

Book Review

Morph and Bloom

Wendy Wisner

(CW books, 2013)

Pioneer

Monica Wendel

(Thrush Press, 2014)

Scissored Moon

Stacy R. Nigliazzo

(Press 53, 2013)

I Watched You Disappear

Anya Krugovoy Silver

(Louisiana State University Press, 2014)

Hot Flash Sonnets

Moira Egan

(Passager Books, 2013)

Alternative Medicine

Rafael Campo

(Duke University Press, 2013)

Reviewed by Kate Falvey

“Various forms of structured language, and especially what we recognize as poetry, have been important and even principal means of healing through history and in many different cultures,” wrote Rafael Campo in *The Healing Art: A Doctor’s Black Bag of Poetry* (Norton, 2003). The authors of these six collections supply means of healing through their poetry—means of coping with suffering and examining fears, means of remaining attentive and alert to the delicate currents of our own mortality, means of heightening our responsiveness to language and to each other. Each of these collections contains poems first published in *BLR*.

Wendy Wisner’s poems in *Morph and Bloom* are at once voluptuous and spare; her candid revelations about the sensuous intimacies of motherhood are both accessible and aching private. She charts the lyric phases of her own birth as a mother, from the ripening desire for a child, through the birthing and nursing and weaning of her first son, to the final exultant pressure to “again/again/again” feel the “ridiculous joys” of making new life (“Weaning: God”). Within this temporal framework of birth and growth—the blooming—life doubles back on itself and the deeply felt *now* morphs into the past, the earthy immediacy of the human body transmutes into branch and blossom, and “all things dreamy and

palpable” (“The Scent”) meld into something oceanic—the transcendent mystery of recurrence.

A lactation consultant, Wisner luxuriates in the dreamy and the palpable, and the fierce physicality of her images drift into pensive, wistful introspection. Breast-feeding, its delicacy and ferocity, features in many poems. Wisner doesn’t shy away from revealing the sensual fervor in her maternal voraciousness: “his dark mouth/breaking my skin... I want him. / I want him back” (“His Dark Mouth”). With nursing comes weaning, just as the fecund joys of birthing bring us closer to our mortality (see the lovely “Benjamin Sleeping”), and Wisner expresses loss and fear, deep grief over a miscarriage, and the vital need to remember: “and if I don’t tell his story no one else will” (“I have a son so the world is split”).

Cortney Davis closes her wonderful essay “Nursing and the Word” (*Rattle* 28, Winter 2007) with these lines: “In my best poems, in my best nursing moments, poetry and caregiving merge, doing the important work of paying attention, accepting, releasing and healing.” In her collection, *Scissored Moon*, Stacy R. Nigliazzo, an ER nurse, makes poems of “floating veins” and “sobbing flesh” (“Gush”) and snatches of image and voice that transcend the exquisite fragility of the sickroom, bringing us closer to the everyday acts of healing in our own lives. The poems collected here are a particularly satisfying mix of unadorned reporting (“[s]he was 85 years old, / had just declined treatment for metastatic cancer” in “Privation”) and surprising, evocative images (like “[h]er pulse pled in whispers” in “Parlay”). Some images verge on magical realism, as in these final lines of “Small Cell Carcinoma Invades the Pelvis”: “The femur resembles a snowy birch/on film,/ its peak,/a hitch of sky in the pelvis” and “Relic,” which *BLR* published in Spring 2012: “I collect you like clover/in the green fleck of my eye – /like bone chips at the altar.” Nigliazzo’s final lines are often stirring and unexpected, bringing each poem to memorable resolution and leaving a trail of feeling in their wake.

A “Notes” section, replete with pictures and medical definitions, makes its own quirkily compelling kind of poetry, interesting reading on its own. Each note also leads us back to its source poem to find out, say, how the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service’s “Healthcare Privacy Rule” provides a sobering institutional gloss on the poem “Confidant,” which contains the lines: “I am your nurse./No one knows/the things/I know.” The poem, placed early in the collection, is about the nurse as secret keeper, charged with the sacred trust of listening. “Face to

face,” she provides “sanctuary,” and hears the fuller, more inflected truth, knowing “[t]here was more to the story” than the bits of data collected by the “quick” and “swift” admissions clerk and doctor. The note here is more than informational, it is context-setting. This nurse works in a hospital, is subject each day to the playing out of arcane HIPAA rules, complex organizational procedures, and relationships. Yet she and her colleagues are the ones who must offer consolation and recognize that the words they are privy to are, indeed, “sacred.” Within the institutional hubbub, the nurse is the human “face”—and heart—of the health care system. There is more to say about this short poem—like how the “I am your nurse” opening lines cited above sound chilling, even sinister until the poem unfolds a more empathic perspective and they are absorbed in the final declaration: “I will listen.”

