

The Awakenings Review

Spring 2025 | Volume 12, Number 1

*Works by Poets, Writers, and Artists
Living with Mental Illnesses*



The Awakenings Review

Spring 2025

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The front cover art is by **Sandra Jo Mazurek**, a visual artist with an MFA and BFA from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. While a student, she learned there are no rules in Art! Freedom! Sandra Jo has exhibited in New York, Australia, and England but says *Awakenings* is her home. “*Awakenings* gives you the freedom to be who you really are and to express this without any rules. My dear friend Nancy Voross has ALS. It breaks my heart. She has no freedom. This watercolor, ‘Flowers for Nancy,’ is inspired by her spirit and kindness. She cannot move but still loves and cares about everyone.”

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Submission Guidelines

The Awakenings Review is an award-winning literary magazine committed to publishing poetry, short stories, nonfiction, art, and photography by creators who have experience with mental illness, whether in themselves, family members, or friends. Based in the Chicago area but international in scope, our print publication is one of the nation's leading journals in this genre.

Please read these submission guidelines carefully before sending your work. After reviewing them, include the word 'IREADIT' in the subject line of your email submission, along with the word 'Submission,' to confirm you have read these guidelines. Thank you!

Focus

We prioritize submissions from writers and poets who:

- Have moved forward toward recovery from the challenges of mental illness.
- Can articulate the experience of mental illness without being demoralizing.

Honest accounts of mental illness experiences will also be considered. We prefer uplifting or redemptive messages but will consider a range of perspectives.

Editorial Policy

We accept submissions from:

- Individuals with lived experience of mental illness.
- Family members, caregivers, and friends of people with mental illnesses.

While we prefer submissions from creators with direct experience of mental illness, this need not always be the focus of the work.

Contributors selected for publication are not paid but will receive a complimentary copy of the journal in which their work appears, along with the option to purchase additional copies at a steep discount.

Submitting Your Work

Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis. Please send your submission as a .doc or .docx file attached to an email addressed to **awakenings.review@gmail.com** with the word "Submission" in the subject line. Except in rare instances, we only accept submissions via email.

Cover Letter

Include a brief cover letter about yourself, which may, in part, describe your connection to mental illness—whether personal, familial, or through friends. This information is voluntary, and its absence will not disqualify your submission. If your work is accepted, we will request a short biography in which this information may be included.

Prose Requirements

- Length: 500 to 5,000 words. Short pieces or flash fiction under 500 words will not be reviewed.
- Format: Pages should be numbered, and the author's name, address, and email should appear on the first page.

We accept fiction, creative nonfiction, interviews, dramatic scenes, book chapters, and essays.

Poetry Requirements

- Submit 3-5 poems that together would fill several pages of the journal.
- Single-poem submissions are not accepted.
- Poems should be formatted with lines under 60 characters to ensure proper printing.
- Group all poems into a single Word document. Do not send individual files or PDFs.
- The author's name, address, phone number, and email should appear on the first page.

Biography

Upon acceptance, please provide a biography of no more than 150 words. We request that this biography include a mention of your relationship to mental illness.

Visual Artwork

We accept photographs, ink drawings, etchings, charcoal drawings, art, and graphics.

- Cover Artwork: Color pieces for the cover should be landscape-oriented and at least 300 dpi.
- Interior Artwork: Black-and-white pieces for the interior should be portrait-oriented and at least 300 dpi.
- Submission Limit: Submit up to 8 pieces per email in .jpeg format. Do not send PDFs or other file types.

Include the word "Submission" in the subject line. Artists and photographers should follow the same cover letter guidelines regarding their connection to mental illness.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

We allow writers and poets to use AI tools for research, proofreading, editing, or structural suggestions. However, if text directly generated by AI is included in a submission, it should be clearly attributed. This can be done by:

- Placing AI-generated text in quotation marks.
- Providing footnotes to indicate AI usage.

Transparency ensures the integrity of the creative process.

Rights

Contributors retain the copyright to their work. By submitting, you grant *The Awakenings Review* one-time rights for publication.

Foreword

I used to believe that writing was a talent that one either possessed or lacked. I thought it was a genetically inherited trait, like athleticism, musical ability, or a knack for mathematics. Two influences cured me of that belief: my father and graduate school.

My father was a writer; a journalist for *The Baltimore Sun*, an author of several books on Baltimore, a feature writer for many magazines from the 1970s through 2019. I saw him write constantly; he kept detailed journals when we traveled as a family, he clacked away all afternoon at a Royal electric typewriter in his study, and he wrote letters to me for four years when I went to college. He preferred writing over talking on the phone.

In high school, when I went to my father for help on a writing assignment, he did the unthinkable. Something as parents we would never do today—he wrote parts of my papers, he wrote over my poor sentences, he re-wrote opening and closing paragraphs. “Now sit down and read that aloud to me,” he would say. I have no doubt that my father taught me, by example, how to write a good opening and closing paragraph, how to integrate a quotation into an essay, what a complete sentence sounds like. He would say, “Tell me what you want to say.” And I would explain to him my idea. And then he’d say, “Now write that down before you forget it.” I didn’t inherit an ability to write through his genes. I can tell you specific moments when it all became clear. He taught me how to write.

Six years ago, my father was 93 years old. I remember telling him I was going to leave my teaching career of twenty-eight years, and turn my attention to writing. I wanted to go to graduate school and earn my MFA in writing.

“Why would you do that?” My father asked.

“Because I want to learn how to write, commit more time to writing, try to get published.”

“You want to learn how to write?” He asked. I knew what he was about to tell me. “Sit down and write. Writers write. People who want to write, talk about writing.” And while I understood his point, and appreciated it fully, I am not sorry I went to graduate school. While my father taught me that writing was a skill, something I was going to have to work hard to learn, not my God-given gift, my mentors in graduate school handed me the tools of the trade.

In graduate school we were required to complete two book annotations every four months. An annotation was loosely defined as an analysis of how writers do what they do. We were asked to choose a book we admired and read it closely in order to take away the mystery of the craft. Writers don’t just sit down and write great prose. There’s a method, a technique, tricks, if you will. And through these annotations, those secrets were revealed to me.

I read nonfiction submissions for two journals that have been around a

long time, *The Awakenings Review*, and *The Stonecoast Review*. I am going to share with you four tips for writing an excellent essay. I was not born knowing this information. It was passed down to me by my father and by beloved teachers, and that's why I can pay it forward to you.

1. In thinking about how to tell your story, remember that the reader cares more about what you learned than how you learned it. Ask yourself, "So what? So this happened. What wisdom can I convey?" Vivien Gornick, in her invaluable book, *The Situation and the Story*, puts it this way: "Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened." In other words, avoid a chronological story of an event. Tell me why it matters, then tell me what how you learned it.
2. Put the reader in your place. This is old advice, but I believe it's a secret to good writing. Show your reader what happened. Don't tell me about it. I need to know how it smelled, what it sounded like, how heavy it was. I need similes to make me understand what you felt like. I can't read your mind. When you tell me about what happened, my empathy wanes. *Show* me what it felt like to be stuck in traffic in the tunnel while you had a panic attack: the colors, the heat, what was on the radio, who was in the car, the sound of the truck engines behind you. If you write this way, I will nod along and say, yes, yes, me too. And isn't that the goal of writing? To share our stories and create empathy? William Carlos Williams advised, "No ideas but in things." Your stories need to be grounded in things: details, senses, and names of places.
3. Recently, I received a submission titled "My Son's Journey With Mental Health." I read the whole essay, but I admit, the title biased me from the start, and not in a good way. No one can tell the story of her son's journey with mental health except for her son. The tip here is to watch your voice. Tell your own story, from your point of view. This writer surely has a story to tell, but it's not her son's journey. She has been on her own journey, dealing as a mother with a child suffering from mental health issues. That is the story she can tell. We cannot assume other people's feelings, only our own. Tell the story from your voice and the reader will believe you.
4. Get to the point of your essay in the first paragraph. My writing mentor, Susan Conley, in graduate school, calls this problem "throat clearing." Often, it takes a writer a few sentences, sometimes paragraphs, to get to the heat of the story. It's fine to get it all out. But before you call it your final draft, go back and see what happens if you start the essay at the fourth sentence or

the second paragraph. You don't need to warn the reader about what you are going to write. Jump in and start from the middle, go back to the beginning, and keep going.

I believe anyone can learn to write well. It's a skill, like knitting, cabinetry, and technology. If you practice every day and learn from writers you admire and respect, you will be a writer. One more important thing to remember when you sit down to write: tell *your* truth. You can't write anyone else's. Sue William Silverman, in an interview with Melanie Brooks for her book, *Writing Hard Stories*, said it best: "I own my story. If (someone) disagrees with it, then she gets to write her own book if she wants. This is what happened to me. This is my truth. This was my story, and I needed to tell it."

You have a story to tell, and no one else can write it like you can. That is the most important thing to remember. So go ahead, put your butt in the chair and write. It's not going to happen if you keep talking about it.

Judith Sandler
Assistant Editor



Preface

Awakenings is a small organization, so my leadership role with *The Awakenings Review* and its parent organization, the Awakenings Project, necessitates that I research grant opportunities. When I find a good one, I brainstorm a project, work with staff, get my ducks in a row, and write the grant. Finding grant opportunities is a tough process, so I was thrilled recently when I came upon a call for grant applications by the Puffin Foundation, a Teaneck, New Jersey, organization that has “built a reputation as a champion of freedom of expression and a supporter of artists who push boundaries to inspire change.”

This, I thought, was an excellent find. However, in their guidelines, they stated emphatically that they would not consider any projects written, developed, researched, or created with any help from artificial intelligence—AI. I was astonished. I found this both surprising and inconsistent. Puffin champions artists who push the envelope, while the truth is that AI is at the vanguard of art in our culture. It defines the envelope. Yet the progressive-thinking Puffin Foundation forbids it. That seems to me shortsighted and contradictory.

I am a frequent user of AI. Despite concerns, I believe that the literary community can and must assimilate AI and that AI can find a rightful and valuable place in the world of creative writing. I use AI often and with surprising results. When I finish writing the first draft of this preface, I will ask AI to critique it. It will do this proficiently. I could, of course, ask AI to copy-edit my sentences and paragraphs—as many of you know, it writes well—but I won’t. So, I will complete this work with computer assistance but without a computer rewrite. As I complete this project, I will return to AI (I use ChatGPT 4.0) to help sort out my ideas and polish the final version. To be transparent, I admit that in this essay, AI has been an assistant (as has a spell-checker and a digital thesaurus). But in the final analysis, this preface is a work of mine.

My aim is clear. I want to encourage the reader to give AI a fair shake. The media has fanned the flames that a large number of jobs and people’s lives—societies, for that matter—are at risk by this digital beast. Thanks to the media and a string of computer experts raising the alarm, people are distrustful and scared of it. Even people who love tech find it unsettling.

I had lunch recently with a good friend, a brilliant woman, Sarah, who had a successful career in broadcasting and journalism. Now, Sarah is very skilled in using tech, but as tech-savvy as she was, there was something about AI that made her uncomfortable. Here is some of the conversation about a PowerPoint presentation I showed her:

I said: After I showed her the presentation, I think she was slightly suspect that I had used AI to help me. She didn’t say so. A little while later, I texted her and told her that I had used AI to help research the topic and write some of the text.

ChatGPT said: It makes sense that she might have suspected it, especially if the presentation had a polished or unique style that stood out. It's good that you were transparent with her in your follow-up message. How did she respond to your text?

I said She was okay with it but said that she hasn't embraced AI as a tool. She called it a slippery slope.

ChatGPT said: It sounds like Sarah is cautious about the use of AI, which is understandable. Many people have mixed feelings about AI, seeing both its potential benefits and its possible risks. Her "slippery slope" comment suggests that she might be concerned about relying on AI too much or the ethical implications it might carry.

As you can see from this exchange, AI can carry on a conversation. Some of you will note that I addressed AI in familiar terms. This was my choice and rendered the conversation to more closely mimic conversation with a human. With a slight suspension of disbelief, you feel that you are addressing an animate being. The computer cannot replace human warmth and social interaction—it's not human; it's a machine—but ChatGPT is programmed to be positive and emotionally attractive.

I have other friends, including my human therapist, to whom I recount the benefits of AI. Their responses have invariably been leeriness or, in the case of one friend, utter fear and loathing. I told that friend that, evidently, she had not tried AI and knew little of its abilities. She wouldn't have it. AI, she insisted, was a grave threat to humankind and a terrifying entity on the horizon. Ironically, this friend was a keen user of her cell phone; like Sarah, she was tech-savvy. It was possible that the media—she referenced a "60 Minutes" interview several times—had unnerved her.

This brings me back to the underlying theme of this essay: with this opposition and fear, what is AI's place in the expression of literature? How do we sanely and carefully incorporate AI's capacities into poetry and prose writing? As I have already stated, AI is powerful and proficient. It is capable of nimble research. AI can clearly organize thoughts and ideas, and it is a capable copyeditor and reviewer. Given all this, it is certain to acquire a greater and more significant role in literature. We can't stop the tidal wave. AI is the future of computing. Yes, we can try Puffin's method: suppress it. Or, we can take that energy, go in another direction, and thoughtfully integrate AI-created assistance with creative activities.

But clearly, there are problems with this. It has long been known that it is possible for a person to instruct AI to write a poem or a story entirely, and AI can do this sometimes with the look and feel of human-created work. A poet or writer could have had little or nothing to do with the making of this work (although an initiator can seed AI with their feelings, ideas, thoughts, and parameters). A writer or poet may then declare themselves as the sole creator of the poem or story. But really, if AI writes copy, shouldn't AI be referenced? Otherwise, is the poet unscrupulous? Is it plagiarism? These are profound questions that the literary community must continue to address.

Celebrated authors, such as Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro, have long speculated about the place of AI-assisted literature. While Ishiguro has not attributed his works to AI fabrication, his novels have explored how technology shapes morality and relationships. Canadian author Margaret Atwood, two-time winner of the prestigious Booker Prize, has taken this relationship further. Atwood has explored AI as playing a supporting role in literature. AI, for instance, may suggest alternative storylines in her creative process. While she doesn't publish AI-generated text outright, she uses AI tools like ChatGPT to refine ideas, resolve writer's block, or brainstorm endings.

Like the Puffin Foundation, there are editors who will forbid this in their publications. Other editors may tolerate or even welcome it. It is no new idea that AI will continue to encroach on literature. Its usefulness will make this inescapable.

AI marks not just a revolution but an evolution in the literary community. We will surely adopt, synthesize, and excel despite this new challenge. We incorporated the typewriter, the PC, the word processor, the Internet, cut-and-paste, the spelling checker (and now grammar checkers), and other challenges the world of technology laid before us. True, AI will compromise the jobs of some writers. Therefore, it is suggested that writers broaden their skills and become competent users of AI. People with the gift of writing who can also excel at AI technology will be in demand. As AI enters the literary world, I urge writers and poets to engage with it thoughtfully, realizing that it is a tool to enhance the literary landscape. I look forward to a future where AI can play a role that empowers the literary community as it is designed to do.

Robert Lundin
Editor



Book Review



Mary Anna Scenga Kruch

WATER MARKS: A POETRY COLLECTION

Goldfish Press (2024)
Review by Lora Keller

Milkweed, marigolds, and coneflowers mark the shores of Mary Anna Scenga Kruch's memories in her new poetry collection, *Water Marks*. And she quarries the creeks, rivers, and streams of her life to try to mark them as well, a task of ephemerality, tenderness and love.

The details of these poems transport the reader into the comfort and wisdom of nature.

...inviting Wood Ducks
and childhood canoes
to follow the ashes
that glide beneath poplars
past the painted turtles
asleep on sunlit logs
past the woundwort and weeds...

Alliteration carries us deep into the writer's imagination as heard in these fragments... "small stones and salamanders... of lilies of the valley and of lilacs... damselflies and frogs." Internal rhymes cascade. This is but one of the many examples. "...of trees shivering though their crowns// laying bare nests made there by a mourning dove pair..."

Adept use of line breaks in a poem such as "Childhood Poplar Tree" propels the reader into the writer's memories.

Book Review

All those times I sat
beneath my childhood poplar tree
at the back of the yard
behind the swings
wished to go unnoticed
leaned into his bark
like an old friend...

Though the music of these poems is delightful, the images are exquisite. For instance, one poem zooms out from a description of broken chairs to what the writer sees beyond -- "ore freighters that rode the horizon." Another poem about her father's ancestral home opens with "Hills fold into shadowed asymmetry."

To enhance the visual acuity of words, the writer includes her own photographs -- a marshy creek, bare tree branches at dusk, and panoramic views of her father's homeland.

The most resonant poems leave room for readers to muse like a skillful Mary Oliver poem does. In "Marsh," the writer prepares to release her sister's ashes into marsh water and ends the poem by writing "Too early//to open my hand." And, in "Notes," the poem begins "What has become of notes on a ripped off corner//of a calendar..." and ends with "...these scraps like feathers//that lift off swim away//these scraps I meant//to fashion into an anchor?"

Prose poems also dot the pages of this collection, which provide a more relaxed narrative experience to explore the pain of loss. "It Must Have Been Sunday" describes a neighborhood child's visit. "... I have barely spoken since losing my husband, am propped up with his pillows, and the screen door open to the songs of wrens and cardinals."

My favorite poem was "Pearls" which describes longing and ends with:

"...I closed my eyes for a forehead kiss
or slight peck on the lips while inside

burned a fervent wish for fires to be lit
where my mouth would open
like an oyster in its bed
his tongue rushing in like the sea."

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A quote from Mary Oliver opens this collection, “It is the nature of water to be somewhere else.” This collection demonstrates the author’s ability to let water be true to its own nature and to find roots within its fleeting landscape.

Water Marks is a collection that flows effortlessly between past and present, land and water, grief and renewal. Kruch’s mastery of language, imagery, and form invites the reader into an intimate world of memory, loss, and transformation. Like the rivers and creeks she so lovingly evokes, her poetry carries us forward, urging us to pause, reflect, and embrace the beauty in both permanence and impermanence. This collection is a testament to poetry’s ability to hold onto fleeting moments, leaving an imprint as delicate yet enduring as water itself.



Paula Goldman



PERLE OF THE SEA

after "Girl with a Pearl Earring"
Johannes Vermeer c. 1665

The pearl in the painting, pearl
of virtue, wealth, rarity, I thought
of my own name, Perle in Yiddish,
Given my first strand, a choker, at 13,
I was harshly told not to lose them.
In a butcher's house, gems were rare.
Perle of the sea is pure. Surely,
the plain pearl that catches the light,
bright at its surface, but at what
were we looking? Oh, mother of pearl
who made me, your life so hard
with a mean husband, the grime
of the meat market, your bloodstained
aprons, what would a pearl mean to you?
Kidneys, livers, gizzards, chicken feet
lay in a cold white case, reaching
throughout the store. Oh, to be clean
as a pearl.



MIAMI VISIT

Not the same ocean
not the same sand
not the same girl
 in the yellow skirted
 swimsuit
looking down at the beach
in the camp photo

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years pass by
parents retired
died here
palm trees against
unclouded cerulean
 sky
this beauty survives

where is my Atlantic City
steadily sinking
with my childhood's
castle turreted hotels
boardwalk carnival rides
roaring waves
pounding the beach
my diving under breakers
running on hard shoreline
girls and boys shouting
 with joy
mothers sitting on the beach
grocery bags filled with fruit
by their sides

kisses and hugs await
the child who went adrift
 to find her stride
we can never go back
the rising tides
forward to uncertainty
where death resides



Paula Goldman

LOT'S WIFE

Genesis (19:26) But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

She's never given a name.
Turned into a pillar of salt
for looking back
at the hell-fire and brimstone
hailing down on Sodom
and Gomorrah.
Salt, symbol of sterility,
nothing grows
where earth's blighted
with salt.
What is she looking for?
Her two daughters and husbands
who wouldn't follow Lot?
Had she enjoyed the riffraff
of the two destroyed towns?
The angels, guests in her house,
give the command
not to look back.
While Lot offered his daughters
to the mob to protect
the so-called angels,
where was his wife to protest?
Stories with no happy endings
curdle our lives.
A warning for humans
not to look back
into a sea of tears
as I have done
all these years?
Tears from a brutish childhood,
I have swallowed many,
no pillar of salt am I.
Fruitful and multiplied,
I've obeyed my tribe.



HOT- BLOODED GIRL

after Paul Klee, 1938

She's young, and
and full-blooded, although
a clenched hand pulls
at her shoulder. Is it
Klee's hand? He was dying,
his organs and skin
tightening.
His lines could not be so fine.

She's on my mirror, a red
postcard of black curled
lines for her hair, heavy dark lines
for her nose, eyebrows.
Why do I not let go and tumble?
What curled hand holds me back?
Not to let the day come forward?
All its play and wonder?

The red chest shows a heart
ready to explode. So much life,
she can hardly contain herself.
Hot-blooded for sex, salsa, Tahitian
seas, silver sequined beaches.
She wants the fist to let go
of her black outlined shoulder
so she can run red hot,
so we can run red hot
with her.



Paula Goldman

CORDELIA'S APOLOGY

*"What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent."
Cordelia in Shakespeare's "King Lear," Act I. Scene 1.*

Father, forgive me, my arrogance.
I was stubborn telling the truth
so harshly, not
what was in my heart.
I knew you loved me best.
You waited for me to be last,
splitting your domain unwisely.
I don't know what got into me.

My hatred for my sisters? Always
jealous of me, the youngest. And
whatever happened to our mother?
You never mentioned her. Motherless,
now I was fatherless. "Nothing," I said
when you asked me for the praise
my sisters lavished on you
as if you were a puppy.

I loved you nothing more
than was natural, as daughter
to a father. Oh, who hasn't wanted
to be rid of a father? Especially,
in one's teen years when the world
seems ripe for plucking princes.

What happened to the loving child?
Tears came seeing your demise.
I was stubborn and apologize.
Yes, what need of my sisters
for husbands, if they loved you "all?"

Love is a flowing spring which touches
everything in due course. From where did
my quiet "nothing" come out? My own pride.
when you asked me to speak, "Nothing," I said.
I paid with my life in this family strife.



Paula Goldman's book, The Great Canopy, won the Gival Press Poetry Award, an honorable mention for the Independent Booksellers Award. Her work has appeared in the raven's perch, Passenger, Visions International, Rattle, Across the Margin, Oyez Review, Slant, Briar Cliff Review, Calyx, Ekphrasis, Prairie Schooner, Manhattanville Review, Cream City Review, Comstock Review, Harvard Review, The North American Review, Poet Lore, Poet Miscellany, Hawaii Pacific Review, Cæsura, and other magazines She holds an MA degree in Journalism from Marquette University and an MFA in Writing from Vermont College. A former reporter for The Milwaukee Journal, she served as a docent and lecturer at the Milwaukee Art Museum for 25 years. "Late Love," a book of poems published by Kelsay Books in Utah, is her most recent book of poems. After an adult life filled with depression, several psychiatrists, including analysis and medication, at the age of 79, she is coming into a life of fullness and light. She lives in Milwaukee, WI, with her husband of 58 years(!), volunteering, biking, swimming, and hiking.

Eileen Coughlin



I CUT MY HAIR

hoping it would
change the way
I looked
at life and it did...

My neck grew longer
allowing me to stick
it out the car window
where the wind –

ow the wind
howled through
the short strands
and my eyes teared

at the corner
of Dickerson street
where I used to live
at the second house

in the Detroit neighbor
hood where a broken oak
tree leans against
the yellow brick home -

stead where ivy
grows faster than
my hair through
the cracks in the steps

up to a non-existent
door where I knock
on what is left
behind then brush it

into a pile to be
swept into a memory
which has landed on
the cutting room floor.



CENTO – THE NEW TESTAMENT

...always failed to hide the fact¹
Jesus was in way over his head²
So, we head out each morning in our
pajamas, clutching coffee mugs and wait³
for someone please to come and fix it⁴
are we even built for peace? I think of breath & my teacher⁵
what can be said about what we do to each other⁶
so much can neither be written nor kept inside⁷
through the thinning wall of the darkness⁸

I swore when I got into this poem I would convert
this sorrow into some kind of honey with the little musics⁹
my own musical self
begins humming:
thanks for the beauty of the world

thanks for my life¹⁰

¹The Sweetness of Bobby Hefka – Phillip Levine

²Liliian – Mary Ruefle

³Continuation – Erika Meitner

⁴Grotus and Coventina --Seamus Heaney

⁵Kafka's Axe & Michael's Vest -Chen Chen

⁶Out of Some Other Paradise -Alex Dimitro

⁷Lamento – Tomas Transtromer

⁸There Are Things I Tell to No One – Galway Kinnell

⁹Spoon – ross gay

¹⁰I am Standing – Mary Oliver



STRAIGHTENING THE EDGE

I remember when my father
returned home from the asylum
with an unfinished clown face glued
together on a tray with small tiles.

There were pieces missing –
a shocking dull to the edges.
At dinner, I watched him sharpening
the carving knife. Listened

for the sound of the shink, shink,
scraping against both sides of steel.
Faster, faster, faster, we sang
until the old sharpness returned.

You are your father's daughter
they said, so much like him.
Intense, serious, sensitive...
I stop to study the blade.
It was in that thin second as
I held tightly onto the handle
of the rod, honing the edge
down onto its staggered

curved lip... that I recalled
Mozart had delusion of doubles
Tchaikovsky feared his head would
fall off and Beethoven was a boozier.

Van Gogh suffered bouts of blues.
Johann Sabastian Bach became blind.
Meticulous Michelangelo was compulsive
and even O'Keeffe was not okay.

The poet Plath had demons
Robert Lowell took lithium.
Roethke had recurrent rowdiness.
Sexton was tormented with bi-polar

The Awakenings Review

I pick up my pen for poetry. A Page
falls out of Sexton's *Awful Rowing*,
Toward God, page 85 'The Rowing Endeth'.
The knife and honing rod are laughing.



Eileen Coughlin currently resides in Bellingham, Washington. She has an EdD in Educational Psychology from Northern Arizona University and completed her MFA in Creative Writing from Pacific University. She has had poems published in *Awakenings Review*, *Door is a Jar*, *Literary Mama*, and *Better Than Starbucks*. These current poems reflect her memory of her father coming home after being hospitalized. His stress cracks had given way to temporary incoherence. She feared for her own mental health and turned to writing to keep herself on solid ground. She also parented a daughter on the spectrum. Her first book of poems, *Postcards From Autism*, is being published by Kelsay Books and will be released in the Spring of 2025.

Bella Aase



AURORA BOREALIS AFTER I GAVE UP HOPING FOR A BETTER WORLD

we drove ninety-nine miles on a cold
spring night, after dark, to find the one
north ephemeral light. parked beside barns,
angus mooing in the night, and what i first
thought was light pollution was actually
glory, glowing shepherd hooks flown
above our shivering camera. my first time and
i cried, for angels are not white
they are technicolor, shard pulses
everywhere, flutters and webs, calligraphy
between stars and you slept in the car while
auroras pressed a stamp, a shifting afterimage
with magentas and greens, printing
their lucida inks to my lucid dream and
i stayed up until three a.m. when you asked me
in sleep-mumbled voice, *how are the lights*
and i clasp your warm heavy hand
and in a fractured voice, breathe out—

my god
it is so bright out



IN FOLKLORE

i am possessed by demons
bipolar with legions
i am become a changeling
a child stolen by cruel fairies
replaced with a duplicate self
a witch to burn, lock in asylum
cursed into paranoia, to fearful ritual
to weeping and mania and apathy
i ask what if
what if fractured minds
were given a place of reverence
in high temples, holy shrines
a place among the demi's and deities
for i survive unseen torture
i sing in the thrash of ribboned skin
these cranial fractures let more light in
what if my dark struggle is divine blessing
a transfiguration into infinite kindness
i am possessed by angels
i befriend the nightmare shadows
commune, learn what they know
and ask why they made me this way
and ask how to thank them
for these wounds with power to heal



IN WHICH A FRIEND DOESN'T KNOW SHE MAY HAVE SAVED MY LIFE

this time i lie sleepless on the couch
forty minutes debating whether to text you back
that i didn't care if i woke up today

and when i send the text, you invite me over for fried chicken
and bake chocolate chip cookies, crumbs in our pink
blanketed laps, not annoyed i'm mostly silent and sad

and we watch Shrek while your roommate's dog
Sage dreams close by you on the basement floor
and you snicker at adult jokes we never caught as kids

the unorthodox means of rescuing a princess
and it's been four hours not thinking about dying
and when Fiona reveals her ogre curse

Sage's legs twitch, tranquil without burden
and i remember love takes many forms
because when i get up to go pee

Sage lifts her heavy head, drops the dream
to make sure i'm not leaving



DURING A PHOTOSHOOT, I WONDER IF THIS WILL BE MY FUNERAL PHOTO

the photographer's lighted eyes
are so gentle, encouraging
even though our session runs late

a few more

i twist and pull my hair taut
a messy bun above wood-carved earrings
my arms rest gentle across my chest
hands cup my blushed cheeks
i part my lips, contort posture
think of how i want to be remembered
look into the camera's iris hex

click. click.

her voice swoons, different angles

click. click.

i think of my name, cream paper bulletins
she was emotional, votive, kind
tearful memories, testaments

click. click.

and if you zoom close into my eyes
one gloss black lens to another
there's nothing behind
except a faint still life
a slow clock, hands posed, waiting



Bella Aase (*she/they*) is a recovering perfectionist with Bipolar II disorder. She is a graduate student in the MFA creative writing program at Hamline University. Their work has appeared in *Serotonin* and *This Was 2020*. Bella lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on Dakota land with her husband, John, who is also a writer.

