The Awakenings Review

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

The Awakenings Review

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With an interest in feelings engendered by the natural world, Newcastle, Washington artist **Judith Skillman** paints expressionist works in oil on canvas and board. Chicory combines brush strokes and palette knife markings. The work is minimalist and expressionistic. Petals occupy the rectangle to its edge as if to illuminate the empty space beyond. Says the artist, "I love the color of this wildflower, known by other names: cornflower, blue dandelion, blue sailors, ragged sailors, and wild endive." Judith has coped with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), depression, and chronic pain due to a pedestrian accident.

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Poetry, essay, and short story by:

Submission Guidelines

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

Focus

We enjoy getting submissions where the writer or poet has moved forward from the challenges of mental illness or can relate the nature of their experience with mental illness without being demoralizing.

Editorial Policy

A writer for *The Awakenings Review* need not have a mental illness—we are open to submissions from family members and friends of people with mental illnesses. We do prefer that a creator have a mental illness of some type and be willing to write about it, but that does not have to be the focus of the writings.

Contributors selected for publication are not paid for their work. However, they will receive a complimentary copy of the journal in which their work is published when it becomes available and additional copies at a steep discount.

Submitting Your Work

Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis. Email submissions should be in a .doc or .docx format attached to an email sent to awakenings.review@gmail.com. Include the word "submission" in the subject line. Except in rare instances, we only accept submissions by email.

Cover Letter

Authors should include a cover letter describing their relationship with mental illness: either self, family member, or friend of someone who struggles with mental illness. While this information is voluntary and its absence will not preclude your work from being considered, if your work is accepted for publication, you will be asked to submit a short biography where we would like you to supply this information.

Prose Requirements

The maximum length for fiction, creative nonfiction, interviews, dramatic scenes, book chapters, or essays for a given issue is 5,000 words. We do not review short pieces or flash fiction less than 500 words in length.

Pages should be numbered, and the writer's name, address, and email address should appear at the top of the first page of a submission.

Poetry Requirements

The AR is looking for a representative body of work from a poet. This may be 3 to 5 poems that would fill several pages of the journal (followed by the poet's biography). We do not review single poems sent to us.

Authors should be aware that an individual line of poetry that exceeds 60 characters in length cannot be printed as a single line when published.

If you are submitting more than one poem by email, they should all be grouped together into one WORD file, not sent as individual files. Do not send PDF files.

Again, the poet's name, address, phone, and email address should appear at the top of the first page of a submission. Do not send us submissions without contact information.

Biography

Upon acceptance, we request that a writer or poet submit a biography of no more than 150 words to us. We ask that they at least mention their relationship with mental illness.

Visual Artwork

The Awakenings Review reviews photographs, ink drawings, etchings, charcoal drawings, art, and graphics. We place photographs or works of art prominently on the cover of the journal and black-and-white work in clusters of inside pages attributed to an individual photographer or artist.

Color pieces for the cover should be landscape in orientation and at least 300 dpi. An individual black-and-white piece to be considered for inside the journal should be portrait in orientation and also at least 300 dpi. Please limit your submission to 8 pieces per email. Send it to Awakenings.Review@gmail.com in .jpeg format (please avoid .pdf or other file formats). Include "submission" in the subject line. An artist or photographer should follow other requirements in these guidelines vis à vis their connection to mental illness and include a cover letter.

Rights

Writers, poets, and artists retain the copyright to their material. By submitting work, they agree to assign one-time rights to *The Awakenings Review* for publication.

Foreword

I trusted memoirists to write their truths until I tried to write my own, a mother's story of raising a son with mental illness. It was then that I discovered how complicated the truth can be and how murky the waters of memory are. Maybe James Frey (*A Million Little Pieces:* Doubleday Books) and Vivian Gornick (*Fierce Attachments:* Macmillan) sought the truth, but their friends and family saw it differently. Maybe they did cross the line in their haste to tell their stories, or they didn't care.

Augusten Burroughs's memoir of his fractured childhood is a perfect example of how fragile the memoir genre is. Burroughs, born Christopher Robison in 1965, shocked the world with graphic descriptions of his bizarre upbringing in his 2002 memoir, *Running With Scissors* (St. Martin's Press). Indeed, Burroughs is not the first memoirist to have been challenged by his story's subjects about the book's accuracy. But perhaps this was a time when readers stopped and asked themselves, who gets to tell this story, and how would the story be different if it were told from, for example, Burroughs' mother's point of view? Or from the perspective of his mother's psychiatrist, who was given legal custody of Burroughs as a child?

Unlike other memoirists, like Frey and Gornick, who, when pressed, admitted to altering facts to create a more compelling story, Burroughs won't admit to falsifying descriptions of the events in his childhood. But in a scathing article, "Ruthless with Scissors" by Buzz Bissinger published in *Vanity Fair Magazine,* Bissinger interviewed the Turcotte children and grandchildren (named the Finches in the memoir), the surviving relatives of Dr. Turcotte, who took over custody of Burroughs, at his mother's request when he was a child. The children of Dr. Turcotte claim that what they read in page after page of Burroughs's memoir was their family depicted as "crude, disgusting, profane, and utterly lacking in rational judgment." They also stated that Burroughs never informed any of them about the book and that they discovered foul and sensationalist stories about their family only after the book became a best-seller. Reviewers of the book called Burroughs a "genius" and a "hero." Yet, his family cites specific examples of events that they claim are fabricated, and in a 2005 lawsuit that the family filed against Burroughs and the book's publisher, St. Martin's Press, the family charged that Burroughs and St. Martin's "falsely portrayed" the Turcotte family as, an "unhygienic and mentally unstable cult engaged in bizarre and at times, criminal activity. In so doing, the author, with the full complicity of the publisher, literally fabricated events that never happened and manufactured conversations that never occurred."

Burroughs adamantly defends the accounts of what he has written in the book and his right to tell his own story. In the same *Vanity Fair* article, Burroughs refuted the Turcotte family lawsuit and said, "This is my story. It's not my mother's story and it's not the family's story and they may remember things differently and they may choose to not remember certain things, but I will never forget what happened to me, ever, and I have the scars from it, and I want to rip those scars off of me."

Because of the settlement of the lawsuit, the book now has an author's note that calls the work a "book" instead of a "memoir" and also states that the Turcotte family's memory of the events is different from his own. The note claims that Burroughs regrets any "unintentional harm to them."

It seems that getting down the facts in a memoir is a controversy as old as the story of St. Augustine in *Confessions*. Jane Friedman, in her article in *Writer's Diges*t, "When is Lying in Memoir Acceptable?" suggests that it is never acceptable. She explains: "When memoir falsehoods come to light, readers feel betrayed. They expect the truth, and they should. When a memoirist writes, 'This happened to me,' readers should be able to trust that it did. Lying about what happened violates that trust. It's that simple." But she goes on to admit that it actually isn't that simple. As memoir writers, we craft literary work, and we rely on our interpretation of events. This makes truth in memoir, according to Friedman, "a complex business."

I am beginning to understand that telling my story will not be the neat package I thought it was. My story bleeds into my son's story and his into mine. In writing about my son, I am confronted with ethical questions having to do with writing about my children. Jill Christman questions in her essay, "Chewing Band-Aids: One Memoirist's Take on the Telling of Family Secrets," "How will I know what is too private? How will I know when enough is enough? …where does my story give over to my children? When does our story together become theirs to tell? Or *not* to tell, as only they can choose?"

It may be complicated, but by contrast, I believe the writers in this edition of *The Awakenings Review* have mastered the art of telling their truths. In poems, essays, fiction, and nonfiction, each author succeeds in finding their voice and telling only their truths. By dropping you, the reader, directly into their experiences, each of these authors has found a way to tell their story as honestly as they know how. Because they are revealing their truths, we feel their emotions. And that human connection, that truth in memoir, is the gold we seek every time we write.

Because of the unique quality of the pieces published in *The Awakenings Review* and because of the distinct relationship our authors have to mental illness and writing, it is no surprise to readers of *The Awakenings Review* that the publication has been honored with the 2024 Mental Health America Media Award specifically for, in the words of the organization, "Accurate and responsible coverage…in breaking down stereotypes and stigma surrounding mental illness and substance use." *The Awakenings Review* team is grateful for this recognition and would like to thank all of our contributors for their courage, honesty, and skill in writing their stories of mental health and recovery.

The Awakenings Review publishes work about mental illness that explores truth in writing, direction, hope, and recovery in the stories of those who live with mental illness. The writing you will find between the covers of this 2024 edition finds a way to tell the truth in the author's voice. And when that truth is revealed, readers feel it in their hearts; a connection is made. And we have done our job, not just as writers, but as human beings today.

Judy Sandler
Assistant Editor

Preface

Many years ago, I was hired to teach American History and a course in modern American History at my old high school, St. Andrew's-Sewanee School in Tennessee. In this role, I had an uneasy encounter with plagiarism.