Registering the potential distance in these initial lines tilts the poem into a subtler ambiguity, akin to the complex voice in Davis’s poem “What the Nurse Likes,” and calls up questions about intimacy and trust. *Scissored Moon* invites rereading and prompts contemplation, conversation, and appreciation for Nigliazzo’s gifts as a nurse and as a poet.

Moira Egan’s *Hot Flash Sonnets* should be on a wise-woman, rite-of-passage required reading list. With wry humor and playfully controlled command of form, Egan renders weight gain, dry skin, aching bones, memory loss, hot flashes, erratic mood swings, and bouts of insomnia into a meditative chronicle of a woman’s coming to irreverent, plaintive terms with aging. As the editor, along with Clarinda Harriss, of *Hot Sonnets* (Entasis Press, 2011), Egan signals her self-ironic intentions from the get-go in her collection’s title. Her voice, as befitting the still-taboo subject matter, is sometimes irritable and cranky, but the tone is never cloying or self-indulgent. Quite the reverse: these poems are buoyed by a knowing self-avowal which turns losses—from muscle tone to memory, sleep to tolerance for cheap wine and vapid talk—into canny expressions of will and resignation.

True to the sonnet’s literary roots, this sequence can be construed as love poems thematically linked to Petrarch, Dante, and Shakespeare, whom Egan directly invokes. The object of this sonneteer’s love is her own life; as she writes her way to fifty, she wishes for “a muse/of estrogen” (“Femystique”), describes her menopausal symptoms (“Or, like that dish of mutton vindaloo...your blood no/ longer blood at all, but habanero” in “Hot Flash”), and dryly observes that “the vibes

I ooze/ out to the world these days read more like ‘Aunt’” (“And Into Ashes All My Lust?”). In “Confused Complexion” she is exasperated as hormonal changes are inscribed on her skin. The “fine lines” in this poem are indicated in the serious turn the poem takes, moving from peevishness to lament:

Does my confusion need to be so present
upon the very face I need to live
in this judgmental world, in which I’m trying
to redefine both who I am and what
I might have actually done? ...

With her technical dexterity, Egan’s confessional brio takes both serious and comic turns throughout the sequence. The tour de force, “Forgetfulness,” boasts a sidebar of “recovered” words listed in the same English sonnet rhyme scheme that structures the poem, with, for example, “Mnemosyne” answering “Where have you gone, Goddess of Memory?” The list culminates in “aphasia” as a response to the sonnet’s final line: “I’m speechless. I know there’s a word for it.” In “Bright Stars,” the “Plathy,” obsessive worrier is “wakened by the boom/of sunrise synaesthesia.” Such “luscious” beauty makes her “forget...why [she] lay there worrying all night.” The sequence ends with “Clarity,” which, if not falsely triumphant, does, at least (the most we all can ask?), tilt toward expansiveness and fortitude: “I’m trying to fashion ways to celebrate/ the scintillant of silver, each fine line, /the tiny crow’s feet tracks that mark my time.”

In Monica Wendel’s compelling chapbook, *Pioneer*, the speaker roams from Florida to Brooklyn, from dreams to galleries, from hazy fragmentation to lucid revelation. The voice here has an odd, disjointed, near-surreal affect, a young person’s knowingness and innocence, that can be unselfconsciously literal, sketchy, and vulnerable. In this pioneer’s landscape, everything can make a poem. Though some of these poems seem like heirs to Language poetry, the evocative introductory poem, “Brain Science,” is a narrative which encloses an allusive blend of associations within a journey to and from the “forest dark” of Ocala, Florida. References to Dante’s *Inferno*; a Radio Lab segment about a deaf girl “struck blind” by a truck; a distant relationship; and a terrifying dream about rape make mazy pathways through each other and introduce the

collection's dominant preoccupations: language, perception, place, and the murky distances between seeing, framing, and feeling.

