

The Debilitated Muse: Poetry in the Face of Illness

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Published online: 18 July 2010
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Abstract Poetry is a supremely sensory art, both in the imagining and in the writing. What happens when the poet faces illness? How is the poetry affected by alterations of the body and mind? This paper examines the poetry of several writers afflicted by physical illness—poets of great renown and poets who might be classified as “emerging voices,” in order to explore the interplay between creativity and corporeal vulnerability.

Keywords Poetry · Poet · Illness · Creativity

When I think about the definition of poetry, I have an image of the vast chaotic world being funneled through a narrow filter that is the poet. What comes out on the other side is an economy of observation about that chaos. Whether the critical essence of that filter is the mind of the poet, or the soul of the poet or the spleen of the poet is to some degree irrelevant, since none of these parts can function alone, and the sum total is that living, breathing body. It takes no great leap of logic to expect that assaults of any sort to that body would alter its output. It is in the details of this truism, however, that one might begin to mine the fascinating and perhaps intrinsic connections between “physicality” and creativity.

We in the medical profession keep our noses squarely on the physical grindstone. Despite the fact that psychiatric illness is considered part of general medicine, we still maintain a palpable orientation to the corporeal. Diseases are discrete alterations of body systems, and what hasn’t already been reduced to molecular genetics surely will be—it’s just a matter of time. “Side effects” of diseases and medications are typically measured in the same corporeal constructs. Examining the effects of illness on something as non-corporeal as poetry subverts the system a bit.

My personal interest in this realm comes from the stapling together of the medical and literary sides of my life. When I first began editing the *Bellevue Literary Review*, it seemed like merely dabbling in the literary world. However, as the *BLR* achieved a degree of

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permanence, it sought a distinct presence in my medical life. It wasn't just that there were copies of the *BLR* intermingling with medical journals on my desk, or that I'd proofread fiction manuscripts between cases of arthritis and diabetes, or that a beeping pager could be the emergency room or the printer, it was more that the mindset of reading literature and analyzing patient's medical complaints could no longer be completely compartmentalized. I'd find myself correcting mixed metaphors in a patient's chart, and then bemoaning the lack of evidence supporting the climax of a short story. Not to mention handing out poems to curious patients, harried interns, and puzzled hospital administrators, while fielding urgent medical queries from hypochondriacal, generally uninsured writers.

Thus, I became intrigued by the question of how poets and their poetry are affected by illness. There is no shortage of analyses on how mental illness has influenced poets, but there is comparatively little written about the effects of physical illness. I became curious to understand how writers—whether literary giants, contemporary classics, or emerging voices—use their poetic coping skills in the face of bodily revolt.

The ways in which the body can fail are staggeringly and terrifyingly diverse. I've chosen to begin with that workhorse sense that might be considered the *sine qua non* for those who put pen to paper—sight. And where better to start than at the waning of the period during which our society collectively opened its eyes—the Renaissance.

Blindness: John Milton and Jorge Luis Borges

John Milton became completely blind by 1652. The cause of his visual loss is generally attributed to glaucoma although theories of craniopharyngioma, retinal detachment, and “incessant labours at the printing press” abound. Milton was already a well-established poet, essayist, and all-around rabble-rouser by the mid-1600s, but he hadn't yet written *Paradise Lost* or *Paradise Regained*.

Milton is the classic case of the artist whose creativity is postulated to have been stimulated by handicap and hardship (see the Gulag writers for the apotheosis of this theory). In particular, blindness is often felt to confer more potent powers of observation. Beginning perhaps with Tiresias, the blind soothsayer who warns Oedipus of his future, the cutting off of external visual stimuli carries with it the powerful poetic suggestion that internal visual imagery can now be unleashed in all its wild creativity. Jorge Luis Borges—himself blinded several centuries later by a paternally-inherited eye defect—famously said of his idol, Milton: “He sacrificed his sight, and then he remembered his first desire, that of being a poet.” The implication is that the blindness served a greater good, that there is an intrinsic strengthening of poetic abilities by having one of the senses severed, that the world might never have been blessed by Milton's apocalyptic masterpieces had not the poet's eyes failed him.