I had assigned my American History class to write a term paper on a subject of their choosing. One of my students was the daughter of the Dean of the College at the University of the South in Sewanee, a well-regarded university only a few miles away. While her father was a brilliant scholar, she was an average student. However, she submitted a paper that was expertly written and sophisticated. I immediately suspected it was plagiarized. With a bit of searching, I found the library book the poor student had copied her paper from and brought it to the attention of a senior member of the teaching staff. I called the girl into my office, telling her the paper was unacceptable and she should retract it. This somehow made it to the Dean of the College (this was awkward because of the Dean's reputation and influence). He humbly assured me that his daughter now understood what plagiarism was. This was the end of the issue.

As with this case, all students are tempted by the practice of plagiarism. Especially with the ease of cut and paste, plagiarism is a serious and developing ethical issue in the literary community. Consider these statistics generated by Claude.ai:

Studies suggest that 30-60% of college students admit to some form of plagiarism. An estimated 36% of undergraduate and 24% of graduate students admit to paraphrasing or copying a few sentences without citation. In a study of 62,000 manuscripts submitted to major scientific journals, about 6% were rejected due to suspected plagiarism. Turnitin, a popular plagiarism detection service, reports that about 14% of submitted papers contain more than 50% unoriginal content. Studies suggest that 10-15% of published papers in some scientific fields contain significant self-plagiarism. The internet has made plagiarism easier, with 52% of students saying it's easier to cheat online than in person.

The Awakenings Review (AR) belongs to a New York-based organization called the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP), which is closely tied to the widely used and popular literary submissions platform Submittable. Like Submittable, CLMP has a broad appeal to the literary community; it is Submittable's forum for addressing a literary publication's various needs, including marketing, the mechanics of publishing, technical support, etc. While *The Awakenings Review* has not yet subscribed to Submittable, we have joined CLMP. One of CLMP's offerings is maintaining a listserv on various topics of interest to literary magazines. (If you're unaware, think of a listserv as an email forum where members post ideas and thoughts and exchange information and advice with each other.) I have read and participated in "chains" about merchandising a literary magazine by selling souvenir clothing, orga-

nizing a chapbook contest, and finding efficient and powerful database programs.

Recently, the CLMP listserv turned to the sticky issue of plagiarism. While plagiarism is a serious and troubling practice, I was dismayed by how they treated the problem. The names of authors suspected of plagiarism were widely circulated. One member even started a chain with a title that named an author who was suspected of the practice. Moreover, the Submittable staff member who monitors the listserv quickly deleted the Submittable accounts of authors whose names were circulated.

Through my listserv posts, I protested this practice and made it known that I thought Submittable and CLMP were in error and perhaps legally exposed. Even though plagiarism is unethical and largely indefensible, I said canceling the offenders' accounts and brandishing their names violated their rights, especially since it appeared Submittable had not researched the infraction and gave them no chance to take recourse or defend themselves. I said Submittable was acting brashly and relying on hearsay from members who had evidently but not conclusively uncovered plagiarism. I also chided Submittable for acting on the statements of these members evidently without investigating the occurrences themselves. I criticized Submittable for not treating the matter confidentially.

Finally, I wrote this entry to the listserv:

> As someone who has fought stigma his entire life, I see troubling signs of it in the way that these offenders are treated. First, there's exaggerated fury and indignation over the offender's transgression, then there's a sullying of the person's reputation, then there's denying him/her valuable benefits, then there's ostracizing the person, then there's giving the person no recourse and labeling him/her as an outcast and a misfit. I don't defend plagiarism, but I do venture to say that it seems to be dealt with on this platform without a measure of restraint and compassion.

The executive director of CLMP was made aware of the issue and was so concerned that she telephoned me that day (I was unfortunately unable to answer her call). She urged me to speak with her or at least exchange emails about Submittable's practices. So, by email, I offered the following list of guidelines which I thought they should consider:

1. If a Submittable member (user) is suspected of plagiarism, the accusation should be directed to a staff member assigned the role of handling and investigating plagiarism infractions.
2. Members of Submittable who suspect or identify plagiarism should be directed to this staff member through a confidential email address. Members should be instructed to treat the information with great care and never post names and occurrences on a listserv or any other medium where the accused's name, account, or identifying information can be seen.
3. Members who report plagiarism should inform Submittable when and where the occurrence happened so Submittable can investigate it themselves.

4. After a careful investigation, if plagiarism is found, then the offender should be notified confidentially that he/she has been identified. He or she should then be given the opportunity to explain how and why the occurrence happened. If the offender admits to plagiarism or if the transgression is inexorably clear, he/she should be warned that his/her account(s) on Submittable is at risk.
5. On the first infraction, the offender should be given a warning but not have his/her account(s) removed.
6. On the second infraction, the offender's account(s) should be suspended for a month.
7. If there is a third infraction, the offender should have his account(s) removed permanently.
8. After a period of time, the offending author should have the right to reapply for an account with Submittable.

As of this writing, I have not heard back from CLMP, but I am relieved they are concerned enough about the issue that they reached out to me. Perhaps my guidelines will be helpful or at least prompt the staff of CLMP to consider crafting an appropriate policy. Hopefully, this issue may be on the road to a positive conclusion.

As the editor, I am charged with keeping *The Awakenings Review* free of plagiarized material. To satisfy my suspicions, several times I have checked work for plagiarism, but to date, AP has not encountered the practice. But the ease of creating plagiarized material challenges us, as it does all literary outlets. However, as I outlined in my suggestions to CLMP, if we discover or suspect plagiarism, we will handle it carefully without publicly humiliating the suspected perpetrator.

In the next issue of *The Awakenings Review*, we intend to explore this issue and the similar issue of writing with the assistance of AI. Like the advent of modern word processors, the Internet, electronic spell-checkers and thesauruses, grammar-fixing software, and the above-mentioned ease of cut and paste, the advent of AI opens up new and massive ethical considerations in the non-attributed use of other sources of research and writing. AR intends to investigate and elaborate on the promise and dilemma of AI in a future issue.

Robert Lundin

Editor

Hope Anderson

HOW TO REMODEL A LIFE: A GUIDE TO LIVING WELL WITH ALCOHOLISM AND BI-POLAR DISORDER

Pipe Vine Press (2020)
Review by Mary Anna Scenga Kruch

The simple life is all she ever wanted, but Hope Andersen's 2020 book, *How to Remodel a Life*, is a personal study of the complicated, lifelong task of rebuilding her life, which she compares to a house after extensive loss. At first, the work appears to be mainly a self-help book but upon closer inspection, it flows easily across multiple genres: biography, self-help, and literary nonfiction. The writing conveys wonderful sensory descriptions, such as when the author depicts what has often held her back. "In raking over the coals of my past, I was quick to brand myself with a thousand horrible names. I knew this did nothing but keep me stuck back in old memories, staring into the amber eyes of negativity that had long held me captive…" (p. 23)

The book, written as a stream of consciousness, reflects the author's healing process as she carries her life story forward in steps, reaches back in time to illustrate milestones again and again with her own examples, and then leads readers forward once more. The most heavily-laden chapters provide an understanding of what it means to feel the *loss of self*, of being truly alone and hopeless in a place void of light. By the time Anderson was in high school, she was drinking to numb feelings of anxiety and depression. "…I lived like a double agent. The overarching sense that I could – and must – succeed at everything I attempted was countered by a deepening sense of despair…that lead me to believe I was capable of nothing." (p. 62) Many readers may see themselves in that last statement and will appreciate Andersen's attention to this topic, being aware that there are other creatives out there like herself, fired by strong imagination and a need for validation. The author's willingness to tell her story from the foundation up and share what she has learned about herself accentuates the vital understanding that we are not alone.

But when she felt alone and as though she did not fit in, the author bravely writes of the times she sought justification by engaging in multiple sexual relationships and in acting out in admittedly self-centered ways. "...I honestly don't know what the appeal was (with an older Argentinian man); he had no chin and was grossly overweight, but he introduced me to a lusty red Argentinian wine…" (p. 19). She married him against her better judgment and then was so far removed from the relationship that she used this as an excuse to pick up men in a local bar when her husband was asleep. "My boldness and promiscuity knew no bounds." (p. 20)

The process of rebuilding oneself is possible in the aftermath of years of addiction and the struggle of mental illness, the author states, but the mania that surfaced for her, especially in its early stages, was cloaked in an aphrodisiac that contributed to creativity. Manic depression can send one to the greatest highs followed eventually by the lowest lows -- a fire that can burn a life down, leaving much debris to sort through, sweep away, and at some point, cause one to find in its stead a strong replacement. The author began with a strong foundation with a 12-step program, choosing to move toward the light, which for her has been nature and a strong spiritual life, including a Higher Power. "Lighting up my life hasn't been just about getting what I wanted – though there has been plenty of that – it has been about *giving*." (p. 66) Giving is an essential teaching in many of the world's religions as well as a central tenant of the 12-step program. "… (there is a) necessity for the recovering alcoholic or addict to share the message of recovery with fellow sufferers in order to maintain sobriety." (p.67)

Also prominent in the author's recovery has been her psychiatrist's diagnosis of bipolar disorder, followed by taking the necessary prescription drugs. It may take a while to get the correct combination in order to lead a productive life, but taking medication is a must for many. There is no shame in relying on prescription drugs. Several of Andersen's experiences have led to wisdom and learning; these have been carefully organized as topics into Toolkits throughout the book. These provide positive guidelines for others on similar journeys and for those who wish to support friends, family, and loved ones who struggle with mental illness and addiction.

