

FIVE MINUTES THAT SHOOK THE WORLD

Anne sits next to me.

“But cancer cells are cancer cells” I hear her saying. I feel no feeling as this isn’t about me because I am in control and healthy. The doctor sits impassively behind his big desk. I don’t hear his words as he answers her next question.

“Didn’t you suggest treatment after the first operation?”

I hear distant muffled words “refused radiation, no urgency”.

“But cancer cells are cancer cells. You know this!”

The conversation is about me. It must be. I sit numbly trying to grasp the enormity of the words. If they are about me then it is to do with my life, and my death. Woah.

I can feel thick blubber surrounding me gradually melt away, leaving gaping holes in my being. The air blows in coldly. Who is looking after me? Me?

“I have trusted you to help me” I silently cry to the doctor. “I don’t want disfigurement, a sore body. But I never expected death. I told you I was frightened of my mother’s illness being handed on to me.”

It seems that maybe, perhaps, that now I must face the thick, deaf, dumb feeling that I possibly said “No, no treatment”, but how was I to know what is best for my life? I trusted that man, initially, because he had gone to my brothers’ school. I was remote from me and my feelings.

Luckily Anne is here. “She must have an operation as soon as possible.”

“I operate tomorrow or next Monday.”

I go home still stunned, then my anger surfaces, I respond and I decide “Tomorrow, I’ll go to St. John’s. I’ll get my bag ready.”

I tell Mick. “Must be there by 7.30 a.m. only for one night.”

It took longer for the shock to be replaced by anger, to be replaced by a decision. The five minutes shook hard. Maybe it had to be that hard to shake up my world. It changed forever.

Hospital 3.03.02

I WANT TO DANCE,

Half naked, leaping like a leaf,

Blowing like the wind on my bare scalp.

I sat in the audience

And danced with you on stage.

I danced higher and wider, and slid lower.

I slithered round snakes and bodies.

I glistened and sexed my buttocks in light fabrics.

I loved myself in your arms,

I flung higher on the kite,

I billowed wilder midair,

I zoomed everywhere and yearned more than the flute.

In my bed now, I was greater than the arms flung wide.

In receiving applause

I breathed life!

YOUR VOICES ARE LIKE

Cats meeting,
Bees round the hive,
Fractious feathered friends
Animals stirring
Linoleum floors
Corrugated iron rooves
Telephones ringing constantly
Mumbling buses leaving
Unknown relatives arriving
Report pages flicking
Stair wells echoing
Heavy doors clanging shut
Tea trays clinking
Trolleys rattling down corridors
Mops banging
Showers gushing
Drip stands beeping
The hum of air conditioning
Curtains being dragged open
Sheets flapping over beds
Lights left on overnight
Computers chattering
A drip in the arm.
Your words
Pervade my body.
Sometimes they heal
Sometimes they wound
Sometimes they're kind
Sometimes they're bored
But all the time
They colour me. Your words. Mary Hudson Ewington

SLOUGH OF DESPAIR

Despondency, depression,
Deprivation, depleted,
Derailed, deranged,
Delighted, delovely,
Deeply loving.

My mother's death has not stopped me living.
My stepmother's life has not stopped me living.
My blood pressure's 85/49
Am I still alive?
I know I've been asleep.
Let me wake robust, roaring, rested, real.

I HAVE TO THANK YOU

"Say nothing, sh..."
"Be nothing- not around us"
"Do nothing- be unseen, unknown, unheard"
Bunkum, bollocks, bullshit.
Be seen- my art is inevitable,
Be known- my name is everywhere.
Be heard- I will sing and loudly.
Be read, be understood,
Stand tall, be forthright, be real.

DRIP IN THE ARM

Drip in the bloody head!
Water on the brain
Body's 70% water (or more)
Dehydration causes nausea,
Inflammation makes stomach cramps
Ahee! Aargh! Help! Mummy.
Sh, be quiet, behave, be normal.
Normal? What's normal?
Shut up, lie down and die?
Bloody no way.
I scream, I yell I moan,
Spill my guts, dry reaching.
Take it away, go away!
What have I done?
What can I do? Jesus.
If you worry, try doing this yourself.
Get a drip in the arm.

PROSE

Tony Childs song, *Stop Your Fussing* is my theme song now. The great blackness still gets to me from time to time. Why should I be going through more of this part of life? Answer, Why not?

And today there is now a thunder storm and plenty of lightning and thunder, it's lovely and refreshing. What do I want for me now? Just to get through the five months, having written a bit more, maybe doing my art, talking to my loved ones, all over the place. Getting a little inspired from time to time, have my artwork scanned and then sending it to someone who can publish it for me.

My chest scar is delicate and if I slump it gets painful. I didn't sleep very much last night, probably from the drugs as well. So, next time I shall get up and write or do something at least. I have a syringe driver in my stomach to help me ease over the vomiting, and I hope that will go tomorrow as it is a drag to have to carry it all around. However, what does this teach me? Forbearance for others who are worse off than I am, in particular the woman probably dying of ovarian cancer, but she now has a loving boyfriend. So she'll be alright. I can tell that. Lucy is a source of so much comfort to me at the moment, when she gives me Light. I am so comforted by her view of simplicity and down to earth quality.

"And there'll be some peace on earth and there'll be some love".

