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Posted on 08 January 2019 By Virginia Woolf

We do not know our souls, let alone the souls of others. An ode to illness Another inspiration. She asks for its presence in literature, as her wit silences desperate voices fighting for her attention. how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist's arm chair Her passionate lyricism blends in perfectly with the subtle irony of her gifted mind. Fragile, gifted mind a novel devoted to influenza lacked plot they would complain that there was no love in it wrongly however, for illness often takes on the disguise of love, and plays the same odd tricks A break from illness Shall we cover the silence with a party No. It all starts again The break is over The burden of reality ceases and a moment of downright existence comes back Virginia looks around She looks up She disconcerts the world while she looks at the sky So much consciousness is flooding the room. The first impression of that extraordinary spectacle is strangely overcoming Ordinarily to look at the sky for any length of time is impossible. The last song to illness We are gazing at the sky as she decides enough A voice comes from a letter Over and over again. Dec 23, 15 Also on my blog. A fascinating, sensitive and insightful essay by a writer who had to live with long periods of being ill all her life All day, all night the body intervenes blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February The creature within can only gaze through the pane smudged or rosy it cannot separate off from the body like the

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sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant it must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul it is said escapes But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record People write always of the doings of the mind the thoughts that come to it its noble plans how the mind has civilised the universe They show it ignoring the body in the philosopher s turret or kicking the body, like an old leather football, across leagues of snow and desert in the pursuit of conquest or discovery Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected Nor is the reason far to seek 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 Short of these, this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the raptures of transcendentalism. 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, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non existent On the contrary, the very opposite is true All day, all night the body intervenes blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February The creature within can only gaze through the pane smudged or rosy it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant it must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul it is said escapes. I was reading these wonderful pieces by Virginia Woolf and her mother, Julia Stephen, last Saturday morning, in bed, sipping coffee and nibbling a piece of toast when I came across this sentence The origin of most things has been decided on, but the origin of crumbs in bed has never excited sufficient attention among the scientific world, though it is a problem which has tormented many a weary sufferer I will

Me, Margaret

The Chronicles of Narnia

Hop On Pop

Stuart Little

Curious George

One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish

Where the Wild Things Are

The Little Engine That Could

The Hobbit, or There and Back Again

James and the Giant Peach

Where the Red Fern Grows

Because of Winn-Dixie

Island of the Blue Dolphins

Guess How Much I Love

forbear to give my own explanation, which may be neither scientific nor orthodox, and will merely beg that their evil existence may be recognised and, as far as human nature allows, guarded against The torment of crumbs should be stamped out of the sick bed as if it were the Colorado beetle in a potato field. After reading that, my breakfast in bed was quite spoiled I was no longer comfortable and kept feeling niggly little crumbs everywhere though I was grateful they weren't Colorado beetles, but I couldn't find any and in the end I was forced to get up, frustrated that, on the one hand I hadn't found the phantom crumbs, and on the other that Julia Stephen refused to reveal her tantalising but unscientific and unorthodox explanation for their origin But I was obliged to agree with her that, Among the number of small evils which haunt illness, the greatest, in the misery which it can cause, though the smallest in size, is crumbs. Reading Virginia Woolf for me is like reading a much eloquent version of my own personal journals I keep She looks inside herself and empties what she finds onto the pages in a way that not only I can identify with but that I marvel at Her prose is an unstructured poem that I can never get enough of I'm an 18 year old girl who has lived with a debilitating chronic illness for the past 3 years and will continue to have my entire life When I found this essay I just about cried The way she shares her experience with the reader is so personal and wonderful I found myself putting down this short book a couple times just to smile and ponder every word she wrote The experience of illness is extremely unrepresented not only in literature but in popular culture all together Sometimes it feels as though it's been sent up into the family attic only to be brought back down when everyone is leaving and needs to say their goodbyes The powerful experience that exists between the physical body and the metaphysical body, is virtually ignored and forgotten But once you become sick it overwhelms you and comes rushing back For most people, luckily, this lasts at the most two weeks of bed rest and antibiotics But for those who live with illness, it becomes a part of you and everything you do With this experience comes a lot of new, even good, things as well Virginia speaks about being sedentary and having the time to simply stare at the sky and flowers, taking in the world and all its small unseen moments as if it were a secret tonic you just

