

# Illness and the Corporeal Experience as a Source of Collective Healing in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century American Poetry

Ronnie K. Stephens

The University of Texas at Arlington; Tarrant County College  
E-mail: ronnie.stephens@tccd.edu

DOI: 10.51865/JLSL.2022.08

## Abstract

Though 21<sup>st</sup>-century poetics is informed by protests and increasingly nuanced conversations about intersectional experiences, representations of chronic and acute illness are fairly rare. Even in the post-confessional era, with poets embracing vulnerability, ableism continues to dominate the genre. However, several poets have embraced their respective illnesses, centring their experiences not as wholly traumatic but as gracefully human. I argue that poets like Danez Smith, Andrea Gibson, Rachel McKibbens and others help insert acute and chronic illness into conversations about American poetics. American literature has long been complacent regarding the erasure of people living with illness, as well as its tendency to sensationalise trauma rather than centre the human experience in stories of illness. 21<sup>st</sup>-century poets are challenging this paradigm, effectively transforming their respective illnesses into a catalyst for activism and grounding their experiences in representations of the corporeal as flawed, vulnerable and yet miraculous.

**Keywords:** *chronic illness, poetry, corporeality, mental health, chronic poetics, palliative care, healing*

## Introduction

American readers have long debated the necessity of poetry, its place in literature and the validity of the genre. Many continue to approach poetry with emotions ranging from hostility to anxiety, often influenced by educators who are equally uncomfortable engaging poetry in the classroom. During graduate seminars, my peers overwhelmingly spurn poetry as inaccessible and make offhand remarks that ‘no one likes poetry’ or ‘poetry is all the same – whiny and self-indulgent.’ Poets are often keenly aware that their writing must do twice the work of prose in order to prove itself worthy of study. Yet even within American poetry, certain communities remain noticeably marginalised. Writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are increasingly committed to diversifying American poetry and calling attention to oft-ignored communities. Defining diversity, of course, comes with its own set of problems. Even as independent journals and presses commit more and more space to uplifting writers of colour and/or LGBTQ writers, ableism abounds. Few poets openly discuss chronic illness, likely because there remains an intense stigma around physical health and its correlation to longevity, especially for poets working to establish themselves as career writers and academics. However, some 21<sup>st</sup>-century poets are pushing back against this stigma, explicitly addressing chronic illness in their writing in a deliberate attempt

to increase visibility for various illnesses and contribute to a collective healing process.

The scope of chronic illness is immense, thus the relative brevity of this essay cannot possibly address all poets contributing to the poetics of illness. Many chronic illnesses and physical conditions are not represented here solely due to space. Within this essay, I strive to highlight a handful of poets writing about autoimmune disorders, as well as several who speak to mental health conditions that require permanent medical intervention. Though some will inevitably argue, and rightly so, that mental health is perhaps the most visible form of chronic illness in poetry, I have chosen to include it here specifically because it often coincides with other physical conditions. Additionally, available research around the function of poetry in palliative care settings and among chronically ill patients indicates that those who engage with poetry show both physical and emotional improvement. Just as there appears a correlation between chronic illness and mental health, research indicates an intrinsic link between physical improvement and emotional healing. I have also chosen to focus on poets who have explicitly addressed their conditions and their decision to write about them as an attempt to assist others, to use their writing as a source of collectivity and community in the hopes that their respective audiences experience poetry as a source of healing.

Two of the most visible poets writing about chronic illness are Danez Smith and Andrea Gibson. Both poets have experienced critical success in the literary community, and each has a large fan base fostered by their respective ability to deliver equally powerful verse on page and on the stage. Smith and Gibson have continually asserted themselves as poets who believe in the function of poetry as a source of activism, and they have each committed to addressing their autoimmune disorders through poetry in an effort to be more transparent about living with illness, but also to highlight core issues in American medicine and stigmas surrounding autoimmune disorders. Smith lives with HIV,<sup>1</sup> while Gibson has Lyme Disease;<sup>2</sup> Smith faces a decades-long stigma around HIV/AIDS, while Gibson chronicles a disease that the medical field continues to debate as a valid diagnosis.<sup>3</sup> Amidst the pandemic, Gibson also shared with fans that they had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer,<sup>4</sup> opting to share their experiences throughout the treatment process via newsletters and social media posts. Similarly, poet Katie Farris made a decision to share her breast cancer diagnosis and treatment over the first year of the pandemic via social media.<sup>5</sup> Gibson and Farris speak to their respective audiences candidly about the realities of cancer, chemotherapy and the increased risk of chronic illness during the pandemic. All three

---

<sup>1</sup> Danez Smith, 'HIV Ruined My Sex Life. Then I Met My Match', *GQ Magazine* (2021); available at <https://www.gq.com/story/poet-danez-smith-sex-life-with-hiv-modern-lovers> [accessed 18 August 2022].

<sup>2</sup> Maya Harder-Montoya, 'Poet Andrea Gibson on Health, Queer Healing, and Learned Behavior', *Posture Magazine* (2018); available at <http://posturemag.com/online/andrea-gibson/> [accessed 18 August 2022].

