AESTHETICISING CANCER

Frissure

Kathleen Jamie & Brigid Collins

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Almost 40 years ago, in *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag said:

'Cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry; and it seems unimaginable to aestheticize the disease'.¹

In *Frissure*, a collaboration between the poet Kathleen Jamie and the artist Brigid Collins, this argument is comprehensively challenged.

The title is a neologism, combining 'fissure' and 'frisson', and the book takes as its theme the scar that remained after Kathleen Jamie underwent a mastectomy for breast cancer in 2012. The scar is re-imagined by both Collins and Jamie, taking on new meanings as it transitions from a representation of cancer, and clinical triumph over cancer, to something natural and beautiful. The book comprises a series of short text fragments and images, arranged as a call and response, illustrating the evolving and shared understanding between artist and poet.

To its owner the scar signifies injury, but of greater interest to her is its texture and appearance. The images interpret the

appearance and notion of the scar as a line or thread. Different ways of looking at the same line on a body are an underlying premise here, but what is striking is that the scar is interpreted as a tearing apart — a fissure — rather than a joining together, of healing. As the book progresses, the images change from clear depictions of a scar or line, to images where the scar has almost disappeared, or been subsumed by other subjects and landscapes.

The concept of having 'been spared', which is threaded throughout this collection, becomes a particular focus in *Gift 2*. Opening with *'Don't you think it's worth knowing what you've been spared?'*, it sits starkly with a corresponding image reminiscent of a fungating breast wound. Jamie was spared this experience, perhaps as a result of early presentation and treatment for her breast cancer, but her prose poems convey some powerful images of the imagined possibilities, *'the nacreous blacks, the poisoned river trceries and slow detonations'*.

The scar is also taken to represent a second chance at life, itself a double-edged outcome since it offers a second chance at ageing and future deterioration:

'To be healed is not to be saved from mortality but rather, released back into it: we are returned to the wild, into possibilities for ageing and change.' (Healings 2)

There is an echo of lines by Carly Simon, the musician, whose own treatment for breast cancer inspired *Scar*, a powerful reflection on the visible consequence of surgery and its meaning. Simon talked of *'accepting the war she went through and being ennobled by her scars'*. In a curious

symmetry her lyrics quote from the Gaelic: *'the scar is God-given as a sign for your life'*.

Nevertheless, there runs throughout this slight volume an undercurrent of tentativeness, of uncertainty about the outcome, perhaps a reflection of the proximity of the diagnosis. The narrative feels unfinished, leaving the reader with a sense that, for Jamie at least, the cancer experience is still evolving, the outcome still uncertain. How will she interpret and express her experience once she feels more certain that this illness is behind her?

The interpretations of the mastectomy scar offered in *Frissure* are very different from the way other patients with breast cancer may view their scar, as a symbol of mutilation and loss of identity. However, this fascinating collaboration offers thought-provoking perspectives on the experience of treatment for cancer. It gives clinicians an insight into the way that the marks left behind by our treatments may be interpreted, but the synergy of art and poetry achieved here will also appeal more widely.

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REFERENCE

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