Through it all, Andersen has sought bliss, which, she writes, prompted her to play "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" at high volume, brought her into lakes to swim, to read Robert Frost beneath a canopy of sun-filtered trees, and gave her a Siamese cat to love in a life that was often darkened by the effects of mental illness, drugs, and alcohol. But bliss doesn't come easily. Andersen emphasizes that first much work and years of taking responsibility, of self-care, and of not looking back with regret are needed. "Enjoy a cup of tea and a hot biscuit, and

stop thinking you are more important than you really are. Stop taking yourself so seriously." (p. 75) Other positive steps toward bliss: read Mary Oliver's poetry (I concur). Learn to say "maybe" or "not now" instead of "yes" too much. She notes, "Self-love and self-care are not luxuries…They are absolutely necessary if I am going to engage in relationships that are healthy and vibrant." (p.161) Andersen notes that when she practices self-love, she is much more inclined to feel compassion for others. (p. 183)

I am grateful for having read Hope Anderson's *How to Remodel a Life.* In it, I recognize and can better understand some of the behaviors of a sister diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She, too, sought the highs of drugs but, more importantly, was able to attain some recognition, as has Anderson, as an incredibly gifted writer. Why not follow a dream? Why limit oneself because of the struggle of mental illness and addiction? This book will make an uplifting addition to many bookshelves, as other readers may find themselves, friends, and family in and among its enlightened pages.

Jessie Brown

DESIGNING CABINETS FROM SCRATCH

You miss him, this man with the steady breathing,
bent over the desk, sketching ordinary objects
on graphed paper. A penciled pair of boots
leans against the ruled taper of shelves. This man
will work all night. He will forget he is hungry,
he will not want to be interrupted. You love
the gray wings at his temples. The blue eyes
pale as sky, and as vulnerable — this man
can cut himself and not notice. Don't disturb
the rolling fields of his mind, carefully tended rows
of lettuces and sweetcorn. Under his stroking hands
the shelves grow doors with handles, each edge
crosshatched with shadow. He is working
for love, and need, and usefulness. For you
and for the children. What was scrap wood
he will make beautiful. His white shirt falls open
at the throat. Pulse of tenderness, fair skin
roughened from the razor. There is no end of effort
for these sweet hours of symmetry, of absolution
and the smell of pine. This man loves work, and the pain
of work. Don't ask him to look up.

WHY I HAVE NEVER WORN THE BROCADE

This is the dress that's followed us through three moves,
silk lined with silk, the one
my mother-in-law offered, in that off-hand way,
a few months after we married.
Her mother's Chinese silk,
seams heavy and straight as a plumb.

The weave stiff with symbols—
Fortune? Health? Between them, birds
dart in cream runnels on the creamy ground.

This is the woman who wore it. My husband's
mother's mother. In photographs,
straight back, small bones, all iron-gray. The one
who had the Steinway lacquered red.
Who lost her family slowly to cancer and to madness.
Who hosted dinners for hundreds, strode
tiny and stately between the tables,
who downed handfuls of pills, and still
lived longer than she wanted.

She is the one I have brought with me
across the country and back again,
whose china we lift out from layers of towelling,
who watches as I unpack
first my dresses, and then her dress.

THE HOURS

When you are empty is a good time to pray.
When the apples tumble; when they rot.
When the yard's knee-deep in leaves,
when your arms ache from raking.

The day you get the results back is a good
time to pray, and the day you wait.
Days you don't rise, the bedsheets grayed.
Days you make the bed.

When you flick the blinds up,
the stove on, the cookbook open.
When everyone is coming.
When no one is home.

When you can't remember how long
it's been, and when the days
rinse you clean. When you rant. When
you can't remember God's name
is a good time to pray.

TWO POEMS ABOUT MELANCHOLY

ANIMAL MEMORY

Into this warm
cage of bones I pull
every sinew,
soul and heart,
a bear hibernating
in my own sufficiency
of flesh. The cave
against the cold is strong. Here
the skin will knit its old prayer
over slow wounds.
Under the red
pulsing bloom of sleep
I lie curled in darkness. I dream
berries, bright water, thick
plenitude, until
the rills run free again,
and the ice opens.

HOPE SPEAKS TO ME

I am the chestnut
with leaves like hands. I
am the reaching branches.
Come. Don't you
already know me?
The lapped bark. Rootsap rising.
The pale green shell

with its perfect horns.
I am the hard
dark satin heart
that hurtles toward you.

Jessie Brown *has two short collections,* Lucky *(Anabiosis Press) and* What We Don't Know We Know *(Finishing Line), as well as poems and translations in various journals, including* Cider Press Review, Comstock Review, Pensive, American Poetry Review, New Madrid, Full Bleed, Minerva Rising *and others. A native of Massachusetts, she has taught as poet in residence in Boston-area schools and community centers. She also leads independent workshops and gives readings both in collaboration and alone. Living with family members who suffer from serious mental health conditions has provided the gift of compassion and outreach in her own periodic depression. She also consults with many organizations and collaborates in local interdisciplinary programs involving visual art, music, and public art initiatives.*

Brian Daldorph

THE WORDS THAT HAVE DIED OUT AND I'M TRYING TO REVIVE

The word for all the things you do
that don't need to be done
when you're faced with a tough task like writing.

The word for snow on a gravestone
that combines the meaning of *death* and *cold.*

The word for that special joy
when you peel off cold wet clothes
in a warm house.

The word just like it for the joy
when you peel off cold wet clothes
in a warm house
with someone you love.

The word for the movement of a dog's ears
when he trots along beside you.

The word for sunlight on the wings of a white bird
in blue winter sky.

The word for the sound of the ocean
when you wake in the night.

The word for the group of ghosts
who gather around you
every time you sit to write.

MARIGOLD

I bring my mother
a yellow African marigold
in a tea mug from Harrogate—
where I was born.

My mother's flowers have given her,
over the years,
as much joy as anything.
I grew this flower for her.

I'm glad I can give it to her
because if her doctor had been right
she'd not have made it to marigold time.

She brings it to her face,
smells it, "Beautiful!"

HARD-LUCK STEW

I make it when I need it
using my grandmother's recipe,
which is no recipe at all.
She'd just tell me to raid the larder,
"and the fridge, if you have one,"
and pull out everything that looks tired, shabby
and needs "eating up":
"Because we don't waste *anything* in this house.
There are too many hungry people in the world."

She'd grab yesterday's rice pudding, cauliflower,
sprouts "that have seen better days,"
a dusty can of bean soup
and stale bread she'd slice into bits,
then cook up a big pot of broth.
When it was boiling, toss everything in

with a few stock cubes, salt and pepper.
"You can drop your disappointments in too," she'd say.

I'd told her about my love for Ann Shannon,
the prettiest girl in my class,
who wouldn't even look at me.
That could go in the pot.

My grandmother stirred, singing "Four Green Fields"
and "When Irish Eyes are Smiling,"
so that now every time I need it
I make my grandma's hard-luck stew
and it fills me up every time.

4 IN THE MORNING

I didn't really know about 4 a.m.
until my first daughter was born
and would wake up crying
ten times a night.
Was she colicky, or hungry? She didn't say.

I got to know about "the small hours"—
1 and 2 and 3 and 4 a.m.
It felt like there were only two people awake
in the whole world
though sometimes a few cars slipped by
and I wondered about those lives too.

4 a.m. alone
with my daughter playing happily
with her wooden blocks and toy animals,
and I'd never before felt so tired
and so full of love.

FOR LANGSTON

Hey, Mr. Langston Hughes!
Greetings from this fool!
I got to tell you something
I'm hopin' you'll find cool.

I wrote some poems for you,
dedicated to Mr. Hughes.
They've got a bit of God in them,
they've got a lot of blues.

I hope you like 'em, Langston,
as you walk your lonesome mile.
The best that I can hope for them
is to make an old man smile

as he hitches up his backpack
an' walks down Lonely Street.
You an' me, Langston,
we got this sad world beat!

Brian Daldorph's *book,* Words Is a Powerful Thing *(Kansas University P, 2021), won a Kansas Notable Book Award and the Hefner-Heitz Kansas Book Award 2024. The book describes his 20 years of teaching a writing class at Douglas County Jail in Lawrence, Kansas, and includes the writing of more than 50 incarcerated writers. Brian says: "Mental illness, especially severe depression, devastated my family, particularly because it was ignored and untreated."*

Vivian Heller

EVERY OTHER SATURDAY: HOW TWO DOCTORS ARE BUILDING COMMUNITY AND DEFEATING THE STIGMA OF PSYCHOSIS

Who goes to a pool party at their doctor's house? We were told that if we didn't feel ready, we could wait and that this party happens every other week. Walking up the driveway with our daughter, part of me wants to turn back, but it's too late.

