The Awakenings Review

Fall 2025 | Volume 12, Number 2

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

The Awakenings Review

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Volume 12 — Number 2

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The striking photograph on the front cover of this issue was taken by **William Leland**. It captures a vivid patch of *Coleus scutellarioides*, a colorful ground cover known for its richly patterned foliage. Leland took the photograph at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Illinois, where the plant's vibrant hues caught his attention. A photographer since his teens, Leland has received recognition for his work, including a first-place award in spot photography from the Illinois Press Association during his tenure as a photojournalist for the *Glen Ellyn News*. In addition to his creative accomplishments, Leland lives with schizoaffective disorder—an experience that informs both his artistic vision and his resilience.

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Poetry, essay, and short story by:

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 review these submission guidelines carefully before sending your work. After reading 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**. Except in rare instances, we only accept submissions via email. We strongly discourage simultaneous submissions.

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.

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 attributed. 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

Stories have the power to illuminate the darkest corners of human experience, offering both solace and understanding to those who walk similar paths. As I prepare to introduce you to the 25th Anniversary issue of *The Awakenings Review*, I find myself reflecting back on one particular Sunday afternoon when my children had returned to their own lives, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the weight of loving someone whose mental health journey differs so dramatically from the hopeful narratives we see on screen. What began as an afternoon of mindless entertainment became a profound meditation on the gap between the stories we wish we could tell and the ones we actually live. It is precisely this tension—between hope and struggle, between the ideal and the real—that makes the work of *The Awakenings Review* so vital and necessary.

By that Sunday afternoon, my oldest son had left our house to go back to his girlfriend's apartment in Connecticut, the youngest child departed with his friend to return to his junior year at Georgetown University, and my daughter and her boyfriend drove to their place two hours south of us in Yarmouth, Maine.

I collapsed on the leather sofa in our family room, where I picked up the remote and hoped to be carried off into the land of insipid drama. I clicked on Amazon and the "Modern Love" series popped up on the screen. Perfect, I thought, as daylight grew dim and the sky clouded over. I was a fan of the New York Times' column *Modern Love,* which is about relationships, and I sank deeper into the sofa, clicked play, and stared hopefully at the screen.

In episode three, "Take Me as I Am, Whoever I Am," a woman named Lexi (played by Anne Hathaway), who lives with bipolar disorder, meets a charming and handsome man, Jeff (played by Gary Carr) in the produce section of the grocery store. At first, Lexi appears to have it all: she is beautiful, charismatic, and has a gorgeous Manhattan apartment. She flirts with Jeff next to the oranges and lands a date in ten minutes. But then we see her depression hit her like an unexpected and unwelcome guest. She loses her job as a lawyer and hides her illness from everyone in her life, including Jeff. The episode closes out with a shot of her gleefully peddling her bike, a brown wicker basket attached to the handlebars, down a busy New York City street. She looks radiant as she tells us, "I've finally accepted that there is no cure for the chemical imbalance in my brain, any more than there is a cure for love. But there's a little yellow pill I'm very fond of, and a pale blue one, and some pretty pink capsules, and a handful of other colors that have turned my life around. Under their influence, I'm a different person yet again, neither Madame Bovary nor Hester Prynne, but someone in between. I have moods but they don't send me spiraling into an alternate persona."

The room was dim by the time the credits rolled. I picked up the remote and clicked off the television. The screen went black, but I didn't get up. My oldest son was not riding his bike off into the soft glow of the evening, reflecting confidently and affectionately about the positive outcome of his medications for bipolar disorder.

To have a child with mental illness is to live my life trying to stand on a ball. Sometimes I find myself surprisingly balanced, wobbly, but standing tall on the ball. Other times, I am completely off balance, falling off the ball, trying to figure out how to climb back on and regain my balance. It is, in some ways, my son's ball on which I had to balance. Whenever he falls off, my husband and I feel called to pick him up and somehow carefully and without the help of medication, because he refuses to take it, place him back on the ball.

I thought about Lexi's parents and wondered where they were in this story of her mental illness. I imagine hugging Lexi's mother in a warm, understanding embrace. She would whisper in my ear, "Don't worry, dear. It will all work out."

"No," I tell her, my hands on her shoulders, staring into her eyes, "My son won't take the little pills that Lexi takes."

"Oh," she would say, her voice dripping with sorrow, stepping aside, forcing my hands to fall off her shoulders. "Then, you will have to write a different ending to your Modern Love Story."

***

I am struck by the honesty, integrity, and courage of each writer who shares a story with *The Awakenings Review,* and I am grateful that I get to read each one. *The Awakenings Review* provides writers and readers a safe space in which to foster connections, gain new perspectives, process emotions, and ultimately reduce the shame too frequently associated with mental illnesses. Writing narratives about our experiences allows us to integrate our experiences and share them with the world, which can be incredibly therapeutic.

This year, we celebrate the 25th Anniversary of *The Awakenings Review*. Although each publication brings new and different perspectives, our mission has remained the same: we seek submissions that honestly explore mental health challenges, whether through personal experiences, those of a family member, or close friend, that bring light to the journey of moving forward, offering insight and resilience without being demoralizing. I congratulate the founders of the Review, the editors, but particularly the contributors who offer their truths so the world may experience the value of the shared story.

Judith Sandler
Assistant Editor

Preface: A Quarter Century of Literary Healing

This issue represents a remarkable milestone: the 25th anniversary of *The Awakenings Review*. What began in 2000 as an ambitious extension of an art show has evolved into a respected voice at the intersection of literature and mental health, now publishing twice annually and reaching readers around the world.

Our origins trace back to 1997, when the Awakenings Art Show debuted at the annual conference of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Illinois. The show's tremendous success ignited a movement, demonstrating the profound power of artistic expression in the healing journey of those living with mental illness. Three years later, we expanded this vision beyond visual arts to embrace the written word.

The timing was fortuitous. Working as an editor for the journal *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Skills* at the University of Chicago's Department of Psychiatry, I had the opportunity to collaborate with Dr. Patrick Corrigan, director of the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation. Dr. Corrigan's forward-thinking leadership proved instrumental when I proposed launching a literary journal under the Awakenings Project. Having witnessed the impact of our art shows, he immediately grasped the potential and provided the seed funding that brought *The Awakenings Review* to life in 2000.

The journey from conception to our current stature has been marked by periods of both challenge and triumph. In our early years, we maintained a modest pace, publishing annually or sometimes stretching to eighteen months between issues during quieter periods. However, recent years have witnessed a renaissance. The literary community's growing recognition of our mission has breathed new life into our endeavor, enabling us to establish our current twice-yearly publication schedule.

This recognition has manifested in meaningful ways. Our 20th anniversary issue in Fall 2020 earned a "Best of Category" award from The Great Lakes Graphics Association, followed immediately by an "Award of Excellence" for our Fall 2021 issue. The spring of 2023 marked another evolution as we transitioned from black and white to full-color covers, symbolizing both our growth and our commitment to showcasing the vibrant creativity of our contributors.

Perhaps most significantly, September 2024 brought national recognition when Mental Health America honored *The Awakenings Review* with a prestigious Media Award. This acknowledgment of our mission, reach, and dedicated work validates not only our efforts but the voices of every writer who has shared their journey through our pages.

As we celebrate this 25th anniversary, we reflect on the hundreds of stories, poems, and essays that have found their home within our pages—each one a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of creative expression. The path from a single art show in 1997 to a nationally rec-

ognized literary journal speaks to something larger than institutional success; it speaks to the enduring need for platforms where healing and artistry intersect.

The Awakenings Review continues to stand as proof that literature can be both medicine and art, that stories shared can become bridges built, and that in the vulnerable act of creation, we find not only our individual voices but our collective strength.

I am honored now to share some words of tribute and support from members of our distinguished advisory board.

"Awakenings" is a godsend to those who know mental illness personally, those who treat and study it, and to those in the public who wish to understand it better. We learn from "Awakenings" not only about suffering but about grit and capacity and beauty and compassion as well. Congratulations to the founders and editors, but most particularly to the courage and creativity of the contributors.

Kay Redfield Jamison, Ph.D.
The Dalio Professor in Mood Disorders
Professor of Psychiatry
The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

"I find that *The Awakenings Review* provides a unique place, not only is it an outstanding literary journal, but it is run by people with a mental illness who have the lived experience. The founders had a vision and have kept it for 25 years. What an admirable idea that has helped many in the last 25 years. Keep up the good work."

Mary Lou Lowry, JD, MS, mental health advocate.

For at least 100 years, the mainstream has been "otherizing" people with mental health struggles. Labeled as "abnormal" and worse. Jailed. Involuntarily hospitalized. Medicated forcibly. In the memory of people alive today, in some parts of the world, struggling mentally could even lead to involuntary sterilization and state-ordered death. The fact is that it is not 1 out of 5 people with a mental disorder; it is 5 out of 5 people who need help in learning how to be more mentally resilient. What better way to start such a universally important journey than to read the stories of those who've "been there." AR has been a beacon of hope and wisdom for a quarter of a century. It's a light in the darkness for everyone.

Steven C. Hayes, Ph.D., Author of "A Liberated Mind"
Foundation Professor of Psychology Emeritus,
University of Nevada, Reno

Over its groundbreaking 25 years of publication, *The Awakenings Review* has come to fill a singular place in the literary universe. While its offerings are of deep value in their own right—powerful, moving, and full of insight—they also perform undeniable service to both the artists and their readers, not just in therapeutic terms but in their insistence on the meaningfulness of ongoing exploration.

David Lynn, Ph.D.,
Editor Emeritus, The Kenyon Review

I began writing poetry in earnest when I turned seventy-five, when the writing of poetry, like painting and woodworking, is often portrayed as the dilettantism of the senile. It has not been so for me (I hope). It has provided a window, albeit dark and vague, on the great questions of life — Gauguin's questions, which have plagued me most of my life, and could be quieted only with alcohol. Reading and contributing to Awakenings Review have then, in a unique way, contributed to my poetry and to my well-being.

Lloyd Jacobs, MD
Professor of Surgery, Univ. of Michigan (retired)
Associate Editor, The Awakenings Review

I am delighted that *The Awakenings Review* has reached its 25th anniversary. The journal is a beacon of light for many experiencing a dark night as well as their direct creation. I look forward to receiving my biannual copy, and I wish the journal many more successful years!

Dost Öngür, MD, Ph.D.
William P. and Henry B. Test Professor of Psychiatry
McLean Hospital, Harvard Medical School

Book Review

Mary Anna Scenga Kruch

GRACE NOTES: A MEMOIR IN POETRY & PROSE

Goldfish Press (2021)
Review by Carol Ann Wilson

Celebrating a life infused with nature, beauty, and love, Mary Anna Scenga Kruch's *Grace Notes: A Memoir in Poetry & Prose* invites the reader to savor these elements of her world as one would a full-bodied Italian wine. It's an easy invitation to accept as evocative imagery and layered insights tempt one from poem to poem, with narratives interspersed like supportive commas, and popular songs as section titles, their occasional lyrics providing emphasis.

Writing about nature's allure in "Farm Meditations: Midwinter," Kruch evokes the joy of discovery in "deer outlines/on beds of decades-old red pine needles... under strongly scented branches." In "Image," she paints a pair of sleek swans swimming below "rain-draped cypress", who do not notice their dual reflections, "expressing reverse sides/of themselves like humans/who impart one image/to the world keep another for private study."

Family threads are apparent throughout the book, in shades of vulnerability. From "The Last Word," which speaks to what will become her sister's estrangement, ". . . we did not know the depth of my sister's sorrow," to "Homecoming: Pofi, Italy," telling of Kruch's delight in meeting her Italian father's extended family, Kruch guides us through a range of familial experiences. Visiting aunts, uncles, cousins, Kruch enjoys the harvests of the farm with its olive grove, pomegranate trees, and vineyard, gratified to know "that their arms will open for me when I return." She meets those "who did not live to see me cross the ocean to find them" through black and white photographs displayed for her.

An early line in the book's opening poem, "Stereoscope," highlights the opportunity for disappointment: "life played out in shades of gray for my mother, but she longed to view it in colors." As newlyweds, Kruch's parents lived with her father's parents, while that longing to see life in colors led them to work hard and save money to buy a home and travel to all of the national

parks. They did save enough for their own home, but three children in a short space of time kept them from the parks. When her father bought her mother a View Master, she could then see those parks in three dimensions and tell stories about them to her children, which she did with gusto.

A full life includes challenges, and Kruch doesn't shy away from them. In the section titled "Turn, Turn, Turn," Kruch holds a steady gaze as she explores the impact of rape by an uncle, telling us in "In and among the Unspoken Year," "My uncle took a special interest in me, often told me to sit on his lap . . ." She also speaks of physical abuse by a boyfriend, depression, PTSD, shame and loss.

This steadiness is particularly moving when Kruch writes about her husband, who suffers from PTSD resulting from his experiences in the Vietnam war. In "Midsummer," she writes of a boy drafted before his graduation "who knew his share of blood/and remained fatigued/pin-cushioned in metal." A prophetic and stunning line, "He was more than his wounds," tells us not only about her future husband, but also of her ability to see deeply and her willingness to do so. She understands the multidimensional nature of a life, while insisting that joy prevails. Hence the title, for even in troubles, one can find grace notes, and Kruch pens them through alluring poetry and spare, clean prose, signifying that nothing notable be silenced.

Revisiting the Detroit home and neighborhood in which she grew up, Kruch's "Porches on Springfield Street" conjures the times through references to playing store with her "father's discarded, wide,/odd-patterned neckties," dancing "when the radio played 'Blue Suede Shoes,'" and "reading *Little Lulu* comics by flashlight." And, in classic Kruch fashion, she calls to mind the fluidity of time and its passing through "windows broken in houses still standing." She asks a lone man on the deserted street about the wonderful maple trees that had shaded the front porch. "All gone, he told me. Long gone."

From Kruch's appeal to the senses, "grilled cheese/in a fry pan/ hissing brown around the edges," and "the silence of a splintered table," to her passion in taking on social issues, ". . . another young black man shot/seven times at close range/in the presence of his children," Kruch writes with a compelling straightforwardness. At the same time, as with poets Mary Oliver and David Whyte, her accessible writing remains richly layered, complete with those redeeming grace notes.

An educator for more than four decades, ***Carol Ann Wilson's*** *work with public schools and higher education institutions focused on issues of democracy and social justice, as did her writing. As an educator, she was involved with students and adults dealing with mental illnesses, primarily depression and PTSD. Her creative nonfiction also includes* Still Point of the Turning World: The Life of Gia-fu Feng*, which won Foreword Review's Book of the Year Award. Her essays have appeared in* Under the Gum Tree, The Write Launch, Wrath-Bearing Tree*, and bookscover2cover and* Unlimited Literature. *Carol lives and writes in Boulder, Colorado. For more information, please see https://carolannwilson.info*

Book Review

Christine Andersen

TO MAGGIE WHEREVER YOU'VE GONE

Choeofpleirn Press (2025)
Review by Ruth J. Heflin, Ph.D.

When I first read Christine Andersen's *To Maggie Wherever You've Gone*, her poems helped me to remember a similar traumatic time when my family simply did not want to deal with the suicide of a beloved cousin. Ignoring such trauma can lead to more trauma, something addressed in *To Maggie* through Andersen's adopted persona—a stepmother who berates herself for missing the early signs, struggles to understand her stepdaughter's self-destructive tendencies, then realizes what she has learned, both about Maggie herself, and about her own needs and anxieties. Only when we confront our own weaknesses and accept them as part of us do we truly heal from trauma and grow as human beings.

To this day, I have no idea why my cousin killed himself, but Andersen does a great job of exploring the possible reasons why Maggie chose to die rather than live. Andersen's narrator learns in the poem, "Nude Model," that the young woman was raped by a photographer who asked her to pose for nudes. Hauntingly, we also learn in "Snapshots from the Family Album" that Maggie was prescribed antidepressants at 12 years old and, by 16, was getting drunk at school, so the young woman's traumas started early and apparently kept coming. Repeatedly, according to "Hospital, Hospital," Maggie is diagnosed with "Borderline Personality Disorder and/or dissociation," but she seems to, once again, refuse the "Dialectical Behavioral Therapy" prescribed.

Like a detective examining clues, "Things You Left" lists many of the items Maggie left behind, including books like *Lolita* and *The Bell Jar*, and, even though she denied allowing photographers to shoot nude photos of her, a "laptop loaded with nude photos from dozens of modeling shoots."

Andersen's stepmother persona, clearly no stranger to depression and suicidal thoughts, seeks help from a therapist because, as she says to Maggie's ghost in the poem "The Weight of You," "the weight of you is pendulous / still straining all around."

A suicide in the family sends ripples of emotion and pain throughout a family, and it's almost impossible to tell when or where those ripples will land or how they will affect people they strike. Maggie's father was especially disturbed by his daughter's death, choosing to flirt with death himself when he runs at night. In the poem, "Poem for Your 24th Birthday," Andersen's narrator reports that "Later a friend / told me she saw/ him in her headlights/ running full speed / down the center / of Rte. 88…/…but couldn't see/ what chased him."

One of the most heart-rending consequences of a family member's death is seeing that beloved person everywhere after they are gone. In "How Many Times More—" Andersen's stepmother character laments, "Sometimes my eyes linger too long / looking for resemblance" in the young women she sees who look like Maggie.

Because suicidal thoughts can be contagious, the narrator ponders if "each of us / in our own dark hour" are "absolutely sure that we / would never jump." Fighting self-destructive impulses can be challenging, but it can be done.

What is most striking about Andersen's style of poetry are her impactful endings, what I call a Classic Andersen Ending. Judge James P. Cooper agrees, noting that "the poems often end with resonant images and metaphors."

Healing from any trauma comes in many forms, but how we approach the self-inflicted death of a beloved family member speaks volumes about our abilities to cope through self-reflection, while avoiding the desire for self-recrimination. Andersen's stepmother persona takes us from her earliest regrets and actual anger toward her young stepdaughter for her self-destructive behavior, through the healing process, to finally coming to terms with the fact that, while we can love others deeply, we cannot take responsibility for their personal choices, nor can we castigate them or ourselves when the life ends in tragedy.

Healing, then, ultimately comes from learning to deal with, not just our loved one's personal tragedies, but also our own. The poems in *To Maggie Wherever You've Gone* take us through that healing process one step at a time to a place where "the forest buzzes with renewal."

Ruth J. Heflin, Ph.D., *did not predict Jesus would appear on the Benny Hinn show, but she did survive growing up in the buckle of the bible belt with the name "Ruth." She still lives there with two cats and a husband. Both humans often take the time to do fun things with their grown son. In her own time, Heflin*

practices her scholarly research skills to write Pitiless Bronze: A Postpatriarchal Examination of Prepatriarchal Cultures*, while also writing other things, like the screenplay* Mrs. Nash *and the collection of short stories,* Time Coven: Tales of Magic, Space, *and* Time Travel.

Sara Shea

VESSELS

For Drew Carter

One dark winter night, lost on a new campus, he fell—
stumbled over the edge of a stone retaining wall.
Fifteen feet—barely the height of a hoop
where he used to sink threes, his body fluid, whole.
Fifteen. The measure of everything changing at nineteen.

Air gave way. Cold concrete caught him—
a dropped bowl shattering on stone.
Bone splintered, skull cracked,
breath locked in his chest
until hands pressed—willed him back.

Lifeflight. Surgery. Midnight calls,
a mother pleading into the receiver.
Every parent's worst nightmare.
Doctors spoke in numbers:
traumatic brain injury, survival rates,
odds of waking, walking, speaking, remembering.

For weeks, silence.
His voice a stone behind his teeth,
his hands foreign, his mind a kiln too hot,
too fractured to hold what once was.

But healing begins in the hands—
the slow press of fingers into earth,
the weight of water in dust,
the turning of clay into something whole again.

Three years: to sip from a straw,
to drag his left leg forward,
to force his mouth around words
that could hold water again.

At nineteen he planned to study art.
At twenty-five, he found himself again—
not in words, not in school, but in art.
In the weight of mud, on the wheel.
The spin, the spiral, the steady pull
of something formless into form—
a bowl, a mug, a vessel for light,
for warmth, for holding what lingers.

He shapes and reshapes,
knowing the truth of fire—
that it hardens, that it breaks,
that it makes fragile things strong.
That even in shattering,
there is art,
there is making again,
there is always the shaping of hands.

In a gallery, a woman holds a vessel he crafted,
traces each hue and curve with her fingertips.
At home, she lifts the cup to her lips—
in quiet contemplation over chamomile,
she heals; feels whole again.

Now, in his studio, the wheel turns.
His hands steady the clay, his body
relearning its own weight
to make something whole again.
Something that can bear its own fire.

TOUCH TANK CREATURE

Six months after tests unravel
The riddle of my daughter's DNA,
we enter the ethereal light
of Miami's Aquarium.

Full-exome sequencing mapped
the twist in her code—
a rare disorder explaining
every delayed step,
each off-beat note
in her small, fierce life.

The neurologist,
clinical and precise,
said, *"See how she flaps*
when the world overwhelms her?
It's a stereotypic behavior—
repetitive, purposeless,
a symptom of autism."

I murmured, *"I think it calms her.*
It's how she speaks
in a language
too subtle for us to hear."

Now, at three, she leans
over the touch tank,
body humming with delight,
fingers dipping into a saltwater pool
where children gently summon
sea rays, conchs, starfish, and slow
drifting horseshoe crabs.

