

Imaginative Medicine: Thinking Creatively about Poetry, Illness, and Pain

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines poems from the books *Via Corporis* by Mexican poet Pura López-Colomé (1952-) and *Harm* by U.S. poet Hillary Gravendyk (1979-2014), which offer two different contemporary examples of lyric poetry's engagement with pain and illness. In each case these poets demonstrate how pain as constructed in the lyric creates its own language, its own poetic corpus or relationship to the body, and distinct approaches to broader cultural contexts. In complementary ways these two poets use their imaginative voices to embody or give form to and create empathy for experiences of illness that, while to some degree universal, may often be side-stepped or considered unrepresentable. These poets' work illustrates how poetic language can communicate beyond narrative, opening other avenues to express and understand pain. Gravendyk and Lopez Colomé extract what happens in the physical realm and, through the use of image, sound, perspective, word play, and figurative language, they construct enigmatic poems that surprise and perhaps challenge existing representations of illness and pain.

KEY WORDS: Poetry; pain; illness; health humanities; Gravendyk; Lopez Colomé

Accounts of illness are often framed as survivor stories that take place in memoir or narratives that reconfigure moments of suffering to create a coherent chronicle. The conventional demands of storytelling—a defined point of view and plot, with a beginning (often the onset of illness), middle and an end or some kind of resolution—shape the reader's experience. Lyric poetry, in contrast, often relies less on story and instead embodies feeling, using voice and language itself to make meaning through symbolism, sound, and figures that dialogue with poetic tradition. In her essay on roles for poetry in the Health Humanities Catherine Belling suggests that the lyric mode is reflective; it requires one to step out of narrated time and then examine what this means (4). She continues: "Narrative may be so dominant in medical humanities because it is a way to keep the literary embedded in the action of medicine, in the adaptive plotting of diagnoses and treatments rather than in-depth contemplation of meaning" (4). The pages that follow examine poems from the books *Via Corporis* by Mexican poet Pura López-Colomé (1952-) and *Harm* by U.S. poet Hillary Gravendyk (1979-2014), which offer two different contemporary examples of lyric poetry's engagement with pain and illness. In each case we discover how pain as constructed in the lyric creates its own language, its own poetic corpus or relationship to the body, and distinct approaches to broader contexts. In complementary ways these two poets use their imaginative voices to embody or give form to and create empathy for experiences of illness that, while to some degree universal, may often be side-stepped or considered unrepresentable. These poets' work illustrates how poetic language can communicate beyond narrative, opening other avenues to express and understand pain.

In her article, "Anecdotal Evidence: What Patient Poets Provide," Marilyn McEntyre notes that: "Good poetry, with its ruptured syntax, surprising images, intuitive leaps, and unlikely associations can be an instrument of healing and a source of unique, useable information for both patient and caregiver" (181). The particularity of poetic expression trains us to pay attention: to notice how things are said or not said, a focus that may offer clues to feelings or reactions that may otherwise be missed. McEntyre observes how line length can create visual patterns of advance and retreat, giving loss or pain a shape and a story and offering patients an exercise of choice "in those inexorable, inescapable situations of illness—where choices seem drastically diminished" (186). Poetic expression, written and read, may challenge the tendency to oversimplify pain (194). Lyric poetry puts feelings first: it may complicate or intensify these through sound, syntax, word choice, line/stanza shapes, references or images. It may tell a story or resist any storytelling and its difficulty may create meaning by indicating through its silences or spaces, indirectly signaling what it works against. Susan Sontag and others have reflected on how language shapes our experiences of illness; honing in on poetry, McEntyre observes: "how a startling image, a counterintuitive line-break, an unusual verb choice, a repetition of sound, or even an antique meter can call our attention to a facet of experience we might have overlooked or trivialized." (199) Paraphrasing Stephanie Burt, poetry may take us many emotional places, to many parts of history or the world, but how we read poetry or where a line takes us also depends on where we want to go (8). My interest here is how communicating about our maladies through poetic language can broaden our understanding of poetry and what

it can do. Situating my reading in terms of the Health Humanities demonstrates how this genre reaches broader audiences, crossing boundaries between medical and artistic realms. Since illness is one condition among others that makes our life experiences strange, perhaps it is appropriate to express this in language made strange.¹

