

NARRATIVE 13.

MOM, CANCER PATIENT,
DOCTORAL CANDIDATE, TA

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At the end of my third year of graduate school, I wrapped a community literacy program at my research site, completed data collection, hosted an undergraduate writing symposium, graded final projects, and scheduled a biopsy for a small knot in my chest that I'd never felt before.

I nearly skipped the biopsy because I desperately needed to meet with one of my dissertation readers. At my husband's insistence I rescheduled the meeting. I was at the library on a playdate—a happy break from the end-of-semester crush—and missed a doctor's call. And another. And another. I called back after putting my children—nearly four and two—down for rests.

It wasn't just cancer. It was rare, aggressive cancer. Unstudied cancer: my academic heart's nightmare. If I could *know* about it, I could know that it would be fine. I spent the next three months transcribing interviews in hospital waiting rooms. I had surgery the day before I started my position as assistant writing center director, missing the first opportunity to meet the first year master's consultants.

I started chemo in early October and went to the hospital a week later. A fellow grad student had shared a cold, and my immunities were depleted. I came home three days later, fine, but acutely aware of new limitations. I worked only when I could: a weekly grad writing group, a few consultations a week, a day-long symposium. I hated the feeling of not being great. Of just getting by. I parented when I could, trying not to fall asleep while playing, to keep smiling, holding, reading, no matter what. I hated being absent, even when I was present.

In the spring, I healed. I tolerated the second drug. My scars closed up. I dug into the relationships and consultations I had longed for all year. Pandemic came at the start of radiation. I was sad, but I found myself glad of the break and ready for the dissertating I had started a year before. What to make of this lost year? As a TA, I already exist in a liminal space—labor, but not quite faculty. Insured, but not quite secure. I make careful decisions about time spent and opportunities taken, hoping for future security. What should I say in job materials? “Instead of a hot publication record, I have two kids and cancer scars?” Do I say, “during 2019, I did what I could?”

I contend, despite the yearlong hole in my CV, that children and illness have given me rich preparation for what comes next. Not because, as some have suggested, my lack of time makes me more efficient. I can confirm that's a myth. Rather, parenting and chemo have taught me to look for the long game. To see other paths where academia defines only one. They've taught me patience, persistence, and the power of saying "I can't right now," knowing that opportunities for great work will come again.