PROSE

Rohan's birthday. 2.3.02

I spent yesterday watching Georgie garden, slept, had about an hour's Light, then went singing fantastically for 2 hours, then had tea with Mick, a conversation with Jill and then to bed, a lovely day! Angela had asked me to be at singing and said, "We need you", which gave me permission to lead the group and to focus on our songs, and to cut the complaining, and to move us forwards. I had lost much confidence in my ability to perform, but it was simply powerful!

This chemotherapy is stronger than the first lot. It took me a week or six days to get over the nausea, but now that I know this, I can rest for the whole time, except for the 2 hours I am teaching writing. And even then my experience is valuable.

I read at the International Women's Day event at Women Tasmania, and exhibited my CD with the data projector. I'll apply for a grant for my images and writing, maybe to the Cancer Council, Women's Health Centre and Rotary, Lions and Apex clubs. Apply for the play of the songs for *Pain to Power* performance for the same.

I so enjoyed the dancing last week because I remembered that my mother had given me ballet lessons and the record, "*Introduction to the dance*" and so of course I am creative and have been put on to this course. So if my brothers and sisters don't understand me it's because my mother asked me to be this way and I am doing what I was told to do.

POEM FOR THE TIME OF YEAR.

Sunny day son's birth,
Waterworks barbecue fire,
Thankyou for this, loving boy!
Red currants stewed with ice cream.
Happy birthday Rohan,
May you enjoy poetry, stories,
art, your body's fitness,
results of your good thinking and actions,
Love, gardening, good food and home,
Friends, work and play,
exploring your value,
And feel pleased with your contribution and place on the earth.
From your loving mother,

I have enjoyed the day-
First the drink with an old friend, clearing our path,
Then lunch with friends, humorous listening,
Red currant jelly and frozen yoghurt,
Pleasant sunshine and surroundings with family,
Thoughts to myself of my own value-
As a parent, as friend, cake maker, consistent friend.

The road is long and arduous, and sometimes just writing can get me into myself and out of feelings of rancour with others, about others I would like to say "they are simply people I have met along the way".

There are many people I have met along the way, some I thought would be important, I thought their roles would make them important in my eyes to me- Husband, step mother, sister, friend, however, they have turned out to be just people I have met along the way. They have their own thoughts, they have their own thoughts. My friends and family I cannot make in my own image, they are their own people.

It has been a frustration to me, I am determined, and I appreciate myself, but I can't force anyone to be like me, or understand what I do. So I can appreciate others and enjoy their qualities and be inspired by them, for example, Jean, Jenny, my singers and the songs- I love them!

ANYTHING BUT MARY. Hospital. 07.03.02

You said "We can talk about anything, but not Mary."
In your eyes I am a non-person, not allowed.
You don't want to think about me.
I am too hard.
Really, I am too emotional,
Too close to your bones,
I AM your bones and blood.
You want to escape me.

Even if you never talk about me again
I know how to haunt you.
I have been a ghost this last year
And I am perfecting the art.
See me in your dreams.
Talk is cheap, love Mary.

I AM HUNGRY

Hungry for life and love
Like the begonia on my hospital tray.
My pencil is blunted
But I'll not stop writing
My voice is denied by my sister,
But I'll not stop speaking your name.
It is dark in here but
I can see enough to know
It's day out there
And I want some of it.
You may reject me, but
You can't keep me from
My own day on the earth.

HAIRBRUSH-no hair

Eye brush- eyelashes in hospital?
Toothbrush-no toothpaste
Toilet brush-everyday
Shower brush-wish I had one
Shoe brush-no shoes-
Nailbrush-clean nails
Clothes brush-for a nightie?
Car brush-no car
Floor brush-I'm in no hurry
Window brush-need cleaning
Table brush- for all the crumbs I spread
Over the sheet, like crumbs for sparrows
In the morning.
Don't give me the brush off,
I brush up quite well.

I HAVE BEEN OSTRACISED

For speaking death.
I have been denied access
Through fear, your fear.
You can't handle me,
I look like death.
You don't want to feel,
Smell or understand.
Too bad, you miss out
On God, on light, on laughter.
I mean, it's all a joke really.
Here I am, breathing in and out
Like you.
We are in the same boat.

YOU'VE TAUGHT ME

Hatred, dislike, loathing,
Anger, sadness, tolerance,
Dishonesty, greed,
Amongst the gardening and art.
You've been exclusive, cruel, mean,
You lied, deliberately taunted,
Exaggerated and shown
Your lack of formal education,
But demonstrated your streetwise.
Money-grabbing focus.
You've no humour and sometimes
I lose mine over you.
I don't understand.
I asked you, you rejected me.
It is tempting to want to
Dance on your grave.
It might at least be fun!

IT WAS WORTH EVERY MOMENT,

The dance, the market,
The wedding party, the performance,
And above all, the singing.
Too bad I got sick yesterday,
Too bad my neutrophils are low,
Too bad my immunity
Could not prevent the germs
Around those people
From infecting me.
But I am not sorry.
I danced, talked, laughed,
Cooked, arranged flowers, performed drama,
And above all, sang.
I would do it all again.

JULIE'S STORY

Hospital Round One Chemo.

"Yes, sweetie" Julie talked loudly to herself while she showered. Letting the soothing hot water spray over her face, her chest, scar, thin legs and her head. Upon washing her hair she found a handful stuck to her hand. Oh yes, out came the hair too. She had noticed a sign on the nurse's station; "Can you take it?" or "Are you up to it?" She couldn't remember which. The general message was pretty accurate.