A sea ray—slick, silver, unhurried—
wriggles deliberately into her grasp.
In that suspended moment, she flaps
her hands in pure, uncontainable joy.
The ray flutters its fins (wings?)

in a soft, knowing rhythm;
a mirrored beat in a secret conversation.
He relaxes beneath her touch,
stays with her
as if recognizing a kindred spirit
in the language of movement.

Two beings, both marked by a wild, unspoken truth.
She laughs, flaps, her hands slap the surface,
the creature swims, flaps fins and flips in response,
rolling to reveal a white-satin belly,
in submission to her tickling touch.

This quiet conversation
of flapping and splashing
lingers in the tropical blue light,
each moment deepening
as tiny fingers and shimmering fins
entwine, until my daughter,
eyes brimming with wonder,
lifts her gaze to meet mine,
touches the graceful creature,
and whispers,
"Friend."

LAYERS OF CRAYON

She presses the crayon fiercely
into the paper, her hand scribbling
swift and frantic,
building up the color, layer upon layer,
like a silent storm, quick and erratic
as lightning.

Sunset oranges, bonfire reds,
pale pinks sinking into deep blues,
swirling beneath the surface,
deep water hues, opaque and slow.

The waxy tip of the crayon
melts away, a slow burn,
pooling like molten gold;
filling the paper's quiet spaces,
each stroke a bridge between
what's in her mind
and what lies in her hands.

Watching my daughter color.
It's like looking through deep water,
where the world holds its breath,
colors murky and rich,
layered, blending,
a sunken world of emotion
beneath the surface,
something I can almost touch,
but not quite.

It's all there - in textured weight
of a thought left behind, layered
like a seed buried deep
in the cool, wet earth.

It's all there, in the thickness of the crayon,
in the way she can't be still,
can't erase. Colors settle
like dust from a storm
in a world we only half-understand.

If I do not whisk the finished drawings
from her hands, she will tear them apart,
destroying them with the same fervor;
finding joy in all the scattered fragments
drifting off — *like a sand mandala*,
where the art is meant to disappear.

Sara Shea *received her BA from Kenyon College, where she served as Student Associate Editor for* The Kenyon Review. *Sara pursued graduate classes through the Great Smokies Writing Program, UNC Asheville, and Western Carolina University, where she studied under Ron Rash. Her stories and poems have appeared in* The Connecticut River Review, Quarterly West, The Key West Love Poetry Anthology, Amsterdam Review, Gaslamp Pulp *and* Petigru Review. *She is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships. More importantly, Sara is the mother of a rare child. Her 8-year-old daughter is one-in-a-million, diagnosed with a genetic difference called Wiedemann-Steiner Syndrome. Sara strives to raise awareness for special needs kiddos, and for all who have struggled with rare diagnoses or mental health challenges. She believes that art and poetry can help illuminate the challenges of those struggling in darkness.*

Kristy Snedden

SISTER SECRETS

I love a hush hush whisper
from your mouth to my ear,
that truth of you in me,
just us, bathing suits dripping
wet on the lake's wooden float.
Evidence of us kids, alive!

Me, a girl, blue checked bathing suit,
queen's shivery bones in charge
of the autumn lake, wrapped
in damp leaves, waving my scepter, waving
the lake and you to join me, to share
the hidden room behind the stairs.

Now in this cottage of secrets,
cast off the hush hush.
I like declarations that recall clean water,
send my words swimming through years
until they land like leaves on your quiet
face seeking solace, seeking whispers.

VAPOR

My sister took the tiny room, anything for privacy,
parents drinking in the living room
unless there were bats in the attic
that brought my dad running like a small boy
with a fly swatter. I snuck out the window
and dropped off the roof to spongy ground.
Our mother wasn't a mother at the cottage
so the front porch smelled of wet bathing suits
and shucked corn complements of us kids.
On the best nights my sister and I were on the deck,
harmonizing to the moon and its pearls of light,
the grown-ups visible through the window's yellow
light, vaporous as ghosts, setting us free.

BLUE ICE

My last option is to follow the blue ice
into night, into water that promises clean stories
but instead offers shards, fragments I piece together
with nonsensical endings. Hope was sparkly
until it too fragmented, slid into dusk.

I knock around the globe, touch the other humans,
one ghost to another, a giggle softer than air.

CALTECH SCIENCE EXCHANGE

"…when two particles become entangled, they remain connected even when separated by vast distance … when hundreds of particles become entangled, they still act as one unified object."

Before quantum physics I yawned
at science. Don't get me wrong, I love
my refrigerator and automatic pet food
dispenser. Because of science I can live
mostly with my mind on poetic journeys
from word to world whirling through
my *Poet's Hologram,* up and down
the glass elevator. And why not? When one
particle is up the other is down. Once
entangled I hiked Laurel Ridge
along with a doe and her fawn, a hawk,
my sister's blue kayak, and a Carolina
Chickadee. Everyone I love was there,
even my dead. Everyone I love.

Kristy Snedden *has been a trauma psychotherapist for forty-plus years. She is also a trauma survivor and is healing from PTSD and depression. She is a poet and artist whose creativity has informed, encouraged, and supported her continued healing. Her poetry has been nominated for Best of the Net and for a Pushcart Prize and appears or is forthcoming in various print and electronic journals and anthologies, most recently* Contemporary Verse 2 *and* storySouth*. Her debut collection,* That Broken Tooth, That Blue Tattoo*, is forthcoming from Indolent Press in 2026. Her chapbook,* Urchin to My Shell*, was short-listed for the Flume Poetry Prize. She writes poetry and creates art because it is the most fun she has ever had in her life. To learn more about her, visit www.kristysnedden.com*

Kathryn Vercillo

OH, YOU AGAIN: DRIVING THROUGH LIFE WITH DEPRESSION IN THE PASSENGER SEAT

Sometimes I imagine that I am a bus driver, navigating my way through the roads of life. If I am the bus driver, then Depression is one of my regular riders who appears on the bus now and then. I'm just doing my route, day in and day out, through fog and sunshine, traffic and clear lanes. Passengers are getting on and off at every stop, every day. Some are strangers I'll never see again, quick blips of feeling that come and go without notice. But many are regulars. A lot of those regulars are pretty neutral. We recognize one another with a mutual nod and go about our days. Hunger is usually like that for me. Hunger shows up every day and gets its needs met without much fuss, then disembarks until the next scheduled time. There is an order, a rhythm to most of it.

Then there's Depression. I live with double depression, so I have recurring bouts of major depression layered atop a steady undercurrent of persistent depressive disorder. It's not a daily rider, but it is a familiar one. One who has the audacity to act like they own a seat. It shows up regularly, sometimes predictably, sometimes like a surprise passenger pounding the door at an unscheduled stop. I've reacted in all kinds of ways over the years: ignoring it, refusing to let it on, allowing it to drive while I curled up in the back, feeling helpless and hopeless. But I've learned that the most effective approach is somewhere in the middle. I open the door, let it climb aboard, and greet it like a traveler I know well. "Oh, you again? Where are you going today?" It's a passenger. It can't drive. Not anymore.

I've been on this route a long time now. Decades. I know the stops well. The predictable ones and the surprise detours. And I know Depression's patterns. Sometimes it climbs aboard and sits quietly. Sometimes it amplifies all the other passengers, turns up the internal noise so that I can't hear myself think. Occasionally, it just sulks in the back, casting a chill over the entire vehicle. Other times, it yanks the emergency brake, disrupting everything and sending my life skidding to a halt. These days, I try to be polite but firm. You can ride, I say, but you will not take over.

When I was in my late twenties, I hit a wall. I crashed emotionally, unable to outrun the symptoms that had been quietly shaping my life since childhood. I was tired, overwhelmed, and desperate enough to consider that may-

be the problem wasn't that I was lazy or dramatic or not trying hard enough. Maybe I had a condition. Diagnosis gave me a vocabulary and a frame. Double depression. Dysthymia. Major depressive disorder. These were not just words. They were a lifeline. It was like being handed a compass after years of being lost in the dark. Finally, I had a map, or at least a rough sketch of one.

At the time, I leaned heavily on metaphors to make sense of what I was feeling. Depression wasn't me. It was something separate, something I could name, examine, and contain. People often spoke of the black dog, made famous by Churchill. But that metaphor never worked for me. My first dog as an adult was a black dog named Fuzzy, a creature I remember only with love and comfort. Depression didn't feel like her. It didn't lick my hand or ask to be let outside. It didn't sit loyally at my feet. That metaphor made no sense in my world.

Some described depression as an elephant on the chest, the heavy pressure of something too large to move. That image landed closer to the truth. There are days when I feel that unbearable weight, like something vast and ancient is pressing down on me. And there's a resonance to that image too, because it captures the immobility, the breathlessness. I've even described it as the broken air conditioning on my bus. A presence that doesn't make itself immediately visible but distorts the entire experience, making every mile harder.

But the metaphor that's held up over time, the one that continues to evolve with me, is the bus. I return to it again and again because it gives me agency. I am the one navigating. Depression is a rider, not the engine. Even when it gets rowdy, even when it tries to distract or sabotage, I still set the course. I still choose where to stop. I choose who gets on and who gets off.

These metaphors helped. They gave shape to an experience that was otherwise nebulous and slippery. They gave me something to hold onto. But as I moved into my forties, I found that the metaphors needed to evolve too. They needed to account for the complexity and layering of life.

Depression isn't the same now. Or maybe it is, and my understanding of it is different. Twenty years on SSRIs. Twenty years on hormonal birth control. The slow hormonal erosion of perimenopause. The grief of lost relationships, the passing of beloved pets, the death of my father. The slipping away of youth, of once-bright certainties, of uncomplicated dreams. These losses have accumulated like sediment.

Life adds layers. Society changes, and so do we. New frames emerged that helped me redefine my experience: disability, chronic illness, and neurodivergence. They offered different kinds of truths.

I've been a writer for over two decades. But claiming that title has not always been easy. I've worked with artists and creatives, many of them women, many from marginalized communities, and I've seen how complicated that

claiming can be. For a long time, I wasn't sure if I was allowed to say it. I used phrases like "I write" or "I do some freelance work." I minimized. I hedged. I feared that naming myself "writer" would require a level of success, validation, and productivity I couldn't guarantee.

But eventually, I came to understand that the title is not a reward. It is a declaration. A reclamation. I am a writer. I am an artist. That claim connects me to a lineage, a practice, a purpose. It reminds me that I shape narratives, including the ones I tell about myself. Now, I say I'm a writer-artist. It gives me space to breathe. Room for contradiction and change. Room for both joy and doubt. And it reminds me that my creative identity and my mental health are not separate journeys. They are parallel lines, spiraling through the same landscape.

Part of what gives that title weight is the community that has grown from it. I have spent nearly two decades writing about the relationship between art and mental health. In the beginning, my focus was on crochet as a form of therapy. That work connected me to an entire world of shared experience. When I wrote my book *Crochet Saved My Life*, people began writing to me to say that crochet had saved their lives, too. Their letters became threads in the larger story. I created the *Mandalas for Marinke* fiber art project to raise awareness about depression, suicide, and healing through craft. It connected people online and in person, all of us makers sharing our grief and our hope, our words and our art.

That led me deeper into exploring the nuanced, often nonlinear relationship between creativity and mental health. I began studying how mental health symptoms impact the creative process, content, medium, productivity, and identity. I examined this across art history and synthesized what I learned in my book *The Artist's Mind*. I've interviewed more than sixty individuals on Substack about their lived experiences of art and mental health. One truth became clear: We are not all tortured geniuses, and art isn't always therapy. Both of those things can be true, but most of what I find beautiful and meaningful lives in the rich, magical middle between them.

That middle ground became the foundation of *Create Me Free*, a project designed to support artists, makers, and creatives in their pursuit of holistic wellness (emotional, creative, financial, physical, and relational.) In the last year, I've expanded that work by inviting people to respond to art-and-mental-health interviews using image or sound, with or without text, in a process I call Visual Interviews. This has opened new channels of communication for people whose language is limited due to trauma, neurodivergence, or other personal histories. It has deepened my understanding of both connection and neurodiversity. It has reminded me, again, that we are not alone in this.

We ask people what they do, but we rarely ask them how they are doing. Especially when it comes to mental health. But both questions matter. Both shape

us. Both shift with time. Neither should be hidden or fixed in stone. We are not meant to be pinned down by titles or diagnoses. We are fluid. Ever-changing.

In the same way I've learned to introduce myself as a writer-artist, I've also learned to reframe how I speak about my mental health. I don't always say "I have depression" anymore. Sometimes I say, "I experience depressive states." That small shift opens a door. It moves the focus from identity to experience. From permanence to presence. It invites curiosity, not confinement.

I used to think of depression as a spectrum, with persistent depressive disorder at one end and bipolar at the other. But reading Bethanne Patrick's memoir "Life B" cracked that open for me. She describes double depression as a kind of low-cycling bipolar disorder. And suddenly, things clicked. Maybe depression isn't a line. Maybe it's a circle, where ends bend back toward each other. Or maybe it's a spiral, winding upward and downward, with each rotation bringing a new perspective. Or a keyboard, where the same song plays in different octaves.

The spiral especially resonates. My life has unfolded like a spiral staircase. I've passed through the same emotional rooms over and over, but each time with more light, more insight, more forgiveness. The lesson I learned at twenty returns at forty with gentler hands and greater wisdom.

And the keyboard is another vivid metaphor. Some days I am a low note, barely audible. Some days I ring out clear and strong. People with different diagnoses may play different songs, but we are all part of the same symphony. We share rhythms, we echo each other's themes, we harmonize without even knowing it.

Some days, Depression is a quiet rider, minding its business. Some days it throws tantrums. Some days it's the roadwork that slows me down. But always, I am still driving.

There are days when metaphors fall away. When I forget the language and just live. But when the road gets rough, when the fog rolls in, I return to the bus. The route may change. The passengers may shift. But the wheel stays in my hands.

Metaphors and diagnoses have served me. They have offered language, clarity, community. They have helped me build bridges. But they are not the full story. They are not the whole map. They are useful signposts, not destinations.

There are still new roads ahead, new routes to chart. And when Depression appears at a familiar stop, I'll open the door. I'll let it board. I'll ask it what it needs. And then I'll keep driving.

Kathryn Vercillo *is a writer-artist living who explores the complex relationship between creativity and mental health through personal narrative, research, interviews and community-based art projects. Her early work focused on the therapeutic potential of craft, including her book* Crochet Saved My Life *and the global Mandalas for Marinke project, raising awareness around suicide and healing through fiber art. Her more recent work looks at the nuanced ways in which mental health symptoms impact the creative process (for good, for bad, for neutral). She holds a graduate degree in psychology and writes regularly about identity, neurodiversity, and resilience. Depression has always ridden along with her, but it no longer drives.*

Lloyd Jacobs

THURSDAYS I SEE MY SHRINK

The elevators are slow
in the tallest building
in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Ascending the twenty floors
a certain ambiance prevails
of dim lighting and worn carpets.

The office participates
in the general aura of decay:
paint peels, hinges squeak.

A studio apartment forced
to its current purpose;
space for only one to wait.

A strip of rubberized baseboard
hangs loose behind the door
to the misfit tub and shower.

She appears, stolid, unsmiling,
frumpy of countenance and dress;
her seriousness infects me.

The place and she are props
for my persistent hope that she
has healing power, and assuages

my fear of roughened hands
thrust into the darkness of silent
coveted loves and secrets.

JANUARY THAW II

Defiantly unseasonable, arriving
just beyond the solstice to display
God's whimsical insouciance, a January
thaw of low angled sun, radiant to dry
sidewalks and shoes and melt crusted snow.

From nowhere appeared sparrows,
strutting, foraging in the balm of spring
and then, at twilight, sex workers
walking the dry pavement with spring
in their step, with a certain *joie de vivre,*
celebratory: "kids will eat tonight!"

SUNSET IV

There is a time
as the sun is falling to the Plimsoll mark
where the western sky attaches to the black
barren trees, that the sun ceases its radiance.

Its blinding rays are quenched
its aura melted, it becomes a burnished copper
penny against a darkening slate. It gives no heat,
no comforting beams, only a suffusion of gloam.

The great red coin hangs aloof for a moment
then to be engulfed by slow diapedesis into
the glowing horizon.

Who knows what the set sun sees, what it hears,
what it thinks (What thinking? What?)
behind the half silvered mirror?

REMORSE

Remorse is a Trojan horse
in an old man's world of memory
his winding sheet made ready

Remorse is a bottom feeder
scavenging in the mud of memory
changing recollection into offal

Remorse is the usurper cuckoo
displacing joyous recollection,
leaving the old man cuckold

Remorse is a contrite prayer
suing for mercy, seeking
forgiveness, its salvific power
to shrive an old man
purchased by the taste of death

EQUINOX

Today is the vernal equinox. Green. The green equinox.
Sixty acres of wheat across the way have greened
and the meadow will follow soon. Birds are returned, trees are budded.
Maple sap is collected, reduced and put in Mason jars.

Wherefore then is April "cruelest" and "Babbling and strewing flowers"
but to mark and mock time's precession.
Except where heaped by wind or plows, the snow has become
the snows of yesteryear.

I like to think how, when the universe is over and the equinoctial curtain
falls, there will be no trace of us, no trace of our mendacity,
of our peccadillos,
our foolishness or our mean-spiritedness.
I like to think of how the dark night of spring will signal an erasure and
forgiveness, a wiping clean and a beginning

After undergraduate study at Miami University of Ohio, ***Dr. Lloyd Jacobs*** *attended The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. He practiced vascular surgery for many years, ultimately becoming Professor of Surgery at the University of Michigan. He was appointed President of The Medical College of Ohio in 2003 and became president of the combined institution when the Medical College merged into The University of Toledo. He served in this role until 2015. Jacobs grew up in the strictest environment and belief system of Calvinism. This experience has shaped his life, which has included a struggle with depression and alcohol abuse. His writing concerns nature and time's passage and reflects these lived experiences.*

WAR CRAZY

I have always thought myself a free spirit,
a philosopher mendicant,
seeking an alternative,
more substantive lifestyle.
So many others, however, see my unorthodoxy, my "spiritual seeking,"
as abnormal and a clear indication
of my insanity.

Perhaps I need to pause
and to reevaluate my life.
After all, being insane is not something
one readily admits.
I guess it's part of being crazy
to cling to a facade of sanity,
to think oneself normal
and everyone else insane.

One thing I am certain of, however,
I haven't always been crazy.
Wasn't born crazy.
I think insanity crept up on me,
happened in Vietnam, in the war.
War does that you know, drives people crazy.
Shell shock, battle fatigue,
soldier's heart, PTSD.
All that killing and dying
can make anyone crazy.

Some survive war quite well, they tell me.
Many even benefit from its "virtues."
But war's effects are not always apparent.
No one escapes war unscathed

in body and in mind.
All war, any war, every war,
ain't no virtue in war.

I think, of those not driven crazy by war,
many were crazy already.
But theirs was an insanity
of a different kind,
a hard kind, an uncaring kind.
I knew people like that,
didn't like them much.
Thought them fortunate, though
as killing and dying meant nothing.
In fact, in a perverse way, they enjoyed it,
enjoyed the jazz, the excitement, the power.
They became avenging angels,
even god herself,
making decisions of life and death,
. . . but mostly death.
Those crazies hated to see the war end.
For me, the war never ends.

Sometimes things work out
for the best, though,
as my unorthodoxy, my being crazy,
probably saved my life.
You see, sane people can't live like this,
in a war that never ends.
Not all crazy people can either.
Guess I was lucky.
Sometimes being crazy helps you cope.
Sometimes, I wish I was crazier than I am.

Serious introspection has made clear
the foundations of my unorthodoxy,
the nature of my insanity.
It is a cruel wisdom
allowing, no better, compelling
a clarity of vision.

I have seen the horror of war,
the futility and the waste.
I have endured the hypocrisy
and the arrogance
of the influential and the wealthy,
and have tolerated the ignorance
and narrow mindedness
of the compliant and the easily led.
War's malevolent benefactors,
who pretend and profess their patriotism
with bumper-sticker bravado,
with word but not deed,
intoxicated by war's hysteria,
from a safe distance.
Appreciative of our sacrifices they claim
as they applaud the impending slaughter,
sanctioning by word, or action, or non-action
sending other men and women
to be killed, and maimed,
and driven crazy by war.

And when they benefit
from the carnage no longer,
their yellow ribbon patriotism
and shallow concern
fade quickly to apathy and indifference.
The living refuse of war that returns
are heroes no longer,
but outcasts and derelicts,
and burdens on the economy.
The dead, they mythologize with memorials
and speeches of past
and future suffering and loss.
Inspiring and prophetic words
by those who sanction the slaughter
to those who know nothing of sacrifice.

I used to try to explain war
to help them understand
and to know its horror,
naively believing that war was a deficiency,
of information, understanding,
discernment, and vision.
But being crazy has liberated me
allowing me to see that war
is not a deficiency at all,
but an excess of greed, ambition,
intolerance, and lust for power.
And we are its instruments,
the cannon fodder,
expendable commodities
in the ruthless pursuit
of wealth, power, hegemony, and empire.

And now, I accept
and I celebrate my unorthodoxy,
my insanity, as an indictment
of the hypocrites and the arrogant,
of the ignorant and the narrow-minded
for a collective responsibility and guilt
for murder and mayhem,
and crimes against humanity.
And I offer my insanity as a presage
of their future accountability,
to humankind in the courts of history,
and to the god they invoke so often
to sanction and make credible
their sacrilege of war.

