Foreword

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In Sherwood Anderson's short story "Paper Pills," an ageing small-town doctor writes down his "thoughts, ends of thoughts, beginnings of thoughts" on scraps of paper (11). The two-page story—part of the 1919 short story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio*—centers Doctor Reefy, a lonely and grotesque man, unable and perhaps unwilling to adequately communicate with others. He instead crumples his written mementos into small, hard balls and stuffs them deep into his pockets, where they dissolve into "paper pills" (10). Doctor Reefy keeps the concerns of his medicine largely to himself, never sharing the full extent of its contents. In this issue of *FRAME*, we take on the task of smoothing out and sharing those paper pills with our readers, collected as 38.2 *Paper Pills: A Medical Humanities Issue*.

Recognising that medicine is not just about diagnosing and treating pathology, but about interpreting, attending to lived bodies, selves, and relationships is at the core of this issue (Spencer 315). In her work "Narrative Medicine: The Book at the Gates of Biomedicine," Danielle Spencer argues that better readers will make for better doctors, highlighting a necessary attentiveness to narrative. The articles collected here therefore aim to explore this capacity of literature to listen to, interpret, and act on the lived experience of illness, embodiment, and relationality:

> What about the power of narrative to deepen mutual understanding and affiliation between patients and providers, thus improving clinical care? What about the power of narrative to illuminate the ways in which an individual might understand an illness experience—when, say, a dominant cultural narrative script is harmful or helpful, prescriptive or liberating? (Spencer 311)

These questions guide the central concern of this issue, namely the exploration of how storywork matters both in clinical practice and in shaping the lived experience of the body.

We broaden these inquiries to address the ethical dilemmas that arise when the "othered body" becomes a site of spectacle, eliciting pity, a condescending gaze, or medical curiosity. We examine how medical narratives can either reinforce or challenge the dichotomy between what is deemed "normal" and what is categorized as "pathological." Furthermore, we examine the implications of medicine as a promise, mythologising youth, health, and perfection and how this promise influences narratives surrounding the body, both in literary contexts and popular culture. Finally, we contemplate the larger role of literature in this debate: does it interrogate, problematise, resist, or reframe these promissory discourses?

Taken together, these questions invite us to consider how narratives give shape to pain, ageing, and disability, and how attending to these stories can disclose the relational and ethical dimensions of care. The articles gathered in this edition undertake precisely this work: they read illness, embodiment, and medical intervention not merely as clinical phenomena, but as lived, storied experiences that shape and are shaped by cultural imaginaries of the body.

Contributions range from analyses of Gothic and speculative reimaginings of medical experimentation and bodily transformation, to explorations of care ethics in autobiographical and graphic illness narratives. Across the seven pieces collected here, the body emerges as both subject and medium: a living site where experiences of illness, care, and transformation are inscribed and interpreted. These articles

share the idea of 'paper pills' transforming what is often private, subterranean, and ineffable into something visible, comprehensive, and ethically actionable. Just as Doctor Reefy's paper pills give physical form to private thought, these contributions attempt to make tangible the often intangible.

The first cluster of contributions focuses on Gothic and speculative reimaginings of the body, tracing how literary and cinematic depictions of medical experimentation, monstrosity, and transformation illuminate societal anxieties about embodiment, identity, and power. The Gothic consistently treats the body as a contested site where social, scientific, and moral forces converge. Rather than functioning merely as a setting or symptom, the body in Gothic texts carries cultural inscriptions: it is monitored, classified, repaired, and punished according to prevailing norms. As David Punter puts it, "Gothic knows the body [...] It knows about physical fragility, about vulnerability" (9). The genre is acutely attuned to corporeal precarity and the ways bodies are exposed to forces beyond individual control. At the same time, Gothic narratives disclose how "medical practice controls, classifies and torments the body in the service of healing" (Wasson 1). In this way, Gothic literature and film resonate with concerns central to the medical humanities: they interrogate the tensions between scientific authority and bodily experience.