Julie S. Paschold



EVEN ODD DUCKS GET LUCKY

I thought only discards
were found on the side of the road
but there I was, where he left me
this morning without a goodbye,
thrown away and alone
on the road of friendship
like a cigarette butt
or an empty beer can
and I started to feel sad and lonely,
remembering the reason for
his departure, calling me
crazy and weird, but perked up
as the clouds walked with me
and seed heads of the grasses
bobbed along to a silent song
and I realized then that
I may be strange and different,
but there's someone out there
to love me because he's not my
only ride on this road and
I'm no dry leaf or piece of gravel
to be driven over,
so I stuck my thumb out
to hitchhike; I figured
even odd ducks get lucky
sometimes.



SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET OF TRUE FRIENDSHIP

Words leave my lips as from my heart do tell.
Though he once shared his day with me each night
And now from him all silence stands its spell
My sorrow does not flow, nor shadows fright.

Sometime too hot in want the fire it burns
And rather than a remedy to find
A wall he builds, unlearned face he turns.
Ah, woe! My love for thee is yet so kind.

When those dislike or to me do object
I don my care as if a Carhart cloak.
Thou scoff, but I my self cannot reject.
Escaping not, accepting self, e'en broke.

Rough winds deter not ties 'tween steadfast friends
So long as hearts hold love until the end.



STEPPING OVER: FUGUE IN E MINOR

I've been stepping over this dead frog
in the entryway of my office for three days now,
the small flat body white-bellied and upside
down, and no one has made the effort
to move or pick it up, bury it or throw it away.
It just stays there, floating between the two rugs.

Today on my walk at work
I stepped over a dun-colored shield bug,
blending in with the pebbles locked in asphalt
around it and the only reason I noticed the insect
was because it was hurrying to get off the road.
I didn't bend over to see if it was
a pest or beneficial, merely noted its existence
and moved on.

Julie S. Paschold

For two weeks now
we've been stepping over each other at meetings,
ignoring the intimacy we were once developing
and its abrupt ending, acting as if
we were strange acquaintances
this whole stretch of time we've known
each other.

Stepping over the nights at my house,
the sent photos, the texts.
Stepping over the tension when I wanted
something and you didn't,
wanted common decency,
wanted reciprocation,
wanted something beyond words
on a screen and a few hidden dark nights.
Something you wouldn't give.

Stepping over the fact that I told you
that you were worth the trouble,
the time, and asked if you thought
I was—and you left, said no,
blocked me, walked away.

On my walks
I'm even stepping over the grasshoppers,
these hungry mouths so abundant this year
they are eating holes in everything green.
I give even the takers more than they deserve—
just because they don't know they're nothing
but consumers giving nothing but smatterings
of bodies along the road
when machinery hits them.
Who wants to save a pest?

Why do I want to save you?
Save what I thought we had?
You were eating holes at me,
gradually, taking my worth.

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At least with animals and plants,
they will be themselves even without
our naming them, without our influence,
will not bleed us dry if we leave them alone.
Perhaps it's safer that way.
Let nature be.
Step over her, instead of in her midst.

To be remarkable we have to be marked
again and again—
but how many times do I come back
to let you mark me unwanted,
unlovable, too much, not enough?

What if I left you alone?
Kept stepping over you, again and again?
Let someone else mark me—
mark me remarkable,
wanted, delightful, bright,
happy, just right?
Lovable?

What if this time was one to forget
and I started over
with a new song
a new lover
a new person with the grit and grace
to hold on for the long haul,
something you never did?

What if you were my fugue state,
a shield bug or frog or grasshopper to step over
and instead I saved you
or tried
but you wrestled your way out of my hands
and I went on down the road anyway,
without you?

—includes lines taken from a quote by David Goss “That is a sturdy love, one that doesn't shy away from the grit and grace that's required for the long haul.”

YOU ARE NOT JUST THE TITLE OF A POEM

You are not just the title of a poem.
You are in every word, every letter,
every line and verse as I write,
every sound that leaves my lips.

You are not a scary winged insect with
malicious eyes painted and staring
that needs to hide alone in the shadows
to protect himself from his monsters.
Here, take my hand, together we shall
fight the fiends that prowl and stalk us.

You are not a creature meant to live
in the dark, searching for another's light.
You are the warm sunset that glows
in the evening, that last golden burst
of rainbowed prism painting the horizon.

You are not a drab moth meant to fly
untouched and tattered into the night.
Here in the dark we will caress my flesh
to your flesh, with a new passion we will
spark a new merging, a new uniting of
these two bodies pressed warm and smooth
fitted together, lying here just a moment more,
a moment in the sunset dark that lasts
forever in my memory.



UNTIL WE CAN LIVE IN A FAIRY TALE

--to Sonia

It's the end of April and I've finally accomplished
mowing my yard for the first time—
not a terrific job, but it'll do.
And with a mower that severely needs to be serviced,
I'm surprised the task was accomplished at all.
Now, almost 50 years old and single,
I've come to accept
there's no one here to rescue me.
I'm living this life on my own.
So I do what I can.
Like leaving the strip of grass I missed behind the tree,
because both the mower and I have run out of gas.
Like deciding to NOT mow the very back
of my yard, because it is full of short weeds
and a fire pit beside my garden—
and no one sees it but me and my family.
Like deciding to clean off the mower another day
because I don't have the strength
to drag out the hose.
No white knight, you see.
It's just me.
I think of us now, wonder what the hell we are moving
towards, and wish we would have started this
in our 20's. You asked once what would have happened
if. What if we started this dance between us
when we were young enough to become what we dream
we could be.
I would want the whole fairy tale—
the white picket fence, the two-story house, the dog,
the 2 ½ kids; I would want it all with you—
the whole nine yards as they say.
When we talk we have to stop ourselves
or we'd talk the night away—
talk the moon out of the sky.
You have a way of filling your throat full of words
that makes me want to jump on your tongue

Julie S. Paschold

and join them. But you smack your lips on them
and swallow. I want to be the one thing that swims
along with them inside you. I want to be fully enveloped
to be completely within your words and world.
Create our own fairy tale out of the little we have
here between our hands, our mouths,
our bodies aging stretching sinking.
I don't want to be rescued
I want to rescue you
to find you here between the empty pages
fill them with our story our words our throats
no minute left
sinking the sun
I want to float the moon in an eclipse and
bring it to you in a paper cup
just to see you drink it, watch you glow—
I want to close my eyes beside you and dream
until we wake
until we can live in a fairy tale
together.



Julie S. Paschold (*Tansy Julie the Soaring Eagle*) is a poet and artist from Nebraska who has Bipolar I, alcoholism, and PTSD. They earned their BS & MS in agronomy from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Julie has three poetry books: *Horizons* (Atmosphere Press), winner of a 2024 Nebraska Book Award, *You Have Always Been Here* (Bass Clef Books, October 2024), and *Human Nature* (WSC Press, Spring 2025). Their poem “Multitudes of Blue Arrows” was a semi-finalist in the first Kate Sommers Memorial Prize in 2023, and two of their chapbooks won honorable mention in contests by *Writer's Digest* in 2021 and 2022. They are in a published book by the International Human Library Organization. For more, read their blog on [medium.com/ @jpaschold](https://medium.com/@jpaschold) or their author website at <https://jpaschold.blogspot.com/>.

Tom Laughlin



BLUE-GREEN FOG

—in response to a painting by Matt Carrano

Drifting beyond horizon's edge
into the blue-green fog of tomorrow,
my red speck of boat is mere memory now
in an ocean-sky without end.
Motor shot,
oars cracked, broken,
current and winds whisper
 nearly imperceptibly
along the gunnels.

Dreaming beyond fog
of some grip of land or sand beach,
I spy a startle of rocky cliffs, sandstone

and shale rising up to menace
and hint at jagged unseens below
this shrinking nautical mile.
No sign of trees,
vegetation, fresh water
or habitation

Dangling beyond words
or dock lines to the familiar,
I listen for songs from the depths
through my hull,
cast some redness on the ocean-sky
and feel for returning ripples,
watch for gull or albatross
and wait
for what will come.



Tom Laughlin

ARRANGING JEWELRY

her knee twitching as I played on the floor
at Grandpa Frank's reunion, my aunt
who had to leave the convent
because of them

and my friend in law school losing his
girlfriend and business, awake for three days
with questions I turned from as I turned
from the observation window and his strapped-in screaming

and my cousin who moved near, growing closer
until he came over smoking strangely and singing
awful, out of tune, ready for a plane
to New York and Olivia Newton-John

and my youngest brother painting pyramids
on his car, taking notes all night
from God and explaining in detail
the way each kid at school should live

and a woman friend's face and hair suddenly plain,
wearing T-shirts to the office, eyes wildly
arranging jewelry on desks and crying
"Judas I forgive you" to our manager

and my mother in her bathrobe
in a bare room with the eyes of a strange child
saying "*You* know what I mean"
my father's face twisting

and my brother again in the corner room
of Webber 1, upside down on his bed
to ease the side effects until
I called the nurse for more medication

so today I have to run to the ocean,
sweats and hood against the rain,
and follow a gull struggling to find
a perch stone in the spray



AFTERVOICES

We're all going to be okay
Nobody knows why it happens
She was a warm, caring person

But we need to help each other
Some people go when they're so young
I'd known her since we were children

Now that we just have us
When there are kids like us making trouble
Living next door for years

You'll learn to clean and fix things
So let's never fight anymore
Come summer you come visit

And cook dinner when I'm working late
And always make our beds like she'd want
And my Jamie will take you fishing



Tom Laughlin

IN THE CITY

solitary trees grow in
square patches of dirt
between cobblestones

men lie on sidewalks
in front of brass doors
kerchiefed women bump past
with orange plastic bags

on benches
beside dry fountains
grandparents reminisce with squirrels

trash blows past
climbs buildings
circling and diving

night empties
fast crowded sidewalks
leaving men who sit
talking to themselves

suburban couples park next to
street walkers and peep shows
and stroll to the theater

lights on the seventeenth floor
stay on all night;
church lights go out
at six

warm, well-lit
lobbies
are locked

outside restaurants
white limousines wait
with their lights on

ten story neon stores
shout for taxis and tourists

towns are illusions
at the ends of subway lines



UNEXPECTED VISIT

He sat by the window
leaning against the cupboard.
We set another place--
moving the cactus
and wicker basket
of unpaid bills.

The fish was split
three ways now
and we brought bread
for the table, and tossed
the salad into a larger bowl,
adding cabbage.

We ate watching our plates,
and I waited
for answers to my questions,
then only listened
to a neighbor's
child crying.



Tom Laughlin



***Tom Laughlin** is a Professor of English and Coordinator of the Creative Writing Program at Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts, where he coordinates the MCC Visiting Writers Series, open readings for students, and the publication of the online literary magazine Dead River Review. He was a volunteer staff reader for many years for Ploughshares and has taught literature classes in two Massachusetts prisons. His poetry has appeared in Green Mountains Review, Ibbetson Street, Drunk Monkeys, Sand Hills, Blue Mountain Review, Pensive, The Main Street Rag, Superpresent Magazine, and elsewhere. His poetry chapbook, The Rest of the Way, was released by Finishing Line Press in 2022. His website is www.TomLaughlinPoet.com. One of his brothers lives with bipolar disorder, and a number of other relatives (past and present), a close friend, and co-workers of his have battled mental illnesses over many years.*



METAPHYSICS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Suddenly the world is in a panic about cataclysmic possibilities from Artificial Intelligence (AI). The crisis seems to have been precipitated by the advent of recent developments in the AI field and abetted, of course, by several slow media days. The crisis of the burgeoning of AI plays to the sense of impending doom that seems to possess all of us in this post-Covid era. There are many more questions than answers, particularly in the area commonly called metaphysics.

Although the crisis has recently been precipitated by advances in AI and the media hype surrounding some of its behaviors, the crisis has been developing for several years. The massive transition to automated systems in record keeping and retrieval, as well as in accounting and communication, has occurred largely unnoticed by the public. Even transportation and manufacturing have been “chipped.” While the steep rise of AI was the inevitable denouement of these trends, grave vulnerabilities to humankind were largely ignored. Three areas under the rubric of AI demand analysis and thought: 1) Is AI good or evil? 2) What is the impact of AI on “truth.” 3). How aware are we that AI can constitute presuppositions that place boundaries on the consciousness of individuals? We propose to give a brief paragraph to each of these.

T. S. Eliot, perhaps the greatest poet of the 20th century, wrote: “However you disguise it, this does not change: The perpetual struggle of good and evil.”

However reluctant is the modern woman or man to sound metaphysical, the burgeoning of AI will demand that we examine its potential for good and for evil. AI harnessed to “good,” linked to the “good” motives in us can become a boon to humankind. AI employed nefariously, linked to the evil which seems somehow to reside in humankind could be apocalyptic. As usual, the outcome depends on human will and intention.

AI will revive the eternal discussions about free will, human intention, volition, and agency. Suffice it to say at this point that AI, in and of itself, is *unlikely* to hate, or to foment hatred, except as it may fall into the hands of the archetypal evil which is inherent in us all. Harnessed for good, it has the potential to greatly improve the human condition. But it must be harnessed quickly by the good people among us.

In general, human beings have been able to assess truth or falsehood by common sense. AI in the hands of evildoers could make it impossible to distinguish truth from lies. Formal methods of discerning truth, such as the scientific method, the jury trial, or double-blind experiments, could easily be thwarted by AI in the hands of evildoers. One common-sense definition of truth is *verisimilitude*, the fidelity of thought and speech to things as they are. AI could easily undermine that definition by flooding the world with spurious verisimilitude.

Nearly all human beings report having experience in an inner place; activities here, in the aggregate, are termed consciousness. In this space, an inner life is conducted and experienced as unique and changeless. In this space, humans, and perhaps some animals, experience the kernel of one's being, the "I" that is the unique being of each of us. Consciousness has been examined and discussed for centuries and is believed to be the definitive of human existence. Perhaps the most pressing question facing us at this juncture in the history of computing is: can a machine experience such consciousness? Do they already? The very question is circular: can a machine experience?

There exists an almost universal sense that most people experience choices that can be freely made. We ascribe to belief in freedom of the will, such as described in Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken:"

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Life is filled with choices. Indeed, choices may comprise what it is to be human. The free will to choose is sensed as autonomy and entirely within the power of the individual. Moreover, this power projects itself into the future and allows us to plan.

There is reason to believe that AI machines can see outcomes and consequences and base decisions upon them, probably better than humans. Will affection and familiarity become part of their analysis? Can these considerations be measured in principle? Will the choices a machine makes be constrained by these considerations?

Memory, imaginings, and dreams are experienced in the inner space of the mind. Labels for these phenomena need to be taught, though there is uncertainty. The hearer of such labels can never be perfectly certain that she and the describer speak of the same thing. This is a particular problem for translations from one language to another, a task in which AI already excels in the area of healthcare circumstances. In short, AI is already competitive with the human mind in handling any measurable quantity; the immeasurable of life is more troubling. Translation of novels and poetry may take a little longer!

Over the centuries, philosophers have made much of the insularity of pain. You cannot directly experience my pain; I cannot directly experience your pain. The physician teaches the language of pain; the surgeon teaches the language of appendicitis. Slightly different, the pain of mental illness is perceived mostly in the inner space experience; outward manifestations may be observed, but the pain itself is experienced solitarily. The craving for alcohol or narcotics is experienced within oneself (I have experienced it). As one of the reviewers of submissions of writings to *The Awakenings Review*, I have been struck by the relief felt and expressed when an author receives a diagnosis of mental illness. The very naming of the malady gives substance to that which has been nebulous and wraith-like. It is easier to wrestle a demon with a name!

A special category in the phenomena of an inner life is regret. Nested within it are many corollaries, such as guilt, shame, and perhaps contrition; regret often plagues the elderly. It may be derived from real or imagined shortcomings and may contribute to negative evaluations of self-worth, suicidal ideation, or real-world actions. Similarly, mental illness is a special category of dysphoria often confined to the patient's inner life. It may violate the volitional nature of choice and intention. Its stigma and recalcitrance to treatment may come to perpetuate one's guilt in a vicious circle. And, of course, there are biological contributors. The work of the Awakenings Project to facilitate authorship is a way to break the circle and is often lifesaving.

But we have digressed from thinking about artificial intelligence. For a machine to become conscious, it will require significant evolution, perhaps a quantum leap. It would be foolish to declare that it can't be done; history has proven that most "impossibles" are wrong. Already, AI bests human beings in the reliability of memory, long division, and the extraction of square roots. Moreover, AI is about to exceed our ability to analyze and translate from one language to another. As AI evolves, it may become more difficult to think out of the box if the box is constructed by AI. Will we be boxed in by AI's rules of the game of life? Will it develop consciousness and all the complexities that it entails? What will it take, merely a larger and larger number of chips and diodes to self-assemble into consciousness? Or will human creatures welcome chips and diodes into human inner life for a new generation?

Lloyd Jacobs



Lloyd A. Jacobs is President Emeritus at the University of Toledo, Professor Emeritus of surgery at The University of Michigan, and a former Distinguished Fellow of The U.S. Council on Competitiveness. He recently completed co-authorship of the book Leading existential change in higher education: Mergers, closures and other major institutional restructuring to be published by Johns Hopkins University Press in early 2025. He is Associate Editor of The Awakenings Review. He continues in treatment for depression and has struggled with alcohol.



WRITING IN THE AGE OF AI: WHY AND HOW TO USE TECHNOLOGY AS YOUR CREATIVE ALLY

As a professional writer and member of the Writers' Union of Canada's committee, I've found the discourse around AI's role in writing both fascinating and perplexing. On one hand, protecting writers from the unauthorized use of their work remains more crucial than ever, which is something I'm passionate about. Yet, the larger challenge may lie in addressing the public perception that AI can replace the skill and dedication honed by years of practice. Incidents like the Clarkesworld bans—where over 500 writers who generated AI short stories were banned in under a month in 2023—highlight not just ethical concerns but a troubling underestimation of the craft, reducing it to a mere means of earning quick bucks.

However, AI is here to stay. Just as the rise of 3D animation in the 1990s reshaped traditional storytelling, perhaps AI presents writers with the opportunity to streamline their workflows and even evolve their creative approaches. Over the past five months, from June to November 2024, I dedicated three to five hours daily testing several AI engines, including PoeAI and ChatGPT, to explore how these tools can assist with creative (editing) versus non-creative (querying) work. Here is what I discovered:

Instantaneous And Mostly Effective Editing Critiques

Firstly, I wanted to test out how effective the engine was in critiquing and editing my piece. So, one of my experiments includes testing out non-commercial horror microfiction as an amateur in the genre. I created the piece in less than ten minutes and put it into the engine to see how much editing I could do in less than thirty minutes. This is my initial input:

“I quickly turned the lock, the loud, repeated bangs on the door filling the darkness. Alright, steady. One step, two steps away. The men can't get me here.

My shoulders relaxed when the cramped apartment's chilly air turned warm, the gentle heat wrapped around my neck like a blanket.

Then, I heard it.

Breathing.”

I pasted my original text into the AI engine and asked for a rating of the piece. The engine highlighted some strengths, such as the ominous atmosphere, the effective use of atmospheric contrast, and how the banging on the door creates immediate tension. However, it also suggested I vary my sentence structure to increase the impact and heighten the tension. After explaining my artistic intention—to lure the protagonist into a false sense of security—the AI adjusted its feedback accordingly, advising me to enhance the sensory experience, incorporate more internal conflict to explore the protagonist's thoughts and use foreshadowing to link the external threat to the mysterious breathing. The engine gave the piece a rating of three stars out of five based on these elements. Taking this feedback into account, I made several adjustments, along with a few of my own tweaks. This is my final result:

“I quickly turned the lock as a loud bang, bang, bang echoed through the darkness. Alright. Steady. One step back. Two steps away from the light. The men can’t reach me here.

The cramped apartment’s December air slowly warmed. A gentle heat wrapped around my neck like a blanket, coaxing my shoulders to relax. Good, the automatic heater should be kicking in.

Then--I heard it.

Breathing.

In time with the rhythm of the banging.”

Overall, I’m quite satisfied with my results, especially considering this is my first attempt at writing horror microfiction. I’ve found that PoeAI edits have been significantly more helpful than ChatGPT, primarily because they are more specifically tailored to provide detailed writing critiques. ChatGPT is useful, but only when acting as a fast search engine for specific words or phrases.

It’s quite clear that AI can drastically speed up revisions, reducing hours or even days of work to mere minutes, and I’ve found the momentum it provides to be extremely helpful for a writer. Of course, I’m not submitting this piece to any venues whatsoever, but I can see how it can serve as a useful critique partner, offering writing suggestions that help identify weak spots for improvement.

That said, I’ve found many of PoeAI’s edits to be, frankly, unhelpful, which highlights the importance of a trained writer’s eye to evaluate and refine those suggestions. I’ve also noticed it works better with isolated paragraphs

rather than large chunks of text, which often result in vague or less useful feedback. Ultimately, it could be a potentially useful way for writers to practice for creative works, though I would still be worried about incorporating it into one's professional life due to the lack of laws and regulations the technology currently has.

More Polished Querying

Secondly, I've been testing the engine with a focus on the more non-creative aspects of publishing, such as querying, writing blurbs, and crafting other essential documents. To assess its efficiency, my co-author and I recently entered a literary pitching competition, where we submitted a pitch for an undisclosed novel that I'm unable to reveal at the moment. For disclosure, all of the main story content has been done by me and my co-author, so I was purely testing the AI for pitching the vision of our idea. However, I can share insights into the process.

By the time we entered the competition, we had already spent three months in the brainstorming phase, which gave us a solid understanding of the plot, characters, and themes. This foundational work was crucial, as it provided us with a clear vision for the story we were pitching. However, the real challenge arose when it came time to frame that idea into a compelling query letter—especially since it required distilling our pitch into a far more limited word count than typical querying.

Despite the competition's deadline being at the end of the month, we found ourselves cramming on the final day. Although we had a rough draft of the pitch, it wasn't polished. In hindsight, we realized we could have used more time for revisions, as good writing comes from letting the work breathe and coming back with fresh eyes. Still, the engine proved invaluable during this crunch period, helping us refine the query letter quickly and efficiently.

Ultimately, we scored 60 out of 70 points, which is a solid result, especially considering the pressure we were under and our stage of development. The highest marks were in areas that matter most to agents and publishers: opening line, story summary, marketability, and a perfect score for the author bio, tone, and voice. The perfect score for tone and voice is partly due to my previous experience with querying, which landed me successful book deals before. However, the AI engine played a significant role in helping me polish these elements even faster, making the tone sharp and professional. The ability to quickly reframe and adjust certain phrases saved us valuable time and allowed us to submit something far more polished than we would have otherwise managed under such a time crunch.

However, we did lose points on the character section, as our descriptions were not specific or compelling enough. In response to this feedback, we immediately developed more in-depth character profiles and sketches to address the gaps. This experience highlighted an important lesson: AI is an incredibly useful tool, but it's not a substitute for solid foundational work. While the engine assisted in polishing our ideas and streamlining the process, the core creative work and strategic thinking still come from the author.

Looking back, I would wholeheartedly recommend using AI as a tool for polishing query letters and other non-creative endeavors, such as email outreach, grant writing, blurbs, and more. In particular, I believe it's most effective when paired with professional references. The engine can significantly speed up the revision process, and I genuinely think we would have scored worse under the time constraints we faced without it. That said, the pitch still required plenty of human input. My co-author and I found ourselves scrambling and exchanging messages about what to fix, who should address which parts, and so on. AI helps make the process less intimidating, especially since non-creative writing engages a different skill set than creative work. It also facilitates a smoother shift from creating to editing. My only regret is not having more time for multiple drafts of the query letter. However, the story wasn't fully developed enough to know exactly what needed to be fixed, so the engine is not to blame. Overall, I still wholeheartedly recommend AI for handling non-creative writing tasks, as long as there's still substantial human input involved.

Conclusion

To reiterate, AI is just a tool—a tool that certainly needs to be regulated, but one that can be incredibly beneficial for writers and editors alike. My love for the craft cannot be overstated, which is why I dedicated so much time to experimenting with the engine: to explore its benefits and limitations. I do believe it can be a valuable asset, with certain caveats. Its primary strength lies not in creativity but in synthesis. Even when it comes to writing critiques, while I find it helpful for identifying my strengths and weaknesses, it cannot replace the actual work of waking up, drafting, and truly understanding each individual element of writing. AI's value depends entirely on the user's capabilities and intentions—whether they use it to refine ideas, streamline edits, or develop new concepts, the human element remains central to the creative process.

I hope you find this article helpful. I don't find alarmist thinking compelling because I prefer to believe there's hope for the future—selfishly, perhaps, but I hold that belief nonetheless. Enduring technological shifts are simply a part of the human experience. And, as someone who loves humanity despite its flaws, I like to think we'll find a way to live alongside these changes.



***Liana Tang** is a teen writer recognized for her acclaimed YA novel, *Stuck In Her Head*, which won five awards, including a gold medal at the IPPY ceremony. She has served as a guest lecturer, professional screenwriter, and comic book writer. Her co-authored picture book, *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea*, will be published by Comicker Press in 2025. In her free time, she enjoys voice acting and playing video games. She briefly struggled with depression, suicidality, and binge eating disorder when she was a child but aims to provide hope in her writing works.*

Christine Andersen



FOR ANYONE WHO YEARNNS

Remember the cold night
in our first apartment,
the radiator clanging to a halt,

how we huddled under a pile of down,
listened to the sleet pelt the open window
like a brush against a snare drum.

We savored the quick December air,
the whistling wind,
the clatter of icy branches,
our young lives expanding
in a symphony of promise—

that splendor before accident,
infidelity,
a mental breakdown, divorce

then the years of ritual silence,
our fair child passed between us
like a golden chalice.

This poem is for anyone
who has suffered disappointment,
who harbors an indelible heartache,
for anyone who yearns—

open your window to winter,
a symphony plays on.

DROUGHT

The year I remembered how I was touched
where no child should be touched
an unrelenting drought riddled the landscape.
The Fenton River was down to its bones.
Rocks, sludge, sand, pebbles.
It smelled of dead fish.
The small pools that remained shrunk daily.
It was if the summer understood my sorrow.

I was helpless against this searing
and searched the sky for storm clouds.
Wished them our way.
But there was only the white,
unforgiving sun scorching the ferns
and the wildflowers from the bottom up.
The trails along the river were dust.

I knew in time the rain would come
to fill the river,
muddy the trails,
water the roots.
I waited,
sitting on a boulder in the empty riverbed.
A walleyed bass with a gaping jaw
stared from a pile of smooth, gray rocks,
a specter of its former self.
After I returned it to the earth
with a burial under stones
honed by the river through cycles
of drought and flood,
I hiked home hopeful.

Crisis is the cornerstone of renewal.

Christine Andersen

BOULDER

The unimaginable happens,
a thing you can't get past.
You begin to live around it,
under and beside it,
but it remains your constant
companion on the journey,
a boulder in your backpack
as you scale the hill.

What more is there to say—
you must find
reasons to be grateful,
and keep on climbing.