<sup>3</sup> Zhen Wang, 'Doctors Debate, Patients Suffer: The Fight over Chronic Lyme Disease in Wisconsin', *Wisconsin Public Radio* (2022); available at <https://www.wpr.org/doctors-debate-patients-suffer-fight-over-chronic-lyme-disease-wisconsin> [accessed 27 May 2022]; Marcelo Campos, 'Lyme Disease: Resolving the "Lyme Wars"', *Harvard Health Publishing* (2018); available at <https://health.harvard.edu/blog/lyme-disease-resolving-the-lyme-wars-2018061814071> [accessed 27 May 2022].

<sup>4</sup> This announcement was offered via Gibson's social media platforms, including Twitter, YouTube and Facebook.

<sup>5</sup> See numerous posts via Farris's social media channels, including Twitter and Facebook.

poets centre corporeality in their work, fixating on the ways in which the body becomes a space of both conflict and healing.

Shira Erlichman, another poet who frequently turns to social media, has solidified herself as a voice for the mental health community. Her first full-length collection, *Odes to Lithium*, helped reinforce her efforts to destabilise stigmas around mental health and medical treatment.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the collection, Erlichman highlights her experience with mental health and how the mind inhabits the body, as well as the impact that medication can have on the corporeal experience. Sam Sax, author of the award-winning collection *Madness*, also speaks to the physical embodiment of mental illness, chronicling the daily experience of living with an embattled mind.<sup>7</sup> Rachel McKibbens, one of the most established 21<sup>st</sup>-century poets writing about mental illness, adds an important perspective to the conversation as a former educator through Bellevue Mental Hospital and part of a family with a history of mental illness. She speaks not only as someone who lives with mental illness, but also as the daughter of a parent with mental illness and the mother of a child with mental illness. These three poets, though far from the only ones writing about mental health, have each established themselves as authors whose work correlates with their desire to end stigmas around mental health and treatment. They also frequently centre mental health as a corporeal experience, focusing on the ways in which things like depression and anxiety manifest physically.

Together, these poets contribute to a larger collective that understands the necessity of writing through chronic illness and toward healing. They use their respective platforms to call attention to gaps in medical and mental health care, as well as to foster a community of readers desperately yearning to feel seen, valued and understood. Their work helps to validate the lived experiences of their respective audiences while also encouraging empathy from readers who do not understand the difficulties of living with chronic illness, especially in a country which prioritises productivity over physical and mental health. The poetry that these authors put forth reinforce what some in the medical profession already understand, that writing and reading poetry can spark measurable improvements for individuals living with chronic illness. As such, the poems and poets considered herein illustrate individual healing while also reaching outward at a time when many immunocompromised people feel increasingly invisible, ignored and disregarded.

## The Medicine

Following months of chemotherapy and a complete hysterectomy, Andrea Gibson shared ‘My Longest Love’ via their YouTube channel. During the poem, Gibson remarks that ‘Anyone who thinks poetry is frivolous has never needed someone to tell them something unspeakably hard beautifully.’<sup>8</sup> They are speaking to the moment they awoke from surgery and their lover shared what the doctors had found. Gibson’s words echo findings from medical researchers who have documented how powerful

---

<sup>6</sup> Shira Erlichman, *Odes to Lithium* (Farmington, MA: Alice James Books, 2019); hereafter referred to parenthetically as *OL* with page references in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Sam Sax, *Madness* (New York: Penguin, 2017); hereafter referred to parenthetically as *M* with page references in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Gibson, ‘My Longest Love’, YouTube video, 12:08, 14 March 2022; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRJd\\_SCxnSM&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRJd_SCxnSM&t=1s) [accessed 28 May 2022].

poetry can be in certain spaces. Elizabeth A. Davies acknowledges that medical professionals require ‘more robust qualitative research’ to support the argument that ‘poetry can be an important way of seeking meaning, finding some pleasure in situation, a connection with others and a means of raising awareness of the importance of good medical and supportive care’, she proposes that more medical professionals encourage the use of poetry in palliative care.<sup>9</sup> Davis further cites research which suggests that poetry can be equally effective for both patients and healthcare workers, each of whom may struggle to process their respective experiences with chronic illness.<sup>10</sup> These benefits extend beyond palliative care, of course. Studies show that cancer treatment, for example, regularly centres physical treatment without attending to the psychological state of cancer patients, yet poetry offers patients a concrete method to create ‘an enduring physical object that can be shared with others’.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas physical treatments require extensive research and trials before practitioners implement them, psychosocial interventions require no search process. There is substantial evidence that reading and writing poetry around illness can drastically improve the quality of life for patients with chronic illness, especially when workshops centre the work of writers who illustrate first-hand understanding of what it is like to live with chronic illness, physically and psychologically.<sup>12</sup> Much of the research around the benefits of poetry for chronically ill individuals focuses specifically on the use of poetry in medical settings; however, the onset of the pandemic necessitates a more expansive understanding of how poetry functions as a conduit of healing for individuals with chronic illness(es). Many immunocompromised individuals may have limited access to medical care as a result of the pandemic, both because certain practices have been fundamentally altered and because many find themselves unable to work without putting themselves at substantial risk of infection. The pandemic has increased awareness around autoimmune disorders and the number of people living with what some called ‘invisible illnesses’, supporting the broader potential for poetry to assist individuals outside the medical community.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, medical practitioners appear more versed in the relationship between poetry and illness than literary critics. Danielle Ofri notes that ‘[t]here is no shortage of analyses on how mental illness has influenced poets, but there is comparatively little written about the effects of physical illness.’<sup>14</sup> Ofri is focused on the ways in which poets are affected by illness, and how living with illness impacts their writing. Literary criticism necessarily centres textual analysis, often working to derive meaning that reflects backward onto the author. I propose that an analysis of chronic illness in 21<sup>st</sup>-century American poetry reorient itself, moving outward from the text to investigate the potential impact that poetry can have on chronically ill readers. There is a level of uncertainty inherent to this method, as predicting the sociological impact that literature will have on readers is far more tenuous than describing how the socio-

---

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth A. Davis, ‘Why we need more poetry in palliative care’, *BMJ Supportive and Palliative Care* 8 (2018): 269.