Lose your hair, not once but twice, and have a needle in your arm for days. Funny how the body stopped hurting at skin level. It was only when she bent the elbow that she felt a sharp dig from the drip needle stuck in awkwardly so she couldn't bend the arm. She ate with the other hand, and asked for help in the shower. It was becoming overwhelming. In desperation she phoned a son to ask him to visit, and at least listen. "No go, Mum, too much pressure, don't push me."

"Poor diddums, can't take it" she mused as she stomped around in the shower. She blamed the boys' father for saying the same words. She phoned the dreaded step-mother and volunteered, "You don't have to talk if you don't want to."
"Oh, I want to" returned the old woman. "It was so good to see you the other day. I didn't recognize you with short hair, and looking so thin."

"Well, I need to let you know I'm in hospital again, I can't work, I'm in \$10,000 debt and you're the only mother I've had since I was twelve. You think I'm honest, well, that's honest."

"Dear, you're upsetting me. I'm moving house today. I'm living on my first husband's money and your father never slept with me."

"Well, that's not my problem. You have a house. I've heard it all for forty years and that was between you two, not me. You're my only mother, whether you wanted to be or not. Yes, I've always said I'm glad you organize your life well, and you are moving. You deserve to look after yourself. I'm not upset with you. Sorry, 'Bye.'"

“Same old story”, Julie thought, as she lay back. “Can’t take the pressure.”

An old woman walked out of the opposite building along the ramp near the sheds. Julie wondered if she could smell any body smells from the locked doors. A bunch of happy girls walked to their study room. If she was teaching them she’d give a list of communication skills and tips for cancer patients, and for surgeons. She remembered she had had no response from the first surgeon she had encountered. No wonder she was frustrated and angry.

The social worker proved to be an old friend. It could only happen in a small town. Jenny came into her room. Julie was so relieved to see her smiling face she burst into tears on the spot. Jenny listened and listened and gave her valuable feedback, “No, you’re not crazy. You have a right to be angry and want results. Your work is so valuable and your students are so lucky to have you. The institution should give you sick leave and holiday pay. Let’s see how we can help you with house rates- one of your outstanding bills. I know you are willing to work, even tonight.”

“Yes” said Julie. “I was just getting back on deck and starting to teach another group. They are lovely people. I did some University teaching last year and was ready to start my business. Now I am up the putt as I can’t work much at all. And now they’ve stuffed up my drugs, and apart from feeling sick and dreadful I can’t earn any money!”

She wanted urgently to know who had changed the ‘script and why, so she could see them and let them know how she felt.

Jenny listened and then told a story. “There’s a rock throwing goddess who bounces around the universe and makes thunder. You might like her.”

“She sounds like my kind of woman” Julie responded. “You mean I’m not alone? There’s a powerful woman mythology?”

As she listened to the story, questions of why me, how come, and hear me came up yet again. At the conclusion of the story, she decided that from now on she would be noisier, more assertive, more honest and practise asking for help for herself. She felt her demeanour change from lowly to strong. She could create. She had some self respect. Anne left the room quietly, with Julie mollified.

The next day, Julie waited to be released from the hospital.

At least she knew that feeling bored was OK. In emotional terms it was high on the list, fairly near zest. In fifteen years of counselling she had taught students that zest was tops, then boredom, embarrassment, irritability, fears (light, heavy) shock and horror, heavy angers and below them, grief and finally physical hurts. With this theory, however, it seemed that perhaps she hadn’t discharged enough of her own hurts. She still had a few physical hurts to grow through. She really couldn’t tell. Maybe she’d organize a session to clear any unwanted garbage away. Emotional discharge they called it.

Sam, the charge nurse called in to check when she would be leaving hospital. “We’ll have to keep the drip in until your doctor says you’re fit to go.”

Julie heard noise in the corridor. A patient was on the phone to her son,

“Love you darling, love you, bye”.

“That’s all very well” thought Julie. “What about my sons?”

In her dream that morning she had been abandoned by her partner, Jack and instead had gone to church. She felt her own psyche was leading her into weird and wonderful places, where sometimes she would rather not go!

“One month of useless chemo. ending up with an infection, great!” she raved. “What a wasted view of my life. Thank you very much. Who cares? Bloody great.”

She phoned as many people as possible, worried about her writing class, which would be left in the lurch if she did not take them. The doctor advised that she would be pressuring herself if she went into teaching at this stage. She phoned the son whom she had organised to take her place with the class.

“Sorry, Mum, I am not cut out for that work. Find someone else.”

“Wonderful” she continued “I can’t teach, yet I need the income. Help! I’ll have low white cell count for another three or even four rounds, and may be back in here. Help!”

She went to the class after all, and survived at half mast. She thought back to the facial expressions when she introduced herself and her treatment on the first night. In the next few weeks I’ll probably lose my hair, feel sick, you may have other tutors, but don’t let any of this put you off. She was surprised to hear the gang of students laughing and chattering in the tea room at break time. Their good humour contrasted totally with her physical state. They were still writing and discussing the topic enthusiastically at the end of the evening. Apparently they were not put off by her illness, in fact

they seemed particularly focused. She continued to meet with them a year later and was told that her story had inspired them so much! What a juggling act this was, in and out of drugs, hospital and work. She wanted it all to end and just to be healthy.

02.04.02

Unfortunately, she did it all again, because she ended up in hospital with dehydration a couple of weeks later, and now she was due to go in again this Friday for the next Chemo. Session. This time it would be different, this time she was volunteering to be in there so she could have the drip for the whole time, and be monitored, so hopefully, she would not suffer the same fate as the two previous times.

