

On being a patient

## Poems

Mary May Robertson

### A doctor's journey through cancer

Mary Robertson has undertaken two major journeys in life: one as a doctor, and one as a patient. She graduated from university and medical school in Cape Town, South Africa, but has spent the majority of her medical career in London. While a doctor, she has travelled extensively, including being ship's doctor on a yacht crossing the Atlantic, and then on a square rigger, which was circumnavigating. She is a Professor of Neuropsychiatry; she is also an international authority on Tourette's syndrome. She has coauthored three books, coedited two, and has over 200 publications in medical journals. She enjoys opera, tai chi, and photography. She writes poetry on specific journeys. In 2002 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. This has been her latest journey.

#### CHEMO AFTERMATH

I'm tired and yet  
I am so restless,  
I lie in bed but  
My mind jumps around like a cricket  
Bouncing on and off the wall.  
One task at time to do:  
Pills, poetry, phone,  
Mouthwash, food.  
Occasionally I jump out of bed to  
Type a letter  
Send an email



Get some food  
I go back to bed tired and shaking  
Feeling nauseous  
And  
Exhausted.  
My mind never stops.  
I do not think it is true akathisia  
But some of it is a side effect and  
An internal discomfort  
Which never goes.  
Will it ever go?  
(11 January 2003)

#### BALDLOCKS

Baldlocks is what John called me  
After my hair was shaved  
It's cold being bald  
It's prickly being bald  
It's funny being bald  
It's peculiar being bald  
The curly veins protrude from my scalp  
It is not a pretty sight  
I wished I had taken a camera  
To the hairdressers  
Half way through the shave  
I had a Mohican look  
My eye-brows are still there  
Imagine I used to pluck them  
Or have them waxed  
What would my Touretters say?  
John's hair is on its way!  
Baldness is much better than  
Tedious incipient alopecia  
With irritating bits of hair everywhere  
On reflection in China  
Buddha never had hair  
But being bald is still peculiar and odd  
For me.  
(January 2003)

#### SEPTICAEMIA

My God!  
I remember virtually nothing  
Of that Tuesday,  
Or indeed the day before.  
I woke with knives and blades and  
swords  
Striking at my throat.  
I had rigors  
Shivering with teeth chattering.  
I phoned our GP  
He'd organise the ambulance.  
Rachel strapped me onto the ambulance  
stretcher.  
John was there too.  
I don't remember the journey:  
I understand blue lights flashed.

I recall only John at my side,  
Also the junior doctor at the end of my  
bed  
And Phillipa visiting in the evening.  
My God!  
Two days of my life I hardly remember!  
I had three drips:  
Intravenous fluids, intravenous antibio-  
tics  
Subcutaneous anti-emetics into my left  
thigh.  
I had blood taken often.  
I was just like a pincushion.  
I had a drip in tissues  
And a nasty thrombophlebitis.  
I survived  
Thank God!  
(Memories of February 2003)

#### COCOON

My life now seems safe only in  
Comfortable, concentric, circles of calm  
cocoons.  
My cocoon is  
Warm  
Quiet  
Peaceful  
Protective.  
Only I know one cocoon:  
My very private cocoon.  
The cocoon  
Negates cancer  
And lives for  
The future.  
Like a silk worm  
I will grow out of my cocoons.  
And the cancer  
Will die  
Forever.

#### HOSPITALS

Hospitals are horrible.  
The congested coughing of  
Bronchitic beings in the  
Chest clinic,  
Intruding images of  
Septic purulent sputum  
Heading for the path lab.

I puff into the spirometer  
"Come on, blow blow", says the nurse  
They weighed me in my boots.  
I'm 9 1/2 naked I protest.  
My oxygen saturation is 98%  
Not bad for me with flu.  
Thank God  
There are no samples from me for the  
path lab.