Remembering/Recreating Pain in Mexico

Pura López Colomé is a well-recognized poet with over ten volumes published; many of these are brought together in her *Poemas reunidos* 1985-2012. While there are poems that deal with illness and loss in her earlier work, in *Via Corporis* (2016) the bodily experience of illness is her primary focus. While López Colomé approaches this through language, her poetry dialogues with the paintings of Guillermo Arreola. His artwork, in turn, revises scientific perspectives, for he has painted over abandoned x-rays, reimagining evidence of illness and suffering. The poetry in *Via Corporis* [which might be translated as *The Way to the Body or The Body's Way*] regularly responds to Arreola's paintings, in some instances more directly than in others (For example in "Leteo subcutáneo" [Subcutaneous River Lethe] the "tú" [you] whom the poetic speaker addresses could be the painter). In other poems the speaker seems to express more intimate experiences: "Proliferación a la voluntad" [Proliferation at will] or "Filtros ocultos" [Hidden filters/philters] both evoke the speaker's youthful memories. In interviews and in email correspondence with me, López Colomé noted that her life and that of her loved ones has been intertwined with illness; the poet lost her mother to preeclampsia at age 11 and has dealt with cancer and its treatments at regular intervals throughout her life, while her siblings have struggled with kidney disease and vision loss.

In her earlier collection *Santo y seña* [Watchword 2007], the poem "Cor cordis" reads as a prelude to the later volume, for it demonstrates how the experience of pain fades and is reconstructed in language.² As Susan Stewart puts it, "Pain has no memory; its expression depends on the intersubjective invention of association and metaphor" (46). López Colomé tells us as much in the first stanza of this poem: "En la pobre, debil carne / proliferada y suplicante / No hay memoria del dolor" [In our poor, weak flesh, / multiplied and supplicant, / the memory of pain fades.] (*Watchword* 82-3). Pain cannot be recalled in the flesh but it can in the word. For although "Relief snuffs / the spasm / of trapped / nerves" (84), the poet uses her language to reenact physical struggle, discomfort, and agony for even in describing what relief erases, she reinscribes pain:³

borra todo
 hasta el tronar de huesos,
 el desgarrar de músculos y tendón,
 el rompe y rasga de membranas
 que dan vida.
 [it erases /everything / until the bones pop, / muscles

tear from tendon, and life-giving membranes / rend and rupture.](82-3)

López Colomé uses the space on the page and breaks up her lines like the physiological "rend and rupture" evoked here. While she delineates "unnamable" pain by describing physical details, her chronicle of the impossibility of remembering "el ardor de alguna bofetada" [the ardor of such a blow] (84-5) shifts in the last stanza that opens with a conjunction marking opposition:

Pero
 una frase
 cortada a la medida,
 filoso y negro dardo de ónix,
 vuelve a chisporrotear en las entrañas,
 con toda su carga atómica,
 siniestra.
 [But / a certain sentence / perfectly measured, / a sharp,
 black onyx dart, keeps hitting the target inside me / with
 all its sinister, atomic / plunk.](84-5)

While the body cannot physically recall pain, it can be reenacted in language. Thus the "sharp, black onyx dart" and the "lenguas afiladas" [razor-edged tongues] that appear at the poem's close can be double-edged, literal or figurative sharp-tongued darts that cut to the point. Or more broadly, these tongues are languages that offer "oraciones / en pos de Alturas / expresivas" [prayers / aimed at expressive / heights] (86-7). With the terms "prayers" and "expressive," joined by the use of italics in the original closing lines of the poem, the poet evokes devotional language. This is meant to communicate with others, to engage with God, or as part of a meditational practice: all instances in which language does something. In "Cor cordis" it makes us feel another's suffering.

The later collection, *Via Corporis*, features 35 numbered poems and a final unnumbered 36th that present a series of conversational moments between a first and second person speaker—a *yo* and a *tú*. The most evident allusion in the title of the collection is the "Via Crucis" in Christian accounts of the stations of the cross (and culminating resurrection), a fundamentally narrative structure represented in many churches by visual renditions of that narrative (retablos, etc.), and one anchored in Christ's body. In this way the poem's title (and its dialogue with the Arreola paintings) set up the expectation of a tight narrative structure that, as we will see, elements of the work then disrupt.

