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publication date: Oct. 6, 2017

Guest Editorial

The Write Treatment; when a writing workshop is a part of cancer treatment



By Emily Rubin
Novelist

Illustrations by Laura Rader

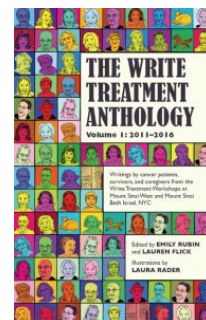
I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008 and underwent treatment until 2010 at Beth Israel Hospital, now Mount Sinai, in New York. A year after finishing treatment I was thrilled to find out that my novel, *Stalina* (https://www.amazon.com/Stalina-Emily-Rubin-ebook/dp/Bo03WJRONW/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1507150802&sr=1-1&keywords=Stalina), was a winner of the Amazon Debut Novel Award Contest.

The prize was a publishing contract. My cancer diagnosis was life changing, but so was becoming a published author. Soon after receiving the wonderful news about my novel, I found signs of a possible relapse of the cancer. Fortunately, tests came back negative. The angst I experienced was an acknowledgment that cancer would always be part of my psyche, if not my body. I wanted to find a constructive way to face these anxieties. I wanted to find a way to give back to the community of patients, doctors and nurses, friends, colleagues, and family who supported me throughout my cancer journey.

With my writing life back on track after the publication of the novel, I thought a writing workshop could be a viable way for people affected by cancer to process, think, and write about their experiences. Even more importantly I felt it could be a way for people to take a break from the rigors of treatment and write from of the fullness of life through prose and poetry.

In 2011 I approached the social work team at Mount Sinai Beth Israel Hospital with the idea of running creative writing workshops for cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers.

“Great idea. Go for it!” the social work team said.



At the weekly workshops, with writing prompts, visuals, and literary quotes, we get together to write and read our work. The participants are welcome to explore the experience of diagnosis and treatment, which they do, but many use the time to take a much-needed furlough from cancer, and in each case the imagination takes flight. With eyes squinting, brows furrowed, and pervasive sighs, the pens begin to glide across the blank pages. It is thrilling to see the imaginings percolate so quickly. Eager and impatient to share, everyone reads back from the penned pages that span the literary landscape.

Since that time the workshops have become an integral part of Mount Sinai's services. Last year more than 300 participants attended the 60-plus workshops.

The Write Treatment Anthology Volume I: 2011-2016

(https://www.amazon.com/dp/0692776184/ref=cm_sw_r_cp_ep_dp_2IeRzbo1V6W7A) is a collection of literature written by cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers who have participated in the Write Treatment Creative Writing and Journaling Workshops at Mount Sinai Hospitals in New York.

The 23 writers included in the anthology have shown a fierce commitment to the process, coming during trying times in treatment, and even during New York blizzards. They have been fearless in acknowledging and addressing their experiences and the unknown—reflecting on Grace Paley's words, "we write about what we don't know about what we know." Their enthusiasm is here in the array of subjects and down-to-the-bone honesty throughout the stories and poems you will encounter.

Taking chances, making hard choices, being fierce and vulnerable, and embracing humor are all part of life with cancer, and, as we have discovered in the workshops, essential to writing. I have seen the Write Treatment Workshops grow from a gathering of people affected by cancer into a community of dedicated writers.

The Anthology is a tribute to the commitment of these writers. I have excerpted their work as accompaniment to this column.

Whether memoir, fiction, or poetry, risk-taking is evident in the fierce, funny, touching, and sometimes risqué musings. That the writing is artful and cathartic is not surprising. Laughter, tears, and prickling energy fill the room, and after two hours we part feeling enervated and inspired. This is the magic, joy, and solace of writing in a group. The writers are as diverse as passengers on any NYC subway or bus—these are the voices of a community filled with empathy and words unencumbered. These stories and poems are written by a group willing to experiment and explore in times of trouble the worlds within and without.

Thanks go to Dennis Paoli of the Heidi Paoli Fund, whose support for the workshops and anthology made this book possible. I am grateful to the dedicated and energetic social-work staff of Mount Sinai Beth Israel and Mount Sinai West: Alison Snow, Lori Schwartz, Nancy Borque, and Sandy Lansinger, for their enthusiasm and continued administrative and moral support for the workshops.