THE ROSE

I remember once, in another lifetime,
noticing a lone rose rising
defiantly from beneath
the rubble of a destroyed city
North of Danang.
It had no business being there,
adding color to the drabness of war,

beauty to the ugliness of destruction, and the hope of life
when life held nothing
but suffering and death.

It was a contradiction
and created confusion
amidst the clarity of killing to survive.

. . . I stepped on it.

There are no flowers in a war zone;
nor color, nor beauty, nor hope.

Camillo 'Mac' Bica, Ph.D*., is now retired after 34 years as a professor of philosophy at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. He is a former Marine Corps officer, a service-connected disabled veteran of the American War in Vietnam, and the coordinator of the Long Island Chapter of Veterans for Peace. Tragically, upon his discharge from military service, treatment for what was eventually termed PTSD and Moral Injury was unavailable. Together with several other combat-disabled veterans, Bica organized and coordinated the "Veteran Self-Help Initiative" (AKA the "HOOTCH Program") at the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Brooklyn. Bica's writing on military service, PTSD, and moral injury has been published in a variety of venues, including the* International Journal of Applied Philosophy, the Journal of Social

Philosophy, Public Affairs Quarterly, the Peace Review, and The Humanist. *His most recent books include* Worthy of Gratitude: Why Veterans May Not Want to be Thanked For Their 'Service' in War *(Gnosis Press, 2015), and* Beyond PTSD: The Moral Casualties of War *(Gnosis Press, 2016).*

Leah Stenson

IF WISHES WERE HORSES

My brother reminisces about
the neighborhood tom girl
obsessed with horses
and the boy dressed
in his sister's skirt
who he met decades later
in a NYC gay bar.

I tell him when he was a child
he was safe in the bosom
of our family.
There wasn't much
to be afraid of except
stray dogs and mean neighbors.

I don't remind him Mother
hadn't yet spurned him for being gay
and he wasn't yet involved
in political activities
leading to the arrest
of colleagues
and the fear of Big Brother.

After his long-time lover
cheated on him and another
turned him on to drugs,
his life went downhill—
from being driven home in a limo
after work at a top Wall Street firm
and gazing at the Statue of Liberty
from his kitchen window—to living
a reclusive life in a small apartment
in a small Ohio town where he gazes

out at an artificial pond.
I wish life was like a fairy tale
and I could wave a magic wand,
restore his hope, his childhood
innocence.

HAIBUN FOR MY BROTHER

My brother admires the Taoist poet Li Bai
who fled to the countryside to avoid civil strife.
On the verge of agoraphobia, he's hidden himself
far away in a small town.

Unable to escape inner strife, he rails
against his personal misfortunes
and the state of the world.

When he's not agitated,
he displays a fine poetic mind:

Searching and seeking in dark corners
on a cold winter night
you finally found safe haven
by the small lamp near my chair.
Now for a night and day you have been resting
in a small warm pool of light
*dreaming your quiet Ladybug dreams**

If the ladybug were bigger, he says,
I could give her a hug.

I would give my brother a big hug
if only there wasn't so much
distance between us.

*Poem by Paul Deland

MY BROTHER'S 71ST BIRTHDAY

In a message on my phone
he sings Happy Birthday to himself
in the tempo of a funeral dirge,
sends me a photo of Marilyn Monroe
in a slinky sequin dress singing
"Happy Birthday" to JFK,
and tells me what I can get him
for his birthday—enrollment
in a witness protection program
or a sex-change operation.

He hasn't lost his sense of humor.
In fact, he's downright cheerful
about the lemon cake
he's baked for himself,
how he poked holes in it
and infused it with lemon syrup.
He loves to cook
and doesn't go out to eat
because he hates dining alone.

I wish I could take him
to the finest restaurant
and treat him to stuffed lobster
or filet mignon.
I love him and want him to be happy.
Even so, I'd still want to catch
the next flight home.

Leah Stenson

FOR MY BROTHER LIVING WITH LONELINESS

Your email said you were up late,
had a vision of Grandma,
how you saw her in the bedroom,
saw the green-painted furniture,
twin beds and cobalt blue bottles
of Evening in Paris on the dresser.

It was late afternoon, sunny.
You felt Grandma's spirit,
felt she had come to you,
come to comfort you—
like she did that day
in the woods when you
were stung by a bee.

I wish Grandma hadn't
left us in our childhoods,
so soon, an accidental death,
alone, asleep in her room.

I wish you and I were together,
together in your vision,
so you would know—
though you feel the world
is against you—
you are not alone.

Leah Stenson *is the author of three books of poetry*—Heavenly Body, The Turquoise Bee *and* Other Love Poems, Everywhere I Find Myself—*and a hybrid memoir,* Life Revised, *which examines a family suicide. She also served as a regional editor of* Alive at the Center: Contemporary Poems from the Pacific Northwest *and co-editor of the award-winning* Reverberations from Fukushima: 50 Japanese Poets Speak Out*. She hosts the long-running Studio Series Poetry Reading & Open Mic in Portland, Oregon. Leah has two brothers living with mental illness—one with schizophrenia and the other with paranoia and PTSD. Her poems in* Awakenings Review *explore her brother's experiences with paranoia and PTSD. She is grateful to the journal for giving voice to writers who illuminate the struggles of those living with mental illness—and those who walk beside them in support.*

Sarah Harley

WHERE THE WATER GOES

In water, like in books—you can leave your life.
— Lidia Yuknavitch

Eventually all that is heavy becomes light; this is the alchemy of water.

My solitary train journey runs alongside the banks of a river, imprinting itself in my mind. From the train window, the river seems to flow imperceptibly, without even a current. In places, it seems languid, as if it isn't flowing at all. I can never escape the river.

My hair is red, and long and straight. My navy blue coat is wrapped around me. I write the names of boys on my pencil case. I am thirteen. My world is vast and crushing.

The river starts its life high in the mist of abandoned granite ruins, before flowing through the golden slopes of Dartmoor, not far from the English channel. Then the river turns east and becomes tidal, widening out as an estuary, then slowly flows to the sea. It's an in-between place, where a river starts to merge with the sea, where freshwater meets saltwater, and everything slows down. This is the place that shaped me.

It is the summer my mother died. June. I fell through a trapdoor inside myself. I entered a vast interior landscape because the world I had once known just collapsed. The loss made a cave inside my body.

The railway line runs from Exeter through Dawlish, in the southwest England peninsula. The line crosses the river at Teignmouth, across a railway embankment. From the train, you can see stark and shifting mudflats and the surrounding green hills.

I still remember sitting on the train, staring out of the window. It's hard to put into words, but I felt the beginning of an engulfing pointlessness settling over the world around me. I see now that it was sorrow but also the beginning of my depression, a soft forgetting of how to feel. I thought about my mother and tried to tend to the feelings inside me. My adolescent grief pressed against my chest, ancient and unfinished, sometimes in contest with other emotions like confusion and longing. It came in waves –deep, then shallow. I learned it was easier to be numb than to feel. I didn't cry so much as I dissolved, quietly and invisibly. This was the first lesson grief taught me: how to disappear.

My part-time job was in a cafe, in Shalden, a village on the riverbank of the estuary. My job was to carry cups of tea to small tables and try to not let all of it end up in the saucer. I was mostly unsuccessful because my hand was always shaking. Women on holiday pursed their lips in disappointment when I put the cup down in front of them.

On the way home, I walked across a long, low-profile bridge, over the wide expanse of the river and salt marsh, to the train station. I always stopped halfway to watch the sleek, black cormorants stretching their wings to dry their feathers. I looked for herons and kingfishers –bright flashes, silver-green edges of wings. The air was filled with a sweet, green scent.

In the mudflats, I watched dragonflies flitting over the shimmering surface of the water. I watched the river finishing its life in the tides, where the land took back its rushing current. What was river became marsh, then memory.

I missed my mother in ways I didn't have language for – in the quiet gaps of the day, when I sat on a train or stood on a bridge. The number of quiet gaps ebbed and flowed. Sometimes it felt like my mother had been gone forever. Other times I wondered if she had just slipped out of the room. I carried her absence inside me; I was water carrying sediment and soil; ice and snow. The loss defined a path that memory and sorrow could return to.

As I crossed the bridge, I imagined it was the start of my own independence. In time, grief will try to dismantle this false sense of separateness, teaching me to value connection, continuance, and entwinement.

My mother's body was cremated at the crematorium on the outskirts of town; the funeral was held in a mostly empty church in the parish of All Saints at Highweek. My mother had lived a life in which she kept to herself, but that's another story. Her remains were interred in the cold ground next to the northern wall of the church's graveyard, on a steep-sided green hill that overlooked the estuary. Here, the river reached its lowest point in the flats of a drowned river valley. My father would have found a way to talk about anything unrelated to what was happening – how the bedrock had been submerged by rising sea levels and flooded by the sea. How the dissolving bedrock created sinking streams, caves, and springs. How the river vanished underground, still flowing, but out of sight.

My mother was gone in June; she was forty-eight. Her body was inundated with exhaustion and the weight of her diagnosis: metastatic breast cancer, which had spread to other parts of her: lungs, liver, bones. My mother lived on in my pain after death as she had in life. She was like the river –flooding without warning, pulling, and holding.

My sisters and I stood at the grave to scatter the ashes. It was a windy day which made us break into hysterical laughter for fear the wind would carry

our mother away. Then we cried so hard our make-up was streaking down our faces. We folded our grief, sorrow, and pain into each other; we were the ones who remained. We stood there watching the river, how it meandered through the lowlands of the river valley, scattered like silver threads. When the mist crept in, you felt as if you were in the clouds. The winds were always aloft there.

The river holds the ash that was burned; the sediment of every passing moment.

On Saturdays, we sisters walked into town to buy white and yellow freesias from the market, my mother's favourite flowers. On Sundays, with our father, we made our way through town, along quiet streets, lines of houses painted magnolia white with slate rooftops. Then we trudged quietly up the hillside to the old churchyard, first consecrated in the middle ages, older than the church we never went to. We only visited the rambling churchyard, where relic-like stone graves were dotted across a hillside. I wondered if people watched us.

At the graveside, I prepared the flowers carefully, cutting the thin green stems at an angle and trimming away the leaves. I focused on the task, as it was something I could control. Grief tried to impart the lesson that control is an illusion, but I was not ready to learn that yet.

When we stayed at the churchyard for a while, I wandered along gravel pathways next to rows of graves. It felt like a miniature medieval city laid out in straight lines. I stopped to read the names on the weathered headstones, imagining the unfortunate – the young and short lived. One of the tiniest gravestones belonged to a five-year-old girl, her name—Lucy—was faint beneath a soft layer of yellow lichen. We counted the ages of the dead on our fingers; we searched for the oldest grave we could find. Sometimes I opened the door of the church by myself, breathing in its ancient cold air.

My father kept his eyes fixed on the distant view of the estuary. I couldn't help but study the movement of his shoulders, searching for a sign he was crying. But he did not show his emotions. Rather, he took deep, jagged breaths, swallowing his grief instead. I stared at the water glinting in the light. I concentrated on trying to understand how the river mingled with the sea, how one moment became another. I felt as if I was floating in the air.

After the first year, we went to the churchyard less often, perhaps every other week, sometimes even less. When we got there, I dreaded seeing the flowers from our last visit. I felt so guilty seeing them – brown and withered, their petals curled and faded.

I emptied the stagnant flower water, pinching my nose because of its sour smell. I washed out the metal vase in the stone outdoor water font, the water cold and icy. I quietly fought back tears, then broke down fully because

my mother was slipping further and further away from me. I cried because I was afraid of becoming like my father; he had started to live without her.

For a while, I went to the churchyard by myself. My body had learned to lock the grief inside. I trimmed the flowers and arranged them meticulously. I had started to bring scissors and a teatowel. I focused on the objects in my field because they were tangible and concrete. I took to sitting on the nearby bench, thinking how I wanted to find a way to restart my life or rewind it. I didn't know it then but I was like the river, wanting to reach the sea and let go of everything I had been carrying: memories, hurt, clutches of abandonment; silt and broken branches.

The river began its life in a light cold rain that mists over the granite ruins at Dartmoor. The ruins had been abandoned long ago but the river continued to form there, from ice-cold drops of rain, trickles gathering in the bogs and mires of the moors. I know my roots are in these mysterious and magical places.

As a child, I didn't fully understand how the river could have a beginning or an end because I thought things, like rivers, went on forever. I didn't think about circles and cycles, release and return.

The river ran quickly at first, impetuous. When young, it rushed its cold self through lost villages hidden in the hills. For much of its journey, the river remains hidden from view, rushing over shiny granite rocks. Swans nested along the edges of its banks; dippers flew swift and low, skimming the water's surface with rapid wingbeats. In the valley's lowlands, the river settled before it reached a steep-sided narrow gorge of deep forest. The river rushed through it, heading towards the sea. I wondered what the river saw in its journey. Did it shiver inside a dark cave? Was it worried or afraid, filled with self-doubt?

I visit the grave by train, usually from London. Often it's the same line I took when I was thirteen. I learn how grief folds time, making the past feel as if it is still happening. This is one of grief's hardest lessons to learn.

On one occasion, the grave was so overgrown with bright green limescale and soft moss I thought it had disappeared. What had been sharp edges of granite now sloped into murky soil, softened by rain over time. I had to carefully cut away the moss, scrape away the effects and erosion of time and rain, neglect and forgetting. I felt as if I was tending a magical garden with a rusty gate into the past. I tried to clean and polish the granite square, extracted and cut from a nearby quarry. I imagined the river winding through an abandoned quarry, once washing over the very stone in front of me.

The etched black words still convey an unalterable reality –two dates, written as years, separated by a dash. My mother's short life from birth to death is summed up in one line.

An orange orb disappears into the river's edge. I inhale the cool evening air. I hear a train in the distance. Migrating birds fly overhead. In the spring, there are swallows and house martins, swifts and warblers, common terns and little gulls.

Strangely, each year I visit, my disbelief is greater. The grief feels heavier too even though it seems like it should feel lighter after all these years. Then I see all that I am still carrying, tied up with identity, memory, and longing. All things unspoken and unresolved, missing and abjured. My mid-life grief presses against my chest, ancient and unfinished, sometimes in contest with other emotions like remorse and regret. It settles inside me, accumulating like silt in a riverbed.

If you don't let go of grief, you must let go of yourself to be able to carry the weight.

I wonder how I want to live, knowing how this ends?

Night falls across the estuary as the river seems to absorb the darkness.

Sarah Harley *is originally from the UK. She works at Milwaukee High School of the Arts where she helps refugee students to tell their own stories. Sarah holds a BA in Comparative Literature and French, as well as an MA in Foreign Language and Literature. Her work is deeply informed by her lived experience navigating depression, childhood trauma, and PTSD. Her essays have appeared in* West Trade Review, Glassworks Magazine, Mud Season Review*, and elsewhere. You can read more of her work here: sarahharley888.com.*

Veronica Tucker

THE CHILD SHE HELD AND LET GO

Her hands were shaking when they placed him in her arms,
so small, so breakable,
his breath barely a whisper against her skin.

She told herself she would do better,
that she would be enough,
that she could quiet the wanting,
that she could keep him safe.

She lasted three months.

The crying, the exhaustion,
the way her body ached for something
she wasn't supposed to need anymore.
She wrote his name in the condensation
on the bus window,
let letters fade as the city blurred
past.
She told herself he was better off without
her.
But some lies settle in your ribs and refuse to leave.

They do not give second chances
to mothers like her.

Veronica Tucker

THE GHOST OF WHO SHE WAS

She does not miss the sickness,
not the hollow ache,
not the mornings that began with shaking,
not the nights spent chasing the thing
that never stayed.
She does not miss the hunger,
not the empty spaces in her ribs,
not the burning behind her eyes,
not the way the world blurred
at the edges of every high.
But sometimes,
she misses the weightlessness,
the quiet between thoughts,
the way time slipped through her fingers
without asking her to hold it.
She does not tell anyone
about the dreams.
How she wakes some nights
to the sound of her own breath,
the echo of the past pressing against her ribs,
whispering that it was easier then,
whispering that it would be easier still
if she stopped fighting.
She sits up,
presses her feet to the floor,
feels the solid ground beneath her.
She does not want to go back.
But she does not yet know
how to move forward
without mourning the woman
she almost became.

THE QUIET BETWEEN CRAVINGS

It comes in the spaces she never noticed before.
Between the footsteps on the sidewalk,
between the slow inhale and the exhale that follows,
between the hours that used to disappear.
At first, the silence was unbearable.
She would pace, she would fidget,
she would reach for something, anything,
to fill the empty space.
But now, the quiet holds her.
The stillness does not scream.
Her hands rest on her lap, steady.
Her breath does not shake.
She looks out the window,
watches the street move below,
lets time pass without chasing it,
lets the craving come and go
without following where it leads.
She does not fill the space.
She lets it be.
And for the first time,
it does not swallow her whole.

ONE YEAR WITHOUT IT

No cake, no candles, no celebration.
Just another morning
without waking up sick,
without running,
without the old hunger clawing at her ribs.

She buys herself coffee.
She drinks it slowly,
lets it settle into her
like something she has earned.

Veronica Tucker *is an addiction medicine and emergency medicine physician, a married mother of three, and a writer based in New Hampshire. Her writing explores the intersections of caregiving, trauma, and survival, often drawing from her front-line experiences with patients navigating mental illness, substance use, and crisis. Much of her work is inspired by the mothers and women in recovery she cares for each day, whose resilience and vulnerability continue to shape her understanding of healing. Veronica's poetry is grounded in the emotional and ethical weight of medicine and the challenge of bearing witness without turning away. Her work has appeared in* redrosethorns, Medmic, *and* Creatrix *(WA Poets Inc), with additional forthcoming pieces. When not writing or taking care of patients, she enjoys running, time with family, travel, and finely crafted matcha lattes.*

Mikaela Standing

THE CRISIS CENTRE

Her eyes are as blank as the walls,
of the emergency ward for the mad,

I am razor-skinned, de-marrowed bones,
but her eyes are as blank as the walls.

Why have you come, she says,
as if one comes here, stable, and sane,

can't she see by the state I am in,
I am here, begging to be saved?

Cars slip past behind me,

She watches,
Through my cling-film skin,

She's blind to my crumbling mind,
Exhaust pipes,
    far more interesting.

The paper quiz waits
        between us,

how mad are you today, on a scale of one to ten?
Do you strongly agree that when you leave,
you won't come and see us again?

I think, if I cut my finger,
with the uncared-for answered paper,
She would rush to get me a plaster,
full stop sized blood,

it matters.

When the crisis hour ends, she smiles,
She does that,
    when I exit rooms.

HEREDITARY ASYLUM

I know not the origin,
of step-mothered apple,
rotting Vesta's temple

black-blood arrows, forced,
on ancestral map,
erased: alzheimers-aged.

But somewhere,
on shamrock'd fields,
blooms a cyanide tree

its wintered seeds, seeped
into luck-less soil,
regenerated: as me.

I know not the famine'd cheekbones,
the revolutionary fists,
or The Troubles peeling skins
of shadowed cores: trigger-blitzed

juice, soured, spilt,
drowns putrefied bough,
where lone-green gene hangs,

haunted.

MAD POETS

I thought I was the only one,
until diagnosis discovered the dead.

New-to-me names,
different pages,
imprinted with slayed-soul stanzas
in versed-trenches,

apparitions of a family,
scattered in mind
scattered through time,

an un-fleshed army,
who fought,
weaponless.
Soldiers in combat,
facing an enemy
that would cower Achilles
into snapping his heel.

They speak of genius
and talent,
the normals.
Praise, admiration,
envy,

wishing they could sculpt mundane words
into a calligraphy
Sistine Chapel.

But me?
One of them,

I think of the price they paid,
to earn lime-peel skin.

You see,
there's a tithe,
to be a member
of this involuntary club,
a tax so high,
sin-preachers would feint.

It's a coin-less cost,
no metal-minted access
into the unreal-realm,

Where we hear
the un-hearable

See the un-seeable

Feel the un-thinkable

All,
unwantable.

Is it a price worth paying?

If you give me an axe,
I will cut off my fingers
and bleed the words they breath
if it means
I can free myself,

from myself

But who would I be?

Without madness?
Without words?

Who would they be,
without the fire?

Mikaela Standing *is a writer from the U.K. with bipolar disorder. She started writing poetry after reading the work of others with the illness. Poetry has become the art form that has helped her express what she has experienced and the challenges she has faced to reach recovery. Living with mental illness can make one feel isolated and alone, and she hopes sharing her work helps people feel seen and know there are others who understand what it is like to live with a mental illness, just as reading poetry on the subject did for her.*

Gretch Sando

A STORY

is carefully kept
in pieces
for most of its
life

it begins in the middle
and reads inside out
telling backwards
and forwards at once

it's the hiding of self
in search of safety
a quest for self
as a life worth living

an internal-external
then and there battle
for control of
the here and now

in the end it continues
i carry on
a story
yet unfinished

BOOTSTRAPS

by which i pulled myself up
was once said
to me
as a way of expressing
admiration

i found it untrue and said so

hundreds of people along the way
contributed to my ability to stand

years of struggle
losing so much in
the effort toward
progress
wanting to give up
over
and over
and over again

hard work
yes the hardest
but help from
enumerable people
buoyed me
along the way

the tiniest of
anything
counted
a wink
a nod
a smile while holding
open a door for a person
such as me

all helped me to
live one more day

and
another

my gratitude
to the
enumerable

SUBTEXT

it's daylight time to rise
but it's dark

see the light
no

time to be on your way
i'm not going out in the dark

see the path
no

then feel for it
but—

scooch flat on your belly and
crawl through the
mud under the
barbed wire

i can't
you can

i hate you
i love you

i'll be on the other side
with a dry towel

Gretch Sando *(She/Her) is a neurodivergent writer whose work often examines experiences gained as a patient and as a treatment provider within various mental health systems. She was shortlisted in Craft's 2023 Character Sketch Contest and her work has appeared in* Pithead Chapel, Sheepshead Review, Naugatuck River Review, Twenty-two Twenty-eight, Inscribe*, and other publications. Gretch is a retired art therapist and resides near the Adirondack Mountains in Northern New York. She is completing her debut memoir.*

David Stern

BLUE POPPY

That April morning gaunt clouds
skidded over mountain peaks,
Adirondack waters darken with churning seaweed,
glazed with white-tipped waves.

