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A Season of Cooking and Cancer

JULIJA ŠUKYS AND KAREN BABINE

Karen Babine, *All the Wild Hungers*.

MINNEAPOLIS: MILKWEED EDITIONS, 2019. 184 PAGES, PAPER, \$16.00.

My sister is pregnant with a lemon this week, Week 14, and this is amusing. My mother's uterine tumor, the size of a cabbage, is Week 30, and this is terrifying.

When her mother is diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, Karen Babine—a cook, collector of thrifted vintage cast iron, and fiercely devoted daughter, sister, and aunt—can't help but wonder, “feed a fever, starve a cold, but what do we do for cancer?” And so, she commits herself to preparing her mother anything she will eat, a vegetarian diving headfirst into the unfamiliar world of bone broth and pot roast.

Julija Šukys, who is the author of three books of nonfiction that explore history, research, family, and self, met with Babine to discuss food, family, illness, writing, and love. The two of them collaborate on *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, which Babine founded and edits.

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Julija Šukys: Karen, congratulations on your new book. It's a gorgeous, quiet, and moving read. With its subtitle “A Season of Cooking and Cancer,” it tells the story of your mother's illness, her treatment, and the complex and beautiful web that makes up your family. But the organizing metaphor here

is nourishment. You once described *All the Wild Hungers* to me as “a book about the food metaphors of cancer.” Can you talk a little bit about how you landed at this nexus, which, on first hearing, seems unlikely? And yet it works so well here.

Karen Babine: Thank you! This book started when my mom was first diagnosed with a very rare cancer, which just happened to grow in her uterus, and her doctors started talking to us in food metaphors. It was a *cabbage*-sized tumor, they were working on her chemotherapy *recipe*, for which she would get an *infusion*. I knew my Sontag, so I knew the war metaphors of cancer, but the food metaphors were new to me—and as a cook, I didn’t like something so terrible being described in food terms. As I started to write the book, other threads began to weave themselves in: my sister announced she was pregnant with her third child, and like many families, we tracked the baby’s growth by what size fruit or vegetable it resembled each week. As my mother went through chemotherapy, and she became neutropenic, my three-year-old nephew was diagnosed with a growth hormone deficiency. At the same time, I kept finding all this very expensive vintage Le Creuset and Descoware cast iron at my local thrift stores, cookware I could never afford new. I’d never cooked with cast iron before, but it became a joy and gave me a purpose as I tried to make things my mom could eat. My sisters and I are vegetarian, everybody else in our family is a carnivore, and my nephew is also allergic to dairy, eggs, and peanuts—and so the food itself was not as simple as putting it on the table.

There was such unknowing around me and I started to cook against it, to find an entry point to knowing anything. I had to learn how to cook (basically) vegan for my nephew; I had to relearn how to cook meat for my parents. We live in Minnesota, so I also had to wrestle with what it meant to be part of a food culture in a cold climate, how my ethics were complicated by our need to import food in the winter, food deserts, and such. Food is never neutral. Food is political. It is the product of history, culture, and place.

JŠ: This is a book comprised of 64 flash essays. Can you talk about how the form came to be? Did you plan it this way or did its fragmented form evolve as you worked? Did you experience any anxiety about the radical brevity of each piece?

KB: This book is a good example of the conversation between form and content. From the beginning, the ideas that I was working through during early-morning writing sessions and before my brain was awake were confined to a small space. When I went to the computer, the first draft of each piece was probably about five pages. They got progressively shorter as the process went on. I liked being able to play with the lines between nonfiction and prose poetry as I looked for the idea that was the kernel of each piece. I consider myself an essayist, in the way that one of my mentors described the essay as “the witnessed development of an idea,” and I saw these flash pieces become what I consider micro-essays. Each one is based in an idea, not just an image or a story. I like that each piece presents an intense moment and idea, and then it’s over, and the reader can take a breath and digest it, and move on, or move away.

I was also doing a lot of research on the conversation this book would enter, from reading flash nonfiction and prose poetry to short nonfiction books. I knew from the beginning that this wouldn’t be a memoir with a narrative arc, because there was no story here for me. *My mom has cancer and it’s awful* is not, for me, a story. Last summer, the Hmong memoirist Kao Kalia Yang quoted her father, saying that “The human life is individual. It is not unique,” and that continues to resonate for me. There’s nothing unique in my mom’s cancer experience, or ours, but my work as a writer needed to get to the individual, so I needed to figure out a different way into the material. The food metaphors were the starting point.

