

Book Review

What Good Will This Knowledge Do You?

Four Poets on Illness

Diary of Our Fatal Illness

Charles Bardes

University of Chicago Press, 2017

Bluenwords Greening

Christine Stewart-Nuñez

Terrapin Books, 2016

Malaria Poems

Cameron Conaway

Michigan State University Press, 2014

Looming

Jennifer Franklin

Elixir Press, 2015

Reviewed by Rachel Hadas

An octogenarian has bladder cancer: two years of procedures, hospitalizations, home again, confusion, decline, and death. His son pays close attention throughout and writes about the experience.

A young boy with a seizure disorder develops aphasia. His mother, who also suffers several miscarriages, pays close attention throughout and writes about the experience.

A health care worker in Thailand and elsewhere acquires a great deal of scientific knowledge about malaria and encounters many people who are suffering from the disease. He pays close attention throughout and writes about the experience.

A poet's young daughter is profoundly autistic. The mother pays close attention throughout and writes about the experience.

Charles Bardes is a doctor. Christine Stewart-Nuñez is a professor of English. Cameron Conaway is an activist and writer. Jennifer Franklin is a poet and teacher. All four of them had written and published poems before the current crop of books. Nevertheless, the experiences that occasioned these books,

and which the poems in them record and address, galvanized Bards, Stewart-Nuñez, Conaway, and Franklin into a new intensity and focus. The death of a parent; a child's irreversible neurological condition; the ravages of a parasitic disease over whole populations—these are not passing aches and pains but irrevocably life-altering experiences, which one doesn't get over. "We never," writes Franklin in her poem "Demeter's Decision," "appreciate anything until it is lost." And then we appreciate it with a vengeance.

In Keats's late epic fragment *The Fall of Hyperion*, the god Apollo proclaims that "Knowledge enormous makes a god of me." Even if their personal losses didn't make these four writers into poets, perhaps their experiences made them better or different poets than they were before. Losses, suffering—whose? Their own or the suffering of others seen up close, experienced over time? The pronouns blur. What's clear is that suffering focused their minds, made them pay attention—and not just attention to the symptoms or the hospitals or the medications, but to everything, including familiar myths or paintings, a train ride, a conversation. And not only pay attention, but keep a record of the dying father, the struggling boy, the malaria sufferer. A record for whom? Sharon Olds used to remind her students that it wasn't only a question of who they were writing *to*, but who they were writing, speaking, *for*. The mere act of bearing witness—of writing, of communicating the onslaught of details, diagnoses, medical lore—this act, if only temporarily and in flashes, clears the mind; with luck and skill, not just the writer's mind but sometimes the reader's mind as well.

All four of these books would have been beneficial to their writers even if they had never been published—to their writers and maybe to a small (or, given the Internet, not so small) circle of family and friends. But having been published, *Diary of Our Fatal Illness*, *Bluemords Greening*, *Malaria*, and *Looming* have entered willy-nilly into a busy national conversation about being a patient or a caregiver, a doctor or a parent or an adult child. Furthermore, these slender books have of course entered the clamorous world of American poetry. Every day, especially during National Poetry

Month, one encounters self-congratulatory statements about the diversity and dynamism of American poetry, its generosity and inclusiveness. But if race or gender or class are no longer barriers to poetic utterance, being old or ill or disabled may be the next hurdles. Perhaps these hurdles have been vaulted over already—after all, isn't Disability Studies a new academic field? Still, there's an inherent isolation in the patient's or caregiver's experience, a loneliness that inflects all these books and relegates them to a quiet but crucial corner of the loud arena.

The very inwardness peculiar to poetry, its paradoxical combination of the personal and the universal, is what makes it distinctive and irreplaceable. Its essential trope of apostrophe makes poetry a perfect vehicle for addressing the sick, the dying, or the dead. Poetry has always offered a natural way to mourn or pray. If the poet's range of reference includes myth, as is very much the case with Bardes and Franklin, then the myth in question (Demeter and Persephone in Franklin's poems, a range of Homeric and other references in Bardes) springs into fresh life even as it deepens and enriches the poet's personal experience. If the poet's resources are scientific, as is the case with Conaway, then the science enriches the poetry and vice versa. The intersections and overlaps are both generative and beneficial. In "Uncivilised Poetics," a recent issue of the excellent new periodical *Dark Mountain Review*, Rob Lewis encouraged his fellow practitioners to "tear down the walls, break up the categories, open the channels. Allow poetry to flow into science, science into prayer, prayer into nature, nature into poetry, and around and around let it go. Interpenetration is in the nature of things." Channels are beautifully opened, interpenetration is in action, when Stewart-Nuñez writes a poem entitled "Lexicon for Landau-Kleffner Syndrome" or when Bardes writes,

It must have been three in the morning when my father phoned. Son, he said, I travelled for days until I reached the center. I underwent purifications and slept in the temple, where incense and fumes wafted

through the air, serpents slithered between the supplicants, and priests tiptoed about us. There I learned my cure in divine dreams and snaky whispers.