"C'mon, let's go for a jog!" we hear my daughter's doctor say.

"Try me later," a young man replies.

"You're killing me! You said that an hour ago!"

"Sorry, Doc," the young man laughs.

"I want to change into my suit!" my daughter exclaims and heads towards the house.

My husband and I wave vaguely at the people gathered up on the porch. Unsure of what to do with ourselves, we stand awkwardly under a tree.

Another family asks us where we're from, and before we know it, we're deep in conversation. Their daughter is the "shy-looking one" sitting on the porch steps with a tall, lanky boy who is reading a poem to her.

Every parent here – they've made their way to upstate New York from New Jersey, Long Island, Brooklyn, Yonkers, the Bronx -- has a story very much like ours. Their children – some are teenagers, others are in their twenties, others are middle-aged -- have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness. Their parents have struggled to find adequate treatment for them. In this garden, we can speak freely, and so we relax.

The doctors who've invited us here are Robert and Ann Laitman. The stories exchanged by their guests are all too familiar to them. Their son Daniel was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia when he was fifteen years old. After four antipsychotic medications had failed to relieve his symptoms, they decided that Daniel needed clozapine, known paradoxically as "the gold standard for treating psychosis" and the "antipsychotic of last resort."

But that was just the beginning of their struggle. After four psychiatrists refused to prescribe clozapine, they took things into their own hands. With clozapine, Daniel finally started to recover. The Laitmans were astonished. Why had this medication been denied to them? They knew that it carried a risk

of agranulocytosis, a decline in the neutrophils in the blood that fight infection, but they also knew that risk was low with careful monitoring and that it diminished over time. As a clinical researcher and psychiatrist, Brian Bennett recently stated,

> Agranulocytosis occurs in just 8 of every 1,000 people taking clozapine, and 97% of them survive it. Importantly, the risk of death from agranulocytosis after the first six months on clozapine is about the same as general life mortality risks such as traffic or occupational accidents. Furthermore, given clozapine's unique anti-suicidal properties and the fact that approximately 6% of people with schizophrenia die by suicide, expanding access to the drug would actually prevent more deaths from suicide in eligible patients than lives lost to agranulocytosis.[1]

The Laitmans also knew that clozapine could produce many side effects but that by including other medications, these side effects (weight gain, seizures, constipation, drooling) could be held in check. Why had their son's path to recovery been blocked?

Appalled by how completely the system had let them down, they made the life-altering decision "to change the approach to schizophrenia."[2] As Robert Laitman writes, "I was very happy practicing good medicine as a nephrologist, gerontologist, and general internist. Then things changed. I had the unfortunate opportunity to experience what a tortuous maze mental health care is."[3]

They created and administered a thorough program for recovery from serious mental illness. It was an integrated approach to psychosis that would provide everything that had been denied them, and they would never stop trying to improve it.

The story of the Laitmans' struggle to help their son and the solution they came up with can be found in their book *Meaningful Recovery from Schizophrenia and Serious Mental Illness with Clozapine*. It speaks directly to those who are seeking help, combining the Laitmans' personal accounts with a guide to the safe and successful administration of clozapine. It addresses doctors as well, arguing for a medication that has been accepted in many other countries but that is under-utilized in the United States. Above all, Laitman holds out hope for meaningful recovery:

1 Barnett, B. (2022). Flawed FDA safety requirements are hamstringing a highly effective treatment for severe schizophrenia. *STAT.*

2 Laitman, R. S., Opler, L.A., Laitman, A, Laitman, D. (2017). *Meaningful Recovery from Schizophrenia and Serious Mental Illness with Clozapine*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. p. 96.

3 Ibid, p. 95.

> Patient has a sense of purpose and self, enabling them to form relationships and be a productive member of their community and society. Vital individuals with optimal physical functioning, pain-free both physically and emotionally, enjoying long and fulfilling lives.[4]

For families dealing with psychosis, these words are radical. By this definition, recovery means much more than mere symptom control. It means living a full life and finding one's place in the world. The Laitmans are doing everything in their power to help their patients towards this goal.

Our daughter, who is by nature sociable, has often felt shut out by people her own age, but she is quickly making friends at the pool. She's excited to learn that these gatherings will be held every other week until the weather gets cold and that on off weeks, she can attend a Zoom led by Daniel, who is now living independently as a stand-up comedian in New York. When she checks out the Zoom, she is happy to find that the conversation is wide-ranging and positive. She's taken part in support groups before, but they've left her feeling anxious. The talk often revolved around crisis, and most of the people she met there weren't doing well, which frightened her. What she really yearns for, and needs is a social life. The Zoom with Daniel is lively and fun; the conversation isn't confined to mental health or coping skills. Her new friends worry about members who don't show up or who seem to be having a bad day, and they applaud those who have gotten a job, gone on a date, written a poem, sung in a choir, and worked as a volunteer. Anything and everything can be brought up. People meet to enjoy each other's company. There is absolutely no stigma here.

Those on the psychotic spectrum, which includes bipolar with psychotic symptoms, schizoaffective disorder, and schizophrenia, are beset with worries at every turn. Should they reveal their "invisible disability" to a potential employer, or will doing so ruin their chances of getting a job? Should they be open about their diagnosis with the person they date, or will being honest prevent the relationship from moving forward? Should they carry their medications in labeled bottles when they travel by plane so that no one thinks that they're illegal pills? But without their pill-cases, how will they organize their meds? Should they learn how to drive? What if they get pulled over? They're terrified of being seen as criminals. If they have children with conditions like theirs, will they be able to shield them? Or will their children be ridiculed and bullied for being different, as they themselves were in school? The questions go on and on.

Our daughter discovers, for the first time in her life, that she can talk about these worries openly with her peers, either at the Laitmans' house, or on Zoom, or by texting or visiting with her new friends. This doesn't make her

4 Ibid, p. 140.

problems go away, but it makes things seem easier for the simple reason that she is no longer isolated.

The gatherings serve a purpose for her doctor as well. They allow him to observe how his patients interact and give him insight into their social skills. Moreover, if he sees any patient looking tense or withdrawn, he will engage them in a playful, kind, and relaxed manner. The Laitmans' credo: recovery depends on "relentless optimism." At their house, they model this optimism in a human way.

Just as important is the help they give to families. Their own experience has taught them that they need healing, too. My husband and I are invited to join a Zoom meeting "for the families", but this Zoom takes a very different form. From 11:00 to 3:00, on the off-weeks when there is no in-person gathering, the Laitmans are there to answer any question that has come up, providing detailed answers from their dining room. Some of the parents on this Zoom have children under Dr. Laitman's care. Others call in for advice on how to deal with doctors who refuse to administer clozapine or who aren't administering it properly. In these zooms, we are made to feel that our role in our daughter's recovery is crucial, that we know her better than anyone else, and that the difficulties that we face are widely shared and surmountable. We suddenly realize that all the doctors we spoke to before never really had enough time to listen. We've gone from one office to another, and we've agonized over conflicting advice. Our contact with other families dealing with mental illness was confined to fleeting conversations in an endless succession of waiting rooms. We did once attend a support group, but instead of being uplifting, it left us feeling depressed. But now, for the first time since our daughter had her first psychotic break, we are being provided with a vital alternative to a culture in which mental illness is shuttered away and stigmatized.

Of all the conditions on the psychosis spectrum, schizophrenia is seen as the most intractable. In his award-winning book *Far from the Tree*, Andrew Solomon perpetuates this damaging attitude:

> We may hesitate to cure some problematic illnesses because they are also identities, but schizophrenia calls out almost unconditionally for treatment. The remarkable parents I met during this research would be better off, as would their children if schizophrenia didn't exist. To me, their suffering seemed unending and singularly fruitless.[5]

These words, so devastating in their finality, are symptomatic of how schizophrenia is seen in our society. The widespread assumption that schizo-

5 Solomon, A. (2012). *Far from The Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity*. Scribner: New York. p. 353.

phrenia is a hopeless condition has led neuro-psychoanalyst Brian Koehler to advocate for the term to be dropped from *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). It marginalizes those who bear it and worsens their suffering:

> In the public's psyche, the term schizophrenia embodies the concepts of dangerousness and unrecoverability (if someone recovers, the diagnosis itself is thought to be retrospectively incorrect). The term can be traumatic for many who have to bear it. It may increase the person's sense of being damaged, socially isolated, feared and rejected.[6]

The Laitmans refuse to believe that schizophrenia is a life sentence. They believe that if it is treated properly, meaning with a mixture of clozapine, therapy, and community, it's compatible with a productive and rewarding life. They argue that clozapine has been proven to be the most effective medication when it comes to preventing suicide among people diagnosed with schizophrenia, whose life expectancy is 25 years shorter than that of the average American. Why should we see clozapine as the medication of last resort when it can save lives? And why should a mental health condition that can produce intrusive voices, visual hallucinations, and mental dysregulation so often be treated with dopamine-blocking medications that are not effective, deaden emotion, and have debilitating side effects? And why is inadequately treated schizophrenia so often punished with incarceration in our country so that our prisons have become our largest mental institutions? Our cities are filled with homeless people whose lives could be turned around with clozapine, therapy, and a supportive community.

