

# Diary of a Detour

Lesley Stern

# Diary of a Detour

WRITING MATTERS!

A series edited by Lauren Berlant, Saidiya Hartman,  
Erica Rand, and Kathleen Stewart



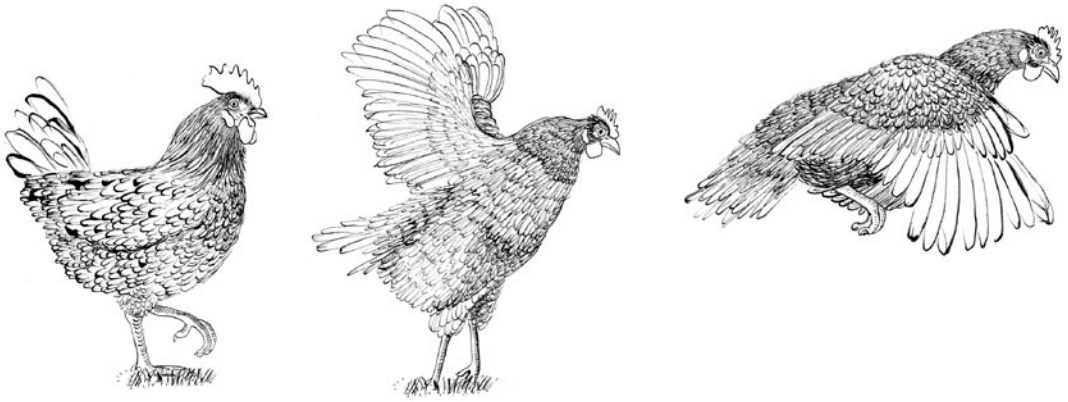
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Lesley Stern

With illustrations by Amy Adler



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COVER ART: Chickens for Lesley © Amy Adler 2019.

Courtesy of the artist.



IN MEMORY OF THOSE, dear to me, who died during the writing of this book.  
With some I traveled fleetingly, others have shared many journeys and detours,  
all have made my life, and Diary, richer.

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## Chickens Saved My Life

SEPTEMBER 28, 2011

Chickens changed my life. Saved my life. Though it is also true to say that as we ride the stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death, many things, people, and events change what we call *life*. A life is merely a conglomeration, a concatenation of effects and affects, often unpredictable, though even when predicted, things seldom turn out as expected.

And it was not by chickens alone that I have been saved. But among all the therapies—chemo, meditation, acupuncture, Feldenkrais, naturopathic treatments, exercise—chickens, four glorious chicklets-becoming-hens, have changed things most dramatically. Holly, Lula Mae, Sabrina, and Funny Face flap, flutter, and jump onto anything that might resemble a perch, including human shoulders and heads. They frequently land together on one side of their feeder and tip it over. They also landed like a miracle, about six weeks ago, on me, and tipped the balance from death to life.

I have an incurable cancer, a form of leukemia called CLL (chronic lymphocytic leukemia), so like everyone else I am going to die but probably not tomorrow. Still, life was becoming rather hard to live. Now, after spending the summer in chemo-and-chicken therapy, I have been given a reprieve. I have been wanting chickens for years, and for years have been putting it off, there were always other things to do, work to get done, fetish desires to satisfy. CLL is one of the slow cancers. For some people it does not progress beyond what used to be called the indolent stage, for others it can race along alarmingly fast for a slow cancer. My symptoms just got gradually worse, though I wanted to defer treatment for as long as possible since once you start treatment you also start damaging your body's ability to fight back.

As my oncologist, Dr. K, says, there are no such things as side effects. All drugs have a range of effects, some good, some not so good (and sometimes the connection between good and not so good is knotted, complicated, measurable only over time). So when he said, I think it's time to start treatment and I saw the summer disappearing into an infusion center, the absolute ghastliness of my condition (so far no treatments have lengthened life for CLL patients) took hold, gloom defeated a habitual Pollyanna-ish reflex. And then, in the midst of gloom, my thoughts turned to chickens. Chickens turned into obsession.

Soon I could think of nothing but breeds of chickens and what color eggs they lay and coops and ventilation and chicken manure and compost and predators and fencing and automatic watering and mites and fleas and worms and herbal remedies, and the chirruping noise that chicks make. I dreamed of collecting fresh eggs from free-ranging chickens fed on weeds and greens and fruit from the garden. I could smell the omelets made from these eggs, buttery and sizzling, sprinkled with herbs. I could also smell the chicken shit and rapturously and endlessly imagined the compost we would have, how contentedly my garden would grow. J, my partner, embraced the idea even more wholeheartedly than I, encouraging a flagrant defiance of budget in order to get the project happening. I spent endless hours on the internet, ordering books from the library, reading back copies of *Backyard Poultry*, visiting friends and perfect strangers with hens in their yard. Planning in minute and exacting detail. My treatment lasted three months, and some of that time was spent backbreakingly (not me) and obsessively (me) assembling *el palacio de las princesas*, so named by my friend Isabel. And then the ordering. And then the arrival one morning, through the mail, of a cardboard box containing four day-old chicks. Through all this demented focusing on chickens I had been feeling not too bad, forgetting the "C" word. And now my forgetfulness morphed into full-blown happiness. We started laughing. The tiny chicks are fluffy and adorable but also absurd in their pomposity. As the chicks grow their absurdity expands, keeping us laughing, tickling a severely compromised immune system, kicking it into gear.

Two weeks ago I saw Dr. K, and he told me what I already knew, could feel, that so far the results are good. This isn't the end of the story; there will be more tests and more treatment sooner or later. But for the moment I'm feeling better than in years and it feels extraordinary, though I guess it's actually normality that I'm feeling.

This book was sprung into being by the chickens, and it will follow, through many detours, the ways that a vague idea becomes focused as a consuming passion. It's also about other things: just as a life can be changed by a chromosome going awry, so it can be transformed by a chicken, or a book that one is reading, or a feral plant that takes root in your garden and slowly grows into an intriguing presence, altering the culture of the garden and making you see and feel differently.

## The Time It Takes

(By Way of an Introduction)

If I write in order to fend off the feelings of isolation and uncertainty that chronic illness can foster, I write for other reasons too, some merely neurotic, some to do with the pleasure afforded by any addiction, and for some reasons (though *reason* seems far too grand a concept) to do with a sense that putting into words this thing called illness produces a materiality, albeit chimeric and diaphanous, something that can spark recognition, something that can be passed from hand to hand, blown through the air or kicked from one place to another.

Diaries are generally chronological, moving forward in a relatively straight line. This one deviates from the straight and narrow, and is not really a diary, more like a series of meditations, stories, excursions, escapes, tirades, and pirouettes. Nevertheless, it shares some features with the genre of the diary. It began as a blog, written sporadically to inform friends of how treatment was going, asking for a ride to the hospital or setting up a rota for meals. Gradually, as my health improved, some of these entries began to take shape as small essays, or ruminations, they became detached from the blog and morphed into a book. This involved a shifting of the “I,” a transition from very personalized and banal reportage to the emergence on stage of a more dramatized, a more fictional “I.”