We cast your ashes onto the lake.

You were a wild blue poppy
blooming at the snowline
on Himalayan screes,
the closest flower to heaven.

Always in motion,
from scrounging drugs in New York's Soho alleys
to law school in Boston
then mending fences on frozen Missoula ranches.

You wrested nutrients from rocky soil,
dense with clay and silt,
hoarding every drop of water,
efforts that quenched your joy.

If only we could have slowed
the breakneck speed of your days and nights.

So much we couldn't understand,
as you bloomed and faded,
then one night disappeared,

your melodies stranded mid-flight,
your mind breaking free
of the pain that held you hostage.

Your mother and I loved you,
but love wasn't enough.

Suddenly you were gone,
soaring free of anguish,
leaving those around you
to grieve and wonder why.

Absent, you still speak to us
in so many voices.

As we scattered your ashes,
you played your final prank, a freakish late spring
flurry, snowflakes soft on our cheeks
and for a heartbeat, our faces mirrored your playfulness,
then crumbled, knowing it to be your last.

Your ashes bobbing on the lake you loved.

Alan Stern
(April 2, 1985 to April 7, 2008)

David Stern

LIVING WITH YOUR SPIRIT

Our eyes open slowly to a sky
of piercing blue with tendrils of mist.
Your voice beckons us to the new day.

The songs of the Adirondack you loved drift in the air:
the *Ee-ee* of the great blue heron taking flight,
the baritone grumble of the drake left behind,
the keening of the common loon.
The difference between life and afterlife: intimacy, without words.

From your first breath, you changed our lives.

At first, just you in your mother's arms,
immersed in her love,
eyes locked in mutual wonderment.
And me, father, thrilled to enter your world.

Then, older brother, delighted to greet you,
a young pup eager to share his domain.

In our quiet Long Island village,
cucumber and cottage-cheese picnics in the park,
sailing on the blue-black waters of the Sound,
baseball and tennis on sun-slapped playing fields
abutting a forest we often explored.

Our family bubble,
where air met blood,
sustained our lives,
but that membrane was only one cell thick.

The bubble expanded for a gaggle of your new friends--
jai alai on Friday, Saturday wushu martial arts,
Sunday churro dinners.

Then the membrane pulled and
stretched as raging demons
ignited a wild, unquenchable flame,
your private lightning bolts,
fierce, violent, transient,
the drugs and fury that made you leave
all you knew behind.

You were at the bubble's edge,
arms outstretched.
Mom and I cried out to you,

but the bubble
burst, leaving you
dancing in space,
seduced by that limitless view.

That's how it is with infinity.

And we're left
with an infinite grief,
filling us with unending longing
but also with a wholeness,
sensing your spirit always here.

REINVENTION

Four generations of family around a holiday table,
aromas tickling our palates,
wild turkey, mushroom stuffing, orange-flecked cranberries
conjuring past celebrations,

which became three generations on a sheltered beach
energetically digging a village of sand,
elders gone but the clan
vitalized by our future together,

which became two generations skimming over lake waters
on just a sail mounted on a surfboard,
creating hardly a wake
as the young swim farther out and family ties loosen,

leaving only one generation – your mother and me –
warmed by the faint glow of spent embers
on the wind-ravaged Atlantic coast
near the sandcastle beach.

I recall those long-past days,
even as we tread toward the sea
with no one behind us,

and think about that April day sixteen years ago
when your brother took his life,
consumed by an unquenchable pain
that robbed him of all he embraced.

There is no path
for parents who bury a child.

I cannot fathom also losing you, our first-born,
the child who remains.

I understand your quest for reinvention,
a life not tainted by loss, nor dimmed
by our eclipse.

But your brother is with us
every day,
his absence, his presence
ever fresh.

His love hovers,
whistling in the marshes
and long grasses of Long Island Sound
that we loved to explore.

Do you remember, too?
You, your brother, and me
losing ourselves in nature's maze.

What do I hope for?
You.
Your forgiveness.

Your quick thumbs-up
and a flicker at the corners of your mouth
that is a window to your heart.

A family that loves and accepts,
even with our penchant for drama.

And I hope this, most of all:
that the worst of the storm
has passed, and
we will watch its aftermath together
on the sand,
so smooth and still.

Dave Stern *is new to the community of writers after decades working as a physician scientist and health sciences administrator. He has placed pieces (in press or recently published) in* The Writer Launch, Windmill, Free Spirit Publishing, 1922 Revival/VOICES, Citizen-Times *(Gannett),* Streetlight Magazine, *and* Personal Story Publishing Project*. Dave grew up on the North Shore of Long Island where he spent summers sailing on Long Island Sound. His life changed completely with the mental illness and tragic suicide of his younger son in 2008. He lives with his wife of almost fifty years in Asheville, NC. Kathleen is a former ophthalmologist and now a full-time artist.*

Meredith Avera

MASK OFF, OR LOOKING IN A MIRROR DURING A MANIC EPISODE

whose face is this, draped over my skull?
i recognize only the pinprick irises
that peek out, shimmering in a sea of green.
ashen lips quake, revealing rows of yellowed teeth
and the tongue, blackened from the matches.
the skin sags forward, creating a mask of pink flesh.
the waxy cartilage melting over my brow,
over the hair that I missed while shaving.

i am not hearing these things surrounding me:
the sound bath held only inside my skull
bounces waves throughout my body.
i can see the reverberations in my eyes,
the beautiful back and forth through stark white.
how can I tell a moment is real and happening
when my face bends to welcome each hushed whisper?
i call my mom; i tell her it's getting bad again.

6.26.2007

watermelon rind, so shallow, so deep;
summer days pass in the heavy june rain.
roly polys march by on their tiptoe feet,
i spit out the seeds and pray to the saints.

music falls soft from the creaky kitchen stairs,
i sense the sticking sweat down to my bones.
my ribs were creaking, my shoulders were bare:
i could be anything all on my own.

lemon shaved ice melts slow on the tongue,
a childhood passes quick in reverse.
skinned knees and burnt palms need ice to go numb,
but the heart will heat and eat anger first.

part of me died on that white picket lawn,
the youthful glow rent permanently dim.
the open gate was stuck still in a yawn,
the driveway crooked like a broken limb.

most days now i spend summers inside.
i'm licking wounds where the blood hasn't dried.

HOW TO HAVE A MIXED EPISODE:

Spit into your ex-fiancé's mouth. Spit again if you so please. Turn your bare back to the sun. It's vitamin D, baby. Eat one grain of rice per second or else the world will end. Turn a corn husk into a doll. You're a mother now. Throw it away, because you can't stand responsibility. Put your money where your mouth is, and then chew, and then swallow. Wax your eyebrows and armpits and use the hair to ward white-tailed deer away from your garden. Stretch out your vowels, there's a shortage. Take every turn at bowling and hit gutter each time. Cheer anyways.

INSPIRATION! INSPIRATION!

Your childhood dog gone grey,
bony and matted, rolled in soft earth.
The last photograph from your middle school play
where nothing could really hurt.

A phone call from your mother,
that reminds you to call her more.
Letters scribbled from an ex-lover
crumpled on the bathroom floor.

The spit from your chest gone onto the grass,
now caked in blue-green dye.
The screaming starlings that flee in a flash-
your lying teeth, your honest eye.

SMOKING GUN

The Texaco off of Highway 280
has the best ever boiled peanuts.
They sit steaming, soaked in brine:
soldiers marching in dizzy circles,
sold by the cup.

You stretch your legs off road,
pinching and eating and sucking,
spitting shells with saccharine tea.
Think to yourself: Mama and Pa,
the slamming door.

Terse looks at your graduation,
you wipe salt on your starched jeans.
Their faces live in memories repeated
so you map them like a dream.
Feel the lines.

You don't know the destination:
anywhere other than here.
The closet is an open mouth:
the disgust, the shame, the sighing,
the last they heard of you.

M. Anne Avera *is a poet and author from Auburn, Alabama. Her work centers around themes of her own experience with bipolar 1 disorder, recovery, and the joy of connecting with others. You can find more of her work at writeranneavera.substack.com.*

Lory Widmer Hess

THE UNRAVELING

** Names and identifying details have been changed in this essay*

I was sitting on the couch in the slack days after Christmas, working on the second sleeve of a sweater that had been sitting in my knitting bag for months. Finally, some time to finish it. I checked the numbers I'd written on a scrap of paper, carefully crossing off each row as I completed it. The work got faster as the piece grew smaller, decreasing toward the sleeve cuff. I had a sense of satisfaction as I neared the end.

The world was in a mess. Thousands of women and children killed in strikes on Gaza. Entire villages in Ukraine turned into graveyards, with the dead left under the rubble of abandoned buildings. Across the ocean from where I sat in Switzerland, an American election season was being dominated by the language of violence, of "death and destruction."

I couldn't do anything about that, but at least I could sit and knit my sweater. *Peace on earth.*

As the end came closer, though, I started to worry. Wouldn't this cuff be too small to fit around my wrist? Was something wrong? But no, I was sure I'd followed the instructions. I shut off my worries, finished the sleeve, and tried it on.

Definitely too small. I suddenly realized what happened: I miscalculated the number of stitches for the top of the sleeve, and from there, the whole thing was doomed. I had just knitted an entire sleeve for nothing.

Discouraged, I stuffed the sweater back in the bag. I would correct my mistake eventually, but not right now.

It was time to go back to work, anyway. The next day, I entered a room with walls painted a sunny yellow, full of looms and shelves of bright wool and fabric. Through the picture window, I could see no sign of anything distressing, only a shallow bowl of bright green grass dotted with cows. On either side rose mountain ramparts crowned with spiky pines. Here in Switzerland, war happens in other places, and conflict is kept civil. Sometimes I chafe against the tradition-bound structure, but it does often feel like a haven of safety.

That morning, I was alone, subbing for a colleague who had earned time off. I started with Kristi, who sat at her loom, groaning and rocking slightly,

pulling at the kerchief tucked around her short hair. Kristi doesn't have the patience to work for long, but for a few minutes, she can throw the shuttle that carries the thread, pull on the frame that beats it down, flip over the lever on top, and repeat a few times. With her hasty, careless motions, she often breaks the thread or shoves the shuttle in the wrong way. I was there to help moderate the extremes, spotting and correcting errors before they became embedded in the fabric.

Kristi is one of sixteen adults with developmental challenges who live together in this peaceful corner of the Jura mountains. Ages ranging from twenties to sixties, all physically mobile but with varying abilities to communicate and care for themselves, they are at home here, some for decades. I'm a part-time visitor, working four days a week, mostly in the weavery.

As the shuttle flew back and forth, I recalled my first experience of this kind of work. It was in another community for adults with developmental challenges in the United States, where I'd gone to live and work with my husband a decade earlier. I'd always been successful in school, but struggled with finding a career; unresolved emotional and psychological issues simmered under the surface, as I met and married him, had a child, and followed his lead in joining the community. He had a training and experience in the field, and I expected him to guide and protect me. I didn't realize he had his own sources of insecurity, hidden cracks in the walls that made me feel safe.

Back then, I didn't know those walls were about to be shattered. Nor did I know I was about to meet my greatest guides, who would show me a way through the resulting chaos.

My attention returned to the weavery as the others started to arrive. Kristi stood up, finished for the day. Nina came in the door, still in her coat and hat. I asked her to take them off, but she merely stood, the upper half of her tiny body cocked sideways, shaking her head. She peeked out at me from behind the brown curtain of her bangs.

I sighed and got up, accompanying Nina to the door, trying to sound cheerful. Eventually her coat was on its hook and Nina back in the room.

Lately, I was having a hard time getting Nina to do anything. She didn't want to do felting or embroidery. She didn't want to sit next to me on a weaving bench. She perched there for a moment, bending her head and shaking her hair over her eyes. Then she got up again and go back to the door. She stood by it, hand on the handle, ready to escape.

Why do people not do what I want them to when the right way seems so obvious to me? That question had become ever more pressing in my last few

years in the United States, during another election season. A decision I expected to bring about resolution and security only unleased complete chaos in my mind. How could this happen? What were people thinking? I looked for books I hoped would explain what was wrong with them, and help me figure out how to fix them.

One of these books was *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*, in which journalist George Packer described disintegrating social and economic structures in the United States from the 1970s to today. Through stories of a few individuals, interspersed with profiles of iconic celebrities, he portrayed how bonds of community were slowly corrupted by forces of money and power. Hidden entities were determined to keep their real intentions dark while nudging the people they exploited toward other targets for their rage. Encouraging them to look toward someone who claimed to be a savior, promising to conquer a fearful darkness and make everyone prosperous and secure.

As I struggled to understand what had happened, I started to believe this was not a question of choosing the right side and keeping the wrong one in subjection. It was a matter of human frailty, of how our souls and bodies manage to survive in a threatening world by bargaining away our greatest treasure, which is each other. When, through early wounding, we lose faith in humanity, we transfer our trust to money and to material things, which won't let us down in the same way. We learn to project our feelings of threat onto other people, so we can either make use of them or get rid of them.

But it's all an illusion. Really, we are only maiming ourselves.

Kristi was sitting and rocking in her favorite chair by the sewing machine, eyes closed in concentration, hands over her ears. Nina stayed by the door, but at least she wasn't leaving the room. Johan came in, frowning and shaking his head, then hooting and jabbing his finger toward something. I took my best guess at what he meant, and responded: *No, we don't need that book today. Yes, we'll be having tea later — thanks for bringing the can.* Johan went to his loom, a larger one with foot pedals, and went to work. He could weave a foot or more in a day, keeping me busy as I helped him advance the loom and spool more thread for the next length. From time to time he wanted to talk, in his unique language of noises and gestures that I struggled to interpret.

I once had great faith in verbal communication. Surely we could work everything out if we just talked about it reasonably, I always thought. That faith was severely challenged during the last few years. Not only did civil public discourse seem to have become impossible, but my personal life started to unravel. Under the pressure of my intense living and working situation, the hidden weaknesses in my marriage and in my own psyche were starting to come to light. At times I felt as though ordinary language, even my accustomed way of

thinking, didn't work at all any more. I was caught in a wordless place where all I seemed to be able to do was cry.

From my experiences with the residents, I finally learned not to resist that wordlessness. They taught me another language, not of words, but of need and response. A basic human tongue transcending culture and politics. Only it takes patience to learn, once we've left it behind in early childhood. We have to come back into the vulnerable state no one can ever enter, who places their trust in death and destruction.

Johan was now waving and calling out to me with his wordless language, wanting me to check on some error in his weaving. I looked at the last few rows he's done and saw that the edges were curving up at the sides, in a wide, colorful smile. That wasn't a happy thing; it meant the warp was uneven, looser at the sides than in the middle.

I find weaving more challenging than knitting, for this reason: you have to get that tension right at the beginning, or hidden weaknesses creep out later. And it's hard to get it right. Some threads always escape from the orderly plan and cause havoc. My co-worker Rafaela doesn't seem bothered about it. She just hangs some weights on the loose threads, or pulls out part of the warp and re-rolls it while pushing back the uneven part, tweaking and tugging till the work can resume. Only when there is no other option does she cut the piece and start over.

With knitting, on the other hand, if something goes wrong, I can rip out a few stitches or rows or even an entire sweater. I can roll the whole bundle of yarn up into a new ball to be done over again later, or make something completely different out of it. It's not possible to do that with weaving, which isn't built up stitch by stitch. Every thread is bound up with the others, crossing over and interweaving at innumerable points. Half the fabric is established at the beginning, and then the other half is laid upon that foundation. If the foundation is wrong, there will be problems.

Out in the world, there are problems. Tweaking and tugging aren't working, but we can't unravel the whole thing and start over. Somehow, we have to find a way to move forward, even with the errors built into our foundations.

Whatever might be happening in the outside world, it was time for tea in the weavery. I called everyone over to the table and poured out glasses. Kristi threw back her tea in one shot and got back up again. Johan drank slowly while he paged through the book of pictures he brought with him every day, images of family and pets.

Johan has a passion for rearranging things. If I'm unwary, I find all the chairs shoved into a corner, or a yarn basket relocated across the room. A

colleague told me the secret to stopping this: just offer to "rearrange" Johan's picture book, and he'll scurry back to his place, guarding his things.

Not all situations are so easy to defuse. If people get anxious, if something unexpected happens or boundaries are violated, there will be discomfort, unrest, even an explosion. When Kristi came too close to Johan's place at the tea table, for example, he started to yell and wave his arms. I knew she just wanted to look out the window, so I told him not to worry. But he remained on edge till she moved away.

Meanwhile, Nina didn't want to sit down, but came when I coaxed her. She sat next to me, her tea untasted, as I sipped my own. She crossed one leg over the other, feet not reaching the floor, and hunched her shoulders, staring at her lap.

I've learned not to take her cold shoulder personally. She'll act like she doesn't want to have anything to do with me, then suddenly grab my hand and spread her mouth wide in a radiant smile, trembling with excitement. I can't understand what causes these jumps. I can only keep looking within and between for the peace not shaken by extremes, the human connection that soothes and compensates. Forgiveness, I think it could be called.

Most humans, I have come to believe, have some mistake woven into their life from the beginning, including our most admired role models as well as our most detested enemies. We can't get rid of the mistakes, but we can find a way to work with them, so long as we are willing to perceive them, and to love what comes about through our patient efforts to make something beautiful out of flawed material.

When a breakdown in my marriage destroyed everything my husband and I had known, the unraveling was disorienting and scary, but it gave us the chance to rebuild on stronger foundations. Taking a new step forward, we moved to Switzerland, the country where his life began. For me, it's been a chance to cut some of my old habits and find a different perspective; for him, an opportunity to rework some of the fabric of memory. As we keep weaving our life together, the mistakes of our past are starting to recede. We can appreciate the skills we've learned through trial and error, the more beautiful, harmonious fabric that's starting to emerge.

Once, I was terrified to admit my own mistakes, but no longer, for I've learned there are many ways of becoming human, none of them wrong. The only error that can't be corrected is denying our fundamental need for belonging to a community of humans who see and appreciate our unique gifts. When love builds a place where people have the safety to be themselves, the need to resist reality abates, and all kinds of creative solutions come to light.

Something like Rafaela's way of adjusting an uneven warp, adding weights to balance out the tension, gently tugging and pushing the threads until they can be worked with a little longer.

A decade of working with the so-called "disabled" has had that balancing effect on me. Parts of me that had been laid down wrong at the beginning, some hanging slack and loose, some pulled to an excruciating tension, started to wriggle free. There was a relaxing and an ordering. I'd made many mistakes, but I didn't have to start my life all over again. I could simply live differently, somehow, by sitting next to people who had the courage to be vulnerable. I could give up my fantasy of fixing the entire world, and concentrate on a more doable task: meeting the other, and myself. Weaving the fabric between us.

Tea time was over, but Nina still had not finished hers. "Drink up!" I said. "*Prost!*" She picked up the glass and took a tiny sip, then another. Finally, she emptied the whole glass in a series of gulps, without a breath in between.

It's always like this with her: all or nothing. She'll hold herself in, making no sound, frozen in place, but then she'll utter wild cries and start slapping herself on the head. In joy, or in distress? It's often hard to tell, a riddle I cannot solve. I can only hold it in a space of wonder, reaching towards love. I am held in that space, too, and so is every other person I do not understand.

Instead of looking for peace on earth outside myself, or longing for a savior to make everything great again, I've been learning to look with a peaceful gaze, learning from Nina and Johan and Kristi. Instead of seeing an annoying person who won't do what I want, or a baffling person whose language I can't comprehend, I can strain toward perceiving a mind, a soul, an unfathomable mystery that nevertheless wants to communicate with me, sharing my world.

I took up the embroidery I'd been working on, stitching flowers onto a felt chair cushion. "Nina, want to help me?" I threaded the needle and stuck it through the fabric. She headed toward the door, but then circled slowly around the table and back towards me. As she came close, I offered the needle for her to pull, and after a moment of hesitation, she did.

Another circle, another stitch. It was slow work, yet if it brought us closer together, it was worth all the time it took. The threads that bind us together are the ones that will make us whole.

The world continues to unravel. I can't solve all its problems. But each time I step into this peaceful room, I know we are making something that matters. What looks like a mistake might become the basis for a new creation. And so, facing an uncertain future with my baffling, beloved companions, I will weave.