Literary analysis, like conspiracy theory, is brimming with attempts to construe logical causation out of random events. The temptation to find order and purpose in a sequence of occurrences is undeniably appealing, and probably innate, but it can often lead to questionable associations that take on lives of their own because they “feel” so logical. Borges certainly isn't the only one who felt that Milton's blindness was part and parcel of his genius, perhaps even a divine gift that was a necessary birthing pain for his greatest writings. Milton apparently composed *Paradise Lost* at night, then dictated his words in the morning to his wife, an assistant, his daughters, or his friends. Over the course of several years, he dictated this roughly twelve thousand-line epic poem to his—at least, outwardly—tolerant scribes. One might imagine Milton conjuring up images in an especially visceral

fashion to make up for the inability to “see” the images before him. (Though it could be argued that since Milton did once possess the sense of sight, his memories and imaginations would have a visual accuracy that those blind from birth would lack.) One famous excerpt from Book Nine, in which Adam expresses his love for Eve, offers the non-visual but potentially physical image of giving up yet another rib:

How can I live without thee, how forgo
 Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joined,
 To live again in these wild woods forlorn?
 Should God create another Eve, and I
 Another rib afford, yet loss of thee
 Would never from my heart; no, no! I feel
 The link of nature draw me: flesh of flesh,
 Bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state
 Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe. (9.896–916)¹

In contrast to Borges, T.S. Eliot felt that Milton’s blindness actually impaired his poetic abilities. In fact, he felt that all of Milton’s five senses were “withered” by his voluminous book learning at an early age. Thus, the loss of sight was merely the final death knell on his creativity. Without being able to use his eyes to visualize scenes, Milton had to rely on his other, already-blunted senses, resulting in a poem that lacked well-developed imagery. For example:

Hail holy light, of spring of Heaven first-born,
 Or of the Eternal Coeternal beam
 May I express thee unblamed? since God is light,
 And never but in unapproached light
 Dwelt from Eternity, dwelt then in thee,
 Bright effluence of bright essence increate!
 Or hear’st thou rather pure Ethereal stream,
 Whose Fountain who shall tell? Before the Sun,
 Before the Heavens thou wert, and at the voice
 Of God, as with a Mantle didst invest
 The rising World of waters dark and deep,
 Won from the void and formless Infinite!²
 (3:1–12)

The Hallmark-like phrases such as “eternal coeternal beam” and “bright effluence of bright essence” would likely merit Milton a rejection from even the smallest circulation literary magazines today.

The truth is that Borges and Eliot were both right, to some degree, about Milton. His epic poems are so gargantuan that, like the blind men feeling the elephant, it depends where one touches. There are flashes of brilliances, and there are sections that drag achingly. Whether his blindness contributed to either or both of these ends of the poetic spectrum is difficult to determine, since we could never know how the Paradise epics would have sounded had Milton possessed full visual powers when they were written. However, we do

¹ J. Milton, *The Poetical Works of John Milton: Volume 2: Paradise lost ... Paradise regained. Samson Agonistes*, ed. D Masson (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1890), 400–401. Digital reference: http://books.google.com/books?id=2jQPAAAAMAAJ&dq=milton+paradise+lost+volume+9&source=gbs_navlinks_s

² *Ibid.*, 228–229.

have some insight into Milton's perceptions of the meaning of his blindness. In 1655, when Milton was forty-seven years-old and fully blind, he wrote his famous sonnet, titled—conveniently enough—*On His Blindness*.

When I consider how my light is spent
 Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
 And that one talent which is death to hide,
 Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, lest he returning chide;
 "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
 I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
 That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
 Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
 Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed,
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
 They also serve who only stand and wait."³

The sonnet suggests that Milton's first conclusion about blindness is that his poetic abilities are destroyed, that he can't write without being able to see. Consistent with his world view, he interprets his affliction from a religious perspective, concerned that he might be a failure in God's eyes if he doesn't continue to write poetry, since he was convinced that it was God's destiny for him to be a poet. The blindness might even have been a challenge from God to test his faith. His political opponents, however, speculated that his blindness was a punishment from God for supporting Oliver Cromwell's Republicans who eventually executed King Charles I.