The fifth poem, "Fantasma glandular" [Glandular ghost] begins with a particular poetic speaker, apparently recounting a story: "Me han contado que te fuiste alejando. Sin norte. / Aunque querías estar aquí" [They told me that you went off. Aimlessly. / Although you wanted to be here] (33). Unlike the short lines of "Cor cordis," this first stanza has the shape of a paragraph, anticipating an account, but there is no narrative context. We don't know who this

"tu" is or why they seek to escape or from what: from a place, from a time, from a (suffering) body? The collection of possibilities suggests that this is metaphorical travel, for the verbal images that accumulate indicate the speaker is addressing the subject of the x-ray/painting. Arreola's work features paired images of oblong shapes and the possibilities of what are these are abound. They are "dos lámparas negras," [two dark lamps], "brújulas húmedas," [damp compasses], "conductos muy delgados," [very delicate conduits], trompetas de Fanfarria [fanfare trumpets], trompas de Falopio [Falopian tubes], bronquios ennegrecidos [darkened bronchi], riñones hechos piedra [fossilized kidneys], in López Colomé's sort of free association of ideas that are expressed in a series of sentences that begin with "Or." The stanza ends implying that the list could go on as the speaker also affirms what these are not: "Y lo demás que, / de par en par, creaba la ilusión de seguir adelante. No el pobre / y solitario corazón. O el cerebro ingrávito" [And the rest that, open wide, created the illusion of going forward. Not the poor / and solitary heart. Or the weightless brain] (33). The idea of an x-ray is to see inside, to "open wide" and expose the organs and possible ailments in a healthcare setting, so that the subject can "go forward" or continue living. Yet here, in an artistic context, the script is rewritten and the poet visualizes many conceivable organs, both metaphorical and literal. Reading an x-ray is transformed into a creative exercise for both painter and poet; there is no objective knowledge of the body so that the only way of going forward is imaginative, to rewrite or reconceptualize this body's path.

In this way the poem scrutinizes what it means to get an x-ray and, in dialogue with Arreola's work, reminds us that anatomical forms can also be aesthetic ones. The process of examining the x-ray images also brings to mind what it means to believe in a future, in survival, in a cure. In the last two stanzas the abandoned radiograph and Arreola's reworked image become a kind of mirror. No longer passive, it confronts the speaker: "Ha venido a toparse conmigo. A no/ tomarme a la ligera" [It has come to meet me. Not / to take me lightly]. Is this the ghostly encounter of the title? Who sees who (or what) shifts, from I-you and what we (and the artist and the poet) see in the images, to what this image sees in its observer:

Me mira con duelo. Y de inmediato, al voltear para el otro lado,
me duplica. Dos formas crueles, encerradas
en un resquicio claro, una cuarteadura llena de esperanza,
que no da a ninguna parte, no lleva a ningún sitio. Aunque
tiene pulso.
[And it looks at me with grief. And at once, turning to
the other side, / it becomes my double. Two cruel forms,
enclosed / in a clear crack, a crevice full of hope, / that
leads nowhere, that takes us not anywhere. Although / it
has a pulse] (33).

The image is and is not a person; it is not an image of a body but a

possible piece of one, yet submitting to an x-ray offers evidence of a person's desire to go on. Perhaps that is why López Colomé finds a heartbeat here. The image becomes her poetic voice's alter ego, its double, for they share the act of looking within and moving on.⁴

The fourteenth poem in the collection, "Proliferación a la voluntad" [Willing Proliferation], marks a similar trajectory, beginning with the suggestion of a story, but in a different context. The poem opens with an italicized speaker who questions smell:

*¿A qué huele?
Aquí sí, entre las capas.
¿Qué es lo que se me viene encima
y se multiplica?
[What does it smell like? / Here, yes, between the layers. /
What is it coming over me / and multiplying?]* (67).