While *Detour* does not, then, follow the path of a disease, step by step, nevertheless a bit of a chronology might be useful, a map, a background against which to read the excursions and meddling with time. I was diagnosed with CLL in 2008. A new primary care physician, MM, asked me about fatigue. Yes, I said, but there are probably reasons for that. Work. Let’s do some blood tests, she said. In fact she knew, as she later told me, what to expect because, when she became my doctor she looked over my record and saw that since 2004 my white blood count had been high. This was before you could see your test results online and you (or I) took

the doctor's word that everything was fine. I saw a hematologist who referred me to Dr. K, a leading researcher in CLL and very fortunately for me located at the university where I worked in San Diego. Three years later I began my first chemotherapy, a combination of high-dose prednisone, a steroid that slows or stops the immune system processes that trigger inflammation, and Rituximab (both taken as infusions). Rituximab is not actually a chemotherapy, it is an immunotherapy, but generally the treatments are referred to here, and more generally (at the hospital, for instance, by the insurance companies), as chemo. Two years after that, in 2013, I had my second treatment (as part of a trial)—a combination of Rituximab (taken as an infusion) and Revlimid (taken orally, as a pill). Revlimid, an immunomodulatory agent, was seen as a twofer: it was hoped that, in addition to acting on the CLL, it would also promote immunity. There was no expectation that any of these treatments would produce a cure. There was hope, though, that they might provide temporary relief from the symptoms and partial remission.

This book begins with the first treatment in 2011, since at that point something other than medicine entered significantly into the treatment. Call it chickens, or call it obsession, or call it a detouring away from the medicalization of cancer, a deflection from immersion in the idea of illness. The book takes off, however, two years later with my second chemo treatment in 2013. It ends in 2018, ten years after diagnosis (and after fourteen years of living chronically with CLL).

In this account it is illness that determines the march of time, but the chronology is not entirely indicative of the way the book unfolds. People often speak of a cancer journey or, more specifically and in my case, of the CLL journey. Although I recognize that analogy, I bridle against the habit illness has of commandeering attention, and even while this book aims to put into words the experiential dimension of CLL, that very project entails a shadow boxing with the phantoms of illness, a deploying of tricks to nudge the self-importance of cancer, now and then, into the background. There are other backgrounds that sometimes leap forward into sharp relief and speak to obsessives of various stripes—gardeners, for instance, food aficionados, fermentation freaks, travelers and fellow travelers, cat lovers, bookworms, straying Buddhists, and pedantic amateur scientists. Not that it is always a matter of trickery. Once you start writing, the writing escapes your grasp; like an octopus it slithers out of its cage and spreads tentacles in diverse and unexpected directions.

If there is a tension that animates the book, between time as a chronology, where events are narrated sequentially, and time as a time-out, where sensations and feelings expand the experience of the moment, the minute, the hour, there is also a tension between language that evokes and lives in details of the everyday and the language of science. These different registers can be read as speaking to

one another, as a blurring of the categories of science and affect or emotion. Or the pieces that privilege one mode or the other can be read entirely separately (though they do have a habit of interrupting each other), you can jump around, skip chunks, circle back.

One way I found of fighting off the imperiousness of the malady was paradoxically to enter further into the lairs of medicine, to try to develop at least a rudimentary grasp of the science of CLL or, more generally, of cancer. Science is mysterious to me, slippery and evasive. So grappling with this, putting it into words, was an invigorating challenge, and needless to say, in the process, I felt that the knowledge I was acquiring was giving me a modicum of decision-making power, power over my future, and a way of communicating with others in the same boat. Is that feeling real or illusory? This is one of the questions threaded in a ghostly form through *Diary of a Detour*. The more I delved into the scientific, the more I found that awe was being ruffled by skepticism. The skepticism is not ranged against science as such, but against the way science can be used and against the extreme medicalization of cancer in our culture. By *medicalization* I mean the impulse to describe its causes, origins, trajectories, and treatments in primarily medical terms. What other language might there be? What ways of evoking the feelings and sensations that one might experience; what ways might there be to think about cancer not in terms of a war waged by the wonders of medicine against a foreign invader, but as something that arises in the body and is a part of life? How to shift or at least shake up the idea of living with a chronic illness, to think about living itself as a chronic condition, not a fortress armed against death?

In a fanciful rather than scientific gesture Plato defined the human being as “a biped without feathers.” It tickled my fancy, this aphoristic description of the human being. There are occasions when I experience myself becoming chicken, and there are times when a chicken takes it into their head to become human. This makes for stories. But it also provokes me to think about the process of domestication and how this relates to boundaries, parameters, borders. I was born and grew up in Zimbabwe (though then it was Rhodesia) and lived for many years in Australia. I now live in the U.S. city of San Diego, a city on the border with Mexico, where I also spend time. This peripatetic life has nurtured both a yen for travel and a meditating on borders. Where does one country end and another begin, what is it that makes a difference between a well body and a sick one, how do you distinguish between species that interact and depend on one another in intricate and complex ways, how do the dead speak to the living? During domestication humans change animals and plants through artificial selection, but the process of domestication also changes us, genetically and socially. In some ways my dance with CLL is akin to this reciprocal process of domestication. It begins in wildness



and evolves into an attempt to tame and contain the dragon. In some ways the attempt works, in other ways, not. The CLL also tames or shapes me, alerts me to new modes of inquiry. Similarly, I make use of chickens, but as is often the case they turn out to make use of me, to shape the writing and thinking in ways I did not anticipate or envisage.

Being a chronic condition, CLL doesn't go away, but there are quasi remissions when you can up sticks and fly away to new adventures. The book itself can take wing, and on occasion it flies away from San Diego to places far and near. But then there are missteps, the symptoms creep back, gradually the fatigue begins to permeate your every moment, you succumb to infections, some virulent, you dodge death threats, and you realize there's no getting off the bus. On the other hand, here I am, after fourteen years, still going. In the meantime various friends or people who have inspired me on the CLL trip and side trips have died—some suddenly and without warning. The first to go was my friend Miriam, who died after I was diagnosed but a few months before my first treatment began. I wrote a small piece when she died, and I include it in the book, even though it falls outside the time frame, because I learned from her, and from writing about and to her, not exactly how to face death but how to live, how to get on with life. The book is punctuated by addresses to or about friends or people, dead and alive, who have at some stage mattered to me or who shared the journey or parts of it. If there are hungry ghosts haunting this book there are also spirits who inspire. There is no ravine separating the dead and the living, health and illness, animals and humans, chickens and microbes. And so dead ones and animals and plants animate this writing as much as humans and those alive.

