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From Surreality to Surreality

On Nancy K. Miller's Cancer Collages

Introduced by Tahneer Oksman

In December 2011, Nancy K. Miller, a memoirist and scholar who has spent years investigating, among other things, how people write about their lives, was diagnosed with stage 3B lung cancer. Her 2014 article, “The Trauma of Diagnosis: Picturing Cancer in Graphic Memoir,” is an examination of graphic memoirs about cancer, incorporating, in first-person prose, discussions of her own diagnosis and its aftermath. She explains how soon after learning about it, “I found myself unexpectedly attracted to drawing, or rather cartoon collage, as I think of it, in order to deal with my shock and rage.”¹ Many of these images, which can be seen on her blog, *My Multifocal Life*, accompanied by equally candid and evocative “diary” entries, are startlingly funny.² They also simultaneously conjure up those painful emotions—shock, rage, confusion, distress, terror—that inevitably arise for those living with cancer.

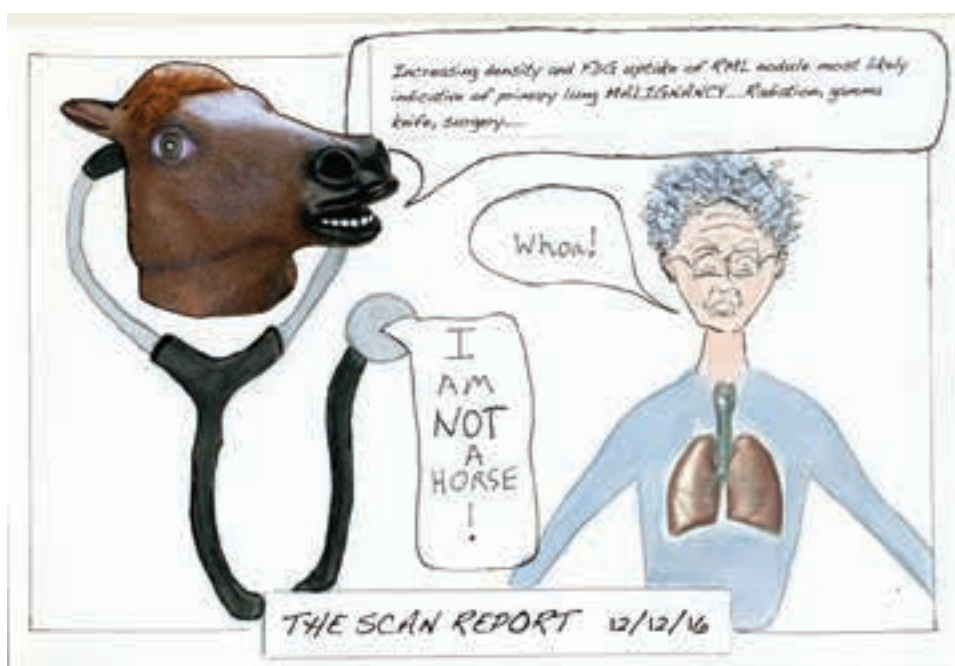
Scrolling through the cartoon collages, it feels, in fact, that the unexpected humor is an inevitable reaction to those often-violent experiences of bodily and psychic woundedness as anything else. In an image dated December 12, 2016, “The Scan Report,” Miller pictures a simple cartoon drawing of her avatar, wearing a grayish top, whose smooth watercolor wash is overlaid by a startlingly corporeal medical illustration: a pair of lungs settled in the middle of the chest, with the details of trachea and bronchi also visible (fig. 8).³

The photographic cutout, which punctures an otherwise simplistic drawing of a torso with arms, is colored brown and black. This chromatic scheme notably

1. Nancy K. Miller, “The Trauma of Diagnosis: Picturing Cancer in Graphic Memoir,” *Configurations* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 211.

2. Nancy K. Miller, *My Multifocal Life*. Accessed May 2, 2019, at nancykmiller.com.

3. Miller, *My Multifocal Life*.



8. Nancy K. Miller, “12/14/16”/“Scan Report,” from *Did You Smoke*. Unpublished (2016). © Nancy K. Miller.

contrasts with the usual bubble-gum or flesh-colored lungs featured in posters and textbooks displaying such internal organs. A single, simple thought bubble emerges from her avatar’s head, the dark glasses and shock of curly gray hair familiar to anyone who has tracked this character before on her cancer journey. “Whoa!” she utters, and beside her we see the object of her exclamation. In another unexpected juxtaposition, a matching-brown photographic cutout of a horse’s head floats in space, a black-and-gray stethoscope—sharp and inorganic but oddly mirroring the patient’s granular tubes, pictured inside her lungs—dangles where a neck and body would otherwise be found.