As at the close of "Fantasma glandular," this voice could be the canvas itself speaking of circular images in the painting that another, non-italicized voice goes on to describe. This second speaker speculates: they could be image of cells "a la ene" (*a la enésima potencia* or to the nth degree) or of bubbles, or hoops. They are "partes de una persona que no se quiere ir, / dedicada a repetirse, replicarse sin contención, / hasta que ella misma no se deje respirar" [parts of a person that don't want to go / dedicated to repeating, replicating themselves without containment / until the person herself is not allowed to breathe] (67). The kaleidoscopic description of possibilities transforms from line to line in the first stanza, reconfiguring what we see, offering us multiple perspectives. In the next prose poem section, this first person voice becomes more intimate. She tells us that what she sees in the canvas resembles what she saw as a child after pressing on her eyelids and making her head spin. She identifies with the cells she sees: "Mi cuerpo era el tubo. Las células desbordadas lo de adentro, / una mano invisible lo hacía girar." [My body was the tube. The cells overflowing the insides / an invisible hand rotating it] (68). These verbal and visual images evoke her own experience of cancer, yet the *yo poético* concludes: "¿Con quién estoy hablando? / ¿Con una voz cancerosa?" [Whom am I speaking with? / With a cancerous voice?] (68).

These poems register the writer's reactions, her "readings" of the paintings in another art form, and through her experiences of illness, her own and others'. While interpretation of and meaning in literature and art is always a co-creation, this relationship becomes explicit here. In her book, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, Rita Felski examines the "reorienting force of art" and proposes ways in which our entanglement with art is a strength (141). In the course of her detailed scrutiny of how people respond to works of art, Felski probes the manners in which we form ties and are reoriented as we discover our own positions in relation to a piece (154). She explores this in dialogue with many others, among them Paul Ricoeur, who uses a metaphor that resonates with the corporeal depictions in López Colomé's poetry and Arreola's paintings. Felski says:

If a work exists only as an object to be deciphered, its impact will be attenuated; as Ricoeur writes in a harsh but vivid metaphor, it is treated as a “cadaver handed over for autopsy.” Any knowledge is circumscribed by parameters that are already given. And yet a work of art has the potential to alter what we know and how we know it. (*Hooked* 152)

Rather than dissecting dead bodies, reading these poems stimulates new perceptions: about bodies, about illness, about scientific knowledge, experiential knowledge, about ourselves and what we know, kindling recognition of others’ experiences. Even, perhaps, about the larger context—in this case, Mexico. Nuala Finnegan reads many of the images in *Via Corporis* as representing death and she finds in these a political charge; in her perspective the bodily suffering depicted is a metaphor for the violent deaths that have plagued the country for the past 15 years. For Lorena Huitrón Vázquez, however, López Colomé’s poems are life affirming, “both vulnerable and imposing.” She characterizes them as “arteries: if they are severed, the pact with life is voided.” Confronting and creating images of illness, injury, disability, survival and death, the collection presents us with what may seem unpleasant or remote, yet in the process, this artistic interchange arouses a “reflective receptivity” that may clarify “what it means to be reoriented by a work of art” (Felski 146).

In a verse from “Silbido apenas, trino exhausto” [Barely a whistle, exhausted trill], López Colomé offers us a condensation of the ways in which her poetry recasts illness via multiple modes of sensory perception throughout the book:

La elevación de una voz afónica.
Del añil al púrpura al violaceo al azuloso
se borra a cuentagotas y en sus surcos amarillentos,
visibles al buen entendedor,
la música escrita de una vida,
huellas apenas sobre la placa biográfica.
Tu grafía. Oculta en la cápsula del cuerpo.
Entre canario y jilguero.

[The raising of a soundless voice. / From indigo to deep purple to violet to bluish / it fades by the dropperful and in its yellow folds, / visible to the wise, / the written music of a life, / scarce prints on the biographic plate. / Your writing. Hidden in the body’s capsule. / Between canary and goldfinch.] (97)

The accompanying painting features white horizontal brushstrokes suggesting ribs, on a red background, with purple rising from below and blues within the thoracic cavity. The poet’s synesthetic description melds color with sound, medical with poetic and natural terms, to read this painted life as a musical composition. Her use of *palabras esdrújulas* (stressed on the third to last syllable: afónica,

púrpura, música, biográfica, cápsula) and alliteration (for example, hard c’s here), open acoustic possibilities. Breath is translated into color, bird song, and writing. Poetry’s focus allows us to experience this patient’s ordeals from multiple sensorial perspectives in quick succession. Far from autopsy or a diagnostic reading of an x-ray, the poem changes the kind of knowledge created by the image of curved chest bones to generate a sense of a person’s being, of their life. López Colomé and Arreola alter what we’re accustomed to seeing in an x-ray image, in these records of illness, of living. Poetry and painting give them, and us, room to breathe.⁵