The book that started me thinking down this path was Robert Bly’s *What Have I Ever Lost by Dying*, which came out in 1992, long before prose poetry or flash nonfiction was common parlance. Bly’s text is poetry, so says the back cover, but I realized what he was doing was closer to micro-essay (and I started to question if readers could recast a writer’s intention as we develop new vocabulary—did he write poetry? Certainly. Can I also say that he wrote micro-essays if the term didn’t exist back then? Still working on that answer.). I keep thinking about how the vocabulary of nonfiction is continuing to evolve as writers continue to seek the best form for the content in front of them.

JŠ: There’s so much to admire in this book. There’s the economy of form but also an economy of language. There isn’t a single extraneous word. Tell me about what you left on the cutting-room floor. How much overwriting did

you do in this book in order to trim it down to its final state? How do you approach the task of self-editing?

KB: The short form of the micro-essay gave me the space to be very dense with language in a way I haven't been able to in longer pieces. The trimming came mostly when I put the book together from the individual pieces, which needed to include the same kind of background information (what kind of cancer, etc.) to be publishable on their own. But I also remember that when we started making the pieces shorter, it was easy to see where I shifted tone or register, or went in a direction that didn't serve the smaller piece itself—and in that, I was able to cut whole paragraphs. My expectation became that if a piece wasn't working, it just needed to go shorter—not longer. I'm used to going the other direction, writing 15- or 20-page essays, to go deep into a subject by spending significant time on the page. This book was the complete opposite.

I wrote a piece for *Brevity* on Brian Doyle's language, and at about the second page, I knew that to do Doyle's work justice, I was going to end up with 20 pages. So I sent this version to my mentor, Scott Olsen, and he sent back one line: "Eight Variations on the Idea of Failure," which is an essay by Paul Gruchow, my favorite writer. I knew immediately what he meant, so I reread the essay and wrote "Eight Variations on the Idea of a Sentence." Because I was able to find the right form for the content—and I went shorter, rather than longer—I was able to do what I intended to in a way that also mirrored what I was doing in the cast iron/cancer essays. (Doyle also died of cancer, by the way.) It got to the point where if a piece wasn't working, my immediate revision technique was to condense.

JŠ: Let's talk about research. In chapter after chapter, you take the reader on thinking journeys. We follow you as you and your family navigate the American healthcare system. We accompany you as you experiment and eventually learn how to feed and strengthen your mother's ailing body. We watch as you, a vegetarian, gather wisdom on how to cook various cuts of meats for her and to make bone broth. We take deep dives into the ins and outs of caring for cast iron cookware, perhaps the most surprising thematic turn of the book.

What role did research play for you in the writing of this book? How do

you go about incorporating research? And how did you know you'd taken an idea far enough and that it was time to switch gears?

KB: Honestly, research is, for me, the best part of writing in general and writing nonfiction in particular. Most of the research I did was serendipitous, and it appeared when I needed it, like a fascinating article on fetal microchimerism, which is the phenomenon of fetal cells being found in the mother decades after birth. That got me thinking about my mother's uterine tumor, my sister's pregnancy, and my grandmother's ectopic pregnancy in 1952 that nearly killed her. What's left behind? My sister commented last week about how much science is in this book, and there is a lot—from biology to the chemistry of her chemotherapy meds, which came out of Fritz Haber's creation of mustard gas during World War I, which also became the basis for a lot of chemical fertilizers. There wasn't a plan to the research, but that's the best part of essaying. I never know where the ideas are going to go.

The research that has been done on my mom's cancer is really thin on adults—it's a childhood cancer, and there are only about 400 reported cases of it in adults in the last 30 years. The available information didn't help us at all. Knowledge and understanding were opposites here.

JŠ: There's a slowness and a stillness to this book that I think comes from the way it gets at enormous questions of grief and mortality through a prism of small, human-paced experiences like making soup, baking with children, and watching snow fall. Can you talk about pacing and time in your writing? Is cultivating a kind of slowness something you do consciously?