Lory Widmer Hess *lives with her family in Switzerland, where she works with adults with developmental challenges and practices spiritual direction. Her book* When Fragments Make a Whole: A Personal Journey Through Healing Stories in the Bible *(Floris Books, 2024) includes reflections on her struggles with depression at various times in her life. She is also mindful of a legacy of ancestors challenged by mental illness, stories she knows only in part. Lory's essays and poems have been published in* Parabola, Interweave Knits, Pensive, Anglican Theological Review, Vita Poetica, Amethyst Review*, and elsewhere. Find more of her work on her website, enterenchanted.com.*

Dan Sicoli

SON/TIME

her voice distracts
casually stating
“you know, you’re not
really suited for this”

i chuckle at her
first words of the morning
“you’ve got that right,
but i’m all you’ve got”

my father’s
impatient genes
surge me like a drug

but i manage to help her
in this
comical moment
and we both
breathe a sigh of relief

* * *

when the day comes
and dread dissipates
my orbit will weaken
like a moon
losing influence in
rolling back the tides

Dan Sicoli

OUT OF THE CORNER

of his eye she sits
in her chair
where she is
sometimes there

and for now
so is he
and this is enough
to fill this momentary
silence
in this waiting room

TUNNELING

she spends yet another night
tunneling
and the forest clouds
appear like a falling blanket

there is
no wisdom
in this shroud

like an ominous sign
the tunneling turns
surreal before the enlightening

she has no word for tomorrow

her vast heart now wounds
but her fingers don't bleed
from the digging
and forest leaves fall
into the nothingness of oblivion

there is only the remainder
for us to fail
and fail
        again

Dan Sicoli *lives between two Great Lakes in New York State, where he is an editor with* Slipstream*. He will have a new poetry collection (his third) out from Ethel Press in 2026. A three-time Pushcart nominee, he's had poems placed with* Abandoned Mine, BlazeVOX, Evening Street Review, Hellbender, Hobo Camp Review, Home Planet News, Loch Raven Review, Lowlife Press, Misfits, Steam Ticket, and San Pedro River Review*, among numerous others. His three poems appearing in this edition mostly concern his experiences as a caregiver for his elderly mother as she slowly progressed into dementia with Alzheimer's disease. Seeing his ailing father's love for her remain strong right up until the end gave him inspiration. They passed exactly two weeks apart; his mom first, followed by his dad. On weekends, he beats on an old Gibson in a local garage rock band.*

Linda LaDuc

LITHOS

soft, silver, white stone
cached in still air
fights fire with fire

isotopic cure
for my dysphoric self
my speeding self
my grandiosity

thumb-sucking tongue-tapping teeth
dyskinetic beat

'to' and' fro' the hammock swings, pauses
manic moves to fugue

lost woman lost takes
a pilled pinch of salt
trudges through thick air…

and superwoman, superwoman…
sweeps in with perfect poise
cape billowing gracefully

Fighting fire with white stone,
she swoops into her life

SCARILY REACTIVE METAL

mineral, salt, trace
chemical power, lithium
reset my inner clock
remodeled my circuits
yes, altered my reality

before that little bit of salt
I lived life at fast forward
crashing, predictably
at the mercy of a brain revving
proteins binding to DNA
clinging onto midnight riding fast

sunlight could not bring back
indifferent Circadian rhythms
sunlight could not bring back
the normal ticking of my clock
nor slow the steady rhythmic spark
of too excited neurons

but this little bit of salt
this scarily reactive metal
walked me through thick air
to a calmer resting place…

…no, regret does not undo
the wildness of lost years
nor ease the leaking loss
of a racing, fertile brain, yet…

… regret should not halt
my unexpected movement
out of fugue

RAINSTORM ON TISSUE PAPER

Once upon a time
long ago
I was fragile
dissolving
like tissue in a rainstorm.
I was soggy
and not
holding together.

Years later
now
after cyclones and waterspouts
have groomed me
I am strong
calm
not panicked
on a dark windy night,
a full moon
raining light.

I am walking faster,
striding toward my life
just this corner turning
laughing
fresh drops on my face.

I am impermeable to water now.
I am not afraid of the lunar smile.
I am not afraid of the rain
beating down,
flushing the sidewalk
clean.

***Linda LaDuc, PhD**, Rhetoric, retired professor and grateful survivor of bipolar disorder, grew up in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. She currently lives in Massachusetts.*

THE SAME MOON

The same full moon floats in the sky tonight,
the same one I gazed at through the neighbor's
bedroom window as a child after I was robbed
of my innocence. The truth is the sad and beautiful
abide together. Stars fall in the same sky
where others are born—

Do you ever wonder at the starlight, so distant
and so distinct, traveling in those galloping galaxies
where the ancients hung their mythology?

Men at war search for constellations like they did as boys
stretched out on their front lawns, the rousing chirp
of crickets pulsing through the laden August air.

Beauty keeps us sane when blossoming in uneasy quiet.
It is the tender mouth of the morning glory opening
to the rain.

CROSSING OVER

I cross the road from my house to the neighbor's
clutching a handmade card of the Easter Bunny drawn
in Crayola pink in one hand, a hairbrush in the other.
I made the card for my molester because of some backwards
Compulsion to placate the beast, and for some odd reason
I decided he was the only one to brush my blonde hair.
When I step to the middle of our quiet side street, a car
at a distance is driving toward me. With the vehicle advancing,
I hit an invisible wall preventing me from moving forward.
I freeze. Having no choice, I go back to my side, wait
for the car to pass and set out again. This time
I have no trouble. *How odd.*

I walk back and forth without difficulty, shrug my shoulders
and skip on into the neighbor's house. I didn't understand—
some part of me stayed in the road while another part went on
to sit on the neighbor's lap, to let him brush my curls,
to watch him smile at me with his teeth.

To whet that monstrous appetite.

STRANGER

My mother leaves me with the neighbor's wife
while she goes to the beauty parlor. It is the era
of bobs and perms. When she comes to the screen door
to pick me up, I run to his wife, throw my arms around
her legs. A stranger wants to take me home. The two women
laugh, thinking I don't recognize my mother with her
new crown of curls. But something stranger is happening.
I watch the scene from above, part of me knowing
my mother, part of me not knowing. Coming to,
I take her hand, step out of a world beyond my world.

THE LILAC GARDEN

At the end of the carport, a row of leafy bushes
boasting giant lilacs. The cone-shaped flowers,
full and pungent, announce themselves when we
open the backdoor or crawl out of the Buick.
Each spring, my mother lops the gnarly stems
with the kitchen shears and sets bouquets
on the Formica table in an heirloom, cut glass vase.
They hover above me as I spoon my cereal,
scoop after scoop, to beat the school bell,
and whisper gray mornings lavender.

I carry the scent with me down the driveway
and into the road, past the neighbor's house,
swinging my lunchbox.

Even in a war zone, the air can be flavored
with innocence.

SNIP

At seventeen
I didn't know what possessed me
when I decided to cut off my long, thick hair.

One light brown lock fell into the sink,
then another.
Layer upon layer,
a pile ballooned like a sad story.

Shorter and shorter.

I stared in the mirror
at the ravage,
seeing and not seeing.
Numb,
almost indifferent.

then cleaned up the mess,
carefully,

attempted to style
my shocks of hair
with a wet comb,

and opened the door
to let the world see
what I was blind to.

Christine Andersen

HIDDEN

I wonder when I walk the trails
in the woods about what lies hidden—

a den of coyotes or bobcats,
a mountain lion that has strayed into New England
from Canada watching from a ledge,
a mounded black bear napping under a heap of fallen trees.

I hang a whistle around my neck just in case.
Loud noises keep the wild at bay,
though I'm told animals stay out of sight
for mortal fear of man.

In autumn, when men and women
crouch in camouflage to pummel the peace
with their gunshots, I wear neon green.

Guessing how close I'm stepping to peering eyes
has become an involuntary habit,
as if being hunted is part of my DNA,
but I cannot stay out of the woods.
They are too beautiful.
The way the seasons ruffle the trees
then color and denude them,
powder them white, glitter them with rain.

The way the April river rushes under the walking bridges
or in February, freezes mid-flow to pendants of ice.

How July's wildflowers bend with the marsh grass
into prisms of blossoms before October reinvents orange.

I'm learning not to fear what lies hidden.
I don't run.
So much better to face the shadows head-on.

Christine Andersen *was finally properly diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder after 30 years in the revolving door of therapy. It is her mission to dispel the stigma of the disorder, as splitting is a creative response to extreme early trauma. She raised two well-adjusted children, earned a Master's degree in Counseling Psychology, enjoys loving relationships, and established a fund to train future psychologists in trauma therapy. She has published over 100 poems.*

AJ Saur

IN SPACETIME

the sun has no pull.
It doesn't ring you
on Sunday with an aging
voice to guilt a visit

to the driving range—
all hope
in small slices
of conversation between

perfectly-gripped swings
you are far from
mastering. Nothing's said
about a hole-in-one

or too many disappointments
will play through the mind,
deepening the silence
of space.

I would mention Einstein,
if I better understood
the physics of gravity,
the speed of descent, how

the straightest path
always curves—the stars
unhooked
from their trajectories

catching on
dreams, creating those tiny
indentions of possibility
we turn into.

THE CURVATURE OF DAY

My alarm clock unfurls
space until I'm vertical
and accelerating toward sunrise.

By what physics does it defy
gravity lifting me as if I was light
skipping a horizon still heavy

with darkness? It sounds my depth
until I'm skimming a dream
surface of flower beds,

the bulbs nestled in earth,
color turned inward
for a later revealing.

Please drop the lead and line
to this mattress and let linger
without worry of shoal

or the breaking of hull.
I want to be dull of all things
except the swallowtail, its eyes

new and resting in chrysalis—
no hurry to raise sails
into a westward wind.

AJ Saur

ONE AFTER MY OWN HEART

What happens in the one before
the excited dog greets me
at the backdoor? Is he after

the cat again—that raised back
and fur? Or, perhaps, his water dish—
the ravenous slurping after chasing

rabbit after rabbit dreams.
This coming beat is mine, I guess—
the tail thumping tile floor

until knob is turned and I'm inside
the wet kisses of the long awaited.
And if it isn't clear that this is all

I've longed for after a disheartening day
at the office, you will need to know
that before I got on with dinner and chores

I laid my body down on the cool ceramic
pressing my harried face into his chest
for I don't know how long—

until, at least, my pulse matched his
and we went on together
into the next.

AJ Saur *is the author of five books of poetry from Murmuration Press, including, most recently,* Of Bone and Pinion *(2022). AJ's poems have also appeared (or will soon appear) in* Third Wednesday, Abandoned Mine, Marrow Magazine, Front Range Review, Willow Review*, and other journals. AJ comes from a long line of individuals experiencing acute depression, often undiagnosed (but the effects of which are daily evident).*

MONDAY NIGHT

I did it.
Again.
Made it through an entire day
without shattering, kept my
balance while running over
wet stones with an armload
of landmines.
Didn't cry, didn't curse, didn't
damage any relationships, did
not pity myself or blame
others.
No one knows how brave and
strong I am because I won't
let them know. I hide all that
in poems, a place where
almost no one looks.

RESTLESS MIND

My mind was restless so
I turned it loose in the
house and it did pretty much
what you'd expect: ran from
room to room looking at, touching
and sniffing random objects,
knocked half the books off
the shelves and read a paragraph
of each, looked in the fridge
four or five times, checked
voicemail and email and the
mailbox and the thermostat
and the sump pump, ordered
things from catalogs, fought
with the cat, wrote angry
letters and tore them up, wept
over photo albums, played the
radio, tried on clothes,
rearranged the cupboards…

On the bright side, it gave my
soul a half-hour to sit
quietly and gaze out
the window.

Dave Morrison

MY GRAY TWIN

He's not gone,
my gray twin, but
he doesn't live here
any more.

I don't miss him,
but sometimes I
wonder where he
sleeps now.

For years we used to
sleep in the same bed. He
was not stronger than me, but
he was bigger, and
some mornings I would wake
up with him on top of me;
I could hardly get out of bed.

I would wash him, dress him,
feed him, and then he would
climb on my back and I would
carry him; to school, to work,
to church, to parties, and then
all the way home in the dark.

I could hardly bear his weight,
but I was never alone. I rarely
mentioned him, hoping that
people wouldn't notice. How
do you even complain – he ain't
heavy, he's my brother – right?

I imagined that in some way
he completed me. He gave me
something to endure. Low-rent
heroics.

I began to meet people who
were not put off by my gray twin,
or carried twins of their own. As a
way of explaining I would cut pieces
of him and offer then to the curious,
the caring, and as I did he shrank
until I could carry him in a backpack,
then a pocket, and finally now he
is pressed between pages like a
black rose from a long ago
funeral.

He ruined so many things, my gray twin,
and when I hated him for it he only
held me tighter. He only loosened his
grip when I discovered that I could
love him. That's what you do with
family.

*Hailed as "A hearty weed in the garden of American poetry" (*Dispatch Magazine*)* ***Dave Morrison's*** *poems have been published in literary magazines and anthologies, and featured* on Writer's Almanac, Take Heart, *and* Poems from Here*. Morrison has published eighteen collections of poetry, including Sprinter Runs the Marathon (Rain Crow Press, 2025), his most recent collection. Morrison says, "I was a bright kid, and a poor, disruptive student. I wrestled with anxiety and depression (and what I believe was undiagnosed ADHD) for years before I finally got the clarity to see that I was not lazy or weak or stupid—I just thought differently." Originally from Boston, Morrison now lives on the coast of Maine.*

FOR YOU

for you
each new sky was
a breadline without charity

all that
was known was chalk
piled in drifts of nothingness

along the river
in which you bathed

still

you bathed in that river

looked up at the stammering stars

and knew that you knew nothing

SOMEWHERE, A STUNNED BRAMBLING

somewhere,
a stunned brambling discovers her wings,
not solely for flight; stunned, she discovers they give shelter.

SOMEWHERE, A STORM-PETREL

somewhere,
a storm-petrel takes wild,

cluttering flight;
it migrates, beneath

an errant sun, a course
that's not its own.

ALWAYS, OTHERS THOUGHT YOU A LONG FEBRUARY

always,
others thought you
a long february – equal part
doll's arm and a quail egg in brine;

but yesterday,
you arose (reborn),
no longer adrift between
solstice and equinox, no longer
a lone cold voice singing *Requiem in Grief Minor;*
but you, reborn as *How to Bask in Afterglow,*
reborn as *Here / Another / Answered*;

you awakened
all tin-scrap & disappointment,
hard-worn cloth and razor-wire, refit
as wings in search of a crow,
but found yourself, still,
without lift or drag;

today,
grounded,
you plead refuge
for your migrant heart.

George C. Harvilla *is a multi-disciplinary artist and executive leader in the global health sciences. His poetry is informed and inspired by first-hand experience with the adverse effects of environmental, social, and emotional stressors on both physical and behavioral health. Through lived experience in his dual careers, he became an advocate for holistic, integrative care plans – plans that simultaneously treat both physical and behavioral health, incorporating strategies that address amplifying factors like post-traumatic stress, domestic abuse, sexual assault, gender-expansiveness, immigration status, ageism, homelessness, substance abuse, addiction, food insecurity, and income insecurity, among others. Harvilla's poems have appeared* in Atlanta Review, Dogwood, California Quarterly, Medicinal Purposes, The Comstock Review, The Journal of Poetry Therapy, *and* Willow Springs, *among others. He is the recipient of a 2025 Individual Artist Award from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.*

Mike Panasitti

AND THE WORD WAS G-D

The past tense is of little use.
My friend Phil *is* locked up.

I wrote, in a previous poem,
he lumbers on a sidewalk

filled with parricidal ire.
I mentioned smoldering fire.

Phil calls me from jail,
raving. His voice, while not

hateful, is hopeless, disturbed.
I feel I've committed him

to this fate with a poem.
If that's the case,

if the word is G-d,
written *kalimat*, Allah,

dharma an expression of Buddha,
can I write another destiny?

Can poets right wrong,
by not writing wrongfully,

by not writing woe,
but composing weal?

If poets can, we must.
If words express a divine will,

I will Phil hear a song.
Not the resigned death trill

of Keats' gloomy nightingale,
but of the hummingbird

hidden in every errant heart.
The hummingbird that, for love,

pulls up from a dive
before crashing to earth.

The hummingbird, that spends its day
seeking sustenance,

to the delight of any onlooker.
A little work of G-d.

One of the world's precious words.
With this poem,

may Phil extinguish his ire,
pull up from a dismal dive,

and find renewed, abundant worth,
become evidence of an Almighty

strength, a testament to divine
mercy and compassion.

I, HIS IMA

When I was a child, he was born of my loin and bosom.
Born of dreams

and of his Aba's vexatious seed, but I rarely speak
the language of irritation

or schisms, nor do I know what a prism is. I once told him
a children's story

that was no story for a toddler. He stopped asking I tell it.
I always encouraged

his learning, helped him with elementary school homework.
Today he is clever

and explains what jism, even schismogenesis, mean.
He is also gifted—as a scholar,

an artist & now a poet—though I can't make heads or tails
of his poems. Until the days

he didn't, he's always had a home. I wonder whether madness
caused his talents

or becoming mad is predicated on the ability to read tomes,
paint pictures,

and craft words. I say, becoming, but I mean being.
To be or not to be is often

his question, but he isn't a diagnosis. He has one, and some day
he will let go of all

the lunacy, quit having fits—as surely as one day we will cease
being body & breath,

but never I his Ima, hoping even beyond the grave
that schizophrenia will eventually release

my first child from a tight embrace, unlike the way
I've always been his to have and hold.

Born to Argentine parents in East Los Angeles, ***Mike Panasitti*** *received a master's degree from the University of California at Berkeley. Six years after being diagnosed with schizophrenia, he had a near-lethal experience with police and subsequently became a patient and inmate of the mental health/industrial complex. Upon his release from prison, he started an adventurous and harrowing journey to mental health. Today, Mike is enrolled as a graduate student in creative writing and an educator providing social recovery workshops to formerly incarcerated individuals. This is the first time his poetry has appeared in* The Awakenings Review.

A BRANCH GETS BROKEN

No apples will grow upon it.
Other branches will produce fruit
that will be plucked and savored
because there are fewer of them.

I cannot repair what is severed
and break it some more for kindling,
watch the flames rise like wishes.
Everything altered after the storm.

KITCHEN

Chipped Italian tile floors
stained with years of random spills
and crumbs and family meals made.

Cabinets with thumb prints
from honey, olive oil, and tamari,
taking them from the wooden shelf.

A mystery of late what is behind
the aging veneer door. Touching
the sticky drips down the bottles.

An intimacy with each one
that thrilled me, aromas released
in one twist of removing a cap.

Something has changed between us,
the vigor of energy dwindling,
reaching for the savory and the sweet.

Elizabeth Brulé Farrell

PICTURE WINDOW

Blinking because maybe my cataracts
have gotten worse, or dry eye syndrome
has blurred my vision and I need drops,
I finally realize the window is dirty.

The season will soon change.
Vibrantly colored leaves will let go
of their branches. Flowers will die
in the first frost. Basil will turn black.

Squirrels will gather nuts, other animals
will get ready for hibernation. I relish
this time of preparation and take out
my bucket of soapy water and squeegee.

Hours will be spent looking through
the glass. Snow will fall. Some birds will
migrate. Silence will settle over the garden.
A kind of quiet grace will visit my mind.

It is a timely task to wash the window
to see everything clearly, getting ready
to witness this picture, this magnificent
turning from one thing to another.

WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN

I have charred the toast and left it
in the stainless-steel grave sitting
on the counter. What is that smell,
is repeatedly asked with no answer.

An odor familiar yet distant,
unnamed and suddenly forgotten.
The question will be resolved
the next time morning toast is made.

I won't even be embarrassed by
the discovery, maybe even laugh,
before burying it deep in the trash
so no one else can see my mistake.

STEALING THOUGHTS

Pressing the rim of my ear against
your ear, I want to believe that I can
hear your thoughts. The ones
you do not say out loud, the private
silent dreams, ambitions, hopes,
that I know reside within you.

I was told as a child holding the shell
in the same way would reveal sounds
of the sea, secrets whispered in the history
of waves, sunken ships, mermaids talking.
Never did I think it folk lore, untrue.

Why not with a human ear, shaped to fit
as though a pattern of our connection.
Gentle moment of touching, you unaware
that I wanted to steal your thoughts.
Willing to allow this kind of playfulness
you fill me with joy, even a slight expectation.

"The relief to be real, as I really am, is a gift. Writing poems allows a healing release and ends the silent suffering of having experienced the many manifestations of mental illness and its impact on daily life. I am therefore grateful to The Awakenings Review *and other publications such as* Stronger Than Fear, Beyond Forgetting, Food Flowers Medicine, The Healing Muse, Watch My Rising, The Paterson Literary Review, Poetry East *and more."* ***Elizabeth Brulé Farrell*** *worked as an advertising copywriter in Chicago and a writer-in-residence in some Massachusetts public school systems. She has been the recipient of the Louise Bogan Memorial Award for Poetry.*

Brian James Lewis

STILL TRYING TO FIND MYSELF

I'm still trying to find myself
Ten years after the accident
That made me who I am today
My irreparable spine broken
Nerve tunnels shut down, blocked
Unapologetically closed for repairs
Taking longer than road work
In the state of New York

I'm still trying to find myself
After finally getting up
Out of that constraining wheelchair
But requiring crutches to stand
Pain still travelling the white line
Feet and legs numb or screaming
Medications make me slow and dizzy
Unable to concentrate or remember things

I'm still trying to find myself
After years of being a suicide risk
Hypervigilant, always angry, depressed
Rage spewing onto the sidewalk stupidly
Threatening armed drug dealers
Yelling at everyone equally
Friends, foes, family, my wife
"Go ahead, pull the pin on this grenade!"