She had been so depressed and black here and there. She was planning how to make this time better, First have some visitors, some Reiki, some light, some music, a walk this week because she would not be able to, while tied to the bed! She waved the right arm, appreciating it in its free state. Her eyes were still pink and she guessed her cells aren't up yet. She felt quite weak and low from time to time, but the weather was lovely- sunny and fresh.

God, there are still things she wanted to do, and these included, sitting in the sun and relaxing, visiting her sister and brothers, seeing a few films, walking in new places she hadn't been before, looking at new things, enjoying her friends, singing new songs, sharing that uplifting feeling. She wanted that!

"I'll phone one or two people and see what can be done for me today!" she felt better already. Each day she phoned some-one and asked for help. It was tough training, but unless she made the effort, she became isolated. The isolation was fine for her creativity and the time to paint and write, but a person's hello or phone call, she found, could make or break a whole mood.

A year later she met with the same students, shared stories, and exhibited her artwork. The journey had provoked more creativity, she had run workshops, taught medical students and demonstrated to specialists.

"Won't forget those lessons," she told herself as another person with not long to live came into the room. She had been terrified of dealing with people and their deaths, now she had a colourful buffer of images and stories, humour and pathos, honesty and reality to bounce against.

DREAM.

In the hospital in the morning, she pondered her dream. Yes, the step mother was cruel and distant, and yes she would never see her again. After a farewell, earlier in the week, Julie knew it was a farewell, as she took a photo of the old lady. She was moving into a unit in Mary Ogilvie Old People's Home. Julie felt neither sad nor emotional, just dead. There was nothing to lose, nothing to gain, nothing to say. Farewell. Why the dream then? "Morning tea has arrived, with your biscuit", announced the aid. Julie scoffed it down and cast an ear to the corridor conversation.

"You know it was an old lady" Sam commented. "No way" Amir huffed. His word counted with the nurses, all 6 foot of voice. "Why would anyone kill, let alone dump a body in the hospital grounds?"

Julie packed her meagre gear into her going home bag and prepared to leave. Fred would pick her up if she gave him a call.

Anne, would be waiting at their home, eager to know if she was OK. now, and ready for her regular dose of chemo. the following week. "That's all my life is, these days," thought Julie." Chemo." Mind you there was a handful of friends and family who certainly did not want to know about her chemo treatment, her sister for one. People avoided her like the plague, she observed.

"I can do nothing" moaned her step mother about a year ago. Julie wanted to say "Call me. A phone call goes a long way, and now I have no money and I can't work, how about a cheque in the post?" but her words stuck fast. Not worth it. This old lady was some-one she had known at an early stage of her life and that was all, that was all. It was easier to have some detachment, to not take the complaints and insults personally. If there was something she had learned after all the years it was detachment.

Still, there was the body they'd found down in the alleyway, a floor below her hospital room. She remembered glancing down and noticing nurses walking by on their way to their shift.

"Cold and dark," she thought, "I'm glad to be here cosy and warm."

It was in the paper the next day, and was one thing which grabbed her attention from her home bed. A body, the body of an old woman. Why leave it down there and who cared anyway? Maybe an over zealous medico had put her out of her (or his) misery. Perhaps she had carped on one time too many. What about the rellies? They all wanted a slice of her cake, especially the gay boys she had taken to in the last ten years. Julie realised that she was now confusing the body with that of her elderly step-mother, who was also in the property stakes where the friends and relations were concerned.

The news died down after a day or two, as an old lady is not terribly exciting compared to Bosnia, or Afghanistan or terrorists. The local policeman mentioned the case, months later.

“Whatever happened to that body?” they asked at a party.

“Funny you should ask” he replied. “It turned out an old woman had dementia and had walked out of the ward late at night. I don’t know how she got around that part of the hospital, but no-one goes that way at 11 o’clock. I wouldn’t. It appears that she sank down onto a sack of cotton waste, and being so small was hidden from people as they passed the next morning. That could have been the time you glanced out the window. Seems a dog sniffed out the body. Probably wasn’t painful as she would have just lost consciousness in the cold.”

He turned back to his drink and the warm fire.

Julie sighed and curled back into the armchair.

“Only an old woman” she thought, “perhaps like Natalie.”

She met Natalie in a cafe and noticed her again sleeping under cardboard at the State Library in August at midnight. Flotsam and Jetsam of society, held precious if she had some money or possessions to be passed on. But who was to say that she didn’t have a secret wealth hidden somewhere, accessible only by the nearest and dearest at the time of death? Natalie at least could play the piano like a dream and was the darling of the media. She had played it for all it was worth, and was eventually moved into a solid house and care in her old age. Natalie was worth remembering for many reasons. Now this old nonentity at the hospital, did Amir and the nurses remember in their daily round?

Later that year, her step-mother died. She was rung by one of the daughters in law, who was eager for her to celebrate the astonishing long life of the 90 year old. “Celebrate what is there to celebrate,” thought Julie, as she cleared the garden of rubbish. She hadn’t contacted the old lady in a year, due to her own illness and lack of interest and let’s face it, family love. Julie was surprised and somewhat overwhelmed when she received a fat cheque in the post some months afterwards, with a handwritten letter from the old woman. She recognized the writing and a shiver ran down her spine.