Embodied Experiences: Hurt and Harm

Breathing is central to Hillary Gravendyk’s collection *Harm*. Unlike *Via Corporis*, that originates from found radiographs and speaks “(literalmente) por la herida” [literally through the wound] from “una llaga abierta que no cierra, porque la palabra la alimenta” [an open lesion that does not close because words sustain it] (“Sobre *Via Corporis*”), *Harm* arises from very particular biographical circumstances. In her introduction to the book Brenda Hillman tells us that the collection was written “in a great burst after the poet underwent major surgery” (13); it doesn’t take much investigative work to learn that this was a double lung transplant in 2009. Gravendyk suffered from Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis (IPF) that increasingly scars the lung tissue making it progressively more difficult to breathe and this malady eventually took her life in 2014. Living and writing with an illness with a poor prognosis after a major medical procedure subtends the collection.

In an interview that appears on the website accompanying her book the poet states that she has lived much of her life “amid unmanageable physical harms.” She notes that the response to her illness has often taken the form of another kind of harm through cures, such as surgery. She says:

As people read the book, I hope the title will echo with ideas around harm to nature and harm to the body and the old medical phrase “do no harm.” Part of what this book does is problematize the notion of “cure” by casting it as also a form of harm itself. The title “Harm” wants to trouble easy divisions between cure and harm, landscape and body, wakefulness and sleep. (“Interview with Rusty Morrison”).

This book is very personal; it is grounded in subjective experiences of suffering and illness that Gravendyk extends beyond her self. It is an artistic response to a time in her life. In some ways it is a poetic memoir that explores the body and suffering as these intersect with the world around her. “I’ll impose a narrative across an abrupt jumble of absences, call it *healing*,” she tells us almost as an afterword in the penultimate set of paired verses in the book. Although a story traverses the collection, it is written in bursts of insight and associa-

tion that condense physical and emotional experiences that alternate between submerging us and bringing us up for air through language.

"Botanica," the prose poem that opens the book, embeds the speaker—a "creature of occasion," as we are—in a natural landscape. Leaves, like bodies, have teeth and are shaped like lungs, breathing the forest's night air. The poetic speaker's multiple monikers are Latin names for trees: *Acutifolius*, *Candicans*. "The hand goes black against the low green. I'm *Candicans*: looking / white or frosted. Or *Sylvaticus*, *Californicus*." These metaphorical associations become literal in the poem's final image: "Asleep, I laid my / hand on the tree until my skin turned to bark" (19). The poet sets up associations between human anatomy and that of the broader environment that will recur both in other "Botanica" poems in this collection and as natural elements of poems with diverse foci.

The next four poems are clearly post-operative. "Eight Days Asleep" begins: "She left the body trailing its appetites/ like a honey-moon. She left the body/ permissionless, dreaming..." (20). Rather than the form of a prose poem, here lines are spaced, line endings making for short breaths, and gaps becoming part of the reading and twilight experiences. In "Night Wing," whose title recalls both bird flight and hospital structures, Gravendyk uses open couplets that hang on the page; they are fragments or residue, scraps of sensation:

In this all-night elaboration, all the language is the
language of birds,
damaging and certain.

It's not a bit like rest, these blown black hours. But a
darkening sea,
now a white and rushing traffic, light combed into quick
streaks. (22)

The segmented structure works to offer glimpses into the strangeness and estrangement of this medical experience. As Gravendyk tell us later in this poem, "It's a careful violence" (22)—for care, like cure, depends upon a calibrated degree of damage.

