

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Essays

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection

March 2023

The Scars That Bind

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_essays

Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "The Scars That Bind" (2023). *Essays*. 37.
https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_essays/37

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Essays by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lfthompson@pittstate.edu.

The Scars That Bind

It looks like I simply never had breasts, just a barely detectable line armpit to armpit. The scar up my belly is also faint 14 years after my uterus, ovaries, and assorted other parts, including one aptly named an apron, were removed.

These are the scars I think of first—on my soft front rather than my hard back, laid in places of vulnerability, made consciously for the sake of life. The only accidental scars are on my left thumb from when I was 24 and cutting a bagel the wrong way, and across my forehead when, at age five jumping chair to chair in the store my father and grandfather owned, I missed. There are also small scars from cancer-related ports and biopsies, little marks on the terrain. The scars of family and culture continue transforming, snakes in motion somewhere in my being.

Each scar has its story, geography, history, biology, and ceremony. Each scar is a constellation in the shifting night sky of my body which, just like the sky, makes everything look the same age when gazing up, vanishing the long arcs of time between and inside one story and another.

The lower-Manhattan store was in the subway arcade of the Nassau and Fulton Street station, a station long closed after 9/11 three blocks away. The entrance, 14 steps down, is sometimes open, a scar that leads nowhere, and sometimes boarded up to keep people from running down the stairs to the ghosts of old stores and a metal gate preventing passage to the subway's underworld.

Subway Stamp Shop was eight feet deep and nine feet across, and packed with rage, cigarette smoke, and stamps from Angola, British Columbia, Persia, Botswana. My father and his mother screamed at each other, an ancient fight that seemed to have no origin, just longevity. “You're dead to me,” my grandmother would scream at her son. “When I die, I'm going to dance a jig on your grave,” my father would yell back at her. Meanwhile, my grandfather, a quiet man with a deep disdain for

conflict, yelling, or being indoors chain-smoked 100 unfiltered Tareyton cigarettes a day, ashes dropping off the end of his current one in the thick glass ashtray right next to where I drew large pictures of snakes threaded through each other for hours, hyped up on chocolate malteds, fear, and the weight of being a child empath in a family of screamers.

After I dove into the floor, father was thrilled to get to put the new siren he bought for such an occasion on top of the car and to drive as fast as he could. The spinning red light and high-pitched hum of the siren cleared the streets for us. Later, there were Frankenstein stitches across my forehead, and on the way home, soft-serve ice cream.

I was proud of my scar, one I earned from flying and falling. It brought me attention and even the affection—momentarily at least—of my parents, plus the acclaim of the streets as we roared forth, owning the city. There was a lot of blood, but that too was a badge to wear: a sign of daring followed by the courage, or maybe it was fear, to sit very still while they sewed me up.

“Everything can be survived if it's part of a story”—so goes the old Yiddish saying. Scars are narratives, beginning one place and ending another. They also embody the arc of the story informing them: an accident, a purposeful surgery, a long-coming severing of relationships, a botched-up reconciliation, a tearing apart of the land or the soul, and then whatever we can do to mop up the mess. When I speak of my breasts cut off, I use words like “surrender” and “willingly.” When I write of land long after it was cut asunder, I lean into “reclamation” rather than “erosion.” I'm an optimist that way.

This doesn't work when it comes to the story of my Polish grandmother, sent to America after her mother was raped and killed her while she hid in the blankets, and none of her siblings could raise her. Once embedded in Brooklyn, her scars multiplied across the death of her son in her arms and her surviving family killed in the Holocaust into other terms: “mental illness,” “manic depression,” “shock therapy,” and “lithium”—words that held her in a narrative and extended the sharp knife of that

narrative. No way to find redemption for herself, she split her time between crying in her bedroom and sidling up to me to say loud enough for everyone in the living room to hear, “Look at my daughters! So fat, they look like elephants, so disgusting.” My mother and aunt covered in shame.

Some stories don't have resolutions, open wounds begetting open wounds.

We moved to “the hill” as we called it, a housing development in central New Jersey where the streets had rhyming names, and the Levitt houses were either ranches or split levels painted dead colors. Our building site had a cliff behind it, and on top of the cliff, the backyard of another house facing the opposite direction as ours. “We're getting a hill,” my dad yelled, excited to have the land contoured to be something less edgy, uneven, and rife with danger.