The sequence is ruffled because it is not in fact a sequence; or, as one might say, it is not, in the end, the illness that determines the trajectory. Correspondingly, the map encompasses more than lines. The squiggles, veers from the straight and narrow, ideas that grow in the writing and careen into obsessional cannonballs—all these excursions embody the energetic impulse of the detour. In the end, and from the beginning, it is the detour rather than the journey that embodies and mobilizes the way time is experienced in this book. Hence: *Diary of a Detour*.

It is 1958. She is eight years old, bored, waiting in the car on a hot day. They have come into town from the farm, she waits while her mother nips in to see her grandmother in her office. She says she will only be a moment. The moment grows longer and longer, boredom expands like oil in a hot pan, it spreads, the car is cloaked in oily viscosity. She suspects that behind closed doors her mother and grandmother are arguing. She does not know what it is that they argue about, but she does know her mother will return flushed and irritable, frayed, untouchable. Unspeakable to.

Then there is a tap at the window. She has been warned never to wind down the window and talk to strangers, but this woman is not exactly a stranger, she and her husband have a farm in the same part of the country as her family. She is pretty and has two young children. The girl has never seen her like this: distraught, her hair in disarray, cheeks streaked, eyes reddened and mascara smudged. "Where is your mother?" Her voice is jagged; the question, an appeal. "I have to run; everyone is waiting, but tell your mother something for me. Tell her . . . tell her I've got cancer. Do you understand?" She says this—do you understand—in a tone of acerbic despair, as though she knows no one will ever understand, least of all this child. And yet it is important that she understand, she is the one chosen to be the bearer of knowledge, the one charged with a secret. "Don't tell anyone else, just your mother; this is a secret, but you must tell your mother. Only your mother."

The woman leaves, the car turns cold and clammy. Eventually her mother returns, flushed and irritable. "Don't talk to me," she says. The girl rehearses how to say it, she does not know what it is, this thing called *cancer* that the woman has. Where did she get it? Did she buy it, or was it given to her, where does she have it, in her purse, in a safe with her jewels, tucked into her bra with a spare five-pound

note for emergencies? But she senses that to say the word entails repercussions. She knows the news she has to impart is lethal. Eventually she whispers to her mother, so as not to crack the brittleness of the air. “I have a secret to tell you,” she whispers. “Not now,” the mother snaps. Head on the steering wheel, hands in her hair, pulling. Then, more gently, though still exasperated by the demands of the child, “Later, tell me later.”

But later never comes. She tries but cannot find the moment, the right moment when she can say the word, pass on the secret. The word becomes cheese-like, heavy and sweaty in her pocket, it grows moldy, accruing guilt. The secret stays with her.



## A Possum Fate (Averted)

I am woken by a screeching and flapping, the air vibrating, dinosaurs returned to the earth.

Finishing round one of the seven-month regime. I have been taking a daily dose of Revlimid for three weeks (the regime is three weeks on, one week off, during which there are Rituximab infusions). Apart from fatigue, sometimes overwhelming, other things have been manageable, including a rash that came and went. But then last weekend it turned into serious torment. The hospital team determined it was a reaction to either the Revlimid or one of the drugs given to fight the effects of the Revlimid (probably the latter). Since I'd stopped the Revlimid the other drugs were discontinued, but the torment continued. Drinking ginger tea was a comfort, but not a cure. The only thing that gave some relief is a narcotic. This is fine at night, not too good when you have to work. Monday I worked till mid-afternoon, came home, took the drowsy pill, conked out. Surfaced just before Judit, bearing chicken soup, came to fetch me for our Feldenkrais class. The class was, as always, succor for body and soul. I lay on the floor, moved minutely, and every so often dozed off. An hour later at home, heating up the chicken soup, I hear an almighty kerfuffling in the yard, much screeching and flapping, the air vibrating, dinosaurs returned to the earth.

Two of the live chickens (as opposed to the chicken in the soup) were careening around the yard. I grabbed a flashlight and broomstick and staggered out. The door to their run was wide open, and so were all the doors to their little house. One of us had forgotten to lock them in for the night. There in their house taking up most of the floor was a possum, an unusually pretty possum, tan and grey. And just above the possum was Sabrina on her perch, shivering and shaking, silenced. With the aid of a broomstick I edged the possum out. He slipped down

the ramp to the ground, gliding with greater elegance than the hens ever do; they slither and hop and stomp down the ramp to freedom every morning. I had to chase the possum into the vegetable garden away from the other two chickens and away from Sabrina, who was now performing in the yard like a yoyo emitting strangled clucks. Then I sat on the ground and lowered my weapons and listened to my own heart emitting strangled clucks. Chickens can't see in the dark, which means it is sometimes very easy to pick them up and sometimes impossible if they are in panic. Holly and Sabrina stopped running, and I cooed to them, making the chicken lullaby sounds they know from nighttime, when we do the final lock and check. Holly is the sook, and so she was, I think, calmed by being picked up and cuddled and stroked and returned to her house. Sabrina next, no problem. Funny Face next. Then Lula Mae, the little wild one who disdains human contact, did not wish to be touched or returned. Every time I approached, crouched and cooing, she would be propelled from her own crouching position into a feathered ball of fury, flying through the air away from the chicken run. Half an hour of cooing, begging, reprimanding, and cursing ensued, half an hour of stalking and stumbling. Adrenalin had expelled all narcotic effects, and the drama suppressed the itching. Eventually I held Lula Mae in my two hands, feathered lightning condensed into a solid little body. Finally they were all back home, all doors sealed, a possum fate averted.

At last I got to eat my chicken soup.

The next day off we go, J and I, to the hospital for the first infusion of Rituximab. I have had this drug before, about eighteen months ago, and tolerated it fairly well. Today it goes slowly but uneventfully. Five hours or so after I arrive, the little packet on the IV stand is nearly empty. Then I start shivering. The PAs (physician assistants) are there straightaway, and lots of nurses and what they call "the kit." Don't worry they say, you've got the chills, it's a common reaction, we are going to give you a drug and then you might sweat and it'll be OK. In a flash something shifts, blackness encroaching, panic, as though there were a possum in the room. I remember saying, I feel really bad. "What sort of bad?" someone asks. But I just feel the tar pits opening up and the possum lurking and can't speak. The next thing I remember is the doctor shouting at me, "Open your eyes! Open your eyes! Look at me!" and all I want to do is sink back into oblivion. Then time seemed to go very slowly, and after a while they said, "You can close your eyes now and relax." When I asked what happened they said, "You gave us a fright, you just lost consciousness, and then you stopped breathing."

