

bloodli(n)es: Carnivalizing Narratives of Illness: Breathing Bakhtinian Life into the Compromised and/or Dying Body

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Abstract

The following presents and discusses an excerpt from a work of creative non-fiction – a 90 page long poem titled *bloodli(n)es*. *bloodli(n)es* explores the evolving experiences, tensions, and suspensions of living with a degenerative and incurable disease. The poet confronts her diagnosis, her prognosis, a variety of physiological complications and related indignities, while being confronted with an inhospitable medical discourse. She struggles to come to 'new terms;' with her tumultuous past, her challenging present, and her uncertain future as well as with the new discursive, linguistic and physical terms being thrust upon her. Among the pressing questions the text raises is, why and how does this woman write; about her past, her disease, and her dying? What does her writing accomplish? How does she seek to write herself out: of an over-determined father-daughter history; a seemingly dead-end story; a textual tradition; the elevated poetics of sentimentality and transcendental notions that so often characterize stories of illness and death; and an overwhelmingly positivistic medical discourse, which increasingly threatens to over-define and over-write her?

A series of paintings expressing tensions arising at various points in the text accompanies this work. These are titled: (1) *father/daughter dis-eases I*; (2) *silences suspended*; (3) *bloodli(n)es*; (4) *seeing red*; (5) *father/daughter dis-eases II*; and (6) *art-eries*.

Literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind;

that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks
straight and clear . . . in illness this make-believe ceases

.....

To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of
a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of
the earth . . . Yet it is not only a new language that we need, more
primitive, more sensual, more obscene

.....

There is, let us confess it (and illness is the great confessional),
a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted
out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals.

– Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill*

[2] This excerpt from Virginia Woolf’s essay, *On Being Ill*, aptly situates and contextualizes my study. My first interest is in writing illness. Secondly, as Virginia argues in this passage, I feel that traditional literary approaches to writing of illness and death - its formal language and forms of polite discourse - are woefully inadequate to articulate the experiences of chronic, acute, or terminal illness. My scholarly and creative work seeks to subvert a long-standing classical tradition of literary representation in favour of a language grounded in the Bakhtinian grotesque body and a carnivalized writing that rematerializes the body and is thus better suited to such

narratives. Contemporary poetics, in particular those founded on the vernacular and other so-called 'sub-literary' discourses, can provide suitable alternatives. More specifically, I would argue that writing based upon the carnivalesque and basked in the 'grotesque' (as espoused by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*), offers the most fertile ground for articulating illness.

[3] I have adopted the phrase 'diss-courses of bawdy/body language' to describe the aesthetic and writing strategies that I see as being most suitable to this task; those characterized by vernacular, bawdy, bodily and scatological counter-discourses that are, in keeping with Woolf's suggestion, more primitive, more sensual, and more obscene; basically more bodily. When writing out of a grotesque and Bakhtinian aesthetic, the materiality and matter of the body is no longer avoided and in fact, at times, takes on a life of its own. Indeed, anyone who has been truly ill, or has even gotten 'sick-drunk,' can attest to the 'baseness' of the situation and the inappropriateness of high-minded discourse. As one becomes subject to (and the subject of) one's own body and its functions and malfunctions (burning from fever, lesions, rashes, infections, etc.), the cold, classical, and bloodless body of literature seems a distant and false manifestation; a hoax.

[4] Turning our attention to Bakhtin for a moment, I'd like to consider three aspects of the carnivalesque in particular: grotesque realism, the conception of the grotesque body, and the notion of carnivalized writing. Bakhtin speaks of the carnival atmosphere as an anti-authoritarian attitude to life, founded in the joyful acceptance of the materiality of the body. The essential principle of grotesque realism is "degradation," or debasement, and despite conventional connotations, he does not mean this to be wholly negative (Dentith 67). According to Bakhtin, "debasement is a fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images" (Bakhtin 370-371). Stressing the ambivalence of carnival imagery, Bakhtin asserts that the degradation enacted in grotesque realism is a constant reminder AND affirmation that we are all creatures of flesh and blood and other bodily fluids, emphasizing that even excrement is 'gay matter,' simultaneously linked not only to decay and death, but also to regeneration and renewal. Grotesque realism celebrates the material body that eats, digests, copulates, and excretes, doing so in an abandoned and exaggerated way.