She sat down in her favourite chair, a drink by her side and read slowly. “Julie, you have been distant from me for the last ten years, since your father died. I do not blame you, as we were never close, however, you have made an impact on my life and for this I thank you. I had three lovely girls, a wonderful house and family, and a comfortable life, even though I have found that my shyness inhibited me from getting closer. My painting and gardening sustained me. I do however, remember that you of the three were the most sympathetic and compassionate, a bit like your father. You rescued me from embarrassment on more than one occasion when my skills as parent were just not there. I didn’t know what a mother does. I avoided your school and your life, your friends and all the hubbub of teenagers. I had no idea of small personal joys and consequently I missed out on the ties we could have had. Never mind, this is to say thank you for surviving me and our life together. Dorothy.”

Julie sat flabbergasted, and not only drank the tea but grabbed a wine as well. So, she had died consciously, forgiven herself and those around her, and spread some of her money around. “Well I never did!” Another elderly body in the grave. Dorothy would be remembered a little more gently than she had threatened, as she had said so many times, “You’ll all be happy when I’m gone”. Yes Julie would be just as happy as her life allowed, and she would plant some more shrubs, perhaps fix up the sun-room and drink a wine to Dorothy once in a while.

Julie phoned her own two boys and gave them the news. Like her sisters they were amused by the windfall, and proposed going out to dinner to celebrate.

“I wonder, if she really decided on euthanasia” commented Rory. “She was very interested in it for a long time.”

Douglas answered “Not at that age, she was not game enough to try, and she wouldn’t have been able to complain about everyone hating her. She had to stay alive to see the end. Anyway she died in her sleep, didn’t she Mum?”

Julie thought about it before answering.

“Seems she did die in her sleep and she was lucky, having been healthy all her life. I don’t think there was any question.”

They completed the meal in silence, each dreaming of the small joys handed down from one generation to the next.

I WEAR A BLUE SHIRT

Poems flow from my fingers

Warm armchair and fire.

Rings absent from hands

Unadorned images move

Me, to write poems.

Do I now exist?

Behind the mask, the faces,

Winter's grey seascape.

This long life's residence

Is a precious place

A body of wondrous artistry.

Expanding ideas

Words stretch into whole stories

My pen gallops fast held tight

Will I be alright?

Can my body take it all?

Motion sickness throws

My body into confusion

Chaotic thoughts explode

Give me chamomile tea now

I want rest in peace please.

PROSE

After the 4th. Chemo.

Boyohboyohboyohboy!

I have survived the 4th, chemo. And it was not as difficult as the 3rd. when I went down like a fly and stayed not once but twice in hospital and simply absorbed the fluids and the blood transfusion. Blood transfusion. How I find my treatment words difficult. They seem so ugly and ill, but in effect I am so lucky because, I am not an extreme case. So many women get this that it is not unusual for a woman to be in hospital every chemo. Time to get help, and help and succour is what it is.

The nurses have been kind and soft-spoken, attending to me night and day. (I am pleased that I can still type competently).

Every day I write 20 things which inspire me, make me happy, give me hope or that I am pleased with. Now I shall write 20 things I am proud of:

My son and his girlfriend, Jess, that I am friends with them, and liked, I have friends, I went walking with Lyn, enjoyed the bush, the leaves and found a parrot feather to put on Truganini's memorial at the Signal Station. I can type and have Robyn to thank for taking my poetry class this evening, I realize that life is far less stressful than I thought. I thought that I had to be tops for everything and teaching at full tilt! Anything less was not good enough!

However, now I know that it is fine to do things which are comfortable and relaxed and not over the top, in fact I can't do anything else at the moment. It is also good that winter is finally here and it has been raining, and I am knitting a yellow mohair jumper. Cheery colour. The view out the window is good, because the Eastern Shore is lit up with street and shop lights and I know that people are there getting their food for the night and bustling around in the dark and wet, and sometimes that can be inspiring. I have been asked to enter some artwork in the Glover exhibition at the Long Gallery- good that I have so many paintings, which can be exhibited and are of good quality. Maybe it will be OK. My hair is growing slowly but surely, I have a warm fire burning, I made some muesli, gave some to Duncan, I can get some counselling from Coleen, I had a sleep today and got warm again, my feet are warm, I look forward to writing emails to my friends again soon, received some Ugh boots from Gillian. (20) I sang a song in the shower this morning for once and enjoyed it, thinking that I can sing for myself easily.

I am pausing at the entrance,

Resting my reticent body

That cannot be housed in

My mammoth menagerie.

I am breathing in the dark

The dark under the waves

That muster and smash over me.

The end of the story.

After the treatment, the cure, the rest, the abide with me, the hanging out in a leafy garden with flowers and vegetables, the walks in the bush, she eased up on herself flagellation. She saw the tendency to think to over-think, to dissect, to discriminate, to criticize and tear herself to shreds. However, with gentleness, the shredded body and mind came gradually back into focus. The various parts of the body mind spirit reassembled in a peaceful fashion. Her feet and legs grew stronger- no more aches and pain, or tingles after walking a few steps. Her mouth opened wider to let air and words flow. No more dry tongue, stuck syllables, drinks in the night, sweats and yawns. She spoke her story aloud.

Rachel wore a vibrant blue mohair jacket. Maybe the jacket was more peacock or lapis lazuli. The buttons were multi-coloured pauwa shell, and Rachel fashioned the jacket herself from pure energy. Her other names were Aurora-meaning southern light, Octopus- cold sea creature of intelligence and slender adaption and cunning, brilliance, Swift Parrot- that joker of the bush. Her mother was Silver

Gull, ever present and light, and her father was Blackbird, looking for worms around the home, keeping her company, near and far. Black cockatoo warns her of imminent snow and cold weather, and in summer, blue tongue lizard eats strawberries and lies in the hottest places, creeping under the grass to get the juicy morsels. She liked lizard as a friend and accomplice.