Milton finally concludes that it is neither his poetry nor any other labors that will grant him God's favor. Salvation is a gift by God for those who keep the faith. Therefore, it seems that he can accept his blindness and whatever other obstacles are placed in his path because as long as he can "bear his yoke," he will be saved. Perhaps it was this conclusion that freed him up after 3 years of blindness as well as grief from the death of his wife and child to begin writing in earnest again. It was roughly in this year that he embarked upon the decade-long endeavor that resulted in *Paradise Lost*.

Like Milton, Jorge Luis Borges lost his vision in mid-life though the process was more protracted. Borges underwent his first operation for cataracts at age twenty-eight, and his vision progressively deteriorated over the next three decades. Also like Milton, Borges wrote in all genres, with poetry becoming increasingly important as he grew older and blinder. Borges, in fact, began as a poet though he was later quite embarrassed by the "riot of sham local color" and the sentimental views of Buenos Aires that his three books of poetry from the 1920s contained. He spent the middle years of his career writing the fiction and political articles that brought him serious critical attention. However, he returned to poetry later in life, publishing nine—far more memorable—books of poetry between 1960 and 1985.

Because of the genetic nature of the blindness in his family, visual loss exerted a variety of influences on Borges. He always expected to be a writer, carrying on a

³ J. Milton, *The Poetical Works of John Milton: Volume 30* from Volumes 28–30 of Aldine edition of the British poets (London: Bell and Daldy, 1866), 212. Digital reference: http://books.google.com/books?id=eOwTAAAIAAJ&dq=milton+%22on+his+blindness%22&source=gbs_navlinks_s

tradition at which his father apparently didn't succeed, in part because of his own visual problems. These problems grew so severe that the elder Borges relocated the family to Paris and then Geneva in search of better ophthalmologic treatments. The outbreak of World War I, however, prevented further travel, so the Borges family was forced to remain in Geneva. Thus, because of his father's blindness, Jorge Luis Borges spent four critical years of late adolescence in Europe, learning French and German and apparently having his first (failed) sexual encounter with a Swiss prostitute—all of which heavily influenced his writings.

Before blindness took its toll on Borges, however, there was another medical incident that profoundly affected his writing. Shortly after his father died, Borges scratched his forehead on a freshly painted stairwell casement on Christmas Eve of 1938. The wound became infected, and the infection spun out of control. Septicemia ensued, and Borges spent five weeks critically ill, hallucinating in bed while his blood pressure hovered dangerously low. After recovering, Borges was concerned that his sickness might have robbed him of his creativity, that the lost weeks might have permanently affected his brain and soul. However, in the writings that followed (mainly stories and essays), he blended elements of fable, fantasy, and irony, none of which had much of a role in his earlier work. The first text he published after his illness, "Pierre Menard, Author of *The Quixote*," was a tour de force of literary criticism. Borges created a modern-day, fictional French writer who "recreated" Quixote in the original 16th-century Spanish. In this manner, Borges was able to blend fiction with fact, both satirizing and illuminating literary criticism, while weaving in issues about contemporary writing and the philosophy of translations. One might be tempted to parallel the mixing of literary forms and the mixing of sensory experiences during prolonged illness and hallucination.

Borges would undergo eight ocular surgeries during the course of his life, none of which was ultimately successful. He continued to write short stories and essays through the 1950s, but at this point, his vision became a serious handicap. He found that it was easier to revise verses of poetry in his head than long passages of prose and turned predominantly to poetry in the last third of his life. His first collection of poetry, *El Hacedor* (The Maker), was published in 1960 (later re-titled *Dreamtigers* in English). It contained the poem "Ars Poetica," which many feel is Borges' "poetic manifesto":

To gaze at the river made of time and water
 And recall that time itself is another river,
 To know we cease to be, just like the river,
 And that our faces pass away, just like the water.