So for the next infusion, two days later, they fiddled with the cocktail, added some stuff (steroids), changed the secondaries (the drugs that guard against the side effects). I was really scared this time, like I have never been before. I think

that J was even more scared. He said it was really terrifying when I lost consciousness and stopped breathing and the room was suddenly full of doctors, technicians, and machines. It was much more terrifying for him than for me—I didn't know what was happening and couldn't see anything. I am glad he was there.

It went very slowly but without drama. And same yesterday. Yesterday was Sunday, nice and quiet in the infusion center. They had to change me from Saturday to make sure there was an oncologist on duty. My nurse said, "Glad to meet you, you are the Blue Code Lady." Blue code, she tells me, is when a patient stops breathing.

The itching has stopped. I continue the infusions tomorrow. And then restart the Revlimid. We hope the rash and itching will not start up again. If it does it means it's the Revlimid and treatment will have to stop. If it doesn't it means the "side effect" is caused by the anti-side-effect drug. I hope it's not the Revlimid. Despite the horror of all these chemicals and the dubious ways they change your body and the fact that this drug is in the experimental stage for CLL, I remember what it was like to have more than a year of partial remission, to feel normal, to wake each morning with energy. And I want to be there again.

(for Miriam)

Events unfold in the snow. The bare black winter trees echo the straight edges of the frame, it is a perfect composition in black and white, artistically monochromatic. This prologue is intriguing (we recognize the actor Javier Bardem, but there are no other narrative orientations), and for a few moments, though intrigued, I also feel prickled by the rather precious aestheticism of the setup, the painterliness. A young man, younger than Bardem, walks in out of the blue and into the snow just as Jane Greer walked in out of the sunlight in *Out of the Past*. Who is he? And why are they meeting, here, in a cold and lonely place? There are no smiles, no greetings, no signs of familiarity. Is he a ghost, an assassin, a drug dealer, Alain Delon returned to exact revenge? There is a sliver of icy menace in the scene, a dead owl lying in the snow. The stranger warns Bardem that he should not wear a pony tail because he looks like a fox and will frighten the owls. Ah yes, says Bardem, I heard that story. A glimmer, memories stirring. And then the young man tells Bardem that he can make the sound of the wind. And he does, it is a magical moment as his face changes shape and sounds issue forth, and there is a cut to the snowy expansive space and the sound of the wind whistling through the landscape, through the permeable contours of the film screen, whistling and whirring through the film theater, into our bodies, waking us up. And then he imitates the sound of water, the gurgling gushing whooshing and sucking. Bardem asks him if he can do both sounds together. He can. And when he does, Bardem smiles. The smile cracks open his long granite face and simultaneously sunders the austere aesthetic verticality of the scene—the bare black columnar trees, the standing figures of the two men. The gravitas of his demeanor crumbles into rivulets of

pleasure. And we laugh too, involuntarily, as though we have been tickled. We laugh with him, but we laugh too, I think, not simply out of recognition or identification, but because the cinematic technology enervates our senses. The sound is at once human and inhuman, natural and unnatural, and mediated, produced through cinematic technology. We in the audience smile or laugh because we see and sense the act of making noise.

The smile, like the snow drifting very gently, eddying in small twirls, introduces movement, energetic sensation, into this aesthetic scene. It also initiates a discursive dramatization of cinema aesthetics which unfolds throughout this film. This film, *Beautiful*, in which there are very few laughs.

A few weeks before she died Miriam and I walked in the snow near where she lived in Chicago. She walked this route almost every day of her life in Chicago, through the Japanese garden, around the small lake, usually with her husband Michael. It was routine, and yet every time it was new, every time she discovered new things to delight in, new sensuous pleasures. That day was no exception. It was exhilarating and fun, and we laughed at new leaves improbably emerging on dead twigs, the young men improvising a skating rink on the lake, the sound and touch of the softly drifting snow. We argued about the names of the wild flowers that grow in this urban space. And we talked of what would happen to her ashes, and what we would cook for dinner (anticipating a tussle over the exact timing of the beans—*about* three minutes, or, two minutes and forty-five seconds *exactly*), and of the book Miriam had finished, and how her ideas had changed over the years; how, in her close and long and attentively detailed attention to the three old blokes (my term, not hers of course)—Adorno, Kracauer, and Benjamin—her understanding of aesthetics had mutated. Of course, what she has done in this book and in her other work is theorize for us new understandings of cinema aesthetics in a changing and globalized media landscape.

Just before coming to Chicago I had been in a Shambhala workshop in which we had been exploring the icon of the snow lion: on the banner a blue figure—a rather curious rendition of a lion, an Asiatic lion I guess, a lion with a snub nose—against a white background. Suddenly I understood: Miriam embodied this idea, as we walked in the snow—the combination of discipline and joy. And I understood her fanaticism or practices that I had often taken to be fanatic: her routines (yoga, diet, a programmed time to take a nap, massage, acupuncture, walking in the fresh air), her insistence, even when ill and feeling lousy and running a temperature, on sticking to routine. I understood then how that routine enabled joy and an opening into the world.

It was not a soothing experience to sit through this film, so soon after Miriam's death, this film in which a man dies slowly and painfully of cancer. And that's not



all. The film heaps on misery and misfortune in piles, one shovelful after another, in your face. The melodrama is rather extreme. But the sensory excitation of that early snow scene seizes you by the skin and the nails, and reverberates through the film, as various threads unravel, spin out, weave together. Threads that are narrative but also (and not always coincidentally) more like the laughter and the wind and the water: sensations of movement, images that move through you, through the film and that gather like snow, forming new knowledges, ways of knowing.

*Biutiful* takes place in Barcelona, though not the Barcelona of *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. It is a contemporary European city. Which is to say: a city no longer clearly defined by Europeaness, but one crossed, often contentiously and violently, by various vectors of migration. In this city Uxbal (Bardem) is a middleman. Living a marginal existence himself, he collects and distributes money, moving between various groups of illegal workers and their bosses and the forces of law and order. But as becomes the role of middleman he is also a mediator. While dodging between the police and the sweatshop owners and the illegal Chinese and African workers, he is a medium, a spirit medium. He can communicate with the dead and is able to ease the passage of a dead child who does not want to leave. Facing his own ghosts, though, turns out to be a bit more difficult.

Facing imminent death himself Uxbal also faces other deaths, or should we say that other deaths, spectral lives, rise up and insinuate themselves into his consciousness and the somatic consciousness of the film? The young man in the snow, it turns out, is the father he never knew who fled to Mexico from the Franco forces before Uxbal was born. In Mexico, where he died, the body was embalmed and then sent back across the sea, back to Spain. In his coffin, moving over the ocean, he hears the sound of the wind and the water. And now, many years later, Uxbal is being offered money for the *nicho*, the space the body occupies. The coffin is opened up so that the body of the father can be cremated. It is a shocking, almost-horror-movie moment in which recognition and misrecognition collide. The body has been uncannily preserved, but when Uxbal puts out a finger to touch the flesh it gives way. I think of Bill telling me how unnerving it was at the funeral to sit so close to the coffin and to (inescapably, involuntarily) think of Miriam's body in there. I think of friends who sat here in San Diego with Arsenio, who died a week before Miriam, the friends who took turns to sit for three days and nights by his body, helping to ease his passage to elsewhere, to reconcile their own feelings of confusion and loss. I hear Ariana in the theater next to me let out an exclamation. Later she tells me that this is the cemetery in which her mother is buried.

