Overformalisation of clinical terms has denuded them of everyday meaning, but they act as a valuable shorthand between doctors. The initial problem is how to master the pattern recognition and language attributed to each syndrome. Exposure to patients is mandatory, and rapid acquisition of knowledge is possible, even with an inexperienced eye. Some students learn lists but I find animation far more provocative than strings of black and white characters. My mind's camera has processed those curiosities of morbid significance and refashions the features of disease in grotesque apposition. A translation emerges through my pen which is not really a patient at all. It is caricature.

The Physicians' Duel

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The Persian poet Nizami of Ganjeh (*c* 1140-1209) probably never imagined that stories from his magnum opus, the *Khamseh* ("Quintet"), would be illustrated in lavishly produced manuscripts. Yet, by the sixteenth century, when "The Physicians' Duel" was painted, the *Khamseh* had long since joined the repertoire of illustrated works to be found in the libraries of established or aspiring bibliophiles. The manuscript from which "The Physicians' Duel" comes was compiled for Shah Tahmasp (reigned 1525-76) in Tabriz between 1539 and 1543. The work of five of the Shah's leading artists, its miniatures represent the pinnacle of sixteenth century Persian court painting, a glorious synthesis of the rational style of eastern Iran and the colouristic ebullience of its western half.

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The Physicians' Duel. Khamseh of Nizami. British Library, Or 2265, fol 26v

According to the story, two rival physicians served at the same court. To determine who was superior, the two decided on a contest of skill. The first doctor offered the other a deadly pill. Although his rival swallowed it, he immediately rendered it harmless by taking a powerful antidote. He then picked a rose and breathed a spell on it before handing it to his competitor to smell. As soon as the rival sniffed it, he collapsed dead. The power of fear proved more lethal than actual poison.

In the illustration the dead physician, with the offending rose at his side, sprawls at the feet of the victor, who hops, grins, and rubs his hands with glee. The ruler observes impassively from a pavilion at the back of the tiled terrace, while courtiers raise their fingers to their lips in astonishment. Rather than simply illustrating the narrative, the artist has included numerous details of daily life at court. At the right a falconer accompanies a servant who carries wine vessels to the king. Platters of melons, pears, apples, pomegranates, and cones of spun sugar have been placed near the assembled guests.

The story takes place within a typical Persian garden. Here the arid, mountainous background contrasts with the lush vegetation on the banks of the stream and the elegant architecture of pavilion and pools in the foreground. The stream, originally painted silver, has now tarnished to black. Beyond the stream a gardener digs the dry soil, perhaps in an attempt to extend the greensward. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Persian shahs and grandees enclosed enormous tracts of land, sometimes over fifty acres, to be used as gardens. These encompassed wilderness areas, orchards and other cultivated sections, palaces, and viewing pavilions. Grids of paved watercourses punctuated by pools criss-crossed the planted sections, providing irrigation and also the pleasant sound and cooling vapours of running water. As in the painting, the pools were stocked with fish and ducks and adorned with fountains.

Both the hot climate and the nomadic life of certain sectors of Persian society resulted in many activities taking place out of doors. Until the eighteenth century, paintings of interior scenes invariably included glimpses of verdant gardens through windows or beyond walls. Although we may be grateful for advances in modern medicine and the abandonment of most magical spells in the operating theatre, we could imagine worse working environments than the elegant pavilions of the Persian garden.

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