[5] Related to grotesque realism is the conception of the grotesque body, which Bakhtin sharply distinguishes from the 'classical body.' The body of classical art (both in its representations and as a category), being subject to

the bloodless niceties of academic philosophy and polite society, is a completed, contained, enclosed, spiritual and presumably eternal *thing*; a cold, static, bloodless body - consider, for example, the Apollo Belvedere - whereas the grotesque body is unfinished, protean, unapologetically corporeal, and ambivalent. It is, to quote from Simon Dentith in his book *Bakhtinian Thought*, "a thing of buds and sprouts, the orifices evident through which it sucks in and expels the world...a body marked by the evidence of its material origins and destiny" (67). In the context of carnival, the body is unbounded, is in transformation, and materially linked to the past and future. Whereas classical art celebrates the elevated realms of the spiritual and the cerebral, the grotesque celebrates *le bas corporel*, or, in other words, "the material bodily lower stratum;" our material connection to both birth and death (Bakhtin 325). According to Bakhtin, the "verbal norms of official and literary language, determined by the canon" prohibit and exclude what is linked with birth, sex, and death, distinguishing between familiar and vernacular speech, and so-called correct language (Bakhtin 320). In the context of these conventions, the grotesque characteristics of the body cease to play a role, and cease to be spoken. For Bakhtin, the grotesque body - physically and linguistically - brings the materiality of the body back into utterance and text (Bakhtin 318).

[6] Carnivalized writing can be understood not only as an aesthetic that celebrates the anarchic, body-based and grotesque elements that can be mobilized against the seriousness and sterility of official culture, but perhaps more stylistically, as writing that has taken the carnival spirit into itself and consequently reproduces it in its own structure and practice. Like the carnival, carnivalized writing becomes a time outside of standard time, and so structurally, is often given to non-chronology, shifting tenses, overlaps and non-linearity. The language of the carnivalized text is 'down-to-earth,' idiomatic and vernacular, allowing for the informality, familiarity, fraternization, and intimacy impermissible at other times and in other con/texts, offering an aesthetic liberated from that which is prescribed and universally accepted. Common to both the carnivalesque and carnivalized writing is an attitude in which the high, the elevated, the official, and even the sacred, is debased and exposed, specifically as a condition of renewal and regeneration. It is often characterized by a swing from a mock-serious tone, to the comic or sardonic, providing a malleable space where activities and symbols can be inflected in different directions. Both are also characterized by polyphony, that is, multiple voices - as if standing in the middle of a crowd at a carnival - fragments, overlaps, snippets of conversations, and so on.

[7] From out of this theoretical and critical context I have been writing a long poem titled *blood-lines* in which I have sought to apply the Bakhtinian 'diss-course of bawdy/language' to a narrative about chronic illness and the experience of facing death. The narrator has been diagnosed with a degenerative and incurable form kidney disease, and as she becomes increasingly ill over a period of several years, being diagnosed with other complications and conditions, she records her thoughts and experiences. A notable aspect of her writing is the manner in which she singles out individual body parts, organs and other 'matter,' giving them "Id/ entities of their own." She takes off the kidd gloves, if you will, wading hip deep into the material and materiality of her body, refusing to hide behind polite discourse.

[8] Additionally, her use of bawdy and bodily humour not only transforms "terror into a gay carnival monster" (Dentith 241), but undercuts the prescriptive seriousness and sterility of the medical professionals and their discourses, which might otherwise over-write her. Her writing also subverts the desire of polite society to avoid talking about the body, its matters, and most of all the messiness of death. The narrator engages in Woolf's "childish outspokenness" and blurts out that which might otherwise be deemed inappropriate and literarily unacceptable. And her writing itself is carnivalized; drawing upon the tumultuous, rebellious, parodic, and evolving

character of the carnival. Finally, by employing these carnivalized strategies, the narrator is able to side-step the conventional abstractions, transcendental pit-falls, and sentimentality that are so frequently characteristic of texts dealing death.

life
Increasingly becomes
a series of
strange plantings...