The sixth poem is another "Botanica," offering a block of text creating a dreamlike, grassy scene. The mood created by this scene is linked to the next poem, "Harm," through its opening image: "Ahead the sky is winnowed to its smallest feature. Starred with damage,/ the body. What was promised, what was revealed." The body is starred instead of scarred; surgery is a kind of skywriting. Harm's associations multiply: it is a winking neon sign, a kind of adhesive, it is "flat as a / swept floor. As a drawn planet. A bright story is requested. What will be / touched? Machines, that flashing support, a threaded needle. And the / body sutured to harm" (25). The poem (like the book) draws attention to the complexity of the idea of a cure—instead of a "bright story," the illusion of return to a life without illness, the speaker depicts survival as dependent upon

damage. In some poems she wants the trauma to be more dramatic, not such a pedestrian part of everyday living. Rather than coughing "little hearts and stars and carnations" she suggests: "Let's go out with a thicker line, a cerulean skylight, rain that gets dumped / out of a trough to *thwack* the pane of glass, a smear of red like tempera / paint across the cheek or the hand, streaming from the mouth" ("Exuberance" 49). The poem concludes: "...remember when it meant exuberance, remember awe? / Let's be that breathless." Illness alters a person's life story; in response Gravendyk rewrites the script she's been handed, to redefine and reconceptualize her situation, to make it her own.

One of the features of IPF is progressive honeycombing of the lungs, a term that refers to the appearance of the scarred lung tissue. Gravendyk takes this image and uses it at key moments in *Harm*, investing it with multiple meanings. In the prose poem "Beneath the Stiff Wing of a White Fir," it appears at the poem's outset in a dreamlike naturescape:

Hived lung, yellow and tangled with blue air. At the office
of synchro-
nized bowers, she charges up the dirt stair and vanishes
into the promis-
ing veil of brightness. Reflection studded sky, greening
and pitted with
green weeds; the green-eyed hills carved into an unburnt
hearth, purple
with cold. (68).

The lung may be a literal hive in this forest in which the speaker wanders, at once inside and outside of her body. In "Rejection" it is clearly an organ, yet one that the poet animates through apostrophe, the figure through which an absent or inanimate entity is given life:

Honeycomb lung you
were whiter then,

your light-box heart, lit
for every occasion.

In these plain rooms, in a language
that separates us

you refuse me. (70)

The scene here is indoors, inside the body, and the promise suggested by the earlier poem is compromised. The poetic form shifts to short lines, creating the sensory qualities of breathlessness, and enacting the medical and sensate separations between the speaker and the bronchi suggested by the title. While the speaker can animate the lungs by addressing them, the gap between health and

illness cannot be healed through language alone. The poem ends with the speaker or, perhaps, a stranger, "left to other devices" (71), indicating their own devices, perhaps, or alternative ways of surviving, or medical devices, closing a somber topic with sly humor rather than pathos.

The hive image also recurs in two other poems in which the speaker turns to people she loves: "Apology with Bees In It" and "The Way You Wait When You Wait With Me." In "Apology..." the honeycomb metaphor is less direct, for here the speaker addresses her beloved and the risks taken in loving someone with "circumstantial organs" (62). To live within this situation, the poem's addressee: "packed a suitcase / with bees, collected honey / in the lining," in the first stanza. Here the hive is a source of sustenance, a resource rather than a threat. In the closing tercet this approach shifts and intensifies: "You lined your pockets / with bees you shoved your hand / right in" (62). Fear is secondary; ardor makes this person courageous and daring, plunging into the cluster, pocketed, close to their body now, with its sweetness and the sting of loving a person with a serious illness.

In "The Way You Wait..." the apiary is again inside the body, more particularly, the lungs. In the third stanza it is a "Little hive buried in the chest, little swarm / I know perfectly well what you mean. / Every telephone call a fishhook in the spine" (78). Honeycomb lungs mean danger, uncertainty, shared fear about what has happened, is happening, what may happen next. Together the speaker and person addressed await an uncertain future or a future certain to hold more harm. The poem documents the vacillation between possible remission—the "corona of uncertainty"—a pause in the struggle to achieve some level of health or acceptance of "this ferocious *cul-de-sac*," to thrive within the moment. The poem ends: "O sweet pretender, tell me it's now I am afraid of: / this gasping in the bright sun / with darkness on the sun's far side" (78). Longing to live life as it is, the speaker seeks an ally who might help her confine her fear to now.

