

# Mary Cappello

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an excerpt of

## *Getting the News: A Signer among Signs*

All this hearing and being heard takes time . . .

—Lyn Hejinian, *A Border Comedy*

AT first there were only looks and very few words. I didn't even have a name, so I asked her *her* name, assuming that if I called her by her name, *I* might begin to have one.

"She" was the ultrasound technician who was examining an image of the inner contours of my breast on a screen. Before I met her, there had been a mammography technician who called me back into her room in the hope of gaining a better purchase on the mystery, of getting the machine to hone in, to bore down into, to see. Behind the scenes, I knew, there was also a radiologist, invisible as Oz's wizard; she was planted somewhere, in an inner sanctum, reading. She was neither chewing gum nor drinking coffee in my mind's eye; she wasn't leafing through the empty paragraphs of a waiting room's magazines, she was *reading*—undistracted, I hoped, by her love life, the pain in her left foot that was requiring an undue emphasis on the right, the impending visit from her estranged daughter, the whiff of a near nightmare she'd had the night before, the matter of her refrigerator seemingly on the fritz with the dinner party upcoming, or the unsettling-because-no-longer-disturbing news of that morning's death toll from the war in Iraq.

Mammograms are painfully unpleasant, but at least you *stand* for them. In the ultrasound room you are supine—which in medical situations, as far as I'm concerned, is never good. Rather than look at the screen, I watched the ultrasound technician watching. I tried to read her face. It was peering, and at a certain point became more alert, the way a scuba diver's might when he finds the endangered anemone he's in search of. But this nearly jubilant alert-

ness turned almost immediately into its opposite: the nameless woman's face turned—there is only one word for it—grave. She gave me her face, her sad face, and said, “You stay right here while I show this to the doctor.”

The doctor and the technician returned together, the wizard revealing herself to be buxom and long-nosed, a kind of Wallace and Gromit figure with a British accent—not a mainland accent but the tonally differentiated purl of someone reared in a colony. (My guess: South Africa or New Zealand.) She neither asked me my name nor greeted me, but bustled all aflutter toward the screen as she took the matter literally into her hands. She began to wield the ultrasound wand as if to suggest that if she did this herself, she'd see something different and better than the technician had. The doctor didn't quite know how to angle the instrument, so the technician helped her by saying, “Do you see the shadow, and the peaks?” These words called to mind a painting by Caspar David Friedrich.

The doctor then looked at me as though I were an out-of-focus text and she was without her reading glasses. “Yes, you need to arrange to have a biopsy. This is concerning,” she said. And I said, “But I'm leaving town tomorrow; I'm a writer, and I have a new book just out, and I'm giving a series of readings from it beginning in California.” She looked at me sadly and said, “You'll have to figure something out.” Then she left the room.

“What's your name?” I said to the technician.

“Joan,” she said, and I said, “Joan, my name is Mary. Can you tell me something about what you're seeing?” She used the doctor's word—“Well, it's concerning”—and then she said, “It's suspicious.” The euphemisms were coming thick and fast, and then her face turned grave again, and I thought she was going to say, “It's your cat, your little cat with the graceful lilt and upturned tail, something fell on your cat and smothered her, and well, she's dead,” but what she said was—moving her head to one side as though she knew I would want to punch it—“It's definitely not a cyst.”

“So what does that mean?” I asked.

“It means it's a mass. It's concerning.”

I'm not sure at what point I moved from lying down to sitting up, but I remember saying to Joan, as though I didn't have to think about it, the words coming so naturally, “I guess it's my turn.” Joan gasped a little, my words annoying her, and she addressed me as though I were saying something self-punishing or inappropriately not nice about myself.

“Don't say that!” she said, still with the long face.

So I explained, because Joan clearly wasn't understanding me.

I said, "I'm not saying I'm going to die, but every other woman I know has cancer, so I'm just saying I guess it's my turn. I mean why *shouldn't* I have it?" And hearing myself say this I cried a little, but not for long because I knew I had to gather my "real" clothes now from their locker, and I didn't want to disturb the other women in the waiting room; I didn't want them to know what I had been told about myself, so I quickly wiped my tears.

Now Joan offered help: she told me they were going to call my gynecologist and that maybe the biopsy could be performed that afternoon.

"So this is him, right, Doctor Timothy Speers?" she asked, looking at a chart, and I corrected her: "No, it's Doctor Beaumont, René Beaumont." Joan showed me the form with the wrong name on it, and I noticed that the name of the radiologist was wrong, too, because I'd just met the buxom woman with the long nose and I don't think her name was James L. Fraser, MD. Maybe this world was like marriage: all the female doctors had to take on the names of their male peers.

I was entering a world in which names didn't matter, nor words, when both were everything to me.

I'm amazed by how my mind never slows down, how it gathers together in a flash multiple points of compatible referents as a means of making sense of things. Or maybe that is only something it's doing now, confronted as it appears to be by the c-word: not the dirty word for woman, nor the kiddy name for shit, but the rampant and yet still tabooed emblem for a disease entity that scrabbles sideways like its namesake among crustaceans and hosts patterns much less wondrous than fractals. I'm sure that through the right set of eyes something marvelous must lurk inside a c-cell, not only something horrifying.

Joan had cut a path through my gynecologist's waiting room upstairs, and within an hour I was seeing Doctor Beaumont, but with a different sense than I had ever felt before: suddenly I was in love with my gynecologist for the way she stood for someone I had known and in whose care I'd been, however routine that was, and intermittent. She introduced me to a word other than *mass*.

"So it's not a cyst," I said, and she said, "The thing about it is that it's *solid*. Ultrasound is very good at telling the difference. And it could be a kind of fibrous mass that women get, but the thing that is concerning is that its edges are ragged, where the edges of most benign tumors are smooth." Prior

to trusting me with such an important distinction, she had complimented me on finding the lump because she found it hard to feel as she examined me, and had shared her sense of hopefulness that it was small.

“Would that this too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew.” Literary references immediately entered my mind. I felt like reciting Hamlet’s words, but checked myself. Alice James’s description of the lump in her breast also occurred to me, and Susan Sontag—almost as though her impeccably wise face were nearby—whispered to me a line from *Illness as Metaphor* about illness depositing a person onto “an island of difference.” (I heard this line even though nothing about a potential breast c- diagnosis made me feel “distinct.” It’s really utterly banal.)

My mind, so as not to spin off course, tries to interpret the situation it finds itself in with metaphors. Without metaphors, I’m hopelessly alone. *With* metaphors, I’m *like*, I’m *kin*. . . .