Canonical works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and H. G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* position the body as a site for both experimentation and transgression, thus revealing the fine line between scientific progress and moral peril. Contributions in this issue continue this lineage, probing the body as a contested site where care, control, and resistance intersect. Together, these articles map a genealogy from classic Gothic anxieties to present-day debates about aesthetic surgery, biomedical enhancement, and the policing of difference, and demonstrate that the genre remains a powerful register for thinking through medicine's ethical, political, and affective claims on the flesh.

In Hannah Markley's provocative study of body dysmorphia entitled "Monstrous Disorders: The Dysmorphic Gothic in *Frankenstein* and *The*

Substance," we encounter the "dysmorphic gothic," where beauty norms and bodily imperfection are examined through horror. The article argues that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) explore the horror of self-representation through body dysmorphia, where the self and its image exist in a fractured, abject relationship. Markley contrasts the despair of Victor Frankenstein's creature with the possibility of agency found in *The Substance*'s monstrous figure, Monstro ElisaSue. This juxtaposition not only offers a feminist reading of bodily monstrosity but also challenges us to reconsider how care for the body intersects with societal standards of beauty and worth.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor's creature embodies Victor's dysmorphic misrecognition (his horror of his own bodily and psychic imperfection) while the destruction of the female monster reveals the novel's gendered fear of the monstrous feminine. In *The Substance*, this dynamic is reimagined through Elizabeth Sparkle's attempt to perfect her aging body, producing her flawless but parasitic double, Sue. The film literalises the dysmorphic split between body and image through feeding, hunger, and rage, culminating in the monstrous birth of Monstro ElisaSue. By bringing together feminist theory, disability studies, and psychoanalytic accounts of abjection, Markley argues that both works expose how beauty norms and bodily perfection are built on processes of self-loathing and exclusion. Yet *The Substance* offers a reparative vision: whereas Victor's creature dies in despair, Monstro ElisaSue embraces her monstrosity, suggesting that accepting bodily imperfection can resist the ableist and patriarchal ideals that generate dysmorphic suffering.

If *The Substance* transforms *Frankenstein*'s horror of imperfection into a reparative acceptance of bodily difference, *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019) extends this inquiry into the future of corporeality. Imogen Grigorovich's article, "Future Imperfect: Transhumanism and the Marginalised Body in Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein: A Love Story*," reimagines *Frankenstein*'s questions about creation, embodiment, and exclusion through the lens of transhumanism, asking how the desire to transcend the body reshapes the possibilities for those already

marginalised by its limits. *Frankenstein*'s legacy thus extends beyond its original critique of bodily perfection and monstrosity, continuing to serve as a framework for reimagining embodiment in contemporary narratives. *Frankissstein* hereby reactivates *Frankenstein*'s anxiety about the boundaries of creation and the ethics of remaking the human. Grigorovich asks how the future of embodiment is envisioned in the age of transhumanism, particularly for marginalised bodies. Grigorovich unpacks the tension between liberation through the shedding of the body and the grounding of identity in one's embodied history. At the crossroads of feminist, queer, and transfeminist debates on embodiment, the article asks what kind of future transhumanism imagines for bodies that are trans, female, or otherwise marginalised. In a future that seems to promise freedom from the body, the article underscores how these fantasies of disembodiment often perpetuate exclusion rather than liberation for those at the margins. Through the dynamic between Ry Shelley, a transgender surgeon, and Victor Stein, a transhumanist professor, the narrative highlights a fundamental tension: while Stein views liberation as the shedding of the body, Ry's identity is deeply bound to their body's layered history. Using Jay Prosser's idea of "skin memories," the article reads Ry's body as a palimpsest: a text that retains traces of past inscriptions while remaining open to change. In contrast, the sexbots of the novel embody a prosthetic model of being, defined by interchangeability and forgetfulness. Together, these figures reveal how both embodied multiplicity and prosthetic fluidity, though disruptive to fixed humanist ideas of selfhood, are ultimately assimilated into normative systems that perpetuate exclusion and violence.