To feel that waking is another sleep
 That dreams it does not sleep and that death,
 Which our flesh dreads, is that very death
 Of every night, which we call sleep.

To see in the day or in the year a symbol
 of mankind's days and of his years,
 To transform the outrage of the years
 Into a music, a rumor and a symbol,

To see in death a sleep, and in the sunset
 A sad gold, of such is Poetry

Immortal and a pauper. For Poetry
Returns like the dawn and the sunset.

At times in the afternoon a face
Looks at us from the depths of a mirror;
Art must be like that mirror
That reveals to us this face of ours.

They tell how Ulysses, gluttoned with wonders,
Wept with love to descry his Ithaca
Humble and green. Art is that Ithaca
Of green eternity, not of wonders.

It is also like an endless river
That passes and remains, a mirror for one same
Inconstant Heraclitus, who is the same
And another, like an endless river.⁴

The fourth stanza has particular significance for Borges' life. He talks of poetry returning like "the dawn and sunset," which might be an illusion to the prominence of poetry early and late in his life. He also refers to "a sad gold," perhaps a reference to the sunset or the poignancy of poetry or the specific nature of his limited visual abilities. As a child in Buenos Aires, Borges had a particular fondness for tigers and spent hours at the zoo, staring at these creatures. Late in life, he commented on the connection between the tiger and his vision: "I used to stop for a long time in front of the tiger's cage to see him pacing back and forth. I liked his natural beauty, his black stripes and his golden stripes. And now that I am blind, one single color remains for me, and it is precisely the color of the tiger, the color yellow."⁵ The "sad gold" of "Ars Poetica" might well be the color of the tiger, the last dim vestige of Borges' visual perception.

In an obvious homage to Milton, Borges wrote his own sonnet entitled, "On His Blindness." Penned late in life (1985), the poem talks about the penumbra in which he is stranded because of the loss of vision. He admits that he misses the sighted world, but he concludes—however, sentimental it might seem—that blindness has given him the gift of poetry:

After the years it surrounds to me
an obstinate luminous fog
that it reduces the things to a thing
without form nor color. To one it almost devises.
The vast elementary night and the day
people plenty is that fog
of doubtful and faithful light that it does not decline
and that watches in the dawn. I would want
to see a face sometimes. I ignore
the unexplored encyclopedia, the enjoyment
of the books that my hand recognizes,

⁴ JL. Borges, *Dreamtigers*. (Austin: U of Texas Press, 1964), 89.

⁵ JL. Borges, *Twenty-Four Conversations with Borges: Interviews by Roberto Alifano 1981–1983*. Ed. R. Alifano (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 1984), 25 (poem, 140).

the high the gold birds and moons.
 To the others they have left the universe:
 to my penumbra, the habit of the verse.⁶

Cancer: Jane Kenyon

Perhaps the most famous pair of contemporary poets who have faced illness and incorporated illness into their art is Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall. When they married in 1972, Hall was concerned with the twenty-three year age difference between them (they'd met while he was her writing professor). After consulting actuarial charts, he sadly concluded that he would leave Kenyon as a widower for a quarter-century. The science of life-expectancy—however accurate for populations as a whole—offers frighteningly little solidity for individuals. In 1989, Hall was diagnosed with colon cancer at the age of sixty-one. Though the cancer was removed surgically, it recurred in 1992, accompanied by metastases to the liver. Normally, metastatic cancer of any type, but particularly with involvement of the liver, is an ominous prognosis. In Hall's case, he was given a 30% five-year survival rate, meaning that 70% of patients with his condition are dead within 5 years. As of this writing, a decade and a half after the grim pronouncement, Hall remains an active presence in the world of poetry and recently served as the Poet Laureate of the United States.

However, 2 years after Hall's liver metastases were uncovered, Kenyon was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia (ALL). ALL is typically a pediatric disease and is the poster-child for oncological advancement. In the normally dismal world of cancer treatment, a startling 80% of children with ALL are completely cured with current chemotherapy regimens. However, the poster fades noticeably as patients age. Although most adults achieve some degree of remission with treatment, less than half are actually cured. ALL otherwise offers a brutal and inexorable course. Regrettably, Jane Kenyon fell into the latter category and was dead within 15 months of her diagnosis, at the age of forty-seven.

