don’t just go along with such things without doing some inquiring and thinking on my own.”

In Carson, the disease followed a painful trajectory. She resisted a mastectomy. The cancer metastasized into her bones; a bombardment of radiation and treatment with hormones and the unproven anticancer drug Krebiozen could neither slow Carson’s decline nor alleviate her pain. Yet, until a few weeks before her death in 1964, she insisted on being a fully-informed partner in her health care, in a way unthinkable 50 years earlier for Mueller. Nevertheless, like Mueller, Carson regarded her experience of breast cancer as a private affair. She shared her history with only a few intimate friends. A conspiracy of silence continued to envelop breast cancer, although the percentage of sufferers was rising steadily.

As the 21st century dawns, medical science has still not triumphed over breast cancer as it has over smallpox and polio. However, in the years since Carson’s death, we have come to understand that it is not simply one invariant fatal malignancy, but a complex taxonomy of diseases. Women (and men) with breast cancer are now seen as medical consumers rather than the helpless victims of a killer. The disease has finally been liberated from taboos and inhibitions (until the 1990s, it was never mentioned in obituaries.) Yet breast cancer is still seen as an issue of corporate accountability through the control of toxic substances.

A Darker Ribbon not only gives readers an uncompromising and unsentimental view of breast cancer as it has over smallpox and polio. However, in the years since Carson’s death, we have come to understand that it is not simply one invariant fatal malignancy, but a complex taxonomy of diseases. Women (and men) with breast cancer are now seen as medical consumers rather than the helpless victims of a killer. The disease has finally been liberated from taboos and inhibitions (until the 1990s, it was never mentioned in obituaries.) Yet breast cancer is still seen as an issue of corporate accountability through the control of toxic substances.

What insight, what emotional understanding, can medicine gain from the artistic expression of physical or mental suffering? Several works in Mexican Modern Art 1900–1950, a groundbreaking exhibition now on view at the National Gallery of Canada, pose this question. Most notably, the intensely personal paintings of Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), Mexico’s ambassador of art, shout out not only the agony she endured as a result of polio and, later, of a bizarre accident, but also the emotional turmoil of her life. The intricately wrought and disturbing canvases of her lesser-known contemporary, Manuel González Serrano (1917–1960), express the precarious mental state that resulted from bouts of depression and the guilt of religious doubt.

Kahlo placed her pain front and centre in her art. Exposed bones and organs, and medical aids such as the corsets she wore to support her spine, are recurring motifs.1 Polio at age six caused permanent disability to her right leg, which later became gangrenous and had to be amputated. And, in a horrific bus accident at age 18, she was impaled on a metal rod from her left hip through to her genitals, suffering, in addition to extensive soft-tissue injuries, fractures of the third and fourth lumbar vertebrae, pelvis, and right foot, and dislocation of the left elbow. Years of her life were spent in bed in unspeakable pain as she tried to recover from a succession of spine fusions and other procedures. A mirror attached to the canopy of her bed and a special easel enabled her to paint in the prone position. In the self-portraits that resulted, her intense and apparently calm countenance belies her inner anguish.

The Ottawa exhibit features what Luis-Martín Lozano, guest curator from Mexico City, considers Kahlo’s four best self-portraits, in addition to a depiction of a friend’s suicide and two still lifes. For Lozano, Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird shows Kahlo at her most artistically mature. She uses Christian (thorn necklace) and native (hummingbird) imagery to ex-
press the pain of divorcing her husband, the renowned muralist Diego Rivera (whom she remarried later that year). The seemingly placid image is about to erupt into violence. The hummingbird, a Mexican love charm, is in the throes of death after pecking at Kahlo’s chest, causing the thorns to pierce her skin. The cat, perched on her left shoulder, is about to leap on the bird. When that happens, the pet monkey, for Kahlo a symbol of domesticity, will no doubt leap into the fray.

González Serrano’s work speaks to a different pain — that of debilitating depressive illness. He died while undergoing a lobotomy that was intended to relieve his mental suffering. The painting entitled Equilibrium expresses the delicate balance of his life. The board that supports the broken pot and cannibalistic-looking flowers is held by two unravelling threads. In what is perhaps a representation of modern life, everything — including the marbles — will soon be lost in an abyss of geometric patterns. A related painting, Self-portrait at Three Ages, shows the same precariousness, but this time a board supports a three-sided death mask, eyes empty but crying, mouth open in horror, while butterflies and the tendrils of plants emerge from the top: pain and life at the same moment.

With 270 works by 50 artists, this exhibition is remarkable in its expanded chronology of contemporary Mexican art and is enriched by the inclusion of prints, photographs and mural sketches. An ideal antidote to rainy spring days, it delivers sunshine and colour, plot and pathos, drama and dissertation. Mexican Modern Art is on view Wednesdays through Sundays until May 17 at the National Gallery in Ottawa.

Reference

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Room for a view

**Damocles**

Dionysius the Elder invited Damocles to a sumptuous banquet to dramatically demonstrate the insecure nature of grandeur and happiness. Damocles was thoroughly enjoying the banquet until he was asked to look upward. There above his head, hanging motionless by a single horsehair, was a razor-sharp sword.

Hesitantly, he closed the car door and walked up the driveway. I noticed that his beard and moustache were grizzled, but otherwise Jack Weber looked just as he had 30 years ago.

Bev and I had met Jack and Cathy Weber as far west as you can go in this country and 40 miles farther. We were drawn to the Queen Charlotte Islands to cut our teeth in our brand-new careers and marriages. We worked with Cathy at the hospital, and it wasn’t long before I got to know Jack, who was grading logs for one of the lumber companies. We were isolated, far from home, and the Webers became like family to us. We shared the newness, the adventure: fishing, beachcombing, getting lost in the great Sitka forest. One overcast day toward the end of spring, Jack and I hiked through the rainforest to explore the elk barrens, the home long ago of early settlers. At the edge of the barrens we found an old log cabin. Most of the shingles had blown from the roof, the chimney was precariously askew, the verandah had collapsed at one end, and the once robust cedar logs had begun to come apart. Suddenly we heard a strange trumpeting, and from the fringe of the forest a great white bird majestically emerged and then slowly disappeared into the mist. We watched in awe.

It was to be our last outing on the Charlottes. That summer Bev and I re-