs, arms, and head tingle so insistently that something in me separates, as though half of me has walked out into the hallway and left the other half behind.

When the tape loops to the next version, Dr. McFinney is very rested. Her twin two-year-olds slept through the night, so her white coat is crisp and properly buttoned. Her stethoscope hangs authoritatively from her willowy neck, and her brown hair sways

at her shoulders, gray threads combed through like tinsel on a Christmas tree. Her gift to me unwraps in her smile and settled eyes: “Just as I thought, a mere premenstrual breast.”

At the amusement park on the beach a few blocks from our house, a saltwater taffy machine’s movements pull a wad of rubbery candy out to its stretching point then back again. Its beginnings and endings intersect, a moebius strip in sticky motion. Like that taffy, I am repeatedly pulled apart and put back together, in the milliseconds it takes the mind to fool the body into believing it has experienced the future over and over again.

A few days into the wait, my heart occasionally races and I’m vaguely nauseous off and on, as though I have a teenage crush. I can’t concentrate for long—can’t write, can’t read much of anything except junk mail fliers. One afternoon I see auras around the juicer, the rose bush, and even my neighbor who, in her raggedy orange bathrobe picks up the newspaper off the walk at 2 p.m.

Annie has great news: our friends can’t go to the Indigo Girls concert and so are giving us their tickets. These are coveted tickets, for the Indigos hold court as an immensely popular duo, who happen to be lesbians, playing in a small, sold-out venue in our very lesbian town. I have a feeling that somehow Annie finagled these tickets to distract and entertain me, but I don’t ask. I know she’s worried and that my nervous energy and talk of seeing auras around the rose bush is driving her nuts.

Dressing for the concert, I quickly put on my bra, avoiding contact with “the spot.” My breasts are rather large, a 38C on my 5’8 frame. Usually they are like breathing: I don’t much notice them unless I’m physically exerting myself. For running

I wear two jog bras to avoid what I only half-jokingly call “boob sprain.” Once I ran a couple of blocks with a regular bra on, and my right breast ached for a week. Another candidate to add to the “potential causes” list.

When I was 18, my boyfriend John told me that the thing he loved about my breasts is that they stand up in a perky way, even without a bra. Other breasts, like those of his former 33-year-old girlfriend, did not have the shape of mine, he reported. Sometimes when I see my breasts drooping, feel their rounded undersides graze my ribs, I wonder if John ever realized that gravity had not yet taken hold of my young breasts, unlike those of his older ex-girlfriend. Whatever his knowledge of the physics of breasts, John’s personal aesthetics insisted on “lookin’ good.” He loved to look good and have his girlfriend look good: the latest fashions (like wrap-around pants), the latest hairstyles (like feathered, hair-sprayed wings), the latest toys (like Pong or an ATM card).

It’s curious how John has remained part of my awareness of my breasts—indeed, my whole physical body, in more ways than one. He thought I was beautiful when he first met me, followed by a year of trying to improve me. We remained friends after a series of breakups involving a girl named Candy. I wonder what he would think of me now with my unshaved armpits and my thick, relaxed breasts. At age 28, John fell off a ladder while painting a house. He died soon after. Sometimes I feel like he’s right here, telling me that the body is to be enjoyed, not fretted over, and that I’m lucky to be freer while still alive.

Women and a few men swarm around, drinks in hand, while Annie and I sit at the bar, waiting for the concert to start. I catch snippets of conversation: one woman hopes

that the Indigo Girls will play her favorite song, another complains about her high school students' inability to spell, and a third waxes philosophical about the effects of a hungry, stray dog appearing on her front lawn. I am struck by the minutiae of life, how its electricity continually buzzes. I could be sitting here with cancer in my breast, and the most familiar cliché rings true: life goes on. I wonder what hidden pain, disease, and fears the other women around me harbor. I suddenly feel a surprising affection for life's details, as though they are excited little children whose exuberance forces us to live in the naive moment.

“Oh, look who's here,” Annie says, and I peer over the rim of my wine glass mid-sip. A brown-haired woman stands before us, broadly smiling, displaying what looks like a bit of cream cheese lodged between her two front teeth. For a fleeting second I can't place her. Then a shock of white coat flashes in my mind's eye, replacing her turtleneck sweater. Dr. McFinney. It's as though my hidden thoughts have uncannily materialized.

“What a coincidence,” Annie says. They ensue on a point/counterpoint about the Indigo Girls' lyrics and intricate harmonies. Irrational thoughts seize me: What right does she have to hang out enjoying live music when she holds my fate in her hands? How can it be that she doesn't notice the cream cheese in her teeth?

I have been a teacher for many years, and when my students run into me at the grocery store, I can tell they marvel at the fact that the woman who conducts their classes actually buys bananas and bread. That means their teacher is a person who has a body that engages in bodily functions. They blink at me like they've just exited a dark theater.

Why do we deny authorities their bodies? The body is vulnerable, subject to embarrassing noises and messy disease. The body is a personal space, and “professional”

is supposed to be the opposite of “personal.” So separating professionals from their bodies imbues them with power. And a false immunity is lent through the trappings of their professional authority: the blackboard, the white coat. The figure of the professional provides us with some relief from ubiquitous mortality. The professional somehow seems to have transcended death.