Jane Kenyon's full oeuvre of poetry was published in 1995,⁷ including the contents of her five published collections, her translations of Anna Akhmatova's poetry, and a handful of "uncollected poems" that hadn't appeared elsewhere. The poems are chaptered in their original collections and arranged chronologically in the book. There are but a scant few poems written during the time she had cancer. (Her leukemia plays a much more potent role in Donald Hall's poetry). The poems that do touch upon Kenyon's illness tend to offer brief but sometimes chillingly insightful hints about how one moves through a life that has been viciously redirected. An example is "Prognosis":

I walked alone in the chill of dawn
 while my mind leapt, as the teachers

of detachment say, like a drunken
 monkey. Then a gray shape, an owl,

⁶ JL. Borges, "On His Blindness," *Poetry Magazine*, 164, (1994), 71.

⁷ J. Kenyon, *Collected Poems*. (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2005). Poems reprinted with permission of the estate of Jane Kenyon.

passed overhead. An owl is not
like a crow. A crow makes convivial

chuckings as it flies,
but the owl flew well beyond me

before I heard it coming, and when it
settled, the bough did not sway.⁸

What strikes me most about “Prognosis” is the image of walking alone in the chill of dawn. Many patients tell me that one of the most difficult aspects of living through an illness is that one must do it alone. No matter how many devoted family members and dedicated nurses and doctors are at the bedside, no matter how many social services and support groups are available, patients must ultimately walk through the illness alone. Nobody can live that life for them (as much as a parent might wish to do for an ill child); nobody can feel the pain, face the fear, incorporate the loss, absorb the anxiety, ponder the future, contemplate the death, or eat the hospital food for them. Illness, especially terminal illness, is existential loneliness wrought real, as in “What It’s Like”:

And once, for no special reason,
I rode in the back of the pickup,
leaning against the cab.
Everything familiar was receding
fast—the mountain,
the motel, Huldah Currier’s
house, and the two stately maples....

Mr. Perkins was having a barn sale,
and cars from New Jersey and Ohio
were parked along the sandy shoulder
of Route 4. Whatever I saw
I had already passed....
(This must be what life is like
at the moment of leaving it.)⁹

However, there is occasionally happiness, even during serious illness. The first stanza and a half of the aptly titled poem, “Happiness,” give a rhythmic sense of the unpredictability of emotion:

There’s just no accounting for happiness,
or the way it turns up like a prodigal
who comes back to the dust at your feet
having squandered a fortune far away.

And how can you not forgive?
You make a feast in honor of what
was lost....¹⁰

⁸ Ibid, 286.

⁹ Ibid, 301.

¹⁰ Ibid, 271.

Although leukemia was the most serious illness that Kenyon faced in her lifetime, it was depression—and occasional mania—that plagued her for the greatest length of time. Her most recognized poem dealing with depression—“Having it out with Melancholy”—is a five-page poem filled with potent images of the pain of this illness. A few are excerpted here:

When I was born, you waited
 behind a pile of linens in the nursery,
 and when we were alone, you lay down
 on top of me, pressing
 the bile of desolation into every pore....

I only appeared to belong to my mother,
 to live among blocks and cotton undershirts
 with snaps; among red tin lunch boxes
 and report cards in ugly brown slipcases.
 I was already yours—the anti-urge,
 the mutilator of souls....

A piece of burned meat
 wears my clothes, speaks
 in my voice, dispatches obligations
 haltingly, or not at all
 It is tired of trying
 to be stouthearted, tired
 beyond measure....

Coarse, mean, you'll put your feet
 on the coffee table, lean back,
 and turn me into someone who can't
 take the trouble to speak; someone
 who can't sleep, or who does nothing
 but sleep; can't read, or call
 for an appointment for help.
 There is nothing I can do
 against your coming.