I'm still trying to find myself
After hitting hard rock bottom
Sitting in a filthy house
Full of liars claiming kindness
Darkness closing in hungrily
Licking its lips and drooling

For my polluted lifeblood and soul
Nudging me towards death

I'm still trying find myself
After to choosing to walk away
To slowly climb back out of
The hole I'd dug myself into
Enjoying the fresh air and sun
Cutting way back on medication
So I can see and feel again
Not stumble in the fog, but…

I'm still trying to find myself
This isn't some kind of Disney flick
Full of singing happy idiots all
Dancing to a jolly soundtrack
I'm still disabled with PTSD
Things may get better for me, but
Chronic pain always shortens my day
While that evil rage just lies in wait

Still, I'm happier trying to find myself
Instead of pretending I don't care
Getting hurt and hurting others
While constantly living in fear
I'll never be exactly who I was
But this new person has potential
There is no such thing as perfection
Making the best of things is real life

HITTING MY STRIDE

I've been
knocked down by pain
Nearly killed by suicide
Mental health issues
Setting fire to my life

But now I'm hitting my stride
No longer content to step aside
While life parades down the street
Leaving me alone by the wayside

I found
The best love I ever had
In a voluptuous red-haired babe
Full of laughter, but horrified
As anger and drugs took their toll

Got stuck in a wheelchair
Pissed off and going nowhere fast
But now I'm hitting my stride
Got up and out before I died

I didn't
Find religion or a gun
But when diabetes almost killed me
Dying didn't seem like much fun
After all the times I wished for it

So now I'm hitting my stride
Looking forward to what's on
The other side of this mountain
That I try to climb every day-a little at a time

Sometimes I
Fall down, slide a few feet
In the wrong direction, yelling
But eventually, get back up and retry
Perfection does not exist, forget that "sheet"

But now I'm hitting my stride
Doing the best I can with what I got
Sometimes great, sometimes not
Pain and disabilities won't win this time

CRACKS

Morning comes and light seeps through the cracks
in the blinds next to my bed
Blinding me as the annoying alarm clock in my phone
rattles off what's supposed to be a song

Groaning in pain, I roll out of bed and struggle to stand
My back creaking and cracking
around the new hardware installed 2 months ago
Shining with fresh hope and dreams

It's easy to feel if you run your hand down my back
A thick column of steel and bone
under a scar that runs from my shoulder blades
way down to the crack of my ass

When my back was broken over twelve years ago
in a stupid, easily preventable accident
My life was fractured like a mirror hit by a hammer
Cracks spidering across the glass

I declined rapidly both in my body and my mind
Nothing was safe from the cracks
Addicted to medication that didn't stop the pain
I got stuck, raving in a wheelchair

A neurosurgeon said she could probably fix me
At least, take away the pain
Toss the trash, add spacers, bolt things together
Close up those constantly shifting cracks

Today I'm standing and walking with just a cane
not a single wheelchair in sight
Pain, stiffness, creaks and cracks still exist but
I'm moving now and think I'll be all right

HOLE

I was starting to do good, but now I've fallen into a hole
and it seems that I can't get up, get it up, or get out
of these deep tire ruts in the sands of suckitude and I'm sad
For just a minute, I was in "4 HI" rocking along in my 4-wheel drive
Keeping close to the trail, and following all the road signs
Big tires getting good traction-making me part of the action…
But then I got lazy, or maybe afraid of all the effort required
to make it and be the successful writer that I truly want to be
Suddenly everything seemed too hard and it was easier to just sleep
like a dog in a backyard who's found a sunbeam and favorite toy
The confusion returned making my thoughts into a cloudy haze
where I couldn't see the forest for the trees or the right path for me
I began to falter, that big old truck slipping out of gear and sliding
backwards down the hill I'd worked so damn hard to climb
My beautiful song of hope collapsing into a warbling parody
Bloated by too many notes that meant nothing
Much like those masturbatory 80's hair band guitar solos
When I wanted to be more like Buddy Guy's perfect creations
Full of heart, soul, love, and all that pain
My attempts to escape have been half-assed mostly
Just a lot of noise and wasted gas, impotently going nowhere
Old habits are hard to break, watching TV and staying up too late
leads to lurching mornings of going back to sleep, leaving life undone
So, I shut things down and took some time for thought
Realizing that with chronic pain, anxiety, and depression
that I'll always have unwanted baggage that wants me to stop
"Hey it's not my fault! Guess I'll just have to accept my lot
A crummy life of hills and valleys, a flawed person going nowhere"
But something inside of me, maybe my heart won't just crap out
My ears have closed to that gross greasy garbage self-talk
For the first time, I realize that my truck has a winch up front
A gleaming steel cable there for my use if I want it bad enough
To unspool, hook on to the tree of life and pull myself out

After an accident stole his ability to walk, trashed his mental health, and left him in chronic pain, ***Brian James Lewis*** *needed something good to focus on. His psychologist encouraged him to submit some of his poetry for publication and keep writing. He was amazed when some of his work was accepted. While this didn't replace his ability to work on cars or take away all his problems, it did give him a sanctuary and restored his self-respect, leading to a better quality of life. Most recently Brian's work has appeared in* Shooter Literary Magazine, Trajectory Journal, *and* Holistic Horrors *where he wrote about the importance of writing to survive PTSD and physical disability with chronic pain.*

Grace Flaherty

A METRIC OF MOVEMENT

My mom hated playing baby dolls with me as a toddler. I'd line them up in a perfect row and make her take attendance, repeating each name until she got them all exact. No exceptions. If she stumbled, we started over. And this was because I kept my baby dolls in pristine condition with even more pristine care. I had a very specific way I wanted things done, and my mom never got it right. She'd slouch their heads, forget to burp them, or, worst of all, feed the wrong food to the wrong baby. She never "played" the right way—at least, not the way I wanted. But then again, nobody did.

I push down the safety tab, unscrew the cap, and shake out sixty milligrams of medication disguised as a white Tic-Tac. Morning isn't marked by the sun or an early alarm but by the pair of tangerine bottles resting on my dresser, waiting. Night isn't signaled by the glow of the moon or the flicker of the TV, but once again, by those same carroty canisters that bookend my days. I toss the pill into my mouth, chasing it with a swig from the water bottle that never leaves my side. Slippers secured, I shuffle downstairs, drawn by the comforting scent of fresh-brewed coffee.

From as long as I can remember, my days have always been measured in rituals. My habits, routines, whatever you want to call them, are second nature to me. I'm good at them, and that's exactly what makes them so satisfying. They've of course evolved over time, shifting as I've grown, but the need for them has never wavered. Now, they manifest in strict nightly showers before bed, upkeeping my apartment so I can sleep peacefully at night, and plenty of morning time to perfect my makeup, ensuring every step is accounted for, every detail just right. I've been called a neat freak, a perfectionist, and maybe I fit the bill, but with time, I've realized that, to me, it's much less about perfection than it is order.

"You comin' right home after work today?" My dad asks, the stream of coffee filling his mug serving as a steady backtrack to his question.

"Plan to, yes," I reply.

"Okay, good, I need the car if you could."

"Got it," I say, filling up a mug of my own. I make my way back upstairs to my room, setting the coffee on my desk before reaching for the floral makeup bag resting on my dresser. But before I can start, I find myself leaning

in, scrutinizing every pore in the mirror, poking and prodding at imperfections only I seem to notice.

By the time I've fussed over every blemish on my nose, set my face with powder, and coated my lashes in jet black, I can finally move on to my hair, where I inevitably overcomplicate the delicate balance between claw clip and ponytail. As I run a brush through my bedhead and mist it with water, my eyes drift to the pill bottles sitting nearby. I don't just remember my mom's inability to play with baby dolls, but her inability to do hair too.

Back in elementary school, the bus arrived at eight forty-five, but I was up by six, already in the bathroom with my mom before she had to leave for work. Three tries to do my hair—that was all she'd give before I was on my own. I wanted to like it every time, but it was never perfectly centered on my head. There were bumps on the sides, and when the top was finally smooth, the bottom half of my hair would bubble under the elastic.

By the second attempt, I was usually already unraveling, my cheeks burning, tears streaming. And by the end of the third, I'd be itching to rip out the tie, fall to the tiled floor, thread my fingers through my hair, and pull it so taut I could feel my roots lifting from my scalp. When she left me to my own devices and stood her ground as she'd learned from therapy, I'd beg her to try just one more time. She'd say no, and on my worst days, I'd whack the brush against my forehead, frustration boiling up from nowhere but within me.

I secure the clip in my hair, use a bristled brush to seamlessly smooth over any imperfections, and then set it back on my dresser where it belongs. Consider it my mantra: if you want something done right, do it yourself. It's a mindset that has carried me through everything because I'd rather take on the burden solo than risk someone else messing it up. Just as it's not so much about perfection as it is order, it's also not so much about control than it is trust. Trusting that the only person who truly knows what I need is me.

I move on to picking out socks that color-match the outfit I laid out on my dresser last night. I like my clothes to match from my shoulders to my toes, even if those toes end up concealed under rubber soles and scuffed canvas anyway. It's the same way my pajamas must coordinate even though their only company for the night is the top sheet and comforter. Silly enough, this is my sane.

I used to refuse socks entirely, claiming they felt funny in my shoes, the sensation unbearable, like a layer of static trapped between my foot and the sole. The seams pressed; the fabric clung to my skin—everything felt wrong. Too tight, too itchy, too much. Nana had to hunt down seamless socks just to get me to wear them at all. Barefoot was always best, and to this day, I still shiver when someone tells me they sleep in socks.

Taking the folded clothes from the dresser, I unbutton the jeans and slip them up over my thighs, which is a lot for me, considering jeans were once an impossible ask too. Denim and I always had a bone to pick until my appearance gained higher prominence in easing my mind than my comfort did. As I'm pulling my t-shirt over my head, careful not to disrupt any hairs on my head, a knock comes from the door.

"Getting dressed, what do you need?" I holler.

"Just was making sure you were awake" my dad's voice trails through the cracks in the door, "it's eight, didn't want you to be late."

"Yup, almost ready!" I respond, stepping into my sneakers.

Gathering the empty coffee mug from my desk, my ID badge, and the purse that cradles all my daily necessities, I scoop up the small pile of laundry lounging on my floor and head downstairs. As I toss my clothes into the washer, the steady hum of the machine starting up echoes through the quiet room, and I'm reminded of how I used to cycle through four outfits a day, each one never quite clean enough to continue on in. It's thoughts like these that make me wish I found those little Tic-Tacs of contentment a lot sooner than I actually did. But then again, there are also days where I wonder if it's all just artificial.

I refill my water bottle and grab my lunch from the fridge, before reassuring my dogs I'll be back later today. When I open the door, I notice it's warm today for the first time in a while. I stop and let the sun kiss away the crispness of the air on my cheeks for a minute and then slide into the driver's seat. The engine roars to life, the morning's stillness broken by the rush of sound. As I pull out of the driveway, I'm already utilizing my ten-minute commute to start thinking of the workday ahead. Who will I be responsible for? What room will I work in? Is there an outing today? What are the activities planned?

My questions simmer as I pull into the parking lot, a sign reading, *Thriving Futures Center: Opportunities for People with Disabilities,* resting just beside the entryway. Once I park and step inside, I swipe my ID and punch in the door code.

"Good mornings" and a chorus of "how was your weekend?" flood the hallway as I make my way to my boss, who is greeting clients as they step off the vans.

"Grace! Good to see you," Lena calls, a clipboard balanced in one hand, and a pencil for attendance in the other. Before I can even say hello, she flips through the pages. "I'm gonna have you walk Stanley in this morning and then head to Tara's room to help out for the day."

"Good to see you too, that sounds great to me!"

"Speaking of which, I think that's his van behind this first one," she says. "If you don't mind dropping off your things and coming right back, that'd be great."

"Yes, absolutely. I'll be right back."

After setting my things down, I scurry back to the van door to find Stanley hunched over in his suspenders and what he proudly calls his "Chuck Taylors." I tell him that kids nowadays call them Converse, but that's not proper to him. His lunchbox and backpack skim the pavement as he waits there, silently counting the seconds in his head before he's able to allow himself another step forward. On a good day, it usually takes him thirty to forty-five minutes each way—coming in and going out—to make it from van to room.

"Good morning, Stanley," I greet him with a smile, "can I take your bags for you?"

"I-I got it."

"Are you sure Stanley? Because we've got other vans to unload, you can't be stuck in the hallway now. It's too narrow and we've got the wheelchairs that need to get by," Lena reprimands.

"I-I got it," he insists.

I meet her eyes and nod—a silent agreement to let him be.

"Grace," Stanley finally acknowledges me, taking a step forward into the building finally.

"Nice job, Stan, keep it up. How was your weekend?"

"Ducks, Grace?"

"All in a row, right?" I grin. He chuckles, shuffling forward three more steps as the hallway widens a bit.

"Nice?" He scuffs his feet against the tile, trailing beside me as I carry our conversation toward his group room.

"Nice day?" I clarify.

"Mm-hmm."

"You know, it's still a little cold, but I'd say it's pretty nice. We needed one, don't you think?"

"Mm-hmm," he nods, handing me his lunchbox and taking just enough steps to round the corner. He hesitates at the doorway, but I know what will help him take that last step inside.

I walk straight in, greeting the others as I set his lunchbox at his seat. Then, turning back toward the doorframe, I watch him count down the right moment to move.

"Fist bump?" I offer, holding out my hand with a hopeful smile. There's no "mm-hmm" this time. Stanley stumbles right forward and meets my fist with

his. I have him make his fist explode with mine before I go. As I'm walking out of the room, my name is called one last time.

"Grace," Stanley says, "End of the day?"

"To the vans?"

"Mm-hmm."

"You bet I'll walk you out" I say and trudge off to the room I belong in for the day.

I don't know what it's like to be as trapped in my own mind as Stanley is in his. I have never had to fixate on each individual step, nor have I felt the weight of others urging me to do what only I know is right for myself. I have never measured time in counted seconds, waiting for the precise moment to move.

But I do know what it's like to wake up three hours early just to perfect a ponytail. I know the disentangling feeling of a meltdown triggered by the wrong fabric against my skin. And I know the paralyzing fear of getting sick—the kind that kept me from eating at all.

So, while I don't truly know, I can imagine. Imagine what it means to be held captive by no one but yourself, even if in different ways. And maybe, just maybe, that's why Stanley and I understand each other without the help of many words.

At the end of the day, when I find him by the door, waiting just as he always does, I don't rush him. I don't push. I simply stand beside him with a quite patience.

"Ready, Stan?"

He doesn't answer right away. He's counting, waiting for the right second.

Then, finally…

"Mm-hmm."

Step by step, side by side, we walk toward the vans.

Grace Flaherty *recently completed her Bachelor of Arts in Writing at Emmanuel College in Boston, MA, with minors in Women & Gender Studies and Education. She writes personal essays and short stories that explore themes of memory, identity, and the complexities of growing up. Grace has lived with anxiety, OCD, and depressive disorders since early childhood, experiences that have shaped both her creative voice and how she moves through the world. She currently works with adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, often drawing on her own past to practice patience and understanding. Her work can also be found in Memoir Mixtapes, redrosethorns, and Symphonies of Imagination.*

Mary Magagna

What do I say to someone, maybe a young person, newly diagnosed with a mental illness?

A diagnosis stays with you like a middle name. Let a diagnosis help you find treatment; don't let it define you. You will always, always, always be more than a diagnosis.

In the beginning, I wasn't sure what it meant. Would it make me better? Could anything make better how I felt?

I wanted to be free of a burden no one felt but me. I wanted my mind to be lifted out of my head and fixed like it was the engine of a car. I wanted my thoughts and feelings corralled and tucked in bed; they were running like a pack of wayward wolves. My illness was a pack of wayward wolves—thoughts were racing, feelings ragged and raging, or empty, desperate, and hopeless. Finding a diagnosis put a name to my pack of wolves and gave me a place for them to dwell. From there I could range with the help of a therapist, take medication (lots of trial and error with meds: some work, some don't. I had to be patient as a patient).

Money—money for meds, for therapy. I wish I could say something encouraging about the cost. I can't accept that a diagnosis is necessary for insurance to kick in or for state and federal bureaucracies to step up, but the paperwork is a lot of work. I had a job and paid out of pocket after I used up my insurance. I don't know what your resources are but my advice would be to try to find an advocate like a social worker to help you navigate the mental health system. It's a doozy if you live in the United States. I didn't qualify for disability but maybe you can and it helps to have a steady income. Check it out. Having a diagnosis helps to qualify.

Trust. Oh, that was hard. Either I was smarter than everyone or else everyone got it wrong, didn't understand me, so I didn't trust them. Trust is hard to give, hard to get. Eventually I just had to settle down and keep working with the same person until I learned enough about that person's ways to trust them. But Trust is a two way street. Someone had to trust me enough to keep working with me.

It helps, by the way, to work with someone who recognizes that your mental illness isn't just yours. It's a reflection of the societal and familial mental illnesses that surround us. But that's a huge topic to consider. For now, as you're

beginning, small steps. Watch out for the blame game. It'll distract you. Stay focused on you—your health.

Be prepared for frustration. Nothing about working with a mental illness is quick. I wanted a cure. I'm not sure I'll ever be cured but I did figure out how to laugh at myself and that has helped a lot.

Set up a routine. Create a pattern. This in the morning, that in the afternoon. A walk, perhaps, at evening. A glass of water before bed. You'll be re-wiring your brain, creating better pathways for that pack of wolves to walk.

Look for small changes. One day, maybe, you'll notice the warmth of the sun on your skin. Or how a color changes in the light, or the smell of a flower. Maybe you'll be able to taste food and tell the difference between sour and sweet. Or make sense of numbers. Maybe you'll be able to make and record music to play back and listen to, or draw with lines you control and paint with hues you like, then hold your art out and look at it, or put into words a sentence that rings with your truth, on paper where you can read it back. That'll be you, working things out.

Alarmed by her sensitivity and imagination, ***Mary Magagna's*** *family did their best to toughen her up and prepare for a jaundiced world. But those of us labeled with disorders know that our tendencies are forged by genes. Diversionary tactics did not displace Magagna's bent toward depression and she has spent her adult years learning about the lowered keys in her life's registry of notes. Writing is how she finds herself and receptive companions as those found at Awakenings are her solace.*

Mary Anna Scenga Kruch

SANCTUARY

Must I release colors that stream
through my days that began far before
Sundays became daily Mass?

Gold light through the rose window
Blasted the priest's chalice as he processed
toward the altar while tinny echoes would

strobe through the Faithful and at least
once as the cross made its way to the apse
yellow mucus sparkled on the altar boy's

sleeve before it blobbed onto on his
white robe but he didn't give it another
thought until his eyes locked with Sister's

whose voice boomed out *How Lovely is
Our Gathering Place* fueled by her
reminder to slap the boy after Mass.

As a young girl in junior high my favorite
quiet place was a pew in our empty church
where the door was always open and

I could sit and dream about angels
and stare at the deep blues and greens
and rich reds of stained glass.

The church was near our parochial
school so I could easily stop in as
it was an especially safe place when

boys in cars catcalled and honked
as I walked home and I never
told any adults because this seemed

to happen to other girls plus I
did not understand my feelings
of shame so just ran for the cover

and quiet of my room but wonder
now if I had told my mother
about two physical assaults– the first

as a child – might I have told her
about the second attack in college?
Those gray days filled my ears with

sounds of cracking ice and not wanting
to draw further attention to myself
did the sobbing in the privacy of my

bedroom or retreated back behind the
swing set at the back of our yard as
the house was often noisy with yelling

and it's a damn shame that the church
of my childhood now sits empty and is
set to be torn down so I keep adding

stained glass to my home windows to create
a sanctuary as close to church minus the
sounds of what must have insanity to feel

cathedral colors clad in a sense of safety
for me now just as church has been a refuge
for all through the ages -- and my array

of colors beginning with the rose window
down the aisles of the nave to the golds
and greens in glass images of the saints

donated by wealthy parishioners are likely
long gone as I long in a most sacred way
for the safety of a stained-glass church.

TAILS OF SMOLDERING KITES

She recalled the winds
beat at laundry on the line
as storm's sparks hit the pole
that fell onto their house
set the roof ablaze
and axes hacked
through bedroom doors
did not keep the fire
from burnIng diaries
amid a recurring reality
of childhood screams
but their mom scooped them up
and wrapped them in clean sheets
and she watched her pages stream aloft
like ragged tails of smoldering kites
and so her nine-year-old self's
retelling of uncle's rape
had gone up in smoke
her mouth agape but silent
every regret stood mute
in the soot of a wind
committed
to air dirty laundry.