MENDING

After I entered therapy for childhood sexual trauma,
I took up sewing by hand.
There was something comforting
about sitting in the slant of afternoon sun
or under lamplight on winter nights
with a blanket across my lap
when I couldn't sleep.

I would sort through my sewing kit for the right color,
wet the end of the thread,
guide it through the eye of the needle,
snip, tie the knot,
and start in on the pile I had gathered—
clothes not worn in years
because they needed mending—
lost buttons, torn sleeves,
hems hanging from broken stitches.
I sewed colorful patches of
peace signs, roses, butterflies and bees
over the holes in blouses and jeans.

The Awakenings Review

Then I started in on pillows and blankets,
coat pockets, a bed skirt my puppies
had ripped along the mattress.

A few months on,
when there was nothing else in the house to fix,
I slid the sewing kit to the back of the shelf
and took long walks in the snow,
threading my way through the bright, white woods
to continue my mending.



AUTUMN FLOOD

I love the poetry of raking,
each stroke like the pull of oars,
dried leaves rustling like water lapping.
I hear the rush of a river flowing
when the piles are hoisted
over the wood fence
and shaken free of an old sheet,
one threadbare with history,
love and loss.
A wave forms against the slats
until the wind carries
leaf after leaf
into the woods
like words recited,
pooling at the base of trees.

When autumn is in flood,
if you are weary,
afraid of drowning,
listen to the language of leaves.

Christine Andersen



Christine Andersen is a retired dyslexia specialist who lives on a horse farm, sans horses, in Connecticut with five hounds. These are good years of writing and reflection. Having endured severe sexual abuse as a child and the ups and downs of a lifetime of recovery, she has found constant comfort in the metaphors of nature. This collection is fresh air for healing. Christine is closing in on 100 published poems and won the 2023 American Writers Review Poetry Contest.



TWO CHAPTERS FROM *CAST
OFF (FALLEN LASSEN)*

Translator's Foreword by Sebastian Smallshaw

Brigitte Schwaiger's debut novel *Why Is There Salt in the Sea?* became an overnight feminist classic on its 1977 release, sold half a million copies across the German-speaking world, and was studied as a set text by multiple generations of high school students. Schwaiger wrote several more novels over the next decades, a period in which she also dealt with worsening depression and was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. In the early 2000s, she was admitted to the Otto Wagner Spital, a psychiatric hospital on the edge of Vienna.

In 2003, she began writing a book about her experiences as a patient. *Fallen lassen* was published three years later, laying bare the unmodernized state of Austrian psychiatric care. It did so in such unsparing detail that the book resonated beyond the literary world, with opposition Green politicians reading its most indicting pages into the parliamentary record of Vienna City Council. Schwaiger's descriptions of cage beds galvanized the campaign for a ban, which was passed in 2014.

Schwaiger's criticisms of the system are both lightened and sharpened by the acerbic Viennese humor she serves them up with. But when reflecting on the kind of radically reformed professional care that would make a difference, she puts irony and pessimism away, writing with sincerity, idealism, and hope. Throughout the book, she opens up about her "unlucky life": the trauma of growing up with a Nazi father who abused his children, her stress and anxiety as a lesbian trapped in a straight marriage, and losing custody over her teenage son.

Brigitte Schwaiger died by suicide in 2010, an act that hangs heavily over *Fallen lassen*. Commentary in the wake of Schwaiger's death pronounced her a "victim of the literary world", who wasn't taken seriously as a professional writer despite bringing out a book every couple of years. While true, this was almost as hypocritical as the media and music industry's reaction to Sinéad O'Connor's death. To read what critics and peers wrote about Schwaiger during her lifetime is to read about a string of public breakdowns, often coupled with the misstatement that she had stopped writing. When the critic Günter Nenning wrote that she had fallen into a "fifteen-year void" after *Why Is There Salt in the*

Sea?, Schwaiger sent him a package of the novels she had published during that time with the message “Here’s your void!”

The last few years have seen a resurgence of interest in an oeuvre and creative life that was all but written off by the literary establishment. The Brigitte Schwaiger Society was founded in her hometown of Freistadt in 2021, and the academic Stefan Maurer is currently researching a biography of the author. Schwaiger’s name crops up regularly in interviews and book recommendations from Gen X and Millennial women writers, while a new generation of readers has been freshly receptive to her focus on abusive relationships and controlling men. This was dismissed as passé in the “post-feminist” 2000s, but today seems not so dated after all; the 2010s saw an alarming rise in gender-based violence in Austria, which now has one of the highest femicide rates in Europe.

“My words are slime, ashes, cement.” Brigitte Schwaiger was one of the most remarkable autofictional voices to emerge in postwar Austrian literature, whose body of work was guided by the conviction that complicated lives like her own deserve a place in the literary imagination. *Fallen lassen* is the most personal book she wrote, and at the same time very different from the brash style of confessional memoirs like *Prozac Nation*. Schwaiger wrote what she believed society needed to hear about mental illness, without posturing and self-pity, without offering herself as a voyeuristic object. The result, as literary critic Doris Plöschberger wrote in *Der Spiegel*, is a “disquieting, breathtakingly truthful book”.



Sebastian Smallshaw is an award-winning translator from German, Dutch, and Swedish. His translation work ranges from books in the fields of musicology and theatre studies to literary texts by contemporary Austrian writers such as Ingeborg Bachmann, Elfriede Jelinek, Milena Michiko Flašar, Julian Schutting and Doris Mühringer. His translations have appeared in *Asymptote*, *No Man’s Land* and *Circumference Magazine*. He won the Translation Prize of the Austrian Cultural Forum London in 2018 and is a contributor to the “Profile” book series of the Austrian Literature Museum.

FALLEN LASSEN (CAST OFF)

Pavilion 10, second floor. Shared restrooms and shared bathrooms, used by both women and men. One single room for a man or woman. A larger single room for a man or woman recently built in the hall, which was partitioned to make space for it. A few twin rooms, I think three altogether, for men or women. A four-bed room and a three-bed room both for women, a huge dorm room for men (six to eight beds). When a woman in a nightgown leaves the women's bedroom, she bumps into a scruffy, half-naked man doddering out of the men's dorm next door. Spittle dribbles from his lips, and his hair sticks out in all directions. When someone gets up and shuffles to the restroom, there's no overnight carer on hand to assist.

The bathroom: here you can take a bath or a shower. There are two sinks to wash your face, for men and women. Gender separation, I once said. I'd prefer it to be gender separated. But there's just not enough space.

I'd have liked a single room, but of course, no such allowances are made for writers. A board on one of the walls lists our names. Brigitte Schwaiger, Kaspar L(...), Ulrike B(...). Excuse me, but are you *that* Brigitte Schwaiger? Is that *you*?

– I thought you were a doctor, says a fellow patient. The way you were walking around before, the way you're dressed, and the way you acted in the dining room, I thought you were a doctor. The way you spoke to one of the patients, as well. It was like an epiphany for me.

– What brought on this epiphany?

– Oh, you know, the way you were talking to him.

– Well, thanks. I had an epiphany once myself, a year ago. I've been here a few times, after all. My epiphany was seeing a patient speaking to a fellow patient. It made me think: aha, I'll do that too.

I'll do it by telling the patients with saliva dribbling from their mouths or lips crusted yellow with dried spittle: "For the love of God, go and wash your mouth! I can't bear the sight of it anymore!"

The woman who showed me you could talk to patients as you do to other people was slim, tall, and elegantly dressed – in an unpretentious, stylish way. Her mother was schizophrenic, her brother was schizophrenic, and her own diagnosis I no longer remember. She was in love with a man who lived abroad and had known her only for a short while. Every day she would call London on her cellphone. A patient who had come up to me before ("Please, do you have a cigarette for me?") approached her with the same question, which made her jump up, throw down her knitting (she was knitting a rather special

design with fine wool), raise her arms and run across the room: “I can’t! I just can’t! I can’t take it anymore!”

I’d had enough and couldn’t take it anymore, either. I was glad when she ran across the room and said it. She did so in my stead, so thanks for that, my dear, sadly I haven’t seen you in a long time. The older lady with the crutches and wheelchair had come in beforehand, the one who had thrown herself out of the window and survived. She was educated, not particularly physically attractive, with untied long hair and dark clothes. She spoke poshly and smoothly, was upset that nobody paid attention to her, and asked me for cigarettes. And the knitter (with her London lover, schizophrenic mother, and schizophrenic brother) and I gave the lady some cigarettes before the man who also wanted some came along, and I almost lost it, but then the younger woman really did throw down her knitting and protest.

She protested at how unbearable it was. The poverty, the deprivation, and these people who had been shunned by their families, been taken here by their wives or the police, had maybe just been released from prison and were in the psychiatric ward because of mental illness. “My trusted person is coming this afternoon; he’ll definitely give you the cigarettes back.”

“Excuse me, do you have a euro for me? I want to make a phone call.” The telephone is an ancient contraption on the upper floor. Up two long flights of stairs that not everyone manages to climb. These people are so weakened by pills that they give up when they want to make a phone call. Our floor has an office phone, but patients aren’t allowed to use it.

Sometimes, as an exception, a doctor, carer, or nurse lends their cell phone to a patient.

– But keep it short.

– Of course.

Just like a doctor’s appointment shouldn’t take long. (Tell me briefly... Can you quickly describe...).

Occupational therapy sessions are held one floor below, in the basement with its exit to the park, meaning that the basement is the ground floor, ours is the first floor, the telephone as well as geriatric care and gymnastics are on the second floor, and the third floor is a ward like this one, just not for emergency admissions, so no acute cases, but for the chronically ill. Restrooms and bathrooms there are used by men and women at the same time. Upstairs isn’t as clean as downstairs, so I heard from some patients who were moved up there because beds were needed on the second floor.

The charming knitter with her cellphone and acquaintance in London says that occupational therapy is like preschool. She calls “Nana!” when she needs the therapist. We sit at tables and sew, stitch, knit, craft, draw, paint and

glue, but don't sing songs while we work. We're the hard-working laborers of Steinhof. The basement is opened at exactly ten o'clock in the morning. Beforehand, we sit waiting on a bench in the cold hallway (when it's winter). Then the doors are opened. We're let into the bright rooms (artificial lighting), and everyone has their own desk. Some "nanas" go from desk to desk and then chatter among themselves. They, too, seem to be rather sick characters: a scatter-brained, bossy one that the patients are afraid of and a scraggy, scrawny one with her hair dyed blue, green, pink, and yellow. She likes to wear pants and a cropped t-shirt that shows her bare midriff. I think she has a navel gem. Her colleague, the ergotherapist (ergotherapy is the same as occupational therapy), has the number three tattooed from her neck to her ankles.

I prefer the strict, scatter-brained, bossy one because we're the same age. If I can't do something, she takes it off me and finishes it. I really only wanted to knit. One woolen scarf after another. Knitting is so good for gathering your thoughts and listening, dreaming, making plans, and weighing up decisions. When I begin a second scarf after finishing the first, the strict one says: "No!!! Another scarf?!" She shows me a Norwegian crochet pattern and demonstrates a few stitches.

– It's too complicated for me.

– What do you want to do then? Another scarf? I won't let you!

Of course, I could have insisted that knitting scarves was a proven and effective way of putting me at ease. It was calming even though it also became an addiction because, for a while, I knitted scarves whenever I wanted to give people a little something instead of letters or visits. Everyone I liked got one.

The ergotherapist says I should sew something. Sewing, oh God, give me a break. After a few days, I relent and even bring along my sewing machine in my granny cart. Just as I have a piano but don't play it, I also own a sewing machine, even though I don't sew. I proceed to sew bed linen for weeks on end. Then I do something else, like painting a cardboard cut-out that hadn't quite turned out. I cover up the botched bits as well as possible, making use of the painting skills I acquired over many years. The clown is starting to look very nice. Do I want to have him? No thanks. Then we'll give him to the Christmas exhibition. At Christmas, psychiatric hospitals put on bazaars. The patients' handiwork is exhibited and sold at a low (but not exploitative) price. Painted silk scarves, jumpers, ashtrays, bowls, small figurines, woven baskets, hand-bound blank books, and so on.

One patient painted a cockatoo on silk and was asked if he wanted to take it home. No thanks, I already have so many at home. Not long after he jumped out of his window at home and died. He was maybe forty. Slim, medium height, glasses, always sad. We peeled potatoes together on Wednesdays (cook-

ing takes place on Wednesday morning), with him in his bluish-black sweater that he almost always wore, a slightly tatty thing that looked like ski wear. While cutting potatoes and moving his arm over the bowl, his droopy sleeve constantly brushed over the potatoes. I said he should keep his arm clear of the bowl and he replied: "Ah yes, otherwise the sweater will get dirty, thanks." My thought was more that it's unappetizing for whoever has to eat the potatoes.

The day before his death he went on a walk with us. We cooked on Wednesday mornings and went on walks together afterward. We'd met up with our group of ergotherapy classmates and set off. Either into the city on public transport or to the palace gardens at Schönbrunn, or somewhere nearby by foot. It would be discussed and agreed on, usually days in advance. Just like what we cooked on Wednesdays was planned a number of days before and decided on together. Who, how, what. Where we go shopping. Who should get the pumpkins: me, me, me!

I did my bit and bought pumpkins the day before, along with the man who killed himself. Then we did our cooking, followed by our walk up from the pavilions to the Otto Wagner Church (which is indeed beautiful, from a distance, the golden dome is like Jerusalem) and into the woods, over sloping undergrowth, on paths next to meadows and fields, to a Schutzhaus, a hut serving food, where we could sit outside in the springtime air. Cappuccinos, lemonade, tea. The man who killed himself was next to me and didn't say a word. I knew he was unhappy. I didn't speak either. I was at least as unhappy as he was. The next day, when another patient whispered in my ear that he was dead, I was shocked. I wished him all the best, congratulated him, and envied him. Good thing I hadn't said anything else, I thought. He said his sweater would get dirty from the raw potatoes. I thought it was unappetizing, but good that I didn't tell him this; I thought, good, good, good, because otherwise, I might wonder if that was why he jumped out of the window.

– You have to deal with it stoically, I tell the other patient. He's dead, he managed to end his life, he won't have to spend the rest of his days as a cripple, we don't know why he did it, we didn't really know him, except that he was here. Either way, I won't blame myself. I was always nice to him.

– But I wasn't, she said. I wasn't nice to him.

She is one of those patients who wasn't nice to anybody; for months, she appeared to me as a completely sealed-off person, with a certain quiriness and a strange gait. During another stay on the ward, she suddenly started talking about how she once jumped from the fourth floor and survived. Eight months in a cast in the hospital. Sexually abused by her parents.

Sexually abused by her grandmother and grandfather. There are so many sexually abused patients. People who will never recover, who will always feel

fear, doubt, and self-hatred.

Another patient phoned the other day, in her mid-thirties, unable to work, sexually abused as a child, saying that she had been “out of touch for a while. Sorry, Brigitte, I tried to kill myself and was in the hospital for a long time.” One of her attempts involved a lot of alcohol and eight hundred Truxal pills. In a wood. She was found in a coma. “The coma was lovely. I saw a sea of balloons rising over the meadows.”

A critic wrote to me once, saying I shouldn’t write about such things. Readers would be driven suicidal by what I wrote. If you’ve attempted suicide, you shouldn’t tell anyone.

The food was good and the mineral water too, though supplies of the latter were stopped at the end of 2003 due to budget cuts. Replaced by tap water. We then had to take small tumblers set out for us and get our drinking water from the unisex restrooms that are also used by the staff. First door for men, second door for women, third door (with key) for the staff. Often a man goes into the women’s cubicle and vice versa, the toilet seat is usually wet and the toilet bowl unclean sometimes clogged with toilet paper and shit, the shit sometimes next to the toilet bowl, on the tiles in the cubicle, my God, what the Jews had to suffer, it always helps me to think of the Jews, the Jews in the concentration camps, and I’m in a very friendly concentration camp where nobody gets shot.

That’s at least something.

And the coldness here, the icy atmosphere? You want to feel the touch of human kindness as well? You honestly expect some human warmth?

Those of us who live with mental illness are not gassed, not subjected to the torture of forced labor, not beaten. Very rarely and at times of extreme pressure, someone may unthinkingly thump a patient, or a patient slaps a nurse who is rubbing him the wrong way.

– Why did you hit her, I asked him. The nurse had left. He continued eating his lunch.

– Because I won’t be talked to in that tone of voice she uses. Because she’s a Nazi, a fascist, and a slut.

I was quietly happy when she got slapped. This particular nurse was feared by all the patients, including me. When a patient told me that she had locked him in a cage bed twenty times, I went to her with him; she was in the kitchen at that moment and said, “You’re not a nurse! You’re a bad woman! You always give me too little when you serve meals! I always go hungry whenever you’re there!”

There was another nurse I got on with – we addressed each other with “Du” – and when I briefly mentioned her dreaded colleague once, she interrupted me: “Don’t say anything about (...)! Without her, this place would fall apart!” This nurse, who wouldn’t allow a complaint to be made against her efficient colleague, took three weeks’ leave at one point in order to see a psychotherapist. “If I don’t do therapy now,” she said, “I’ll get sick myself.”

And we wouldn’t want that. We have to stay fit.

The forced encounters with people who immediately address you with “Du.” They all come from different upbringings and backgrounds, have worked in all kinds of professions, and hail from all sorts of countries. Then there are the random patients who pop up in your face half-naked – usually men. The nurse who suddenly calls you “Du.” Doctors, carers and nurses who call each other “Du.” At least in Pavilion 10. Hairy bare legs, slippers, dressing gowns flapping open, cheap smokes, “Do you have a light?”, “Yes, but you have to give it back to me.”

Chairs are moved noisily, their wooden feet scraping against ceramic tiles. Tables are moved. The volume on the TV is turned up and down. Sometimes, CDs are played in the nurses’ room and piped through a loudspeaker in the hall. It’s definitely a hall, not some snug refuge. The occasional scuffle breaks out, and games of table tennis go on forever, but later, the hall was made smaller, or rather, they took some space from the back to build a wall, adding a new room inside the hall instead of on the outside.

A new room for difficult patients. The aggressive ones, who were usually kept in cage beds. From the outside, the new room looks like an odd dungeon or a small bachelor pad.

There was often this feeling of *how should I make myself understood to other people*. Who should I write to? What could I say to explain why I’m here? There’s no way I could ever tell people, “Don’t think I’m crazy just because I’d rather be in Steinhof than down below in your Vienna.” Crazy people always say that they aren’t crazy. In the daily morning rounds, in which one or two doctors, a carer, and one or two nurses check up on twenty to forty patients, it wasn’t always comfortable for me to open up about my suffering in front of strangers, and I largely kept it to myself. Just like the other patients didn’t talk much either. Only things like: how did you sleep, how are you finding the medication, do we need to adjust it, do you want to go out today, what are your plans for the weekend? Are you expecting visitors? When is your trusted person

coming? Have you already contacted the patient advocate? Should we notify your parents that you're here? Do you wish to be visited or do you not want any visitors?

More than a few patients didn't want visitors. One young woman always refused to accept visits from her parents, yet had her wishes ignored. Almost every day, the parents showed up smartly dressed – the young woman also had a large suitcase full of fancy outfits – and Daddy made quite the impression by staying seated in the dining room well beyond visiting hours. Perhaps he had a special mission or had given the staff an enormous tip. At any rate, two hours after visiting hours were over (at seven in the evening), he would still be there, and I preferred to avoid contact with visitors because some of the readers among the patients, those with a love for literature, were delighted to see me around. They said this made them feel much better. Their parents and other relatives would cast curious glances at me; I would be introduced, then invited or pushed into taking a seat at the table for the purpose of cultured conversation (which thoroughly exhausted me). Or, as also happened once, I interviewed another patient and a third patient suddenly started taking notes.

I asked the other patient, whom I knew from several stays on the ward, to talk about his life and opinions on this and that. He was a very educated alcoholic, partially paralyzed with a damaged leg (excessive drinking can cause paralysis), and the new patient, who was a journalist, started taking down what he said. I asked her not to write a newspaper article about this man, because he was telling his story to me. There was no other room where we could talk privately. The staff said we should sit on the balcony to prevent her from taking notes. But it's far too cold there. I went to the doctors and explained that literature is protected by copyright and the patient and I are deemed joint copyright owners if I write down what he tells me. And that, ultimately, I'm the one who is inspiring him to dig deep and really talk with the way I pose my questions, take in his answers, and inquire further. It's not fair for a rival professional (journalists often get irritated by novelists) to write this down and then claim it as her own work without even obtaining the patient's consent. The doctors say I should agree with the patient himself whether he wants to talk and to whom. And we are advised to "Go somewhere private!"

We somehow pass the time between breakfast and lunch, assuming there are no appointments, with things like occupational therapy, one-on-one conversation, physiotherapy, going to the doctor, or seeing to bureaucratic matters. (Those who need to do the latter but are too ill to make it alone through the traffic in Vienna are accompanied by a social worker.) I pass the time by interviewing patients. How long have you been ill, what was life like before you came here, where will you go when you're discharged, what's your biggest

wish, can I mention you in a book without revealing your name? One or two would gladly have me write a whole book just about them and not bother to leave out their names.

One time, a doctor comes up to me. “Frau Schwaiger, you can write about everything you see and hear here, about everything that happens here. It can, of course, be critical. And no names should be mentioned. We’d like you to write a book about psychiatric care and have another success like *Why Is There Salt in the Sea?*”

He means well, and I feel very flattered to be asked to perform a public service and offer constructive criticism. At the same time, it hurts that he talks about “success” and *Why Is There Salt in the Sea?* It makes me feel under pressure, a pressure to perform. I vowed to myself a few months after my first novel was published that I wouldn’t write another bestseller. So I got on with it, a different style instead of more bestsellers, different subjects, a zigzag trail between literary genres. I wouldn’t get stuck stitching the same stitch, endlessly repeating myself. Always something new. No standing still and turning into a literary robot. Now, a book about being in psychiatric care. Opinions on this were divided. I said to one doctor, “I’ve already been able to work a lot today.” “You aren’t here to work but to get better.”

A phone call with a childhood friend based in Vienna, an artist who lives with depression. I call him during two of his extended stays at home. He recommends reading Seneca and says that Prozac helps him a great deal. Then a friend – I do have them – visits Vienna General Hospital to bring me a copy of Seneca.

In November 2004, I get a visit from the youth worker who supports my son during a period in which I’m constantly on the verge of losing custody, as I was the one who wanted to designate a trusted person back in 1994. I can make art, but I can’t sell it. As an artist, I depend on people who are involved in selling art. You can be guided very well by them, but there’s also the risk of getting scammed or taken advantage of in other ways. After decades of dealing with publishers, I trust hardly anyone anymore. Publishers want to earn money, and of course, artists need money too, but they also need other things, and artists without any family, without relatives, without peace of mind, roaming alone through the city, mentally ill, dependent on the kindness of random strangers, often sit down with so-called tramps and beggars or visit people in prison, because they’re determined to make themselves useful, but no longer trust those who made use of them: those who exploited and abandoned them to face creative crises alone.

Seneca gives me good advice in the summer of 2004 and beyond. In November and December, I have behavioral therapy at the General Hospital. A

fellow patient, very mild-mannered and fancily dressed, is suffering from terrible depression and keeps saying she'll kill herself. She then has a fall, caused by a sudden epileptic seizure or something similar, and breaks her shoulder. She's taken to another ward where there's a scene, as she doesn't want to be operated on or tied down. When she returns to our ward, she remains comatose but sometimes feels a little better. Her mother, a dressmaker, comes every day. When she comes on Saturdays, she brings *me* a newspaper. Her daughter isn't much older than thirty and worked for many years as the union representative at an institute that promotes Austrian literature. She says she saw how little work was done there and how high the salaries were. She couldn't stand it and quit.

After intensive specialized therapy at the General Hospital, I spend months in outpatient group therapy for borderline personality disorder in the third district, which another patient from the General Hospital also attends, a doctor who had become unable to work. She says, "The funeral is today". It's the union representative who took her own life with an overdose.

I can't reveal what she told me because it was shared in confidence. We had a lot of mutual acquaintances. She was an editor and lived for a while in New York, where she was happy. In the group meetings at the General Hospital, she said a few times that she was considering a return to New York. The therapist argued that if she went to New York and felt better there, it would be very well, but everything would start all over again as soon as she returned. She should take the time to fully recover before traveling abroad.

An autopsy was performed on her body, which revealed that she had a fatty liver. She wanted to be thin and didn't eat any fat. If the liver isn't given fat, it produces fat itself. A fatty liver is a very serious condition. Medication barely had an effect on her. She said to her mother: "You've had a daughter for over thirty years, and now I can no longer go on; please, let me die."

When I said goodbye to her in December, I had promised her and her mother that I would paint her portrait one day. This didn't happen because painting is an expensive pursuit and I receive no financial assistance for it; I have to borrow money for painting supplies and pay it back with my canvases. I can only rarely find the money to pay for sitters. So I took my time calling her, and only two months later, she was dead.

I went to the cemetery with the doctor who was unable to work; it was snowing and very cold, and the ground was covered with deep snow. We couldn't find the grave, which was somewhere in the very large Neustift Cemetery. Then we heard that the actual funeral, the burial of the urn, would only take place in a few days. I couldn't attend because I had an appointment with social services.

Brigitte Schwaiger

We are no longer able to fulfill our responsibilities to other people. The state, with its tunnel vision and penny-pinching, prevents us from doing so. We are the dregs of society in Austria, the dregs of society in Europe, the dregs of society everywhere in the world.



***Brigitte Schwaiger** was born in the Austrian town of Freistadt in 1949. She had a middle-class upbringing as a doctor's daughter, while her great-grandmother was Carola Seligmann, an opera singer who died in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. After living for a time in Spain, where she discovered a life-long enthusiasm for sculpture and painting, she wrote her first literary texts for magazines. Her debut novel, *Why Is There Salt in the Sea?* became a bestseller in 1977 and was followed by a steady stream of novels, plays, stories, radio dramas and poetry. *Fallen lassen (Cast Off)*, her final book, was published to acclaim in 2006. After living for decades with severe chronic mental illness, Brigitte Schwaiger was found dead in July 2010 in a sidearm of the Danube River in Vienna. Recent years have seen growing interest in her life and legacy from a younger generation of readers and scholars.*



REMEDIO

One of the best memorials in the plaza on the second of November, the one with the best bottles of tequila set out, the most colorful and imaginative designs sprinkled in colored sawdust, is the one in memory of José Alfredo Jiménez, he who sang some of the most unforgettable songs of Mexico.

Of lesser note, is a humbler memorial, a simple *altar*, a mere *recuerdo*, improvised of hat, boots, and a cold plate of *chilaquiles*, to Socorro's father. There is his fair share of tequila, if not the best, nevertheless the one he fancied, and...in order that his semblance not fade with the rest of him...the picture of a man much younger than he was at the end, handsome and confident, with none of the endless string of non-events fated to follow in that straightforward gaze.

One might wonder if the temporarily restored father sees his fairly numerous children, all destined to do not that much better than he; if, in particular, he is keeping at least one eye on his favorite daughter, Socorro, who has learned, in the absence of men, brothers included, gone in search of work, how to take care of herself. But, enough about the playful passage of time, *el Día de los Muertos* itself has gone the way of all the other days, people are preparing themselves for the next wedding, or bedding, for, 'and ye,' as the lord is said to have said, 'be ye fruitful and multiply.' To our pueblo he may have added 'and don't forget to have a good time while you're at it.'

For Pueblo Nuevo knows how to party, no one has ever denied that. A fiesta here might begin at seven or eight or, somewhat earlier, say about four in the afternoon, but it doesn't really get going till ten or ten thirty and might, somewhat fitfully, build till four in the morning. Everyone knows how get-togethers go in *el parque*, the huge roofed area between the church and *la plaza*, an area that doubles as a cold concrete basketball court on school days, but weddings, second weddings, church weddings following first weddings (civil and legal, wherever some functionary, say the mayor, condescends to do the honors), generally save their wilder celebrations for the somewhat distant green, gotten up and rented out by one of the better heeled families of Pueblo Nuevo.

Here, this unusually industrious family has installed a couple of fountains, concrete blossoming like stone flowers, that begin their soft spurting hours, even days, before the fiesta that follows the church wedding. Several ornate, Ionian it is said, columns pierce the sky, columns swathed in sheets

of white the night of the gala, an unblemished white that also skirts dozens of tables and more dozens of chairs, chairs brightly beribboned, flowered like so many silken unmentionables, and set, with the tables, beneath an enormous white tent hammered down as if life's circus itself is staked against the prevailing winds of the hilltop.