Hillary Gravendyk's poetry in *Harm* offers us her embodied experiences of IPF. Many of the poems present an inventory of what she's been through, for she translates her breathlessness, experience of anesthesia, the strangeness of transplant, and the twilight consciousness of recovery into language. Her sensory images call to mind Marni Jackson's assertion that while scientific language is objective, pain is subjective and must recruit metaphors to communicate bodily experiences (2). *Harm* demonstrates Gravendyk's experiential and emotional expertise (versus clinical) as a poet living with a chronic illness that brought her nearer to the risk of death. Grief, fear, uncertainty, wit, honesty, and pain are parts of the lyric conversations she explores with her loved ones, her illness, her body, and the natural world. Her poetry here also resonates with Dr. Paul Kelly's account of the three levels of pain: sensory, cognitive, and affective or emotional, for in these poems she hits every level (quoted in Jackson 61). She distills her own experiences on the page to offer us glimpses into how one may tolerate overwhelming feelings;

rendering these in speech, turning them into verse, making them part of life's rhythm and flow.

Imaginative Medicine

Susan Stewart reminds us that poems are social acts, not things (26). The poetry of both Pura López Colomé and Hillary Gravendyk offers their readers particular knowledge about illness that includes not just the personal, but also everything around it: elements of treatment, myriad people affected by illness, and a country that may become inured to suffering and death. The distilled vision in their poetry allows us to imagine ourselves into their experiences. In each case they examine how vulnerable we are as living beings; there is no closure to the trauma or the intensity evidenced in this poetry—only pauses.

The term "creative thinking" that I use in my title comes from Marilyn McEntyre, who says this is something patients who are poets can teach their caregivers that can be of "immense value," for: "patient's symptoms often present in metaphorical manners" (182). Metaphors are central to these poets' work: the radiographs that pretend to reveal the interior, yet await the work of the artist and poet to speak; the honey-combed lungs that draw together breath and death. We have seen how these two poets work with the precarity of our bodily lives, bringing this to the surface through language, examining what it means in their lives and in the lives and deaths of those around them. In the case of López Colomé, the suffering and death of fellow Mexicans; in Gravendyk's work her caregivers, family and friends. Their perspectives suggest to those who work in the healing professions other ways of understanding what illness means. That they do so through poetry offers all of their readers the possibility of wrestling with deep analysis and interpretation to understand health and illness. Their poetry disrupts the through line of narrative models typically used in medical accounts, providing alternative, more in-depth information about human experiences of illness and pain. Gravendyk and Lopez Colomé extract what happens in the physical realm and through the use of image, sound, perspective, word play, and figurative language, create complex poems that surprise and perhaps challenge existing notions of physical suffering.

This poetry is another reminder that patients are multidimensional people and that there are limitations to the quantitative methods of science. Artistic responses to bodily experiences can offer innovative perceptions and thoughts, new means of comprehending health and illness. The lyric genre brings to the forefront the strangeness of language and creates an inventive zone of attention to communication that makes readers revise our understanding of illness. This poetry may work as consolation or therapy, or perhaps even transfiguration, as it metamorphoses suffering into beauty. These poets' sharpened vision is pain and illness's gift; their ability to put this into poetic form is theirs to us.

 NOTES

¹This comes from the Russian Formalists' idea of defamiliarization, a key element in their definition of poetry.

²Forrest Gander translates this poem's title as "Heart's Core," which works well, but the use of Latin also brings to mind both Biblical and medical realms. In the case of the former, it calls to mind *De doctrina cordis*, a 13th century Latin treatise later translated into several languages and aimed at preparing the heart to receive Christ. In the case of the latter there is a strong medical referent, for a "cordis line" (often condensed to the first word) is a central venous catheter. The combination of spiritual, medical, and lexical realms illuminates López Colomé's approach here.

³English translations of the poems in *Santo y seña* are from Forrest Gander's versions in *Watchword*. All translations from *Via Corporis* are my own.

⁴Nuala Finnegan expands on the idea of exteriority/interiority in a different context in her insightful reading of the collection that she shapes around how the visual and written images interact in what she terms a "transmedial" or "expanded" book.

⁵In Granvendyk's dissertation she observed a similar dialogue between scientific and artistic expressions in a U.S. context in the book *Endocrinology*, which joins the work of poet Mei-Mei Bergenbrugge with artist Kiki Smith (1997). She finds that their interartistic creation combines visual and language arts with science and mingles "the language of affect with that of information, creating conditions for the reader to take in affective data as 'information' and to experience the affective valence of informational data" (136).

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