THIS (BIRD'S) LIFE

She lay on her back and gazed up at a tiny square of clouds and blue. She couldn't move. Her chest was bandaged, a glass of water sat nearby and the drugs were on the table. She had had no expectations of the treatment, except that it would be hard. She now knew that it was gruelling. She had spent a lot of energy staying clear of grey depression and fear. Now there was nowhere to go, no-one to speak to, and nothing she could do to change any part of the process.

"Oh well, I thought I would live a lot longer, but maybe not".

She sighed. She could see a clear, flat line.

"You live, you die. Simple." She smiled wryly.

"Had a couple of kids, published some books, done some writing and art. I guess that's all. But I would like to do some more things." she thought wistfully. She was pulled back by the blue square. Surrounded by plain cream walls, the white lace curtains cast grey shadows.

Nothing happened. There was nothing to do but breathe.

She grew very bored, waiting for death. Death looked black and empty, not a lot going on. She tried to imagine more but couldn't. Death offered limited potential- she would say goodbye to her children, to projects, to the café crowd, to mountain walks in cold winds and snow, to the myriad tiny daily pleasures. Then what?

Her body did not hurt at all, surprisingly. They had offered her Pethedine after the operation and she had taken a lot, only to vomit the next day. Now, her chest was smooth, taped and numb, but she was tired, and could not be bothered trying to get up or roll over. She waited. Still no change. She looked up at the square.

Suddenly a bird appeared, high above the city. It flew higher.

"Bloody bird." She muttered.

"It's having a good time. What about me? What does it care about me, down here?"

The bird soared and swooped. Sunlight glanced off its wings. She imagined herself flying so high, looking down on the tiny rooftops. Her dormer window was so small, it was impossible to look through to the bed and the body. How could she survive as a bird up there? She grew dizzy. It was cold and her bird brain was watching for movement and food only. Perhaps she would be stuck as a bird forever. Oh, no. Human immediately, she fell back into her bed.

She lay unmoving.

So, the bird did not care. It was only doing bird things. She realized she did not desire to be that bird. It had no imagination to be able to see her, but she watched the bird's flight, its shape silhouetted against the pale sky. She felt a warm, glad sense that it was up there, flying freely. It started descending. Where did it live? Where was its family?

How glad she was not to be that bird.

How glad she was that it was doing its bird thing.

How pleased she felt to be secure in bed, entertained by another life.

The relaxation stayed with her- she did not get sucked into feelings she could not handle with other people. She stopped feeling envy.

She dozed and then slept in stillness, her breath moving in gentle rhythm. She dreamed of running on her beach, completely whole, her feet digging into the warm sand. When she flopped down onto a rug she glanced up at the brilliant sky and caught the flicker of birds' wings in sunshine.

TANKA

Fishing boat wake lines

Embroidery twisted on

All that blue fabric!

You could pull the cord up tight

And the view would gather

Sewing the bay side to side.

A tiny moving speck

The canoeist comes

Back to his rock starting point

A satisfactory lunch hour

Fresh cold air, warm wet sunshine.

LEARNING CAT YOGA

The yellow cat sits on my bench, talking about my food.

I elbow her, she elbows back, I lean, she leans on me,

Tiny, skinny, loyal, persistent, energetic, verbal, feisty.

I am learning character cataristics.

Her plump, slow, sister meditates on the mat.

Not for her the confrontations, she shows up when the action's done, Manages to silently grab a good portion,

And sleep on the best doonas or in my armchair.

ANOTHER SPACE

During the third chemo. session, she ached so much her legs twitched. She was aggravated and restless, and saw black depression everywhere. She could not eat and asked for anti-emetics constantly. Sometimes she heard herself moaning as she lay alone in her hospital room. She sweated in great waves, alternating with streams of cold damp air. The heat pump was either too hot or too cold and she couldn't get it right. She crawled out of bed at intervals overnight trying to adjust the temperature. Her hat was pulled tightly onto her bald head and then wrenched off in great heat, only to be pulled on firmly again. With the hospital noises of running water, laughter, chatting and late night discussions, beepers and interruptions, there was not much time for sleep.

She lay in fear of some unknown experience of death. In the long dark night it was easy to imagine this was her last time on earth. Oh well, she was now resigned and didn't have energy for thinking anything else. Occasionally, a nurse would walk in, check her temperature and blood pressure, talk briefly, and leave quickly. Sometimes she thought of a small thing to make herself more comfortable after they went away.

She learned to cry openly, to say the small things, to let the staff know how she was feeling even when they did not ask directly. It was the only way to unburden her body and mind. It was almost self defense, and she learned the lesson quickly. Even in hospital she had to have her wits about her, as the system moved on.

One nurse brought a vomiting bowl and this she used frequently. Though the effort was great, there was not much to show. Worried about the wrong foods she ate little and lost 7 kilos. Easily. Hospital food was uninteresting although she noted that the staff took pains to present it beautifully. It tasted unappetising and inspected white thrush patches in her mouth. For these she sucked yellow tablets and gargled a yellow creamy fluid. They tasted very medicinal and put her off eating.