<sup>10</sup> Davies, 267-9.

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Rickett, Cedric Grieve and Jill Gordon, ‘Something to Hang My Life On: The Health Benefits of Writing Poetry for People with Serious Illness’, *Australasian Psychiatry* 19.3 (2011): 265.

<sup>12</sup> Rickett et al., 268.

<sup>13</sup> Emilia Nielsen, ‘Chronic Poetics and the Poetry of Chronic Illness (in a Global Pandemic)’, *Canadian Literature* 245 (2021): 47-63.

<sup>14</sup> Danielle Ofri, ‘The Debilitated Muse: Poetry in the Face of Illness’, *Journal of Medical Humanities* 31 (2010): 304.

political climate impacts literature. Nevertheless, the findings put forth by medical researchers offer a firm foundation on which we can theorise the futurity of poetry as a source of healing.

## The Body

Our tendency to fixate on poetry that centres illness belies the pervasiveness of corporeal metaphors and the embodiment of illness in 21<sup>st</sup>-century writing. For many, the most immediate experience of living with chronic illness is grounded in the physical deterioration of the body. Autoimmune disorders can be especially difficult to process because the body is its own source of pain, its own catalyst for breakdown. Unsurprisingly, images abound that describe the body, a specific organ or even blood as an enemy that has infiltrated barriers and waged war from within. Poets who commit themselves to furthering collective healing, though, often resist this trope; instead, they write about coming to terms with their physical limitations and the source of their pain. In essence, they forgive themselves. This is an essential element in the poetics of collective healing, as it rejects the shame that chronically ill people are taught to carry in capitalist societies. Andrea Gibson champions the importance of writing love poems to the body, a practice they began in earnest with ‘I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power’s Out’, a response to Whitman’s classic ode to the corporeal experience in which Gibson speaks to the importance of loving one’s body at its weakest points.<sup>15</sup> ‘Tincture’ goes further, explicitly celebrating the body’s ability to feel, even when what it feels is pain.<sup>16</sup> The speaker in the poem highlights the experiences that would be impossible without a physical form, such as ‘the way the body would hold another body’ and ‘the legs creaking up the stairs’ because ‘what else could touch a screen door and taste lemonade?’<sup>17</sup> Gibson also writes that ‘fever is how the body prays, how it burns and begs for another average day’, ultimately closing with an image of the stars asking the disembodied soul what it is like to feel.<sup>18</sup> By situating negative physical experiences alongside sensory memories and reactions, Gibson is able to decentre the hopelessness that so often accompanies chronic pain and offer readers a reminder about the simple miracle of existing inside a body.

Danez Smith grapples with the realities of living with HIV throughout *Don’t Call Us Dead*, often considering the varying ways in which American society forces them to face mortality.<sup>19</sup> The poem ‘it won’t be a bullet’ features a speaker who wrestles with the reality that many Black men die by the bullet, but they are ‘the kind who grows thinner & thinner & thinner’ until family urges them to go.<sup>20</sup> Across the next several poems, Smith continues to address their blood and its potential lethality; ‘Recklessly’ employs narrative to trace the mixing of blood, ‘elegy with pixels & cum’ utilises dialogue to unpack the ways in which HIV often invites public scrutiny even in death, and ‘litany with blood all over’ considers the futurity of being HIV positive and

<sup>15</sup> Andrea Gibson, ‘I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power’s Out’, in *The Madness Vase* (Nashville: Write Bloody Publishing, 2011), 102-5.

<sup>16</sup> Andrea Gibson, ‘Tincture’, in *Lord of the Butterflies* (Minneapolis: Button Poetry, 2018), 42-3.

<sup>17</sup> Gibson, ‘Tincture’, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Gibson, ‘Tincture’, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Danez Smith, *Don’t Call Us Dead* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Danez Smith, ‘it won’t be a bullet’, in *Don’t Call Us Dead*, 28, lns 8-12.

wanting to have a family.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, in ‘every day is a funeral & a miracle’, Smith proclaims that ‘they sent a boy / when the bullet missed.’ Though their series of poems about blood is often haunted by dead Black men and the ever-present reality of Smith’s own death, Smith pushes the reader toward a poem of celebration. ‘a note on the body’ utilises the second person, encouraging the reader to embrace the body, acknowledging that ‘this is your hardest scene/when you think the whole said thing might end // but you live oh, you live // everyday you wake you raise the dead // everything you do is a miracle’ (spacing theirs).<sup>22</sup> The ordering of these poems is vital to healing. Like Gibson, Smith refuses to sanitise the grief and trauma of living with an autoimmune disorder, but they also deliberately move the reader toward a moment of self-realisation that celebrates the body not in spite of its illness but because of it.

