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Webs

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I begin with the sound of peepers and the scents of plum and lilac blossoms.

Dear Alicia Ostriker,

I am saddened but not surprised to meet you again in your poems in Ms., your mastectomy poems. I first met you a decade ago on a prowl through library shelves, the kind of random prowl when I find the accidental treasures that stay with me. First, I had stumbled on Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ essay, “Psyche, or Wholeness.” It was a time when I was newly annoyed with Simone de Beauvoir for saying that a woman had never written a War and Peace. And with Virginia Woolf’s insistence that art is androgynous. I was astonished that DuPlessis included her child’s return from school in her dissection of Erich Neumann’s Jungian reading of the Psyche myth. Then I found you, Writing Like a Woman, and a line that I have held and used ever since: “Nothing human is alien to any of us.”

I know you didn’t say it first. It goes back to a dead old white (Ro)man. But for me it became a key for opening doors between man’s world and woman’s world.

In “Wintering” you say, “Today I’m half a boy.” Then you go on to long to claim yourself as Amazon or Shiva, one-breasted or many-armed and powerfully hermaphrodite, “but I don’t feel/Holy enough or mythic enough.” I kind of like being half a boy, half a woman. My head says that as woman I am Amazon and Shiva, was even with two breasts, but I don’t feel powerful or heroic either. Even my husband’s supportive talk about Amazon just made me giggle. Becoming half a boy made me feel more whole, more inclusive, as though I really did incorporate the maleness that had been alien, that I had been alienated from by my upbringing. The surgeon left me some muscle, so I even learned to flex the pecs, a little ripple that makes me laugh past the scar.

You do “get used to” missing a breast. What I never get used to is having housed cancer, fed the cells that feed on you.

“We are all terminal cases,” John Irving says in The World According to Garp.
“We have always been temporary,” says Audre Lorde in The Cancer Journals.
“We are all survivors,” my friend said when I was feeling both self-pity and survivor guilt.
Can it be that cancer is not alien but the ultimately human, the experience that binds us? Its power over our imaginations is more than the shadow of mortality; heart disease kills more people. Susan Sontag claims that the cancer metaphor suggest inner rot, self-inflicted by passion. “Passion moves inward, striking and blighting the deepest cellular recesses.” AIDS, she says, is seen as the “alien” invasion. Now there’s an image worth deconstructing—a society rotting from the cancer within closing its borders to HIV-positive immigrants. We think we can save ourselves by excluding these aliens while our cities are eaten up with violence and decay engendered by hatreds rooted in race and gender and class, their malignant nodes metastasizing throughout the country.

I wonder why Sontag never mentioned her own cancer in *Illness As Metaphor* but brings it up in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, saying: “I didn’t think it would be useful—and I wanted 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.” She also admits, though, that she “wrote it very quickly, spurred by evangelical zeal as well as anxiety about how much time I had left to do any living or writing in.” Separating the narrative from the idea distorts both, it seems to me. The narrative is diminished, the idea fleshless. Audre Lorde’s essay with strands of her journals woven throughout incorporates both personal narrative and idea, as DuPlessis did, as you do, writing like women.

Dear Susan Sontag,

That desire to be useful that you talk about is overwhelming in people I know who have fought off mortal disease. There I am, using the military metaphor you abhor: “We are not being invaded. The body is not a battlefield. The ill are neither unavoidable casualties nor the enemy. We—medicine, society—are not authorized to fight back by any means whatever.” And there is Audre Lorde using it, the “warrior,” as she, too, speaks of wanting to be useful: “To be of use, even symbolically, is a necessity for any new perspective of self.” *Illness as Metaphor* became even more useful for me when I reread it knowing that you had lived it, that your resistance to being inscribed by unacknowledged metaphors was personal.

The metaphors you trace seem consistently to attempt to encompass both purification and decay in the experience of illness. In our century madness carries the imagery of self-transcendence that was metaphorically associated with tuberculosis in the last century; cancer embodies the horrors of dying, even though both TB and cancer are associated with repression. “The romanticizing of madness reflects in the most vehement way the contemporary prestige of irrational or rude (spontaneous) behavior (acting-out), of that very passionate-ness whose repression was once imagined to cause TB, and is now thought to cause cancer.” The self is denied such agency in the metaphors associated with cancer: “In TB you are eating yourself up, being refined, getting down to the core, the real you. In cancer, non-intelligent (‘primitive,’ ‘embryonic,’ ‘atavistic’)
cells are multiplying, and you are being replaced by the non-you. Immunologists class the body's cancer cells as ‘nonself.’