The uncanny exchange between body and phantom, flesh and memory, image and flesh. This I think is what haunts us, causes that hollow pain in the solar plexus, the imagining of a body so vividly alive and now not alive. It is as though,

like Uxbal, you reach out to touch, but instead of encountering solidity things crumble.

Spain and Mexico. *Biutiful* recasts the old romantic story of the new world and the old. Just as it stirs the pot of hysteria that is materializing all over Europe (and the U.S.) about immigration, it returns to us as a material reminder (a body of proof) of Spain's own migrations and appropriations and enforced exiles and simultaneously complicates the story of a one-way street. Exile, invasion, inversion, appropriation, exploitation, compromise, refuge—all these vectors, and others, mark the globalized urbanity of the twenty-first century.

Uxbal's father emigrates to Mexico and returns as a corpse to Spain. A different Barcelona from the city he left. Miriam's ashes will return to Prague, a different Prague from that which her parents knew.

There is a devastating scene toward the end of the movie in which the bodies of a dozen or so Chinese workers are washed up by the sea, splayed out on a Barcelona beach. They are stone cold dead, all sounds of moving wind and water wrung out of their corpses. They have been dumped into the ocean in order to erase their presence and the crime. They were illegal immigrants employed in a basement sweatshop who die because of inadequate ventilation. Uxbal himself is implicated: in an act of concerned generosity he had provided the space heaters (during a freezing winter) that cause the suffocation. They have no legal status or presence in Barcelona, no families to mourn, it is easy to dump them like trash.

But they return. And Uxbal is wracked by remorse and grief, not only for the political enormity of the crime (and his implication in it, which becomes more contorted as the plot unravels; it is not easy to escape the tangled web of corruption) but also because of a personal relation. Lily, who had babysat his children, is among the dead, washed up on the shore still clutching her young child.

They do not laugh and gurgle and splutter and whistle, but their sounds of silence infiltrate the film. The corruption that sustains illegal immigration is made material in the sound of Uxbal's sobbing. Drowning out my own sobbing, and muffling that of the man behind me in the theater, and others all around.

As I watched this film Miriam was with me, I felt her presence and thought about what I learned from her, the kind of conversations we shared, all the feelings of love and friendship and separation. This is not a bad function for films to perform. But more than this it was Miriam's interest in film aesthetics that spoke to me through the film.

In the film Uxbal's father returns—as a man younger than Uxbal himself—not merely to haunt him, but also to lighten his life. Of course what Uxbal remembers is not a memory, but an imagining. And perhaps it is always this way, the dead haunt and persecute us but also ease the pain we survivors endure in that they

lend us their whistling, and their words, out of which we weave new sensations. Part of me feels a terrible loss that I can never again call Miriam up and talk to her—about *Biutiful* for instance. Miriam had the capacity to listen and to read very closely and the tenacity and loyalty to keep conversations alive and lively. And so I will continue to talk to her, to imagine what she might say and to think through with her a whole range of intellectual problems but also shared pleasures of a quotidian kind: swimming, walking, eating, gossiping while driving, choosing colors, picking beans.

Siegfried Kracauer once said that “in a photograph a person’s history is buried as if under a layer of snow”; in contrast, films “have an affinity, evidently denied to photography, for the continuum of life or the ‘flow of life.’” Snow itself, however, is a very cinematic type of a thing, deployed both for its heaviness—to bury—and its lightness—to flutter; its propensity both to preserve and to instantiate movement, to manifest as a rippling of the air, the passing of time, the dissipation of matter. I think of Walter Benjamin and his collection of snow globes. I think of him dying, stateless, after having lived in exile for seven years in the border town of Portbou, about eighty miles north of Barcelona. I remember Miriam—who has done so much to preserve the spirit of Benjamin and to animate his work in a changing media landscape. I remember her that day we walked and talked in the snow. I wish I could encapsulate that memory in a snow globe, shake it up at will, use it as an antidote to grief. But somehow Miriam won’t stay put, in one place, predictably globalized. She has more to say. Her voice, like the sounding of wind and water in *Biutiful*, continues to whistle and whirr through the permeable contours of the snow globe, infiltrating our somatic consciousness, waking us up.

## Chicken Feet

Chicken feet. Becoming chicken feet. My hands: scaly, reptilian, taloned. The rash and pustules are drying out and sloughing off, flakes of brittle skin. There is a compulsion to pick and peel, this skin that is me, uncannily so—half dead and half alive. This body—alien, prehistoric. Palms upturned, my hands do not resemble hands. What I see are chicken feet like those bought from Curtis at the Hillcrest Sunday farmers' market, a bonus thrown in with the chicken, along with a few heads and giblets, to add to J's chicken stock.

I imagine how the cats, Elvis and Roxy, felt the first time they encountered the chickens. When we opened the door of their run so that they could range the yard, they stuck together and stayed close to home, moving in a mass, a singular feathery body, delicately pecking at this and that, determining what was tasty, where the bugs were. As the days passed, they grew bolder. Then they saw the cats. Curiosity killed the cat they say, but this time the curiosity was in the chickens. Intrigued by these new creatures they charged—en masse, all four of them—thundering down the yard, wings flapping, huge scaly taloned feet. Dinosaurs in flight. Imagine those talons ripping into flesh.

Layer after layer—though not smoothly, it's not as though there is a layer, as in a ream of paper, where you can shuffle and each piece of paper settles back into its own layer; no it's more like when, in the Los Laureles Canyon in Tijuana, mud—after a churning storm—dries and cracks and flakes when you walk on it, disintegrating. Nothing underneath, no topsoil. Let's stick with the saying anyway—layer after layer my skin peels away. What will be left? My hands will disappear into nothingness. I will be handless. And what will all the peeling away of the body reveal: a complex psyche? Not bloody likely. More likely just a skeletal claw, something resembling a chicken's foot. But without all the gristle and gelatinous support that makes for such delicious chicken soup.

## Why Chickens, or Homage to Gloria

I remained loyal, as a man would to a bride whom his family received with open ridicule. Now it is my turn to wear the smile, as I listen to the enthusiastic cackling of urbanites, who have suddenly taken up the hen socially and who fill the air with the newfound ecstasy and knowledge and the relative charms of the New Hampshire Red and the Laced Wyandotte. You would think, from their nervous cries of wonder and praise, that the hen was hatched yesterday in the suburbs of New York, instead of in the remote past in the jungles of India.