Somehow she quite liked the fragile body. She looked after it carefully. She almost felt like her own sister, but at some distance. This helped her attend to her own needs. But she felt that deep inside this was not happening to her, really. It was an intense experience but did not touch the healthy, whole person inside, the young woman full of so much vitality, who could run and swim with the best of them. The young girl who loved to dance looked at the older face in the mirror, the one with no hair, and wondered who this was. How had she got to be here? She noticed her body hair rubbed off, even her pubic hair. This made her feel extremely naked.

It seemed like a bad story, and she was going along with the ideas, to keep people happy. Later she realized that she had taken decisions about her own health and had listened to guidance. She had chosen this way, without knowing fully what was involved and had had to succumb to the medicine. The alternative was not pretty, and so she simply did her best to survive, not only the illness, but the treatment!

Lorraine walks into the room and sits by the bed. "Can you lie flat, and I'll put my hands on your operation site" She quietly touches me briefly and then holds her hand away from me, giving light and silence. My twitching continues, until I start breathing deeply and gradually more heavily, until I relax. My legs stay still and I begin to find another place, deeper below the terror and blackness. This place is dark, but restful, it has no anxiety or depression, it is neutral. There is no light there but it is not bad, just spacious. I am so relieved to relax.

My poor body rests, I breathe deeply and acknowledge that my mind can expand to find more resources than I thought possible. With Lorraine's help I have found some solace underneath not only mental, but physical pain. I am so grateful to have that simple energy of attention. During this ordeal I am able to read people's feelings, motives and sense of themselves as soon as they walk in my door. I am so sensitive. I knew the discrepancy when a woman walked in and said "I am here for you" while stretching away and showing the whites of her eyes.

Each day I explore the no-mind space, the no-thinking time and the no-talking. I am with myself and recognize peace pervading my being. I give up arguments, worrying and much decision making through having no energy. I learn what can be put off until tomorrow, knowing that people will come to me for necessary payments and responsibilities.

After a while I welcome this time of nothing, and rest frequently and voluntarily. There is nothing else to do, after all. Sometimes someone gives me Reiki or Light or visits and I can speak and show my feelings. I have much support.

CHARACTER SKETCH

Susan looked pinched- her face had a narrow, shut-in look and her eyes had always been hooded so that she looked half asleep, or very sad. She had played the organ in the community church and as far as I know was never sad, but very opinionated and determined. She became a music teacher and obviously loved her work as she described the school enthusiastically. She worked with nuns in a private girls' school, and showed me the photographs.

They had recently put on a concert to celebrate The Federation of Australia and were all dressed in period costume- long skirts and high necked blouses. I noticed a lovely brooch pinned to the neck of her own white blouse.

The new school buildings were situated amongst sunny bushland and shrubs with paths leading down to a sparkling cove. Susan mentioned that the trees would soon be covered in Spring leaves. She was very happy with her girls. I could almost hear them singing to her piano accompaniment. It reminded me of my own happy school days singing and performing with the trio in assemblies.

I had found Susan a bit daunting as I grew up. She was older than me, and more friends with her contemporary, my sister Gillian. On visits to our house, I was treated as the little sister, whose opinion didn't count. I found the attitude hard to get through as I grew older, and did not take up opportunities to get to know her family. Once I made an appointment to meet with her in Sydney, but could not find the Post Office, and so missed the appointment. I was too embarrassed to phone and explain that I did not know my way around Sydney.

I imagine she found this behaviour very rude, and more or less said so when we eventually met. I managed to blurt out that I did not know Sydney like the back of my hand. I think we got through that sticky point. On our next meeting, she proved to be very sympathetic once she knew my point of view, and she sent me material about my illness and recovery, but I guess that I'll never be more than Gillian's little sister.

CHARACTER SKETCH

Dorothy was a mean, naughty old woman. At ninety, her latest act had been to phone me up when Anne was off on holiday to chat for half an hour. She rarely spoke for more than a few minutes if you were lucky. I was amazed, because through my fifteen months illness and treatment she had phoned my only twice, to briefly check how I was doing.

Her behaviour puzzled me until I realized she could only cope with one of us girls at a time. She mumbled and slurred her words and talked of her dog, now dead. She seemed to pick up as we talked, or rather as she talked. The conversation inevitably was about her. She could not hear others' stories. If she was offered a trip in the car somewhere, she replied "No". Unfortunately she then complained about having no support and feeling lonely. In reality, people called in every day and sometimes twice daily to help her in her home.

She began to complain to me, but I replied, "You live or you die, Dorothy." She refrained from further talk on the subject as she knew I was in a life threatening state.

But she went to hospital two days after our conversation. Had she meant to ask for help but could not utter the words? She was always going on about being so independent, and found it impossible to talk of her real emotions. Occasionally, she went overboard and spoke of the best thing that had ever happened, or the worst, but never in anything but black and white values. She denied any sympathetic genuine feeling and if she felt anything, she wasn't going to let you know. In my youth while living in the same house, she had been capable of not looking at me for a whole week and not uttering a word.

She complained to me of the six nighties Anne had given her for hospital.

"Anne is a kind and generous girl!" I stood up for my sister.

"Oh she can't love me that much" retorted the old girl.

"My boys are gorgeous, aren't they" I commented after she had smiled glowingly at my two sons.

"I wouldn't say that" she responded, while she virtually pulled Rohan closer, with her iron grip.