The proprietary family, the one cashing in on the people's uncontrollable urge to party, does not sit on the trappings and accouterments between events, but negotiates with an agent who can arrange delivery, setup and removal. For them, the landowners, it is no effort and considerable revenue. Those who do the setup also do the takedown and fill black bags with plastic and glass; all the disposables they will, as part of the deal, dispose of.

As night wears on and children tire of climbing the inflatable castles, which will last about as long as their dreams, a number of young women will decide that, though they may have to go unmarried in our relatively manless pueblo, there is no reason to go childless—the remedy for which is not unknown—and discreetly withdraw from the feast with their chosen partners.

Generally, the bride, not to mention the bridesmaids, as all the young women of Pueblo Nuevo who judge themselves, with a little touch up, yet eligible, have hair, faces and nails done in *la Casa de Belleza*, by none other than our principal character, Socorro Preciosa, whose father's life was celebrated, however humbly, and not that long ago, with tequila and colored sawdust shaken out in intricate patterns, and who went—in the blink of an eye not yet shed of its tear—from setting up his *altar*, to decking out the still hopeful “girls” of Pueblo Nuevo.

But our story really begins a generation earlier when, not yet out of childhood, Socorro was exiled from the family home to live with and care for an aging grandmother. It was only a matter of thirty meters, less, but exile was exile. As a Mexican child, she already knew how to mop tiles, simmer *frijoles* and *pozole*—the preparation of meals seemed to go on forever—to clean babies and escort toddlers to the toilet, and she would be spelled in the afternoons so that she could attend the second shift at *la secundaria* and not grow up totally untaught. With luck grandma, who had already seen one century come and go, would take wing high over the church before Socorro was required to put in a full day at *la prepa*.

So, on mornings when the old girl went red, then white, and coughed up the tortillas Socorro's hands had so dutifully patted, the young girl stood and watched with fingers crossed. But, even without María d'Alba's frequently anticipated departure—for grandma coughed up her tortillas with some regularity—Socorro, when time allowed, indulged her one vice, which was...

Reading.

Reading as night fell and fell further and she huddled ever closer to a naked bulb. The question was: what did she, not yet out of childhood, but required to offer care all morning every morning, and to sit bored out of her skull at the secondary school five afternoons a week, read?

The local library consisted of one wall of books fronted by a woman who made sense of the world by running a finger along the chosen line while mumbling the sounds the little marks were said to represent and who guarded her charges most religiously. What went out would come back and on time, or else. Or else the borrower would be neither seen nor heard when next she presented herself, selected volume in hand, before the little woman's desk.

Since *Aventura Romántica y Amarosa* and *Aventura Mortal y Fatal* were, as usual, out on the day of Socorro's visit, she was handed a bilingual *Macbeth* and told to have it back, with minimal stains of junk food, *comida chatarra*, splashes of the prestige drink, Coca Cola, and with pages unbent, in three weeks. Socorro carried her slim tome home with some misgivings. She'd never heard of the ambitious king or his author and found some relief in the smallness and lightness of the one-play volume. Surely, since half, well, somewhat more than half—words of her language were required to be at least one, preferably three of four, syllables longer than their English equivalent—was in Spanish, it should go fairly easily, but the exception...

‘...*mañana y mañana y mañana...*’

...somehow didn't sound quite right. Everybody in Pueblo Nuevo knew *mañana* didn't mean tomorrow, just not today, so why didn't the author just get on with it and say, instead of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, ‘well... not exactly tomorrow, but certainly not today?’

But Socorro, as was her nature, persevered, the soul of María d'Alba, the apparently immortal grandmother, took wing on schedule and the girl proceeded to *la prepa*, where her *Macbeth*, along with a few other volumes nobody wanted, gave her a bit of an advantage. As her father, who was still alive then, suggested, she kept her mouth shut for the first year for, he told her, no one likes a smartypants, especially a girl in that category. Nevertheless, it was in her second year, with only one more to go before those destined to go on, not including Socorro, went, that she met the love of her life, a young man who would not only soon set foot on the road to a beckoning future, but go on and on without even the thought of return, while Socorro, though it could hardly be said that she knew it at the time, was already destined to pass her life in Pueblo Nuevo, to, when her parents were gone, fend as well as she could for herself.

Thus *la Casa de Belleza*, which followed several less than successful ventures, including the inevitable one-room shop on the front of the house, where you sell, on a lucky morning, a bag of Doritos and a bottle of Squirt, *la*

comida chatarra that would round out the girls of Pueblo Nuevo, married or not, pregnant or not, well before they were thirty.

In her next enterprise she was able to sell several silken unmentionables ordered by the more active married men for young women who had chosen not, in a pueblo always on the point of losing its population, to remain childless. Not all of these community-minded males paid and when Socorro was forced to send a bill to some Romeo's house she was sometimes rewarded with threats of the kind that had been more common in the last century. She soon realized that neither *la tienda* of minimal sales, nor *la roperia* of unpaid bills, would keep her alive and so took the bus to the city one day a week until she mastered the art of flattening rounded cheeks, heightening hidden cheekbones, lengthening determined eyelashes, enhancing resolute eyes and, finally, sculpting long black hair to frame her handiwork.

Socorro soon realized that girls and young women were willing to pay almost anything to improve their chances and so, bit by bit, she raised her prices until she was living comfortably in the house that had once held her mother, her father and seven *hermanos*, all, all gone, the last, as may have been said, in search of work, and, her expenses being practically nil, she cut back on work hours and found herself, once more, with time. Time for what? Time to read, of course. The question, once again, was, now that she had read Hamlet and Othello as well as Macbeth in single-volume bilingual playbooks that had come, God knows how, to our local library, what to read. Romance and Adventure were, when not out, nearly shredded, falling apart, but something must have been written since 1616, the year she understood her author, his work done, had given up the ghost.

The little woman in the library had also taken wing or been replaced, but the books were unchanged. The only one Socorro could find, in a dust-covered row of identical volumes on the bottom shelf...multiple copies of the magnum opus someone felt everyone in her pueblo, if not all of Mexico, should not even attempt to live without...one that didn't appear from its cover to be a bodice ripper or a fight to the death was by another author who, oddly, had also died in 1616. At least it had been written in Spanish and remained so.

Though, as may have been mentioned, even more than once, most of the males of Pueblo Nuevo, even as adolescents, had left, somehow babies kept coming and, the population remaining, for the moment, fairly constant, Socorro persevered and survived, though for her too...as she one day, all at once, realized...the years were passing. Her hard-won talents had kept her young—they had to, for who would make an appointment to see a bent, a wrinkled beautician with liver spots on her busy, busy hands?—she, coincidentally with finishing the story of the undefeated knight, realized her own windmills, if only in terms

of survival for the single woman were, ever so slightly, leaning, even...as she could see the future of her client's *ilusiones* as those of her flip-flopping friends and slowly turning foes, easily enough...in danger of toppling.

It was time for a visit to the full-length mirror in the upstairs bedroom, one that had been her mother's, not to mention her mother's mother's before that. There she stood, a little cold, for the old house never completely warmed up and, unusually, for she had never had anyone to show herself to, naked. Not the ideal shape, no, she never had been but—the good news—she wasn't any worse than last time she looked. Time to turn around. Well... The behind was still curvaceous; perhaps, she would like to think, irresistible, but the backs of the arms, in spite of her good work, were hanging a little. Face the thing, the full-strength mirror. Take a step closer. The neck, on closer inspection, was less than ideal. Hardly any horizontal creases, *gracias a Dios*, and not even thinking of hanging like a turtle's. No. But, a step closer. There.

...the eyes...

Little feet leaving their prints to either side...crows laughing in the distance, but—worst of all—a touch of hopelessness, of despair, that look *sin esperanza* in their black depths. Easy for her to recognize, for it was just that look she labored to remove from her, no longer as hopeful as they had been clients. Terrible that their beauty should peak at thirteen, though there was a dark, mischievous look at thirty that could not be denied. But even that was behind Socorro, well behind.

Was it time to realize that she...master craftsman, craftswoman, that she was...must face up to manlessness in her pueblo of a not yet declining population, time to consider if she wanted to add childlessness to the petty pace of every day? Though, even the child, she realized, turning away and quickly dressing, for she was shivering with knowledge, leaves or goes on to have her own fatherless child. Still, she, her inevitable daughter, for daughters were what most babies insisted on being, would have a decade or two when the house was not entirely empty, and Socorro, she or her daughter, would be, each in her turn, wondering who would pat their tortillas when they couldn't pat their own.

To work. She was late. Two not quite despondent hopefuls waiting in the street. The stairs. The heater to take the coffin-like feel from the walls. A fiesta this weekend. There would be more "girls" who could not wait for the hoped-for proposal but must choose the abandoned house or the back seat of the wreck for the deflowering that might fend off loneliness for as much as a generation.

Yes, she could see the futures of those whose features she, in so far as it was possible, perfected. They could see it too, if they looked in the mirror as she had, uncompromisingly, for it was there, as she well knew, writ large in dark eyes of unknown depth.

That weekend Socorro, who was always *invitada especial* at the fiestas she prepared so many for, knew it was time to make her own choice and, suddenly, there he was. Obviously he always had been, but now she knew what he was good for. *El toro*, one of the young bulls of Pueblo Nuevo. She also knew he was a ne'er-do-well, most of the remaining men were, but endless hours in the corn, in the *agave*, had given him a shape she could only hope her son—somehow she was sure that, against all odds, it would be a boy—would have.

The mind, the well formed words, the bearing and grace of he who was not *mal educado*, were elements, enhancements, she might herself add. The boy might even grow up to do something, something for Pueblo Nuevo, for Mexico, for the world. Not that she herself had done nothing. She had kept innumerable women from hopelessness, helped them feel better about themselves, no matter what was, or was not, to come, and, feeling better, they did, in fact, look better and went on to splash something other than what they might have on a backdrop of tears.

But why persevere, she asked herself, why, even, go on, when so little, finally, was possible, for her or her offspring? Perhaps, in the hours of reading, a little of the philosophy of the Knight of the Sorrowing Face, product of the Spaniard dead in 1616, had rubbed off on her. You do what you can, even when it isn't that much, even when it seems mad to do so and the crowd is only, for Pueblo Nuevo was, often as not, more or less polite, holding back its laughter.

It was two in the morning before the target male...in response to innumerable dark eyed glances...asked her to join him in one of the mating dances *la banda* banged out as the night, inevitably, ended, and nearly a month before Socorro realized that, in spite of her daring, the spark of pleasure she had allowed herself, she was not *embarazada*. She would have to, at the next fiesta, which was already a work in progress, try again and, if that didn't work, well... She didn't want to be listed, even mentally, among the "girls," all too well known, who tried, if more fatalistically than philosophically, and tried again.

This time, though her eyes, discreetly, roved, she spotted no one and it was a moment or two before she realized the young man, only slightly younger than she, across the no longer white table cloth and behind the fallen plastic cups was talking to her.

"Socorro..."

Of course everyone in Pueblo Nuevo knew her name as she knew everyone's.

"Rodolfo..."

"Advise me."

"What advice do you want, Rodolfo?"

“I have an offer, a kind of offer, to take a place with a group of mariachis from Pueblo Viejo, to work our act up there, here, to take it on the road. What do you think?”

“What do I think? What does it matter what I think? Everyone knows you can sing.”

A moment passed in which the concerned, if not yet desperate, beautiful and the man only a few years her junior who had done nothing yet but hold his own in life, looked around at a desolation of empty bottles and rolling cups, for a bit of wind had come up, and back at each other.

“If I go on the road,” continued Rodolfo, “I’ll never see you.”

Socorro was surprised enough to raise one perfect eyebrow.

“When do you see me now?”

“I see you when you go to work, when you go home to cook your *comida*, when you go back to work, when...”

“Have you been spying on me?”

“I have...I have been...for years...I have been...how to say?...admiring you.”

It couldn’t have been that many years unless, for him, it had begun in boyhood, though now he was slightly caved, an artistic type, not at all like the young bull, and wore rounded glasses that added a certain owl-like wisdom to his art. Nevertheless, his little wiggles must have had whatever it took for, at the end of the month, Socorro knew she had caught one, she was *embarazada* and, a couple of months later, all her clients knew it too.

Word of mouth must have been better than a paid ad for her appointments quickly increased and she was able to raise her prices yet again. Socorro was proof of her own medicine for, of course, she did her own nails, eyes and hair, though perhaps it was because of her perfected beauty she gave birth—not to a man who would, against all odds, lower his visor and charge the forces of evil, if only, in the delimited world of Pueblo Nuevo, of apathy and inaction—but to the inevitable daughter, a daughter perfectly beautiful from the beginning.

When Rodolfo was not off on a gig, he often visited Socorro and her perfectly beautiful daughter. He would sing in his magnificent tenor...the one that always made Socorro, deeply moved, turn away...a mature voice, a voice far older and wiser than hers and honed by long hours on the road, some of the usual classics, such as José Alfredo Jiménez’s...

*No vale nada la vida
la vida no vale nada
comienza siempre llorando
y así llorando se acaba*

*por eso es que en este mundo
la vida no vale nada...*

...which reached deep into Socorro even as she considered the possibility that, quite possibly, the lyricist, José Alfredo himself, was right...

‘worthless is life, life is worthless,
it begins with, it ends with, tears,
and for that reason, life is, in this world, worthless.’

Sometimes Rodolfo would step up behind the woman who had turned away, he would sing softly to the back of her neck, softly kissing it between lines, until it would occur to both of them, for subsequent attempts to find *los hermanos*, who would leave anyway, for the girl, had been fruitless, to try again, right there at the sink, though both, instinctively, for they were, in their way, a tasteful couple, would agree that it was more seemly to climb the stairs to the bed that, for various reasons, would never be called the marriage bed, and try there.

But something must have happened, Socorro would know soon enough, lying motionless in the morning before she went to work, dark eyes on the arched bricks of the ceiling; his little wigglers must have died on the road, and she knew in her bones she would never catch another.

Still, she had her daughter, she would not be entirely alone when the bells tolled and, true, her young man had added love, talent, even intelligence, to the mix and, though he still doted and visited whenever he could—for he and his group were often on the road—something, she would know soon enough, was wrong. That something wasn’t evident for a couple of years. Then, suddenly, it was. Though Remedio, the daughter, had her father’s artistic eyes set above her mother’s daring cheekbones, there was little in them. She couldn’t look at you for long. She couldn’t follow anything, a word, a pointing finger. When she wasn’t chewing on her own, she looked at them and that was, generally, what she did: chew her fingers or stare at them.

Socorro tried everything she knew to reach inside Remedio, to touch her curiosity, her interest for, she knew from experience that, somehow, you must find the world interesting, more complex than you first thought, that that is the first step, the one from which all else follows. She wasn’t asking the girl to be the first female mayor of Pueblo Nuevo, *la presidenta*, if perhaps, hopefully, to take a step further than she, Socorro, had, but it was becoming obvious that, like her mother and her mother’s mother, Remedio wasn’t going anywhere. Not to *la secundaria* or *la prepa*, and certainly not to *la universidad*. No.

Remedio would never leave the house.

But that was what she had wanted, wasn’t it, someone there at the end, as she herself had been, for her grandmother and, in God’s good time, her moth-

er and her father. Yes, she knew what it was to be there at the end, but it wasn't what she had wanted for Remedio, no, not like this. And, though the romance with Rodolfo might go on forever, did Socorro really want to take the chance on another? God only knew which of his creatures might follow the first.

In time, and a time of hopelessness it was, Socorro learned that the most she could do for her daughter was to do what she always did—come home, pat the tortillas, simmer the beans and *pozole*—and to do it quietly, very quietly, for noises terrified the girl. With one exception.

Her father's voice. It was very, very soft, repetitive songs, songs Rodolfo made up for Remedio as he went that got her to look away from her fingers, to listen, even to tap the table in perfect time, and, finally, to look at him, to smile. But that, apparently, was it. Rodolfo would play his guitar, tap it, sing his soft, soft, songs, Remedio would smile, grin, drool and tap, tap, tap the table, in perfect time, even as Socorro danced around the kitchen and clapped her hands, softly, softly, so as not to upset the girl, and that was it, the family picture...

The couple of differing ages and interests, the couple that would, for various reasons, never marry, the little girl who would never go anywhere, would never do anything, never find her own means of survival in Pueblo Nuevo, the pueblo of those who remained honoring, periodically, the memory of those who had gone before, of those who had left, if only to take wing over the church.

In time, though Remedio didn't seem to know her own name, speech came to her and she would repeat...sometimes in singsong, sometimes in a flat, toneless voice...exactly the words she had just heard, even as her hands, like some great orator's, would move in patterns, patterns she would immediately repeat, and repeat.

Remedio was still a little girl when, one day in the kitchen, her mother discovered she could dance, though what she was doing was not the usual mating dance of *el parque* or the distant green, the available female flung high, legs apart, but something altogether different, something out of the old movies that never quite left the television, more like Donald O'Connor or even James Cagney in one of his lighter roles. Nonetheless, Remedio—only God knew where it came from—was dancing.

Well, thought Socorro, if that's what the girl can do, that's what she can do, and got her, in the distant city where she herself had learned to shadow eyes even while brightening their depths, the training she needed. True, her fellow students, as with so many mortals the great Don himself encountered on the road to nowhere, had to, with a child's hand over a child's mouth, suppress their laughter, but Remedio persevered. Like her mother, she was no quitter and it wasn't long before she was performing with her father's group at weddings, or beddings, though Socorro clearly stipulated she was not—God also knew where that, also, might lead—to go on the road with them.

Remedio herself discovered she could delight the crowd with her weightless high-speed tapping, and that, with a little encouragement from an audience of dozens who had never gone anywhere, never would, she could do some deadly imitations, word for word, of those who had, those who, with head held high...even when they were, as everyone knew, on the take...and having returned to claim and hold office, considered themselves among the overachievers of this world, even if they hadn't quite changed it, didn't want to.

"Who are you going to do now, Remedio?"

"Who are you going to do now?" asked Remedio.

"Are you going to do the mayor, Remedio?"

"Are you going to do the mayor?" asked Remedio.

"Go on, Remedio, do the mayor."

"Go on, Remedio, do the mayor," said Remedio.

"*El presidente!*" screamed the crowd.

"*El presidente,*" whispered Remedio.

Perhaps Remedio on stage was one person and Remedio at home another, yet, in either location, she couldn't really talk with anyone, even Socorro, her mother, except distantly or at cross purposes. She would understand what had been said to her literally, which was sometimes the opposite of what had been intended or implied. Though she did not read, she would spend hours counting, perhaps because, unlike words, numbers had no shades of meaning, reaching totals that Socorro, even with a calculator, could rarely attain.

But, in time, it was discovered that when the mariachis stopped and turned to her, Remedio could also sing, sing a solo that slowly silenced those who could neither dance nor sing, but only stand or sit and look and listen, including those who, not that far away, in abandoned houses and parked cars, had heeded the admonition to be fruitful and multiply; sing so that it brought stillness to those who, at tables covered with tipped bottles and rolling cups, had been doing their best to avoid stillness, a stillness in which the untackled tragedy of Pueblo Nuevo might loom large for a minute before it settled around them.

*...no vale nada la vida
la vida no vale nada...*

Yes, thought Socorro, looking around her at those who had tried, if not always successfully, if with her most professional help, to hide their hopelessness, and those who she had, clearly, helped, weren't even attempting to conceal their laughter at the little girl's performance, it was more or less true, as the lyricist said, 'worthless is life, life is worthless,' but if José Alfredo Jiménez

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had been there—unlikely, since his liver had failed him and his soul had taken wing in 1973—but if, somehow, thought Socorro, he had been, perhaps he, yes, perhaps he would have stood at Remedio’s side, his hand on her shoulder, head bowed.



Michael McGuire was born and raised and has lived in or near much of his life; his horse is nondescript, and his dog is dead. Naturally, McGuire regrets not having passed his life in academia, for the alternative has proven somewhat varied, even unpredictable. He has lived many years where children with problems are not institutionalized but handed on, even as the generations pass. It is not a solution, but it is more human than institutionalization.

Maya Klauber



SOME THINGS I KNEW

For instance, on a bus ride back home, I'd slide open my window for a better look at the cow blurs rushing by, and my eyes would be pierced by ricochet-pebbles.

And if not that, I'd be fresh out of college, fumbling to entertain friends. I might feel proud of my lasagna—of my worldliness—but in good company, I'd die there choking, while outside the car horns blared on.

I might have also said that one day I'd be driving down a snaked highway—music turned up—and I'll drag a man a mile before I even know.

Facing his small wife, my knees would feel like anchors on my ridiculous body, and I'd buckle to the weight of my accidental sin. But, really, I imagined it far more likely that one day I would

board a plane (touching each side of the doorway three times for safety). As we peeled away from earth, the seatbelt lights would ignite, and we'd plummet

faster and longer than normal. More than ever, I would consider how we're all just dry bone after dry bone; that we are all afraid of water. But I would look out for a child with a face like a pink beach shell and to her

I would say—like my father always said to me over whitening knuckles—*turbulence alone never ended anything. Trust me, my darling, this isn't how it ends.*



SIGNS

Everyone I know is looking out for signs
that things will be okay; that love will stay,

and their dead might return in exceptional ways.
They swear they've seen it in the insects and

the feathered creatures or in cumulus formations
heavy with rain. I too need that reason to believe

—now more than ever—that we endure everything
we endure for a reason; when it's more than just

a season; when pain becomes chronic. Unwavering.
I need to know I'm still meant to be here. In fact,

even just yesterday—walking home from the doctor
—I was scanning city blocks for reasons to stay.

Would you believe that bells chimed out the moment
I even asked? I swear they did, and it may have been

the last sign I expected to see, but I need to believe.
I need to believe that hour they rang out for me.



Maya Klauber

SNAPSHOT OF A PHOENIX

In a still life, it's difficult to know
whether the phoenix is rising or

falling. The fire in its belly looks
the same, and—either way—

it will be born again. Dust to
dust. Reminds us of our own

short flight. A divine right
to come up for air. After all

this heartbreak, why wouldn't
we open our own wings to this

aching world? Help even one soul
to behold their sacred place in the light.



*Having coped with physical illness since childhood, **Maya Klauber's** struggles with mental health began during college. Today, she lives with her beloved husband and their dog in New York City. Her poems are most recently published and/or forthcoming in Bellevue Literary Review, Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine, Sky Island Journal, The Sunlight Press, tiny wren lit, among others.*



K-POP THERAPY

I told my daughter's psychiatrist, Grace, that she “should hand out Korean pop CDs with every Zoloft prescription.”

Grace is twenty-nine years old. She offered me that thin, polite therapist smile. “CDs. Cute. I used to have some of those when I was little. Thank you.”

Last month, my daughter, Mei Lin, and I were sitting in her bedroom in our Manhattan apartment. I asked her to rank everything that helped her out of her suicidal depression because we should prepare ourselves if it returns. Also, I like ranking things and couldn't think of anything else to talk about. I listed everything we had done; me resigning my job to spend more time with her; finding a good therapist; giving her Zoloft; nightly walks with her mother; buying a Border Collie we named Jojo.

I was naïve and self-centered enough to think she might say something like, “Dad, it was you resigning. You're my hero.”

But she said, “All those helped. But Dad, you're missing the most important thing.”

We're Christians now, the Presbyterian variety, so I hoped it was something like prayer, reading the Bible, church, fellowship, whatever - just something involving God.

“What is it?”

“Isn't it obvious?” She smiled and pointed to all the posters of Stray Kids we had hung last Labor Day. The ripped singer, Seungmin, bulged out of a singlet on the wall-length poster beside her bed. Bang Chan loomed imperially on her ceiling, pulling off a killer James Dean despite bleached blond hair and hoop earrings. Felix, a Korean reincarnation of David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, filled the opposite wall and bounced across her computer monitor. At least fifty other posters and photo cards decked her walls with all eight members in various poses.

“Stray Kids?” I said in disbelief.

“Of course,” she said as she looked down and tapped on her iPhone.

So, eight Korean guys halfway around the world helped her more than her parents, medication, her out-of-network psychiatrist, and even God. Did it really matter to me how she got better, so long as she did? Honestly, it shouldn't, but it did. So, I just told myself that God also created Stray Kids, right? And

everything I provided – food, shelter, Verizon Fios, an iPhone – allowed her to listen to Stray Kids. Regardless, every time we pray now, we thank God for our food, house, our health, the health of Stray Kids, and ask that they never break up.

I didn't realize how bad things were with Mei Lin until two years ago. My wife Pau had said something about Mei Lin feeling down, but it was October 2020. Who the hell didn't feel down? One Friday afternoon, I was sitting on my couch working on a cash flow model when my boss Hank sent me a request to Zoom. Hank is a frail man from a botched appendectomy (I didn't even know you could botch an appendectomy). I disliked the man for several reasons – most of all was his thick, lustrous hair. He would brush it on Zoom calls. I am balding and fighting the comb-over temptation daily.

The Zoom opened, of course, with him brushing his hair.

“Bill, we need to show the model to Mike by Monday, so I need your draft by Sunday night.”

It would take me *one* more day to finish the model. “Hank, the model needs *two* more days of work.”

“You got this Bill,” said Hank. “All about the bonus. Don't fuck this up.”

As soon as I disconnected the Zoom, I received a text from Hannah, the mother of Mei Lin's friend Mia. Hannah is a nonplussed Israeli who tells stories of attacks on her Kibbutz with less emotion than Americans use when talking about denting our cars. But that day, her text read, “I CALLED. CALL ME IMMEDIATELY.”

I couldn't imagine anything other than a missile attack that would wind Hannah up so much. I called her immediately.

She answered, “Bill, my God.”

“Hannah, what the hell?”

“Mei Lin told Mia she was so sad she wanted to kill herself.”

I don't think I said anything else. I just raced to Mei Lin's room and saw her lying on her bed, curled in the fetal position, knocking her knees together. Two crimson scabs snaked up her arm from her elbow to her shoulder. She covered the arm with the tattered, yellow baby blanket she still slept with.

“What the hell,” I said.

I snatched the phone from her hand. Without speaking to her, I just scrolled through her messages and found the text to Mia. The two words - “kill myself.” Two words telling me what I loved the most in the world was in danger, in pain. How the fuck did this happen?

Friends asked me what Mei Lin said when I asked her about the message and the scabs. But I didn't ask. It was all there in thousands of black pix-

els and red platelets. I thought it wasn't time for half-measures, like talking. I took a screenshot of the message and forwarded it to Pau, a pediatric resident. I called her and said, "Meet me at your ER now." I just hung up without letting her respond.

I tried to lift Mei Lin out of her bed like she was still a forty-pound five-year-old instead of a seventy-five-pound nine-year-old because I thought she would object to going. But then she said, "Dad, what are you doing? I'm fine, I can walk."

Only one parent was allowed in the ER because of COVID, and since Pau was a doctor there, the triage nurse said it would be better if it were her. But I fought this because Pau is Chinese . . . and marrying her didn't cure me of my racist assumptions. I just assumed she would downplay the seriousness the same way her parents had when she told them she was depressed post-partum. That conversation went something like:

Pau: "Ma, I'm so depressed."

Her mother: "Don't be! Eat something. I'll cook for you."

Her father: "Depressed? Crazy. Baby is healthy. Good job."

Of course, my wife isn't her parents. Mei Lin said she wanted Pau instead of me.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. *Of course.*

I left the hospital and wandered the Upper West Side for several hours in a dazed funk thinking about my epic failure. I think I cursed out one of those Hansom Cab horses (not the driver, the horse). I may have pissed off a pier into the Hudson River. And I still don't remember how I ended up with dog shit on my back.

How did a nine-year-old who should be dreaming of ponies, fairies, and Taylor Swift have thoughts about ending her life and cutting her arm? Why didn't I catch this until now? When did this messed up part of her brain start (we later learned from Grace to give it a name. Mei Lin called it "Bitch")? Was I responsible? Did I neglect her for work and watching sports? But we had breakfast most mornings. We ate Starbucks egg bites for breakfast together so often she gets sick when seeing them now. Besides, I was the primary "breadwinner." I won three times the "bread" as my wife did. Breakfast, a direct deposit check, and even a few hours for softball on Saturdays. I was doing my job, wasn't I?