Emily Rubin is a novelist living in New York. Sales of The Write Treatment anthology will help fund the workshops and a percentage will be donated to a cancer support organization. Additional information is posted here (<http://www.emilyrubin.net>).

Email: rubin.emily@gmail.com (<mailto:rubin.emily@gmail.com>)

The next reading will be at Mount. Sinai West (<http://inside.mountsinai.org/blog/new-book-celebrates-cancer-patients-poetry-and-prose/>) on October 23rd at 5:30p in the 14th floor Boardroom. 1000 10th Ave, NYC. Please contact lori.schwartz@mountsinai.org (<mailto:lori.schwartz@mountsinai.org>) for details.

Excerpts from the Write Treatment Anthology:

Wiggle Room



By Melody Johnson

My hematoma
Pulses breathes waltzes with me
Even looks away

From husbands who curse
About the costs of living
And now this cancer?

Her gray eye tearing
Pus and fuss of memories
Told to remain shut!

A hole in my heart
That he did not cause this time,
This one will heal faster.

The Boy in the Striped Tee Shirt



By Jacqueline Johnson

One autumn day I was walking along the city streets with my camera in hand. There was no plan of photographing anything or anyone in particular. I noticed a young boy, maybe preadolescent, playing with some other boys about the same age. He had a face that transcended time, and he seemed to represent generations of young African American males.

I was suddenly aware of the variation of horizontal stripes on his shirt, which contrasted with the vertical iron bars on the fence he had posed himself against. Judging by the chain tightly wrapped around the gate entrance and locked shut with a padlock securely in place, the owner of the property obviously wanted the assurance of keeping trespassers out and safety within. There was something soft and innocent in his face.

Our eyes had met, and I approached him to ask if he would oblige me by posing for a picture. He agreed and maintained his pose. As I looked into the lens of the camera to shoot the picture, so much about history rang out, and yet I was intuitively aware of his story. As I studied his face, his eyes looking directly into the camera gave the impression that there was not an object between us. There was a reflection of wisdom and contentment exuding from them. The slight smile seemed to express humble self-confidence. The right hand posed over his head holding onto a cold metal fence post seemed to signify he had a grasp on his life. He was making a statement that he was in front of the bars, not behind them. There were no chains shackled around his hands and feet but around the gate.

His wry smile said, "I am a conqueror."

Consequently, his pose reminded me of an action hero. I pictured this champion, who was reaching behind to pull forth an arrow from a quiver to be placed in a bow or for a shield slung low across his back. Whatever it was he was reaching for, he had the appearance of a warrior ready for anything, ready for the future. He had put the cold, unfeeling, and unrelenting oppressors behind him and was not at all intimidated by anyone or anything, and he allowed me to record it all through my steady lens.

No One Imagined



By Peggy Liegel

No one imagined the storm would be that bad—

Four at the table
Only three the next day,
The table floating away.

No one imagined the storm would be that severe—

The night the lights went out

And it stayed that way.

The burnt board with the nail and the color red

Ripped right through

Stuck on the sand-cemented beach.

It was a choice

To go to sleep or to wake up

After storm had passed.

Waking up, the fear going into it
After eyes see first

The nothing that is there.

Forgiven by him,

Healing took long.

Forgiving him, too,

I felt love.

It Was No Accident It Was an Accident



By Connie Perry

It was no accident that it was an accident. A particularly timed collision of personalities needing to express themselves at a time of great need in their lives. A gathering of souls collected to write.

The connecting medical threads are for some, dramatic, heightened, immediate, and all have a measured focused battle toward being whole. Each person turning pain shards into word gems, wisdom from each individual champion, which they impart on the collective group.

His story is uplifting. Her story is amazing. We have all endured. He'll rally, I hope. While, she might come undone.

My experience is vastly different from the others, but the shared pen slash-and-bare-all determination connects us to this gathering of humanity.

We deliver the story of our health, a fiercely regarded commodity, in simple yet true prose. We possess our story. We delve into the giant maw of the illness industry by laying down our ink-stained description of anxiety. Sometimes we channel our anger. Can we trust our experiences will be measured against the passing of time?