transplant:
to plant in an other
place...

i found myself
at a sex conference, ended up
in a lecture, by accident, intimacy
coaching, they called it
the speaker wanted to
do an exercise, asked us to
focus, on what we wanted, he said
it didn't have to be
material, but we should choose
something big, i thought

*what the hell, let's
give this a go*

had three words
on my mind, when i opened
my eyes he was staring
at me, he said
"what do YOU want"
caught
off guard, i blurted
"a healthy kidney"
the audience went
silent

transplant:
to settle
in an other
area...

it wasn't where I planned to
do it, but there,
i said it, i have
said it
aloud,

finally

allowed to
say
it, was that me?
a kid
ney, speaking
the unspeakable?

**PKD is inherited,
a dis-
ease passed on
from parents to children...**



gene tics in my family

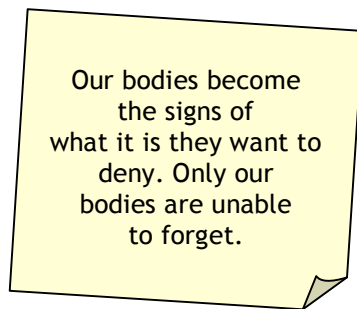
tree dis-eases
passed on, root to tip

**...if you inher(e) it
the gene you will have
the disease, or will be
a silent carrier...**



silence
so long
i've been
silent
a carrier
of silences
festering
i've been
sentenced
by secrets
needing to be
kept, the words
held
on the tip of
my tongue, dangerous
if let
loose;
i just kept
quiet, my mouth
shut
things would work

out, in the end
but held hostage
beneath my thinning skin
the past
worked its way
out
wormed away at
secrets and cells
mutating, i am
infected, have
been exposed, at last
diagnosed
as a carrier of
dis-eases



Our bodies become
the signs of
what it is they want to
deny. Only our
bodies are unable
to forget.

"we'll have a better idea
of what we're dealing
with when you see
the nephrologist", doc's talking about
the 'how long'
and 'how bad'
details, i'm about to become
an expert
on parts
of my body which, until now,
i hadn't given a second
thought...

...changes everything
the world has
shifted
on its axis, wor(l)ds
have changed

transformation:
change in
composition

touched, the intimacy
coach seems
shocked, but pleased
with my honesty

*i wonder if
i have gone
too far
am too far gone?*

he doesn't hold
back "you know,"
he says, "kidney
failure is a manifestation of
unresolved anger" or
in other words, being
pissed off,
that's clever
kidneys, the bladder being
'pissed'
urine and all
that too

*u r' in the ball park, man on
to me, i guess*

have i been dealing
with the past, he ventures
or perhaps repressing
feelings of frustration

*?what's the big deal
do you kid
know or not
do you like fooling
around, the block
i've been there
and yer' catching on
to the dirt
rounding third
hoping for a homerun*

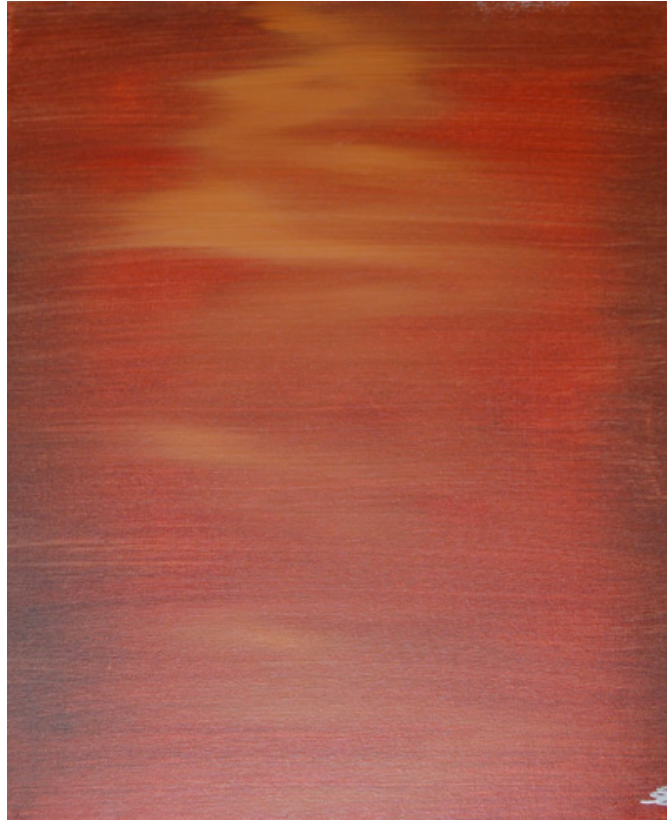
kidney:
one of a pair

they filter impurities
in the blood...



