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Editorial

The Sur/Real of Dis/Order

In this issue of *Ars Medica* there is an unsettling and productive thread of what we might call disrupted vision and narrative rupture. When rent, the body, heart, and soul require new forms to express their fragmentation and, in turn, new forms to approach wholeness again. Within the health-care humanities, we often speak of narrative coherence—of the ability of the well-told story of illness to help us make sense of and communicate illness experience. Yet, tidy stories with beginning-middle-end resolutions belie the often chaotic, fragmenting, and corporeal oozing of the body and mind in disorder.

In Guylaine Couture's *New Dress Against Disease*, on the cover of this issue, a cut and re-assembled book is required to tell the story of six women with different cancers. The viewer must make sense of this fragmentary narrative, and “try on” different story frames to (re)dress the illness—from science, philosophy, art, and other disciplines. It calls to mind the paper doll books of childhood in which the punched-out clothing can be laid over the doll figures, but in this case from a more knowing, adult vantage. These dresses offer new and hopeful layers of narrative and meaning, but cannot reverse the red dots of cancer that blot the women's bodies underneath.

Couture's cutouts also call to mind the scissors and collage so important to surrealism. From the 1920s, surrealism was associated with artists and writers such as Andre Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Desnos, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí. The movement is often understood as a response to the bodily and psychic trauma of WWI and to the increasingly mechanistic reduction of modernization. The surrealists' adventures into the psyche, and into territories of dreams, desire and the unconscious, released objects from everyday life, and repositioned them in unexpected combinations and juxtapositions. Surrealist art practices often cut and tore things apart and recombined them in ways that were startling, raw, and transgressive. According to Breton, the aim of surrealism was to, resolve "two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*" (Breton, 1924).

Very little has been written about the relation of surrealism to the medical and health humanities. Many facets of surrealist practice and representation offer potentialities for new expressions of the body that are in excess of linear language and reason. Despite major critique of surrealism by feminists, who cite the dominance of male artists and the tendency to use the female as muse and the female body to fragment, dissect and reassemble (such as in the collages of Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer), Whitney Chadwick (2017) observes that many women surrealist artists resisted this idea of passive muse. And later, female artists built upon and re-appropriated surrealist techniques, tech-

niques that resonate within Guylaine Couture's collage book art, and which allow her to imagine alternatives to the female body struggling with cancer.

Martin Edward Springett's *Gnarly Hearts* uses the form of the comic book to document his experience of cardiac surgery. Comics also evokes childhood, as he recounts, "instinctively ... creating a 'comic book'; a form of visual storytelling that I have loved ever since I was a child." This form allows him to put a "frame around what would otherwise be a roiling sea of emotions." The majority of the pages of this visual narrative contain few words, seemingly depicting nonlinear temporal sequences and multiple subjectivities and vantages. The images offer a lyrical story out of the author's fragmented visions, turning delirium into the magical as patients and hospital equipment are relocated to natural settings, and as vines twine themselves along hospital corridors and beds.

Brandon Michael Muncan uses pop art in his *The Mind Sees Many*, reproducing and manipulating a CT image of the brain to create tension between similarity and individuality; the disembodied and familiar outlines of the brain conceal the individual and lived realities of patients struggling with the personal meanings of their diagnoses and illness. Muncan's artistic mode of reproduction confronts us with a vision of the dehumanizing aspects of technology within medicine.

In her series of poems, Crystal Hope Hurdle uses language to simultaneously evoke and disturb vision, which accompanies the narrator's recovery from eye surgery. Through her poems, which range from ekphrastic readings of the paintings of Francis Bacon, to engaging with poems by Ted Hughes, and Sylvia Plath, "the eye eye eye becomes its own hot dark panting muse."

From his collection *Yams Do Not Exist*, Garry Thomas Morse's "Farinata After the Flood" ventures into mental order/disorder, an area too infrequently explored in *Ars Medica*. Morse, who has been described as a poet of prairie surrealism, depicts Farinata struggling to maintain mental composure and stability, using the vast and open prairie landscape to anchor himself and avert "another mood coming on." As Farinata contemplates the landscape, he alludes to Saskatchewan born abstract painter Agnes Martin "who had striven so hard—all her life in fact—to think of nothing," even as he wards off his own thoughts that "br[ing] back the trauma ... like some unidentified but almost fathomable speck on the horizon that was approaching at top speed."

Morse's syncretic style defies this attempt to "turn the mind to anti-matters," drawing in Farinata degli Uberti, who appears in Dante's *Inferno*; musing over his own misquotation of symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud's "tout se fit ombre et aquarium ardent"; and Cecilia Bartoli's rendition of Vivaldi's *Cessate, omai cessate*. Vivaldi's words, not included in Morse's story, suggest an intriguing intertextual subplot to Farinata's

wish to blot out the trauma of memory and
achieve a quiet mind:

Cease, henceforth cease,
cruel memories
of despotic love;
heartless and pitiless,
you have turned my happiness
into immense sorrow.
cease, henceforth cease
to tear my breast,
to pierce my soul,
to rob my heart of peace and calm.

As Farinata struggles to quiet the mind, and to
steel it against the piercing of memory, Morse's
narrative erupts with the language of neuroscience,
proliferating in this already flooded space:

neuronal production ... sudden glut of
neural data in terms of image, sensa-
tion, and mood. ... the rough-and-tum-
ble *a posteriori* arose from the
imbalance of glutamate promoting irri-
tability, to dip our beaks even deeper in
the elemental chemistry of Farinata's is-
sues, postulating in step with the school
of thought that dopamine agonists have
a starring role in precipitating mania ...

These very different contributions, by couture,
Springett, Muncun, Hurdle, and Morse, each
demonstrate the power of narrative and visual *in-*
coherence to convey psychic and corporeal trauma.

Through the imagination, however, these fragments are stitched together in a way that at once retains the *stice*, or puncture, and the reparative thread that sutures the wound, retaining the tension between fragmentation and wholeness, meaning and lack of meaning, certainty and uncertainty. As Springett writes, “the blow to the body caused by” his surgery leaves a residual anxiety that he “would fly apart.” This anxiety of disintegration is tempered by the “imagination ... a refuge to soften the blows of the world.”

Ultimately, even as these works represent blows to the body and psychic ruptures, they grasp at and cling to imagination and creativity. This power of the imagination in the face of illness is boldly celebrated through the other contributions to this issue: in the prose of Gordon Sun, Mary Hutchings Reed, Saher Shaikh, Julie Hein, and Ann Starr; and the poetry of Alan Steinberg, Louis Leveen, Changming Yuan, Jennifer Markell, and Rebekka DePew.

References

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