

## Literary Selections Discussed in “‘Fact vs. ‘Truth’ in Narratives of Illness”

**Poem**, by Frank O’Hara

Lana Turner has collapsed!  
I was trotting along and suddenly  
it started raining and snowing  
and you said it was hailing  
but hailing hits you on the head  
hard so it was really snowing and  
raining and I was in such a hurry  
to meet you but the traffic  
was acting exactly like the sky  
and suddenly I see a headline  
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!  
there is no snow in Hollywood  
there is no rain in California  
I have been to lots of parties  
and acted perfectly disgraceful  
but I never actually collapsed  
oh Lana Turner we love you get up

(from *Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, University of California Press, 1995)

from “**Last Things**,” by Debra Spark

Cyndy is dead, of course. That is why I wear her black coat now. She died of breast cancer at age twenty-six, a fact which I find unbelievable, a fact that is (virtually) statistically impossible. When she was twenty-one, she was in the shower in her dorm room at the University of Pennsylvania. She was washing under her arm when she found the lump. She was not checking for breast cancer. What college girl does monthly exams on her own breasts? Laura, my twin sister, says I was the first person Cyndy called about the cancer. I don’t think this is true, though Laura insists. I’m certain Cyndy called my father, the doctor, and that he told her to fly home to Boston. He demanded her return even though the doctors at Penn’s health service pooh-poohed her concern. Finally, after a long conversation, I realize why Laura thinks Cyndy called me first and I tell her: “I think you’re thinking about the rape.”

“Oh, yeah,” Laura says. “That’s probably right.”

When my father called me in Wisconsin to tell me about Cyndy, I said, “Oh, well, I’m sure, she’s okay. Lots of women have fibrous breasts.”

“No, Debra,” my father said, sternly. “That’s not what this is about.”

“Do you think she’ll have to have a biopsy?”

He was quiet.

“A mastectomy?”

“That’s the least of my concerns.”

I guess I wasn’t quite able to hear him right then. I hung up the phone and pulled out my copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* to look at that book’s photograph of a jubilant naked woman---out in the sun, with one breast gone, the stitches running up her chest like a sideways zipper. I remember wailing, literally wailing, at the image and the prospect of my sister losing her breast.

I didn’t know that my father had examined my sister when she came home from college. My father is an endocrinologist, a fertility specialist. He examines women every day in his office, but to feel your adult daughter’s breast---breaking *that* taboo, because medical care is shoddy and you *do* love your daughter desperately and *appropriately*---and to know, right away, what it is you are feeling . . . I have to stop myself from imagining it. And I think my father has to disremember it, too, because even though he knew, right then, she had cancer, he tells this story about himself: When the x-ray of Cyndy’s chest was up on the lightboard, my father pulled the x-ray off the board and turned it over to look at the name. “Spark, C.” He looked back at the picture. Turned the x-ray over again to check the name. “Spark, C.” He did the whole thing again. And again.

Later, two weeks before she did die, I remember seeing her x-ray up on a lightboard. Not something I was supposed to see, I know, but Cyndy’s treatment all took place at the same hospital my father has worked for twenty-five years. I knew my way about and I knew how to take silent advantage when I needed to. I looked, but from a distance. I was out in the hall, standing over Cyndy in her gurney, as orderlies were about to move her out of the emergency ward and up to a floor. My view was oblique and once I knew there was nothing happy to see there, I said, Don’t look. Though later, all I would do was say, Look, Debra. Look, this is a person dying. Look, this is Cyndy going away.

(originally published in *Ploughshares*, Fall 1994)

from *My Own Country*, by Abraham Verghese

During my internship and residency in Johnson City, I moonlighted on free weekends in small emergency rooms on the Tennessee – Virginia border. I pulled sixty hours shifts---Friday evening to Monday morning---in places like Mountain City, Tazewell, Grundy, Norton, Pound, Lebanon, and the Lonesome Pine Hospital in Big Stone Gap, Virginia. These hospitals had anywhere from twenty to forty beds, two-bed intensive care units, and the ambience of a mom-and-pop grocery store.

