

ire'ne lara silva, *Blood Sugar Canto* (Saddle Road Press, forthcoming), 61 pp., \$15. Reviewed by Regina Marie Mills.

The title of ire'ne lara silva's third book, *Blood Sugar Canto*, works both to structure the collection of her poems—blood, sugar, and song—and also to foreground the purpose of the poetry presented: to sing in a world that tells a Latina, indigenous woman with diabetes that she is broken. The title of silva's collection highlights the prominent topics and tropes of her poetry, including the tangible body, the medical system, the prevalence of diabetes in “hispanic latino mexican tejano” and native communities, the struggle of living with chronic illness in an ableist world, and the process of healing.

One of the more palpable themes in silva's poetry is the body. In poems such as, “labwork” and “grace,” silva does not treat the body as a metaphor but as a concrete object, one that has tangible effects in the world. Her poems ask us to forefront how we consider our bodies. For example, in “love song for my organs” the speaker purposefully names her organs and the parts they play in her body. For example, she names her kidneys and expresses her gratitude for their role in keeping her body cleansed: “i sing you strong sing you whole / and thank you for filtering my blood.” She also speaks to her pancreas, her “sleeping little warrior” which she longs to reconnect with: “years now i have lived on foreign insulin / always approximate subject to wild swings / of not enough too much almost in time /i long for your fine tuned calibration.” She asks the reader to consider the relationships we have with our flesh, blood, and bones, to appreciate the body parts that function as expected and to recognize those organs which may not be functioning normally or that have been lost.

The focus on the body often intersects with her critique of the medical system. Several poems paint the medical industry and its practitioners as dehumanizing, racist, and classist. In “grace,” the speaker recounts a particularly gentle diabetes check-up with a physician's assistant. The speaker emphasizes the humane

treatment she receives during a usually dehumanizing process. While other doctors look away as she removes her shoes or look at her feet with disgust, the physician's assistant is kind and caring. At the end of the poem, the speaker likens the experience to Mary Magdalene washing Jesus's feet with her hair: "this was a gift. as humble / and great a gift as if she had washed my feet / with her hair. [...]." However, this poem is the only one to hold up a medical exemplar; the rest highlight the institutional racism and general disregard that many low-income indigenous and Latina/o people experience with doctors. In "we don't give morphine for heartburn," the poet shows how the medical system discriminates against and distrusts brown people, forcing the brother and his family to persist in getting him treatment. What stands out in these poems are not an attempt to make amends or 'forgive and forget' but a searing and unapologetic anger aimed at the perpetrator of injustice, such as "dr. dossantos," whose Spanish surname does not stop him from perpetuating a discriminatory medical system.

The poems about the medical system center around diabetes, which silva argues is at epidemic proportions in her community, most notably in her poem, "diabetic epidemic." Whether it is the brother in "we don't give morphine..." or the speaker in "april 23, 2008," this collection repeatedly presents how a diabetes diagnosis changes the life of every person it touches. Her poem, "dieta indigena," argues that the move away from the natural and common foods eaten by the speaker's ancestors is the cause of so many chronic illnesses. In "diabetic epidemic," silva reveals the way in which the omnipresent "*la azucar*" weaves its way into the everyday life of her Texas community. In "lullaby," the speaker wants to find a way to educate her family and friends about their diabetic heritage and the ways they can try to avoid that fate. In both poems, silva underlines how knowledge is hoarded by the medical and academic communities. She points out how the brother in the poem is told by his doctors that "[they've] *read studies many pima Indians / have all three diabetes high blood pressure and high cholesterol.*" The community starts to adapt because they spread the word; the speaker tells everyone she knows about the study.

These poems assert that diabetes is a community issue that requires community support.

However, several of the poems in *Blood Sugar Canto* focus on the individual struggle with diabetes and ableist discourse. In “april 23, 2008,” the speaker describes the day she was diagnosed with diabetes. This poem, which is right at the beginning of the book, shows the speaker viewing her chronic illness as making her a lesser person. Her first thoughts revolve around what she “couldn’t” do any longer. The speaker also points to the invisibility of her new identity. This poem does not end on a hopeful note. The doctor does not predict a date of death, but at the end the speaker lists only negative thoughts of being “broken” and “afraid.” In the second section of her book, the poem, “*en trozas/in pieces*” recounts the death of so many family members at an early age. The title recounts how the speaker’s father feared losing his feet to diabetes and how he eventually did. The speaker too fears losing the pieces of her body to diabetes. The poem confronts fears driven by living in an ableist world, living in a world where one’s self-worth is tied up in what you can do, in being “whole.” She offers a prayer that she calls “selfish” but also reflects internalized ableism: “*diosito* grant me 75 years of life to do my work / please i want to stay whole and strong / able to walk.” The end of the collection works to dismantle this limiting view of productivity and usefulness and reveals how the poet has moved toward healing.

silva hints at the healing path several times in earlier portions of *Blood Sugar Canto*. But much like in real life, it takes time to find comfort, support, and to do more than just survive. In “despair, you are invited to my table,” the empty space between phrases structures the poem to create a separation between the speaker and her despair. However, as the poem continues, instead of continuing this disassociation, this break between the sadness caused by her new condition and her outward identity disappears. By the end, they are merged: “despair, i want to live / let us find a way to live peacefully with our same face.” However, fear and anger still permeate many of the poems afterwards. The turning point is the

title poem, where the speaker confronts the terror and shame that begins at the doctor's office, a place steeped in the language of fear. In this powerful poem, silva rejects the common image of the body at war with itself, "the blood turned against itself." She identifies and rejects the false dichotomy created by this analogy because in a war, there must be a loser. Instead, she advocates for the harmony that can be created when one listens to the body's song, which will eventually allow the speaker to write the song: "you learn to listen / until you are the one writing the song / and the daily challenges / are the discordant notes / you must work into the score." silva's poetry only becomes possible when love rather than fear allows the speaker to sing.

ire'ne lara silva's collection is a moving experience. I felt the fear, shame, and melancholy so painfully and artfully evoked in the first pages of the book become transformed into tools for healing and survival. The last section of the collection, "let my last breath be song" does not claim to erase and conquer the anxiety and loss that silva begins with. Rather, she learns to use her energy wisely ("diabetic love song") and to playfully work her sugar restrictions into her sex life ("the diabetic lover"). Most importantly, by engaging with her fear, the poet crafts songs that celebrate flowers, lovers, and food. Her last poem reveals a poet no longer engulfed in mourning, one who has found balance and strength: "i would like to die / singing let there be song in my throat / spilling out let my last breath be song."