In the time I knew her, she had berated every person in the family not immediately present, and I had listened. I eventually realized that this activity was to divide and conquer the large family she had become a part of, to control everyone. Her policy had been to undermine and insult every one. If I complained, she had said, "Can't you take a joke?" Unfortunately, this action had led to my brothers and sisters disliking her with a vengeance. She had no close friends. I never knew she had a brother and nieces until I had left home, and they started appearing at her house as she did not speak about her own family.

At one point in my young adult hood, I had written her a letter naming twenty ways I appreciated her, so that I could handle the visits to my father. The letter went by unnoticed.

But this now elderly woman had been very talented. She was a visual artist and made excellent gardens for show. The houses were always beautifully designed and kept. She had a vibrant colour sense. She had loved her various dogs, but found people hard-going. When she opened the subject of her terrible time as our step mother, I once mentioned that she had actually chosen to be part of our family and we had welcomed her. She told me she had only wanted to mother my younger brother John, and that we girls had been very naughty, keeping her out of our shared bedroom.

I then saw that she had really wanted to be part of our vibrant, energetic, happy family, as one of the children, to be looked after by our omnipotent father. She never recovered from her foray into the role of Maria, in the sound of music, (she told me she thought our family would be just like the film), because reality was not quite the same.

Anne persevered with visiting her, in hospital and the Home, way after I had given up. I had concluded that she was just someone I had known in my life. I had nothing more to say to her, and did not want to hear the usual trash. But Anne had a nurse's professional view. "Elderly people get like this". I thought, "How sad to be bitter about how you have chosen to live your life." knowing that underneath bitterness lay disappointment or unreal expectations. "You'll all be happy to see me go" Dorothy frequently moaned. Visitors usually responded. "No, don't be silly" but underneath I was bored.

In trying to get perspective on this now frail old lady, a balance of actions and attitudes would be necessary, and who would I be to judge anyway? I was only the youngest girl, who was twelve when this woman was already fifty. On the one hand, she had talents, an eye for beauty, a capable earthy quality and a love for her dogs as companions. On the other hand, terrible skills with people, or an excruciating shyness which even she did not admit to. She was entirely ungenerous with young people and immediate family, and still frugal at 90. This frugality was probably born of her early years in the country. In light of her age, upbringing as older sister, lack of formal education, and uncommunicative family of her own, she did her best and probably in marrying my father, did even better than she had expected, on one level. Pity that he had all these children!

In a good moment one could be generous and say she did very well, but even so it was sad that she was so bitter about her life with "The Hudsons". What had she expected and why did she not speak to us at the time? In the end there was no time and no point in going over old territory. I knew that today is the only day.

VIGNETTE

What makes me live?

The courage to face black death with passion

Laughter and noise, like Duncan.

I have a dream to live fully.

LEARNING CAT YOGA II

The yellow cat sits on my bench, talking about my food.

I elbow her, she elbows back, I lean, she leans on me,

Tiny, skinny, loyal, persistent, energetic, verbal, feisty.

I am learning character cataractics.

Her plump, slow, sister meditates on the mat.

Not for her the confrontations, she shows up when the action's done, Manages to silently grab a good portion,

And sleep on the best doonas or in my armchair.

Charming animals, charmed lives.

HOSPITAL

I threw a bottle across the ward, it didn't hit the bin.
I'd throw myself out of this place if I could touch the magic rim,
Into my future fun and games, into more of my passion flower
More raptures, everlasting life, more warm summer showers.
But- This is my only moment,
This is my only day
This is my only lifetime
This is my only time to say
I am. (Crash!)

PRUNED

I've been pruned enough,
Dropped lots of dead branches,
And leaves litter the hospital floor.
But wait, I need some weight
Or my trunk will grow crooked.
How about a 1 kilo pear
Balanced from my right shoulder?
Maybe I prefer this nude look,
Perhaps a plain stem suits me.
I've lost my crown of thorns,
Lost the moss soothing my crevices.
In Spring I'll sprout new grass,
But I can't grow another breast
Maybe a prosthesis would be best.

TANKA

Fishing boat wake lines
Embroidery twisted on
All that blue fabric!
You could pull the cord up tight
And the view would gather
Sewing the bay side to side.

A tiny moving speck
The canoeist comes
Back to his rock starting point
A satisfactory lunch hour
Fresh cold air, warm wet sunshine.

METAPHORES

The chemo has been like a scourge, a purge and hopefully not a durge! The hospital was a bare cell designed to simplify me to a body and a temperature. Even my blood cells were very nearly annihilated!

The nurses were voices who moved quickly in and out of rooms at night. One night nurse was a reek of acidic perfume waking me with a jolt. Thankfully the drip felt like a muffled heartbeat- I got used to it. My visitors appeared like quiet warm spirits, entering silently, hanging about and gently wafting away. My mind became an empty space- thoughts disappeared into thin air, occasionally reappearing but sometimes getting lost in the void. The time of lying low stretched forever, particularly the night which took three weeks to get through eight hours. I anticipated a sumptuous breakfast but the porridge was cool slime, toast a bendable sheet of card and the tablets like pebbles.

Why? It happened because I was as ignorant as a cow in a paddock.

I changed doctors like a smorgasbord, gaining confidence each time.

The journey has been a deadly game with me a slow learner.

Emotions have been as volcanic as the treatment, each stage a traumatic experience of allowing myself to be as helpless as a baby.

The patient experienced good and bad, took heart from the people encountered, the drugs, the care, family and friends. She became defenceless, let flow, breathed, found another reality, lost her mind, acknowledged simplicity, gained calm, asked for help, learned honesty, spoke out, endured, took responsibility and gave away too much worrying.