*When I am awake, I am still with thee.*¹¹

Chronic disease: Paul West and Joan Seliger Sydney

Paul West reminds me of many of my patients, struggling for years with a variety of chronic illnesses. In his case, it is diabetes, migraines, heart disease and cerebro-vascular disease. Illness isn't one thing for West, like cancer or multiple sclerosis; it is more a general state of being. He has been a prolific and eclectic writer with twenty-five works of fiction, sixteen works of nonfiction, and four collections of poetry at last count. In 1995, he published a memoir of life with ongoing, multiple afflictions entitled, *A Stroke of Genius*.

¹¹ Ibid, 231–236.

But it was in 2004 that his illness, in essence, became one thing. A major stroke left him with “only 4 h of lucidity a day.” The rest of the time, he experienced “aphasic gibberish” and was unable to decipher a clock or do basic math. Somehow, in these four-hour windows, over the course of 2 years, he managed to produce a book of formally structured poetry. *Tea with Osiris*¹² is a set of fifty-three untitled, rhymed, fourteen-lined sonnets. Fourteen is the number of pieces into which the Egyptian king Osiris was chopped by his brother Seth—after Seth had asphyxiated Osiris in a sealed coffin. Luckily, Osiris’s sister-wife, Isis, retrieved the segments from the Nile and reassembled Osiris into the God of the Underworld.

West is predominantly a prose writer, and his poetry has a prose-like feel to it. There is a slyly maniacal tone to his writing, a sense of a frenetic word-meister, but then an oddly powerful image will suddenly ground the poem. Many of the poems relate to medical issues and procedures, with no less than five dealing rather bluntly with the intricacies of the Foley urine catheter, a handful about kidney stones, and a few about body orifices in general. The characters of Osiris and Seth wend their way through a number of the poems with particular focus of the chopping and slicing of body parts. Poem “26” (the poems are numbered not titled) is representative:

Breakfastless, nervous as a newt
 he begins the word *Versed* without
 sensing a pun there on the brink
 of never-never. Let us say (or think)
 All he gets out
 is the first syllable and he doubt-
 fully wakes up. “You didn’t do it,”
 sez he, “you chickened out. I gotta
 pee, see, I just gotta, I gotta go.”
 Between his legs he senses a rube Gold-
 berg contraption, something between
 a curtain rod and a turkey baster,
 rigid, gross, all penetrant pilaster
 turning his *mons pubis* arsenical green.¹³

This poem especially caught my attention because every time I use the short-acting sedative, Versed (pronounced *Ver-sed*), on my patients, I wonder why the pharmaceutical company never considered the obvious poetic pun. When my patients are appropriately sedated for whichever procedure is about to commence, I can’t help but think of them as “well-versed.” West’s other poems about the Foley catheter are a bit more graphic (and scatological), but I have to admit that the image of catheter as part curtain-rod and part turkey-baster just about nails it on the head. Two points for accuracy. Bonus point for humor.

Poem “10” is more self-reflective, even alerting us to that with the first line and beginning with the usual raucous verbal riffs and rhyming contortions. However, the final sentence is a poignant homage to the ravages of disease and age with particular emphasis on literary abilities. This is the closest West comes to describing for us what it must be like to try to write while the mind, brain, and body are constantly under attack. Once again, the essential aloneness of illness comes to the forefront:

How does he see himself? (Eschewing
 mirrors of course). As a monster

¹² P. West, *Tea with Osiris*. (St. Paul: Lumen Books, 2006). Poems reprinted with permission.