The ER nurses were on a first name basis with every patient that came in. The ambulance drivers rarely resorted to the “forty-three-year-old-white-male-with-chest-pain-unrelieved-by-nitroglycerine” jargon. One was more apt to hear on the scanner that Louise Tipton over on Choctaw Hollow says Old Freddy’s smothering something awful and we better get over there right away, ‘cause it’s worse than the last time when he came in and Doc Patel put him on the breathing machine.”

If I was lucky, no more than eighteen to thirty patients came through the ER in twenty-four hours. The drive up through the mountains was breathtaking, the staff exceptionally friendly, and the cafeteria food free and plentiful.

The patients were earthy and appreciative and spoke a brand of English that made diagnosis a special challenge. Who knew that “fireballs in the ovurus” meant uterine fibroids, or that “smiling mighty Jesus” meant spinal meningitis? Or that “roaches in the liver” meant cirrhosis. Soon, “high blood” (hypertension), “low blood” (anemia), and “bad blood” (syphilis) became part of my own vocabulary as I obtained a patient’s medical history.

(Vintage, 1995)

*Another Case of Chronic Pelvic Pain*, by Veneta Masson

Like the others, she is not from here  
and when she came she left  
all of what matters behind---  
four children, a village  
a father (not well) the lingering  
scent of her man (who had fled)  
Sunday walks in the plaza after mass  
on days when the soldiers were gone  
on days when no bodies were found.

The journey from home was perilous---  
sometimes on foot, or crowded  
into the back of a truck, over hills  
through dense forests, arroyos  
dark rivers, toward menacing lights,  
the eyes of hostile cities.

The trip cost her more than  
she wanted to pay---  
all the crumpled bills  
from the earthenware jar  
in the wall of the house,  
the silver bracelets and earrings  
passed down from her mother.  
Her body they took along the way  
again and again as if for a debt  
that can never be paid.  
What drove her on was a woman’s  
fixed and singular faith that  
she is the giver of life  
the mother of God.

By bus from the border  
by phone from the station  
by foot to the room of the friend  
of a cousin who knew of a place  
and jobs cleaning offices at night  
where no questions were asked  
and dollars were paid  
unless you missed work  
or were caught by the *migra*---  
all this distance she came  
numb to the pain in her feet and back  
and the ache in her lower heart.

She spent her days trying to sleep.  
Nights she roamed large empty halls  
as wide as the streets  
that gave onto the plaza  
pushing a cart full of cleaning supplies  
bagging the trash, sweeping the floors  
washing away the stains of another  
day in the upper world.  
Paydays she sent her money home  
by the man at Urgent Express.  
Sundays she sometimes walked  
down the street at the edge  
of the park, watching  
with shaded eyes among the men  
for one she might know.

Months passed this way  
and with each one she wept  
the tears of blood that women weep  
and felt the ache in her belly  
grow stronger until at last  
there was no relief,  
come new moon or full,  
and no poultice, tea, or prayer  
that helped her bear  
what she must bear.

She sits in the clinic---  
“a 32-year-old Hispanic female  
complaining of pelvic pain.”

The results of all the tests

are negative, they say.  
That means there's nothing we can find  
to blame for all the pain.  
There is a cause, of course---  
perhaps a scar deep inside.  
Surgery might tell us more---or not,  
but then there's the matter of money.

*I see, she says simply.  
Well, if you can't find  
anything wrong---and you know  
there is no money . . .*

There are some pills  
you could take, they say,  
for the pain, when it  
bothers you most.

*You are kind, she says  
and stands up to go,  
like the others,  
from here to her job,  
her room, and perhaps twice a year  
to a telephone that spans the miles  
of dense forest, dark river  
to the house of a friend  
of an aunt of her father  
to ask if the children  
are well and in school  
on days when the soldiers are gone  
on days when no bodies are found.*

*I will send for them  
one day soon, she says.  
For now there is only the ache in her belly,  
come new moon or full,  
and no poultice, pill, or prayer  
to help her bear  
what she must bear.*

What drives her on is a woman's  
fixed and singular faith that  
she is the giver of life  
the mother of God.

(from *Rehab at the Florida Avenue Grill*, Sage Femme Press, 1999)