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‘Swansong’ and ‘Losing Yourself’: meditations on life, death and the liminal

Cristal Duhaime, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

Abstract

This article considers two very personal audio documentaries that reflect on love and identity via the liminal space between life and death. *Swansong*, by award-winning UK radio producer Hana Walker-Brown, is set in a hospital, as Hana and her father bear witness to her grandmother’s dying and celebrate her joyful life. *Losing Yourself*, by US producer Ibbby Caputo, is a revelatory account of dealing with a cancer diagnosis.

Swansong is a picture of a person fondly remembered but Hana elevates it beyond eulogy into a multi-layered meditation. Her grandmother Joan’s voice flutters in and out of ethereal recreations of the jazz hall parties of her youth. Waves of drone and sparkle transition us from one spirit world to the next. Rhythms are made of Joan’s breath, bringing us back to the body; to earth.

In *Losing Yourself*, Ibbby Caputo interweaves audio diaries and retrospective narration to create a vivid picture of a young person coping with the unexpected threat of imminent death. An audio diary objectively documents *and* leaves ample subjective space for the listener. And for that authenticity it remains one of the more powerful forms in radio.

Whereas *Swansong* builds its experience through layers, the emotional intensity of *Losing Yourself* comes from its bareness. We are invited into an eavesdropping experience made all the more uncomfortable because of the stripped-down production of the piece: there are no music swells to escape into, no montages to distract. When all is stripped to the bone and made bare, we might indeed see/hear ourselves for who we actually are.

Keywords

podcasting, audio storytelling, death, cancer, hospital, family, grandmother

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‘Swansong’ and ‘Losing Yourself’: meditations on life, death and the liminal

Reviewed by Cristal Duhaime

‘Swansong’ by Hana Walker-Brown (UK, 2016)

Falling Tree Productions and BBC Radio 4, 11 April 2016. 28mins

<https://soundcloud.com/fallingtreeproductions/swansong>

Swansong is a personal documentary by award-winning radio producer Hana Walker-Brown, made for Falling Tree Productions, a well known London-based independent audio production company. The final performance in the title comes from Hana’s grandmother Joan, who, after being kept in hospital limbo for seven hours, passed away at 86 years old.

The portrait piece combines interviews with Hana’s father, narration from Hana, as well as recordings of Joan herself, piping in where description just won’t do.

We learn that she was “the original party girl” and defined herself through her love of jazz music, pantomime and sherry. (She confirms this last one with a laugh.) She enjoyed life’s silly pleasures, listening to a circular song about bananas for instance; Hana and her father giggle over an excerpt together. Grandmothers are easy to love, but Hana’s was someone you’d spend your Saturday night with.

Swansong is a picture of a person fondly remembered but what makes it truly interesting is the way Hana elevates it beyond eulogy into a multi-layered meditation. She concerns herself with the space in between this life and the next, the time travel her grandmother is experiencing in the holding bay of her hospital bed. Where is Joan exactly? What does she see of herself? Do her memories align with the ones her family has chosen to sculpt her biography with?

As the voices shift we picture the scene in the hospital room, the viewpoints fanning out like the branches of their family tree: Hana looks at her father, who looks at his mother; they all reflect back on each other. Though we do not hear from them, other loved ones are present, too.

Hana’s father, a musician and recording engineer, likens it all to a musical experience. He describes the quiet emotion being generated in his mother’s hospital room: “you could cut the silence into blocks and build a castle with it”.

This density is also found in *Swansong*’s sound design, a quality that lends the piece its experiential effect and pulls it towards sound art: Joan’s voice flutters in and out of ethereal recreations of the jazz hall parties of her youth. Waves of drone and sparkle transition us from one spirit world to the next. Rhythms are made of Joan’s breath, bringing us back to the body; to earth.

I initially had trouble with the relationship between the biographical elements and the more ominous tones – by cushioning Joan’s life between darker beds, it felt like Hana was trying to temper any sentimentality by suggesting something edgier about her grandmother... Or an unsavoury story turn to come.

But with further listens I heard the conflicting musical elements not as a counterpoint to Joan’s portrait but as an impression of the grief and memory bubbling beneath the roots of their family tree, hard to pin down. Sound is good at communicating the emotionally amorphous – if you let it.

The experimental makeup of the piece also serves a second story layer. Around eight minutes in, Hana takes us off-road from Joan’s portrait and into a reflection about her own practices of making, and more specifically, the making of the very documentary we are listening to. She asks herself where her creative impulse to tell stories might come from. We go back to Hana’s earliest moments as a documentarian: her father chuckles about a time when a young Hana recorded her voice over a cassette tape of his – a rare recording of Jimi Hendrix. He berates Hana lovingly for her poor taste. It’s an interaction that illustrates the family dynamic of cheekiness well; they all like to play.

