

## Pathographies: Voices of Illness

This section features original work on pathographies—i.e., (auto) biographical accounts of disease, illness, and disability—that provide narrative inquiry relating to the personal, existential, psychological, social, cultural, spiritual, political, and moral meanings of individual experience. Editors are: Nathan Carlin and Therese Jones. For submissions, contact Nathan Carlin at: Nathan.Carlin@uth.tmc.edu.

### *Pedaling Toward Revelation*

#### *My Summer with Flannery O'Connor*

BEN SAXTON

In July 2014, at the Old Governor's Mansion Education Building in Milledgeville, Georgia, Flannery Camp was in full swing. Bruce Gentry and Robert Donahoo, the codirectors of the Flannery O'Connor National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Institute, were there. Twenty-four NEH Summer Scholars, mostly English professors, were there. And I was there—barely. A few days earlier I had tumbled from my bike, snapped my elbow like a wishbone, and traveled by ambulance to Macon's Medical Center, where surgeons repaired a compound fracture of my right arm. Upon my return, just in time for the month's first evening lecture, fellow NEHers greeted me with cheers and tears and delicate hugs.

Before one of the plenary speakers discussed *Wise Blood* and literary Darwinism,<sup>1</sup> Bob Donahoo presented me with the coveted Crackerjack Award, which I earned not for any groundbreaking scholarship, but simply for making it through the weekend alive. Although

I treasure my prize and enjoyed eating its contents, the Crackerjack Award isn't why, over a year later, this evening stands out. What I remember most is an offhand remark, a wisecrack in the back of the room, from a guy whose knowledge of literature is rivaled only by his badass grooves on the guitar. Perched by the refreshment stand, James Potts of Mississippi College cackled and cried out: "So have you had your revelation?"

It was well-timed comment, delivered to the right crowd. After all, you couldn't slip a Flannery O'Connor reference past *this* group. We could spot the structure of her stories: that familiar movement of ignorance, violence, and epiphany that her protagonists often endure. We could recite the characters who had been maimed, gored, whipped, trampled, beaten, and shotgun-blasted to redemption. And we could cite O'Connor's own views of her fiction, how she believed that "violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace."<sup>2</sup>

After the lecture, as I hobbled to the dorms at Georgia College, I chuckled to myself. *Yes, that's it, I'm a character in a Flannery O'Connor story.* Maybe she really haunted these streets, pen in hand, like some literary ghoul from Central State Hospital, the old asylum that looms on Milledgeville's margins. But if this were somehow true—if I were really one of O'Connor's grotesques—then I could expect to learn something. Couldn't I? The accident had meaning. Didn't it? Collapsing into bed, I guzzled pain pills and reconsidered those words: *Have you had your revelation?*

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What strikes me most is the summer's remarkable strangeness. First of all, there was the strange tumble from my bike. I had pedaled onto Mcintosh Street, a quiet road near campus, enjoying the warm breeze and the calmness that graces Southern summer afternoons. Something happened. I lurched headlong over the handlebars and fell—hard—on my right arm.

No screeching car or flailing child, no pebble or pothole: just my bike, a gentle hill, and a spectacular wipeout.

My first thought, as I writhed on the ground, was inspired by years of unflinching health.

*Maybe I can walk it off.*

I tried to move. No luck. My right biceps felt hot and tight, like it was squeezed inside a blood pressure cuff. Its sudden heaviness glued me to the ground. My stuff had scattered like shrapnel—a helmet, headphones, sunglasses, a vintage teal road bike with one bent wheel.

A man jogged toward me with his phone out. His horrified expression resembled that boy's at the end of *No Country for Old Men*, the one who spots Anton Chigurh staggering from a ruined

car and says, "Mister, you got a bone stickin out your arm."<sup>3</sup>

No, I wasn't going to walk this one off.

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There was the strange irony of my scholarly focus. I tend to study O'Connor from a medical humanities perspective. For 14 years, until her death at 39, O'Connor suffered from systemic lupus erythematosus—also called "the Red Wolf" because of its vicious nature—that caused thinning hair, fatigue, nausea, rashes, joint pain, insomnia, and weight loss. During my first week at the Institute, which I spent in the archives of the Flannery O'Connor Collection, my research was driven by one question: How did O'Connor's illness inform her fiction?

O'Connor usually downplayed the significance of her lupus. "The disease," she wrote, "is of no consequence to my writing since for that I use my head and not my feet."<sup>4</sup> This, as you might guess, isn't true. Every morning around six, when she woke in bed on the first floor of Andalusia, O'Connor read from her Benedictine prayer book. Then she rose and, with the aid of metal crutches, carried herself to the bathroom. After selecting a protective outfit so that her lupus wouldn't be inflamed by the sun, she met her mother Regina in the kitchen and listened to the local weather report on the radio. Perhaps the weather would be mild. Pulling a black wool tam-o'-shanter over her head, O'Connor stepped into the Georgia sunlight and drove with Regina to mass at Sacred Heart Church. When she returned home around nine, she was already tired. But there was work to do. O'Connor entered her bedroom, tucked her shriveled body beside a small wooden desk, and began to write. On good days, she worked for 3 hours. On bad days, when the Red Wolf

devoured every ounce of energy, her arms were too weak to lift to the typewriter. I'm not sure what's more incredible: that O'Connor wrote so well, or that she wrote at all.

In a 1960 letter, O'Connor made a rare admission. "I have never been anywhere but sick," she confessed. "In a sense sickness is a place more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company, where nobody can follow."<sup>5</sup> Sickness and its neighbor, loneliness, housed O'Connor for most of her life. They were everywhere.

