

Brave of Worms

Most afternoons in my rural western Massachusetts town, Westover C-5 planes scream low over the houses and yards. If I am on the phone or talking to a visitor I have to stop speaking. There's no way to hear over the wail engines.

If I am outside in the yard or taking a walk when the grey planes, like thunder clouds, pass overhead, I press my fingers into my ears to block the sonic pain.

But once the planes all pass, sometimes one every couple minutes for an hour, or one every half-hour for several hours, I forget about them until the next afternoon when the piercing pitch of their unholy existence, their astonishing defeat of gravity, and the shock of their massive grey cargo bellies crawl across the sky again, so low over the yard they seem to brush the tops of the tallest trees.

I started chemo on the third day of June in 2014. Bi-weekly for eight weeks I underwent a combination Adriamycin and Cytoxan therapy, including what the nurses called the "red devil," a derivative of mustard gas. To control its entrance into the blood stream and avoid burning out my vein, the red poison had to be administered by syringe, injected slowly by a nurse into the chemo port surgically implanted over my left breast. As the cherry-colored liquid emptied from the fat syringe, a metallic taste bloomed in my mouth.

When I had had the chemo port inserted under the skin by my collar bone, the nurses and other medical staff assured me that I would think it was the “best thing ever.” I never thought it was the best thing ever.

Two years later, where the port had been inserted, there is still an angry pink blotch circling bumpy white scar tissue.

The chemo stations at the D’Amour Cancer Center—the Cancer Center of Love—line the outer edges of the Infusion Suite. I am not inventing these names. To be truthful, the hospital building is named for a benefactor whose last name happens to be D’Amour. But that coincidence merely highlights how the language of cancer treatment is otherwise purposefully designed to cushion the blow of diagnosis, of death. A beautifully wrapped present in which boxes are nestled in other boxes, surrounded by tissue paper and bubble wrap, but in the final, inner box is a sleeping cobra.

The cancer lexicon, as has been noted countless times before, often implies warfare. Cancer *invades*. Patients and doctors *fight*. Some *beat* the disease. More than 40,000 women a year lose their *battles* with breast cancer. Throughout treatment, I never felt as though I was fighting anything. I did at times feel helpless, scared, and absolutely alone. I often felt as though I was *submitting to* others, the nurses and phlebotomists who stuck needles in my veins, anesthesiologists who told me to breathe naturally and count backwards, radiologists who patted me reassuringly before punching biopsy needles into my breast, the surgeon who sliced into my breast and armpit. Radiation therapy was the worst. Every day for six weeks I had to lie on a table while three technicians positioned me, measured my breast and wrote on me, even permanently tattooed my skin. They cautioned me to remain motionless, then they left the room,

closing a massive lead door behind them, leaving me prone for a half-hour while a giant metal Cyclops aimed radiation into my breast, armpit, and neck.

Along with the cell-destroying chemicals pumped into my veins, I was given massive doses of anti-nausea medication. Emend was the most expensive with a co-pay of \$150 per tablet. The pills came in individually wrapped pouches. The first time I took one the nurse asked me if I knew how to extract the pill. I thought I did but my hands shook so much that I pushed the pill too hard against the tinfoil covering and the tablet exploded. A fountain of expensive sprinkles spilled over my lap and onto the floor. The nurse retrieved another \$150 pill from the pharmacy and opened it for me, waving away my concern about the expense.

I never vomited from chemo. At times I experienced a low-level nausea, but not enough to take all four of the different anti-nausea medications on offer.

Back at home after the morning's "infusion"—as though I had gone out for a cup of herbal tea—I lay on the couch. By midafternoon the Westover planes were parading overhead.

According to the Westover Air Reserve Base website, the tails of the C-5s are as high as a six-story building. One plane can carry a 74-ton mobile scissors bridge, a convenient portable infrastructure when troops need to cross rivers. Westover had been slated for decommissioning and then 9/11 happened and it came back to life. While the U.S. made plans to invade Afghanistan, the cargo planes screeched across the sky. Equipment was on the move.

I bragged to friends that we knew the invasion of Iraq would happen before George W. Bush's ultimatum to Saddam Hussein. How did we know? The planes came and went in greater numbers, the aeronautical equivalent of marching soldiers.

More recently the passing planes announced the U.S.'s involvement in the Syrian civil war.

Unlike the BBC WWII dramas I like to watch, in which the RAF pilots zoom across the sky to the sound of swelling, heroic orchestra music, the Westover planes in their slower, heavier bodies imply a more mundane, even humdrum side of war. The stagecraft of killing.

In the summer of 2009, one of the C-5A Galaxy jets dropped two of its wheels not too far from my house. Each plane has 28 wheels in its landing gear and each wheel weighs more than 150 pounds. The wheels landed in a wooded area where people hike and hunt, where I have watched dozens of wild turkeys cross a trail in single file and where a moose aimed its gawky body one icy February day as it loped across the road in front of my car, its tall cartoon legs seemingly too spindly to hold up its torso and massive head.

No one was hurt by the landing gear. Sometimes, while I am sitting at my computer or lying in bed, I imagine the weight of 150-pound wheels crashing into my house, collapsing ceilings and floors as easily I can crush tissue paper.

Oncology derives from *onkos*, the Greek word for "burden" or "load" or "mass."

The April that I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I had just finished teaching Kristen Iversen's memoir *Full Body Burden* about growing up next to the secret plutonium trigger

factory in Rocky Flats, Colorado at the height of the Cold War. The book had come across my desk as one of those free copies publishers send professors and, after reading it, I felt as though I could not *not* teach it.

Iversen details her childhood riding horses across the windswept landscape and swimming in the nearby lake, unaware as many were in her town that she breathed air and drank water contaminated by the nuclear weapons plant which had not alerted the public to critical fires and escaped plutonium particles, invisible to the eye and deadly at the smallest amount. I counted on my students, who are often patriotic and apolitical simultaneously, to be unable to ignore the devastating consequences of their government's lies and people's unwillingness to believe scientists and whistleblowers. Iversen chronicles her own undercover research at the plant alongside the undeniable amount of independent evidence showing the environmental and public health dangers. Local farmers discover strange mutations in their animals. Iversen and her siblings are plagued by thyroid-related illnesses. Neighbors, plant workers, and friends are diagnosed with various forms of cancer. Yet it takes decades before the weapons plant is shut down, and then, irony of ironies, the federal government designates the contaminated land a wildlife refuge.

A routine mammogram led to my diagnosis. The day after the x-ray, the radiology clinic left a message on my answering machine asking me to return for more images. I got the message after hours and couldn't call until the next business day. But that night, after I heard the message,