As Dr. McFinney animatedly chats with Annie, I ache with the recognition of her humanness, her vulnerability. Someone who blindly smiles with cream cheese in her teeth—and who attends pop concerts—wilts my shred of confidence. Forget human. I want a superhero for a doctor.

So many of my women friends and family members have located breast lumps that have turned out to be “nothing.” This thought provides me with sporadic comfort in the days until my doctor’s appointment. Breasts, apparently, are lumpy, and the quality of that lumpiness changes throughout the month. Sometimes they are like cottage cheese, other times like gravel. Lumpiness is normal, even though “lump” is so often conflated with “cancer.” I can’t fully convince myself, however, that the equation of lump=cancer is faulty since for several women in my life the equation was accurate, including my best friend, Marie, her daughter Melinda, and her sister Jan.

Two years ago, Marie, who is 56, hit her five-year-with-no-recurrence mark, which means she is ostensibly cured. The next year, her 48-year-old sister died after battling the disease for three years. Soon after, her 37-year-old daughter called her from overseas, where she was studying, to tell her she’d found some blood in her bra.

“I’ve never heard of bleeding through the nipple as a sign of breast cancer, have you?” Marie had asked me on the phone one spring morning. Her voice ached for me to share her perception.

“No,” I said, trying to veer my friend’s life away from tragedy. I had a vague sense that I had once heard that such bleeding was a sign of cancer, but what I said at that moment would not alter her daughter’s diagnosis. If there was any truth to the saying that thoughts are things, I wanted my thoughts to be cures.

After their agonizing equivalent of my current ten-day wait, Marie called to ask if I would take her to the airport. Her daughter’s doctor was pressing for a mastectomy, and Marie wanted to be there. Every day I checked my email for ongoing letters from Marie, who detailed the events with the clarity of a journalist. It seemed as though those moments of almost-objectivity gave her a certain strength. The email subject headings piled up like headlines: *Melinda and I Search for More Information, Doctor Recommends Implant Over Reconstruction, A Needed Night of Belgian Beer, Melinda Set for Surgery*. There was something terrifying and reassuring in these missives, like wires from the front line. But the combatants were not faceless soldiers; they were my best friend and her daughter. The final email I received from Marie before she returned home buoyed me with its irreverent pugnaciousness: *Melinda Fortified with Bionic Tit*.

At the Pride Parade in San Francisco a few years back, a topless woman wove among thousands of people colorfully displaying their banners and bodies. One breast hung long and thin; the other was non-existent. In its place, ribs protruded, the ribs a woman usually doesn’t reveal. Inlaid in the skin covering the ribs was a long, clean scar like the line of foam a wave leaves behind.

I imagine my breasts erased from my chest. My inner arms would cleanly rise from my sides, rather than grazing these knolls of flesh. Could I run without jog bras, or would my phantom breasts heave? Can we really leave the body, or parts of it, behind?

I haven't been running for nine days, since my lump was discovered, as though I'm avoiding my body. Perhaps I'm also avoiding the ocean, the vast sheet of saltwater that won't let me pretend that I'm indispensable.

It's an incredible day, one of those days where you can't feel your skin the air is so light. Our cat sits on the warm concrete porch, watching Annie water the hydrangeas. No matter what Dr. McFinney tells me tomorrow, a path is spread out before me. An earthquake seems to happen suddenly, but the shifting of the ground has subtly preceded it for years, counting its own geologic time. Stasis is an illusion, and one day my molecules will mix with the dirt. That's not exactly a reassuring thought. It's just the truth, the only one I can count on.

Nestled in my perfectly fitting running shoes and favorite blue jogging shorts, I take off slowly. My breasts, bound in two black jogging bras, span my chest—a ledge of flesh. My breath takes a few minutes to settle in. I reach the end of our street and turn to run along West Cliff Drive, overlooking the blue-gray expanse of sea, which flashes its expansiveness. A V of pelicans swoops near me, and for a minute I can pretend I am flying with them. In unison, they dive down, the tips of their wings gracing the water. I am suddenly so light, as though I am already my ashes, thrown out by someone's hand, released from the weight of the body.

I can't end this piece with transcendence. The vicissitudes of my moods are such that one day I embrace the thought of being ashes, while the next I greedily hold tight to this earth. Once again I am on my back as Dr. McFinney feels my breast. My body thumps like a huge heart, and a tear of sweat slides from my armpit down my rib. I begin to feel like the waiting has been the worst part. Whatever it is, I will deal with it. I will grieve, go into shock, get my own bionic tit—live until I die. I just need a label: benign or malignant.

Dr. McFinney gropes a bit more, her eyes revealing nothing. Finally she says, “Yep, it's gone. You're fine.”

A flush of freedom washes over me. I know at another point in my life I'll likely have another ten day wait. Perhaps I'll find a lump myself when I'm ineffectively patting my breasts in the shower. But just for a moment I want to savor the tall tale of immortality.