filtering impurities, by-
products
guess that's been a problem
bye-
products
ta-da, see ya
waste-
not, want
not, i'll tell ya what
i want not
to have to
waste another day
you know

**PKD causes cysts to form in the kid
ney, there is no known treatment or cure...**



i'm not scared

What is a poem
but an answer
to fear?

but
pissed
off, at the moment
(oops! that's what got me
in this
mess, right?)
i should re
vise, get hold of
myself, say
i am in
disbelief (but
it wouldn't be
true)

cyst:

sac containing fluid or semifluid
morbid matter...

;morbid matter
more bad
news
what's the matter

with you

morbidity:

...indicative of dis-
ease

doc said to me
"at least you have that
healthy sense of humour"

morbid:

an unusual interest in
sad or unpleasant things,
especially death.

anne called
today she says she knows
someone else with this
did i want it?
their number?
so i could talk to them
she's trying
i know, to be helpful
but i can just imagine
the call
hi, you don't know me
but we have a disease in
common, my fear is
this will be
come my primary source of
id
-entification,
i've never been the support
group type

*do they have one? a twelve
step program for going
into kidney failure?*

**other organs can be affected
including the heart...**

? how/do i get passed it
,my past

has taken over, how
do i grow
passed it or
do i, try to
take another

pass;
can i pass?

What is the heart
but the muscular,
thick skin of
an abiding secret?

can love be
a burrowing or
a burying
(of hatchets, perhaps)?



the old man and me
are at an impasse,
have not yet come
to terms, but i've learned

to manage
the mess
minimize
the waste
at this stage, the best i can do
is damage
control, i figure
he knows that, finally
has decided to leave
well enough alone

Simon says,
what a waste...

**...the main job of the kid
neys is to remove waste...**

Kidney as editor
taking out the bad stuff,
now walking off the job;
what's a poet to do?

...clean up your own mess

**...without properly functioning kidneys
waste products build up
in the blood, are poisonous...**

? have you ever tried to
imagine, your insides
the landscape beneath
skin,
it's alien, my own
flesh and blood,
unnerving,
i've been learning
how things are
supposed to be, how
my body, stubborn
refuses to con
form
i'm getting acquainted with

the uni/verse
inverted
my in/verse
my photo negative
forced to see
the world
in black and white

**one litre of blood
enters the kid
ney through the renal art
eries every minute...**



art-eries
scary stuff, after all
veining the canvas
of skin;
never a dull moment

the intimacy
coach is persistent
thanks me for sharing
gives me a voucher for a free
forty-minute session

*it's like getting a coupon
for a free oil change*

*after the car is wrecked, eh?
sure
all i really need
is an oil, lube and filter
and i'll be roadworthy,
ready to go!*

says he'd be honoured
to coach me, that is
*help me out
with diet and exercise, maybe
or perhaps, it's psychological
well-being he's after
either way, it's a dirty
job, but someone's gotta
do it*

i get this image of us shackled up
in LABOUR AND DELIVERY

*i must admit
i'm labouring
for some
deliverance, here*

he's in
my room, i'm hooked
up to machines
and monitors, labouring
he's cheering me
on like a Lamaze coach
"come on, be a sport!"
he's checking my fluids, hey
listen, it isn't that far
fetched, is it
birth
or death
they've always been
twins
twined
together if you want
to make an om
let's get real here,
you have to

scramble a little sometimes
break some, if you can
have someone coach
you through
birth why not death,
why not?

Note

Passages appearing in 'yellow notes' have been borrowed with permission from Robert Kroetsch's *The Hornbooks of Rita K.*

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