The breast clinic  
Conjures up cancer, but  
At UCLH I feel we're all a family so it's  
better.  
My right breast has cancer  
Consequently the chemo for months.  
A small lump in my left breast  
An FNA to be safe, and  
My left breast cells go to the path lab.

The phlebotomist forages for  
A distended vein  
“Pump your fist please”!  
My poor veins are pincushions  
From regular ravages of needles.  
Yes, at last blood!  
My deep red blood heads  
For the path lab.

Kathleen Ferrier, a deceased singer, is  
the name of my ward  
The ambience is good, kind and quiet,  
One man in the open ward  
Vomits, pukes and sounds distressed  
Most patients look ill—no! All patients  
*ARE* ill  
Coping with their diagnosis of cancer  
Porters wheel patients to radiotherapy,  
Not yet to the path lab.

In radiotherapy one feels like a blob of  
body on a slab of a bed.  
Bright neon lights, red and green laser  
lights shine and  
Technology is at its height.  
Little humanity pervades as the thera-  
pists cite  
Numbers which line me up with the  
LINAC technology and  
Aim the frightening radiation onto my  
right breast.  
I pray all future cells of mine will be  
normal in the path lab.

Hospitals however were wonderful  
when I’m Consultant and Prof too  
My confidence inspires others as I teach  
my students  
My patients react to my kindness, I give  
of my best  
I know many of the staff and my car has  
its place.  
Clinics, ward rounds, teaching, exams  
and admin  
I know the place and feel at home—I’ve  
been there 16 years mind-you,  
I pray that I return to my former self

And that not too much of Me goes to  
the path lab.  
(2 May 2003 and 28 August 2003)

### MY RIGHT BREAST

My right breast was 54 and well  
As the cold set in, chills all around  
On 27th November a lump was found  
To be cancer.

I hated it for many months  
And I cared not my breast to touch  
As I abhorred the cancer so much,  
I hated the cancer.

My body was battered by 8 chemo  
sessions  
From time to time I was very ill  
Septicaemia tried me to kill,  
But I survived.

On 30th June my surgeon took  
The upper quarter of my breast away  
But the nipple and surrounds were  
allowed to stay  
I liked my small breast.

I liked the breast  
And prayed I’d need no more removed  
I thought the nodes were also involved  
I was so scared.

On Friday 4th July the USA celebrated  
Independence Day  
My surgeon told me that the cancer was  
cleared from my breast  
The 17 nodes were clear and blessed; Oh  
happy breast!  
I had my independence from cancer.  
(4 July 2003, UCLH, Middlesex  
Hospital)

### SLEEP 11

Sleep is peaceful and  
Lazy with the sun, grass, butterflies,  
cows and  
Easy living down on the Itchin and  
Easy living in the countryside and at  
Peace with oneself  
(27 July 2003, Hampshire)

### SUMMER HAIR

After total chemo alopecia  
My hair grew into a  
Cool, cropped style.  
I braved Sainsbury’s,  
Embarrassed.  
However, nobody noticed me.  
I, on the other hand,  
Saw a woman with pink hair,  
Another with blue hair,  
Another with streaked red hair,  
Yet another with long blonde dyed  
dreadlocks,  
And another with a shock of a tomato  
red twelve inch pony tail,  
An Afro-Caribbean with tightly braided  
long red and black hair,  
As well as another with sleek stylish  
spiky grey and black hair,  
And several male  
Beckham wannabee lookalikes.  
A woman with black hair with stripes of  
blue, turquoise and  
Red popped out of her crash helmet.  
A man with long multicoloured dread-  
locks, light blue,  
Mauve and crimson, spoke with an  
American accent.  
Soon I was no longer self-conscious.  
Admirers told me that I (my hair) was  
Chic, cool, trendy, funky!  
In the winter my bald head was cold.  
In this hot summer, my hair feels and  
looks “cool”,  
I’m not sweating like those with long  
hair.  
I like my new look.  
Many, friends and colleagues suggest I  
adopt the new hairstyle—Cool!  
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