

GIVEN

We all have words we hear as bells, as bellows, as bellwethers.
When these words are spoken, we hear them louder, clearer.
They rouse us from a waking sleep.

You know the words I mean.

Word-bells.

Mostly women have given me my words. *Creek* was given. *God* was given. *Garden* was given. *Margin* was given. My teacher taught me that “all words run along the margins of their secrets.” Rachel Carson called the edge of the sea “the marginal world.”

She loved the crabs that scuttled at the margins.

Several years before her breast cancer diagnosis, Carson wrote, “the little crab alone with the sea became a symbol that stood for life itself—for the delicate, destructible yet incredibly vital force that somehow holds its place amid the harsh realities of the inorganic world.”

The little crab is also cancer’s symbol.

The margin of a cancerous tumor is removed during surgery. When no cancer cells are found at the edge of the tissue, the margin is described as negative. When cancer cells are found at the edge of the tissue, the margin is described as positive.

The margin where ill and well meet.

Dying of uterine cancer, Terry Tempest Williams's mother told her where she could find her journals, though she instructed her daughter to wait until after her death to read them. A few weeks after her mother died, Williams found the journals, but what she didn't find were words. Her mother's journals, shelf after shelf, were blank.

"My Mother's Journals are the power of absence."

"My Mother's Journals are the power of presence."

After being diagnosed with breast cancer, I began reading the texts of other women writing through diagnosis. I discovered that oftentimes these writers chose to write about their illness in letters and journals, which, presumably, they never planned to publish. Sometimes, even in these private writings, references to the writer's cancer were veiled, secondary, marginalized.

Cancer and Breast were given.

I hear these words now and two bells ring as one.

A belling is a welling up of water, as from a spring.

To be made well again, a cancer patient who is also a writer has to gauge the healing that is done by making her illness her subject versus the damage that is done by making her illness her subject. That which cures cancer also causes it.

What is the margin of doubt, the margin of error, the margin where to harm is also to heal?

Shortly after I was diagnosed, my friend Julie sent me Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, which I read as I recovered from surgery.

"I was going to die, if not sooner, then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself," writes Lorde.

But to whom must she speak? The nurse who insisted she wear a prosthesis? The cancer-industry that demanded she follow its protocol? The toxic, racist, misogynistic, homophobic world that didn't want her to survive?

To them she rang the word-bell that she meant the rest of us to overhear—*No*.

No was given.

Lorde rang other words as well.

Loneliness was given.

Companionship was given.

As she tells it, never had she been so lonely nor so accompanied, “floating upon on a sea within a ring of women like warm bubbles keeping me afloat upon the surface of that sea.”

Mostly women have given me my words, and I heard
the books
with all her
beautiful names
ringing
on the shelf.

A few days after Thanksgiving, 1960, Rachel Carson wrote to her friend (possible lover), Dorothy, to tell her that her breast cancer had spread, “I thought a door had been closed last spring, and now it has been opened a little.” She worried mostly about how this opening might slow her work on *Silent Spring*, how it might infringe upon her ability to answer “the sense of urgency...to press on with the things I need to say.”

Toxin is given.

In *Silent Spring*, she kept her distance, writing about how chemicals affect plankton, chickadees, robins, brown trout, whitefish, ladybugs, pirate bugs, and humans, without ever mentioning the cancer she was battling as she rushed to finish the book.

Carson felt the mounting pressure to write about carcinogens.
Carson felt the mounting pressure not to write about her own cancer.

What is the margin of exposure, the margin of safety, the margin at which the toxic substance becomes carcinogenic, genotoxic?

A woman writing about her experiences runs the risk of being discredited.
A woman writing about her cancer worries she might call it toward her.

Like the shifting margins we see on the shore—swash lines, bedforms, drift lines, ripple marks, up and down, up and down the seaboard, fear strays toward the diagnosed and then away.

“Always the edge of the sea remains an elusive and indefinable boundary,” writes Carson.

What if the body is an ocean which, at every tide, covers what it needs to survive?

What if the body is an ocean which, at every tide, recovers what it needs to survive?

Body is given.

Survive is given.

What if the body is boundless/marginless when afloat upon the boundless/marginless waters?

My daughters watch me as I swim out into the Pacific, past the waves, and float, eyes shut.

They dip their toes but do not dare swim in without me watching them.

Women in crisis sometimes address other women (in letters) or themselves (in dairies, journals, notebooks) as protection against a world hostile toward their bodies. Or, they address both.

Friend is given.

They send their message out into the not-always-greatly-hopeful, toward something standing open.

They float.

A margin is open, as is a poem.

“Maybe margins shelter the inapprehensible Imaginary of poetry.”

Maybe a poem is a margin, a margin a poem.