—E. B. WHITE

Chickens are certainly in the air right now; you can hear them everywhere ruffling their feathers, chirruping and emitting alarmed raucous clucks as they lay their eggs; you can hear them in urban areas as well as farms throughout the country; you can hear and see them in the news, on websites, on Facebook. Forging communities, shaping identities, making people feel good about themselves, validating their farm-to-table authenticity. I like to think I am not merely part of a trend, party to a prevailing home-steady ethos. But such individuating is not new, or rather, the popularity of chickens—and along with it the desire to participate in the party but also simultaneously to set oneself apart as superior in terms of credentials, chicken acquaintance, and history—has happened before in this country.

E. B. White has a marvelous essay, “The Hen (An Appreciation).” I knew of him as the author of *Charlotte’s Web* and the husband of Katharine White, a garden writer whom I revere, but I didn’t know that, as well as being a quintessential New Yorker (and indeed an essayist at the *New Yorker* for many years), he was also a farmer and a chicken devotee. In this essay, written in 1944, he writes that the chicken has not always been in favor among city-bred people, but “Right now the

hen is in favor. The war has deified her and she is the darling of the home front, feted at conference tables, praised in every smoking car, her girlish ways and curious habits the topic of many an excited husbandryman to whom yesterday she was a stranger without honor or allure.”

When showing off the chickens, I am often compelled to insinuate into the conversation my long history with chickens, to make it clear that I am not merely a fly-by-night, an arriviste, a devotee of every passing fad. I hear my backyard tour segueing into braggadocio, but even as I hear myself I can’t stop the train that’s started relentlessly chugging along, assuring my captive audience of my superior credentials. The truth, however, is that although I have been around chickens, off and on, all my life and have indeed nurtured a great fondness for the chicken as a creature and for fresh eggs as one of the great benefits of being a human being (or a raccoon or a snake), I have never before been so involved, engaged, consumed in the project of chickening. Mostly this has been a matter of timing. I had been wanting and hoping for chickens ever since living in San Diego and having more yard space. I arrived here after ten years of living in Bondi Beach, Sydney, surely the most desirable place in the world to live. But there I lived in a small rented apartment, no chicken or garden space. Here, I traded the beach for a garden.

Then I got ill. Or, rather, was diagnosed with CLL that slowly progressed and so began the years of declining energy and fluctuating symptoms. It was when things got a bit worse and I faced the second chemo treatment that I turned to chickens. And at the same time, or perhaps it wasn’t coincidental, backyard chickens were coming into vogue. There I was slap bang in the middle of the zeitgeist.

One day I found myself musing upon the two banana trees, gorgeous trees that endowed the garden with tropical opulence and proffered leaves for wrapping tamales and fish. One yielded small red bananas, the other, tasty yellow bananas. Theoretically yielded. In fact we had had very few crops. One day, fixing a tear in the automatic drip system, I sat back on my haunches and gazed upon the banana trees. “You guys take up a lot of space,” I said, sadly. And water. And suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, an image appeared to me: a chicken house planted where the banana trees now grew. Curtains for the banana trees. Slowly, over the next months, a chicken plan began evolving. Steve Illott bought me a subscription to *Backyard Poultry*. The CLL was worsening, and Dr. K had me lined up to start a treatment. Dispirited and drained of energy, I found it hard to summon enthusiasm for research and writing, after teaching. But chickens were a different matter. Somehow the mere mention, a passing thought, of chickens sharpened my mind, focused attention, sent me on a mission to find out *everything*. I was able to focus on the chicken project with obsessive acuity. Bit by bit, week by week, Peggy and

I hacked back the banana trees; J carted the foliage away, uprooted the plants. I paced out the available area and began looking at designs for chicken coops: planning, scheming, imagining a new world.

There is evidence. Small square photos taken by my father with his brownie camera, shots of me as a little girl, among the chickens, gazing at them in wonder and delight. They lived in small A-frame lightweight houses, which were moved around, and during the day they ranged freely. *Free range* was a word that frolicked in the air, danced, a minuet partnered with words like *Rhode Island Reds*. I so clearly recall the adult conversations, the tossing back and forth of possible breeds. Rhode Island Reds were particularly alluring because of their supposed island provenance, the exoticism of islands to a child living in a landlocked country. In the photo, however, the birds are white, not red. These must have been the early experiments. Later there were hundreds of chickens, housed in small pens, each with a small run for ranging. They were situated near the mulberry trees, huge old trees copiously bearing fruit that we would pluck and eat, our bare feet turning purply red as we tramped over the fallen squishy fruit.

It would be nearly twenty years before I would live with chickens again. In Australia, a friend, Doris, whom I had known in Glasgow when I was a graduate student, and I bought a small run-down farm near the town of Toora in South Gippsland, a couple of hours from Melbourne. Rolling hills, a few miles from the ocean and a few miles to a mountain where ancient rain forests grew. It had been a rich dairy farming area, but with the monopolization of the dairy industry small farmers were being squeezed out and weekends were buying up. There was a small shed behind the house, which sported an old sign, tinny and faded but still legible: TOORA HOLIDAY FLATS. With the help of others, particularly Helen Casey and “the boys” across the road (the farm we bought had been a larger property divided in two, and two local brothers bought the other half) who taught us how, we built a fence around the outhouse, which we smartened up, installed perches, repainted the sign, and planted kiwi fruit and passion fruit vines.

Then the big day came. We went with one of “the boys,” our lovely neighbor Peter Danuser, to fetch the dozen white leghorn pullets ordered from a chicken farm in Yarram. Back at Toora, Peter and I clipped one wing on each bird before releasing them from the cage into the run.

Helen was very fond of the chickens. There is an old photo of her proudly holding a chicken as though it were a large but living fish she’d landed. Instead of a man with a fish or a boy with a car: a girl with a chicken. In a comment on my blog, that she titled “Homage to Gloria,” Helen recently wrote, “For the curious, the chickens of Toora were all named Gloria as their talents were worthy of a Patti Smith title.”

For Charlie Aarons it was different. She had a phobia about birds. She was staying that weekend and came with us to Yarram. Although she was brave, I imagine how she must have felt that time she came with us to buy the chickens. I cannot worm my way into her skin and feel what she feels when in the presence of chickens, yet I have a vague inkling since I too have a phobia. Recently she wrote to me, posting on the blog: “Collecting eggs from a chicken coop is still a serious challenge for me let alone the idea of actually picking up a chook!”