Some of us will bury our memories with this pen and paper.

We'll slog through to the other side of medical jargon, jotting down impersonal confusing procedures. We'll make glib mention of jokes here and there. Altered states of dark humor offered up for shock value.

Dare we compare notes? I can't handle your distress. Our pens climb us to a rallying cry of: enough. We breathe along the margins. Being prompted to remember details means being delivered back to immediate and deep distractional fog.

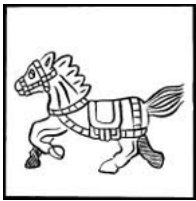
Pen strokes to obliterate some fears.

Black and blue only from the ink flow now. Bruised flesh left behind as good health checkups flounce upon the steady march of time.

Deliver news. Reclamation of self, coming five pages in.

It is no accident that it was an accident that a writers group formed in a cancer ward.

All in a Day's Work



By Lara Stein

"Horrible, isn't it?" says the genetic counselor, striding down a labyrinthine hallway, her back to me. "Horrible" comes out as "harrable," strangled by a New York accent and attitude, the indignities of urban life piling up like a personal affront. Something is always "harrable" in the city. She ushers me into her office and shuts the door.

She is referring to the weather, apparently—the rising mercury, the summer heat index—that is horrible, not the personal inferno; I've been sweating the past two days. I am thirty-six, and I have a three-year-old child. I can measure the time since my cancer diagnosis in hours—less than forty-eight.

My newly shell-shocked world is the elephant in the room, never referenced during our two-hour counseling session. We are in a suite seven floors up from the sweltering pavement; the office is perfectly climate controlled.

Clean Tupperware litters her desk, the detritus of a routine day, fork-fuls of salad for lunch followed by spoon-feeding statistics all after-noon—flipping charts, comparing prognoses of patients with BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations, floating clinical terms like "chemotherapy" and "prophylactic hysterectomy." Each situation is hypothetical; my coin toss is still up in the air.

I'm searching for a thread I can weave from the life I once knew to this strange new world, when I remember having genetic testing while pregnant with my son. It turned up no Tay Sachs, no mysteriously named maple syrup urine disease. The memory is oddly comforting, until the counselor, a new mother herself, leans forward and whispers in a conspiratorial voice, "You know, BRCA mutations have no bearing on childhood cancers."

In her single unscripted moment, she unwittingly twists the knife, introducing a horror far greater than a hypothetical hysterectomy. Her attempt at mother-to-mother understanding is genuine, a real stab at human connection that our counseling session lacked. She reaches out as a mother, an experience we share in common, but she can't connect as a cancer patient. We are on opposite sides of the same horrible desk.

Lightning Bolts



By Caroline Marie Sun

Lightning strikes once—a strange occurrence: shocking, surprising, out of the blue. We talk about it like it is rare and unique, but it happens all the time, all around the planet, thousands of times a day. And yet to see a bolt do it right in front of you, when you cannot predict it, cannot really imagine it, and then it just happens.

The closer it is, the more powerful and instantaneous the rumble that reverberates over you, through you, shaking the foundations of your chest and stomach. Blinding you with sight and deafening sound. But then it is gone. It moves on from where you are standing, or sitting, or staring, or looking. Another flash and rumble, further away, moving in another space and time, receding from you. Slowly it heads into the distance and then is seen and heard no more. But lightning can and does strike twice and sometimes more than even that.

Now it is a different story. It is aiming at you; it will not let you go this time. It is waiting in the darkness undercover, waiting for the moment to strike again. This time it is aiming at your vitals. You cannot see or hear it coming, but you feel it. You know something is not right, something is about to knock you down again. You hope, against hope, that this storm will pass over quickly, leaving nothing but distant echoes and shimmers of light behind. But we humans have harnessed the power of those bolts in CAT scans, MRIs, and PET scans. Now we train those powers on our fragile, moist, vulnerable selves, turn the beams on, and see what sparks fly. Another turn of the circle in the “doughnut-shaped” machines seals my fate. Lightning has struck me again—both where it hit before and also in a new location, shattering my lower spine with fracture, fatigue, and searing pain. Now I need the painkillers and steroids for real: to be able to sit, to bend and tie my shoe, to roll into and out of the bed, to try to wash my feet in the shower.