When we visited the site, I slipped away my eight-year-old body and scrambled up the cliff to hide half-way up in a shallow cave that would soon be shaved away. I didn't know then this cliff-turned-hill would be my touchstone, a way to return to the earth, which has always been my sanctuary.

By the time we moved in, it was a smooth hill, but my father, unlike the other dads in the development, didn't mow it low and keep it fertilized. Instead, he let it go wild, its grasses long and falling over, composing perfect hiding places although it was a suburbanized wilderness cut and shaped to fit the American dream of pioneering while maintaining an illusion of wilderness. It was enough though for a broken little girl to take her sketchbook and baggie of pretzels into, hiding in the grasses to draw, safe in the narrative of making something.

The thumb happened at a party in a tight kitchen with a lot of drinking people laughing. Bagels were involved. I was telling stories, laughing so hard I couldn't get out the punch lines. Also slicing a bagel. What was I thinking? Not much, glorying in my new boyfriend—who later became my husband—and finally finding a place I belonged. Even the wound was a joke, “Now, look what I've

done!” A slapstick routine. An eye-roller. *Aw, it's nothing, let's just get a bandaid*, but the bleeding was too much, the gulf between skin too wide.

Even today, after the stitches are long out, an unfaded party scar, strangely compared to the cancer, family, or land scars. *Don't cut toward yourself*, it says. It was the first time in my life I had found my place, my people, my great love. The old narrative sang through that time, *I don't deserve this happiness*.

Miraculously, scars can vanish on the surface of the body although, as Ursula, the German energy healer I've worked closely with for decades reminds me that everything removed from the body remains in the astral body. “What falls apart is always. And is near,” writes Theodore Roethke in his great poem, “The Waking.” I picture the parts of me cut off or out floating in the atmosphere close to my body, a shadow me, larger, aura-like, where the broken toys meet in the junkyard of what's no longer in Body Central, Inc.

At the same time my breasts are gone, and strangely enough, beyond my reckoning, I don't actually miss them anymore. How is that possible?

The first cancer surgery was to remove a bit of the left breast and pinball radioactive dye through me to light up any cancerous lymph nodes. It sounded to me like body-as-pinball-machine, surely a Star Wars episode, complete with other planets.

Afterwards and back home, my surgeon called: two out of 19 lymph nodes had cancer. Just two. But two is more than the zero, and zero is the rule for no chemo, not that I didn't have a choice. I chose chemo willingly, even lovingly, saying, *Okay, bring this poison into me to kill what would kill me. Make me sick, very sick at times, and fill me with counter-acting meds to minimize the shooting pains in my bones, the vomiting, the migraines, even the exhaustion, as if an extraterrestrial vacuum*

was linked to my body, sucking out all the energy. I don't regret suffering in this case.

Before chemo, the lymph node removal and lumpectomy; after chemo, the hysterectomy, oophorectomy; after that, the bilateral mastectomy. All those “omy” words, friendly sounds as if we're adding a baby-talk ending to words of war. But just listing all the surgeries feels dishonest, as if I'm listing dishes in a 10-course meal, so orderly with lots of white tablecloths involved. It was far more of a foray to the underworld that wasn't the underworld at all, but a wilderness beyond this wilderness of prairie and woodlands where I live. I found refuge in hot soup, a dear friend looking into my eyes, my husband holding my scars in his sleep, the clouds banking purple and orange at once across the windows of what I thought I knew. So much more refuge than I knew life was capable of giving me.

The night before surrendering my breasts, we climbed the hill in the dark. It was late March, windy, and I wrapped my tattered sweater around me. Earlier I had Ken take photos of my breasts so I could remember them in images. Larger than I would have imagined when, as a young woman, I suffered the humiliation of having small and odd-shaped boobs, triangle danglers I called them, with enough room for a third breast in between the two.

I carried a round candle, and placed it at the base of a tree, lit it, and read into the wind a goodbye letter to my breasts. I would miss them. Mostly, I would miss my nipples, which couldn't be replicated in any kind of reconstruction. That long, thin road to stimulation—another wild zone for pleasure during sex—they would be gone too, and how would I get over this?

I did and I didn't. Over 14 years since having my breasts cut off, I enjoy sex as much as ever, maybe more so. I also want to reach out and hold other women's breasts sometimes just to feel the weight, and see if from outside-in, I can remember the inside-out. I hold the silicon prostheses I wear as breasts sometimes, my hands instinctively covering them when I'm cold although there's nothing there to shiver like there used to be.