While the choice to introduce this storyline so far in– just as we’ve been cruising along with Joan – has an effect of being abruptly re-routed, these scenes ultimately lend the piece its emotional backbone. This desire to create, to make, is what connects Hana to her family, to her grandma; *Swansong* is an ode in all senses.

In some of the more explicit meta-moments, I was brought out of the piece a bit, made to think too much about the production process... (It brings to mind the question of why we so often feel the need to explain the construction in radio – as though our artistic expression is something we need to admit.) I also wonder if listeners could have been trusted more to earn the connections for themselves rather than Hana calling them out in her narration. But the choice to highlight the creative link with her grandmother with a bright marker does not make the connection itself any less meaningful. And any heavy-handedness is made up for in Hana’s poetic writing:

She was organising the chaos of that room like bars from her favourite song. Breathing some melody into the life that was left. Somewhere in that oddity was a desire to tell stories, to make something.

In her final hours, Hana’s father says his mother had asked him to “turn it down”. She had taken the rhythms, the whirrs and hums of the medical equipment and imagined herself a jazz symphony. Improvised into the sterility. Transported herself into one last performance. *She was making the music.*

Rather than attempt any literal representation in sound (wisely, since a recreation likely would have stepped on the listener’s imaginative agency) Hana continues to describe her grandmother’s musical transformation with words, ending on the sage-like thought:

The very opposite of dying is making, isn't it? And if making is the opposite of dying, what is more opposite than making something that lives? That carries on to live.

And of course, through Hana's alchemy, Joan's song can do just that.

'Losing Yourself' by Ibby Caputo (US, 2016)

Scene on Radio podcast, 10 February 2016, 32mins333
<http://podcast.cdsporch.org/episode-12-losing-yourself/>

Ibby Caputo's documentary *Losing Yourself* (produced for the Scene On Radio podcast at the Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University) also draws on the tension between making and death. But whereas *Swansong* builds its experience through layers, the emotional intensity of *Losing Yourself* comes from its bareness.

Narration leads us into an audio diary of Ibby, recorded years earlier. She's twenty-six years old and moving through a hospital. The hallways seem serious. She gets on an elevator and after a few floors pass in silence, a bell signals her arrival. The scene has been set for a difficult journey.

From her overhead view, narrator Ibby shepherds us back towards Ibby-in-the-tape: "*She* tells the story better than *I* do."

It's a handoff that plays on a few levels: it's a wink to the listener in the context of a radio piece produced by the narrator herself – a deflecting of authorial identity that comes back into play at the end of the story. But from a perspective of form, it is also a statement that proves true: audio diaries do tell certain stories best.

We dive back into the recordings, starting at the beginning. A bad bikini wax infection is what brought her to the hospital but something much more serious is discovered: leukaemia. At twenty-six years old. As she shares this diagnosis with her recorder – with us, an audience that doesn't yet exist – we hear the raw fear in Ibby's voice – an emotion rarely captured in radio. The threat of cancer is taken out of the casual space of internet symptom searches and made crushingly real.

Other moments in the piece are equally devastating in their intimacy. Like when Ibby makes a phone call to her father to give him the news. "Dad it's me, Ib..." she starts. The familiarity in her address is heartbreaking – if only we could suspend there.

Ibby's voice breaks as she continues. We can't hear her father's side of the phone call, only Ibby's responses as he asks her for more details in the way that parents do, likely searching for practicalities to keep him upright. It reminds us of the capacity illness has to reduce us all to children.