Lightning knows no mercy. She strikes with precision and ruthlessness. Her skill is almost surgical, and yet catastrophic in her damage. I am numb with this new onslaught—hating the universe for hitting me down again when I was just starting to feel that things were looking up, alternating with a sense of doom and a sense that there is nothing I can do as I am once again carried along, helplessly, on a sea of chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery.

Where is my agency in all this? Where are my thunderbolts? Oh that I had a quiver full of them like the Greek god Zeus that I could grab and hurl at the demons that now beset me. I need Hephaestus to smith them out for me with his band of mighty Cyclops—electric blue-and-pink bolts to counteract and heal the damage that these new blasts have done to me. Oh Prometheus, bring them gently to me with a bow of gold that I might take sure and steady aim.

If Picasso Was My Plastic Surgeon



By Kristin Westbrook

Missing pieces, torn apart.

Deconstructed.

A profile.

Plump, open lips.

One tooth overlaps the other.

Large tears spill down the left side of the face,

Pouring out of green eyes.

Lashes burned away.

Heart flattened.

Body pulled apart.

Dissected.

Removed.

Cut up negative space.

Long crooked, blood red semi-circle line across the belly.

Navel new.

Borrowing from Peter to pay Paul.

Missing breast sculpted and reformed.

Scarred.

A thin circular line annotates the missing nipple like a proofreader's mark.

The torso looks like a smile and a wink.

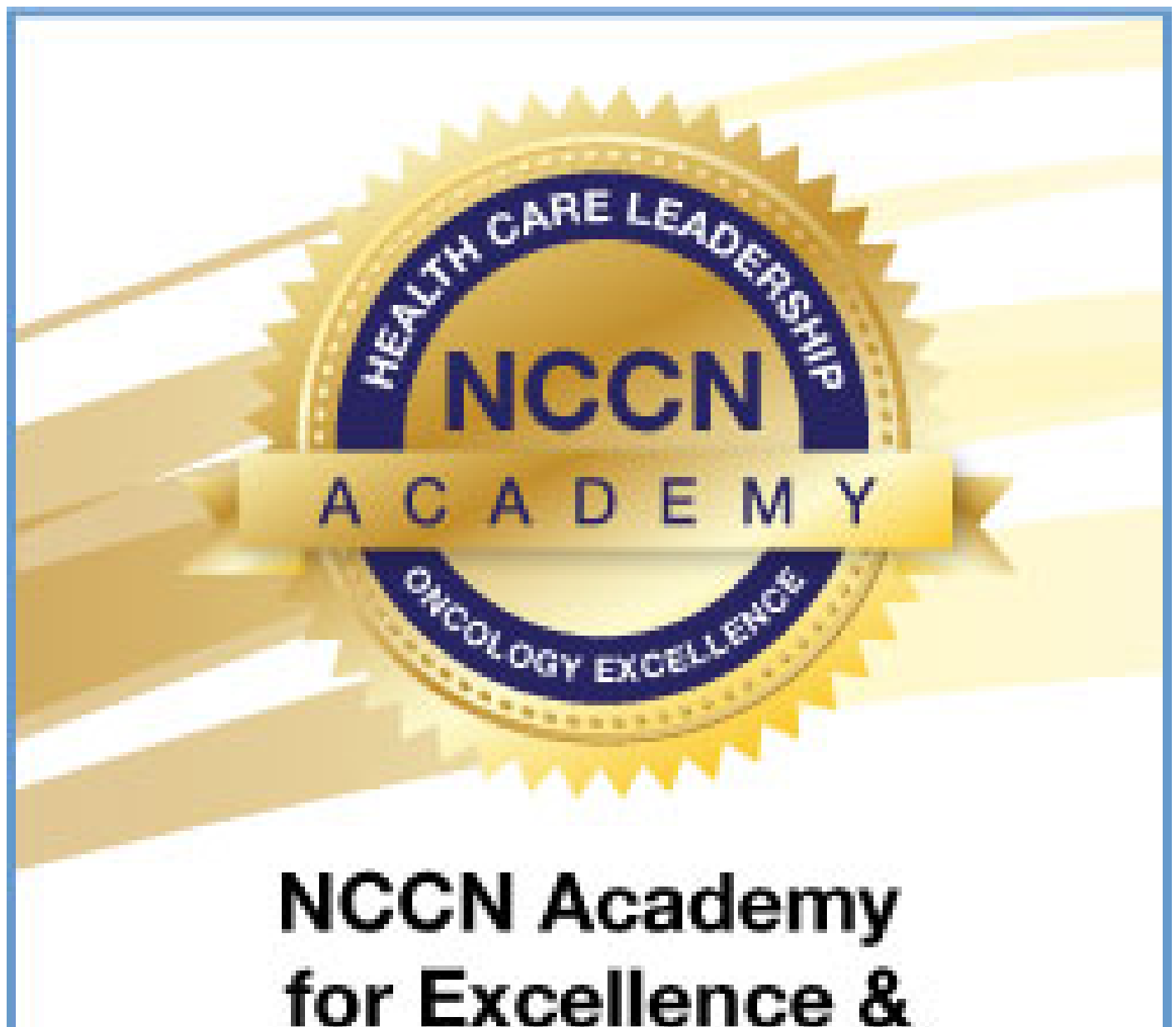
A deep dark hole left where she used to be.