You

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realized you could never live without It is only the recumbent who know that, after all, nature is at no pains to conceal that she in the end will conquer I could quote this entire essay and still be unable to express how I feel about it All I can say is, like all of her writing, it is an experience that can't be missed in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poems by Mallarmé or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words give out their scent and distill their flavor, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having come to us sensually first, by way of the palate and the nostrils, like some queer odour Foreigners, to whom the tongue is strange, have us at a disadvantage. Virginia Woolf from *On Being Ill* Had I known about this essay, *On Being Ill*, and had I read the quote above prior to publishing my first book of poems, *Zimble Zamble Zumble*, I would have used it as an introduction to my work No one could have framed my book any better than Ms Woolf did here, although Gordon Lish wrote a foreword for it the likes that I have not ever seen bested anywhere else An editor of a small press in New Orleans, I have forgotten his name and outfit as I am sure most of us have or eventually will, wanted to publish my first book provided the Lish foreword was removed He certainly did not get what my work was about inasmuch that Ms Woolf surely would have and Lish had already proven he does and did I gladly refused the scum bag's offer and went on to publish a limited edition with *elimae books* and now have an artifact we are all very happy with, and I guess by chance we have survived him. The point is the body, and it happens through our feelings And if we get the meaning of something it comes through these senses Every word must do something to us, make us feel it through and in our body, and the meaning of the work is secondary and something that comes when it does as a result of this communion with our senses The queer odor is foreign to us, almost another language sometimes, and must be enjoyed and savored the way one reads philosophy and poetry the likes of Gilles Deleuze and Wallace Stevens for two of the most perfect examples I can give Virginia Woolf writes in this manner, and this essay precludes her great work *To The Lighthouse* There are interesting back stories behind the writing of this essay *On Being Ill* One tidbit has it that T.S Eliot had requested an essay from Woolf for his revamped

magazine New Criterion even after having basically screwed the Woolfs own Hogarth Press over by republishing his book The Waste Land at a rival press a mere three years after Hogarth Press had graciously published it Eliot has always been known to have audacity, but this, if true, proves it Of course, Woolf agreed to provide an essay for him and Eliot published it after remarking that her work was wordy and feeble There is a lot I personally do not like about this guy Eliot, and for Virginia I feel the extreme opposite But this essay of hers is basically a long poem for me, beautifully written, and lyrical enough for me to hear the birds sing It is short, twenty eight pages, and something to revisit from time to time It is challenging and brave, and hardly sad at all even when book ended by her own eventual death and her several failed attempts at suicide prior to the one which finally succeeded There is something glorious and operatic about reading Virginia Woolf The shorter her work is the better able I am to withstand my own resulting and incessant pounding happening in my chest. CONSIDERING how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us in the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist s arm chair and confuse his Rinse the mouth rinse the mouth with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us when we think of this an infinitely , as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza epic poems to typhoid odes to pneumonia, lyrics to tooth ache But no with a few exceptions De Quincey attempted something of the sort in The Opium Eater there must be a volume or two about disease scattered through the pages of Proust 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, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes, blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February.

Read the full text here [VW's thoughts into words on the inadequacy of language to capture what it is to be unwell, unfit, ill](#)

Her mother too, before her, a regular at sick beds all the while raising her own and stepchildren nursing those in need and recording her bedside accumulated practical knowledge for palliative care. Taken together this volume gives look to what has always been difficult to grasp: human need for comprehension of the as yet unknowable realm of suffering. Empathy is as close as can get but still lacking in actual understanding. All empathy is approximation. Woolf does however relate the offshoot of illness as an affinity to the unspoken base level of being in the world at an almost plantlike rootedness in concert with soil, air and sunshine soaking luxuriously in photosynthesis. Being outside a painful inwardness. She was the patient, her mother the caregiver, and together they laid down a framework of reaching out to bring comfort and understanding to the human condition for all time.

In This Poignant And Humorous Work, Virginia Woolf Observes That Though Illness Is Part Of Every Human Being's Experience, It Has Never Been The Subject Of Literature Like The Acceptable Subjects Of War And Love. We Cannot Quote Shakespeare To Describe A Headache We Must, Woolf Says, Invent Language To Describe Pain. And Though Illness Enhances Our Perceptions, She Observes That It Reduces Self-Consciousness. It Is The Great Confessional Woolf Discusses The Cultural Taboos Associated With Illness And Explores How Illness Changes The Way We Read Poems. Clarify And Astonish, Shakespeare Exudes New Brilliance, And So Does Melodramatic Fiction. *On Being Ill* Was Published As An Individual Volume By Hogarth Press. In While Other Woolf Essays, Such As *A Room Of One's Own* And *Three Guineas*, Were First Published By Hogarth As Individual Volumes And Have Since Been Widely Available, *On Being Ill* Has Been Overlooked. The Paris Press Edition Features Original Cover

Art By Woolf S Sister, The Painter Vanessa Bell Hermione Lee S Introduction Discusses This Extraordinary Work, And Explores Woolf S Revelations About Poetry, Language, And Illness I liked the subject matter and the connection metaphor mention Woolf makes with nature and flowers, but after reading it straight through I was left a bit confused and had to reread a few passages to make sense of Woolf s point claim.