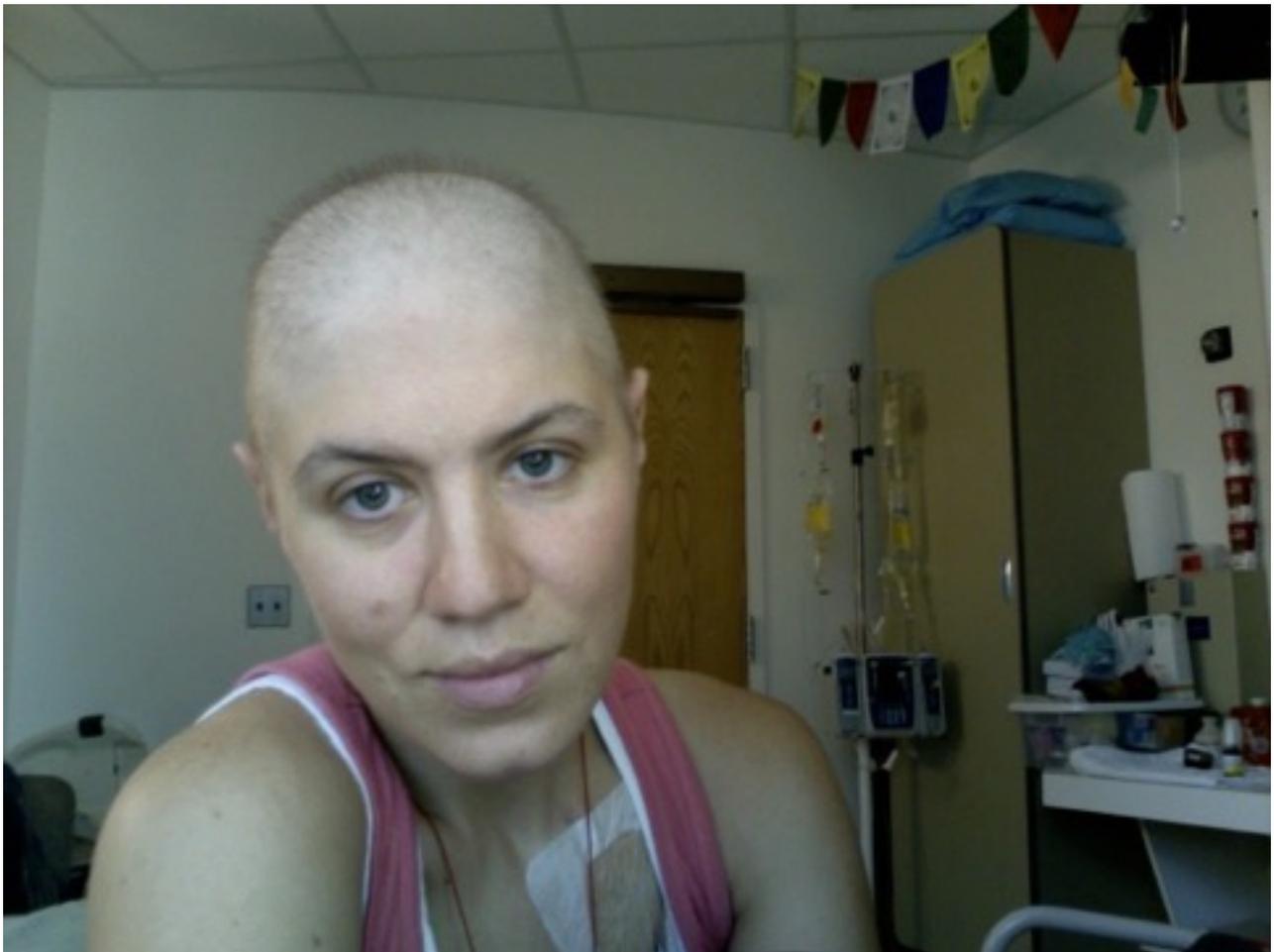
Ibby lets us in on these private moments, invites us into an eavesdropping experience made all the more uncomfortable because of the stripped-down

production of the piece: there are no music swells to escape into, no montages to distract.

Instead, what we hear outside of voice are the natural sounds of the hospital. Whereas in *Swansong* Joan's room was reimagined as a jazz symphony, Ibbby's mutates only in the subjective quality we project onto it. When we hear Ibbby tell her father that she has leukaemia, we might imbue the ambient sound with the emotional weight of a father learning that their child is dying but factually it remains the exact same space; the medical monitors and electricity carry on as they were... indifferent.

An audio diary objectively documents *and* leaves ample subjective space for the listener. And for that authenticity it remains one of the more powerful forms in radio. (The long-running and multiple award-winning [Radio Diaries](#) from Radiotopia is a prime example). Ibbby's recordings do not lie – they just tell us what is.

By Ibbby having recorded herself in real time, we're able to squeeze ourselves into the cracks of her story that don't hold the same charge when it becomes the memory work of "this is what happened." Of course, the radio piece we listen to is a constructed result but the magic of the raw recordings themselves is that they transport us to a time when Ibbby herself did not yet know the next beat in her story. There is immediacy and great vulnerability in "this is what is happening."



A young woman receiving chemotherapy. Photo credit: Ibbby Caputo.

She says she instinctively started recording because she was just starting out in radio and didn't know what else to do. It's not difficult to imagine that the act of documenting gave Ibbby a sense of control over an experience that is so uncontrollable. She fights against her body breaking down in these recordings, fights to retain a voice.

