

Measuring Time

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A wall-sized slab of a redwood tree adorns a wall of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Some poor intern in 1904 probably had the unenviable job of counting the rings and then dutifully signposting the great moments of humanity at regular intervals. The birth of Jesus and the fall of Rome seem decidedly insect-like against the sheer magnitude of the grain.

Long before my husband Kevin developed cancer, one of my ongoing projects was something I thought of as “a way to measure time”—where I looked for alternate ways in which time could be measured.

Many of the kauri trees of Northland in New Zealand, where I make my home, are over 2,000 years old. Lie one kauri’s life against the next, the nurse log and the seed; the time it takes for one to decay and another to grow would add up to only ten trees since Paleolithic cave bears were asleep on a snowy winter’s night. Five more and someone was painting maneless lions on the walls of Chauvet.

This, I thought, is a way to measure time.

I have seen a hawk pull apart the body of a still-twitching rabbit, and watched forest mushrooms explode into being for a single day. I have seen spiderwebs hang like forgotten party streamers under the weight of a November morning’s hoar frost and then be melted away by noon.

These are all ways to measure time.

Hospitals create their own form of Time, one that is almost geologic in feel, creating eras and epochs like those charts every student of evolution memorizes. Yes, this is the Holocene, and after lunch, when we’ve tried to spoon feed you some derivation

of beef stew that can be drunk through a straw, we will enter into the Eocene where the afternoon will stretch on and on, the equilibrium will be punctuated only by the sound of the man next door crying for his daughter and the nurse with the medication cart and the machine that beeps incessantly until she finally smacks it, silencing it like an unruly patient. The surgeries and the scans, chemo days and nights, they all exist in an otherworldly space as if once one enters the hospital, Time’s very nature changes.

In a period when we were moving in and out of hospitals nearly every day, I was in touch with a friend who wrote about the nature of enchantment and Faerie. His description of the other world of Faerie made me think of our hospital. A familiar enough place in which Time is so radically changed as to give the appearance of an other world. A world within this world, expanding and contracting with circumstances.

I have thought of other places like this—Heathrow airport, the Radcliffe Camera in Oxford, and the dingy office at the Manhattan car pound where you sit for hours wondering if the nasty woman behind the bulletproof glass will ever release you and the hundreds of others who parked on the unmarked section of 22nd Street and have now been told that even though the No Parking sign had been stolen from the street, “you shoulda known” not to park there because New York parking is all about possessing some sort of prescient clairvoyance.

The gates of the hospitals I have known are all much the same. You pass from the outer world of weather and street chatter through a numbing wall of banal. Benign pastels of boat scenes from the south of France or Florida line the corridors, their lack of geographic detail an anesthetic in its own right. There are badly framed pieces of indigenous art from obscure university departments who think they’re being ‘philanthropic’ by donating slightly erotic African art scenes to the quiet hum of the hospital’s

otherwise bare walls. At the Churchill in Oxford there was a dusty sock puppet of a snake stapled to a bulletin board sometime before the Cretaceous that seemed endlessly fascinating to me as its mere existence, much less its perpetual persistence, seemed to speak volumes. One whole side of his back nurtured an entire ecosystem of dust mites and mold.

Deeper in, you pass the shop selling flowers to the guilty—overpriced and sanitized, stuffed with extra statice or cheap carnations—but at least they offer some kind of balm against empty-handedness. One hospital sold them via robotic arm in a sort of stylized vending machine built in the 1960s that looked like a cross between a flower mausoleum and an extra from *I Dream of Jeannie*. The information desk is almost always deserted, heightening the sense of being lost in a foreign country (except on alternate Thursdays when ardent pensioners in blue pinnies practically beg to give directions).

In the midst of Kevin's illness I lost the capacity to exhale. It began the day I heard the words brain tumor and didn't end until almost five years after his death. Hospitals are places where the idea of exhaling seems fundamentally impossible. Combine fear and a justifiable trepidation about the unknown, replace Time with an ever-present wait, and no, I don't believe that anyone there ever breathes out, or if they do, they don't breathe out easily. For the patient, at least, there are machines to monitor such things, but there are none for the accompanying person who has landed in this strange new world.