The gatherings at the Laitman house culminate in a larger event in August that is attended not only by their many patients in the Northeast but by families from all over the U.S., as well as by clinical social workers, policy-makers, psychiatrists, and researchers in the field of mental health. Over 200 people attended at the last count. It's an occasion for the families to express their gratitude for the community in which they can share their stories without any fear and their hope of achieving true recovery. Although we exchange stories of hardship, there is a feeling of joy in the air. We are connected not only by suffering but by a spirit of hope.

"God bless these people!" a woman from the Bronx says to me. "If it wasn't for them, I don't know where we'd be. Do you know that Dr. Laitman called me at 10:30 at night to tell me that he could help my son? He talked to me for over an hour. Who does that?"

"Did your son come with you today?" I ask.

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6 Koehler, B. (2017). APA: Drop the Stigmatizing Term Schizophrenia.

"That's my beautiful boy over there!" she says, pointing to a young man at the other end of the table. He looks up from his plate and breaks into a slow smile. "He's been through so much," she says to me. "But the doctor thinks that by next year he'll be able to go back to college."

I talk to the woman for a little longer, and then I get up and walk around.

"Good enough recovery is not enough!" I hear Dr. Laitman saying to another guest. "As long as patients aren't trying to kill themselves, our crazy system says they're doing fine. What we want is full recovery – a meaningful life."

And so people crowd into the Laitmans' backyard, bringing their dogs, favorite foods and forbidden desserts, their swimsuits and towels, and, above all, their running shoes. Those who join Robert Laitman on one of his jogs receive special encouragement. Given the distance our society needs to go, it seems appropriate their fantastically giving doctor is a marathon runner. An alternative for walkers is provided by Ann Laitman, whose kindness, hard-won wisdom, and uncompromising determination are felt by all. Together, the Laitmans make us feel that we've finally come home.

As for the mental health care professionals who have come to this party for the first time, many questions are likely to run through their minds. How can what the Laitmans are doing be extended? How can they emulate the Laitmans' model of integrated care? Here and there, they've heard the Laitmans talk about a clozapine clinic that would include not only psychiatric internists, psychiatrists, and therapists but also job trainers, peer specialists, social workers for housing, family educators, nutritionists, and physical trainers. So far, this clinic is just a dream. In order to make dreams like this into reality, significant funding and planning would be required. How to mount this kind of campaign?

The first steps will probably be the most difficult. But maybe those first steps are happening right here, I think, watching my daughter introduce herself to a girl sitting by the pool as another group of runners heads out.

"I can't go with you guys this time," I hear Dr. Laitman say to them. "There are some people here that I need to talk to first. If you start feeling a little tired, don't get discouraged. Give it your best shot!"

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Vivian Heller *received her Ph.D. in English and Modern Studies from Yale University. Her non-fiction publications include* Joyce, Decadence, and Emancipation *(University of Illinois Press),* The City Beneath Us *(W.W. Norton & Company),* and Analysis and Exile: Boyhood, Loss, and the Lessons of Anna Freud *(Confer Books). Her essays have appeared* in New Observations, The Journal of Literature and Medicine *and* The Georgetown Review. *Her short stories have appeared* in Confrontation, Bomb *and* Fence. *She teaches in the Narrative Medicine Program of Columbia University and at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. Her daughter has been dealing with a serious mental illness since she was 14 years old, and getting adequate treatment for her has been both difficult and eye-opening, confirming that finding a community based on hope, engagement and acceptance is key to recovery.*

Glenda S. Pliler

BORDERLINE IDENTITY CRISES

All my life, I've been an actor,
Bit parts and one-night stands,
Directed by Society,
That purse-lipped old biddy
Who says, "On such and such a cue,
This is how you play the scene."
But I never could get it right.

She scoffed when I broke my contract,
Barging out as I did in the middle of a soap,
Protesting that it wasn't *me*.
She warned me I would never find another job
In her theater and went off mumbling about ingrates
And neurotics, about unaccommodating oddballs,
And, indeed, I am now out-cast;
I don't know my lines,
But then, I never did.

But then, I ask,
(The question bounces off the walls
Like eerie silence in a darkened, empty theater)
If those roles weren't mine, then
Who am I?
I search the dusty manuscripts I've played.
Yet life still feels disjointed,
Nonsensical, extreme,
All unfinished fits and starts, scenes and sets,
Nothing deep, nothing consequential.

In the rush to find what matters,
In the rush to find what's *me*,
Scripts fly 'round and 'round,
Leaving muddles even bigger than before,
Like Hamlet, caught between to be or not to be.

"Such a mess," the biddy scolds,

"Can you do nothing right?"
She pressures me to play the part
Of someone not quite bright,
Incompetent, a fool.
Inwardly, I groan, and wonder, is she right?
Am I Blanche DuBois, lost in others' fantasies?

With ragged breath, I protest—"No, not yet!"
"I can't accept a role so small,
So insignificant.
Don't I need more time
To find my Self, the part that's really *me*?"
(It must be here somewhere, surely, and something *more*!)
My voice edged with panic, I shout back,
"How can one put one's life in order
Before one knows what's true and real?"

Still, I doubt. Is she right—is this madness?
Am I hopeless, a misfit without appeal?
Am I merely egotistical (or worse, absurd)
To want, to need, to seek
A role worthy of applause,
A role as great as any can be great,
With depth and breadth,
Rich, full of sound and fury
Signifying everything of meaning,
Of truth, of uncontrived reality?

Or is life merely vaudeville skits,
Ourselves no more than second-raters,
Our differences measured only in
That some better speak their lines?
It seems so on the surface. Yet
How can this be?
Should not life, at very least,
Be equal to her arts?

Or is the truth it's all pretense,
Sham, fake, and make-believe,
As counterfeit as politics,
As forged as bogus checks from cons,
As "spurious as a young man's words of love,"
All set to music to glorify
The merely mundane?

Perhaps it's true I am not great;
It speaks of that, that when I cease shouting
About greatness, in the end
Merely worthwhile would be sufficient,
Merely respectable would be acceptable,
Merely having a common script
Among the players,
Would bring relief.

And yet I wonder,
If any role,
If any play,
Would ever be
Enough.
So many roles, so many plays,
So many possibilities,
And yet I do not see,
Where, among it all,
If it is there at all,
Is *me*.

WHEN WILL I AWAKEN

have slept in Tennessee,
A hitchhiker hidden on a mountain rise,
Swallowed in infinities of waving grass,
A small speck shivering in an ocean
Of undiluted stars,
Worried about tomorrow.
Lord, lord, when will I awaken.

I have lain on pine needles
At the furthermost Key
Delirious beyond sleep
In exaltation
With windsong and tree whispers
And the immortal rhythms of seawater.
I thought it surely was
Divinity
To feel so high
But just like yesterday
The sun came up
And it was just plain life again,
Only now,
More tired.
Lord, lord, when will I awaken.

I have slept in fits and starts,
Head buzzing from time zones
On a plane seven seats wide
With nowhere to lay my head,
Like a church congregation,
Facing that silver alter
Playing *Inception*, *Matrix*, or *Inside Out*,
No one thinking about miracles,
About how this sliver of metal hangs
Between the full moon and black ocean,
This oldest of oceans,
Too ancient to comprehend,
Too far away to see.
Lord, lord, when will I awaken?

I have slept in Canada
On my honeymoon
In a second-rate motel,
The night of the day we saw the moose,
The night of the day I realized
I didn't love my husband.
The moose was ugly, but real.
The fantasy was beautiful, but not.
Lord, lord, when will I awaken?

I have slept,
Sometimes surreptitiously
Sometimes with slack-jawed verve,
In lecture halls and churches,
In traffic and out,
More than once, while making love,
More than once, while making promises,
More than once, without closing my eyes,
(Most of my life, without closing my eyes).
What is dream and what is Truth?
Lord, lord. When will I awaken?

THE THOUSANDTH DEATH

I.
Waiting in every dark,
Ancient universal demons
Metamorph into present danger,
Futures imagined worse than those past,
Gargoyles and griffins guarding all doors,
Whispering and roaring our deepest dreads,
Muttering, like contemptuous tribunals,
Immutable verdicts of immutable guilt.
The faster we run the faster they fly;
Black gripping horror freezing the moment
With pictures and promises of doom and damnation,
Eternal justice in outer darkness
Where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

II.
There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth,
Until at the far wall, at the last farthing,
At the ends of the earth in the dying embers
Of burning dross, shaken till nothing is left that can be shaken.
Exhausted from grief and loneliness,
In misery beyond enduring,
We lay down like death-row prisoners

Like Jonah waiting to be swallowed,
Broken.
Death stalks, so close his breath is in our hair,
But our white-circled eyes go soft
And rasping breath slows
For when we are done
We can run no more, ever.