¹³ *Ibid*, 59.

of platitudes: an old bitch sowing
 platitudes, lack-luster punster
 with whimper not bang,
 ego rain-sodden from
 Rangoon, around the neck a Cang
 from ancient China, from Brumm-
 agem an ancient tin thumbstall,
 between his toes enough Plasticine
 to keep a thousand children sane.
 An outline of a man, outrigger
 alive there on catamaran,
 agent of record for many moons.¹⁴

The most interesting and enigmatic poem in the collection is Poem “37.” After pages and pages of fetid brains, charred suet, tepid torsions, violent hams, humiliated schlongs, meat cleavers, sphinx’s farts, poisoned menses, Ravel’s sperm, and wave-hopping fakirs, it is somewhat of a relief to stumble on lyricism, even if the lyricism eventually turns to chancres and boils. The question of whether we are sustained by sweet melancholy or by nightmares is “settled” by the odd image of a “crosspatch lion’s work to which all the answers are horses’ names.” I am assuming that West himself is the crosspatch, the local grouch, and is making reference to the havoc that cerebrovascular disease has wrought upon his brain. For what could be worse for a writer than to have his or her circuits rerouted, metaphors unhinged, virtuosity upended?

“If our sweetest songs are those
 that tell of saddest thoughts,” sez Osiris,
 “then our saddest songs are those
 that tell of sweetest thoughts.” Who’s
 asking? *I* am. It doesn’t balance.
 somehow it, doesn’t add up. Dalliance
 is verbosity. ’Twould be better
 if we thought of something neater:
 Our nightmares are what sustain us.
 Blood and gore staidly restrain us.
 Chancres and boils enlighten us.
 The family next door are all dames
 attempting a crosspatch lion’s work
 to which all the answers are horses’ names.¹⁵

Multiple sclerosis: Joan Seliger Sydney

Many poets, such as Hall, Kenyon, and West were writers before they were patients, transforming their thoughts, feelings, and observations into poetry and prose, and perfecting their craft over a lifetime. When illness became part of their lives, it was naturally incorporated into their poetry. For example, Lucille Clifton wrote about her renal failure

¹⁴ Ibid, 27.

¹⁵ Ibid, 87.

and dialysis, Hayden Carruth about his emphysema, and Paul Monette about his HIV. However, there is a crop of new writers whose illness has brought them to writing. These people were not poets or authors in their “prior” existence, but when illness plowed into their lives, they picked up the pen. Or, they were fledgling writers, and illness galvanized their efforts.

Joan Seliger Sydney was a newly-married, high-school English teacher when a first episode of neuritis jolted her life. A course of prednisone calmed the symptoms, and for the next decade, she lived a “normal” life, including raising four children. Ten years later, halfway through her doctoral dissertation, a recurrence of her symptoms confirmed multiple sclerosis. Over the next 8 years, she managed to keep her diagnosis of MS a secret from her children and co-workers but began writing poetry as a “way to control an external world that had disappointed me.” Only when her symptoms recurred with a vengeance, did her now-teenaged children learn of her diagnosis. It took another 4 years to tell her Holocaust-survivor mother.

During these years of secrecy, writing was Sydney’s major outlet for honest discourse. Her poetry, as well as a prose memoir, is collected in her first book, *Body of Diminishing Motion*.¹⁶ Although the poems precede the prose memoir, I found it more illustrative to read the memoir first, providing context for the verse. The language in this collection is fairly straightforward, whether the poems are dealing with constant shadow of her mother’s escape from Hitler or the direct effects of what Sidney calls “my body’s civil war.” The poem, “Legs,” isn’t necessarily the most richly appointed poem in the collection or the most daring, but in its plain wording, it brings the reader front-and-center to the losses, indignities, and occasional bittersweet joy in that civil war:

Once I draped you over a desk’s edge,
inadvertently letting my freshman
composition class note the distance
between miniskirt and panty.

But now you force me
to grocery-shop out of town
so that no one I know will notice
my blue and white parking pendant.

Most obvious imperfection,
blight on my daily life,
you dangle from your gel-cushioned throne,
daring me to bear weight.

Legs! How we have suffered
each other these thirty-four years.
When did we get so distant, so standoffish?
accepting with only a spasm whatever comes?

And yet you surprise me still
each morning at the pool,
churning waves with your flutter
kick of muscles hip to toe.

¹⁶ JS. Sidney, *Body of Diminishing Motion*. (Fort Lee: CavanKerry Press, 2004). Poem reprinted with permission.