Although it’s hard for me to grasp, I do know that you don’t have to have a phobia exactly to not be enamored of chickens. And childhood intimacy with the birds does not necessarily guarantee lifetime devotion. I have two friends, Steve Fagin and Allen Shelton, who were sent to collect eggs as kids and found it a terrifying and repulsive experience. Allen, nevertheless, always asks about the chickens, and Steve is my main supplier of chicken stories from all over the internet. He takes delight in the more macabre and bizarre inflections of chicken faddishness. Such as: *Backyard chickens dumped at shelters when hipsters can’t cope, critics say* and *Chickens in Sweaters* on Etsy. Looking back through the emails I see my response: “Thank you Steve. I would sooner eat my chickens than dress them in such unstylish gear. Get a dog if you want to dress.” Always laconic and sardonic, he concluded the exchange: “Glad to hear you ascribe to ‘higher values.’”

In Perth I bought a house that came with chickens. Perhaps that is why I bought that house, or maybe it was also the swimming pool. The pool only brought trouble, but the chickens were a joy, especially Miss Fluff, a Chinese bantam with fluffy legs. They used to escape periodically through a hole in the fence to my neighbor’s yard, that of Susan Melrose, who was also a colleague. So when I left, the chickens just moved over permanently to live with her.

As a girl I coped once, or rather did not cope exactly, by constructing a project, an obsession, to counteract the humiliations and debilitations endured in the biology classroom. On that occasion it was because of a phobia, and salvation came through poisonous plants. On this occasion it is because of chickens and cancer. Although that girl abandoned science, she learned—through studying poisonous plants—that the category of *poisonous* is relational. Poisonous to whom? When and where is the poison active? And she learned a little bit about botany, about plants in the wild and those that have been domesticated. And in time she would become a fanatical gardener so that when she was diagnosed with leukemia she had a garden to be obsessive about, a garden where she could welcome chickens and build them a *palacio de las princesas*.



## Boomerang

*Why did the Australian go berserk?*

Because he got a new boomerang and then he tried to get rid of the old one.

Yesterday—an infusion day—Akos gave me a ride to the hospital. He was euphoric, having just sent off his book manuscript. But, he said, his relief was shadowed by a joke. Akos is married to Judit Herskó, whose father was János Herskó, a Hungarian film director who would often enter his own films to tell a joke. He might for instance materialize on a trolley and, for no very good reason, would tell this boomerang joke. I guess it was at the height of boomerang jokes. I vaguely remember them circulating when I was a kid, round about the time of hula hoops.

Every writer knows this: the sense that your book is never really finished, it will keep coming back, there will be more revisions, and more and more. And now that all the versions are electronic, the old versions, full of typos and one or two crucial mistakes, threaten to reappear in the proofs. It's only when you get the published book—that solid thing—in your hands that it feels finished. Maybe. But of course all that is changing. That solid thing, the book, is disappearing, words materialize and evaporate as you write, as you read. This is not to say that nanopublishing and the drive toward the short bite rather than the long book guarantee the sense of an ending. No, instead there is something far more precarious: ephemeral finality, ghosted by a labyrinthine digital archive. Words are like money. They melt into air and reappear in new configurations.

Akos's book is about plastic money, a history of the credit card in postcommunist countries. Some of these credit cards, linked to the state rather than to banks,

are used much more habitually and extensively than in the U.S., for instance. Money in the form of bank notes and coins and written checks scarcely exists. Credit cards have become a form of ID, they store information, can be used to receive, electronically, all sorts of things, like your pension payments. And even as I write, credit cards themselves are disappearing: into cell phones, into thumbprints, into eye scans. Not only in the postcommunist world. You know that dubious item you bought (no didn't even buy, just perused in a browsing sortie late one night)? Well it will reappear for everyone to see on some social networking site as something you "like." Even worse, that aberrant impulse will return to plague you in the form of endless haranguing from cheesy underwear companies. You might forget, but the marketing machine will not. Your secret is never safe with Victoria.

The boomerang joke can manifest in many guises. You could give it a Žižekian spin, which might go something like this. The Australian wants to get away from Australia and start afresh. So he goes to California, say, and sets up an alternative market where he sells tea tree oil and water-wise Australian native plants and a unique new service, surfing therapy (therapy while you surf). . . . No problem with the Californian surfing dudes—they take to therapy like ducks to vodka. But then comes a guy who looks and talks like Bryan Brown. Laconic, gruff, handsome in a chiseled, hard-knocks kind of way. Turns out he himself is a surfing analyst, and the question he asks, which sends the whole new age entrepreneurial enterprise for a loop, is this: "Why did the Australian go berserk?"

For me, in the Moores Cancer Infusion Center later in the day, it bounced back in the spectral form of CLL. In the past week I've been feeling considerably regenerated, exhilarated, hopeful again. The lab results confirmed that the feeling isn't merely illusory, so Dr. C thinks we can now double the oral dose and reduce the infusion to once a month. He warns that things will probably get worse again, before and if they get better. He says they do not know whether the increased dose correlates with increased effectivity (this is a trial; it's one of the things they are trying to determine); it does seem to be the case, but it might be that because patients are improved before the dose is increased their systems are in a better position to deal with the ravages of the drug. In the infusion center, while keeping up a façade of cheerfulness, I experienced again the cul-de-sac sensation. The futility of it all. Although there may be periods of respite, CLL itself will always bounce back. Once it starts progressing, it will move in a relentlessly linear fashion, gathering momentum, working toward a conclusion. But against this teleological drive, as a person who "has" CLL, you (and this applies also, I imagine, to those who have other kinds of chronically incurable diseases) experience periods of optimism, euphoria even. Just when you have forgotten about CLL, are getting on with life

in an enjoyable day-to-day fashion, it whizzes through the air and hits you on the back of the head, sending you catapulting back into the ER, back on to antibiotics, back into a funk. The malevolence of repetition.

There is an extraordinary air of cheeriness in the infusion center. At its worst you might think of it as something akin to battery chicken farming. When you close your eyes and try to sleep the noise keeps you awake, the noise of beeping machines, televisions, people talking on cell phones, nurses reading out orders—all these noises merge together and sound like the strangled clucks of a thousand tormented chickens. All of us chickens chained by tubes that run between machines, that run from little packets of clear liquid hanging from hooks, into a multitudinous network of veins, ready and waiting for chemo plumping. But at its best everyone is cheerful in the infusion center, polite even, even as the day wears on. There is much joshing and spinning out of repartee, bits and pieces of verbal exchange are tossed hither and thither, everyone enters into the fiction that this is just an ordinary day, a day like any other. And of course for the nurses and staff it is, which makes it all the more extraordinary that under duress and repetition they are so alert and behave with such good-natured equanimity, remembering names, histories, stories. And through this enactment of an illusion everyone rises to the occasion, enters into the spirit of the performative event, into this compact of civility.