Javon Johnson compares cancer to gentrification as he works to process the impending death of his step-father from lymphoma.<sup>23</sup> Significantly, he writes that ‘to gentrify is to take the body and gut it’, a searing metaphor that echoes the tendency to describe cancer as an intruder in the body.<sup>24</sup> Near the end of the poem, Johnson insists that one of the important questions about cancer is, ‘Why did the body eat itself alive?’<sup>25</sup> He then proclaims that cancer ‘pushes God out of the body’.<sup>26</sup> Johnson, who writes from a place of mourning and as one without cancer, works to reconcile faith with the reality that his step-father’s body has seemingly turned on itself. Katie Farris, who writes of her diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer in her chapbook *A Net to Catch My Body in its Weaving*, tries to capture the duality of housing cancer inside the body and the way her husband approaches her body ahead of her scheduled mastectomy. Her poem ‘I Wake to Find You Wandering the Museum of My Body’ immediately situates the body as inanimate, venerated not for its life but for its ability to preserve the past.<sup>27</sup> The title does not invoke the future as a possibility; however, her observation of the way her husband approaches her body shifts her thinking. Her bald head becomes ‘a lofty sunlit dome’ in his eyes as she realises, ‘My organs are / The furniture galleries / Everyone skips, but for you.’<sup>28</sup> ‘Woman with Amputated Breast Awaits PET Scan Results’ moves the speaker in Farris’ collection further away from grief and the seeming inevitability of death as she proclaims ‘...And whom / can I tell how much I want to live? I want to live’.<sup>29</sup> Farris injects resiliency into the narrative, something we do not necessarily get from poets who write about chronic illness from the outside.

Cancer diagnoses can be remarkably traumatic in that the potential of death, sometimes very swiftly, requires an immediate shift in our worldview. I recall an episode of *House* where Dr. Wilson, an oncologist, is sued after informing a patient that he has cancer, only to later inform the patient that initial tests were inaccurate and he is cancer free. Dr. Wilson is sympathetic of the man who, despite receiving excellent medical news, has just spent several months believing that he was going to

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Don’t Call Us Dead*.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Don’t Call Us Dead*, 72, lns 9-13.

<sup>23</sup> Javon Johnson, ‘When the Cancer Comes’, YouTube video, 04:34, October 13, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-Ndef0msHs> [accessed 28 May 2022].

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, 01:31.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, 03:17-03:20.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, 03:31-03:35.

<sup>27</sup> Katie Farris, *A Net to Catch My Body in its Weaving*, (Windham, ME: Beloit Poetry Journal, 2021), 25.

<sup>28</sup> Farris, 25, lns 12-19.

<sup>29</sup> Farris, 27, lns 11-12.

die and making major changes to his life.<sup>30</sup> Readers can see the impact of this in Andrea Gibson's most recent collection, *You Better be Lightning*.<sup>31</sup> Though Gibson has already established himself as a spokesperson for others with chronic illness, their most recent collection presents a clear shift in tone. This is due, in part, to Gibson receiving a cancer diagnosis during the final stages of proofing the collection for print. As Gibson confided to me in a personal communication, the diagnosis compelled them to consider what message they would want to share if the collection were their last. Perhaps this is why the collection includes poems centred on forgiveness and compassion, including an epistolary poem addressed to the tick that bore Gibson's Lyme disease. 'Love Letter to the Tick that Got Me Sick' presents a potential narrative of Gibson's infection wherein the speaker describes the summer they spent caring for their eight month old niece.<sup>32</sup> The speaker recalls how a nest of baby wrens would startle their niece, causing the speaker to 'rip the hat off [their] head / and place it on hers' to distract their niece.<sup>33</sup> They imagine that, during one of these moments, the tick fell from a tree and landed on their uncovered head. By the end of the poem, the speaker tells the tick

You are my blood now.  
Which is another word for *family* –  
Which is the least tiny gift  
my life has known.<sup>34</sup>

Framing the moment of infection in a scene of compassion and joy with their niece is integral to the most prominent theme of the collection, namely that we should prioritise love over anger, forgiveness over grudges. Another poem describes how Gibson grappled with the news that their mother had a genetic illness that would ultimately leave her paralyzed, and the fact that Gibson could take a DNA test to determine the likelihood that they would develop the illness as well.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, they choose not to because the most resilient act of love we can show ourselves is to continue moving forward, day by day, despite the challenges we face.<sup>36</sup> This may feel cliché or naively optimistic, but readers must consider the timeline of Gibson's life. For virtually their entire adult life, they have lived with the possibility of developing a debilitating genetic disorder, the chronic pain and fatigue associated with Lyme disease, and now ovarian cancer. Their insistence on living every day in defiance of chronic illness is not hollow; rather, they choose to embody love, for themselves and others, precisely because they view it as a direct foil for the embodiment of chronic illness.

Tracing the work of Farris, Gibson and Smith over time provides readers with a concrete trajectory that somewhat mirrors the stages of grief. Early poems may communicate anger, whether with themselves or the source of their illness, followed

<sup>30</sup> *House*, 2004, Season 4, Episode 9, 'Games', dir. Deran Sarafian, aired 27 November 2007 on Fox.

<sup>31</sup> Andrea Gibson, *You Better be Lightning* (Minneapolis: Button Poetry, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Gibson, *You Better be Lightning*, 60-63.

<sup>33</sup> Gibson, *You Better be Lightning*, 62, lns 54-55.

<sup>34</sup> Gibson, *You Better by Lightning*, 63, lns 80-83.