KB: I was incredibly conscious of time as I wrote the first draft of the book. Because I get up at 6:00 each morning, I was able to trace the daylight getting longer as the spring progressed. Our days were regimented around what time Mom got which medicines. When I first put the book together, I had no real sense of which order the pieces should be in, and my first structure was organized by color, not time. Eventually, my editor convinced me to at least *try* a chronological structure, and wonder of wonders, he was right—all the threads wove themselves together in the right way.

I did have a moment, not too long after I turned in the finished manuscript,

when Mom's cancer came back, in August 2017, and I wondered if I should rewrite the whole book, given this new information. I decided that those next six months needed to stand on their own, for what they were. If there were a book to be written about the return of her cancer, or her death, it would have to be another book—and right now, it's turning out as fiction, not nonfiction, because I need the distance of that kind of grief happening to a character, not to me.

JŠ: There's also a cool, northern light that suffuses this book. It's so deeply rooted in Minnesota. Can you talk about the sense of place in your work?

KB: I didn't think this book would have anything to do with place, but then I started working on food culture, cold climates, food deserts, and realized that place was an essential part of what I was doing. The food I ate growing up, which was dependent on what was available in rural northern Minnesota in the 1980s, as well as the ethic of food my grandparents, who came from farming families but who never farmed themselves, passed down to me. We had a giant garden when I was growing up, and preserving that food for the winter was always a huge family task. We stocked up on pasta and ground beef when it was on sale. My dad got a deer every year, and that went into the freezer for the winter.

My favorite part of the research I did on Swedish rice pudding—*risgrynsgröt*—came when I was living in Nebraska. I've been the family historian since I was 17, and I knew that the Swedes in my family moved back and forth from Minnesota to Nebraska, so I went looking for them. My grandma's story of rice pudding was that her mother always had a pot of it on the back of the stove to cook slowly over the course of the day, but as I looked through old church cookbooks for rice pudding recipes, what I found was not *risgrynsgröt*, but *risgrynnskaka*, and it was baked. Everything else was the same, down to the dried bean hidden so that the one who found it would be the next one married. I started to wonder about how food adapts to place, to what is available. We only make it at Christmas, and I'm the one who does it now.

JŠ: Another aspect of your writing that I have such admiration for is the control you show. On the one hand, this is a deeply personal, extremely vulnerable book. It not only shows you in moments of anger, despair, and fear but also

at your quirkiest—when, for example, you reveal that you have named your cast iron pots.

So there you are, on the page, this “Karen” who feels very present and human and real. And yet, looking back, I see that parts of your life are totally absent here—the reader learns nothing about your romantic life or past relationships, for example. Nor does this book venture into your life as a writer. My point is that this book is very deliberate about its boundaries and limits and shape. It knows exactly what it is and what it isn’t.

Beginning memoirists and essayists often struggle, on the one hand, with fears of betrayal and, on the other, with the notion that they must strip themselves bare in the name of honesty and vulnerability. I remind my students that they control which secrets they reveal and which ones they keep. *They* get to decide what to divulge and what to keep to themselves. *All the Wild Hungers* is a great example of controlled vulnerability. Can you talk a bit about drawing boundaries and how you decide what to share and what not to share?

KB: Somebody asked this week how to be vulnerable on the page, and I’m still not sure how to answer that. The easy answer is based in my ethics of nonfiction: the first is not to violate the contract with the reader to tell the truth, and the second is to Do No Harm. My family—which is pretty small—got complete veto power over anything that was in *All the Wild Hungers*, something they used sparingly. I didn’t want to hurt my family, even inadvertently, because their vulnerability on the page was not something I was willing to share. I also didn’t use names, except for those who have passed away (like my grandmothers). I didn’t feel I had the right to tell the story of my mom’s friends who were dealing with their own cancers at the same time, nor did I feel I wanted to violate the privacy of my niece and nephew.

I also think that approaching this as micro-essay helped to provide some distance from what I felt as vulnerability. The narrow focus of the book didn’t leave room for backstory—for instance, past romantic relationships—even as they might have contributed to my persona on the page as a PANK (Professional Aunt, No Kids). There was much more personal information in earlier drafts, but that was edited out for various reasons. I needed to remember that I was simply the agent of examination, not the subject. Stories, for me, are always in service of an idea, because I don’t believe in writing stories for the sake of

writing stories. There always needs to be something larger, something universal, and while we may have common experiences, it's absolutely impossible for us to relate to the experience of another. It's the work of the writer to make it relevant.