III.
I can run no more.
Like deer in lions' jaws, I fall limp;
Those who report near-death
Say they thought what I thought:
"So, this is how it ends, not bangs but whimpers."
But it's quiet, strangely peaceful—and I *see.*
As a child sees monsters lurking in every dark corner,
Unable to predict how one grown finds pleasure in it,
I never predicted this, so unexpected—
I see no demons baring razor teeth
But hands to help me rise,
Not alien but universal, full of love.
Like Plato's shadows cast on walls,
Misunderstood.
My vision now is not of shadows
But of the star that cast them.
Lost among the Shades,
I lived in angst, afraid,
Died the thousand deaths of trepidation
To learn that in the end,
Silence speaks with one tongue to say:
There is never any threat but *Mind*,
Never any threat at all except that imagined.
Nothing dies but fear of Death itself.
What waits for us to find it
Is sacred *life*,
A glimpse into eternity.

MOMENTS OF HAPPINESS

I have moments of happiness.
They glimmer between the sorrows
Like afternoon sunlight
Filtering through the blinds and ferns and philodendron,
Flung against the far wall
In filigree arrays
Of light and shadow

Not mine to keep.
Time moves in unmoved silence;
The pretty patterns on the wall
Spread long fingers and grow grave faces
Like gargoyles lurking, bringing grief

That too does not last, for the sun
Only rides Ra's nightboat,
Only circles to the other side
In time to catch the dawn,
Rising to paint joy again,
Not resurrecting yesterday's perfection
But falling on a different wall,
Requiring me to turn around,
So bright at first I cannot see.

I have moments of happiness.
Framed in sorrows;
They come and go,
Not mine to keep.
All moments fly away,
All meanings but a frieze of time,
All loss, all laughter nothing more
Than light and shadow artwork on the wall,
Flowers blooming, dying, born again,
Sun and shadow with nothing sacred
But light and silence,
Nothing sacred
But I, who sees.

RELEASE FROM HELL

How long now, long, long, long,
From sky to sky the earth was flat and barren:
Flat and dirty yellow, cracks starving for the rain,
Days counted by their length in years,
Silence, (recalled as once deep and sweet),
Here but empty stillness.
Is there hope? There is no hope.
I have transgressed; I closed the door,
This is my sentence.
Yet, a tremor, or did I imagine...?

The curse worn thin,
Exhausted, despairing;
Forgetful a moment,
I'd blessed the fishes
Then, again, a tremor? A trembling?

Trapped so long at the end of a scream
In such cramped places,
The torrent spews open,
Burst like the bang of the universe
Three dimensions—no four, oh—was that five?
Images, dreams, colors tumble
Over themselves
Flooding fissured earth
To the height of vision
Where it spills over edges
To fill the skies
In a tumultuous roar of
Rainbows and bright-colored birds and winged horses,
Touchable notes of music
Cascading upward,
Crystal voices
Of light and sound
Which like a train's trail
Lower an octave
In swift passing,

Shapes and forms and feelings,
Needing only circumstance
To sculpt out Heart's visions
In reality,
Treasure boxes of inborn and unborn memories
Held aloft like holy arks
By shimmering formless lights.
Everything full of all else,
Everything touchable, knowable
By the curious, hungry fingers
Of mind and heart:

Long lost friends,
Old friends,
Old friends,
Old friends—

Unseen again, only now sponged into green fullness,
Humility exalted into dignity;
Like passion resting in fulfillment,
Like futures full of promises,
Seeds nestle in moist-smelling earth and
This silence breathing, more preciously sweet,
In a sky filled, rim to rim, with stars.

Glenda S. Pliler *was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, Anxiety, and depression in 1989. Like most with BPD, she suffered from rages, social discord, multiple marriages, and suicidal ideation. The turning point came earlier, in 1973, when she stumbled into a brief experience of higher consciousness (commonly called enlightenment). But where such extraordinary experiences inform, it wasn't until she learned Transcendental Meditation (TM) that growth and progress began in earnest by awakening the mind and releasing the deep-rooted stresses that cause such disorders. She is now happy, healthy, and high-functioning. After obtaining a BA in Philosophy and an MA in Writing from Maharishi International University (MIU), Pliler became a writer for trade magazines. Author of* Diplomat to the Galaxy*, she lives in West Palm Beach, Florida, where she teaches writing to Vets with PTSD. Her advice to other writers: Never quit. "Producing these poems required years of rewrites and personal growth."*

Katherine Szpekman

MAKING CHERRY JELL-O IN WINTER: 1963

You taught me to make Jell-O
on the door of the open dishwasher,
because that was as high
as my three years could reach,

tobacco and coffee on your breath,
and Shalimar everywhere else.
Your sure hand holding my hand
holding the weathered wooden spoon,

stirring the fine red dust
into boiling water.
You added three ice cubes
to the green Pyrex bowl,

and together we listened to the pop
and crack of ice meeting heat.
Your slanted smile, lipstick-red,
simultaneously glamorous

and familiar, framed by sun
streaming in over the sill,
where dust motes hovered
around your head.

You rapped the spoon
on the sparkly-red Formica
and slid the hot bowl into the fridge,
next to the remnants of yesterday's apple pie.

After a time, you called me back
spooned out the ruby-red, wobbly mass,
and topped it off
with a noisy squirt of Reddi-wip.

Outside, the immense evergreens towered
over our small house, silent,
boughs trapped under the burden
of the night's relentless snow.

THE FRUIT IS SWEETEST WHERE BRUISED

The house sleeps.
I shuffle past the crated dog,
the quiet kitchen counters.
My socks disturb dust, dog fur
and crumbs from last night's bread.

Beyond the sliding glass doors,
March blinds with blocks of ice,
waves of snow, houseguests
who have overstayed their welcome.

The dog's frozen footprints form roads
to nowhere in soil, hard as the New England
stones we gather, their grays and browns
like the barred feathers of the owls that perch,
camouflaged in the pines and birch.

Inside, coffee brews.
Hot courage in a blue mug.
You are still
warm in your bed,
knees to chest, as if in utero,
auburn hair a fan shell on your pillow,
eyelids and lashes aquiver
on breaths dreaming.

Oh daughter, I don't yet know
how to write a happy poem.
So, I cook your favorite
banana and cheese empanadas.

The fruit curls like fingers
on a closed hand, their black spots
bruises, sweet with age.

I peel the waxy petals
and slice the ripe coins into
singing sputters of golden butter.
Notes of cardamon and vanilla
release in amber light.

I knead the dough and it is sticky,
connected like how your baby hands
grabbed my index finger, held it tight
like a clothespin, wanting.
You are between the years
of wonder and doubt,
and as I sift powdered sugar
in a dusting across your plate,
and add the strawberries you love,
please know I am sorry.

I don't mean to tip the scale
in the direction of gloom.
It is what I know best,
and so pass along,
like sharing a cold
via a tender kiss.

MAGICAL THINKING

And if I could make a house for you,
it would be strong, and lovely, and open.

It would surround you
with a fountain and a reflecting pool,
and you would know you were welcome,
always, no matter if you entered

with a muddied or bruised heart,
or a mad and violent rage.
Love would make room
for pain and mess.

And if I could make a house for you,
it would be fragrant, and calm and safe.

It would welcome you
with the smell of brewing coffee,
and cinnamon bread, golden and warm.
You would pull up a kitchen chair,
and I would sit with you, and listen.
You would want to stay,
and break your vow
of silence.

MESSAGE THE LIVING

Billow the lace curtains of the woman
who still dreams.
Tickle the grasses,
emerging in spring lawns.
Ruffle the golden wisps on the dog's head
as he leans to the left to pee.
Flap the flags that clang on the pole.
Tease the ocean waves as they crest.
Nudge the feathery pine boughs until all
nod in agreement.
Cheer the robin, the wren, the finch,
as they weave and nest.
Shift the tattered leaves of last fall,
survivors under melted snow.
Sweep out the sorrow in the lungs of mothers.
Brush air with post-rain petrichor.
Shuffle last year's stale brown mulch.
Cajole clouds into animal shapes and ribbons.

Disperse scent of musk, and loam, daffodil and stone.
Message the living.
And if, somehow,
all this goes unnoticed—gust.

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

Christine Andersen

HOW I COPED WITH "MENTAL ILLNESS"

I don't see myself as mentally ill, though some may quibble. I think of mental illness as a normal part of being human, like physical ailments. Some people contract cancer or Lou Gehrig's Disease; others, schizophrenia or a mood disorder. Their bodies or brain chemistry fail them. There is no shame in physical irregularities, and yet when behavior is affected, shame seems to be the knee-jerk response.

Over the course of my 69 years, I have had to deal with the sequelae of early childhood trauma—post-traumatic fragmentation with dissociated memories and feelings that demanded to be integrated. At different junctures, I could have worn labels of assorted disorders: borderline personality, obsessive-compulsive, mania, depression, amnesia, anxiety, bulimia, some experts postulated my brain was hopelessly out of whack—but what I was was deeply hurt, blown away by fear, sickened to my soul with shame, anger, and shock that constituted normal reactions to betrayal and early, ongoing sexual abuse by those I trusted.

How did I recover?