<sup>35</sup> Gibson, 'The Test of Time', in *You Better be Lightning*, 78-81.

<sup>36</sup> Gibson, 'The Test of Time', in *You Better be Lightning*, 78-81.

by poems that centre sadness. None of these authors sit for too long in these stages, though, choosing instead to make peace with their respective bodies and the illnesses they carry. Perhaps more significantly, all of these writers are living and writing through illness in real time. Literary criticism has a tendency to look backwards, to prioritise writing for which can identify measurable impacts. This is not inherently flawed, but it does limit what we stand to learn about the poetics of chronic illness in that we fail to acknowledge the collective healing that takes place between living writers and their readership. I have no doubt that each of these authors will continue to experience critical and popular success in the genre; still, I suspect that their respective legacies will be defined less by the impact they have on individual readers and more by their contributions to the genre. The problem, of course, is that the poetics of chronic illness features an explicit and sustained attempt at human connection; it is less concerned with success and more concerned with healing. That, too, is worth our attention.

## The Mind

I previously cited Ofri, who acknowledges mental health as the most present chronic illness in literary criticism. Scholars have long discussed the underlying mental health that compelled Dickinson's reclusiveness, for example, while confessional poets Anne Sexton's<sup>37</sup> and Sylvia Plath's legacies lie in their struggles with suicidal ideation and depression. Confessional poetics is virtually defined by the presence of psychological turmoil and poets' desire to capture traumas of the mind. Mental illness compels many of us to write in an effort to process not just the world we live in, but the sometimes-competing realities imposed by trauma responses, chemical imbalances and a general inability to assimilate into society. Even medical professionals prioritise the psychosocial impact of poetry for patients with chronic illness.<sup>38</sup> In short, poetry has a long and well-documented history with mental illness. What I find ironic is that both poetry and mental illness are highly stigmatised in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America, each associated with weakness, passivity and vulnerability. Rachel McKibbens speaks to this correlation, arguing that these stigmas have perpetuated decades of silence from people who live with mental illness.<sup>39</sup> McKibbens is outspoken about her own mental illness, which includes both Bipolar Disorder and PTSD, as well as the history of mental illness in her family. In a recent interview, she told WXXI News, 'What I care about is that my art is reflective of the times, it is reflective of my community, and the needs of my people, my kin [...] Those who live with mental illness, the orphans, the misfits, the witches, the bitches, the outcasts. All of them, those are my people. That's the only people I need to connect with.'<sup>40</sup> McKibbens, like many contemporary poets, credits others with mental illness for moving her closer to self-acceptance and healing, including the poets of PS811, a group she worked with while they were housed at

---

<sup>37</sup> Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> See those cited herein for examples.

<sup>39</sup> Rachel McKibbens, 'Poetry as Therapy', YouTube video, 14:54, 1 August 2013; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcgKRJYu-5I&t=1s> [accessed 28 May 2022].

<sup>40</sup> Jeff Spevak, 'Rachel McKibbens' Fringe Show Reaches from the Darkness to "My People"', *WXXI News*, 15 September 2021; <https://www.wxxinews.org/across-the-universe/2021-09-15/rachel-mckibbens-fringe-show-reaches-from-the-darkness-to-my-people> [accessed 28 May 2022].

Bellevue Mental Hospital.<sup>41</sup> According to McKibbens, these young people taught her resilience and became ‘fluent in the language of the living’.<sup>42</sup>

McKibbens, the author of three full-length collections, is one of the most visible and outspoken 21<sup>st</sup>-century poets discussing mental illness. She has inspired a generation of poets who are deeply committed to ending the stigma around mental illness, marking a shift from the largely inward perspective employed by confessional poets to an outward attempt at connection and healing. For the sake of space, I choose to focus on a handful of living poets who ground mental illness in corporeality and who overtly challenge the stigma around talking about mental illness. Two essential collections for this discussion are *Madness*, by Sam Sax, and *Odes to Lithium*, by Shira Erlichman. Each of these collections is framed thematically as an exploration of mental illness and treatment. Erlichman, who is equally prolific as a painter and musician, lives with Bipolar Disorder and speaks the importance of using art to process mental illness. According to Erlichman, ‘when people who have mental illness speak for themselves, we really muddy’ the ‘worldview of purity’, which she attributes with stigmatising conversations about mental illness.<sup>43</sup> For her, ‘[p]oetry is the closest we can get to being inside someone’s head, and so with mental illness, that’s a perfect avenue [...] intimacy is what is missing with most things that are stigmatised. We only have the caricatures. If you can create intimacy ... then you have this ticket to understanding and empathy.’<sup>44</sup>

*Odes to Lithium* is a powerful reproach of stigma that immediately challenges the trope of living with mental illness as ‘suffering’ by framing the poems within as odes, or tributes to medical treatment for mental illness. The very first poem in the collection, ‘Snakes in Your Arms’, echoes Erlichman’s sentiment about the intimacy of poetry while also challenging stigmas that exist inside mental health treatment facilities (*OL*, 3). The poem, which resembles a prose narrative, invites readers inside a neurologist’s office. Written in the second person, Erlichman situates the reader as part of the scene, namely the person in the office who is seeking to understand inexplicable physical sensations. The speaker, who is diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, asks the neurologist if the disorder could explain the pain they are experiencing. This causes the neurologist to bristle, which only gets worse when the speaker says that ‘[i]t’s like needles, but they move [...] It feels like there are snakes in my arms. Electric snakes that move quickly’ (*OL*, 3). Erlichman then includes an aside from the speaker, who remarks, ‘You are a poet and sometimes it helps you and sometimes it distances you from others.’ (*OL*, 3) This aside signals to the reader that the speaker’s remarks about snakes are not literal, but an attempt to describe a physical sensation in relatable terms, to communicate an incomprehensible corporeal experience. When the neurologist asks if the speaker actually believes there are snakes in their arms, the speaker feels trapped by the question; it is clear that the neurologist is attempting to discern whether or not the speaker is hallucinating, leading the speaker to give the expected answer and leave the office (*OL*, 4). By opening the collection with this poem, Erlichman immediately establishes her place within the mental health

