

Considering your significant object again – please write for **5 minutes** and see what comes up. You can write anything, and you don't need to know what it's going to be until you stop.

Lisa – Occult cancer



You have an occult breast cancer!? What does that mean? The term *occult* signifies malevolent forces that hide and deceive. I think of horror shows and the supernatural, and things that go bump in the night. What I hadn't anticipated was how the connotations of the occult would become fused with my breast cancer diagnosis and its traumatic nature. What is an occult cancer? In biomedical terms it refers to the ways in which cancer hides. Some tumours can't be easily seen or detected on certain imaging technologies. It overlaps somewhat with the monstrous nature of cancer, and the horror of the body turning against itself. You can walk around not knowing you have cancer until it reaches certain thresholds of feeling and knowing. Even then, the full extent of the cancer requires skill, elaboration, and labour on the part of a team of specialists to lure it from its hiding place.

The term occult became a literal metaphor for how I had been feeling for the two years prior to my cancer diagnosis. I had been relentlessly targeted by a member of my family following my mother's death from cancer. My cancer diagnosis had fused with the horror and trauma of an occult cancer, and a toxic family member, a perpetrator of abuse, who hid behind the figure of the charming man. What stuck with me during my diagnosis and was difficult to shake was the term *occult*. Like a supernatural force, it carried this prior traumatic history into my diagnostic present, and what was to become my cancer trauma. The memories were reinforced through a swirl of fear and panic as I tried to listen to the consultant informing me of my breast cancer type and the likely treatment plan.

The dictionary definition of occult brings together the associations and relations that collided in my diagnosis: something that isn't palpable or discernible; magical or supernatural powers (the perpetrator told me he puts hexes on people who cross him); something that is cut off or hidden from view; something that is secret or only communicated to the initiatedⁱ. My experiences of abuse were deeply homophobic and misogynist, turning me into an enemy and an object of the perpetrator's vengeful hatred. My breast cancer and experience of abuse had become entangled, however much I didn't want them to be. Has he won? He said he always wins, that he will knock me off my pedestal and send me to an early grave.

I look at the bird and wonder why I chose it as a significant object for the workshop? I can't quite fathom but then it comes. What stories does a fabric bird bring, on the wings of grief and loss, and terrible secrets hidden behind closed doors? The bird stands proud in the face of the malevolent forces that were part of my childhood. The bird is a transitional object. It is a witness and bearer of all that my mother and I tried to resist and refuse.

The bird had a perch once, a huge monstera plant that she made her nest in. One day the monstera was gone, it was chopped down by the perpetrator. I had said how much I loved it (note to self – keep quiet!). When I came home from school it was gone. The perpetrator had chopped it into pieces, a huge plant that went right up to the ceiling. My mother rescued the bird and gave it to me many years later. She gave it to me in secret. It was our secret. It now lives on a new perch, a rather queer bird cage! The bird has become part of an artwork, a memorial to my mother, and our shared humour, and to our love of sentimental objects. The bird has become a replacement for those objects that the perpetrator often destroyed. My grandmother's tea set deliberately dropped on the floor, carefully packaged up in a box to be given to me after my grandmother's death. Don't share what you hold, dear, keep quiet, don't give it away.

The bird persists, she carries on, communicating something else about what went on behind closed doors. The bird reminds me of my mother's kindness, and her capacity to try and love and make something out of a horror-show. She reminds me that it was never our fault. It is not our shame. It is his, although he will never own this. It is always somebody else! The bird retains her colour, a beautiful fabric that has travelled all the way from Singapore, from the 1960's. The bird communicates something else along an intergenerational story of shame, and abuse, of estrangement and mental ill-health, and now of cancer. She sings songs about what might be possible, about roads or flightpaths that circumvent the destruction of her habitat and her tenacity to remain. The bird reminds, and interferes, and sings other songs.

My mother encouraged me to write her autobiography, a shared story, perhaps a shared cancer story. But how will it end? I know she would like an ending that honours what we have both been through. A story that replaces malevolence with beauty, and pain with grief, and new stories that can carry their lives and afterlives. Cancer is traumatic and gathers up other stories. The trauma of cancer and previous traumas can become entangled. They are not easily disentangled, neither should they be.

The occult no longer holds the power that it did. When I hear the term occult, I hear the word delusion. The perpetrator is delusional. He lives in his own fabricated worlds where he always claims victimhood, despite evidence to the contrary. My occult cancer is more of a challenge, manifesting in whether I can trust the yearly scans, and what might be hiding behind the images, not clearly discernible. But this is a pragmatic issue and not connected to things that go bump in the night or evil malicious forces. It has taken a long time to get to this point, with a lot of help, care, and support. This is the beginning of my cancer story and how I might tell it and for new forms of solidarity to emerge. Listen intently to the fabric bird, she knows and can hold other stories, until they are ready to be told.

ⁱ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/occult>