Grigorovich maintains that transhumanist fantasies of disembodiment reproduce patriarchal and anthropocentric logics, offering little space for marginalised subjects. Winterson's 2019 novel, read through this lens, suggests that a more inclusive future depends not on erasing or transcending bodies, but on recognising their histories, limitations, and capacity to remember.

This issue therefore turns its attention to the complex entanglements of embodiment, ethics, and cultural imagination, asking how bodies,

whether marginalised, transformed, or contested, carry histories of oppression, resistance, and possibility.

To take up that question from a different, but resonant, angle, the interview with Dr Xavier Aldana Reyes moves from the rhetoric of transhumanist liberation into the darker, often more ambivalent terrain of body horror and the Gothic. Reflecting on his recent book *Contemporary Body Horror* (2024), Aldana Reyes examines how twenty-first century representations of bodily transformation are refracted through feminist, queer, and anti-racist lenses to expose processes of marginalisation, epistemic violence, and bodily policing. Addressing the historical association of disability with monstrosity, he notes contemporary body horror's increasing attention to inclusion and agency. Across literature, film, and video games, Aldana Reyes emphasises how the genre can both engage with the material realities of the body and open up spaces for imaginative possibilities. He further considers artificial intelligence as a new frontier for the genre that allows an extension to Gothic anxieties about creation, control, and dehumanisation.

As Laura R. Kremmel argues in "Medical Humanities and the Twentieth-Century Gothic," every "evil doctor or dangerous patient in the Gothic" is a veil for the "systemic injustice that the medical humanities strives to rehabilitate" (254). *Paper Pills* thus puts these two strands in conversation with each other, attempting to show how Gothic narratives and medical humanities perspectives can complement one another in understanding the ethics of care. While the Gothic exposes tensions and transgressions, medical humanities frameworks emphasise the ethical and relational dimensions of care. The enactment and systemic limitations of care are especially prevalent in Laura Beadling's "Comics, Voice(s), and Ethics of Care in M. K. Czerwiec's *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371*." In her article, Beadling explores how M.K. Czerwiec's graphic memoir *Taking Turns* (2017) draws attention to the ethics of care during the AIDS crisis. Czerwiec's multi-genre work, blending graphic medicine with oral history, demonstrates how care can be both a personal and communal practice, resisting closure and instead honoring the complexity and persistence of care in the face of trauma. *Taking Turns*, argues Beadling, becomes an ethics of care in

action explored through the lens of graphic medicine. Czerwiec's work enacts Tove Pettersen's notion of a "mature ethics of care" by emphasising reciprocal, non-hierarchical relationships and centering the voices of patients, caregivers, and survivors. Through its structure and visual form, the text embodies remembrance as an ethical act, echoing Susan Sontag's call to transform compassion into action. In doing so, *Taking Turns* demonstrates how care, memory, and storytelling intersect as a tool for healing.

In a similar vein, Irene Pagano's examination of Sophie White's *Where I End* (2022) entitled "Trajectories of Horror and (Impossible) Care in Sophie White's *Where I End*," explores how care, when enmeshed in systemic violence, becomes an impossible relationship—one that exposes the ethical contradictions within medical and social frameworks. In the first section, Pagano examines the repetitive, procedural nature of both violence and care, highlighting how structural routines perpetuate harm even as they attempt to provide care. Drawing on leading figures in care ethics, including Joan Tronto and Eugenie Brinkema, they consider how these patterns expose the ethical tensions inherent in caregiving systems. In the second section, Pagano turns to the ethical and affective consequences of these structures, exploring the horror of absence and the inherent impossibility of achieving truly effective care. Through their close-reading, Pagano situates White's work at the intersection of care ethics and horror, showing how the novel uses literary form to reveal the profound challenges and contradictions of care under systemic pressures.