<sup>41</sup> McKibbens, ‘Poetry as Therapy’.

<sup>42</sup> McKibbens, ‘Poetry as Therapy’.

<sup>43</sup> Corinne Segal, ‘How Poetry Helps Us Understand Mental Illness’, *PBS News Hour*, 2 May 2016; <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/poetry/how-poetry-helps-us-understand-mental-illness>, [accessed 28 May 2022].

<sup>44</sup> Segal, ‘How Poetry Helps Us Understand Mental Illness’.

community. She makes clear to her readers that she understands the lived experiences of those with mental illness and how the very people meant to help them often betray their trust.

*Odes to Lithium* includes two poems that carry the title ‘Side Effects’, each working to reconcile the positive and negative effects of taking lithium (*OL*, 5, 17). In ‘Side Effects II’, Erlichman lists common side effects of lithium: memory loss, tremor, dizziness, increased thirst, vertigo, and many others (*OL*, 17). After each of the first five side effects, Erlichman includes a tercet that presents an image tangential to the symptom. Under ‘tremor’, for example, Erlichman includes the lines ‘When she presses down on the accelerator / I catch the wind in my teeth, my skull / out the window like a Labrador, speakers popping.’ (*OL*, 17, lns 6-8) Each of these images captures the physical embodiment of lithium, a drug meant to be healing. Following the first five side effects, though, the poem descends into a dense list of an additional 20 symptoms, effectively communicating how overwhelming it can be for individuals with mental illness to assess the efficacy of a drug against its potential to cause further physical deterioration (*OL*, 17, lns 21-29). The poem ends with the speaker in a hot shower, rolling a frozen grape around her mouth like a ‘Little God’ (*OL*, 17, lns 32-35). Closing with this image is vital to Erlichman’s ultimate goal of creating a space for healing, as the speaker reminds herself that she is in control. Feeling out of control can be one of the most terrifying and frustrating elements of living with mental illness, especially when medication has the potential to cause involuntary physical reactions, yet Erlichman stabilises this frustration by becoming her own saviour, figuratively and literally.

Sam Sax, like Erlichman, begins his collection with a sharp rebuke of mental health treatment. The first poem in *Madness*, ‘Nomenclature’, reproduces a series of terms from *DSM-I* (1952) that are identified as ‘supplementary terms of the body’ (*M*, 1). The effect is to establish the varying ways in which mental health treatment characterise patients as abnormal, or other. ‘Prediagnosis’, a pantoum, digs further into the desperation of navigating life with mental illness while surrounded by others who pretend that everything is fine (*M*, 3). Sax matter-of-factly refers to a suicide attempt in the fifth stanza:

my overdose a slow-growing child  
 my man a cancer of light  
 he said all i needed was time  
 he left me & i tried to leave life. (*M*, 3, lns 17-20)

Given the structure of the poem, the ‘he’ invoked here simultaneously refers to the men that the speaker uses to ignore his depression and the doctor that was present at his birth. Thus, the doctor becomes synonymous with cancer, a powerful metaphor for the ways in which mental health treatment can actually work against patients. ‘Diagnosis’, seemingly written as a chronological evolution of Sax’s movement towards healing, is structured as a mirror poem (*M*, 18-19). Left-justified stanzas echo the stigma and judgment imposed on those with mental illness, while right-justified stanzas offer a revised phrasing in which the ‘we’ of the poem takes responsibility for the speaker’s distress:

we should have you  
 committed

we should have asked  
what's wrong (M, 18, Ins 1-4)

Readers simultaneously encounter what those with mental illness often hear, both from loved ones and medical practitioners, as well as what they wish to hear. Images on the left are haunting and evoke death, centring bugs and flies, while images on the right introduce a mother and a bed (M, 18-19). Sax manages to communicate the ways in which the body responds to stigma as well as how it might respond to genuine compassion. Importantly, Sax does not write *Madness* as a linear trajectory towards healing; rather, he establishes his understanding of mental illness through poems like '#Melancholia' and 'Relapse' (M, 74-76). These poems appear very near the end of the collection and present a speaker who continues to wrestle with the effects of living with mental illness.