I do appreciate the considerable theatrical skills, as well as the hospital experience, that it takes to generate and sustain a mood. Still, sometimes you want something to puncture the air of equanimity, something that hits the nail on the head, you want a joke that is grim, black, irreverent. The boomerang, as used by Australian Aborigines, was and is a tool and a hunting weapon, some are designed to return (in their flight frightening birds, say), but mostly they are intended to hit and bring down a prey, a moving target. Curiously, when it comes to jokes (and illness), hitting your prey can simultaneously be a way of releasing all those lurgy birds lurking in the wetlands.

## A Way of Making Another Egg

A chicken is just an egg's way of making another egg.

—SAMUEL BUTLER

We experimented at the weekend with a new way of cooking eggs. It goes by the name of Arzak eggs, and I found out about it reading *Lucky Peach*, a new quarterly magazine edited by David Chang, of Momofuku fame, and Peter Meehan, with whom he wrote the Momofuku cookbook. It is a really fun way of conjuring a roundish poached egg, a sphere swaddled in soft white gauze, a teasing hint of yellow within. Once it's cooked you can slide the slippery ball into a noodle soup or over a puree of some sort (imagine an emerald green pea puree over black rice), gently puncture the roundness with a fork, and watch as the creamy golden yolk oozes into the world.

The Arzak eggs are the final touch, the pièce de résistance, the magical surprise. But it's a long haul to get there. First you have to prepare a bed for the eggs. (Some people might consider this the main dish and the eggs as an accoutrement. Not I, nor Señor Arzak.) Long slow preparation, and then when it comes to it, split-second timing and perfect coordination. Turn it into a ritual, take all day. I invite my friend Steve Ilott, who has been so complicit in the chicken project, to share the play, the sense of craziness, and so we can wander around the garden in between phases of cooking—deadheading flowers, contemplating failures, imagining new plantings, and talking to the chickens.

I went with *Lucky Peach*'s suggestion of serving the Arzak eggs over ramen and a ragu spiced up with a Jamaican mix. The recipe is in the same magazine and comes from Mario Carbone, who serves it in his restaurant P.S.46. To save

time I could have prepared the onions—a huge pile of thickly julienned onions cooked down into a sweet, soft, brown-gold mush—the day before, and I could have ground the spices ahead of time, but there wasn't any time in the days before, nor in the days to come. Sunday is the only day we have this kind of time. It was a long, slow, dreamy day of futzing around in the kitchen, wafting through a range of smells, tasting and anticipating. We began at the farmers' markets: from Sage Mountain Farm at Hillcrest we got chuck beef, making sure it was laced with enough fat to flavor the dish, all of the tomatoes came from the garden (the last of the summer crop off the vine and some from the freezer where they were thrown in whole), the spices were ground and roasted, filling the house with delectable smells. The large jalapeño from the garden made for a much more picante dish than anticipated, so we didn't add the chile sauce the recipe suggested (though I did add some crumbled dried anchovies). After hours and hours the ragu was ready.

To make Arzak eggs you first break the eggs, one at a time, into a small bowl lined with plastic wrap that has been sprayed with oil. Steve gathers the wrap and twists it around the runny egg while I tie it with string and hang it off something that serves as a beam to be suspended over a pot of water—a chopstick if the pot is small; we used the handle of a large wooden spoon. Juggling act ensues as we try to keep the wooden spoon steady and attach four swinging egg packages. Then, together—without tangling the string or our ten fingers into a knot—we have to find a way to suspend the balloon shapes into a pot of gently simmering water, making sure that none touch the bottom. Cook gently at the same temperature for four minutes and twenty seconds. Then quickly and deftly (ideally deftly . . . ) you remove the balloon, cut it open, and let the round egg roll onto its luscious and delectable edible bed. Our bed was composed of spicy ragu ladled over hot noodles. The egg was nestled in, some finely sliced scallions and dried sardines sprinkled over the surface. I joined us, we broke the eggs with chopsticks, gobbled, slurped, spluttered, then paused, looked at one another and sighed, grinned together and finished our bowls more slowly, slaveringly. What a way to eat an egg.

OK, so talking of therapy, specifically of nutrition, what, you might ask, is someone with cancer doing eating meat laced with fat that melts into and permeates every oozing fiber of the entire dish? And what about the eggs? Moreover, the combination of eggs and red meat? And, perhaps the most edgy question: what about eating eggs cooked in plastic submerged in hot simmering water? So here's the thing. The thing about cancer, or actually about any disturbance of health: you have to play pleasure against wisdom (or if you're a Freudian, maybe you say the death drive). Although diet may not—or at least not alone—cure you of cancer, it will certainly make it much easier for your body to fight and protect against toxins.

Nutrition is therapy. Avoiding pesticides, the residues of antibiotics in produce, the poisons in packaging and preservatives and processing; and, on the positive side, eating foodstuffs that promote energy, all this is foundational. But pleasure, relaxation, bliss, good company, enjoying cooking and eating food—these states are also therapeutic. Stress builds toxins in us humans as well as in the chickens and other animals subjected to ghastly living and dying conditions.

So, because I'm fortunate to have a reasonably large (though never of course large enough) backyard, I grow, and buy where I can and when I can afford it, organic vegetables and meats, try to minimize eating processed and canned foods and sugar and saturated fats. Though there's quite a bit of stumbling and tripping along the path of good intentions. I don't eat much red meat, but wow is it sometimes fantastic. Phil and Juany Noble who own Sage Mountain Farm graze their cattle entirely on grass and also feed them all the surplus pumpkins and other vegetables from the market stands. Eggs, if they are fresh and organic, are good for you, the cholesterol beneficent.

Cooking eggs in plastic wrap though, that is kind of crazy. The combination of heat and plastic is horrible. You wouldn't want to do it every day, probably you wouldn't want to do it more than very occasionally, if ever. And you can surely arrive at a similar kind of poached egg a number of different ways. At all costs, however, you always want to avoid the kind of ineptly poached egg that haunts me still, the rubbery look and the sulphuric smell, from boarding school days, so vividly evoked by Kate Atkinson as "a sickly jellyfish deposited on toast to die." But the Arzak way is experimental, fun, and in the end beautiful and texturally divine. The original handwritten and drawn recipe in Spanish (where the eggs are part of a larger concoction involving chorizo and bacon) is from Juan Mari Arzak and is reproduced in the magazine.

I have to admit my feelings about the magazine are mixed. The insistently bad-boy braggadocio of Chang, Bourdain, and cronies gets a bit tiring. Beneath the exultant enthusiasm you can hear a muffled whining refrain: kill the mother! kill the mother! Alice Waters and Judy Rodgers run for cover. Nevertheless, there is a welcome verve to the *Lucky Peach* project, a combination of irreverence and inventiveness, terrific graphics, and a refreshing refusal to divide the world of food into haute and fast.

When all is said and done, the thing about eggs is their versatility, the remarkably different ways they can taste, how they are incorporated, deployed, displayed in different cultural cuisines. The humble hen, call her Holly, Lula Mae, Sabrina, or Funny Face, embodies all this potential.