First, when it became apparent that I was a survivor of childhood sexual abuse (I had no conscious memory), I clung to the fact that I was experiencing a normal, treatable reaction to assault. Label it Rape Trauma Syndrome, Complex PTSD, slide me up and down the dissociative spectrum—didn't matter except to provide a framework as to why I was haunted by a constellation of symptoms—flashbacks, emotional dysregulation, self-loathing, nervousness, becoming triggered into emotional hijackings by seemingly innocuous everyday objects—you get the picture. I was the poster child for fight or flight without a clue as to why until the painful memories surfaced.

However, what mattered to me foremost was that I was normal. If I had not engaged my psychological defensive system to survive, it would have been abnormal. I felt so out of step with my peers as an adolescent. I remember wanting so badly to be like them—go off to college, fall in love, hold a job, all the things I struggled with. Embracing my truth gave me normality.

Second, I celebrated my creativity. My mind found a way to go on having a childhood with the abusers constantly in my family circle. I put the hurt on hold until I was mature enough to open Pandora's Box and deal with what I had set aside. Going forward, art and writing will help lead me to wholeness.

Third, I used my intelligence. Knowing that something was terribly amiss inside, I began to read because the psychiatrist my parents dragged me to

when I was 19 was not trauma-informed (few were in the 1970s), and his Freudian approach was less than productive. He had a war chest of pills and a wall of hypnosis certificates from prestigious institutions, but he called me a "resistant" client, and we struggled. I told him I identified with the story of Patty Hearst and her Stockholm Syndrome and with the difficulties of the returning Vietnam veterans, but I was dismissed. Told to stop reading.

Fourth. Finally, in my 30s, I found good help. A storm of memories broke loose. And I continued to read. I found myself in books by Judith Herman, Richard Kluft, Marlene Steinberg, Christine Courtois , Kathy Steele, and Janina Fisher. Knowledge empowered me. Experts in trauma understand that they are dealing with the psychological equivalent of a burn victim when working with a deeply wounded client. Healing is like peeling an onion—layer by layer, safely, delicately, and at a pace the survivor can withstand. And the news was positive. I could transcend, though the process wasn't pretty. I repeated my abuse in romantic relationships, chopped off my hair, ate too much, ate too little, over-exercised, felt unreal, and waded through nightmares. There were times I did not want to live. But I got up every morning and put one foot in front of the other. I kept on.

Fifth. After the long and arduous healing process of one step forward, two steps back, and a revolving door of therapy that included 18 years "on the couch," I used my experience to make a difference. I founded a fund at the University of Connecticut, a mile from home, to enhance trauma education for future psychologists. I was featured as a sexual abuse survivor in The Hartford Courant to promote the training fund. I begged people for money. On a sunny afternoon, shaking in my boots, I shared my story and my art with the clinical psychology students to put a face on what they had read in their textbooks about dissociation. I also wrote a collection of poems about my journey that I am peddling to publishers in hopes of inspiring others who have been similarly hurt. In the process of helping others, I lost my shame. Grew spiritual roots. Found gratitude.

Every day, I find solace in nature, my children, my dogs, and in loving relationships with people who know and accept me.

Will I ever be totally free of triggers when I feel threatened? Maybe not, but considering my past, I like to think that's normal.

Christine Andersen

UP AND OUT

1. GRIEF

I didn't see my partner's death coming.
The void, so permanent.
So unrelenting.

I was told the grief would unfold in stages.
Denial anger bargaining depression acceptance.
One step forward, one step back, and around again, etc.
I have never been good at protocols.

I stiffened with shock,
the sky closed in,
my tongue too tied to talk.
When it unfurled,
anger punctuated my sentences.
I resented every couple I passed
and fiddled an aching refrain—
Why, Universe, did you
step on me again
when I was finally happy?

I took to walking in the woods every day
with our three hounds.
It is hard to be bereft beneath the trees.
The path wended down to the river
where I was drawn to the water's music,
stood on a rock,
defied the current,
sang with its wild, ancestral chords.

2. ANXIETY ON STEROIDS

The daily news was a weight
I struggled to carry.
A boulder in my backpack

as I scaled my heap of days
without you.
Wars, famine, political divides,
migrants hoping for a better life,
the climate screaming crisis.

Didn't the world care—
I had my own crises.
I couldn't change my oil,
stack a woodpile without it unraveling,
calculate the taxes.
There was no one to set the mousetraps
or haul the trash to the dump.
No dialog at dinner.
No even breathing from the pillow
overlapping mine.

Yet the world kept unwrapping its gifts
when I stopped to look and listen.

Last night I crawled into bed
with the windows wide open
as the sky fell all around me.

The rain has such light fingers,
the way it opens June's first rose.

3. BARGAINING

Surely the grief should be lifting by now.
A year passed. Time to cut a deal.

If only life were that simple.
A Farmer's Market.

I'll fill my sacks with this year's crop
if you throw in a magic wand.

Who knew I'd find my magic
looking out my kitchen window.

It doesn't matter what you believe,
the world is rife with miracles.

The alacrity of a hummingbird's wings,
the constant constellations

and from last year's bulbs,
the tulip bud in the garden,

yellow
as a crayon sun,

its quiet petals pursed
like a child's hands in prayer.

4. DEPRESSION

A deep hole I slid into.
Couldn't find my way up and out.
The days dragged by,
each hanging by a slender thread.
I wondered if they'd finally fall,
break to pieces like a puzzle spilled
across a table
longing for connection.

I cocked my head.
The round, silent moon floated
behind a veil of clouds
and drifted out again.
A poet's moon,
a metaphor that beauty found and lost
can be found again
in dark skies.

5. ACCEPTANCE

Each month,
the moon still shines in phases.
Tonight,
it's a crescent sailing like a hook
to hang new dreams upon.

I am more for the gift of love,
not less because you're gone.

Grief has taught me
to widen my gaze
and invite the steadfast stars
into the house.

Christine Andersen *is a retired dyslexia specialist who hikes daily in the Connecticut woods with her five hounds. After the sudden death of her partner over two years ago, she wrote about navigating the stages of grief, which are circular, not linear. Having also struggled with grief in recovery from child sexual abuse, she found that getting outside, living close in spirit to the beauty that surrounds us, is curative. Nothing like a full moon to help pull the heart up and out. Publications include* The Comstock, Evening Street, Gyroscope, New Plains and American Writers Reviews, The Dewdrop, Half and One, and Closed Eye Open*, among others.*

Sharyn Wolf

APRIL AND THE RED BALL

There is no such thing as a baby. There is a baby and someone.

Donald Winnicott

Running errands on Columbus Avenue, I almost bumped into a tall man blocking my path on the sidewalk. He stood facing me, arms wide open. It was Leo. A few years ago, he'd been my patient, our sessions intense, our progress sloth-like. I adored him, and here he was, with that gorgeous smile. And, here I was, about to receive a big hug.

You bet I took it.

Leo, who had spoken so little for so long, had much to tell me. Radiating pleasure. he pulled out his cell phone, showing me photos with his exotic girlfriend at a wedding they'd attended in Taiwan.

"I got a promotion," he announced. "I'm head guy, the project manager."

He knew I would love this long overdue advance.

As our conversation slowed down, I gave in to my urge to do something I'd always wanted to do but rarely got the chance.

"Leo, if it's OK, I'm curious about something."

"Sure," Leo responded

"I'm thinking about our work together. Can I ask you what helped, and what didn't help?"

Leo cocked his head, grinning ear to ear. "You really want to know?"

I nodded.

"Do you really want to know what helped?"

"I really do," I answered.

He took a step closer, and leaned towards me as if we were co-conspirators. He lowered his voice and said, "It was the dog. The dog helped."

We burst into laughter. I should have known the answer without asking. I would have been useless to Leo without my dog, April.

***

On the day he was born, Leo was abandoned on the steps of a church. He knows this part of his story, but he can't remember when he learned it or who told him. Nor could he recall anything about where he spent his first seven years.

In his first memory, Leo is seven, walking through a small village hand in hand with a woman who seems familiar. She lifts his hand by the wrist and stops the people passing by.

"Will you take him?" she asks, "Please, will you take him?"

No one says yes.

They did the same thing the next day.

On the third day, the woman begins knocking on doors.

"Will you take him?" she asks over and over, no matter who comes to the door.

An old lady with curled toenails on her bare feet spins Leo around, looking him over in the doorway of a dark apartment she shares with her frail husband, who is slumped in a card chair, drooling. Leo is handed to her, along with his small paper bag of clothing.

He will be fifteen before he learns what a pillow is.

He is given a mat and told to sleep on the kitchen floor. His job will be to cook, clean, shop, and scrub the floor on his hands and knees. Even at seven, he lowers his eyes and remains silent.

He is taught how to cook and how to prepare meals, but he is not well fed if he is fed at all. He has no shoes or socks, and he wears flip-flops in winter. The old woman hits him with the soles of her rubber clogs or she grabs a pot and hits him on the top of his head.

Leo does not go to school until, two years later, someone comes to the door, telling the couple that he has to go. The first time the teacher calls on him, he wets his pants.