You relate our image of cancer-as-alien to our denial of death, “the ultimate affront, the thing that cannot be controlled.” So we try to control it by making it our fault. “Psychologizing,” or blaming repressed passions, you say, “seems to provide control over the experiences and events (like grave illnesses) over which people have in fact little or no control.” Reagan’s astonishing denial doesn’t bother with psychologizing: “I didn’t have cancer. I had something inside of me that had cancer in it and it was removed.” Your analysis of AIDS metaphors taking over the alien position is convincing, but in literal terms we continue to blame the victim’s behavior, as if that can give us some control over this “invasion.”

I appreciate the way you fight the tyranny of statistics. Hearing that high percentages of cancer patients report depression, you respond: “But it seems likely that of several hundred people who do not have cancer, most would also report depressing emotions and past traumas: this is called the human condition.” Audre Lorde has a word for the statisticians too, though she didn’t aim it directly at them: “We must learn to count the living with that same particular attention with which we number the dead.”

The tyranny of statistics was an early lesson for me. They tell us that one in eight women will get breast cancer; 46,000 women will die of breast cancer this year; about 77% of the white women and 63% of the black women with breast cancer will survive five years. Each of us is different, though; we aren’t numbers. That was the first time during my illness that I got mad—not at the cancer, not at the loss of my breast, but at being counted. Five years after my mastectomy I picked up an article that talked only about ten-and twenty-year survival rates: “after a period of 15 years, only 13% of the 292 patients who had a mastectomy were still alive. Only 3% survived at the end of 20 years.” I crumbled, and it took me months to realize that I had bought into the rage for statistics and considered myself a number. Even at the moment of reading, though, I felt betrayed by the women who edited that Radcliffe Quarterly, who chose exactly those statistical words for a heavy black-type inset, leaving out the facts that these women were the patients of one doctor in Omaha, that the sample was minuscule, that some had died of heart disease and other illnesses, that no mention was made of other carcinogenic factors in the environment of Omaha.

We seem to gravitate into the negative vacuum of the statistics, pulled into the 23% who won’t survive instead of the more welcoming 77% who will. When my infant son was facing heart surgery that was 60/40 against him, I didn’t rest until with his hand on my shoulder the surgeon said, “In the operating room it’s always 50/50.”

At ten years I actually got “discharged.” The surgeon cut me loose. It scared me. The rebirth umbilical cord that tied me to him was more of a lifeline than I had realized. Being declared “cured” gave me no joy. I heard, with great admiration for your courage and generosity, that you went to besieged Sarajevo last month to direct Waiting for Godot. To keep on being “useful” after all these
years? Maybe the cancer experience had more meaning than you seemed to want to acknowledge.

Dear Audre Lorde,

Sontag tries to free us from the burdens of metaphoric meanings for cancer: "Not a curse, or a punishment, not an embarrassment. Without ‘meaning.’" I value her contextualizing, her intellectualizing, but I have been hiding behind it for years. You search for personal meaning. "I mourn the women who limit their loss to the physical loss alone, who do not move into the whole terrible meaning of mortality as both weapon and power." In fact, you tie this limitation to the pressure women receive to wear a prosthesis, creating a "regressive tie to the past" which encourages the feeling that you had too "of not wanting to persevere through this experience to whatever enlightenment might be at the core of it." Even without a prosthesis, though, I didn’t persevere to the core. Maybe it was fear of discovering that I had wished this cancer onto myself. Your answer to this guilt trip is wonderful. After admitting that you let a doctor’s remark "that no truly happy person ever gets cancer" hit your "guilt button," you put the blame-the-victim line into clear context: "It is easier to demand happiness than to clean up the environment."

When I saw the notice of your death in the same issue of Ms. with all the letters about breast cancer, I ached with regret. I had been too lazy or too fearful ever to tell you how you changed my life. Many years ago, around 1980 probably, you came to read at Colby. I passed the table where you were eating with other women. Phyllis called me over. "You two should know each other. You’ve both had mastectomies.” I remember how you lit up with enthusiasm for going bollicky, without prosthesis. "I even make sure I wear clothes that point out the absence, scarves that point right to it,” you said. At that point, I was leaving the prosthesis home only for reasons of comfort and still hunched my shoulders and wore loose blouses.