Was it the long hours Pau kept as a resident? But with insane organization skills, Pau spent an hour with her most days. She brought her medical school textbooks to the hospital so she could study while in labor. She once worked a 24-hour shift and then went to Mei Lin's piano recital.

Later, Pau asked me that very question – was it her fault? “Not your fault,” I told her, probably unconvincingly. But did I believe it? Me, primal man beating my chest = breadwinner. She, woman, mother = deal with kid problems. Some asshole section of my brain argued it was that simple.

I considered another potential culprit - DNA. Maybe it just started a thousand years ago when some stingy, poorly coded clump of DNA told my 10th great-grandfather that he and his descendants would only get half the serotonin they needed. Stupid DNA. Even better, it could have been Pau’s 10th great-grandfather.

Maybe I could just blame COVID. Like pushing that big red easy button from some commercial. And I couldn't be held responsible for COVID, school closings, being holed up in an 800 square-foot apartment for months, those damn masks.

Pau brought Mei Lin home that evening and told me she didn’t need to stay in the hospital because she didn’t have a plan to commit suicide. We spent the weekend scouring her room for sharp objects, hiding all the knives in our house, placing the medications in a padlocked safe, storing all of our cleaning products under our bed, calling twenty different therapists and hospitals to see what openings they had, and finding anything that would cheer her up, even if it were temporary. Mei Lin loved “Stranger Things”, so I went on Cameo.com and paid the actor playing Suzie \$100 to send her a get better message.

On Sunday evening, I found some time to cobble together a preliminary cash flow model, and I sent it to Hank. Around 10 P.M, I answered his Zoom request. I only recall parts of the conversation.

“Bill.” he said, “If I wanted an epic turd, I would have just taken a shit. What the hell kind of assumptions did you use for this model.”

I came clean to him. I explained that my head hadn’t been in the game, and I probably used several more sports metaphors. I told him of my daughter’s “difficulties.”

“Oh shit, Bill. Sorry.” He stopped brushing his hair and leaned into the camera.” “I know all about this kind of thing. Back when my wife Rachel left me. Fuck, I was so down the doctor put me on meds, Zoloft. That’s what helped me. Zoloft.”

“Got it.” I held my hands by my side, out of view of the camera, clenching my fists. Hank turned away from the Zoom and reached for a picture. He held it up to the camera.

“That’s us, three weeks ago. She still looks good for a forty-year-old, doesn’t she.” Hank is fifty-seven.

I dug my index fingernail so deep into my palm it drew blood.

“My balls itch when I wear boxers,” I said.

“What?” He dropped the picture.

“Oh, I thought you started the part of the conversation where we just talk meaningless shit.” I smiled. “Shit that takes time from my daughter.”

Hank slammed his laptop closed. He texted me an hour later and asked me to join his Zoom again.

“I’m sorry for what you’re going through, but the analysis needs to be revised. You need to get this done by tomorrow morning. If you really need me to, I can try to find someone else. But no promises.”

I guess I resigned at that moment, although I didn’t say, “I resign.” I just disconnected the Zoom. He called me ten times that night. Colleagues called the next day. I ignored them all. A human resources person called my wife as my emergency contact person to make sure I wasn’t ill. She handed me the phone, and I yelled, “I’m dead.”

A week later, when they asked me to schedule an exit interview, I scheduled it for a time I had to take Mei Lin to her new therapist – because being passive-aggressive sometimes just feels too damn good. When I was ten minutes late for the interview, they texted me to join. I texted back, “No, I am with my daughter.” I clicked that send triangle on my phone, took a screenshot of the image sent, Monday at 2:14 PM, and set it as my background. I may have even given a stupid fist pump.

The therapist we found, Grace, was in Flushing. The morning of the appointment, Pau asked if we could pray to thank God for finding someone. We had been debating God’s existence the prior year by sending books at each other like fire and forget missiles. She sent me C.S. Lewis, and I retaliated by sending her Bertrand Russell. Two days after I received G.K. Chesterton, I fired back with an order of Richard Dawkins. This tit-for-tat continued until we filled a bookshelf. To Pau’s surprise, I agreed to pray. I then went to the bookshelf and emptied the books into a cardboard box.

“What are you doing,” she asked.

“I’m donating them to that bookstore on Seventy-Second Street.

“Why?”

“We have no more use for them. It’s COVID. There are no openings for therapists anywhere. Mei Lin only wanted to see a psychiatrist who’s an Asian woman under thirty years old. We found her in a week. Debate’s over. You win!”

We were about an hour early to the appointment because it was in Queens and anything across the East River, from Astoria to Montauk, blended together. Mei Lin and I wandered around Flushing’s Chinatown, stopping for Boba Tea. I hated walking around Chinese neighborhoods with Mei Lin or Pau ever since a couple of ABC colleagues joked that I had stolen one of their

women. I narcissistically imagined every Asian male crossing our path silently cursing me. I felt a little more comfortable when we crossed Main Street, and the street signs changed from Chinese to Korean. Mei Lin stopped in front of a Korean bookstore.

“Dad, can we please, please stop here for a minute? Look, they’ve got posters of a band Esther got me into.”

“Careful. They may not let us in. We aren’t Korean.”

Mei Lin just sighed. I held the door open for her. As she passed through, she glanced over her shoulder at me. The sunlight caught her tan hair cascading into a blond balayage. And she smiled. We left the store ten minutes later with me carrying two shopping bags filled with posters, stickers, photo cards, a new iPhone case, two t-shirts, and a hoodie.

To be honest, I don’t like Stray Kids’ music very much. They have a harsh electronic beat that overwhelms their melodies, and they sing in a language I don’t know. But I can tell you the names of all their albums and which member Mei Lin has a crush on (it’s Seungmin this week). I watch her dance every night. I usually smile when she asks if we can move to Seoul, so she can be a backup dancer. She found something to be happy about.



Robert L. Wilson worked as a corporate banker in New York City for twenty-six years. He is now focused on raising his two daughters, writing short stories, and working on a science fiction novel. He continues to attend classes at The Writers Studio. Robert has suffered from OCD his entire life and was hospitalized at the age of seventeen when he became suicidal. After psychoanalysis proved ineffective, he started improving in his late twenties due to the help of excellent cognitive-behavioral therapists.

Beth Brown Preston



BIRTH OF THE BLUES

Was it Miles Davis' "Kinda Blue" bringing me home to you?
Or the musical memories of our mutual histories?
Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll laid back and fingering those piano keys,
on an instrument played by Langston Hughes, Bontemps, Zora Neale
and

Countee Cullen while
Black women danced a close sweating two-step
with their men in Harlem jook joints?

Were the blues born on sultry evenings under canopies of stars?
Come into this world between dark southern thighs
while our enslaved ancestors danced to strumming banjos, wailing
mouth harps
and ancient rhythms of violins, tambourines and drums?

Men and women dancing to words become songs:
work songs
praise songs
kin songs to the blues?

Were the blues born with the birth of "The New Negro?"
or "the flowering of Negro literature"? Or were the blues
more hidden, ever more subtle in the eyes and on the tongues of
Harlem?

In the lyric of Billie Holiday crooning "Strange Fruit" at Café Society?
Or the crackle of Louis Armstrong's voice?
or the clarion call of his trumpet?
Was it in the unstoppable Trane: a love supreme flowing from his horn?
or in a Black child's first giant step?

Beth Brown Preston

Black man, my lover, I held your newborn in my arms
wondering just what he would make of this world,
a world he gazed on with sad, irreverent yet innocent brown eyes.

Black man, my lover, do not ask me
how you will survive without the blues.



A WHITE ROSARY

for Thomas Lux

A white plastic rosary pale and polished,
Curled like a worm waiting on the nightstand
Beside the bed is my gift to you
In the event of my death.

Also to be found on my nightstand
Is an album of recent photographs
Taken of my sons and a calendar of angels
In memory of our mutual departed friends.

I remember one cloudy and restless Ash Wednesday
Witnessing the bold tattoo of charcoal
Across your forehead beneath your shock of white hair,
Your white hair gleaming in the early morning light.

As a child I possessed a similar white rosary.
Beads fashioned of quartz with an image
Of the Christ suspended from a silver cross.
Faithfully every Sunday my family attended Mass.

Finally, when I renounced my father's religion,
At the young age of twelve,
Much to his disappointment, I refused
To acknowledge how much I needed confession.

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I feared the priest hiding in his shadowed box.
I did not want to tell him of my strange desires,
And my sensual, haunting dreams.
But Father told me to recite ten Hail Mary's in contrition.

And so my rosary for which I no longer had any use
Disappeared into my mother's black lacquer jewelry box.
I hope this present of a cheap plastic rosary
Will please you when I am gone. And, for you

This gift will assume eternal value.



COLLAGE - AFTER ROMARE BEARDEN

Gather out of star-dust:
memories of tender Harlem evenings where portraits filled
my young mind with jazz. And we stayed awake late nights
in our rented place on West 131st Street laughing and talking
the talk. DuBois, Hughes, Ellington. The gatherings
when I heard their stories, the abstract truth, scientific in grandeur
yet ever so real, down to earth, stories of Time and then,
the soothsayers, the truthsayers, singing their jogo blues.
Silence willfully broken. Scrapbooks of faded brown photographs,
clippings from Ebony and Jet. Folks dancing the original Charleston,
the fine old step, the swing and the sway.

Gather out of moon-dust:
There was crisis and opportunity. Black new voices, new forms.
Voices of folk singing real soft and mellow.
Lessons on how to become a "real poet," while Claude McKay
joined the Russian Communist Party. Fire from flint.
Letters were penned by Countee Cullen to Langston Hughes.
Shadows reigned over the evening skies of Harlem.

Gather out of sky-dust:
a time for the "new negro."
For Pullman porters to unionize
and for Josephine Baker, chanteuse extraordinaire, to exercise

her wings of gossamer silk and satin.
Music warbled from an ebony flute
while poor folk sold their fine clothes to the Jews.
Was Christ Black?
Do angels really play trombones for God
in a black/brown heaven?

Gather out of song-dust:
Did we owe it all to Spingarn, Knopf or Van Vechten?
Or was originality and improvisation our sacred creed?
As I gazed from the window at the skies
of my fading youth, all I could see was fire.
I wanted to hear the Blackbirds Orchestra wild on a Saturday night.
To hear "Go Down Moses" sung in church on a Sunday morn.
Wanted a style of my own.
To become Emperor Jones.
Daddy Grace.



THE PAINTER

You sat with brushes in hand and the light flowing above and below,
the prayer like paper, the light illumined all our sacred trees.
Somehow, we forgot all our raucous and joyous past loves
when I asked you to listen for the screen door's slam
and the call to supper as I brought you the evening meal.

And then there was that folio of your recent sketches:
so many similar dark faces filled with joy.

I gazed at the rich, brown texture of a watercolor on the page,
a man's tortured face, his beard, his glowing tough bronzed skin.
You said it was a portrait of your brother,
who died overseas during a rain of fire in the Vietnam War.

And you put down your brushes to confess
we were going to start life all over again
without waging the private wars that keep us together.

You painted your dead brother's face
against a background of blue.



CHILDHOOD

Music became a halo, a birthmark, the praiseful signifying voice
warning me not to live in the past, nourishing my young mind.
While rehearsing a sonata on the family piano, I forgot
the repetition of finger exercises, the scales, the tempo
on an otherwise quiet Sunday evening when no one was listening
save my daddy who thought of me as perfect and knew
each note to every song by memory.

When I turned twelve
a backyard party entertained me with a stack of 45s, rhythm 'n' blues,
dancing, chilled sodas, and the sizzle of an old-fashioned colored bar-b-que.
A time for sprouting breasts, long, lanky legs, and knobby skinned knees.
While the Four Tops wailed their sweet soul Motown symphonies on the
phonograph,
I looked down from my bedroom window on the second floor
as fate come a-knockin at my door. It was all so right.

Years later, memories of being twelve returned to me like the ghosts
of failure with the sound of unwritten songs in my ears.

And, my father, who once thought I was perfect, forgave me.



Beth Brown Preston is a poet and novelist with two collections of poetry from the Broadside Lotus Press and two chapbooks of poetry, including *Oxygen II* (Moonstone Press, 2022). She has been a CBS Fellow in Writing at the University of Pennsylvania and a Bread Loaf Scholar. She has written a debut novel -- *Circe's Daughters* -- to be published by the Running Wild Press in 2026. And, she is at work on two new poetry collections -- *Oxygen I* and *Oxygen II* (forthcoming from Aquarius Press/Willow Books in 2024). Her work has appeared and is forthcoming in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Callaloo*, *Calyx*, *Cave Wall*, *Euphony Journal*, *Evening Street Review*, *Free State Review*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Seneca Review*, *World Literature Today*, and many other literary and scholarly journals. She is an addict in recovery with lived experience as a mental health consumer. For eight years, she worked as a certified peer specialist at Horizon House in Philadelphia, serving a population of persons with mental health, addiction, and disability challenges.



TO NAME SOMETHING

It is April and the snow is finally releasing.
I walk the dog.
Storm drains serenade,
a musical melting of ice,
a thunderous splash of slush.

It is garbage day,
all the unwanted
dragged to the curb.
The blue and green pails sit,
like salt and pepper shakers,
at the mouth of each driveway,
awaiting the crescendo of the hungry truck.

We surprise a noisy flock of robins.
The dog jerks and I am pulled,
sliding uphill in mud.
I catch myself,
step on the leash, regain control.

He thinks I am playing
and loses his Golden mind,
grabs the dirty red leash in his
black licorice gums and leaps.

And then we hear it,
a crisp flapping,
like the sound sheets made
when my mother hung them to dry
on a windy day.

Katherine Szpekman

A huge bird lands high in the canopy,
folds his black and white wings
like a fan, and hops
around the birch's trunk.
He pulls back his red piliated head
and jackhammers a rhythmic tattoo.
We stand, heads tipped,
transfixed,
listening to the bold drumming,
like a heartbeat,
like a warning.

Minutes pass.
I want to hold time still,
so nothing leaves.
But the present is myopic.
The woodpecker lifts up, shrieks
a shrill series of staccato cries,
and then, is gone.

I gather myself.
We head home,
walk to the jaunty jangle
of the dog's tags,
tags that bear his name,
the name we gave him,
tags that ensure that if lost,
he will be found, reunited.

And what is it to name something
if not to signal
you belong
to each other,
are connected
by love,
love, that once shared,
never really leaves.



MORNING COFFEE

and even when the night
has been long and lonely
a sacred ritual awaits

that first cup of perfectly hot
and smokey brew
this private moment

a woman's bare shoulder
the day drowsy
anxiety still asleep

the sun rising in salmon sky
highlighted gold
like the grain of Birdseye

lips dip into earthy chocolate
mahogany notes rising
a genie released

John Coltrane *I Want To Talk About You*
smooth, a newborn, held between
palms, fingers wound, wrapped

as if in a forever embrace
the ache, like dark ink
the promise of the ever new

the once again possible
the sole incantation
of hope conceded.



Katherine Szpekman

BEING PRESENT

The backyard is unmoving,
trees like stilts.
My god, are they waiting?
What do they hope, those small red buds
like pink peppercorns hidden among
the sameness of trunk and bare branch.

And in the front yard, the circus of spring
is in full swing. Look at the two window boxes
I planted. Such optimism, the magenta stock.
The yellow and blue, orange and white pansies'
faces, like small children
in a kindergarten class,
– safe in their togetherness.

The daffodils and narcissus have exploded
in yellows and oranges.
Yet something is eating their green leaf tips.
What worry is this?
Climate, fungus, insect, sorrow?
How the quick bloom is followed
by a long dying away. How we must wait
until the greenery browns and gets mushy.

They require patience,
command respect for their passing.
Like an elder whose water pitcher we refill
bedside, offered with a bendy straw,
placed next to the unopened rice pudding cup.
We can't force the passing of time.

Please, someone teach me how to
love the slow browning daffodil leaves.
Please, teach me how to
stay present,
without wishing away what is.
I want to watch the rain fall.

INSIDE WANTS OUT AND OUTSIDE WANTS IN

May arrives like a hungry lover, pines for
the taste of daffodils, buttery and crisp.
Come, sit a while on the front stoop.
Inside wants out, and outside wants in.

Clear the clutter, make space.
Cool air funnels through dirty screens,
billows tired curtains.
Inside wants out, and outside wants in.

Gone are the snow and ice, the darkness.
Twittery robins and finches converse in duets,
instigate a lightness my bones and heart drink.
Inside wants out, and outside wants in.

Lilac buds quiver with heady perfume.
Bees surf the rhododendron's magenta waves.
Earth yields under our bare feet, finally free.
Inside wants out, and outside wants in.



Katherine Szpekman's poetry has appeared in Juniper, Adanna, Connecticut River Review, The Awakenings Review, Sky Island Journal, Sheila-Na-Gig, Chestnut Review, Hiram Poetry Review, Waking up the Earth: Connecticut Poets in a Time of Global Crisis, and other journals and anthologies. She was a finalist in the Leslie McGrath Poetry Prize 2021, and her poetry has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. She holds degrees in developmental psychology and nursing and raised three adult children. She writes: "My older sister faced bipolar illness with courage, but suicided at age 22 while a student at Barnard College. Her illness and death continue to haunt me, and this ambiguous loss has been eerily mirrored in the estrangement of my oldest child, who, like the aunt she never knew, was a gentle, intellectually curious and beautiful woman, as well as a beloved sister and daughter. Poetry is where I find healing and courage." She lives with her family in Connecticut.

Linda Conroy



DAD

I see him, a brilliant man, sitting in his study, a room all to himself.
Don't go in there, mother says. His mind must rest and ponder,
soothe itself from the hard work of being in this world.

I push. The door creaks open and I see the shiny desk, the rows of shelves,
his hands that hover over stamps, tiny colored pictures from across the world.
Don't breathe, or they will scatter from their place.

His glasses, thick upon his nose, slide slightly, blurring sparkling eyes.
His hair shines in the lamp light as he moves his treasures on the page.
A smile lingers on his lips, but seeing me, his face will change.



MAN AS BIRD

A turn of his thick neck,
quick as an owl, a single pivot,
and he sees me back and front,
yet he prefers his solitary company.

He plucks binoculars
from where they're waiting by the wooden bowl,
grabs an apple as an afterthought,

glances at the painting on the kitchen wall,
still life with silver pitcher and a spoon,
the quiet of art passed down.

It's not so dreary, he might say.
One can ponder, paint, and look at birds
without endangering a fondness for routine,

though as long years go by
will it be his heart that is depleted
or his eyes, from his days
of pondering and watching.



SMALL TALK

Uneasy at the table's edge, he runs his finger
down the cloth's white crease, and sighs.
Finding idle chat a waste of time, he craves
routine that only staying home can bring.

His eyes flick warily across the crowd.
Others shake hands and grin, know who they are
when intellect still carries weight. They sit,
complacent, waiting for speeches, for awards.

These ones fancy themselves, he whispers
to Mom. She compares herself with other wives,
but smiles to those who tell of fine daughters,
able sons, and show contented confidence.

They didn't go to Cambridge, like you did,
she whispers back, wondering, as I will later,
what makes life so challenging for him,
sets him at the margin, at fear's brink.

Take pride, she say to reassure. *We're here
because of you, the book you wrote.*



Linda Conroy

INHERITANCE

after Samuel Green

Father is outside in the shed, alone.
See his shadow from the kitchen door,
his head bent over this weekend's work.
Step close and you can watch him shape a sole
to fit my shoe held on a three-footed iron tool.
He's quiet. He's particular. His cutting is precise.
Once satisfied, he taps the nails in place,
holds the pair of shoes before the window,
admires the finished product in the light.

Sister in the early-morning-barn, alone,
pulls the heavy anvil to the door
and reaches for the brushes that work
best to scrape debris from a horse's sole,
to clean its steadfast feet. The best tool
will make sure the fit of its shoe is precise.
Hoping that the farrier can find this place,
she leads the black horse to the window,
sees his face more clearly in the light.

Older now, I wonder as I sit alone
enjoying fresh air from an open door
reflecting on how readily I work
to understand their lives, the truth. As sole
heir of this circumstance, I hold the tool
that tells the tale of differences, being precise
about the thread that binds us in this place
for my children waiting by the window,
that they will hold both love and light.



FATHER

The place where I want you to be
is empty now. That old green armchair,
is no longer warm, a book still open,
lies with many others on the shelf.
Beside your tidy bed, the lamp
you couldn't reach still shines.
Your fourteen jackets lined up by color
in the cupboard in the hall wait
for you to stand and fret and frown
and wonder which you want to wear.

Thinking had become too big a task
but your paints and brushes are still here,
the ones you used for fun when you
no longer cared if you could read,
but liked to sit and draw the scenes
you loved and make the memories real.
By then your hands so often shook,
your hair grew soft, your smile last time
still a surprise, your sudden kiss
upon my cheek the only one.



*After retiring from a career as a social worker, manager, meeting facilitator, and advocate for people with unique needs, **Linda Conroy** knew she needed to write about the complicated and gratifying human behaviors she has been privileged to witness, as well as the impact of the natural world and the changing times. Even now her explorations in describing people that she has known and grown up with delight her and bring her new knowledge. She is the author of two poetry collections, *Ordinary Signs* and *Familiar Sky*.*



DEMOLISH

I have a right to reside in the gray.
No more all or nothing—
entirety of the fridge or saying I already ate—
and a lot more some or most.
The words, “the damage is done,
the calories consumed,
the day has been ruined by your interactions with food,”
flood my mind thanks to disorder,
but I say that “damage” is what keeps me alive.
Physically, relationally.
That “damage” is what allows me to belly laugh with friends,
to bring my dog on walks,
and to think clearly without having to peer through foggy
thoughts,
racking my brain for a word I learned in the second grade.
So, if nutrition is what I’m fed on an empty spoon to be called
damage,
then I’m about to demolish the whole damn thing.



VESSEL

She hated the flesh she was confined in.
Her body,
it did not feel like a home;
she smashed the picture frames on the walls,
ripped up the carpets,
and tore down the cabinets.
Out of rage, she did all she could
to make this house look unrecognizable, unobtainable;

and yet,
her legs
still support her;
her eyes
still search for underlying colors;
her mind
still dreams when she's awake
and when she's asleep.

This body,
though it knows nothing but hatred,
still loves her in all its debts paid,
though she put in work to burn it down,
it managed to ensure she stood on solid ground,
showing its love for her in the only way it knows how.

That's why she's breathing *now*.



MY THERAPIST, RACHEL, TOLD ME TO LISTEN TO “RAINBOW” BY KACEY MUSGRAVES

Said she heard it and immediately thought of me,
so I listened, as she pressed play mid-session, and felt heard.

Understood.

Although I was looking at her from the brown couch in a dimly-lit,
warm room,

I saw the therapist I want to become.

I couldn't have possibly asked for Rachel's field of vision
to become a reflexive response,
a rebuttal to my maladaptive thoughts,
I couldn't have fabricated her lack of hesitance,
when approaching my hyper-independence,
or her reassurance that she could handle
when I dared be dependent,
and though my mind resisted vulnerability,
I found less pain when I named a kernel of things I only once trusted
within the confines of my black leather journals.

It was a comfort to analyze her responses to my anger,
how she showed no unease or irritation of my tears,
and when the palpable misery I suppress daily
turned into a woman who showed no fear to hug me,
when all I ever wanted was to be consoled physically—
which, before her, was a rarely occurring security,

but the rarity of encountering such safety
from the outbursts kept behind my eyes,
is what intensifies the loneliness between sessions.
I make it through each week, looking forward to that one hour
I allow the parts of me I deem “weak” to show,
because I felt most safe
when she couldn't help herself,
when her reflexes were to catch my control;

instinct does not need convincing,
like I've grown to trust her when she says
she can see the *rainbow*
hangin' over my head.



I AM WORTHY

And, in the times of refeeding,
when impermanent caretakers like Amy
supported me through restorative, healing bleeding,
I was taught to know
my blood doesn't have to flow,
nor do my bones have to show,
in order to be cared for.
Some figures in this process must go—
the other clients and providers met along the way—
though they want to stay,
and they will love me from far away.
Yes, recovery feels deceiving,
as it frequently results in people leaving,
but I'm still loved by those who can't remain,
and *I am worthy* all the same.

Martha LaBine



Martha LaBine's poetry has appeared in publications such as The Rapids Review, Suspended Magazine, The Tower, and Words of the Lamb Magazine. She has a Creative Writing Certificate from Anoka-Ramsey Community College and a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Bemidji State University. She is a follower of Christ whose clock runs most peacefully when she is spending time with God, surrounded by loved ones, writing, reading, and hiking in boreal landscapes. For over ten years, Martha has struggled with her mental health. Through all she has endured, including trauma, grief, anxiety, depression, and treatment for anorexia, she has found her unmistakable passion, which is to be an advocate for mental health in many different ways. Currently, she is studying to become a young adult therapist specializing in eating disorders, and she is grateful to all the impactful providers she has encountered who have inspired, supported, and further solidified that goal.

Mary Magagna



I SING IN A CHORUS OF POETS

voices small and swelling
loud and stilling
word flowers
tempered by flame
across an eternal anvil

twisted from iron
daggered and sheathed
drawn at dawn under spreading chestnut trees
leaved in grass
tramping down paths hardly taken

canto larking in as lovely as a tree
steel mongered cat's feet
fogging morning commutes
towers scraping skies of blarney
& fields of barley

exulting in the going
of the inland soul to sea
lapping tides against granite
shaping ear shores
listing toward the sound

we raise our voices in union halls
shout the anthem of garment workers
hide under card tables
listen for the cadences of women's voices
the tramp of daddy's big black boots

Mary Magagna

our songs scaling
purloined peaks taken from ice
thrust from magma
scraping by on tectonic plates
rocking endless cradles

bridging yawning plains
thirteen ways a blackbird
soars the arroyo
snakes the colorado mississippi
missouri rio grande hudson bay

among a bevy of bards'
swans' neck drapes
tasked with serenading sagas
of monarchs, gods, & amazon queens
bigwigs and hoi polloi.

I count myself among warriors of words
comrades in ballads
hip hopped songs of ourselves
& others' prufrocked quartets
woke from anesthesia

wastelands to wonder
fisher kings' gaping wounds
explored with ringed fingers
vulvas traced to mounds
penises sheathed in velvet mouths

out of Africa
blanching varieties spreading
migrating from that fixed point
drums beat into our pace
aboriginal dreams smoked into space

we're up from mud
rise like dust
stare and look out, small
nouns crying faith

herded onto pages

city slickers, rural rubes
bearded ladies, giants from
big tents and drug-sick alleys
coming off the bourgeoisie
& sweat shop proles

straight we were queer we is trans we shall be bi-curious
you name it orgies love children
bruhahas, brawls, & booze
powering the people
we are every

man, woman, child, snotty
teen-ager anguishing in shrinking rooms
wailing, exulting, despairing, fornicating,
defecating, consecrating, belting out our songs
champions of words



WE SEE HER FIRST A GIRL

and think she's only a girl
walking along a winter road
following the furrows of a plow,

a country girl going home against the grain
as orange light from the setting sun rolls her shadow
across the earth a great distance from her body.

closer we see she's wearing a silk robe
with long-swinging sleeves. she lifts a slender arm
and the drape of the cloth covers the sky.
with a swoop, night washes down.

she spreads her arms, opens to space,
brings them back to her body, spins,
bursts into stars,

Mary Magagna

sparks that shoot up along her path, scatter in the dark.
she's a ballet dancer *chaîné* turning,
a galaxy revolving in molten ice.



ON A HILLSIDE OF FRACTURED SHADOWS

ashen aspen leaves shush,
a dark, clear, full moon sky,
blue-white snow moon-lit,
mid-night Wyoming.

I wish
the moon would stay tangled
in the trees' skeletal arms.

I wish
I could deny the dawn
for snowshoe rabbits schussing in fine powder.

owls swoop,
releasing pine,
them I do not wish to deny.

deer rise hasty from their resting under trees,
alert to wafts of scent in the piercing air.
I feel heat radiate as they move,
it blunders through the distances between us.

whether I'm wolf or person
they startle, alert and wary,

but I think of myself
a visitor on a hillside,
made alien by fractured shadows,
awake in the early,
passing through.



IN TREES

leaves translate the souging wind,
stream its consciousness.
they understand the gusting words
and direct the trees to action.

leaves are tricksters, though—
they say whoosh when the wind says wish.

on spring nights where stars exclaim the sky,
meristem points at the ends of branches and
I realize
there are no question marks in nature.



