

Cancer Comedy

Would You Like Hormones With That?

MEG TORWL

La poésie et la prose de Meg Torwl étudient l'expérience du cancer à travers des considérations sur le genre, sur la sexualité, sur la sensualité, sur l'infirmité, sur l'âge, sur l'environnement, sur la société et sur les traitements alternatifs.

When you can name what people fear it no longer controls you. When you can laugh about it, you stop being so angry. I go to a support group for young women with cancer. In the world of cancer that's anyone under 50! Who knew I would find myself in my 30s, admiring straight women's breast implants, and celebrating the return of their post-cancer-treatment hormones, periods, and with it their child-making potential. About hormones, did you know someone did this study where they made men wear estrogen patches and then do math, and public speaking? Seriously, this is for real! What do you think happened? They did really badly. Now don't go freaking out on me. I am the last person to imply women can't be astrophysicists or politicians because of hormones, let's not even go there, we know we can do it. We just have our days when it requires a little more effort than others not to snap our co-workers' pencils. (You can take that any way you like.)

Just in case you are wondering, and you are wondering, I still have my breasts. Sometimes I wear my pink breast cancer survivor bracelet. It seems innocent enough at first; so mutants can identify each other. That's what we are you know, our genes mutated. The cells divide and I makes 2, except one day I makes 37 and a half, and then you're in trouble. Something to do with hormones and math apparently. Remain calm, there is no proof hormones give you cancer, but once the math is wrong and it's 37 and a half, the hormones can get involved in kind of exponential algebra, and all havoc breaks loose. You, the others, those with no genetic or environmentally-induced mutations, I am going to call "the un-mutated". So all the while you are running in the opposite direction out of fear, or offering my job to someone else in case I die, or not dating me because I'm bound to die. I can

feel some small satisfaction that I belong to this exclusive club of mutants, and you, don't. I have decided to risk employment or getting a date again, and come out as the young and the mutated!

M.E. The Unglamorous

I thought cancer was going be different. I thought cancer was going be one of those popular diseases, finally; not like the obscure unglamorous disease I already have. The one that no one is going to give bus fare for, never mind "walk for the cure." Walk for the cure, hell this disease doesn't even have a test! The ones like M.E.—which cruelly for the brain challenged is impossible to pronounce and spell—Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. Or, as it's called in North America, and only in North America because everything is just a bit special here, CFIDS that's Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome. The syndrome doctors either don't know about, don't believe exists, have no tests for, nor treatments, and generally have no idea what to do about. Kind of like before MS, or HIV/AIDS and the like, got nailed down. The syndrome I have to print out the World Health Authorities' 1993 definition from the world wide web, and give it to doctors so they will know it is a real illness. In the USA one study found M.E. is eight times more common in women than breast cancer, and 17 times more common than AIDS. We do have our own day, May 12, and our own ribbon. It's blue and not as popular as the pink bracelet, but nevertheless cute in its own right. No one wants to be our allies and wear the blue ribbon though. We can be tired and grumpy, ungrateful, and worst of all, we probably won't get better, and it might not kill us either.

Cancer the Glamorous

I thought when I got one of these more glamorous diseases like cancer, I would get much better attention from the

medical system. But how wrong can you be? As young women, every single one of us was told we were too young to have breast cancer, and yet we do, in our 20s and 30s and younger. Unfortunately, most of what the medical system knows about breast cancer, for example, is applicable to women over 50, since 80 percent of women who get it are over 50. So it came as quite a shock to me that I had to go the cancer agency website and find the protocol for GP's for annual follow-up tests after a breast cancer diagnosis, and give it to the doctor. That I had to point out that the suggested annual mammogram for the six percent of women with breast cancer who are under 40 can miss breast cancer up to 52 percent of the time and demand an ultrasound with 94 percent accuracy rate. I find that's the best way to deal with doctors, don't you? Give them a prepared speech, with statistics, handouts, and weblinks, because between work and illnesses and friends and fun I have so little else to do!

When I "just" had M.E., people had no trouble at all telling me, friends, relatives, strangers, if that happened to them they'd want to be "put out of their misery," you know, euthanized. So comforting and supportive to know that so many felt I would be "better off dead." Now people fall into two main categories, and one special and rare subgroup. Group 1: totally in denial I have cancer, never ever mention it. Group 2: obsessed with my breasts. Not my health, not my well-being, not how I am feeling, not if I have enough to eat, but my breast, the tumor, the treatment, or lack of, as they see it. They don't say I would be better off dead now, they say, "please stay alive" with their scared-by-cancer faces. Now that I have an additional illness to deal with my life is of course so much more fulfilling. The rare subgroup: perfectly fine to mention it or not and very grateful I am.

Many think it sheer lunacy, that I have taken matters into my own hands, done my own research, hours and hours, of all the different treatment options. Made the choices which are right for me. Choices they do not understand, and that makes people, afraid. Not the right choices for them, and that makes people angry, with me. It doesn't matter that I have copies of all my test results and reports, and x-rays. Or that I make qualified professionals explain to me exactly what each one means. It doesn't matter that I know exactly what my cells are doing, and what I am trying to do to them, with the medicines I am taking. It's not over either way, no one can say I am getting better, nor that I am dying. I am living with this illness cancer, and that apparently, is almost, unforgivable.

I have traveled a different journey from some. I went through the heartbreak of illness in my early 20s, of confusion, disbelief, of believing I was going to get *better*, of not getting better. Of believing I *was* going to get better, of not, getting better, of believing I was going to get better, of not, getting better. It went on for years, until finally I had to accept it, and move on, and I did. People ask me what my plans are. I have none really, to

be peaceful, to get better, to live my life how I would if I was going to live, or die. It is all the same in a way, the mindfulness of how you spend your time. Frankly, I am invested in neither outcome, remission or death, but in some middle-ground, which is the present day. That's perfectly okay with me, but not for most others. They want to know what to expect, and when. None of us can ever really know. So, these are my plans: sleep, rest, food, medicine, meditation, art.

Meg Torwol is an interdisciplinary artist, working in Writing/Performance, Arts Advocacy, Radio, Video, New Media. Her work has been published, performed, broadcast, screened, and exhibited, in Canada, USA, UK, and New Zealand. Her writing has been published in Knowing ME, Spin, Eat these Sweet Words, Linescapes, Nuestra Voz, Sinister Wisdom, Magdalena Aotearoa, Sins Invalid and (in) valid. She has a degree in Social Policy, and is a commentator with the NZ Disability Media Collective. She has produced three new media projects and four documentaries, which are distributed by Video Out. Her program dealing with cancer, The Young and the Mutated, was broadcast in 2007. Her work can be found at <<http://integralmedia.blogspot.com>>.

JOANNA M. WESTON

Keep Childhood

unfold the children
lay them carefully
down

iron bodies flat
so they will fit
into the spaces
held for them

slide them onto hangers
in locked cupboards
where moth and rust
cannot corrupt

oh their innocence

Joanna M. Weston has had poetry, reviews, and short stories published in anthologies and journals for twenty-five years. Her poetry book, A Summer Father, was published by Frontenac House of Calgary. This poem was originally published in The Outreach Connection (2003). Reprinted with permission.