I had always studied O'Connor from another country, from a place where the mind thinks and the body responds. Things changed last July when I discovered not sickness, but incapacity. I had visited Milledgeville to learn about O'Connor's failing health; the strange irony was that I was forced to learn about my own.

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EMS responders loaded me into an ambulance that sped to Macon. Suddenly it stopped. My arm was bleeding uncontrollably and needed to be stabilized manually. A burly medic apologized and clasped his arms around my slippery biceps. "Hang tight, son," he told me. "This trip's liable to get bumpy."

An hour later I reached the hospital. Nurses and attendants wheeled me to one room, then another, then another. Doctors requested consent. Tests were taken. Surgery was completed. A catheter was administered. Eventually, 12 hours after hitting the ground on McIntosh Street, I rested in the trauma unit, where a hissing machine drained fluid from my arm.

During that lonely night at the hospital, when I could barely limp to the bathroom, when my only company was the persistent hissing of that machine,

I could almost see *her* hunched in the corner: thinning hair, frail frame, crooked lips, face puffy from years of exposure to steroids. She looked weary and indomitable, like someone whose suffering has been instructive. Carrying herself closer, leaning over my bed, she placed those crooked lips next to my bandaged ear and whispered, *Well. Did you find what you were looking for?*

During this harrowing weekend, NEHers expressed their concern in ways small and significant. The subject line of one email said "We'll Take Care of You." A friend and colleague who drove to Macon the day after my accident—and many days after that—sat by the bed and held my hand. Others visited me one afternoon and said, "You're doing so well!" I felt better and better.

Later that day, one late arrival burst through the door like an NFL fullback. Catching sight of me, he stopped short and said, "Dude. You look *terrible*. What did you do to yourself?"

That was when I knew things would be okay.

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After the ambulance and the surgery and the Crackerjack Award, there was my strange conversation with University of South Carolina professor Robert Brinkmeyer. Like me, Bob was fascinated by O'Connor's illness. "One of the best ways to think of O'Connor's illness," he said in his evening lecture, "is to think about lupus as a gun held to her head. Lupus is a very painful disease. It's not one that you can forget. So O'Connor is always facing death every time she feels a twinge in her joints. Which gives, I think, some insight into why her fiction is so stark and demanding: because that's the way she was living. She is living in perpetual crisis so that ultimate matters are always there."<sup>6</sup> After the lecture, Bob gave me a

lefty handshake and said that, also like me, he had broken his right arm in a bike crash. "It happened in 1993 or 1994," he told me, "on a ride through lovely neighborhoods one beautiful morning in Evanston, Illinois. I hit a pothole, or so I think, and flipped over the handlebars, landing on my right elbow."

Nice weather, a leisurely ride, confusion, a fractured right elbow—our accidents were identical!

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Finally, there was the strange reunion with my bike. The rest of July went smoothly. My arm was healing. I spent time with new friends in seminars and lectures and seats on the porch, where James Potts cackled and played guitar. NEHers signed my hard green cast, writing, "This is God's Country, Don't Drive Through it Like Hell" and "Converge!" and "Hall and Oates 4EVA." Flannery Camp was almost over. When Jim Owens, an MFA student at Georgia College, brought me to the campus police station, I was already thinking about how I'd drive one-handed to Houston.

My old friend leaned against the wall with one bent wheel and a sturdy frame. We were in roughly the same shape—damaged but salvageable.

An officer handed me my helmet. Oh, that. I felt its hardness and saw, for the first time, a deep diagonal dent in its right side. Jim and I exchanged looks, not wanting to say what we both understood: I had landed on my arm *and* my head. The helmet, snatched from the dorm on a whim, had saved me.

Everything came rushing back. Suddenly I knew that, even after I left town, even as bones healed and scars faded, there would be no escaping questions of life and death, fate and chance, redemption and revelation—absurd

words that say nothing and mean everything.

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My arm is better these days. Sometimes, I'll admit, I still feel like Ruby Turpin in O'Connor's "Revelation." Bruised and humiliated by the end of the story, Ruby trudges to her pig parlor, glares at the heavens, and roars: "Why do you send me a message like that for? Why me? Who do you think you are?"<sup>7</sup> Ruby wants answers. So do I.

Usually, though, I'm not preoccupied with death and God and "ultimate matters." If my summer in Milledgeville has been instructive, then I'm learning how to love life more than its meaning. I'm grateful that I have two working arms. On good days, I read Flannery O'Connor and ride my bike.

## Notes

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2. O'Connor F. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Fitzgerald S, Fitzgerald R., eds. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux; 1969, at 122.
3. O'Connor F. *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*. Fitzgerald S, ed. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux; 1979, at 163.
4. Coen J, Coen E, *No Country for Old Men*. Paramount Pictures, 2007.
5. Quoted in Montgomery M. *Why Flannery O'Connor Stayed Home: Vol. 1 of The Prophetic Poet and the Spirit of the Age*. LaSalle, IL: Sherwood Sugden and Company; 1981, at 17.
6. Brinkmeyer R. "Borne Away, Maybe, by Violence: Reading Flannery O'Connor Alongside Eudora Welty." Unpublished Conference Paper. NEH Summer Institute, Reconsidering Flannery O'Connor, Georgia College & State University, July 16, 2014.
7. O'Connor F. *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*. Fitzgerald S, ed. New York: Library of America; 1988, at 650–1.