Magagna is a depressant with an ironic outlook. She is inspired by nature, her internalized sense of her mad poet mother, and Wyoming, where she was born. Her work can soar, but more often, it is reflective and introspective. If done with attention, Magagna thinks any act of creation—cooking a meal, making a bed, petting a cat (or a person)—can be balms for life's wounds that inevitably leave scars. Writing is her way of paying attention and soothing her wounds. It lifts her from gloom and gives her a mirror that reflects her back to herself and, she hopes, if read as universal, reflects the world to itself.

Annie Dawid



DEEPS

For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.

I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am

as a man that hath no strength.

Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps.

Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me

with all thy waves.

Psalm 88

During my last sojourn in That Place, I could listen only to Paul Robeson singing mournful, soothing gospel. I could read only literature from the nineteenth century. In the solipsism of my condition, I discovered that King David's Psalms described depression with beauty and accuracy, and I found some solace there. I ate only cereal, and that with effort. I could not bear the sun and prayed for rain. Nights were marginally better when I did not have to confront the light. In the wooded park where I walked my dogs, I found the darkest places and the least-trodden paths. On one bend of a trail I'd never seen before, I discovered the hanging tree. I didn't want to study it, to want what it promised, but I was defenseless against its allure. Every afternoon, I walked around the old oak, admiring its solid, sturdy arm under which I believed I would achieve my final rest, like a bird nesting. As school was out, I did not teach and had no daily obligations. I was six months pregnant – six months off my meds.

Friends worried, though I only hinted at the nature of That Place, where I was once again residing, a familiar neighborhood to me during a lifetime lasting – hard for me to believe – thirty-nine years so far, though I felt sure I couldn't breathe that toxic air much longer. Six months earlier, ecstatic, the proverbial biological clock inside my body suddenly wound and humming after years of desire, I thanked all the powers, gods, and spirits as I read the results of my blood test. A hitherto unknown sensation of peace flooded through my veins as I walked alone across the OB/GYN waiting room in which, with my gray hair, I appeared twenty years older than all the other women, expectantly awaiting news alongside husbands, boyfriends, and mothers.

Despite a decade of therapy and medication, depression inevitably followed elation, as pride goeth ineluctably before a fall, but my brand-new

condition seemed somehow outside the parameters of that lifelong template. Proverbially, I glowed. Never once experiencing morning sickness, I gloated, considering myself of stronger stuff than a friend who puked every morning for the first three months. Wanting a healthy, natural child, I stopped taking anything that might harm Helen/Isaiah – I chose to be surprised by my child's sex – including alcohol, tobacco, aspirin, refined sugar and anti-depressants.

Pregnant, I felt gleeful and generous. As I didn't disclose my pregnancy until safely past the common miscarriage timeline, students and colleagues alike must have assumed a change in my spirit that came with approaching 40.

The Columbine Massacre abruptly battered me inside That Place, its fusillade of child-inspired violence restoring my deepest pessimism. The Colorado high school was a few minutes from a friend's home, which her daughters would attend soon. As if it were the school down my block, to which my child would one day go, Columbine's particular horror re-emphasized the true nature of existence. What had I been thinking to bring a child into a world of Columbines? For the first time, added to familiar depression was massive anxiety. I eliminated caffeine, took baths, and drank Calming Tea, but with prodigious time to fill, unable to concentrate on the small print of David Copperfield, I worried.

I couldn't afford a child, I thought. Most importantly and obviously, I didn't have the mental stamina to be a parent, just as I had always believed to be true about myself until the biological clock startled me with its alarm at 37, muffling previous fears and good sense.

Later, I would recognize Columbine as a bad coincidence; the chemical truth was that every time I'd quit medication – feeling so much better and believing drugs wicked, for the morally weak – six months later, with calendrical efficiency, I descended into the suicidally-friendly darkness of That Place. A kind of homecoming. It was, after all, familiar, *gemutlich*, reminding me of my childhood home, unlike the land of light, to which I was a relative stranger. At the time, Columbine and pregnancy seemed stronger than the inexorable pull of blood, but now I see it was, after all, exactly like the fall of 1996, not pregnant and unprompted by any Columbines, when I walked a path outside a writers' retreat in Scotland, searching for the proper cliff from which to throw myself into a gorge.

And that episode repeated in 1993, when, again abroad, when I found myself at Lands End, six months' gone from Prozac, in Cornwall, where I could glimpse Virginia Woolf's lighthouse whenever the fog failed to blot it from the horizon. In the cold rain and despair I succumbed to my truth that, unlike other people, I was not meant for this life. The ends of the earth drew me for a reason, for my own end. "There are other places which also are the world's end," writes

T.S. Eliot in “Little Gidding.” “Some at the sea jaws or over a dark lake, but this is the nearest, in place and time, now and in England.” Like King David, Thomas Stearns Eliot knew depression.

What saved me from the hanging tree, the river outside Edinburgh, and the Atlantic, I believed at the time, were details. I worried what would happen to my dogs. In Scotland, I wondered what would happen to my body in a foreign country, and in the last case, rain-drenched, I discovered that during my walk, my pants had descended to my knees, blaring my long underwear to the world. No one else was walking in that afternoon at Lands End, so my shame was my own. Only later could I see the slapstick quality of a suicidal woman diverted from the deed by her harem pants’ dysfunction, but at the time, it was a terrible humiliation. I trudged back to my room at the bed & breakfast and went on living.

When I was 12, my mother tried to kill herself, and every moment after that middle-of-the-night, dreamlike event darkened my life with despair, ordinary problems twisted by the possibility of a suicidal solution. Only in my early twenties, with a good therapist, did I begin to understand I had shouldered my mother’s depression, hoping to save her. But understanding did not enlighten me.

At 39, I had a life that appeared accomplished to outsiders. I was fantastically lucky to get pregnant so easily. No longer an unhappy post-adolescent, I was a professor, published and sober. I saw myself as too sophisticated for a black-and-white worldview; it was selfish of a highly educated woman to imagine she was suffering.

The most helpful thing a doctor ever told me was the following: on scans of severely depressed people, whole sections of their brains remained unilluminated, completely out of service.

In my final trimester, after trying to hang myself with the red dog leash—too short—on a rafter in the basement—too flimsy for my bulk—I ended up on the psychiatrist’s couch, where my nurse practitioner had sent me after witnessing a sudden failure to thrive. I lost weight, and, despite the apparent health of my fetus, I inquired about “adopting out” my child. After the inadequate rafter and an afternoon with a broken glass in the bathtub, I concluded I would kill myself *after* the birth. For an adult of sound mind – which I believed myself to possess -- to commit suicide was a human right. But to murder another was unconscionable.

So I decided to live until my due date and to see the doctor who specialized in depressed pregnant women. Having only heard of *post-partum* depression, I considered myself an anomaly, depressed at the wrong time: an asshole to want to die while a friend my age in another city kept trying to conceive and failing.

Why did the doctor's description of a depressed brain's malfunction perforate my darkness? Inside me lived my German father's stoicism, deploring my condition as weakness, indicating a feeble will. He had escaped the Nazis and hadn't succumbed to depression. He'd lost his mother at 12, his family had been exterminated in his twenties, his first grandchild died of a genetic Jewish disease, and he'd had to commit his wife and son to psychiatric wards more than once, but he'd never been depressed. Or so he said. What was my failing, if not weakness? I could not bear to admit any likeness to my pathetic, crazy mother.

Whole sections of my brain, said Doctor O, were either operating at sub-par levels or not functioning at all. Like the outer world, the inside of my brain had slowed itself to crawl in darkness. Studies had proved that the eyes of severely depressed people could not recognize all the colors in the spectrum, he told me. It was as if the patient had suffered a head injury in a motorcycle accident or fallen from a height onto concrete. This scientific fact, something empirical that even my steely, brilliant father could not deny, managed to penetrate the veil of my despair. To my mind, his likening of a mental state to a physical one reduced the stigma, making my condition seem less a question of will than of chemistry in one's brain. Certain medications, Doctor O insisted, could help me while not harming Helen/Isaiah. Because my due date was so close, and I knew babies could be born at 7 or 8 months without long-term, life-damaging results, I decided to accept his counsel. If I could live long enough to deliver the baby safely, to hand him or her over to a loving stranger, then it would be enough. I started on a low dose of Paxil, which he hoped would diminish my anxiety as well.

A few days later, my pregnant self, my father and brother were drifting down the Willamette River on a faux steamboat, the recorded info-spiel too loud in our ears. In the group of tourists by the bar stood a very pregnant young blonde, drinking beer and smoking a cigarette with what looked like extended family and partner/husband. People stared, but no one said anything. What an irresponsible mother, everyone was surely thinking. Completely unselfconscious, she seemed to be having a wonderful time, chatting and laughing. I marveled at her brazen flaunting of the unwritten law that now prohibits all smoking and drinking for pregnant women – at least in public. Watching the populated riverbanks diminish as we floated south, barely able to speak as depression still compressed me, I asked myself how could I condemn her nicotine and alcohol infusions when I had come so close to destroying my child in a far more drastic way?

My father had flown out from New York, and my brother up from California to check on me; when they'd made the reservations months before, I'd

anticipated an interesting parental/filial/sibling relation “learning lab” – my old therapist’s phrase for family visits – but nothing dire. After the turning, I pleaded with them not to come, but my sudden resistance without a reason affirmed their resolve to see me.

Each day of the new med regime and a life of regular appointments scheduled with Doctor O, I struggled to feel a millimeter better, to detect an iota of improvement inside me. Did the light hurt a bit less today? Did I feel a trifle less unhinged as I managed to eat a meal out with Steve and Baba, my close, quasi-parental friends? At the diner, I managed a milkshake, and afterward, window-shopping on the way to Ben & Jerry’s for Baba’s lemon sherbet, I ducked into an upscale hardware store’s entryway and began to cry. Steve had been telling a story and stopped mid-sidewalk to find me gone. In the alcove, when I told them I wanted to give my baby away, they didn’t raise their voices in shock or tell me I was absurd. “You’re feeling that bad, huh,” Steve said, rubbing my back as I wiped my eyes, leaning incongruously against the display of fancy gardening tools speckled with packages of heirloom tomato seeds.

“Oh honey,” said Barbara, hugging me, “it’s not going to be like this always.”

My father was staying at the Hilton downtown, my brother with me, and in my little Honda I was driving us all over town, with or without the two dogs’ accompaniment. The two male members of my family of origin tended to argue often. Although we were all now old, gray, balding, or bald, it seemed to me the discourse hadn’t changed much between my brother and father from the days of the younger screaming “Fuck you!” at the dining room table, blaming my father for all his ills. At 20, my brother had descended into another genre of pit, diagnosed first as schizophrenic, then manic depressive. Was his version of the family pathology more typically male? Instead of self-destructing in the female fashion, he struck out, testosterone fueling a brief stay in jail after punching a Mercedes Benz that nearly hit his dog; another time, he drove a car onto our lawn and yelled expletives at all of us, then wrenched the screen door from its hinges. My parents called the police. After running away from various psych wards, the chi-chi private ones as well as bare-bones state ones, he ended up sojourning in his bedroom for many months, eating cereal and watching television, a zombie on Thorazine. I never knew who he was, nor did I try, as his over-the-top illness terrified me. First Mom, now big brother – surely I would be next if I didn’t take considerable care. One day, my brother left for California, poised by the highway with his thumb pointing west, and never returned.

Nevertheless, a couple of decades hadn’t much diminished the tension. However, we were more polite and did not use epithets. My position as the fucked up kid was novel for everyone – in its nakedness, at any rate – and

such strangeness elicited their generosity, sublimating their age-old battle, at least temporarily. At dinner, my brother very sensibly deconstructed all obvious distresses. My father reassured me not to worry about money. Neither understood how my former thrilled optimism about impending motherhood had metamorphosed into its opposite of constant dread. They tried to talk me into hopefulness. I didn't disclose the particulars of my recent descent into the pit, but I did admit to suffering from depression in the past, and it was again upon me like a curse.

"See a doctor!" my father commanded.

"I have," I told him.

In my twenties and thirties, when I'd asked him to pay, he'd resented my seeing shrinks as though his youngest child's regular trips to the therapist condemned him somehow. His wife and son had resided in crazy wards, while I had, to all appearances, avoided them, climbing the white-collar ladder to higher and higher education until, like him, I had a doctor's degree. My sister became a secretary and stay-at-home Mom like my mother, and my brother lived in his van, working when he worked at all for a delivery service. I was the professor, the one who liked to travel, who could speak other languages. Together, we had visited Brussels, Telluride, Taxco, and St. Petersburg.

So what on earth did I need to see a psychiatrist for? "Freud ruined civilization," my father liked to say. Freud wasn't the only culprit, however. Perhaps it was being born into privilege that had harmed us, our lack of struggle. Not only did we have every financial opportunity for advancement, but we were American citizens, growing up unafraid of persecution, tyranny, and impending war at home. During the World War I embargo of German ports, my father's teeth turned brown from scurvy. His mother died of pernicious anemia when he was still a child, and his father had struggled to make a living during the Weimar Republic and lost his job in Hitler's 1935 decree. They survived as well as they could, relying on the income of the Gentile stepmother librarian.

In response to these troubles, my father did not crumple and did not self-destruct with anxiety and/or depression. With a shrewd finesse of the rules, he managed to continue studying law despite the edict prohibiting Jews from doing so. In 1939, he finagled his way onto the last boat out of Genoa, bound for Shanghai. Under threat to his very life, he thrived. Like the children of many such refugees to the United States, his offspring had known nothing of comparable struggle.

After their departure, for reasons I couldn't quite pinpoint, I felt slightly better. On Friday, Baba and I went shopping for a bassinet, the last big purchase I had yet to make. (Evidently, I didn't foresee giving up the baby until after I had made use of the perfect bassinet.) It was hot, my car had no air-condition-

ing, and we stopped for something cold before heading to the baked flatlands of the outer avenues where Babies R Us had its outlet. Sitting in the drive-through lane at Burgerville, U.S.A., I discovered one could get shots of espresso in a mocha milkshake. A former coffee junkie, I'd been without caffeine for months, and I still don't know what possessed me to ask for a double, but I did.

In short order, I began to feel better, more like the self I remembered. In the back of a horrid warehouse-like emporium, I found The Bassinette – unpainted, wicker, and Victorian, with wheels to move it from room to room. The cushion and pillow were soft white cotton, and I could picture my baby inside it, resting peacefully. It wouldn't fit in the Honda, so Steve promised to pick it up in his truck the next day. All afternoon I yakked and even laughed – the caffeine had powered me back into life, or so it felt. In the morning was my first birthing class. That night, I never fell asleep, reading *The Birth Partner*, feeling so alive I couldn't shut my eyes. Though I blamed the caffeine for my inability to rest, I was simultaneously grateful, as that double-espresso mocha milkshake appeared to have reset my clock, springing me back into the land of the living.

When N picked me up at 8:30 a.m. for the class, weird sensations pulsed inside me, brand-new ones. While she drove, I looked up my symptoms in the book, and we decided I must be experiencing false labor pains. By the time of our first break at 11, I was feeling weird. Are they contractions? the teacher asked me. How would I know? I'd never felt one before. Then I discovered I was bleeding.

At the hospital, after we'd stopped at the house to pick up clothes and music and books – as I thought I still had another month, and first-time mothers were usually late, I'd not yet packed a bag – I was chagrined to discover I would not be put under the care of a midwife, as planned, but under the M.D, on duty, due to the abrasion of my placenta. Still fueled by caffeine and wired from lack of sleep and powered by whatever else was going on inside me, I could feel another kind of turning upon me. I was damned if that nasty M.D. would deliver my baby. Our mutual antipathy gave me strength, and I determined to outlast his 12-hour shift.

The bleeding stopped, I was given a room in the midwifery labor-and-delivery wing, and it appeared I was indeed going to deliver this baby early. After eight months and one week, perhaps catalyzed by my double espresso, Helen/Isaiah was ready to enter the world. Or perhaps s/he had sensed my turning and knew *I* was ready to give birth. Happy labor stories are all alike, but every labor is astonishing in its own way.

Approximately 24 hours after being admitted to the hospital, I gave birth to Isaiah Max, 19 inches long, five and a half pounds, whose only apparent trouble was tachycardia, excessively rapid breathing sometimes common to

early arrivals. Later, I would learn this condition was not uncommon for babies born to anti-depressant-popping mothers.

Friends had cleaned the house and walked the dogs, making everything ready for us. The beautiful bassinet was parked in the living room beside my gliding rocking chair with its gliding ottoman, a group present from colleagues. Isaiah had taken to my nipple with gusto, and the following days passed in an easy dreaminess. Baba stayed over, and Steve brought us meals, my favorite Super-Dog Supreme Burritos from across town. Friends arrived to marvel. When I saw the red dog leash hanging on the ladderback chair, I didn't think of the big oak in the woods waiting for me. Instead, I hooked it to Ralph's or Pete's collar, strapped Isaiah in my Snuggly, and strolled the park with my baby and dogs, showing off to the dog-walking crowd I'd been studiously avoiding for so long. Some hadn't even known I was pregnant, but that didn't bother me. I walked in the meadows, avoiding the trees. I put the psalms away.

But heard, half-heard, in the stillness

Between two waves of the sea.

Quick now, here, now always –

A condition of complete simplicity

(Costing not less than everything) from “Little Gidding”



Annie Dawid grew up visiting her mother and brother in psych wards, fearing it would be her destiny as well. When she finally got there, at 39, after the birth of her only child, it was the beginning of a mentally healthy future, where she lives now at 64. Her 6th book, *Paradise Undone: A Novel of Jonestown* (Ink-spot Publishing, 2023 UK, available everywhere,) won the Colorado Authors League award in literary fiction and is the subject of multiple podcasts and reviews accessed through her website. Her 5th book, *Put Off My Sackcloth: Essays* (The Humble Essayist Press, 2021), was the runner-up in the memoir category of the Los Angeles Book Festival. It reveals her struggles with mental health and charts the 20-year path of the Jonestown novel, intertwined with the arrival of her son and a new life in the mountains of Colorado.
www.anniedawid.com #anniedawidnovel

Rebecca Surmont



CRITICAL CARE

With you –
delighting discovery fresh as daily bread,
academic postulations that enthrall and vex, and
novel recommendations for life's improvement.

With you -
An intellectual tableau, Italian heirlooms bright as trophies from
the ash,
garden gaze speculation on your future book featuring
all the main events, headlines that hold you-
Grandfather creates acronym Surname to Mask Jewishness,
Chicago makes an American,
Parents Disown Son who Self-funds a Harvard degree,
Lovers, Friends, Gone to AIDS
and the Opera intermezzos of it all...

With you-
patio cocktails, garden deliveries, tales of European bike trips.
Even the bird house you painted bright
as a bordello had a particular moral elevation
like your view from having risen high through dark, elastic
clouds.

With you now-
the clouds have returned and settled on a stretcher
in your immeasurable mind, and though you survive
with a stent in your heartbreak,
there is a new occupant who does not answer the door
and must be very lonely.

With you now -
the house has fallen in, locks have pitched off doors,
appliances are bugged and bots live in the mainframe.
So, there is no way to reach you when I knock.
There is no bell loud enough to shake you
from invisible holds; your physician logic makes entire sense
to only you now,
your most critical, disordered patient.



UPON FINDING OUT A FRIEND HAS DEMENTIA

What is jumbled now --
can it be separated,
drawn upon?
Are new dreams shaping
in the withering connections,
you know, the ones that held
those characters together
on stage and off?

Under your thin, yellow hair
combustion.
Too much for one brain --
missed deadlines, lost bills, the house too
and you are mist
thin, unloaded, without a landing
and someone else answers
when I call.

But I know how
you set tables for millionaires
sat with me on the Queen Mary,
spoke of the big show- the big top
as it's never been done, visions
as real as the braised rabbit between us.
I'd be right there too.

Rebecca Surmont

Remember
how you managed a
private showing of Tiepelo --
prints laid out before us for an hour?
We imagined history and future
converging, costumed.
We clinked our Chardonnay
to all big risks and rewards.
I'm wondering
if you still know the difference.



MARRIAGE ON THE SPECTRUM

This was no ordinary marriage
with its outside lines,
its side-stepping show-down,
its language losing translation.
Nothing neurotypical.
Narrow views within a wide scope
of unended projects, uneaten leftovers, counters
removed of their décor or usefulness -- barren
like the clinical arrangement of furniture,
clothes ordered by color.
What I didn't know was about
attention deficit to
matters of marriage soaked nightly in Scotch,
laid out in a new neurology like a distant solar system,
our dendrites disconnected
unless they were totaling the sum of
our failings because he was so good with numbers.



Rebecca Surmont is a writer, actor, and leadership consultant living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She grew up in a time when mental illness wasn't discussed publicly, so naming it was very difficult because of the many dimensions it takes on. Having close friends and family members afflicted by it has brought greater awareness, understanding, and compassion. Rebecca's written work has been featured in publications such as Nature of Our Times, MacQueen's Quinterly, Stone Poetry Quarterly, Eunoia Review, Common Ground Review, Crowstep Poetry Journal, Ekphrastic Review, and Tiny Seed Literary Journal.

Elly Katz



IN COUPLETS, I'M MYSELF SQUARED

In metered breath and sound,
I swing over solid ground through

funerals of night
to medicinal lacy light,

understanding that here's translucent sanctuary
for mysterious dreams drowned in the mortuary—

here where beauty blooms, limp logic is lost—
even if its trace traipses, it's too mighty a cost!



YOUR SWEETNESS STAYS

*“While in my heart there swells a song,
And I can sing.”—James Weldon Johnson*

I wonder about the first time your lips
smiled across a saxophone,
brass bending, easy as light through glass,
to become your fifth limb.

How you convinced nothing
you could transduce it
into an elixir.

After I somersaulted down
stairs and blistered my knees,
I wailed with shock.

The Awakenings Review

You hoisted me onto the cabinet,
patched me up with ointment and bandages like you
were only
absorbing a drop of water, like I was too small with life
to bleed with my legs dangling under your watch.

I felt precious as you tended to my scabs,
gathered me into your arms into the playroom
where you withdrew your instrument and
drank molecules into melodies
that leached hurt from my body.

How you improvised a solo surrounded by dolls
and puppets,
a jazz incantation that sung me out of sadness
as your eyes contacted my lifting face.

How the movement of your breath
let me know I wasn't alone,
because I was inside
deathless sound spreading
through me saying
here I am loving you.



INVENTORY OF UNCERTAIN SINCERITIES

"I am not one and simple, but complex and many." — Virginia Woolf

What's shelter?
Where's this poetic cloud metered out
by Frost, Whitman, Howe?

How can I lyric a road towards this mechanism of broken
lines that remember me,
inscribe me inside memories washed out of
roiling lament?

Elly Katz

I'm looking for the dropped comma to be an anchor,
the clause my jury,
the surrounding space my God.

I'm looking for a chair I can't sit
in but that sits inside me,
beats me into step where I don't have to accomplish the impossible:
walk
beyond the tongue.

I'm looking for landmarks of piecing my way
into wholeness, exquisite music—
a periodic table of the self minus thorny elements of the body
hurrying into hurt I can't possess, can't possess me a minute more.

I'm looking for new eyes, not Bishop's
infant sight but unbranded, off-brand eyes
triggering a seeing thus far unseen.

I'm looking for a move, not as a pawn strategically ponied through
squares on
a chessboard, to disrupt the squares altogether so pieces clatter
on the floor— in short, to make noise, emotional
havoc that jostles evolving within.

My mom presses love between the blades while I posture
on a leg shutdown to feeling,
slowing my rocking body on the rolling logs of vertigo—
a boat I'm landlocked inside, a boat that crosses
into dreamscapes to nauseate loops of REM.

I don't believe in chronology,
but in chronic stratification, sedimentation of
modes of being inside syntax first,
semantics second, to record a record in my wake.

I'm not hallowed out, not anymore.
I'm surfing on Eliot, Keats, Dickinson, inheriting myself.

The Awakenings Review

I believe that each swim from
the left margin is a charge into identity that doesn't yet know my
name, shaving off
stroke by stroke
disability's detention.

Let me begin again to commit, as if for the first time, to my body—
this one made in narrow needled doorway of my stroke.
The first corporeality at the threshold of almost adulthood.

I'm tragic, terribly so, they say, but I'm a survivor, a survivor
tutoring myself in the tango,
the tambourine of the voice, voicing my way here.

Let me just be a poet—
the voice-box, my abiding writing implement,
a wine enriching with time in barrels.

A college girl engaged to the college ruled,
hairs trembling at my shoulder with scratching mathematics
into what I then presumed permanency—
a conservative hooked on the crack of theory, narcotic peddling
from air to pencil, callouses on
my hand to show for it.

False gems, idle gods of intellect, you abused me.
I was Stockholm sick for you,
mistaking logic's lacquer for beauty.

My life's not that—
it's stunningly deeper, far deeper than I
surmised before they programmed me into a survivor.

I'm an apprentice now, not striving
to steer the woodshed, just to ride the
gorgeous texture of unassuming
language, the pure human soul undressed.

I'm looking to be a bird, even if I also
must be its cage.

I know I can't rehearse this life again.

I may be a virgin sealed,
but I will circle letters revealed,
asserting a self smitten with reaching across
difference.

Let me be light lifting
from Woolf's lighthouse
across oceans, so I can transverse hope into my dad,
to whom I'm indebted for believing I could compose
silence and suffering into song.

He presides across the room in an armchair,
black hair harmonizing with night,
blurring it so I'm a we, a we less shortchanged by this one tilt of
mortality.

His eyelids weary with the day,
the daze of haze, the maze of me out of phase.

He yokes himself to me across the empty nightmare, an audiobook
slicing
in and out
of my left ear about Alaskan wilderness.
I lay planks away, a plank on my back inside a ruined brain.

We converse without conversing at all—
evocative language a synapse, precisely what the physician
punctured in me, eroding communion between body and highways to
thought, thoughts that displace me at the epicenter of words,
the desperation to journey into
my own lyric amplification.

What's shelter?
I'm not my own Armageddon.

Call me disabled.
Call me a poet.

But I'm my own shelter too— a poet, not a disabled poet.
Redact the qualifier.

Syllables save my life; I dive into Auden.
Yes, let's call that shelter—
how certain words tell us uncertainly
who we are.

I should've married my mouth earlier,
before, so I could've met you,
met elegies that echo me into existence,
so I'm not a stripped stroke victim,
no victim at all,
but a river of sacrifices
on the altar of song.



99TH DRAFT OF A LETTER TO MY BUCKLING LEG

Right leg, it's time we untangle our syntax, you hear my eyes,
endorse my erasures.

You are my Sabbath— to observe you, you must
be as straightforward
as God—
open to commitments
stammering

faith in the chorus
of a solitary voice.



Elly Katz

PETER PAN SYNDROME MEASURED IN SOUNDLESSNESS

Where I lensed into cells,
nuclei's testimony,

I plunder the space
of missing,

what soundscapes
do to a person—
autobiography drowned,
body parts troubled

by the knife of
numbness.

Kinetics tosses out,
deracinates the future where
my mom voices *Where the Wild Things Are*, *The
Kissing Hand*—
wattage in the throat,

the past throwing up into the
present,
so I'm latched to the
country of childhood.

Her hand—
pastels against

what translates
out of perception on my

walker while I amble
on a mishearing, misspelling
leg to
the eternal stranger

The Awakenings Review

of the commode mocking me,
as if the furniture could depose
my

gasping existence.

My mom's love
against my convulsions breaks

down

the bondage of my deaf body,
reaching into me where words
slip,

to let me know brokenness boils
with sentences—
that I am run-through with
revisions for
alternate universes.



*At 27, verging towards a doctorate at Harvard, **Elly Katz** went to a doctor for a mundane procedure to stabilize her neck. Upon waking from anesthesia, she searched in vain for the right half of her body. Somehow, she survived what doctors surmised was unsurvivable: a brainstem stroke secondary to a physician's needle misplacement. Her path towards science, amongst other ambitions, came to a halt. PTSD pulled her backward while survival compelled her onwards. As a devout writer, she feared that poetry, too, fell outside what was possible given her inert right fingers. However, in the wake of tragedy, she discovered the power of dictation and the bounty of metaphor to translate sorrow into song.*



MADNESS, MEMORY, AND RECOVERY THROUGH WRITING

Don't ever let anyone tell you that a madman doesn't remember his madness. I remember the psychotic force of my first manic episode with a desperate clarity that still haunts me after more than thirty years. I remember quite well how my mania grew over days from a pleasant, energetic contentment to an expansive euphoria and then to an effusive agitated state when I no longer needed to eat or sleep. My thoughts began racing with exhilarating speed. Then I tried to enhance the high by ingesting whatever stimulants I could find—cocaine, diet pills, coffee after coffee—and all of it shot me into a suddenly violent insanity. I destroyed my bedroom with a shovel, smashing furniture, lamps and shelves and everything they held. I perfectly recall scrambling like some mad monkey onto my parents' roof and screaming, "*I'm free!*" as a thick froth grew at my mouth.