The scar is a whisper of its former self. Surviving cancer is a tale of how how what's poison can be poisoned, then cut away, and look! The beautiful green earth will knit itself back together, make of this rupture a place of health, a tribute to life which is nothing but life going on being itself.

The land I crashed into didn't rent apart, but it was clear we—the minivan and me driving my three young children—had changed the contours of it. Black ice that morning, and as I drove through the wetlands on our right, I lost control of the van. At least, that's our language of it. Really, the earth just took over in ways I don't have language for. We were swirled and thrown into the only ditch on the right side of the road, landing upside down, still spinning.

Forest, my youngest son, just five at the time, was flung through an open window. I came to with my head below my lap, the van filled with crying. I managed to un-seat-belt myself, and my daughter Natalie, just eight, who was sobbing. We crawled out. Daniel, 12 years old, was already out, holding Forest. I grabbed Forest in my arms, howling and screaming. "He's still alive," Daniel said, his hand on Forest's heart. My little boy was unconscious.

I have never been so afraid in my life. I have never prayed so hard. *Let it be anything else. Let me die instead. Let him live.* We were all wounded animals beyond redemption.

There was a helicopter for him, an ambulance for us after a phone call to Ursula, who would meet us the hospital, slip us homeopathic pellets when the emergency room nurses weren't looking. She would drive Daniel, Natalie, and me back home, me half-blind without my glasses, lost in the crash. We stopped at our house where I would find an old pair of glasses, and throw myself from room to room gathering whatever seemed needed while crying so hard on the phone with my sister-in-law that I couldn't make words.

Then he lived. But it's never so simple. The story of the three days he spent in a drug-induced coma is a twisting river, rushing so fast at moments I thought we would drown, then life spilled us out

on the grateful shore. Ursula worked on him night and day, doing energy work the doctors didn't want to know about. Our people came in two-by-two, as the hospital restricted how many could visit at a time, singing Menominee healing songs, Hindu prayers, Jewish Misherberechs, Christian hymns, Buddhist chants. Through bioregional friends, a group of the Zapitistas in Mexico chanted while an Evangelical church in New Jersey prayed.

He healed. He's 22 now, and thanks to the one permanent loss he had being repaired—a new front tooth surgically implanted when he was 18—there's so visible scars on him or any of us. But what all of us carry in our family from this accident is something like a scar, a faint line that says, *this is where life is, and this is where it isn't.*

Sometime afterwards, we returned to the crash site to clean it up, eat brownies, sing prayers to it with our friends, all of us standing hand-in-hand after picking up so many tiny hot pink and black action figures, half crayons, even my broken glasses. The earth is good, the earth abounds, the earth holds us and lets us go. *Thank you, thank you, thank you.* We told the dirt we were sorry for hitting it so hard, but the ground was already changing its shape.

My cousin sits on our front porch with me. A gay Orthodox Jew who balances and reels between the impossible, he lives in the gap of a scar: one from a closed community that says there's no place for him, yet he is of them. We talk about “the divorce,” the way we refer to my parents' divorce as if it was all of ours because it was. It tore up the family, and for over 30 years, I had no contacts with most of my cousins because they were on the other side of the divide than me. Our rivers twined on a daily basis as kids, playing Red Light Green Light 123 together in between bragging about who got beaten up worse by their dads. His dad, my long-dead uncle, used the buckle of the belt, while my long-dead dad just used the strap. He won that brag.

We talk about the invisible scars of all those beatings, the way the body translates trauma into

illness or chronic pain. His back hurts most of the time, from the beatings, he thinks. I carry a trembling kind of anxiety at times that splays open toward illness and panic. “Anxiety is the most somatic of psychological challenges,” my therapist tells me. The body doesn't just remember; the body composes itself out of its stories.

Yes, there are the physical things, the swinging belt, and the body thrown into the wall so hard the sheetrock indents. But also that sense of belonging and not belonging, the ultimate scar I struggle with, having grown up in a family of origin ripped away from me when I lived with my father apart from my siblings and mother, then with a step-family that rejected me. My child body still yearns to snap into place like an inherent part of the plastic machine of the family body. But it doesn't, and I don't. In both families, I'm the still the outsider, sometimes more a cameo in the ongoing sit-com, or a forgotten actor from episodes long ago.