A funky-up tattered construction paper collage, colors faded.

Pictured in black and white.

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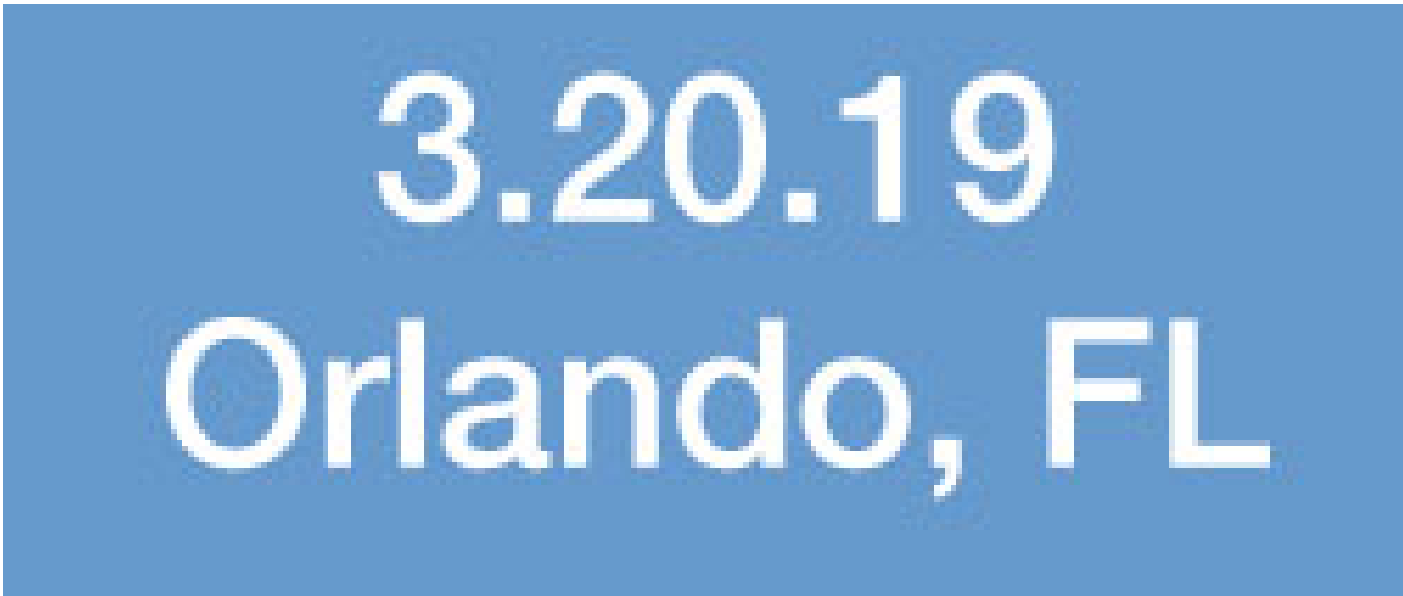
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