In that moment the personal became political. And I was no longer alone, as I had been. You had welcomed me to a sisterhood. In The Cancer Journals you say, "The emphasis upon wearing a prosthesis is a way of avoiding having women come to terms with their own pain and loss, and thereby, with their own strength.” And more: "I refuse to be reduced in my own eyes or in the eyes of others from warrior to mere victim, simply because it might render me a fraction more acceptable or less dangerous to the still complacent, those who believe if you cover up a problem it ceases to exist. I refuse to hide my body simply because it might make a woman-phobic world more comfortable.”

Rita, whom I’d just met, said of my unpadded body in 1977, “That’s so non-phobic.” I thought she referred only to my fears about cancer. You made me see that my fear of death was one thing, society’s fear of the half-boy woman another. Perhaps the averted eyes signaled not embarrassment but fear of the potential toughness exposed by the absent softness.

Margaret, whose tumor had just been diagnosed, said, “I thought maybe since
you weren’t hiding it you wouldn’t mind if I asked you if I could talk with you.”

George, the village lecher, seeing me on a summer night when I was still wearing a prosthesis, leered: “Which one is the real one?” Though I have frequently regretted controlling my right knee at that moment, I never again worried about people who might see me through eyes like George’s.

Countless times over this decade of continued avoidance and denial I’ve said to myself, “I’ve got to read The Cancer Journals.” It is a perversion that I read them right after you died. Yet your words give me courage to write this essay: “Breast cancer, with its mortal awareness and the amputation which it entails, can still be a gateway, however cruelly won, into the tapping and expansion of my own power and knowing . . . . If I can remember to make the jump from impotence to action.” You emphasize that phrase like a refrain.

Now I can give nothing back to you.

Dear Anne Morrow Lindbergh,

You’re still here, but these words won’t reach you. You published Gift from the Sea the year I graduated from high school. I read it some time in the next three or four years. Your work touched me, the beach person. And you inspired me, the young woman, with hope that I could negotiate the web of a woman’s life—“stretched out, exposed, sensitive like a spider’s web to each breeze that blows, to each call that comes”—without losing myself. Now, rereading your gift, I am only a few years older than you were when you wrote it, and I am astonished by how true your vision of the problems remains even after another wave of feminism. And I am troubled that your solutions, including your insistence on time and space and solitude for the self, still seem distant ideals.

I paused over a picture in the albums that were generously left on the counter for us to see Ed’s life as we gathered after the funeral. A tall, grey woman, dressed in light blue, sat on a couch in front of a window, others around her seeming smaller. She looked straight at the camera.

“Is that your grandmother?” I asked.

“No,” said Anne Morrow Kenney, “that’s Anne Morrow Lindbergh, my mother’s cousin.”

I am not as selective as you are. My house is full of jars of shells, shells from the Cape, from Maine, from Florida, from California, from Puerto Rico, even rocks from Lake Huron. On the Galapagos we couldn’t take anything away, so I left a face in the sand made with tiny delicate shells.

Once this summer I did select. Two pieces. One was a luminous, iridescent, pearly thumbnail with ragged edges that made me envy the creature it had housed, until the wind blew my grey hair across my eyes and I could see the world with the same lights. The other prize was not a shell, but a skeleton. After storms “my” beach often holds empty horseshoe crab shells. These creatures are not true crabs but of the spider family, kin to web-makers, most closely related to the trilobites who lived six million years ago. By the tail I knew that this oval with flaps must be the bare skeleton, no carapace, no claws even. When I turned it
over, I gasped. A face like a Greek mask stared at me—sunken eyes, narrow cheeks, sharply pointed rather aristocratic chin. The round mouth is open in a cry, outlined by thin white bone, or shell, that mocks lips. There are no ear spaces. I mounted it outside my back door.

“What does she want that thing for?” wondered my husband’s golf buddy.
To remind me that time is long, life short.

Dear Ed,
One day in the hall you said to someone, “Jean’s one of the cancer club, too,” and the webs of connection expanded way beyond the sisterhood, a health-giving metastasis.

Cancer is this human thing, not alien at all. We struggle, like Audre Lorde, to see it as part of the meaning of our lives, not as the knell of our mortality. But saying it’s human is like the alcoholic saying “that’s who I am.” Humanness can’t be treated. Sontag believes that the metaphors surrounding cancer, the blaming-the-victim, keep people from seeking treatment. Still, the cancer is symbiotic. We feed it. Life and death are symbiotic.