“I am not a horse!” Another simple word bubble is visible, but this one is rectangular rather than rounded and emerges from the round chest-piece part of the stethoscope, its own separate mouthpiece. The words jar; the patient is being reprimanded here for vocalizing her distress in response to the doctor’s complicated and confusing delivery of the news of her scan report (his words are pictured at the very top of the image). Her utterance is, perhaps, too vernacular, too billowing, too *intimate* for this sterile doctor figure who is eager to maintain his distance with the stale and heavy language of pathology and the cool metal-and-plastic tools of his trade. The picture, with its diagramming of an emotionally resonant situation in seven discrete visual components that are in tension and also in conversation

with one another, unsettles, even as it entertains. The subject of the situation is not what imbues the image with humor (the doctor, as she explains, later emailed to apologize for his outburst). Instead, it is the artist/patient's interpretation, her translation, from life to the page, from surreality to surreality. "I have used collage as a way of rendering, although not necessarily understanding," Miller goes on to explain in "The Trauma of Diagnosis."⁴ As her blog posts make clear, the ways that cancer is so often talked about or around, using "moralizing logic," for example, or the "language of euphemism," is useless at best, demoralizing at worst.⁵ To whom, or to what, can the cancer patient turn in order to feel less alienated from her own experience and from the people and forces that surround her but remain, always, at a distance? Miller quotes, in her aforementioned piece, from Sontag's famous opening to her 1978 essay "Illness as Metaphor," in which Sontag describes everyone as holding "dual citizenship in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick," with the sick finally dwelling in that Other space, whether permanently or intermittently.⁶ Miller expounds on this assertion: "The cancer diagnosis makes us travel to another realm of existence, but all the while the realm of our existence as we have known it splits in two. Strangely, paradoxically . . . cancer patients continue to inhabit both worlds."⁷ The "real" world and the world of the uncanny. The world of words, and the world of words turned to something else. Cancer, "the word that takes you beyond words."⁸

If "The Scan Report" acknowledges the boundaries supposedly in place between Sontag's two kingdoms, diagnostic doctors, among others, in one, patients in another, it also unsettles those boundaries, as patient turns to agent, manipulator of this sequence of events, though only in retrospect. For his part, the doctor becomes, uncharacteristically, the objectified target and butt of this joke. Viewers of the image, too, are being subtly nudged. The joke pulls you in, makes you an insider, even as you can never, whatever your citizenship status, be totally pulled into this particular world. The experience is, ultimately, one of being incurably alone.

An earlier image posted to the blog, a different kind of pairing, undated but published May 15, 2015, in the entry to the blog, testifies to this fundamentally isolating status, even from within the "kingdom of the sick." Here we see a collage cutout of Nancy—this time her character is signified not by a drawing but by a

4. Miller, "The Trauma of Diagnosis," 211.

5. Miller, *My Multifocal Life*.

6. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 2001), 3.

7. Miller, "The Trauma of Diagnosis," 213.

8. Miller, 215.



9. Nancy K. Miller, “5/15/15”/“Untitled,” from *Did You Smoke*. Unpublished (2015). © Nancy K. Miller.

photograph of her face—alongside friend and fellow cancer patient Aoibheann Sweeney (fig. 9).⁹

The collage, which does not include any words, is Miller’s altered version of Frida Kahlo’s famous 1939 self-portrait, *The Two Fridas*, in which Kahlo pictured two versions of herself, one traditional and one modernized. Miller has made a copy of the original painting, but she has overlaid cutout photographs of herself and her friend in place of Kahlo’s drawn faces. As the blog post makes clear, this image captures the lived experience of “sharing,” in a very direct way, a chemotherapy session with a friend. She writes,

Last week my friend the writer Aoibheann Sweeney and I discovered that we were both having chemo the same day, on the same floor of the same institution, around the corner from the institution where we both work. How to resist taking advantage of the coincidence? The chemo nurses, always happy to oblige the

9. Miller, *My Multifocal Life*.

patients, set us up in facing spaces. We could see each other across the aisle—and talk. We talked without acknowledging the chemicals slowly dripping into our bodies. It was almost like a continuation of the lunch we had just had together at the local Pain Quotidian. As though we had finished our meal with a *tisane*.

Tisane, a French translation of the word *infusion*, is the word Miller picks out to describe one instance, among many, of how cancer has transformed her, in this case in terms of her relationship to language. Whereas *tisane* used to suggest pleasure, “[s]omething soothing . . . a suave taste to savor,” now it directly refers to the unpleasant drip of chemicals into the body. Friendship, too, has been irrefutably changed; even as this image confirms an intense, powerful bond between women, both in the throes of receiving chemotherapy, their connected hands indexing something shared, something intimately in common, the bodies, borrowed from Kahlo, remain proximate but at a distance; they are still, somehow, formal, beyond each other’s reach.

What is it to be alive when a stable existence has been replaced with “incurable but treatable”? In what ways do friendship, conversation, emotion, even humor, shift once the world as you know it has fractured? With her sharp, playful collages, Miller invites us to look for connections while we bear witness to the breaks.