These tensions return in Luna Dieleman's investigation of Eula Biss's "The Pain Scale" (2007), an experimental illness essay which explores Biss's experience of reporting her chronic pain on a Numeric Rating Scale. In "Situating the Reader of the Illness Essay, within the Illness Essay," Dieleman offers a nuanced understanding of how personal pain, as expressed through the illness essay, becomes a form of negotiation between the individual's body and the broader medical and cultural systems that seek to categorise and understand it. Through Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge and Lauren Fournier's autotheory, Dieleman highlights the difficulty of articulating pain, showing

how personal suffering is shaped by the systems that mediate our understanding of it.

Throughout the article Dieleman engages with Haraway's work to elucidate and query the role of vision in such systems of measuring and reporting, particularly conceptions of vision originating from an ostensibly objective or abstract source. By examining Biss's frequent use of reference and citation to other scales and pain measurement tools through the lens of Fournier's autotheory—which emphasises the interplay between lived experience and theoretical knowledge—Dieleman argues that Biss effectively turns her expression of pain into a form of negotiation between herself, her readers, and the various systems through which her pain is expressed. By bringing these strands of thought together, Dieleman explores the difficulty of articulating one's physical pain, the inherent dangers in abstracting such experiences from the body itself, and how such embodied concepts are shaped and mediated in medical contexts through a network of material and ideological constructs.

Ruth Gehrmann's "Instructive Pandemics? Meaning-Making and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 in Contemporary Historical Fiction for Young Adults" brings a historical perspective to this discussion, highlighting how young adult fiction has shaped the way we understand pandemics and their traumatic aftermath. The 1918 influenza pandemic is considered to be one of the deadliest pandemics in recorded history, yet literature addressing its devastation, specifically in the USA, remains relatively scarce. A century later, the COVD-19 pandemic thrust American society into a comparable period of uncertainty. How can the younger generations, who witnessed such a period while navigating the transition to adulthood, make sense of traumatic and unprecedented times when lacking frames of reference?

Dr. Ruth Gehrmann's article presents three possibilities for 'meaning making,' or "how individuals construe, understand, and make sense of life events," for adolescents by analysing three young adult historical fiction novels set during the influenza pandemic. From an examination of the teenage protagonists and their diegetic worlds in *A Death-Struck Year, In the Shadow of Blackbirds, and One for Sorrow*, Gehrmann illustrates

how historical fiction can effectively mediate the true and imagined through a subjective lens. The act of encasing novels in quantifiable data incorporates discreet pedagogical potentialities that encourage a search for relating oneself to their world and respective place in history. Interweaving the supernatural, thereby asserting that the present is pursued by traces of the past, demonstrates that it sometimes cannot be understood conventionally, but requires transcending typical strategies for meaning-making. Together, the stories offer a framework for processing contemporary phenomena that may feel situated outside the realm of explanation. Gehrmann's analysis thus uncovers the ways in which narratives provide adolescents with the tools for meaning-making during periods of societal uncertainty—a reflection that resonates with the collective uncertainty faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In all the articles that make up *Paper Pills*, we find an underlying call to not only question the medical and cultural systems that shape our understanding of illness and care, but also to reclaim the voices of those who have been silenced or marginalised in these discussions. Whether through the retelling of history, the exploration of bodily autonomy, or the act of remembering, the works in this issue urge us to reconsider how care can be transformative—not just in terms of physical healing but also in fostering a more inclusive and empathetic world.

Through the contributions collected here, we hope to continue a broader discussion on the ways in which medicine, culture, and art intersect in our understanding of health and humanity. Similar work is being done by the Netherlands Research School for Literary Studies (OSL) through their recently launched Research Group in Medical & Health Humanities. In May, we were invited to present an early iteration of this issue at the symposium on Creative-Critical Approaches to the Health Humanities, which gave us further insight into the diverse, original, and important research being done in the medical and health humanities. The Research Group exemplifies the growing field of inquiry that seeks to improve, diversify, and expand the ways in which illness and care are communicated, understood, and remembered. With this issue, we offer a small but deliberate addition: a body-focused corpus that engages Gothic, speculative, and literary approaches to medical humanities. We hope to have unraveled and passed along some of these 'paper pills,' fostering a continuing conversation.

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