Growing up, my mother often gave me books as gifts: some empty (intended as diaries or journals) some full of words (*Little Women* & *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*), all with inscriptions.

Book was given.

Milk was given.

Word was given.

What did *she* call the empty books?

Were they all-open or all-margin?

In them, I kept

a list of words

I kept

quotations

I kept

quiet

I kept

writing messages

I kept

them close to my heart

& sent them off to wash up, perhaps, on some heartland shore.

What do we call the once-empty book now flooded with words?

*October 22, 1983:
Today I got my period.*

Nothing else is written on the subject, until now:

Finding the green skirt of my Girl Scout uniform turned red with blood, the troop leader called my mother and said, “your daughter became a woman today.”

My mother took me home, soaked my clothes, and put me in the tub, just as any mother of a young girl would.

Dear body,

“Pulse of red on the horizon for the ten minutes after the sun has set.

...the rim of the mountain behind which the sun has just set

like the top of a volcano—”

Each month, on the horizon, the sun always rising, setting, or erupting.

I've mountains of names to climb (Tetons, Nippletop Mountain, Tetas, Mammalles, Maiden's Pap, Squaw's Tits) before I find

the other side

open wide
thine gaia.

Historically, the letter, the journal, the diary, were genres available to women writers when other genres were denied.

Sometimes, for women, writing letters and keeping written records of daily activities was not only allowed, but required.

Mormon women, Terry Tempest Williams tells us, were expected to keep a journal.

“My Mother’s Journals are an act of defiance.”

Susan Dickinson, Emily Dickinson’s sister-in-law-friend-beloved- co-creator-of-“early-girl-hood-intimacy-”writer-in-her-own-right-constant-correspondent-reader, was the first person to refer to Emily’s letters as “letter-poems.”

Sometimes women disguise journals as letters, letters as journals, poems as journals, journals as poems, letters as poems, poems as letters.

Sometimes disguised as poems, letters, journals,

women open margins out in all directions

until the text is all margin, all monstrous.

Monstrous because sender-recipient, self-other, are intimate.

Monstrous because we don’t know what to call *it*.

“My Mother’s Journals are letters never written.”

Letters are journals never kept.

Journals are letters never sent.
Diaries are days spent
in/with words at the helm
out / over bobbing up and down.

“When I got your letter it looked like a letter I had written to myself without remembering,” writes Bernadette Mayer in *The Desire of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*.

This way of (not) remembering, of lettering, of reading/writing to one(another)self(each)other is the shadowside, the giftside of being a body in/without margins.

My friend Laynie wrote *The Desire of Letters* as an homage to Mayer, because “you taught me to be presently present”

“So please, partake now and be always well,” writes Laynie to Bernadette, writes Bernadette to someone not named.

This, then, is awash
a wash, the well
so many women
held me
in/ from.

Be always well.
Well is given.

I have almost always referred to those once-empty-books-now-flooded-with-words as “notebooks.”

Poems are notes that precede and exceed long before they recede to reside in a book that opens to hold them, all margin.

Full of disclosures and failures, disjointed and processual, most of my notebooks are painful to read.

But all necessary.

In a 2008 notebook, during a pregnancy that I was told might be both cancerous and unviable, I copied the following quote from the beginning and end of “The Uncut Self:”

“full circle, not based on rectilinear frame of reference of a painting, mirror, house, or book, and neither ‘inside’ nor ‘outside’ but according to the single surface of a Mobius strip... Topologically the self has no homuncular inner self but comes”

This, written collaboratively by a mother and son who began and ended their essay mid-sentence, opening “full circle” as if to draw the whole world to the self, the whole self to the world, the essay between being a new way of seeing the self as something other than independent and singular.

When I copied the quote, joining the severed beginning and end without referencing the essay between, I must have wondered if it was time to reconsider what a body might be.

It took me nearly three years to obtain an image of my cancerous breast.

Though the breast belonged to me, the image itself was not, I learned, my property.

Nothing looked threatening, instead the tumor looked like an oyster mushroom and the veins, its accompanying hyphae.

My mycelium.

Every three months when new images are created, the mushroom is still gone.

But what is wellness anyway?

To be in the world, and of it?

Or, does wellness mean to be
“in the beached margin of the sea,”
where we are not entirely
ourselves, but microbial, autopoietic,
grassleafy, sea kale
polygenomic,
a collection of secrets
sent or kept
a letterjournal diarynotebook
is a volcano. Is
a kingdom of cinders.
Is a lover.
Is a poem.
Is the recipient internal
or external, or both?
Is a reaching, regardless and
once one is known, one knows in which ways one is alone and
once one is alone, one knows in which ways one is known and
Aby gave me a poem:

*Perhaps we'll open the day's doors.
And then we shall enter the unknown.*

Given is given.