In a hospital, one way to measure time is the interval from now until when the tea trolley comes. This of course only works in countries where there *is* a tea trolley. (Do Americans get a tea trolley or only a vending machine?) Tea trolley meals, like those on an airplane, are all about the anticipation; they are eagerly awaited and then equally ever astoundingly disappointing in their reality. I was finally convinced that Kevin's medications were working the night he described his dinner of potato starch with meat broth as

“a gorgeous meal.” Perhaps Ketamine would make cheerful food critics of us all.

In the otherworld of the hospital, one bangs up against profound intimacies and must pretend not to see them. Dangly old scrota of cancer ward men lying atop bedsheets, the sounds and sights of all things entering and leaving bodies, and worst of all, the words of doctors doling out death sentences like afternoon Walker's shortbreads. I knew before the man in the far corner's wife did that he wouldn't live through the week. I passed her in the hallway—how could I have this intimate knowledge before she did? And yet I was the one who watched her husband's hands clenching and unclenching as the Registrar gave him the news, and I had to pretend I had never seen or heard, as in a humane world, I never should have.

When I was given the same news a year later, it was not in some hallowed sanctuary where one could absorb the enormity of what was being said. It was in a hallway, overheard by nurses and other wives, the doctor thinking he was being kind by telling me that I 'looked like hell' and hastily adding that one of the benefits of the New Zealand hospital system was that tissues were still free, as for once, hearing that final news, I could no longer hold back the tears. There were no rivers in that hospital corridor into which those tears could flow. No heron-filled Thames. There was simply no appropriate place for them to go.

In those moments where there is a 'before' that still had a future attached to it (something along the lines of “on Tuesday we'll go home”) and an 'after' that says this is all that is left of this story, and do your best not to rush the ending because now that there is no hope left in it, you have to wonder if you can see through the remaining time, however short, in some other way.

In a single instant in a hallway by a bulletin board covered in plastic yellow daffodils advertising an upcoming social event to support

cancer research, the Paleolithic becomes the Neolithic, and all of the tools that were right for the moment before the doctor stopped you in the hallway saying, “Oh by the way...”, are now obsolete. You have been foraging when you should have been planting seeds.

As each era in the hospital abruptly ends with the next piece of news, you adjust because you must. The concept of the future diminishes to smaller and smaller increments until a way to measure time is counting the number of heartbeats passing between morphine-suppressed breaths.

The hospital must be like Faerie, in that you come back changed. Time on the outside world has flowed onward, but you are Rip Van Winkle or Snow White, asleep for 100 years in another world, awakening to find you know no one and no one quite remembers you, except for the man whose wife lay in the room next to your husband's. He'd never once spoke to you, but he did hear your name called over and over in the night.

He knows his turn is not far off.

He sees your tear-ravaged face as you pass him for the last time in the hospital entranceway at midnight. Perhaps he looks back at you as you cross the threshold, wondering for a moment, if once you return to the other world, you will suddenly crumble to dust. Perhaps he does not look, knowing that not looking is also a way to measure time.

In some ways the cruelest part is that we do not crumble into dust. This is where Faerie's stories do not hold a truth. It is far harder to return to the world of the living having been beyond it, and there are no legends to explain how this transformation is done.

Now in the perpetual After, I sit in a meadow of waist-high grass. Wind rolls through it in waves, a single hawk rides the thermal above, and all that remains of an ancient river of ice are smooth faces of glaciers sitting in the saddles of mountains named for gods long dead.

Kevin is dead five years now in calendar time and yet it feels as though it was both yesterday and a thousand years ago in some other life. I find myself with no barometer, no compass, no gifts from Chronos, and no hourglasses filled with the ashes of my own life to know if this, too, even if just in the writing it down, has been yet another small way to measure time. ∞