This gap of not belonging has been the deepest slash I carry even as I make a family of other beloveds where I'm truly a valued member of the prairie and forest ecosystems, pouring my energy down my roots to feed the roots of others, leaning my scared branches upon other branches who support me. You would think that after all these years that gap would vanish. *You're not enough* or *you're too much* or *you've gone too far*, the gap sometimes whispers. The tribal gap.

The one time I turned down surgery was when faced with “strong recommendations” that I have breast reconstruction. Oncologists, oncology nurses, surgeons, and other medical people, so many I had taken into my heart and loved fiercely as we worked together through chemo, actively campaigned for me to get a new pair of boobs, which could be built either out of belly fat or back fat. Or a pair of inflators could be inserted in my boob pockets, then filled with air over time until they could be swapped out for a pair of interior silicon boobs. Yes, I use boobs here—a cartoonish word—because it's a cartoonish feat.

“Oh, a tummy tuck and boob job at once,” someone told me. “I would so do that.” I wouldn’t, and I knew it right away, but I had to sort out which choice to be and do. “Please don’t do this for me,” Ken told me one night as we left the Asian fusion place, having split an eggplant chicken stir-fry. “Your body has been through enough.”

All along, it was clear. No extra real estate transactions on this body. No unnecessary surgery to make a housing development out of my messy field of a torso. No cleavage, but no matter.

“You can always change your mind later,” my oncologist said to me. We love each other, and I know he was acting out of what that love translated into for him, who had read many studies about how women who have reconstruction have lower incidents of depression. I told him I wanted to see my scars, not have them hidden behind fake boobs.

I asked my surgeon when she would be cutting off my breasts. She frowned and said, “Can’t you say something more supportive? Deepak Chopra says all our cells are exchanging themselves for new cells all the time, so nothing really dies.” But it does, and I found the term “breasts cut off” to be cheerily accurate, a way to own what I was choosing.

Afterwards, I stood in front of many mirrors, holding up my shirt to look up at chest with the tubes of blood hanging off; then holding up my shirt and light bra filled with foam breasts Ken had carved for me; and now holding up my heart and new prosthesis bra with the \$400 each silicon breasts that drooped slightly. I’ve shown my bare chest to many a woman with breast cancer trying to make a decision, and all of them have said how it doesn’t look as bad as they thought it would. Some even decided not to do reconstruction based on my story.

This faint pink line, so slim that I might just look like I have a girl’s chest except for the absence of nipples, is my line. It says that here, the earth opened, then it sealed itself back together with the help of anesthesia, an expert surgeon and competent nurses, stitches that dissolved over time. What’s rent can become whole. In fact, it’s the story of the world I keep reading.

The way of the world is rent and repair. The earthquake in Mexico this fall ripped apart buildings and roads, houses, and lives, layers of buildings and understanding. The world changes breaks apart: the mass shooting in a Sutherland, Texas church, the bombings in Syria, the rapes in Myanmar. So many more places too, the names shorthanded into a kind of scar. But breaches and disasters are also evolutionary: the continents have torn themselves apart, every shoreline a scar.

Closer to home, the crash site is not even a road anymore. Thanks to the hunger to build a new highway, and a deal with the devil to protect the wetlands, the road was unpaved so that the wetlands could be expanded. There's no there there anymore, but a few months ago, I walked where the road used to be. A haven of low-lying water for herons and mallards. A home for the brave and free with no remembrance of us hitting it and surviving the impact. Although this was a human-made reshaping of the land, the land is perfectly capable of and vastly experienced at change. Look at how rivers, left to their own devices, circle back and forward again, braid and unbraided, repair and erode.

I'm 58 years old now, and although I started to write "breastless and menopausal," I realize that has nothing to do with being this particular body at this moment. It's just language I project on myself from what I suspect others might say. Having scars by this age is inevitable. But that's also not what binds me to the life force, the holy, the essence that can't be named without denigrating it. The same is true of scars: I can't say what mine mean in any pithy phrase. The body with all its injuries keeps unfolding across time and place.

We are made to be broken, our skin and souls surprisingly capable of regeneration. Yes, the scars represent the ghosts or angels of the wounds that made them, but they also circle around the fire at the center of the life force, reminding us of what we can survive, and even heal. I put my hands on my bare chest in the bathtub on a sub-zero night, a gesture of gratitude but also of love.