Anya Krugovoy Silver opens *I Watched You Disappear* with the mystically resonant closing lines of Nobel laureate Tomas Tranströmer's "Vermeer": "And the emptiness turns its face to us and whispers:/ 'I am not empty, I am open.'" This, along with the haunting "Dedication" to the sick "[w]ho exist in stages" and "sit in the waiting rooms of far-/away cities" make this collection a reverential offering "in honor of my sisters with inflammatory and advanced breast cancer," as she writes in her Acknowledgments. It is also an unflinching, riveting exploration of her own spiritual journey with cancer as her guide. She is "taboo, now" ("Stage IV"), which gives her license to walk among the unsuspecting, revealing her terror and love—an outlier with a wise old tale to tell.

Using an entrancing mix of fairy tales and art as sources for her own mesmeric purposes, she writes about faith and family and the transformations acute illness breeds. Rage, desperation, and grief coexist with her passionate need for "life – mysterious, ordinary –/holding off pain with its muscular wings." She "exist[s] again" when released from the institutional invasions of the hospital: "The wind tongues me to my feet/like a doe licking her newborn fawn" ("Leaving the Hospital"). "Because the razor of illness is at [her] skull," she longs for the sensual assurance of dresses, "something beaded, lacey, fine" ("Skirts and Dresses") to recall her to her womanhood. In "Owl Maiden," the first of a series of poems inspired by tales from the brothers Grimm, and first published in *BLR*, the woman transmogrifies into a totemic owl: "What terror she inspires now, / perched in some bare and wintry birch. / Her weeping, a shriek. An omen." The weeping still pulses, but the shrieking is muted in "The Hazel Tree," in which the ultimate transformation—from body to tree—occurs so that the mother can speak to her son in leaf and light, "each nut a word.... The day-/light's gold and glass and soft gray wings." These are painfully beautiful poems which help us hear the emptiness as it whispers, "open."

Alternative Medicine is the sixth collection of poetry by award-winning poet Rafael Campo. In a 1999 Poetry Society of America Q&A, the prolific poet describes his uniquely mixed vantage points: "I consider myself an American poet precisely because I am a mutt, a mongrel,

a kind of happy monster, born in New Jersey but conceived in Cuba and Italy, at once devoutly Catholic and flamingly queer, a Harvard-educated physician who prescribes Nuyorican poetry along with pills, who educates about HIV in Spanish and writes villanelles in English.” The book’s three sections speak to the poet’s “mongrel” vision and treat the reader to his capacious humanity. He writes, often with a stunningly inventive panoply of received forms, about childhood memories; writing poetry; his responses to global atrocities and immigrant experiences; his patients and practice of medicine; and his own familial and romantic relationships. Like his earlier collections, *Alternative Medicine* prescribes large doses of empathy for much that ails us.

In the caustic “Pharmacopeia for the New Millennium,” “Empathase” is one of a series of mock drugs recommended for the psycho-social ills that plague the oblivious and well-fed. It is “[i]ndicated for the reduction of/despair associated with the loss/of compassion.” When we are inured to suffering, we, too, become despairing, lost in a solipsistic stupor. Campo forces us to look at inequity and misery head-on and in so doing, to look squarely at ourselves. In the tellingly titled “Iatrogenic,” the doctor gives his complete attention to a patient who self-harms, while “other patients wait.” The poem is an understated elegy for the suffering we feckless humans inflict upon ourselves, all of us responsible, all of us incapable of assuaging or even preventing our collective self-harming. The doctor touches his patient’s “deep red cuts” and knows his patient as himself: “as if I could touch pain itself, as if/ by touching pain I might alleviate/ my own despair.”

Campo’s work provides us with a reminder that poetry is more than palliative; it is a way of touching that existential pain and alleviating the despair that is our burdensome response to the anguish of existence. It is these kinds of poetic reckonings that make Campo a doctor to us all.

Any of these collections would be worthy additions to a medical humanities or themed literature course. Though radically different in voice, style, and theme, each reflects the poet’s belief in the restorative powers of language itself.

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