Sam Sax speaks candidly about the recurrence of suicidal ideation and the importance of communicating mental illness with one's support system. For Sax, that support system often manifests in the form of friends. In 'Ideation', he describes trying to jump in front of an L train only to be saved by a stranger who pulls him back.<sup>45</sup> Sax admits, 'It's not like this was my first time trying to die. I am a grown-up. I've had a long life of not wanting to be alive.'<sup>46</sup> This messaging may appear disparaging, but Sax follows it up by telling the audience that he now hosts workshops 'about staying alive'.<sup>47</sup> This moves the poem away from sadness without sanitising the difficulty of living with ideation; Sax is able to empathise with audience members who may frequently experience suicidal ideation, communicating to them that survival is possible even as the thoughts appear ever present. As the poem crescendos, Sax tells the audience, 'I have been so lucky. I have always had a hand there to pull me back from falling all the way into my own darkness. Dear friends, I'm learning to be careful. I promise.'<sup>48</sup> Hieu Minh Nguyen echoes the importance of communicating sadness in the performed version of his poem 'Notes on Staying'.<sup>49</sup> Nguyen tells the audience, 'Too often I don't tell people, people I love, I am sad. Because I don't think that's something they would want to hear. Because they love me. Because I don't want them to think that the currency of their tenderness isn't enough when it has been and will be again. Well if I'm being completely honest, today I'm sad. Today is hard.'<sup>50</sup> This is a powerful and significant amendment to the published version of the poem in that Nguyen, by telling the audience of his sadness, invites them to participate in his healing. Nguyen follows this with images of hope and resilience, thereby offering to also participate in the collective healing of others in the audience who may not communicate their own sadness to loved ones.

<sup>45</sup> Sam Sax, 'Ideation', YouTube video, 03:06, 15 February 2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mMDuW0OdUA> [accessed 28 May 2022].

<sup>46</sup> Sax, 'Ideation', 01:08-01:16.

<sup>47</sup> Sax, 'Ideation', 01:36-01:39.

<sup>48</sup> Sax, 'Ideation', 02:25-02:35.

<sup>49</sup> Hieu Minh Nguyen, 'Notes on Staying', YouTube video, 03:29, 8 January 2017; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eX1HrytseE> [accessed 28 May 2022].

<sup>50</sup> Nguyen, 01:35-02:00.

## The Collective

Collectivity is present throughout the work of the poets included herein. Two factors which may contribute to this shared effort to create community are the fact that all of these authors are living and writing in real time, and that each of them has a distinct connection to performance poetry. One of the most important and unique aspects of performance poetry is that it puts poets in direct contact with their readership, sidestepping the barrier imposed by authors who connect with readers strictly through print culture. Smith, Gibson, Farris, McKibbens, Sax, Erlichman, Nguyen – all of them are deeply invested in their respective communities, and all of them seem to share an ideology that their writing should contribute to healing. This is conveyed in the way they present themselves during readings. Poets who read well from page, who connect with live audiences effectively and continuously, create a sense of accessibility that is particularly unique to the poetry genre. It also helps audience members feel seen and understood; prose has the potential to do this, ‘but poetry is also vulnerable and elusive, puts into words what others sense but cannot convey, speaks to meanings and, if it is good, survives far longer.’<sup>51</sup> This shared language of chronic illness creates collective healing not just by recognising chronically ill people but also by offering ways for individuals to describe their own experiences to loved ones.

The importance of community is essential to the process of healing, and an inability to connect with others when living with chronic illness can have profound effects. These effects have been amplified by the pandemic, which has introduced a new level of solitude and exclusion for immunocompromised people. ‘Many patients tell me that one of the most difficult aspects of living through an illness is that one must do it alone’, writes Ofri.<sup>52</sup> This is why patients in palliative care benefit from reading and writing poetry together, why the youth in McKibbens’ writing workshop became so well versed in survival, why cancer patients show physical and psychosocial improvement when encouraged to put their experiences into words. Gibson articulates the necessity of a shared commitment to healing beautifully in ‘The Nutritionist’, a poem which begins with them describing their own relationship to suicidal ideation and their desperate attempts at healing prior to being diagnosed with Lyme disease.<sup>53</sup> As the poem nears its end, Gibson tells the audience, ‘Let me say right now for the record, I am still going to be here asking this world to dance even if it keeps stepping on my holy feet. You, you stay here with me, okay? You stay here with me [...] Friend, if the only thing we have to gain in staying is each other, my God that is plenty. My God, that is enough.’<sup>54</sup>

On the far side of cancer treatment and more than two years into the pandemic, Gibson shared a love poem to their partner in which they again acknowledge the ability of their writing to facilitate healing among their readership. ‘I was gonna leave that out of this, but this isn’t only for us. It’s for everyone we can convince not to wait for a tragedy’, they admit after describing months of fighting early in their

---

<sup>51</sup> Davies, 266-7.

<sup>52</sup> Ofri, 310.

<sup>53</sup> Andrea Gibson, ‘The Nutritionist’, YouTube video, 04:19, 19 November 2017; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3rxp2AWLTM> [accessed 28 May 2022].

<sup>54</sup> Gibson, ‘The Nutritionist’, 03:36-04:00.

relationship.<sup>55</sup> Danez Smith also intensifies their effort to foster community through their poetry in their latest collection, *Homie*, which centres kinship throughout.<sup>56</sup> Smith discusses mental health throughout, confronting the reality of suicide in their community. Like Gibson, Smith continually implores that their readers share in their commitment to stay alive; Smith identifies this refusal to die by their own hands as an act of defiance against a world that perpetually endangers members of their community. That both of these poets situate survival a communal responsibility is essential to their larger message that we are responsible for the well-being of those around us. Poets writing about chronic illness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not content to consider wellness in the abstract; there is a sense of immediacy to their message of healing, an urgency to their plea for each one of us to care for ourselves, to care for our communities.