Soon after, brothers and friends subdued me and wrestled me into a car. I babbled nonsense and threw punches as they drove me to a psychiatric hospital where I was committed to at least one month's treatment at another facility. It took many days of massive doses of antipsychotic medicine to bring me back to some semblance of mental stability, some tenuous analogy to myself. But throughout it all, I was more alert and more receptive to mental and physical stimuli than I have ever been, even though at the height of my mania I had no impulse control and believed, with grandiose conviction, that I could read others' minds.

I was eighteen and I was a madman. And yet I remember.

My first experiences with manic-depressive illness bear witness to the potentially cyclic—and potentially deadly—disintegrations of mental stability that characterize this condition. It's known today as bipolar affective disorder, but whatever we call the devastating mood swings, without treatment their results can be catastrophic. Five months before I was committed for mania, I endured a period of depression that so terrified me with its persistent intensity that I believed I had lost my mind completely. I had no idea what was happening; after the episode really took hold, I only knew that I felt nothing at all. Somehow, I hid the emptiness from those around me and went through the meaningless motions: I was robotic, a sleepwalker watching his soul dry up and

fragment like dirt. Family and friends thought I was just suffering “the blues” because I believed a female friend had rejected me. In reality, I could barely rise out of bed each morning. I craved sleep. Food was tasteless and my bowels were chronically unsettled. The act of thinking was a gargantuan task; I said little because I felt nothing except fear. After six weeks of this unspeakable hell, I heard an alien, sinister voice in my head ask me quite clearly, “Why don’t you kill yourself?” And at that horrifying moment, I seemed to stare into some deep black maul. More than terrified, I sat on the couch in my parents’ living room for nearly a full day before I finally found enough courage to ask my father to take me to the family doctor. He did. I wasn’t capable of expressing how I truly felt, how I empty I’d become. The doctor recommended that I look forward to college that fall and get as much exercise as I could.

Somehow, I lived through my first major depression for another five weeks, into my first semester of college.

Fittingly, *memory* is derived from the Latin word *memor*, meaning *mindful*, and the word’s origin illuminates the disease. During mania the mind is full to the bursting point: at the height of my first psychotic episode, I was somehow able to hold six or seven thoughts in my head at once. I certainly tried to *explain* all these thoughts at one time, and my incoherence spiraled. Depression, on the other hand, is marked at its worst by a form of *mindlessness*: thought and feeling vanish; energy disappears; everything seems to lose its value. Yet both states of mind have taught me what it means to make life meaningful. The condition has deeply influenced how I remember certain people, especially family members, important friends and mentors, but also several professionals who have helped me to live well with the disorder and its repercussions.

I live with another form of memory that remains difficult to describe. I’ll call it a blood memory, since it appears to echo through generations. If manic-depressive illness is a genetically transmitted disorder, as most evidence suggests, then I embody the emotional legacy of my afflicted ancestors and *their* struggles during intolerant times before any effective medications became available. In one of my earliest memories, I see my maternal grandfather standing before a stone wall on an overcast autumn day. With yellow leaves beneath his shoes, he waits for our family to pick him up and drive him to his home. It was only years later, as I heard more and more about his illness, that I could locate that stone wall: it surrounded the hospital where he was often a patient throughout his adult life, the same psychiatric hospital where I was taken at age 18, the same hospital that ran the nearby facility where my grandfather died nine years later. After my own diagnosis, I never had the chance to speak to him about the condition; he was often hospitalized during my early adulthood, when

college and work preoccupied me in various places around the country. But I believe he knew quite well that the bipolar self is often precariously balanced.

This condition has also forced me to be brutally honest with myself about my mood swings, about the absolute necessity of taking medications, and about the consequences if I fail to care for my illness. Honesty, it feels to me, is a form of acceptance, no matter how unpleasant or harrowing the truth may be. At the same time, acceptance and memory combine to shape the internal litany I know so well: that this disease is incurable; that I may pass it on to my children, if I choose to have any; that some people in my life will never believe I'm a stable person; and that my behavior at times has destroyed relationships with people I loved.

I've learned over time to describe my illness candidly while also respecting others' privacy. In fact, I've been exploring these concerns since I began writing in earnest during my young adulthood, when therapy became its own kind of ritual. I learned to speak frankly and specifically with professionals about my emotions because my stability depended on it. Especially through my writing, I've also learned to live with what I've come to call "this terrible gift": manic-depression has nearly killed me at least twice, yet the condition has also taught me to see the world anew. It inspires creativity. It continues to make me *feel* emotions and memories and relationships with an uncompromising, often painfully exquisite power and depth.

There has never been a period in my life when I didn't experience my moods or emotions with intensity. Long before the diagnosis, I was aware (as much as a boy can be) of certain patterns in my behavior. My childhood was punctuated with bouts of weeping, hyperactivity, and giddy flights of imagination. I also enjoyed a recurrent kind of religious euphoria that often provided some peace for me. I also felt truly devoted to my friends and large family, and those bonds provided the most stability for me. By the time I was eleven or so, I also began developing a deep interest in literature and the natural world.

Adolescence isn't easy for anyone—we all know that teenagers' emotional lives hinge on hormonal changes, new social pressures, and all kinds of uncertainties. But during those critical years, the mood swings I knew as a boy intensified. Although I didn't grasp what I was doing at the time, by the age of fifteen, I was medicating my elastic emotions by boozing and smoking pot as often as I could, and this, of course, only made things more volatile. All these feelings shaped my sense that something was off balance, something I couldn't quite explain, though I wanted very much to convince myself that everything

would eventually make sense. In reality, my early teens foreshadowed events that appear, as I look back, inevitable: I was sprinting blindfolded across a rocky plateau that led straight off a cliff.

Early in high school, I became more familiar with depressive swings, as a particularly unpleasant situation might illustrate. In one of the local neighborhoods, the kids would gather in a dense tract of woods there, behind a grade school. As a place to party and act out, those woods seemed to foreshadow what adulthood might become (or was *supposed* to become), with all its apparent freedoms—like drinking too much, scoring some weed, or hooking up. Kids gravitated to a spacious clearing beneath an old maple tree, where they'd stand around the makeshift firepit or sit on crumbling logs or cinderblocks. So many boys and girls I knew would visit this grubby spot to discuss movies or music; we'd joke or bicker about school, about our families, or each other, often while passing a joint. On most weekend nights, we'd gather beneath that maple tree and drink cases of third-rate beer: they were cheap and easy to get our hands on. Sometimes we drank the harder stuff, straight from the bottle.

I remember visiting those woods one early Friday night in June, a few days after the end of my sophomore year. A muggy heat clung to the paths that led to the maple tree. Several boys stood below it, with beers in their hands. I knew them only slightly from the neighborhood, but I decided to stay. One of them asked, "Wanna beer?"

I hesitated. Something inside me hadn't been right for a while. For days I'd felt weepy for no reason. I'd convinced myself that I'd never finish high school, even though my anxieties were unfounded—my grades were solid, I was a good athlete, a runner—and yet a panic tore at my guts every day like a garden claw. I wasn't sure if drinking was the best idea, but I took a beer anyway to fit in.

As the sun began to set, beams of orange light fell through the canopy, and a breeze began to cool the humid forest. After my third beer, I stepped away to piss and went down a trail leading farther into the woods.

I followed the path, rounded a tree, and froze: A groundhog lay panting on its side about ten feet away in a small crater in the earth. Its front legs were pawing at the air—a car had probably crushed its hindquarters in the road nearby. Somehow, the animal had dragged itself back into the woods to die. Blood and shit were caked around its back legs. Flies swarmed over its fur in a cloud. It convulsed and twisted about, and I could smell it. The animal looked directly at me and made a low squeal.

I was horrified. I'd never seen a wild animal so close to death before. It squealed again, lower this time, with a gurgling long gasp. Its upper body crumpled back to the ground.

Close to tears, I felt my chest hitch in, and the reflex only sent the animal's stench more easily down my windpipe. The smell instantly reactivated the memory of my first real encounter with death and decay in second grade. A cat—probably a family pet—had been run down on the street where I walked to school every day. Its torn-open guts lay in a pool by the curb, and its dead eyes kept getting more and more bulgy as it lay there rotting for days before someone removed it. The stench got so bad that I couldn't eat for a week without smelling that awful dead thing in my throat. If depression has a scent, it's exactly that—decomposing flesh or the promise of it.

I stood transfixed with horror and disgust as if I were absorbing that groundhog's lonely demise in every way possible.

Voices began to approach me then. Some of the boys I'd been drinking with were coming down the trail. My sudden panic deepened the moment's horror: I knew what boys of a certain mind might do to a helpless wild animal, especially in a hidden place like this. The casual cruelty I expected to witness sent a jagged shock through my stomach, and I fled the spot, still needing to piss but wanting even more to get away. Much farther down the trail, I stopped running and relieved myself. But I was shaking. I could only imagine what the boys might be doing to that groundhog with sharpened sticks or rocks. I could see such a scene and feel it in my body. The animal trying to crawl away, fully aware of its torture. Gnashing its bloodied teeth. Collapsing to the earth and submitting to its fate.

I walked home in the dusk with the beer still swilling in my head. The groundhog had reminded me (along with the rotting dead cat) that I was definitely a sensitive kid as if I could feel the emotional texture of things. But it was more than that. In grade school, no other boy I knew wallowed in despair every time one of his goldfish died or one of his hamsters. None of the other kids appeared to become despondent so frequently. I was the only student among the boys or girls who wept uncontrollably when our first-grade teacher returned for a day's visit after relocating to another school four years earlier.

The moodiness, the acute sensitivity, the belief that people and things were all charged with a huge emotive force—these aspects of my character evolved and deepened during my first two years of high school. By then, I'd established a double life of pattern-partying, even as I grew in positive directions. I excelled in running cross-country and track. I made many friends and learned to write with more precision. My desire to read became insatiable. I consumed the printed word like food: mysteries and true-crime books, novels and short stories, fantasy and horror, and Poe's writing especially. All that reading sharpened my imagination and expanded my worldview. On the night I fled from the woods, by the time I was close to home, the groundhog had come to symbolize

all the darkest feelings I'd endured since childhood. I felt powerless about feeling helpless, and I hated having to accept this inescapable emotional logic.

At that age, I couldn't imagine how devastating a clinical depression can become, but I understood by then a clear result of despondent moods. They muted memories of better times, draining them of their vitality and color. As I walked home in the muggy night, it didn't seem to matter that those same woods were also the setting for exciting new experiences. The previous summer, for the first time, I'd felt something like real passion, fumbling about with a new girlfriend near the maple tree, hidden with her among some thick brambles. I remember us both reclining there on a layer of moss and brittle leaves.

Our time together there was innocent enough, but I also felt alive to everything: her lips and her breath, her hair and perfume, the scent of her skin. As the sun went down, filling the woods with a soothing glow, I heard in my thoughts a Pink Floyd song from that year called "Two Suns in the Sunset." Somehow, its echo inside me extinguished a lingering self-doubt: I'm still unable to describe it. But the song also signaled a clear new beginning, especially through its unforgettable coda, as the sax and piano fade out. As I went on kissing my girlfriend, what I heard in my head was less like music than a sudden conviction that poignancy must color every passion. It sounded like an endless warmth of necessary joy. At that moment, an infinitely gentle yet expansive force seemed to assure me that life was absolutely good and perfectly beautiful. For the first time in my life—but not the last—I felt as if I were melting into everything. Like some fifteen-year-old Keats pining with ecstasy over his nightingale, I believed that recognizing such incredible beauty must mean that life passes and eventually passes away. Even at that age, when I knew so little about myself and the world during such highs, I believed I could feel it all, that I could "get it," and very powerfully.

Less than four years later, at my commitment hearing at the state hospital, the psychiatrist assigned to my case began the formal inquiry by stating my name, home city, and occupation: first-year college student. She was a middle-aged woman with short brown hair. With cordial gravity, she also greeted the others sitting at the room's large wooden table: my parents, a judge, and another hospital official. A sizable tape recorder sat before the judge. He had gray hair, wore a dark suit and tie, but beyond that I don't remember what he or the other male official looked like.

The psychiatrist continued: "Your Honor, he's experiencing psychotic mania. In addition to the typical symptoms—sleeplessness, rapid speech,

grandiosity, sudden swings from euphoria to hostility—he’s also been severely violent. Five days ago, he smashed up his bedroom with a garden implement. He also assaulted several friends of his who brought him here. Along with these behaviors, he believes certain people are persecuting him and he’s threatened to harm them.” She turned from the judge and regarded me directly: “He’s also hearing voices.”

She then addressed my parents and the judge both at once, looking earnestly in their faces. “Given all this, I believe he’s a danger to himself and to others. He desperately needs extended treatment. I’ve already secured a bed for him at the Oakdale Clinic, which isn’t far from his family’s home.”

Of course, to me her diagnosis was *utter* nonsense. When it came time for me to speak, I insisted that I felt *fine*, better than ever before. “I’m not staying here,” I announced. “And I’m not going to another hospital.”

The judge and the other official conferred with the psychiatrist. They spoke with my parents. I don’t remember what they said, but I can still see my parents’ exhausted looks, their devastation. Then the judge explained his decision to me directly: I didn’t have any choice under the law. I’d be treated for at least thirty days as an inpatient at the Oakdale Clinic. He wished me good luck with a compassionate tone I didn’t appreciate for weeks. “We need to speak to your parents alone now, son.”

The psychiatrist stood by the room’s tall double doors and beckoned me with a kindly nod. I stood and went to her, walking in furious silence past my parents. *This is their fault*, I told myself. I didn’t see them again for many days.

Hearing voices—the doctor was right about every symptom but that one, and for a while, I viewed her remark as part of some malicious design to keep me confined indefinitely. *Hearing voices*—that really put the hook in me. I knew what that meant. The previous summer, during my first psychotic depression, I’d heard a voice, all right, a sinister alien voice in the exact center of my head, encouraging me to kill myself. And yet, during my only truly psychotic mania, the one that got me committed, I heard no auditory hallucinations at all. I was delusional and violent, but no voices spoke to me. Not one. A few days before the hearing, as part of her evaluation, the psychiatrist had asked me if I could hear anyone speaking to me in my mind. I understood the term “stream of consciousness” quite well at that age, but it just didn’t register then as my thoughts raced and raced; instead, a dozen other ideas sprang into my mind despite all the antipsychotics she’d prescribed for me. “Yes! Yes, of course! You mean that voice that runs through my head all the time, *every day*? It’s *amazing* you should ask about that because I’ve been *writing* about it!”

As she jotted something on a legal pad, I rifled through the loose-leaf pages I was allowed to keep with me, hunting for whatever passages that might

in *any way* relate to thinking or perception or belief—because during mania, *everything* connects. I couldn't wait to write *even more* about this incredibly meaningful coincidence. In fact, it felt wildly unjust that I simply couldn't crank out ten pages right then and there. But she had more questions to ask, and I could only use a pen three times a day for an hour at most and under supervision.

Hearing voices—the phrase still echoes for me, but not in a clinical sense. Now I understand those words in a completely different light, one that clarifies all the hard work hard it takes to stay emotionally stable. In psychiatry—or literature or films or common belief—*hearing voices* is a central component of mental illness, the *sine qua non* of true psychosis, the indisputable evidence that a person has disconnected from reality. These meanings have real power, of course, but as a metaphor, the phrase *hearing voices* now stands in for several vital forces in my life: I mean the *actual* voices I've learned to value so deeply: the voices of loved ones, or those countless voices that speak to us from great literature, or what I've discovered in therapy since my diagnosis. Completely positive rather than maddening, this living network of voices has largely *kept* me from psychosis since my late teens. Some of these voices have saved my life, a few more than once.

At the risk of sounding exactly like one of Poe's mad narrators—who insist they're completely sane when they clearly aren't—let me state this as plainly as I can: I hear voices every day compelling me to write whatever I can from everything I remember. Much of this creative energy enlivens me—just a healthy man's consciousness tumbling forward in time. Sometimes, though, terrible voices break into my thoughts without any warning like molten rockets hitting light speed. They reactivate memories I'd like to forget but can't, at least not completely, a clear manifestation of post-traumatic stress.

As the gaps in time between my episodes have grown from months to years to decades, the voices now tend to sound off as stewards to great beauty and insight. I respond to them with vigor and hope, describing how they shape and define my determination to stay well. Writing, as a vocation of self-discovery, has always called on me to look sharply at the world outside *and* to listen well to whatever speaks to me from within. Writing also enables me to confront my worst memories head-on, to call them exactly what they are, and to stare them down if I can. Here's the redemption in all this: through a long range of written work, I've managed to exorcise the animating forces of some truly awful experiences. At the same time, for every line I've ever scribbled to run down some past horror that won't stay dead, I've also been inspired by the vital spirit within other living voices: Creative expression and scholarship. Teaching. Brotherhood. Encouragement. Love.

Donald J. McNutt

For me, all these powerful voices work together as guiding inflections. And they're grounded in my commitment to live with this disorder well enough to contribute a lasting voice about it.



***Donald J. McNutt** was diagnosed with manic-depressive illness/bipolar disorder at age 18. After a series of destabilizing mood swings, he was hospitalized for two months. Since then, he has worked with many excellent professionals while taking effective, life-saving medications. He is now a retired professor of American Literature and living in New York State. He is currently writing a book-length memoir that describes how the disorder has shaped his life, his writing, as well as his devotion to his family and Irish American heritage.*



BEING ARACHNE

I am in the kitchen, trying to divide a spider plant for my daughter. It is messy work – the white tubular roots are tightly bound together, and I have taken a steak knife to cut them free. Dirt is lodged under my fingernails; it coats my hands, the table, the floor below. I wedge a piece of the plant into a pot too small for its size, then curse as soil spills out over the top. I try to push down a few errant roots, but they resist. The green leaves droop to one side. I rearrange them to cover the white tubes poking through the soil.

Suddenly, I start to cry. Huge wracking sobs double me over. I crouch on the kitchen floor, then fall to my knees, tears running into my mouth, my chin, down my neck. I can't breathe. I am making sounds like an animal, grunting and heaving. I tell myself to stop, swiping at my eyes, the dirt spreading across my face in a muddy streak. I cannot stop. I curl in a ball, knees to my chest, and push my back against the kitchen wall. The sounds will cease, then the tears. After this, my breath will come, slowly. I will sit up. I will get to my feet. I will wash my face and hands, sweep the floor, clean the table and the dirt from underneath my fingernails. Soon. But for now, I lay here, looking up at the two dying spider plants.

These crying jags always surprise me. When my daughter was first hospitalized in a psychiatric ward, I cried every morning in the shower before work. As soon as the water hit my body, I would weep in silence. Sometimes, my showers would last a long time. I would wait for the tears to stop before stepping out, toweling off, and going to work. It was a morning ritual, a purging of the sadness that crept into my body during the night.

Usually this was enough to be able to withstand the moments in the day when I felt vulnerable. A colleague would stand in my doorway and ask in a tentative voice, "So, how is your daughter doing?" "Better," I'd say, as I looked quickly towards my computer screen, signaling the end to the conversation. Real conversations were dangerous. When your 22-year-old goes crazy, people don't know what to say. "I'm praying for you" seemed facetious since I suspected this meant they were really offering prayers of thanksgiving to the god that had spared their child by cursing my own. Telling me stories in hushed voices of their aunt/friend/cousin/college girlfriend who too had these "kind of terrible experiences" struck me as voyeuristic at best, cruel at worst: if you ar-

en't a parent living through this experience, why share it with me? Thankfully, most people didn't ask. They were the ones I liked the best, those who would say hello, smile politely, and look away.

But there would be moments in the day when I would see a young woman in the hallway, her long blond hair tucked into a messy ponytail. Or I would open my purse and find a note crumpled in the bottom: "tampons, milk, frozen peas, soy sauce," in that familiar loopy handwriting. Or one of my students would perch on the rocking chair in my office, chewing on his right index finger and, in a hoarse whisper, tell me he was really struggling this semester. In these moments, my throat would constrict, and the tears would well up in my eyes. I would stare at the ceiling, refusing to blink. I would think deeply about the upcoming local mileage vote, about the 43 composition papers I need to grade over the weekend, or my goal to lose five pounds before Christmas. I would think of everything and anything but the truth, that dangerous commodity – I missed my daughter, and I wanted her back.

She is back now. Six months after being hospitalized, she is taking college courses, working a summer internship, and playing on an intramural women's hockey team. More importantly, she gets dressed every day, eats regularly, takes her medication, and sleeps at night. But she is quieter, slower to smile. She struggles to make friends and often spends her weekends alone. And her discussions about her future plans after graduation, once so very clear, have become nebulous and vague. My brave daughter is attempting to weave together the patterns of her life once again, but the strands are frayed and broken in spots. It is slow work.

Recently, she asked me for a plant for her apartment. "I like green things," she said. "They make me feel hopeful." I pick myself up from the floor and nestle the two small plants in my muddy palms. Both are already starting to wilt. But I have to believe they will grow strong again. They will settle back into the rich soil and reach their long green leaves towards the light.



***Helen Raica-Klotz** teaches writing courses at Saginaw Valley State University in Michigan. She has taught writing in a regional prison, a homeless shelter, a juvenile care center—any place where she can find people with stories to tell. She is the mother of two children who battle mental illness, and they are some of the bravest people she knows. Her fiction and creative non-fiction have appeared in various publications, including The MacGuffin, Porcupine Literary, Dunes Review, The Brevity Blog, and Muleskinner Journal. She currently lives with her husband and their big black lab in Bellaire, Michigan.*

Morrow Dowdle



117 POUNDS

The first doctor shows me the ultrasound,
speaks broken ovaries, cysts like a string of pearls.
Gives my husband magazines, makes him spurt
in a cup. Offers progesterone, Lupron, IVF.

The second doctor recommends I eat
more seeds, sleep in the full moon's light.
Gives me a test that advises I give up
chickpeas, tomatoes, every color of pepper.

The third doctor avoids eye contact as he types.
I tell him, like the others, *I want to get pregnant.*
He looks at me, then. Says, *You know
what would happen if you gained a few pounds.*

I hate him. Then take the counsel. I drink
whole milk. Slather bread with butter.
Shovel omelets and steak and devil's food cake.
I eat the medicine. I clean my plate.

And one day, the number comes, though
I don't know it yet. Menses return from
their three-year retreat. And one week later—
yes, one week—it happens

with my husband, in the backseat
of my Honda in an Aldi parking lot
under a moon so full.
So very full.



124 POUNDS

The nutritionist agrees to see me,
despite my dubious prognosis.
We talk business: inputs and outputs.
It's not unlike financial planning.

We make a meal chart. She assigns
energy bars, protein shakes.
She sets the number I must reach.
No more exercise until I near it.

We talk from stats into the weeds
of the past, where kudzu choked
amaranth and aster. We hack
away the eating disaster to find

its unhappy gardener who misplaced
their spade and rake, lugs incest
and betrayal in their basket.
We can help them carry less.

She gives me one month to begin.
Otherwise, it's off to the hospital.
I see her reason and I despise it.
It goes against my ethos—

a donation to a crooked politician.
a wedding to someone I don't love.

She hands me the contract.
I sign it.



THE PINCH

Fingers inch their way to belly,
pinch to find how fat I am today.

I am the fraud physiognomist,
practicing with digital calipers,

the shower still the place
of treacherous landscape—

Look down, swells of flesh
for the waterfall—

a dynamited cliff over which
I might end it all.

Logic assures me
I look like I should—

forty-one, twice pregnant,
but I'm not convinced.

I remember being pinched,
as a kid, by my mean cousin,

classmates who made
rose gardens of my arms.

Is that who I want to be,
to me?

I uncrook my fingers,
weave them together

to make a basket. Cradle
what held child, holds

stomach and intestine,
contest and strife.

What gave and gave
and still gives life.



THE CAKE

It's a decadent concoction—
dozens of cookies
mounds of chocolate
billows of whipped cream

I'm an expert at desserts—
if I have no commitment
to eat them

Or if I must eat them
find some way to reduce and substitute
what's required

make it more acceptable
for my ingestion

This time it's different—
I follow the recipe to a T

promise to both give
and take

And when the cake makes its debut

I come to the table—
a seat that has been waiting
a plate that is now willing

Someone else wields the knife—
still beyond what I can bear—
and when everyone has been served

Morrow Dowdle

the noise of celebration fades
replaced by a silence
that can be described only
as reverent

the room united
by a single pleasure

I sit there at its center
and taste the deepest layer



Morrow Dowdle has had poetry published in or forthcoming from New York Quarterly, Baltimore Review, Pedestal Magazine, and I-70 Review, among others. They are a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee and a finalist for the 2024 Red Wheelbarrow Poetry Prize. They edit poetry for Sunspot Literary Journal and run a performance series called “Weave & Spin,” which features historically underrepresented voices. In addition to writing, they are an amateur herbalist and a student of the mystical and mysterious. They retired in 2023 from a career as a physician assistant specializing in mental health and have been on their own lifelong journey to recover from posttraumatic stress disorder. They live with their family in Durham, NC. Find out more on Instagram @morrowdowdle.

Jodi Hall



ON GOLD MEDALS AND NO
VANILLA EXTRACT

In a fog of my mind's own making, I could not recognize the hand in front of
me
as my own.

Think of something peaceful, I beg myself,

And I recount every grounding exercise and every trendy mantra,
But I see every fluorescent light illuminate every face and my heart is racing
as if
I am being hunted in some sophisticated murder plot and my neck and
shoulders
feel prickly and my limbs are heavy as lead.

The item I braved those automated sliding doors and hurricane force gusts of
AC
for has moved and I could search the aisles for it and I could obviously ask
someone
who works here but now I feel the slight sting of sweat on my brow and tears
permeate
my eyes and every thought I have races through my head in a way that if you
were
to ask me *what's wrong* I could only scream.

Fear, fear, fear,

My stomach is twisting and my toes are twitching and I resist the urge to
scratch my skin, which always calms me down, but I have gone eight months
and
three weeks and four days without this brand of comfort and I will not break
that
streak today.

So, I briskly walk out of this Price Chopper that has now become the site of
an
Olympian feat of self-control, and I leave without vanilla extract and shame
burns like
magma in my chest, but I leave without the beginnings of a new scar.

And that is enough.



IN THE BEGINNING

I went to a Christian elementary school that taught me A. God loves me and
B.
God can send me to hell.
I tread in the unfriendly waters of this paradox until I was drowning.
I questioned,
And my questions were met with raised eyebrows and Biblical text,
So, I stopped questioning.
Instead, I prayed,
Meticulously and with tenacity, and, above all, with all-consuming fear.

Most nights I was in elementary school I suffered severe anxiety attacks.
I feared that if I prayed to keep my dad safe in his helicopter in the desert
then God
would try and strengthen my faith by letting him die.
I feared if I prayed for help with my anxiety, he would allow my mom to get
into
an accident, which my young brain surmised God could do to teach me to
manage
my racing thoughts. I became obsessed with it all,
With how exactly to pray so that I could both get relief from my own mind
while
also keeping my family safe.

My fear started to affect me physically by way of headaches and intense
nausea when I suspected God was giving me this anxiety because I had
done something to deserve it.
So, I prayed,
“Please forgive me God, I am a sinner.”

The Awakenings Review

“Please don’t kill my dad, God, I will do anything.”
Childhood with my God did not feel like childhood.

When my dad came home, I felt relief but there were, of course, my friend’s
dads

who did not come home.

My teacher had assured me God answers prayers, were those Marines who
had less

family praying for them more deserving of death?

Did God really need sustained worship from the masses to decide which lives
were

worth saving?

Could I love a God who did?

Any time I would feel the sticky, black poison otherwise known as doubt
seep into my

skin I fell into a deep depression that I could only ascertain was happening
because I had abandoned God.

This made me stay.

“Yes, Lord I know I am inherently bad, please forgive me.”

“Yes, Lord I know I am nothing without you, please love me.”