Mary Anna Scenga Kruch *is a career educator, writer, and photographer who explores the natural world, her Italian ancestry, social justice, and mental illness in her writing. Her older sister struggled with deep depression and Dissociative Personality Disorder, which led to her estrangement from most family and friends before her death. In addition, the author's father and fraternal aunt also suffered from depression and anxiety, while the author was diagnosed midlife with chronic anxiety and dysthymia; her husband of several years is a wounded Vietnam veteran who lives with PTSD and depression. Both have found their correct treatments in addition to medication: for the author, that includes writing and visiting family in her motherland, Italy, and for her husband, it is landscape gardening. Dr. Kruch has published a textbook for middle school writing teachers following 30 years of classroom teaching and several more at the university level called* Tend Your Garden: Nurturing Motivation in Young Adolescent Writers *(2012) as well as three poetry collections*: We Draw Breath from the Same Sky *(2019),* Grace Notes: A Memoir in Poetry & Prose *(2021), and most recently* Water Marks *(2024). Recent poetry appears in* Humana Obscura, Walloon Writers Review, *and* Wayne Literary Review.

MISSING YOU (DANCING WITH DEMENTIA I)

I know that I am
missing you
drifting you
as if we were on separate floats
coins of sun sliding
on the water our fingers brushing
and blue water cradles underneath
rocking in the liquid warmth
you don't realize I am borne
away.

I realize.

I see that I am missing you
I see it like I see the shadows
of friends long ago
the air is warm and colored lights
ride in the breeze above our heads
the table rough, the wine coarser.
I want to see my friends again, see you again,
they are not there, you are not here
I see you laughing, grasping
for more, for me, my hand under the table.
Your shadow hand passes through
the fingers miss,

And I am missing you.

I hear that I am missing you, not hearing you
fingering guitar and song, laughter and challenge.
Now there is silence, repetition, fear, and defiance.
I hear you in my head
but the room is quiet.
Dialogue redundant, replaced
by random post-it notes:
Don't forget. Don't forget. Don't forget.

You will forget.

Our fingertips miss.

And I am missing you.

DANCING WITH DEMENTIA II

"Where are you," he calls to me
winding in and out of each room.
"Where are you?"
"Here," I respond.
My question-where are YOU--
hangs unspoken.
Where he is, I do not know.
Wandering in a mental maze
where words hide, sentences
and thoughts jump midstream
onto the escalator
above or behind, hiding
where he cannot follow.

"Here you are!" his face appears
relieved, reprieved. "You
disappeared!" "I am here."
I repeat. Always repeating.
"I am here."
I take his hand, and he smiles.
I search blue, fading points,

guiding stars I've sought for fifty years
and wonder – when
will lights fade,
the escalator disappear,
carrying him away
to where I cannot follow.

DANCING WITH DEMENTIA III

I see him fold into himself
like an insect folds in its wings.
Those iridescent instruments
which allow one to soar
to float, to speed, to gently alight
to commune with kind
on gossamer light.
His wings have disappeared.

DANCING WITH DEMENTIA IV

No cards or flowers for me
today. You don't know
what this day is.
But to watch delight
relight your vacant eyes
as the chocolate heart
sweetens your smile –
You still know who I am.
That is gift enough.

PERPETUAL DAY – GHAZAL (DANCING WITH DEMENTIA V)

Ulysses, he wanders from room to room,
My husband resides in eternal day.

Events, past and current, swirl along.
The future decides his eternal day.

This disease is relentless and only one-way,
as distance divides our eternal day.

Memory obscured, all familiar leaves
But our love abides in eternal day.

Cynthia Storrs *writes and paints in Nashville, Tennessee. Educated in the US and UK, she has served on the board of Poetry West (CO), Pikes Peak Poet Laureate Committee, and Pikes Peak Arts Council. She was awarded a grant by the Arts Council for promoting poetry in the Pikes Peak region. She currently serves on the board of the Poetry Society of Tennessee. Her poetry has been published in numerous anthologies, magazines, and online. She has also published academic articles on bilingualism, biculturalism, and acculturation. Her interest in mental illness comes from a family history of depression and Alzheimer's disease; her husband of 50+ years has dementia. Her first chapbook of poetry, entitled* Garden Clippings*, will be published this fall by Finishing Line Press. She loves art history, theatre, landscape painting, and chocolate.*

THE CRYING WOMAN (LA MUJER LLORANDO)

She sits in the corner, crying, dressed in blues. The crying woman (la mujer llorando.) Why does she cry?

She cries over the disease that is slowly, painfully, paralyzing her (and thousands of others) to death.

She cries for those who have suffered abuse/trauma of whatever kind, occasionally even for the abused-turned-abuser.

She cries for the immigrant forced to flee from their war-torn homeland, for the immigrant who has not assimilated in a way that pleases "the American."

She cries for those who are mistreated due to another's prejudices of color of skin, who they love, how they worship.

She cries for those who have lost the song of their heart, the poem of their soul, the dance of their body.

She cries for those who have been hurting so much, for so long, that you erroneously believe they no longer feel.

How do I know so much about the crying woman?

Because she is me
I am La Mujer Llorando,
The Crying Woman

And if you sit gently awhile with me
I may share with you the best chocolate I have and my hidden sweet smile.

(poem inspired by Velma, Solomon, Marta, Eugene, and many others)
Dedicated to Helen, Bryan, and Ron

Nancy Voross' *courage in facing ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) has garnered her a strong community of supporters who admire her bravery and resilience. Her determination to die at home and not in an impersonal nursing home has inspired a great many supporters. Nancy has lived with PTSD and anxiety, and before being disabled with ALS, she was an active participant in Awakenings' studio gatherings in Elgin, Illinois. If you would like to help her situation, you can go to her GoFundMe page at: Fundraiser by Everett Bross: Help Nancy Battle ALS at Home.*

Naomi Stenberg

THOUGHTS CROSSING A FIELD

There is a god for people with bipolar.
She is bending down low to talk to me.
"You worry too much. Here."
She hands me a glass of water.
Sits.
Requiring nothing.

THE ROOM OF STARTING OVER

In 2009, a plane struck a flock of birds,
shortly after takeoff from LaGuardia,
losing all engine power. The pilots
glided the plane down to the Hudson River
near Midtown Manhattan. All 155
people on board were rescued.

In the room of starting over,
a flock of geese sucked into a jetliner
has been miraculously resurrected
and is sounding an earth cry of triumph.

In the room of starting over,
the plant I killed last summer is still blooming.

The gaps in my resume have been filled,
so I appear stunning in my achievements.

The ten years I went without a kiss
are now a decade of anniversaries.

In the room of starting over,
I am not childless.
I have a text from my daughter at Smith.
"Hi Mom," it says, "I love it here.
I think I may have met someone."

In the room of starting over,
hysterectomies reverse themselves,
scars become exquisite tattoos.

And a hundred limping things in us
are healed by just the right angle of the light.

The room of starting over is filled
with light.

Come in.

ANVIL, A POEM ABOUT DEPRESSION

Do you know that moment when upon first waking
you think your life has changed?

Sunlight dapples the wall of your bedroom
like the star from the East.

Hope rises treacherously. You listen
for the stirring of your cells.

Yes, you are feeling better. Now you're sure of it.
As long as you don't move, you'll be all right.

Don't move, you tell yourself. Not one muscle.
That's the trick. Be sarcophagus.

You wait. Holding your skin to its bones in the silence.
Please, you think. A simple inchoate please.

No. You are not to be relieved.
This moment will limp itself into the next.

Finally, you turn on the light.
You have chores: an anvil to push off your chest.

THE WORLD BENT BACK

I have felt oceans of nothing
for years in solitude.
A whisper of the world
bent back is
so much more than the usual.

To greet today
with this
banner waving is
astonishing, the
reason I smile first
thing in the morning.

Naomi Stenberg *(she/her) is queer, neurodivergent and thriving in Seattle. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in* Awakenings, Corridor, Sky Island Journal, Knee Brace Press, Does It Have Pockets, Soul Poetry, *the anthology* Teacakes and Tarot*, and elsewhere. Her bipolar and PTSD, particularly, permeate her work, are the foundation, both the well-spring and the dark-spring for it. She is forever proud of how she lives with and has lived with both disorders. In her spare time, Naomi collects, on vinyl, female rockers from the eighties, does improv, and walks her dog.*

Joseph Colicchio

I WAS SHOCKED

I was fourteen the first time my mother had electroshock therapy. This would have been 1967. My father had taken a taxi to Christ Hospital to pick her up. I was standing at the living room window, waiting, when the returning cab stopped in front of our two-family house. My dad got out of the back driver's side door and paid the cabbie before circling to the opposite side to help my mom. She was carrying a little beige clutch and wearing an overly warm fur-collared coat of the same color.

As she stepped into the street, she looked up and around at the sky, the trees, the neighboring houses, awed, a big smile on her face—her face "lit up," as she would have said. The open air was, it seemed, all new to her, and she appeared entranced, in a dreamland. She didn't look towards our second-floor apartment, not towards the window at which I was perched. Or, if she did, it was a scan. I imagine it hadn't quite clicked that this house was special: hers, ours.

My father had to hold my mom under the arm for her to walk, but, despite a stiffness in her movements—an uncertainty that the ground would hold, the need to look up and check that the man holding her was my dad—the pervasive look of awe and happiness remained. She was a child, indeed, a newborn. Once they made it to our front steps, I lost sight of them, my view blocked by the porch roof. And so, my listening became keener. There was the puff of the outside door, the jiggle and creak of the apartment door, their shuffling steps and the hushed words that passed between them as they climbed the stairs. My dad whispered something to her, and my mom answered with a surprised, "Yeah?"

They reached the final steps in our too-dark hall as I waited on the landing, watching each slow movement.

My mom—my father behind her, fingertips gently against her back—didn't look up until she'd reached the third step from the top, where the staircase turned. My mother looked at me, our eyes met, the space between them a swirl of consciousness, my face, no doubt, as perplexing as I was perplexed. I forgot about my dad, who was left alone, in sadness, to observe his wife and child.

Her face was heartbreakingly, heart-tuggingly beautiful, nearly pulling my heart from my skinny chest, wanting to give itself, to give all of its love to her, wanting to infuse her with strength, to embed in her at least the possibility of happiness. Her eyes were as naïve as a kitten's in a cheap painting, her face

as weathered as an old baseball glove. It was a face that identified me not specifically as her son, but undeniably as part of her salvation.

She had lost considerable weight, her hair was frizzy and, not having dyed it during her hospital stay, grey nearer the scalp, a sort of amber above that, brown towards the tips. There were thick, black hairs growing above her lip, red swells at her temples. Her movements remained stilted, not quite robotic, but untrusting. Until, that is, she decided to hug me—it was a half collapse, half lurch, and I had to go to my knees to catch then squeeze her. My eyes welled up. Head on my mom's shoulder as we rose, before me was my dad's helpless frame—not his whole frame, just from the second shirt-button on up. We held. And in that moment, I realized that the mom I knew was gone. The mother-son relationship in which I had been swathed, which I had experienced and enjoyed all my life, was gone. Gone, gone, gone.

I knew that I would now be protecting and taking care of her, and I realized that that care would have to spread in many new directions. It would be more than going to the A&P for her, more than cleaning up after myself, more than taking down the garbage. I knew care would mean something much larger than I could yet comprehend. I lifted her past the top step and tried to harden myself with the manly conviction that whatever the burden, I would do it, do it without fail, do it for as long as she lived. I was 14 years old. There was no way for me to guess that, despite my love, despite my purest efforts to draw every bit of strength from myself that I would fail her and that—in order to survive, to grow, to thrive--I would choose me over her many times.

Joe Colicchio *is a novelist and short-story writer. Many years after the fact, the mental-health struggles of his mother (and his aunt and uncle, who lived with the family in their two-family house) still haunt him. Their difficulties resulted in a spinning wheel of 1980s-style Electro Shock Therapy. This tale recounts the story of a boy awaiting the return of his mother from her first hospital stay, which included a sequence of twelve treatments.*

TO BE FREE

You approach the door, go through, still plodding in a long-term haze. Then CLANG—that sound makes the heavy metal bars on the door significant. Shut and done, no turning round. Signed in by the doctor, the state's charge now, caught fast. A response to that iron finality stirs in you: panic. Suddenly, your eyes are wide open in the bustle of the receiving room. "Mary Opperman," your name goes round the room from mouth to mouth and from form to form as they go through your purse for valuables, for sharp or forbidden objects. They grasp your hand, press the fingers into an inkpad, then onto paper to make black prints, without ever addressing you directly. But something in the timbre of their voices as they speak to each other makes you guess at their opinion: a sick young woman, not to be trusted.

Isn't that what you'd been thinking, too? You'd been unable to manage the daily chores, too heavy with gloom to even rise from bed in the mornings. Swallowing the pills had seemed the only way to give the desperate message: help me! Still, no one knew what to do. But in the sodden, sleeping aftermath, you had caught sight of a weak glimmer of light deep within you—a spark of the desire to live.

"But not like this," you had protested, "not so painfully." And then a daydream had sprung and grew: go to a hospital, lie in clean white sheets neatly folded back, gaze out a window at the blue sky and a green tree.

But as a woman with jangling keys leads the way through dim corridors where plumbing pipes protrude like sordid reminders of inner workings, you know, with rare certainty, that this is not to be the embodiment of that comforting dream. You think, what have I done? Every step on the winding stairs increases the sense of incarceration. Deeper and deeper into the maze of linked buildings, and your heart begins to flutter, then pound. However, to be free?

Delivery to Ward 14: you, and then an attendant takes charge. Black in her white uniform, solid, large, watchful, she directs your shower with strong soap, checks your long, thick hair for bugs, takes your blue jeans and cotton striped shirt. My clothes! Naked, you shiver and finally begin to put on the underwear she has laid out, the slip, the blue and white-checkered, shapeless dress marked with a black 14.

Down the length of the wide hall, there are chairs and sometimes tables scattered along the walls. A few women sit on them, smoking, staring vacantly or with curiosity. In a fair-sized room, well-groomed older ladies serve cookies and Kool-Aid around a big table. They do the talking: bright, cheerful sentences and chirpy questions. The patients do the eating: most eat steadily, stuffing food into their mouths like gauze into a gaping wound. You are in awe of them, and all these others, except the charitable ladies—they don't seem as real, their words ring false somehow.

When the food is gone you drift out with the others, back onto the ward's wide hall: well-lighted, smooth-floored, high-ceilinged. You lean against the wall and slowly edge toward a vacant chair, then sit there staring too. A nurse appears, holding out a small yellow pill in a paper cup and watches as you swallow it with water.

"That'll help you feel better," she says, a note of kindness in her voice. But what is one to say?

At bedtime, the same attendant takes you into one of the sleeping cubicles off the hall, the one closest to the nurse's station, because you are labeled suicidal. It has one small barred window and two beds. Sleep comes down like a thick comforter; safe sleep, blank sleep...gone.

But someone is calling your name, forcing you to wake in the darkness. Lights, action. Dress, go to the toilets which have no doors, not even separating walls, so that women stand in line watching each other's turns in the cruel light of bare bulbs. Back to the hall; you sit. Some of the women are pushing heavy buckets, wielding mops, and swabbing down the wide floors. Others sit and watch the clock.

"An hour and a half until breakfast," you hear one mumbling. Meals and sitting fill the day. Quick pills vaguely punctuate it, and another day.

The woman with clothes that fit walks up. Out of the red lips in her mushroom white face come these words: "What's your name?"

"Mary," that's not too hard.

"I'm Pat. Why're you here?"

"It's a mistake." This is the idea on which your thoughts have been revolving for hours and hours, and now the words spill out as if eager for the relative solidity of sound. "I've got to tell them. I'm just fine. I don't need to be here."

Pat levels a long look at you from her black eyes. "Tell the doctors you mean? They won't be back until Wednesday."

"Wednesday?"

"Yeah, this is Friday," she says, cracking her gum. "The doctors only see people once a week."

"This is a state hospital; lots of patients, not enough doctors." She shrugs, her shoulders saying: What do you expect?

"I've been watching you moping around the hall looking at people. You scared or something?"

"This is..., well, I've never been somewhere like this."

"Same for a lot of us. But come on over here, and I'll introduce you."

Sitting in a group is better. There's a vague sense of belonging and it's no longer necessary to decide just where to sit. Sometimes the women tell their stories—why they got here—or other things about their lives; whole lives, unknown, to break apart like bread and share in the common wine of sorrow, bitterness, hope.

Betty, thin and careful, has a drinking problem, and has lived here for two years trying to face the reason. Jean is a big chunk in men's slacks and shirts, short-haired, plain. She has an infant; her husband brings it when he comes to take her home, sometimes on weekends. Pat went wild, stole her fiancé's car, and wrecked it in the midst of a drugged extravaganza. Sarah, sad, stays sad since all her children are grown and her days are empty. And you. What identity do you assume here? Mary I-shouldn't-be-here. The only thing you can contribute is this mistake, your difference from the rest.

The weekend passes, then Monday, and on Tuesday night, you're sure the doctors will listen and send you home tomorrow. In the hall, walking beside Pat, you say this for the forty-seventh time, and she turns.

"It isn't like that. Getting out isn't as easy as getting in. They watch. You have to toe the line. A doctor signed you in, and that means sixty observation days."

Sixty days! No. "I'll just tell them..." but even to your dull ear, the words sound like a broken record now.

Morning, and the ward bustles getting ready for the doctor's meeting. Anyone with hope wants to look presentable. Throughout the hall there's a prickly feeling akin to the way radio static sounds; authority is due to make an appearance. Groups of five are called into the television room to await their individual turns.

You go through to the inner room. The walls are lined with people having various degrees of authority: attendants, nurses, doctors, a supervisor, a psychologist; all silent and watching. When your mouth opens to tell them how fine you are, nothing will come out except crying sounds, and tears gush out of your eyes.

"Continue the medication," a doctor tells a nurse. "And let her go to meals." As someone leads you to the door, the same doctor's voice says, "See you next week."

Sobs ache in your chest until you are safe on the brown bedspread that grows wet with tears. Close around, the walls of the little cubicle are bland as oatmeal and as unpromising. You won't be leaving it behind today or even tomorrow. The possibility of free, you tell yourself, is out of sight. The bars on the window cast a faint shadow pattern across the bed.

"I am locked in. And I don't know how to get out." These words even for yourself are startling, edged with panic and full of despair. The familiar thought of dissolving comes—the atoms of your flesh spin farther and farther apart until there is no body on the bed. Gone.

"Mary. Time for lunch." The solid voice reassures you instantaneously. Your body is heavier than ever; it's a struggle to rise against gravity.

The days tick by, circle after circle on the large-faced clock above the nurses' station. Waking, waiting, eating, sitting; another round goes by. You begin to watch the activities more closely and notice smaller patterns, like pill lines. Women must swallow their pills at the fountain while a nurse watches. Sometimes, though, a person hides one in her cheek and later shows it, then throws it in the trash or toilet.

On Monday morning, you notice three people staying behind who usually go to breakfast. Mid-morning, they reappear on the ward looking dazed and blank.

"Why weren't you at breakfast?" you ask young Andrea.

"Breakfast?" She repeats, her strawberry blonde ponytail wagging faintly as she shakes her head uncertainly. She walks on down the hall, and you take the question to the customary table. Only Jean is there.

"Electric shock treatment," she replies. "They get it on an empty stomach, so they don't go to breakfast. Andrea gets one every week."

"She seems...different..."

Jean lights a new cigarette from a butt before crushing it out. "Each treatment wipes out a little bit of their memory. They can't remember the early morning, or sometimes the last evening. But the dazed look goes away after lunch."

"Electric shock?" You feel quivery inside.

"Yeah. They wire you up and send a jolt of power through. It's supposed to shock you out of depression."

"Does it work?"

"Seems like some of the people get better; others..." she blows out a long stream of smoke steadily from her nostrils.

"Who gets it? Everyone who's depressed?" That's the label the receiving doctor used for you.

"No. The doctor decides about it. And if there's a family, they can say no."

You sit there, silent as your first days on the ward, but more jumpy inside. Wire ends seem to tickle just beyond your temples.

Tuesday evening, you are at the edge of the group in the hall when the visitor's bell rings. An attendant lets them onto the ward: Donald, the man you've been living with, and Lin, his sister. You hadn't forgotten them exactly, but you really didn't know if they would show up here...in your new existence.

"They wouldn't let us come before this," Donald hugs you in his strong arms to his large, solid body. Oh. Well...yes. Donald...those arms...this is what you wish to return to...isn't it?

Your tongue is quick, though, in answer to their questions. "Oh yes, quite a place. We're herded around like cows." (laugh, laugh). "All kinds of people really out there in some other dimension or something." Implication: that you're not. (giggle)

In a mocking voice, you tell a caricatured tale of daily life on the ward. Your tone rises gleefully to a crest not far from hysteria, but their relieved laughter drowns out that quality.

"It's so good to hear you laugh again," says Donald.

"You're talking," adds Lin, "It's amazing. You must be doing really well."

"Oh!" You pause significantly, "They're giving me Elavil, a 'mood elevator.' It's as simple as that little yellow pill three times a day."

"Well, when are you coming home?" Is Donald's next question, his hand reaching out for yours that lies there, suddenly limp.

"I...well, maybe really soon. Tomorrow we will see the doctors again. I've got to get out of here before they give me shock treatments!" You joke, describing the apparatus, the zombie look of treated patients. Do they understand? Panic brings the one serious moment of the visit.

A whisper: "I don't want that."

Wednesday morning you enter the doctors' meeting with a smile, determined. The doctor with brown and silver hair says: "I am Dr. Karolin. Dr. Cruza here will be your doctor, but I'll be overseeing her work." Her hazel eyes are questioning: "How are you this week?"

Your mouth opens on cue, but then your lips waver silently until tears roll in warm, wet streams down your face. Your jaw keeps working, but not a single rehearsed word can be uttered. Dr. Karolin is talking in a gentle tone, but you are not soothed or solaced. Sabotaged by your own body!