With you I struggled to acknowledge cancer, to know it, to look straight at it, to get past denial. I can’t do it the way you did it—brave and tough and clear. I look away. I coat it over. When I asked about your mother’s illness, you said, “You don’t want to know.” But I did. She had the recurrence of cancer sixteen years after her mastectomy. I was then seventeen years past mine.

I wonder if your mother ever stood in front of a mirror, arms outstretched, looking at how the right upperarm hung down and flapped while the other was taut and showed the curve of muscle. Did she ever measure them, holding one end of the tape measure in her teeth as she wrapped it around each upper arm? “Scraping out the lymph nodes often destroys that muscle,” the surgeon explained, and added with a twinkle, “but there’s no charge for removing the sweat glands.” For me, the loss of a body part was easier to comprehend than the destruction of a part left, a part once controlled, integral, now, as you saw in your mother, “going in one direction while her hand, inexplicably and preposterously, went in the other.” It’s hard to imagine this one of Shiva’s arms.

Out of control. My friend Elaine told me during my illness that she had heard cancer described as “the cells going crazy,” as if keeping stress mentally under control had pushed the craziness away from the brain cells to some other part of the body. Sixteen years later I sat in a doctor’s office in California with Elaine, talking about the plants in the office and those outside the sun-filled windows. She decided to treat her lump macrobiotically before taking any other steps, and she has never developed cancer. Nancy has not been so lucky. Her whole life is centered around self-healing, and at first she, too, relied on diet and spiritual healing. A year later her treatment has progressed from lumpectomy to mastectomy to radiation to tamoxifen. Yet she has managed to move through the medical establishment without resentment, as you did, Ed. “I think of it as both/and, not either/or,” she explains. She maintains serenity.
In 1974 I didn’t know about options. I was good at keeping control of the medical establishment when my children were involved. With myself I just relinquished control entirely. I discovered the lump under my arm; it never did appear on a mammogram. Since no breast lump was apparent, the doctor prescribed antibiotics and told me to come back in a week. By then a second lump was forming, surgery was suggested, a second opinion concurred. Then my husband took control, refusing to use local doctors, calling the surgeon a hundred miles away who had operated on our son. I gave up the controls, went on automatic pilot. Well, there was one tiny rebellion. I refused to go into the hospital until after my son’s Spring Show at the elementary school, “The Little White Rabbit Who Wanted Red Wings”; I was playing the piano for them, all those crepe-papered kids, green and yellow flowers, pink and white bunnies. Even here I lost control. We had the dress rehearsal in the afternoon, but a storm canceled the performance. So I got to the hospital, in the snow, around midnight. And everything went lockstep from then on.

“I’m sure I got it all,” the surgeon told my husband in the corridor. “We don’t even need radiation or chemotherapy.”

“And your father told me that cancer meant you were going to die, no matter what the surgeon says,” my husband told me.

As Sontag says, “one of the mystifications is that cancer = death.”

I hadn’t been to church in years, but I called a priest on Thursday. It was Easter weekend; he couldn’t come to the hospital.

It was all out of my hands, on Good Friday, in Operating Room #13.

But I hung onto control of one thing, my emotions. First, you cry? Not me. Later, but not first. I insisted on spring cleaning when I got home that April, giving in only enough to get help. If I had to climb the walls with my hand to get the mobility back, I might as well wash windows.

Not controlling my treatment while controlling my response had its price. I never experienced this illness, never as you said, Ed, tried to “see what it can teach us.” Perhaps that’s why I felt no joy when the surgeon said, “Don’t come back.” When you began that television series of discussions about literature and illness, you gave me the chance to learn about myself and my illness. Everyone who shared your journey at all learned from your courage, your struggle to control your treatment, to live fully your life with cancer. Audre Lorde said: “There must be some way to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it.” You did that.

“He’s the most amazing man I have ever known,” your doctor told me at your funeral.

Thank you, Ed, for “Waves.” Just like you to leave us something so beautiful and to frame it as a tribute to your mother and a meditation. You said once last year that you still needed to grieve for your mother. Riding those waves you coalesce in your experience all connecting, all leave-taking. You weave the narrative and the idea. Webs are not just women’s writing; nothing human is alien.
to any of us. Your essay is full of you, too, full of your life, your strength, your generosity that always turned your sailboat, the Metaphor, toward home.

I finish on the dock at Bayside, looking at the moorings where you kept the Metaphor, hearing the halyards snap, watching the loon dive and trying to guess where it will surface.