At times you even sidle up
in the locker room, letting me
pat you dry. Or slip into the proper
panty leg without crisscross,

while my helpers, suddenly unnecessary
clap and cheer. O, my
melancholy babies, come to me
and we will rock around the clock.¹⁷

Surgery: Alex Lemon

Alex Lemon is a “new voice” introduced by Tin House Press and his debut book, *Mosquito*,¹⁸ chronicles his experience with neurosurgery, recovery, and “return” to life. We never learn the reason for Lemon’s surgery, but we can ascertain that he lost an eye from it. Much of the language of his poetry is meaty with thick, swarthy verbs. The images are boldly drawn, with a degree of shock value layered atop pictures usually powerful enough on their own. The style is illustrated with the poem, “After,” which appears in the first section of the book and which deals most directly with Lemon’s surgery. Although the poem is somewhat unclear, it likely describes post-operative sensations:

- i.

Open my mouth & watch the mouse-trapped shake,
the maggot-house-meat

splayed before dogs—I am

that scab
peeled from the butcher’s midnight eyes.

Persistent scalpel—I will thorn soft

these ill-illuminated pleasures.

The mouth whips. The mouth
whips itself clean with wind.
- ii.

I knife your words into trees & repeat them backwards

to feel, thief ear to breast
like a cheat. Today I hunger

for the smallest sheen, hunger for leaves backboning
a chain-link fence.

A shattered-foot ballerina, I cross
pavement split-

¹⁷ Ibid, 62.

¹⁸ A. Lemon, *Mosquito*. (Portland: Tin House Books, 2006). Poems reprinted with permission.

lipped, slopping my ruby hooves. Birthing children

piece by piece. I live by fortune
cookies, blizzards & scars.¹⁹

The poem offers a raw and disorienting sensation, accurately portraying how many patients feel after surgery. But the neologistic verb phrases—“I will thorn soft,” “I knife your words,” “thieve ear to breast,” “leaves backboning,”—generally strike a discordant note. I appreciate the poet’s earnestness, the struggle to discover or invent the most perfect, illustrative, muscular verbs, but they call such attention to themselves that they risk undercutting the image for which they’ve been corralled. Fortunately, there are also poems in this collection that are more lyrical such as “The Best Part,” where less self-conscious writing provides the images with an organic power that is far more affecting than any of the more “potent” images of the previous poem:

The best part of brain surgery isn’t the shining
staples that keep it all in, the ways

fingers and tongues will find the scar.
It’s not wheelchair rides through maple leaves,

sunlight warming a bruise as I fumble
peeling an orange. Nor is it the gentle tug

of a nurse reminding muscles—bend, stretch
and flex. The sweetest ingredient—

the best part is the cutting. Hollow space
that longs to be filled with what little I have.

The first bite, cold fruit. Bedridden, I weigh
my glass eye in a wrinkle-mapped hand.²⁰

Whether the writer is a world-renown poet or a just an “ordinary” person, whether a poem turns out to be a genre-defining classic or an awkward journal entry, it is clear that major illness profoundly affects poetry. For some writers, there is nothing but—once illness pervades their lives, illness pervades their poetry. Or once illness arrives, they are driven to poetry with bone-rattling urgency. For others, illness is simply one other of the bizarre laws of nature with which their creative art has to contend. It is impossible to tease out the precise effects of illness on poetry because it is impossible to conduct a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial. We can never know exactly how Borges might have written poetry at the age of eighty if he remained sighted because such a scenario never existed. And we could never predict with accuracy how West might have written rhyming sonnets if he had only the effects of aging and life experience on a raucously creative mind with which to grapple. For all the reductionist scientific advances in medicine, illness is still

¹⁹ Ibid, 7–8.

²⁰ Ibid, 6.

profoundly illogical and mysterious. Despite its complexity, the human body is primed to work perfectly, and our reliance on this effortless functioning is our primordial defense mechanism for survival. When the body breaks down, we are literally rendered speechless, but poetry is one of the ways that we reclaim our voice. The loosened and limitless reigns of poetry make it particularly susceptible to, and reflective of, the warp and weave of illness.

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