Leaving my small, private elementary school for a public middle school
introduced me

to jokes about sex, the best friends I probably had in my entire life, and a
history of the

world that did not include Noah’s Ark.

My life did not revolve around God, but I was still fearful and still a dirty
sinner and still praying.

I journaled my feelings compulsively which now read like the confessions of
a monk wrestling with a crippling crisis of faith and not of a sixth grader

just wanting to not

feel so nervous by the bus stop.

So, I prayed strategically, careful to not kill my mom or any of my new
friends in the

process, Careful to not crash my bus.

“I am so sorry I ever doubted you, please don’t hurt me.”

In public school we had an assembly on abusive relationships and how to
know you

were in one and, critically, how to leave.
A speaker spoke of her experience with a man who hurt her.
My friend asked, "How could someone stay through that?"
I said nothing but when I got home and submitted to a force I worshiped
because I was inherently bad and stupid and dirty and not worth saving on
my own merit alone, *I knew*.



THE NEW HAND I HOLD IS MINE

The Carriage holds my old Bible and the parts of myself I lost,
To stay in my Father's favor no matter the earthly cost.
But the fee to me was hours and hours of being on my knees,
Praying this wretched mist around me would wholly and finally ease.

Writing all my sins and wrongs with fingers long gone numb,
Too lost, too muddled in my skin to see what I'd become.
So, the kindly man in his Carriage holds a heart no longer my own,
I left it behind when I beheld how far into my mania I had flown.

So, tell who waits in the Carriage I will hold and love her soon,
When the rest of me stops to stay awhile when on the other bench
there's room.
Until then I will hug the parts of me I cherish with relief,
The girl who saw through the fog around her and told it its real name
was grief.
And now I see the world around me, clear of cloudy vision,
Nothing saved me half as well as losing my religion.



ON TURNING 30

I am knocking on 30's door,
I know the me that answers will be wiser and I hope she will smile.
I spent a very long time not wanting to be here, longer than what is healthy to
reminisce about.
I remember my mom once described swimming in the ocean and being hit by
a wave.
She was so disoriented while under the water, spun all around holding her
breath,
She didn't know which way was up and which was down,
Which direction would lead her toward safety and which would plunge her
deeper
into dangerous waters.
That is depression.
For years I couldn't tell up from down, I was numb and cold and distant from
myself.
And, for a while, once I did find the surface, I yearned for those lost years
back.
I clung to the air for dear life and I asked myself, more than once,
"How do I learn how to live now that I don't want to die?"
Slowly I constructed a new life and though I spent more time than I would
have liked by
the water's edge I have not yet been resubmerged.

From my own memory, I remember putting on my glasses for the first time.
I could see a sky that was bluer than I could have ever imagined and my
brother's face.
I could read without squinting and the earth was suddenly clear and bright
after so long
spent diluted by a blur.
That is recovery.
So now I am knocking on 30's door, grateful.
I know the me that answers will be wiser and I know she will smile.



Jodi Hall



***Jodi Hall** is a medical librarian living in Shawnee, Kansas, with her husband and three-year-old son, who light up her world. She is widely passionate about reading, writing, coffee, and Halloween. Jodi is currently working on a novel detailing her experience with autism and Scrupulosity OCD. Her poem "Undiagnosed" was nominated by her university for the 2024 AWP Intro Journals Project. Her poem "Mother's Day" was recently published in the poetry anthology Mother's Reverie.*



BOP: LITTLE HEART SONG

Heart baying like a motherless pup, I track the playground
perimeter.

Some boys—names I no longer remember
are sparring two grasshoppers.

Visceral legs against antennae until victory:
one has lost its head. The girls watch from on high,
recess royalty looking down while I walk the liminal.

and she shall have music wherever she goes

Mom says speak up and they'll love you
like I do. Doesn't understand the calamity
in my mind that words cannot master.

Dad says he felt it too, his stomach turning
over small talk with strangers. Our shared
pain makes it hurt worse, somehow.

He says just push through - like his father
before. Subdue what you can't control.

and she shall have music wherever she goes

So of course I embellish the prison of my mind:
books and ballads pasted to its crumbling walls,
I write myself better. Nursing pretty little pangs,
my heart sings that sublime song of knowing
that these hands that warm and wound alike
still long to be held.

and she shall have music wherever she goes



GRANDDAUGHTER OF A MEMORY

For my Bubby

My pen always seems to find you. Tracing the outline of your old armchair. It tells everyone how it felt to watch you fade. I don't want to recall your tired eyes and age-marked hands, but these ink-marked pages say otherwise. My memory fails when it comes to you. This pen marks sorrow, prints apologies for missing the storied You. The golden-haired dreamer. Faithful servant, husband, and father. It lauds the steadfast soul cataloged in the stories of my grandmother. It traces your eyes and finds their likeness in my father's steady gaze. It won't squander your image with limited recollections. Your might is much more than it will ever know, a spirit living in the hopeful ruminations of this woman, taller and wilder than the crying child who sat by your bedside.



SHADOW SONG

Not blessed by cosmic anti-gravity
but suffocating silence. All absorbing
void. Heaviest parts of me
sewn to my callused soles.

My shadow's made of starstuff

Its overactive voice like
cicadas in summertime,
a familiar cacophony
dancing along dimly-lit
bedroom walls.

My shadow's made of starstuff

It surrounds me like an old coat,
that familiar weight
enveloping me in its thread-
bare embrace.

My shadow's spatial murk
but its dark matter makes song.



***Payton Willhite** emerges from the Arkansas landscape as a poet who transforms personal struggle into raw, eloquent verse. A recent graduate of the University of Arkansas's Creative Writing program, she navigates the complex terrain of southern adolescence through her work. Her poetry excavates the intimate landscapes of anxiety, depression, and grief. When not wrestling with words, Willhite finds solace in the mindful movements of yoga, the comfort of books, the creativity of cooking, and the unbridled joy of her dog. Through her writing, she maps the intricate emotional geographies of pain and resilience, inviting readers into the nuanced world of her lived experience.*

Dave Fekete



SOMETIMES IT COMES DOWN TO SCALES

Sometimes it just comes down to practicing scales
If you want to be good at playing music
There's a lot of considerations in life, there's things to get mad at,
There's the examined life, self-awareness,
Outgrowing the script childhood wrote for you
But that won't make you good at playing music
Your scales will be effortless, unless you're swimming in all that
Then, you won't get through one scale without mistakes, or a song
Your mind won't be there, and it isn't considerations that you're playing,
it's scales
There's a time when you have to let go, or work through it to peace
What good are considerations, self-awareness, spiritual growth
If you're not going to do something that does something for your world?
Like my friend, a former NFL linebacker, said when I mentioned the
body-builder
Working construction labor with me, afraid the heavy lifting would ruin
his work-out
"What's the point of having muscles if you're not going to use them?"
Unless we're talking about soloing, or composing, or writing a poem
Then you'll want considerations, the examined life, self-awareness,
The struggle to outgrow the script childhood wrote for you—
These are to poiesis as scales are to a musician
I would say a good song or poem sings out of, sings out the human
condition
Audiences don't like a poem or a song that they can't hear
That doesn't bespeak the human condition, their own condition
So poetry isn't self-reflexive language alone; it's a style of saying
something
Poetry that's just playing games with language won't go very far
Nor is music but an arrangement of scales, rules, and theory, though it is
Miles Davis said to forget all that after you've learned it
These days, I'm not composing. Though I do still write poems, and solo
So I can't abandon considerations altogether

I've slept for 27 years, awoke atrophied, I have much to recover
So tonight, and for the next good while
It comes down to just practicing scales



SCHRUNS AND ALL IT MEANS

I know the meaning of a \$40 night out; it's too much for me
The way it hacks down my bank account, fast
And by the week's end I'll be broke and desperate if this keeps up
Which would leave me nothing for groceries
So I say a prayer my car won't break
And rob me of my mobility, which means so much,
And my reliable Civic affords when I have enough for gas
Living like this, I think of Hemingway in Paris just learning to write
How he and Hadley would save up all year for a ski trip to Schruns
I don't make enough to save up anything for anything
Besides, COVID has shut down travel for Carol and me, anyway
Paying 3 months of bills I ignored about burnt up fun money this week
I write poems in a dive, drinking a Pepsi or coffee—sometimes it's on
the house
And find it more fulfilling than it probably should be
Like learning a new blues song on my piano,
A song the guitar player of a fledgling band I'm trying to start showed me
last rehearsal
And to talk with Carol while we walk in the park
It makes for a good life, for a real good life
Essentially for free, since I own my musical equipment
Which I bought when I had money
And I wonder how many people on a couch in front of their \$5,000 TV
Live this good



SO SAY THE BUDDHISTS

The Buddhists say we are all connected, are all One
The coffee plantation in Uganda and breakfast in New York
My coffee cup and a Chinese factory worker who made it
The rice paddy that gave her supper, and I and my coffee cup
The exploding star that forged the iron of which the rice paddy's plow is
made
And so I am one with that exploding star, the plow that cultivated the rice
paddy
The exploding star that forged the iron for the bullets in my enemy's gun
My enemy who would shoot those bullets at me
The iron in my body's blood
The iron in the blood of the other political party, who stands under my flag
We are all connected, are all One
My enemy as my beloved are all one with me
And I am One with everything
Makes me think twice about rage, about hate



SCALES

I will be at scales, tonight
Despite my flaws, Carol accepts me as perfect for her
She is perfect for me, our world is perfect
As perfect as can be this side of eternity
But the world isn't only Carol
My world can't be only Carol, can't be only our world together
The world doesn't care about me like Carol does—why would it?
There are 24 key signatures counting the major and minor, all with their
scales
48, if you count pentatonic scales, then I suppose there are the augmented
and diminished scales
And 7 modes in every scale. When you're thinking about scales, you kind of
lose count
They are all expected of me, of every musician; I expect them of me
If I'm not careful, I'll rest content in the way Carol sees me
Rest in the perfect world our own, in which all is caring
Carol doesn't care about scales—why would she?

Though she is my whole world, and we are the whole world to each other
The world is not only Carol
So, if I'm going to solo in Santana, I had better be sure in my scales
Eternity is more than scales
And the man playing the scales is as the music in eternity
Time was, that man was all that mattered to me
But the world is not eternity
Even if I think I'll find eternity planted in the world
It's good to plant my feet on the ground, even if the ground be art
Carol likes it when I play a song for her



NOTE AND WORD

Notes did more than ride on rhythm
Pulsing through the unity that was the song, is the song
Uniting string, amp, voice, and ear
Hearing players sound together song
Dionysus dance energy and harmony
ALL HARMONIOUS

Text can never do it, even if spoken
Written reference to literature speech and word
There is the I AM
Logos
Being in existence and the regression into terms
Name it and it's gone

The harmonies that played together knit
Player, hearer, heart, and feet tapping
Head nodding, dance, night-time, night-club
Night after night and us three playing
All harmonious over time
And a long time since

Vicissitudes over much time
The song sung together, composed of us three
Now an echo
To talk about together



Dave Fekete writes, “My first psychotic break occurred after I had written the first chapter of my doctoral dissertation at the University of Virginia. I became delusional and labile and was admitted into the locked wing of a hospital voluntarily for a month. There, I received my diagnosis of bipolar disorder and psych meds for the first time and graduated with a Ph.D. later. I had a Master’s degree in Religion and Culture—culture being literature—from Harvard University. Through Harvard and into the early years of my Ph.D. program, I rode a hypomanic high. High, but not too high. Overmedicated for 27 years, lethargy and avolition robbed my competencies. Naturopathic healing got me rethinking my medication dosage. My psychiatrist courageously worked with me and titrated me lower. First, my will returned. Then, the joy of my former piano playing and practicing. I gradually recovered competencies while adding to them. Now, they exceed even my abilities before bipolar disorder. I wrote poetry in earnest, now, not as an avocation. I write poetry.”

Elizabeth Brulé Farrell



ENOUGH

He asked me if I was getting enough sunshine
while leaning into my car window.

Maybe he thought my skin looked too pale,
or my mood seemed too melancholy.

Handing me a receipt after pumping gas,
he said he was always looking for it.

Stood beneath the sun every chance he got,
in-between customers who should do the same.

You must look up for the radiance, take it
all inside, make sure you have enough.



CHANGING DIRECTION

A mouthful of water and it's over.
I swish and spit it out. A salty death
I don't want anymore. Gulping air
my arms reach toward shore, pushed
by heavy rolling waves as I kick harder,
my muscles cramping with fatigue.
Closer to the coastline I float and rest,
the romance of drowning finally gone.



WHAT WILL BLOOM

She cradles the injured plant
with a promise of recovery,
mixing bone meal and blessings
with her thick gloved fingers.

The heels of her hands push
a collar of earth around its base
before she rises to her feet,
hope blooming inside her.



WINGS

The birds flit before the window,
land with feathers folded down
in bright red, dark gray, blue.
Each kind with its own song.

So simple to watch them,
all else falls away. We do not
talk of illness, only are glad
to spend the time together.



SLOW WALKING

There is a shift in my stride.
Gone from fast limbed to slow,
no more rushing through the hours.

I am becoming a connoisseur
of the corner, the neighborhood,
anywhere sauntering steps take me.

Everything appearing in focus
as never before.



Elizabeth Brulé Farrell grew up in a house where the fallout from a chronically depressed mother affected her outlook on life. She became a young observer of her mother's repeated suicide attempts and survived her sister's fatality by her own hand. As an adult utilizing EMDR and cognitive behavioral therapy, she came to understand she could reframe her past and present views in transformative and positive ways. To this end she aims to tell the truth in poem-making while also finding balance with both pain and joy. She worked as an advertising copywriter in Chicago and a writer-in-residence in some Massachusetts public school systems, encouraging students to find their own words and confidently express them. She has been the recipient of the Louise Bogan Memorial Award for Poetry, published in many anthologies, and is grateful to have the supportive community of The Awakenings Review include her work.

Linda Logan



GENE

Shoes (1939)

I heard I had an Italian aunt who would sit under a tree on the mountain for weeks at a time. Relatives urged her to come home. They carried up her small children, they left her baskets of food, (my father once brought her the head of a sunflower), but she was intransigent. Some days she would rake her nails along her arms until they bled. But most of the time, she spent the days tracing the stitching on her shoes with a blade of grass. When she felt better, she returned to the village. Thinner, with a feral look in her eyes.

Handkerchief (1960)

My father always wore a suit, even on weekends. They were, as was he, dark, serious, composed. I used to watch my mother iron his clothes in the morning. His white handkerchiefs—the easiest part of her task—were left for last. A mist of starch, a light press, and they were done. On summer nights, my father and I walked around the neighborhood after dinner. I would often get a bloody nose before we reached the playground. Never a trickle, it was hemorrhagic. My hands were soaked, my clothing stained, the metallic taste of blood filled my throat. My father's handkerchief (front right pants pocket) and his firm pinch of my nose staunched the flow. With my head tilted back and handkerchief drooped over my face, we slowly walked home, hoping not to disturb the nesting clot.

Dress (1990)

A week before he died, my father bought me the dress I would wear to his funeral. I had an afternoon pass from 12-K, the hospital's locked psych unit, and he picked me up to go to lunch. It was summer: hot and humid. Inside the restaurant the air was gelid. My father draped his still-warm jacket over my shoulders. I ordered a shrimp cocktail.

“And?” he said.

“I'm fine, Dad,” I said. “They're discharging me next week.”

I picked at the shrimp. Ate two, left three. The waiter approached with dessert menus. My father waved him off. After lunch, he took me to a clothes boutique next door.

“Pick something out,” he said.

“I don’t really need anything. It’s not like I’ll be going anywhere.”

“I want to buy something nice for you. To celebrate your discharge.”

He hovered over me as I flipped through the racks. Paisleys, plaids, stripes. No, no, no. Then, a simple black dress. The salesgirl went in the back and found a size 00. She folded and wrapped the dress elaborately, ceremoniously, in a way that made me think of Japanese theater. I returned to the unit with the tissue and beribboned package and put it in the metal locker in my room. Three days before my discharge, an errant clot of blood journeyed to my father’s heart. I got a pass to go to his funeral.

Fedora (1989)

At 9:30 every morning, the mental health aid buzzed my father into 12-K. “The man with the brown hat is here,” he announced. I took my father’s hand and led him to the long table in the day room where several other patients had already gathered to wait for the Visitor, the Oracle, the Survivor. They knew his story. The doctors knew it, the nurses knew it. My father spent 14 months in this hospital after he was felled by manic-depression—the same disorder that brought me there fifteen years later.

My first day on the unit, a nurse told me, “I was here when your father got a pass to go to your wedding.” I remembered that day: my 105-pound father dug his nails so deeply in my arm as we walked down the aisle, a line of beaded blood dotted my forearm when we reached the altar. Now restored after a handful of lithium salts and an assortment of amber vials, he sat at our table in the day room drinking tepid coffee from a Styrofoam cup telling us this would pass, we would get better, we would endure—atoning for his mangled gene.

Linda Logan



Linda Logan is a writer and artist living in the Chicago area. Her creative nonfiction article “The Problem with How We Treat Bipolar Disorder” was published in The New York Times Magazine in 2013 and selected as a Notable Mention in Best American Essays 2014. Outside published her essay on storm chasing in Tornado Alley in 2020. Her novella, Body Ghost, was recently selected as a semi-finalist in Black Lawrence Press’s Big Moose competition, a semi-finalist in Black Lawrence Press’s Hudson Prize, and longlisted for Craft’s novelette contest and is currently seeking a publisher. “Gene” is her second appearance in The Awakenings Review.



CONSIDERING THE POSSIBILITIES FOR AI AND FINE LITERATURE

My relationship with AI is one of skepticism, as I hold an MA in English Literature from the University of Maryland and am somewhat of a Luddite. My husband, however, is technical and works in the field of VR. He is a fan of ChatGPT*, as is my son, who, like his father, has a degree in Physics. My son works with AI for video gaming; my husband works with leading-edge VR (virtual reality). I have, therefore, been in the company of people, in this case, close family, for whom AI is becoming an increasingly relied-upon tool, and, over the past three years, have seen the evolution of ChatGPT. Each iteration is faster and more adept at accessing information, writing articulate responses, and doing thoughtful editing.

This close-up viewpoint leads me to the belief that there will be benefits to using ChatGPT and other AI-based tools for the population at large, specifically for those who suffer from mental illness. When one engages with AI, an abundant source of information on any topic is rendered quickly in a user-friendly fashion. The resulting responses are balanced. Because the speaker has no pathos, all answers carry a neutral tone. This can be seen as positive rather than negative. As humans, we are trained to survive in a hostile world and hold a negativity bias; that is, we actually look for and notice negative factors in our environment more than those that are non-threatening.

With AI-generated material, whether the query comes from a person who suffers from autism, depression, or suicidal ideation, there is no effect. Emotions simply don't exist. It's as if one were talking to the character Mr. Spock from Star Trek.

"What helps chronic pain?" I asked ChatGPT 4.0 this question. The reply was helpful and nonjudgmental. I learned nothing new, but I felt reassured that my approach to this ongoing problem is appropriate and requires no adjustment.

With respect to literature, I just finished rereading Albert Camus's *The Stranger* for the fifth time over as many decades. While we may not expect a chatbot developed by OpenAI to write anything approaching *The Stranger*, AI is like a cane for the blind. It serves a purpose: discovering where the curb lies. To extend the metaphor, AI has no eyes, nor does it contain a spark of creativity.

One can steer the conversation by giving specific cues and directions. Currently, the result is precious and barely tolerable.

Here is one example:

Me: Tell me a very short, dark, and edgy story about a married couple who are starting to suffer from dementia. No happy ending.

ChatGPT:

In the quiet of their home, Sarah watched her husband, David, fumble with his keys for the third time that day. His hands trembled, but she couldn't remember why.

"Do we live here?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"I don't know," she replied, staring at the door, unsure of who was supposed to answer.

As dusk fell, they wandered into separate rooms, strangers in a house full of forgotten memories, both slipping into the dark.

Here is an exploration of AI's understanding of the spectrum of autism and its ability to employ different points of view. I ask for poems about autism from different perspectives and with different directions for poetic style:

Poem from a "Normal" Person About an Autistic Person

Across the Silent Sea

I watch you from the shore of my understanding,
As you navigate a world I cannot see.
Your eyes reflect a depth so commanding,
Yet drift away when they encounter me.

You dance to melodies I cannot hear,
Lost in rhythms only you can know.
I reach out, but the distance is clear—
A silent sea between us starts to grow.

Your fingers trace the air in secret patterns,
Painting stories written in the sky.
I long to learn the language that matters,
To bridge the gap between your soul and mine.

Though words may fail to build that passage,
Your presence writes a poem on my heart.
(Italics mine)

I want to emphasize that last line for two reasons. There is *Ars Poetica* here. The term *Ars Poetica* refers to a poem that explains the “art of poetry” or a meditation on poetry using the form and techniques of a poem. While precious, this piece holds the understanding that someone challenged by autism may need overstatement in order to grasp how special they are in being neurodivergent. Secondly, this ending couplet doesn’t rhyme, while the preceding lines are sing-song, undercutting any possible emotion this poem could have.

Here is another example using a different point of view:

Poem from an Autistic Person about an Autistic Person

Inner Worlds

In a tapestry of thoughts, I weave my days,
Threads of logic, colors bright and pure.
The outside world moves in a puzzled haze,
But in my mind, each pattern feels secure.

Echoes of footsteps fade into the air,
Conversations flow like distant streams.
Eye contact is a weight I cannot bear,
I find my truth within these silent dreams.

They call me distant, say I'm hard to find,
But galaxies reside within my reach.
If you could journey deep inside my mind,
You'd see the stars have lessons they can teach.

We are not lost, just traveling afar—
Exploring worlds beyond the brightest star.

I prefer the first poem. Other readers may have different preferences, but the message is clear. ChatGPT can create rudimentary literature that passes a low bar, similar to an adolescent who begins to write without having studied or read any of the great writers. It is, however, interesting that asking for varied points of view is an instruction that AI can carry out. In the following two examples, the bot was given the same prompt but asked to write in free verse:

Poem from a "Normal" Person About an Autistic Person:

Between Worlds

You stand beside me, yet your eyes drift to horizons unseen. Hands twist
and fold,
creating origami of invisible cranes.
I speak, and my words seem to flutter past you, like leaves skimming over
water.
I wonder what melodies you hear on the silence that envelops you.
There's a universe inside you, stars arranged in patterns I can't decipher. I
reach out,
not to pull you into mine, but to glimpse the constellations in yours.
In your quiet, there is depth; in your stillness, a journey. Perhaps connection
isn't
a bridge, but a shared sky where different stars can shine.
(2) Poem from an Autistic Person About an Autistic Person

My Spectrum

Colors breathe and shadows dance; I feel the weight of sound, The texture
of
time beneath my fingers. Words are fragments, pieces of a mosaic I'm still
assembling.
Eye contact is a river current— Strong, unyielding. I prefer the steady
ground
of looking within.
They label me, but labels are for jars, not people. I am not a puzzle to be
solved,
but a story unfolding, each page a different hue.
In my world, details sing, Patterns hold the universe together. I am whole, A
complete spectrum in a world of singular shades.

I like the line in the second free verse piece: "...labels are for jars, not people." Otherwise, I find the result stale and cliché.

Ultimately, AI seems to grasp the difficulties of living with autism, yet its ability to create literature remains questionable. Pitfalls include the fact that if students use AI to write, they will never develop their own particular voice, rhetoric, and style. In addition, students who get summaries of literary works most definitely miss out on the joy and personal growth that comes from the simple act of reading literature. Certain benefits may eventually counter these

problems in that AI, as an ever-present editor for language-challenged people, could increase the quality of communication. Only time will tell.

*ChatGPT is a chatbot and virtual assistant developed by OpenAI and launched on November 30, 2022. Based on large language models (LLMs), it enables users to refine and steer a conversation towards a desired length, format, style, level of detail, and language. [*Wikipedia*](#).



***Judith Skillman** is the author of twenty collections of poetry. Her work has appeared in Cimarron Review, Commonweal, Threepenny Review and other literary journals. She is the recipient of awards from the Academy of American Poets, Artist Trust, Washington State Arts Commission, and Floating Bridge Press. Her connection to mental illness includes GAD (Generalized Anxiety Disorder), PTSD, and chronic pain due to a pedestrian accident. This essay relies on her husband, Tom Skillman's expertise in soliciting poems from Chat GPT.*



AI AND I

Is writing for information only? Good writing is not. I have taught university English the same way that I was taught writing. Good English writing isn't only the knowledge content one expresses. English writing is about the *way* one expresses the knowledge content. At my Harvard commencement, the keynote speaker said that a Liberal Arts education teaches students to express complex ideas in simple form.

But it isn't simple form alone. It is a writing style. We write in the active voice with our verbs, not the passive voice. Good English writing today avoids complicated sentences with cumbersome clauses. We prefer a writer to break up one sentence with many ideas into several short sentences, each with a simple idea. Hemingway taught us to do that after Henry James buried us with cumbersome complexity.

Hemingway, excerpt from *The Sun Also Rises*:

I was out in the hot sun on the steps of the cathedral, and the forefingers and the thumb of my right hand were still damp, and I felt them dry in the sun.

Henry James, excerpt from *What Maisey Knew*:

The father, who, though bespattered from head to foot, had made good his case, was, in pursuance of this triumph, appointed to keep her: it was not so much that the mother's character had been more absolutely damaged as that the brilliancy of a lady's complexion (and this lady's, in court, was immensely remarked) might be more regarded as showing the spots.

Probably the most important aspect of good English writing is the flow of emotion. Writing and living are both affect and cognition—emotion and thought, feelings and ideas, heart and mind. When teachers design courses, they are required to write both affective and cognitive learning goals. Writing is both, too.

I do not believe that AI can sustain a seamless emotional flow. Good writing does. We do not often pay attention to the emotional flow of writing. That is because we feel it and don't consciously pay attention to our feelings.

Except in poetry. In poetry, we pay more conscious and deliberate attention to the emotion in writing. But it's that way with all writing. Hemingway once remarked on how great a difference there is between "For whom the bell tolls;" and "Who does the bell toll for?" (Paraphrasing Hemingway) I will go a little further, mischievously: "Again with that bell? Who is it this time?" These nuances that everyone readily catches are emotions captured through sequences of words. I do not believe that AI can do that.

I recently wrote an inspirational piece about Professor Brian Daldorph's creative writing program in The Douglas County Jail (Awakenings Project Newsletter Fall 2024). Dr. Daldorph's creative writing program facilitated personal reflection and self-understanding among incarcerated individuals. It gave some incarcerated individuals insight into how their lives came to be the way they came to be. This allowed them to intervene in their own lives and break the cycle of recidivism. Inspiring. Inspiring hope. Hope from hopelessness.

My piece on Dr. Daldorph's writing program was run through an AI program, and all the inspiration was excised from it. It read like a refrigerator instruction manual. And it was written in bad English. If a piece about drug addiction and jail and liberation from the cycle of abuse is an information-only piece, then AI would not be a problem. However, that would cheapen Dr. Daldorph's mission. But AI's writing style would still be a problem. It was grammatically correct but clumsy, complicated, and choppy stylistically. As an English teacher, I would have gotten out my red pen and done significant editing.

If living were on a need-to-know-basis, and if knowing meant only data, I suppose AI would be fine and dandy. (Would AI know how abysmal a language construction, "fine and dandy" is?) Then, AI writing that reads like a refrigerator repair manual would not be a problem.

But living is the heart when living matters. Living is wit, whimsy, reverie, daydreaming, stream of consciousness, ecstasy, trauma, despair, joy and tears. If AI can capture that, as good writing can, then let it. I have no argument.

I issue a challenge to AI: I wonder if the *Awakenings Review* Editor can instruct AI to write a piece from scratch, contrasting AI writing with human writing. Specifically, I do not wish AI to edit this article and adapt the ideas I have thought up and arranged into this sequence. Let's see if AI can think for itself, organize its own ideas, and write for itself. Then, I am also willing to see what it does with my writing style. I am also interested in seeing how AI's writing style compares with my writing style. Hopefully, it will not be like a Hemingway/James comparison and contrast.

It might be fun to try this. Too bad AI can't have fun, I don't think.

I can.

Dave Fekete



***Dave Fekete**, a graduate of Harvard and the University of Virginia, lives in Edmonton, Alberta, and writes on religion, philosophy, and culture. He is also a poet and an avid musician.*

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