## Bibliography

1. Campos, Marcelo. 'Lyme Disease: Resolving the "Lyme Wars"'. *Harvard Health Publishing*, 18 June 2018. Available at <https://health.harvard.edu/blog/lyme-disease-resolving-the-lyme-wars-2018061814071>. Accessed: 27 May 2022.
2. Davies, Elizabeth A. 'Why we need more poetry in palliative care', *BMJ Supportive and Palliative Care*, 8 (2018): 266-270.
3. Erlichman, Shira. *Odes to Lithium*. Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2019.
4. Farris, Katie. *A Net to Catch My Body in its Weaving*. Windham, ME, Beloit Poetry Journal, 2021.
5. Gibson, Andrea. *Lord of the Butterflies*. Minneapolis: Button Poetry, 2018.
6. Gibson, Andrea. 'My Longest Love'. YouTube video, 12:08, 14 March 2022. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRJd\\_SCxnSM&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRJd_SCxnSM&t=1s). Accessed 28 May 2022.
7. Gibson, Andrea. *The Madness Vase*. Nashville: Write Bloody Publishing, 2011.
8. Gibson, Andrea. 'The Nutritionist'. YouTube video, 04:19, 19 November 2017. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3rxp2AWLTM>. Accessed 28 May 2022.
9. Gibson, Andrea. *You Better Be Lightning*. Minneapolis: Button Poetry, 2021.
10. Harder-Montoya, Maya, 'Poet Andrea Gibson on Health, Queer Healing, and Learned Behavior', *Posture Magazine* (2018). Available at <http://posturemag.com/online/andrea-gibson/>. Accessed 18 August 2022.
11. McKibbens, Rachel. 'Poetry as Therapy'. YouTube video, 14:54, 1 August 2013. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcgKRJYu-5I&t=1s>. Accessed 28 May 2022.
12. Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Anne Sexton: a Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.
13. Nguyen, Hieu Minh. 'Notes on Staying'. YouTube video, 03:29, 8 January 2017. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eX1HrytseE>. Accessed 28 May 2022.
14. Nielsen, Emilia. 'Chronic Poetics and the Poetry of Chronic Illness (in a Global Pandemic)'. *Canadian Literature* 245 (2021): 47-63, 193.
15. Ofri, Danielle. 'The Debilitated Muse: Poetry in the Face of Illness'. *Journal of Medical Humanities* 31 (2010): 303-17.
16. Rickett, Carolyn, Cedric Grieve and Jill Gordon. 'Something to Hang My Life On: The Health Benefits of Writing Poetry for People with Serious Illness'. *Australasian Psychiatry* 19.3 (2011): 265-8.
17. Sax, Sam. 'Ideation'. YouTube video, 03:06, 15 February 2018. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mMDuW0OdUA>. Accessed 28 May 2022.
18. Sax, Sam. *Madness*. New York: Penguin, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Gibson, 'The Longest Love', 08:53-09:01.

<sup>56</sup> Danez Smith, *Homie* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2020).

19. Segal, Corinne. 'How Poetry Helps Us Understand Mental Illness'. *PBS News Hour* (2016). Available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/poetry/how-poetry-helps-us-understand-mental-illness>. Accessed 28 May 2022.
20. Smith, Danez. *Don't Call Us Dead*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017.
21. Smith, Danez. 'HIV Ruined My Sex Life. Then I Met My Match.' *GQ Magazine* (2021). Available at <https://www.gq.com/story/poet-danez-smith-sex-life-with-hiv-modern-lovers>. Accessed 18 August 2022.
22. Smith, Danez. *Homie*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2020.
23. Spevak, Jeff. 'Rachel McKibbens' Fringe Show Reaches from the Darkness to "My People". *WXXI News* (2021). Available at <https://www.wxixnews.org/across-the-universe/2021-09-15/rachel-mckibbens-fringe-show-reaches-from-the-darkness-to-my-people>. Accessed 28 May 2022.
24. Wang, Zhen. 'Doctors Debate, Patients Suffer: The Fight over Chronic Lyme Disease in Wisconsin'. *Wisconsin Public Radio* (2022). Available at <https://www.wpr.org/doctors-debate-patients-suffer-fight-over-chronic-lyme-disease-wisconsin>. Accessed 27 May 2022.

## **Boala și experiența corporală ca sursă a vindecării colective în poezia americană a secolului XXI**

Deși poetica secolului XXI este animată de proteste și de conversații din ce în ce mai nuanțate despre experiențe intersecționale, reprezentările bolii cronice sau acute aproape că lipsesc. Chiar în zona post-confesională, cu poeți care optează pentru a reprezenta vulnerabilitatea, abilitismul continuă să domine genul. Totuși câțiva poeți au redat propria boală, centrându-și experiențele nu ca deplin traumatice, ci ca pur umane. În acest articol demonstrez că poeți precum Danez Smith, Andrea Gibson, Rachel McKibbens și alții ne ajută să introducem boala acută și cronică în conversația despre poetica americană. Literatura americană a fost mulțumită cu sine să privească ștergerea oamenilor suferinzi, precum și tendința de a augmenta trauma în detrimentul centrării pe experiența umană în nararea bolii. Poeții secolului XXI recuză această paradigmă, transformându-și efectiv bolile proprii în activism și folosindu-le ca teme al reprezentării corporalității văzută ca defectuoasă, vulnerabilă și totuși miraculoasă.