What is the matter? Sitting on your bed, that sole island of privacy on the crowded ward, you begin to hear that question repeatedly, and it leads to others. Why did I cry? Why didn't I tell them what I'd planned? I want out of here. I want. I want...what? I want to be free. Free of what? There is an insistent voice in your mind hammering on with these questions, and the answers fall out,

surrender. Free of the pain. Where's the pain coming from? No! Danger—your thoughts are edging toward dark obstacles that look hard as rocks. Stop! You lie flat on the bed with the pain covering you like a black wool blanket two feet deep. Smothering, yet so soft you sink into its darkness relieved, peaceful, gone.

But after a while, there is a tiny spark of light, like the one that brought you to the hospital. Into this little flicker of brightness slide memories: a hillside of violets, a mountain stream running clear and cold over smooth stone, the dew-beaded green of a summer sunrise, evening snow, stars. Wait. You sit up, forcing away the blanket. I want to be alive. I've got to try. Stand up. Walk. Into the hall you go, into the stream of the living.

Now you become involved in the hospital plan of progress which has release as its goal. At the next meeting with the doctors you're assigned a responsibility: a section of the hall to mop each morning. Every morning you hate the grey, opaque water in the bucket, the heavy string mop equally grey and grimy. But you want the doctors—Dr. Karolin—to know that you are trying.

Then, for a while, you become giddy, singing and dancing in the unlikely environs of the ward. They cut the Elavil dosage, then stop it altogether.

"No more magic pill," you tell Donald and Lin on a Sunday. "I'm on my own now, trying to figure out some things."

"They're going to send me for some testing; Dr. Karolin thinks I should go to college. I could get rehabilitation funding. What do you think of that?"

Donald shrugs, "Hey, you want to go and it's free—far out." His green eyes look so alive.

"You don't have to stay here, though, do you?"

"No," you say, smiling at him.

Yes, you've decided to try figuring out some things, but the habit of evasion is not an easy one to break. This facility for entertaining people pops up in group therapy, too. Soon you feel like a ringmaster in a circus: putting people through their paces, helping them to see the flaws in their performance of life. These are laughing, jolly hours for a group accustomed to seriousness. But one act has never been premiered: yours. Aggressive direction of the discussion keeps it always on someone else.

You're sick of your own, you admit to yourself one day. Sick, sick, sick of being so pushy.

"Why aren't you talking today?" Asks one member of the group after twenty faltering minutes of the next session.

"I talk too much. It's disgusting. Other people should have a chance."

Dr. Cruza is part of the game, too. She attends the therapy group, but the sessions in her office are one-on-one. This takes more adeptness. You have it. She is from the Philippines, a different culture. Perhaps that is one of the cards

in your favor. She has a high little laugh like happy birds twittering. You talk and talk, always with a placid expression.

The best part of the visits is going outside. The cool air feels beautiful on your skin. The November lawns are an immense refreshment after the long slick floors of the hospital buildings. The last hardy chrysanthemums show colors not seen inside, and the naked trees' branches swaying in the wind move altogether differently from the plain pace of the ward. Oh yes, the earth is sweet and life can be good. Can't it?

But the real work happens with Dr. Karolin.

At a weekly ward meeting, you get a surprise. "Mary, I've decided to work with you myself. You'll come to my office one hour a week—Fridays at 1 pm." You meet her clear grey eyes, and a long sigh eases your lungs, but no words come.

In the hall, though, second thoughts ruffle the brief calm. This one might be able to see into the area you've kept hidden in the fear that anyone who saw it would run screaming, never to return. Can she stand it? Can you?

Silence and soggy tissues are two of the things you will always remember about Dr. Karolin's office. Another: the fact that she never answers her own questions.

"Why did you try to kill yourself, Mary?"

Looking back, that time before the hospital looks like a muddle.

"I don't know." But unlike Dr. Cruza she offers no suggestions, clues or cues as to the answer of her question, only silence. The question lies there until the realization comes: only your own answer will do. How to say it? How to put all the heaviness and anguish and ripping apart into the words and sentences of an answer? She gives you the box of tissues as you sob but not single word until you have told some of what it felt like.

"And I knew the pills wouldn't kill me. I knew it. But I wanted someone to see that I needed help."

"All right. What made you feel so bad?"

"Nothing did. It's just me, the kind of person I am. I've always been gloomy."

"Have you really?"

You can't honestly say yes. Finally: "No."

"So sometimes you've been happy?"

"Well...yes, but the happy's only on the surface, inside is what I really am." Danger. Danger! Red alert. All your cells seem to be surging up, straining against the containing skin.

But she doesn't look a bit apprehensive.

She asks calmly: "What's in there that you're so unhappy about?"

"I don't know." And you don't. Gradually, however, in the silence, you become aware of something like heavy black curtains. There is a slight parting among the folds, and an arm is reaching in, grasping, pulling one thing out toward the ears of Dr. Karolin. Somehow, you know that this is a movement with which you will become very familiar—how to draw out a single item from the mass of personal deficiencies you had at some time, then shoved just beyond the edge of awareness. The funny thing is that not even this first one looks nearly so bad in the light of day as you had expected.

"Okay," says Dr. Karolin at one point, "Let's say it's as bad as you think. So what is to be done about it?"

"Done?" Your voice starts out loud and gets louder. "That's just the way it is, the way I am. What are you talking about—why can't people just accept me the way I am? I have to be the way I am."

"Go ahead then."

"But I'll never get free from this stupid, stinking place!" How can she be so dense?

"You came here on your own. Why?"

"Because I wanted to feel better." By now, you are shouting.

"That's right!" You shout, then stop. You can see yourself surrounded by bars of fate far harsher than the bars on the office window. How to be free? Now you mumble: "I want to be different, but I have to be like this."

"Do you?" The session ends in silence.

Days and weeks roll by on the wheels of routine, and you begin to think that perhaps you're being trained to better ignore the unhappy part inside. Do the doctors see it and realize that it's just the way you are, that the best to be hoped for is keeping it fenced, held back? Was the hope of lighting that darkness just another fantasy like the one about white sheets and a window framing blue sky and a green tree? Get back to the grind, you try to encourage yourself. Enjoy what you can. Keep hoping you can maintain by staying busy enough. But I don't want to be just busy—it's that voice again, like an interfering busybody. Why can't it be satisfied with the progress you've made? But no. I want more out of life.

On your own, you begin to work with this idea, to formulate responses to all those dead ends reached when Dr. Karolin would say "And what is to be done about it?" The next time that she asks, you are able to construct a possible alternative right there in her office. Her eyes narrow just a little, and a smile creeps onto the corners of her mouth. And you can laugh, a true, deep laugh that gushes out like a spring of sweet water from what had seemed like barren rock. She's smiling in a way you haven't seen before. So you unveil it, like a statue still in progress yet undeniably formed and full of promise: "I can change."

For a moment, you don't mind having been so silly and slow in coming to this; that you have at all is cause enough for celebration. "But why did I think that I could never change? Why did I hold on so hard to that attitude?"

Now Dr. Karolin's eyebrows raise like question marks, and her mouth tightens to a line as she tries to hold down her smile. "You're asking the questions."

"Yeah," you nod as more things fall into place. "That's what I've been learning to do here isn't it? To ask myself important questions. Oh, I used to ask questions sometimes, but I didn't really wait for the answers like you do."

Her smile is wide as she passes you the box of tissues.

One day, you pace the hall thinking about freedom. The apartment has been an integral part of the freedom you propose to have by getting out of the hospital. But now the question occurs: Why wasn't I happy when I had those things? Is going back what I want?

Outside, a strong evening wind has risen, and a fresh, faint puff of it comes through the old windowsill. You take a deep breath. If I can make things happen...You get a feeling like you're standing on a high, high hill turning round and round to see all the horizon, open and endless and inviting. Your heart is pounding, and it seems to move within you like the tree branches that are rocking and swaying outside in the wind. Your hands reach out and touch the steady wall to stop the sudden vertigo. Something tight yet exhilarating is rising up in you. But wait! Don't be foolish. Caution is calling you back. Maybe it was only that you knew yourself, and so, what was bound to happen. But the feeling, name it—say excitement—the excitement is filling you, buoying you up like a balloon ready to soar away from its newly cut fetters. You hug yourself. Why don't I take a chance? Believe it. What do I have to lose?

EPILOGUE

Dear Lin,

Just a note as you settle into your new home. I'm sad for myself that you've moved so far away and yet I'm glad for you—the job sounds exciting. And what do you know? I'm moving, too. I'm being transferred to Ward 25 today, so going home can't be much further away.

I've taken all those tests they promised, at an agency, and they've decided yes, I can go to college and study whatever I choose. It surprises me—how interesting the courses sound and how many I want to take.

Two different weekends now, I've been home with Donald and it's been fun. I do like him a lot, and yet there are moments when it seems like we may

not be quite right for each other. Perhaps we've changed... But for now, we both want to go on for a while.

Sometimes, looking back over this experience, I am still surprised that I've been a patient here. Do you remember the idea I had about the hospital before entering? The one of lying in bed looking out the window day after day, resting, quiet. Wonder where I'd be now if that had been the case? Still sleeping? My other idea—about getting help to live less painfully—well, that one has worked out, although I didn't see how it could at first. I've learned a lot, even though I chose a rather melodramatic way to do it.

Ever,
Mary

StarMary *grew up in a small former coal town amid the hills and trees of southeastern Ohio. Reared by paternal grandparents, she did not experience family life with her siblings, but was loved by the older folks. After the hospital stay, she excelled at university, graduating with a 4.0 grade average. Her real love is travel, and she enjoyed much beauty in the country while hitch-hiking cross country solo various times. Married to a Californian, she continued to cross the country to visit her partner's family. She met her stepsons when they were four and five, and the two boys were teenagers when her daughter, their half sister, was born at home. At three years old, her daughter was weaned, and StarMary started taking Prozac. The medication helped. Currently, she takes three antidepressants a day, successfully. A Friend, or Quaker, for thirty years, she also advocates for natural burial.*

Anna Klivas

FROM WARD L TO WELL-ADJUSTED: A BORDERLINE JOURNEY

I wasn't diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) until I was 44. By then, I'd already fried four husbands, ruined my kids' lives, and alienated the rest of my family.

Before then, I'd made a few brief stabs at therapy, but found therapists hopeless. One told me I needed to do as he instructed. I didn't go back, of course—who did he think he was to try to tell *this* woman what to do… even if it was for her own good?

Another ruined his credibility when he asked why I was mad all the time. I just stared at him, thinking, *You're the therapist. If you don't know, what am I doing here?*

In 1973, another therapist said my kids would be better off with someone else, but her only diagnosis was that I had "problems in living." She never used the word *Borderline*.

Even when *borderline* was a wastebasket term for people who didn't fit elsewhere, no one gave me that label—not even when I spent a month in a military mental ward in late 1975. I hadn't ended up there for acting out, but because of mysterious physical pain. The unspoken diagnosis? That I was a troublemaker—just another wimpy swab faking illness to get discharged.

"Without a specific diagnosis," the doctor said, "the only way to get you back to the states for more tests is to label this a psychiatric case."

Thinking it was just military semantics, I agreed, expecting nothing unusual.

But when we arrived stateside, instead of a hospital specializing in mysterious illnesses, I was taken directly to a locked psychiatric unit—Ward L.

Surely it had to be a joke. *Ward L*? Was the L for *Loony*? I still don't know if some sadistic designer picked the name, but sure enough—Ward L was the loony bin.

Mental Ward

If you don't think you're crazy, being taken to a mental ward is seriously frightening. Even more unnerving, I was put into a padded cell.

As I stood in the doorway of that cubicle with its bars on the window, my blood ran cold. It reminded me of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* that old film about fear and insanity. Like the woman trapped in that nightmare, I felt the walls closing in. What if I were never allowed to leave this place?

"Just standard procedure for new patients," the orderly explained with a cheery smile. But dismissing it as if it was just a formality smacked of the saying equally dismissive response to many complaints—"You knew the job was dangerous when you took it. Buck up." Or, who knows, maybe he was lying through his teeth to get me in there without a struggle. He just quipped, "If you're a good girl, three days from now we'll put you into the open ward."

In this out-of-control situation, I began to doubt myself. I knew I had problems, but I thought I was justifiably temperamental, not mad. Also, by then I had a huge mistrust of therapists. In my younger years I'd been impressed with the case histories where therapists had brilliant insights, guiding patients to life-changing epiphanies. But I no longer believe those existed any more than I believed in Santa and other mythical creatures. The ones I met in real life didn't seem to know more than anyone else—and certainly none who knew more than me.

A door cracks open

Still, under the circumstances, I was having second thoughts about myself. In a mandatory meeting with my Navy psychiatrist, fiddling with my hair, I worked up the courage to ask, "Am I crazy? Is that why they sent me here?"

He leaned his lanky white-uniformed frame back into his swivel chair. "No," he answered frankly. "It's normal military procedure that if you don't fit into standard categories, you're automatically considered mental. That's the catch-all slot. With no clear reason for your body pains, they sent you here."

Snatching a glimpse of my records, I read that I was, "passive, intellectualizing and dependent."

I rankled. Me, passive? How could I be passive when I didn't hesitate to attack people with snarky criticisms? That word *intellectualizing* caught my attention.

I asked the psychiatrist what it meant.

"Intellectualizing," he said, "is when you live in your thoughts and remain unaware of your feelings. If an intellectualizer went to Heaven, rather

than experiencing the bliss of reality, she would ask for the library so she could read about it."

Yep, that was me. But I didn't get this yet.

"Try just sitting quietly," he suggested, "and ask yourself what it is you're really feeling."

I thought it was a silly idea. But, back in the barracks, I found myself wondering, could there be more I might not be aware of? I closed my eyes and asked myself, *What am I feeling*?

Insight

To my astonishment, what jumped into mind was the image of a woman with wild, unkempt hair, rocking—not mindlessly, but mindless—in a rocking chair, moaning and staring. Like the woman from *Jeremiah Johnson* who was so unhinged with grief she chastised her dead daughter for not wearing her shoes.

The woman in the chair looked like that—grief over the loss of her children had left her mindless.

That woman, I realized, was me.

I saw that the devoted mother part of me still existed.

In that moment, I saw what intellectualization was—someone who ignored feelings. I had gone all those years without even knowing that grieving mother was inside me. No one had acknowledged her pain—not even me. No one had comforted her. She had been grieving in silence the whole time, unseen even by my conscious mind.

For a brief moment, I understood what intellectualization really was—*thinking about things instead of feeling them.* Was that one reason why I had always been so explosive when I *did* feel emotion?

In the light of that understanding, I felt a deep compassion for the woman who had gone crazy with grief. I promised her I'd try to get her children back for her.

Almost as quickly, I forgot the incident.

"She's dissolved now," I told the therapist—cheerfully, as if that one visit to her had done the trick.

Looking back, all I can say is: *That poor woman.*

Problems in Living

I accepted that I had "problems in living" stemming from an abusive childhood and a lack of proper socialization, but was only now wondering if I might be "crazy." In Ward L, I studied others, trying to understand where I fit in. I met people who were schizophrenic, paranoid, and bipolar. One schizophrenic guy who was a patient there somehow got through three locked doors without a cent in his pockets and returned hours later with a fishing pole and tackle box. No one was ever able to learn how he got out. When asked why he left, he said, "God told me to go fishing."

Another man ranted about voodoo and at times appeared to become possessed. When this happened, he became so strong that he could—and did—rip the metal barriers off the windows.

Another was a pathological criminal who shamelessly said, "My goal is to become a world class thief."

I met people who were having psychotic breaks and people who were simply sick of the military.

But I didn't find myself mirrored in any of them, and nobody called anyone "Borderline." Officially, my physical diagnosis was "psycho-physiological musculoskeletal disorder, acute and chronic"—a polite way of saying, "It's all in her head." Or more bluntly: "smart-ass troublemaker."

Twenty years later, they'd call that part fibromyalgia.

BPD history and diagnosis

In the mid-70s when this was happening, the term "borderline" went from a wastebasket label for the difficult-to-diagnose, those who were resistant to therapy, or those who were otherwise not understood, to gradually becoming more identifiable. Those with BPD were described as "irritating, confusing, obnoxious, worrisome, demanding, resistant to treatment, and often uncategorizable." When asked how to describe someone with this personality disorder, the BPD expert Marsha Linehan replied "A borderline is a goddamn son of a bitch."

Despite that definition, BPD remains hard to diagnose. In the hierarchy where neurotics build dream castles in the sky, psychotics live in them, and psychologists collect the rent, the borderline is left homeless, wandering across all worlds. He or she takes turns visiting with the two relatives, sometimes even living with their cousin, "Normal," and some are even capable of being the psychologist. Sometimes the borderline appears competent, sometimes merely eccentric, and sometimes truly psychotic.

I have been all those things but until the end of my fourth marriage, when I finally admitted I needed help, I still thought my problem was poor choices.

The day I was diagnosed in 1989—fifteen years after my time in Ward L—the therapist handed me three pages of an MMPI report. I knew instantly that three pages wasn't a good sign. As I read, it felt so chilled it was like my lifeblood—all my denials and rationalizations—pouring out, leaving me naked. Skilled as I was in arguing, I couldn't deny the truth in that report. I hardly had the strength to say, "I don't want to be like this."

My therapist recommended that I read *I Hate You Don't Leave Me*. In it, reading about people who had identity issues, I suddenly had an identity—I was a BPD.

Progress

Since then, I have made extraordinary progress. I wouldn't disagree that for the first three years of therapy, I was very much a "goddamn son of a bitch." While I bounced off the walls with sudden rages and suicidal despairs, slamming doors on my way out, it was discovered that I came close to having multiple personality disorder. We found five different personas—not as severe as in multiple personality disorder yet such strong, distinct personality fragments that we could name them.

Over time, I was able to integrate those five into two main characters: one identifiable as a sweet but seriously immature child, and the other a fiercely rational, masculine fragment who protected her, ran the household (and everyone else), and nearly worked me to death with perfectionism. One of the biggest crises happened when "he" finally broke down, leaving the child on her own. That child turned out to be the core *me*. After the initial confusion, she—I—rose to the task.

By then, I was ready. Step by painful step, I had conquered my temper. Degree by degree I turned down the intensity. I'd become a rational thinker. I'd learned communication skills. I'd become caring. I even overcame the lusty crush I had on my therapist to adopt a healthier attitude toward men and sex, ending decades of promiscuity. In a word, I got *better*—I became more mature, more compassionate. I also learned I didn't have to have a brilliant therapist, and that it wasn't even necessarily to feel understood—I learned to listen to myself, to use any therapist as a sounding board for my own growth.

A worthy life

My biggest and longest-lasting trigger was any unexpected suggestion that I might be *mistaken.* Most people think a mistake is regrettable but not the end of the world. For me, however, it *was* the end of the world. If there was even a hint that I made a mistake, I believed it meant *I* was the mistake. In instant panic I would fall into a dark underworld, splitting off from rationality into an all-black world where there was "wailing and gnashing of teeth." Hell. You don't want to go there, believe me.

In the end, even that went. What informed me I'd succeeded in overcoming the grip of BPD was when I had the sudden realization that, instead of panicking into that frozen nowhere, I could simply accept that, "This isn't my last chance—I'll do better next time." I still fall into it at times, but I know where I am now and I just wait for the bus to carry me out. By bus, I mean the reorganization back into mental health.

Proof of all the progress came recently when I reconnected with my oldest son. With heartfelt relief, the crazy woman in the rocking chair was at last reunited with her child. It feels like this has been the purpose of my life: to become well enough to be capable of love, and to now have the maturity to do it well. It feels like fulfillment.

How it happened

There are three things I attribute my recovery to. First, my own persistent drive to get well. I wanted successful relationships and was willing to work to get them.

Second, it was thanks to a long string of therapists. Each one, in their own way, tolerated my intensity and helped me peel back the layers.

Finally, the most powerful source of healing came through Transcendental Meditation. TM isn't a belief—it's a medical reality. The mental clarity that came from it helped immensely, speeding up the healing so much that my first therapist said I progressed twice as fast as he expected. That kind of progress, where you can see real results, brings an enduring sense of worth.

Had DBT come to me sooner, it too could have sped up my recovery, for it describes what I'd been learning the hard way for over two decades of trial-and-error therapy. The lessons in it are bedrock measures of mental health, something to return to again and again for deeper understandings. DBT is a map of how to become sane, in a world where most people are emotionally reactive, fragmented, or wounded.

My identity no longer depends on labels but I gave myself one because I earned it: I am a "high-functioning BPD." My stability is still more fragile than a "normal" person's but when issues arise, I manage them well enough—and fast enough—to do no damage to myself or others. Many people with mental disorders recognize the saying that a bone gets stronger in the broken places. Like that, even though we have been so terribly broken, we end up even stronger for it than those less challenged. And often kinder. More compassionate. More understanding. Because we've been there.

I no longer think of anyone as "crazy" now. I simply recognize that everyone is somewhere on the road to becoming even stronger than they thought possible.

Anna Klivas *is an essayist, poet, and author of three books who lives and writes in Florida. She has a master's degree in writing from Maharishi International University and likes to quip that her real expertise is in personal growth. Drawing from her own long journey through mental illness and recovery, she writes with candor, compassion, and hard-earned insight. One of her favorite sayings is, "Don't pray for an easy life, pray for strength."*

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