Ibbby talks through a chemotherapy treatment, reacting in real-time; it is queasy-making. Through the absence of visuals we are made free to imagine the chemical running through her veins and when Ibbby asks the nurse in a confused voice what is happening and starts to feel claustrophobic, we swear we feel dizzy, too. Chemotherapy is made visceral here, Ibbby's recordings again bringing specificity to a disease and treatment that is often so generalised.

But *Losing Yourself* is not always so grave. There are beautiful moments of levity as Ibbby captures both the mundane and the surreal. Like when she remarks on how the chemotherapy tree's shadows spread across the ceiling, so pretty. Or when she tries to choose something healthy to eat from the menu of processed breakfast foods, remaining patient with hospital staff even when frustration would be a valid reaction. One would expect a flattening of character in such circumstances, but these scenes show us who Ibbby really is.

When the time comes to shave her head, it is a defining scene, as it no doubt is in most narratives of cancer. But Ibbby mourns the loss of her hair for a more specific reason as well: she told herself that when her hair had grown long enough to be put up in a bun, she would get married... It's a version of her future she must put on hold. For now.

The narrator comes in at this point to tell us that Ibbby stopped recording audio diaries after that... things got too difficult. And with this comes an identity shift: the narrator admits that, despite having referred to the woman from the audio diaries in the third person, they are actually one and the same person. Sort of.

"If you met me now, you'd never know I was once her," Ibbby-the-narrator says.

The reveal that Ibbby is Ibbby is not intended as a plot twist but it does signal a turn in the sense that, by formally acknowledging the prior storytelling distance between the narrator and subject, it can now be collapsed. When Ibbby switches to the first person, it feels symbolic – like she is finally acknowledging the experience, having put order to the tape.

Whereas in *Swansong* pointing directly at the story-making sometimes felt diminishing, *Losing Yourself* expands from it more organically, the structure serving both the story and theme.

The switch to the first person also serves a practical purpose in that the narration can take over and summarise months of experience. It is also the first time that music is used; airy, other-worldly tones give a meditative quality to "this is what happened":

It turned out that Ibby had the “bad” kind of leukaemia and had to have a bone marrow transplant. She spent five months in the hospital. But she eventually recovered. And got married, as was her hope.

Before wrapping up, she takes us back to one last recording from her time in hospital. Even though we now know how the story turns out, it is still heartbreaking to hear the uncertainty in sick Ibby’s voice. Like Ibby the omniscient narrator, we want to reach back into the tape and let her know it’s all going to be ok.

The surprise comes when Ibby from the past instead addresses her future self in the recording, wanting to let Ibby of the present know that while she is suffering, she should also remember this period in her life as one of great spiritual strength.

(It’s a remarkable feature of time capsules, this ability to trade empathies with past selves. Interestingly, it’s a technique that Scene on Radio creator John Biewen notably employed in [Scared](#) (2008), an award-winning Third Coast Audio Festival Short Doc that featured his recordings of his daughter from baby to pre-teen years.)

But how do you sum up such a profound and emotional listening experience as Ibby has presented us with? Scripted end lines are never easy and I wrestle with them constantly in my own work – there’s always pressure to come up with the perfect button of wisdom, to send listeners off with some sort of lesson. But final words often end up feeling flat precisely because of their moralising tone. Ibby does not avoid this trap:

“If you lose yourself, you might just find who you’re looking for.”

On some level, it feels like she’s answering a question here that hasn’t properly been set up – there are no mentions anywhere in the piece that suggest she might have been grappling with identity or a loss of self either before or during her illness...

But maybe what I’m tripping over are mere semantics – despite it not being set up as a quest in the literal sense, *Losing Yourself* does lead to these final words in both content and form. When all is stripped to the bone and made bare, we might indeed see/hear ourselves for who we actually are.



Photo credit: Jer Clarke

CRISTAL DUHAIME

Cristal Duhaime is the co-creator and producer of CBC's [Love Me](#) –a show about the messiness of human connection, and [Pen Pals](#) –a comedy fiction series that puts unlikely pairs in conversation. Previously, she was a producer on Jonathan Goldstein's [WireTap](#), for which the team won a Prix Italia for Best Original Radio Drama and a HearSay audio prize for fiction. She and co-producer Mira Burt-Wintonick also won a Grand Prix Nova for their short radio drama [Call of Dating](#) and a Miller Humour Prize for [Toccata](#) (made with Falling Tree Productions) – a piece that recounts Cristal's bout with human botfly after a trip to Costa Rica. She is based in Montreal, Canada.