

Rogue Cells

ANN TWEEDY

I wanted to keep my diseased breast.
For one, I didn't want to lose feeling in it.
(Other reasons: the foreign implements
required for complete reconstruction and that I simply liked breasts
and couldn't stand to think of lacking one).
Mostly I was glad to know
for once what I wanted. To not have to follow
my usual dance of asking several divergent people for advice,
then painstakingly weighing it.

A surgeon from whom I'd sought a second opinion
insisted that, with small breasts, I needed a full mastectomy.
And threw out the afterthought that it would reduce the chance of recurrence.
I'm thankful that in my darkest moments I could seethe,
that my stubborn will became indomitable.
I'd wanted to face death with equanimity,
but in retrospect I like what I got instead:
the sudden knowledge of how to be my own best friend.

The sensation is less than expected. That breast is mostly numb in spots
and—four-and-a-half years later—dislikes pressure.
A feeling between ache and sharp pain if I try to cuddle in the wrong position
or a cat steps there. It is a sad thing, but I don't think much about it.
Just part of the truth of not being able to go back anywhere.
Of the ubiquitousness of loss and how it's cumulative.

I watched my father die last year of another cancer.
He was frail and weak and needed help
to get to the bathroom and back to the couch. Once, at the rehab center
I broke down and his wiry arms held me,
his ribby chest that had for decades been well-padded.
His catheter stuck me like a pill vial protruding from his body.
I resented its wedge—entry point for poison
we all hoped his numbers would be high enough to allow him to be hooked into.
Let his body be healthy enough to take it so we can have him with us longer.
He was a complicated person
but in those moments we were desperate for him.

When I got another lump this spring, I saw myself in my father's place
and felt nauseous. And could hear again the rude doctor.
And understood finally
why an old friend—now dead of a car crash—had gotten a double mastectomy
after discovering cancer in one breast.

The lump turned out to be nothing, but still the oncologist in South Dakota seems more worried than my old one in Seattle. You're so young, she says.

You need to keep taking hormone disruptors for as long as possible because, having had a positive node, you're of indeterminate risk.

The one in Seattle had said five years of pills was fine and it wouldn't be too bad to stop earlier.

The change in doctors has made me feel like a ticking time bomb so I'm left to take comfort in the fact that nobody really knows.

I'm the same person and shouldn't get caught up in one doctor's level of optimism versus another's. But a void is a fantastical place for a foothold.