It's not as if Jennifer Franklin had to strain to reach for the myth of Demeter and Persephone; it was right there, ready for her use as she investigated maternal loss. Demeter's loss of her daughter, however wrenching, is less devastating than Franklin's permanent loss of the daughter who, trapped in the underworld of her autism, is neither physically absent nor personally present—a murky condition the psychologist Pauline Boss has dubbed ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss also characterizes Stewart-Nuñez's interactions with her increasingly aphasic son, and Bardes's with his failing father. Ambiguous loss is hard to live with; it is also a fertile field for poetry. As Stewart-Nuñez puts it in “When My OB/GYN Said He Didn't Understand Poetry,”

When I build a nest of words,
paradox and ambiguity kiss each time,
offspring running down the page.

In addition to apostrophizing the absent or unresponsive, in addition to braiding myth or science into their fabric, poems have a generic genius for asking unanswerable questions. Conaway and Franklin provide eloquently defiant examples:

You know the names
Of every Sicilian wildflower

But what good will this
Knowledge do you in this world?

(Franklin, “Wildflowers”)

Is the surface of life like the thin skin of stilled
water or the water itself? Is it the brindle of *Anopheles*
or the mosquito being behind
what we've wrapped in name and taped down with distance?

(Conaway, "Die Never Always")

Stewart-Nuñez is more declarative and descriptive, and Bardes oddly eschews question marks, so his work lacks an interrogative lilt. But the dispiriting flatness of the exchanges Bardes reports are no less unanswerable for the absence of question marks.

My father said, I suffer pain. The doctor said, Where.

Dad, I said, why do you now read only the history plays.

If myth and apostrophe ease the loneliness and solipsism of the sickroom, if questions open out the scene into larger vistas, then simile and metaphor, also native to poetry, have a similar function. They relieve the tedium and vary the scene of the sickroom or the waiting room, if not for the patient then at least for the observer, the one keeping vigil, who is after all often the poet. Listening to a reading of the *Iliad* some years ago, I was very struck by the sheer relief provided by the wonderful string of similes at the start of Book III. Released from the claustrophobic tent full of heroes shouting at each other, the audience stirred and breathed; we could, however briefly, imagine the scene from a loftier, fuller, and calmer vantage point. Poetry constantly offers such little respites.

Of these four poets, Franklin is the most formally accomplished. Her lush, controlled lyricism aches with an unrelieved sadness that might risk monotony, but her poet's eye and ear, and her probing honesty, seldom fail her. Conaway is more stylistically uneven, but his electrifying "Die Never Always" is worth the price of admission. Perhaps Conaway's "In Season," a trenchant tour of a

“supermarket/in a six-story mall/in Bangkok” could have been a prose sketch, an article. Perhaps Bardes’s “Diary” could have been written as what it only superficially resembles—a journal, a prose memoir. Sometimes Stewart-Nuñez’s work savors of reportage.

And yet these poets know what they’re up to. Poems, with their contrasting textures, their brevity, the discontinuous energy of their juxtapositions—“a way of happening, a mouth,” as Auden puts it in his Yeats elegy—poems can be true in a way prose cannot be to the hour by hour experience of illness and caregiving. This experience is at once, or by turns, excruciatingly slow and endlessly unpredictable. There are conversations, doctors’ visits, excursions, remissions, relapses, diagnoses, dreams, flashbacks, distractions, descriptions, lists, apposite quotations—the list goes on. Raising a son who is losing speech or a daughter who cannot interact—the frustrations and sadness, the flashes of hope or tenderness or joy, occur not day by day but minute by minute. Prose risks smoothing out the discontinuities, papering over the bumpy passages with a homogeneity that can come to seem specious or flat.

These are four books for which to be grateful. Writing under (or in the case of Bardes, perhaps after) circumstances of wrenching difficulty, the poets did their best to bear witness; and in doing so they also lifted themselves, however intermittently or briefly, above those circumstances. Thus Franklin and Bardes, Conaway and Stewart-Nuñez have helped themselves. Moved, instructed, and inspired, we are their beneficiaries too. ❧