***

During World War II, the Nazis took more than 12 million forced laborers from all over Europe and split them up into groups, depending on the countries they came from, which also determined their treatment.

Ostarbeiter, the name given to the Eastern workers, was made up of 3 to 5.5 million slave laborers wrested from Ukraine, Belarus, and other central European countries, either through a campaign of lies or by violent force. Half of the Ostarbeiter were teenaged girls, aged 15 or 16. Considered less than a notch above Jews, they were treated far worse than other slave laborers. As they died of injuries and starvation or were killed by their captors, more and more girls replaced them. By 1943, the Nazis had lowered the age requirement to 10.

Behind barbed wire, the Ostarbeiter worked 10-12 hours a day under heavy SS guard. Girls and boys were raped. Himmler announced that mothers don't make good workers. Hundreds of makeshift 'birthing centers' popped up where infants could be efficiently disposed of—as many as 200,000.

***

By chance, I worked with two unrelated daughters of Ostarbeiter survivors—Mary, who was in her forties, and Patricia, who, in her 50s, appeared to be not a day older than twenty-five. Neither of them had ever had an intimate relationship or a friend or had gone on a single date.

Mary told me the story of her mother, Ana. The soldiers showed up one afternoon, shooting rifles into the air and yelling for everyone inside the house to come outside. They demanded the oldest daughter, but the oldest daughter was her mother's favorite, so the mother pointed to Ana, her 13-year-old.

"Take her," the mother said, shoving Ana forward. "This one is stronger."

Ana was given minutes to pack. Clutching her tatty bag of clothing, a piece of cheese, and a favorite blanket, she joined the growing group of teenage girls who were told that they would have paying jobs and three good meals a day.

How soon did Ana recognize what was really happening? Was it when one girl complained that she had a blister on her foot and could not keep walking the seven miles to the railway station? Was there a girl who asked a soldier for something to eat? Did it happen at the railway station itself when the butcher's blonde daughter was dragged out back?

Patricia says that her mother was taken from a fine Russian home. She was wearing a white dress, looking like Irina in "The Seagull."

Years later, my patient, Chava, spoke of her Ukrainian grandmother, who escaped this fate by lying in a muddy ditch for three days without moving. When Chava asked her grandmother what she thought about as she trembled, pissed, and shat and went hungry under mud and leaves, remaining motionless, her grandmother said, "Goats. I thought about goats."

***

Leo lived the life of an Ostarbeiter, losing his hearing in one ear and barely surviving 8 years of slave labor. Then, one day, on his trip to the market, he kept walking. He walked his way to other countries and took odd jobs doing carpentry or picking fruit. He was a handsome teenager, and when there wasn't any work, he did what he needed to do to survive.

He found his way to New York City, where his carpentry skills landed him the underpaid work that immigrants get. Leo was curious and skillful, and the owners of the construction company soon realized this. They praised him, slapping him on the back and buying him a beer. But they didn't pay him more.

Leo didn't care and didn't ask.

A carpenter, whom I'd known socially for years, took notice of Leo and forged a tentative friendship. Eventually, he insisted that Leo come and talk to me. The carpenter, a family man, knew something was wrong. I can't imagine what he did to convince him, but Leo came.

Leo had nothing to say. He could not name a feeling. He could not remember his past. He didn't know why he showed up or what he wanted. Leo was frozen in place.

Robert McFarlane says that ice never forgets the past; ice never forgets the dead. Coastguard alerts warn us that we see only 1/8th of an iceberg. The other 7/8ths stay hidden underwater. For Leo, talk therapy would be about as useful as rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, hoping to find a more comfortable seat.

What Leo didn't know was that I wasn't working alone. His was a case where I relied on my rescue dog, April, who was not about to allow Leo to continue to suffer. His pre-verbal state was her area of specialization. Her treatment plan focused on healing early childhood trauma. Her toolbox was overflowing. She was experienced.

From the tenth floor where I worked, April could smell when Leo entered the elevator. At his second appointment, she insisted on scooting down the hall so she could be standing in front of the elevator when the door opened. She squealed and feinted, first right, then left, as Leo emerged. He was not sure what to make of her, but she managed to engage him in a bit of roughhousing in the hallway, which they continued inside my apartment. April made it clear that I was to keep out of their way.

Leo never had a dog, so April taught him how to behave with her. He learned that April got rough in a tug of war. He discovered that he should make a great show of hiding the small, pink plastic pig behind his back and squeaking it. Then he was to hold the pink pig high above his head as April attempted to boing 6 1/2 feet straight up in the air to claim the pig.

Weeks later, he came to trust that she'd never bite him when she covered his hand with her mouth. What he didn't know was that she was mouthing him the way that mother dogs do after they give birth, cleaning off their puppies, carrying them around.

Every week, Leo was on time, and April was at the elevator door. Every week, after their play in the hallway, April ushered him into her office, insisting

that he find the pink pig and join her on the floor. Soon, Leo was laying on his back doing bicep curls, lifting a twenty-pound dog up into the air.

April had mastered gleeful contact, which made her work more important, not to mention of a higher quality than mine. Her only requirement of Leo was his presence. Her eyes shone with pleasure as she maintained a constant, fluid connection. She kept Leo moving, accelerating his heartbeat until he broke a sweat.

***

The Dancing Plague of 1518 in Strasbourg, France, began in July and lasted longer than two months. One day Frau Troffea began dancing, without music, in the street, and she continued to dance non-stop for six days. 34 other dancers joined her. The nobility believed this could be an illness of 'hot blood' and went to extreme measures to normalize it, building a stage, hiring musicians, and expecting citizens to dance their hot blood out of their systems.

The plan backfired. Attracted by the musical festivities, up to 400 people joined in, dancing uncontrollably to the point of injury, heart attack, stroke, exhaustion, and death. Up to 15 people died each day from one of the above. Some were fearful that it was a demonic possession, but as years passed, others believed that the people were afflicted by a fungal disease in rye flour. Today, one of the more widely accepted explanations is that what happened was a mass psychogenic hysteria called Conversion Disorder, a psychological diagnosis where motor disturbances can occur.

I learned about Conversation Disorder when I saw Shirley Temple in the 1937 film, "Heidi," adapted from the 1881 novel written by Johana Spyri. Five-year-old orphaned Heidi lived with her curmudgeonly grandfather in the Swiss Alps. Too much for the old man to manage, she was sent to Frankfurt, hired out as a companion to the wealthy but fading Clara, an invalid girl in a wheelchair.

Clara's guardian, the cruel-hearted Fraulein Rottenmeier, loathed the free-spirited Heidi and sold her to the gypsies. The Hollywood ending happens when Clara, visiting Heidi in the Alps, rises and walks ten feet into the loving arms of her father.

I was waiting for Leo to discover that he could talk for ten minutes, and I knew that Darryl Zanuck was not going to drop like a deus ex machine and help.

***

In their sessions, April continued to work Leo hard. After exhausting him, she would apply her warm tongue to his salty crevices, working to break the hydrogen bonds between his frozen molecules—all part of her treatment plan because salt melts ice. April employed the technique of ablation, the transition from solid to liquid. You may know of the medical procedure for clogged arteries, which is similar to the procedure April was using to de-ice Leo. The more he sweated, the more salt he released, the more furiously April worked, licking away.

Butterflies in the western part of the Brazilian Amazon wait for the yellow-spotted river turtles to lumber out of the ocean and sun themselves on the beach. The butterflies safely get their salt by landing near the turtle's eyes and drinking the turtle's tears. The turtles are getting something, too, scientists are sure, but they haven't figured out what.

If the scientist asked April, she would explain the importance of skin-to-skin touch, which she combines with Tai Chi. For example, she instructed Leo to repeat a circular motion with both hands as if he were washing windows or auditioning for "The Karate Kid." To the untrained eye, this healing motion could have easily been mistaken for Leo being suckered into providing April with endlessly long belly rubs.

Newborn mammals immediately attach skin to skin to their mother's chest. Her warm, redolent body soothes the baby as their heartbeats synchronize with hers. Mother and child are bonding. This is also an early lesson in survival. The mother models how the baby can use their own breath to regulate their autonomic nervous system. April was both soothing Leo and teaching him how to survive. She smiled at Leo with the loving gaze of the mother. When he smiled back, she fussed over him with terrier diphthongs of approval.

Oh, the games they came up with, taking turns at being dominant and subordinate. When April was the boss, she liked tug of war on the floor, and she liked winning. She also liked novelty, so there were variations—tugging a rope or a pillow. When Leo was dominant, he liked to play Monster Man, looming over April in Boris Karloff poses, arms straight out in front of him, stiff and menacing. He moaned her name, "Aaa—ppprrriiillllll, Aaa—ppprrriiillllll," as he lumbered towards her. April pretended to fear Monster Man, darting around the room, zing, banging off the furniture.

Resting when they are tired, one would gleefully start up again when the other least expected it. Occasionally, they got a little too rough. April might let out a whimper, or Leo might yelp. Then, April immediately offered repair with non-stop licking. It didn't matter whose fault it was or who got hurt. It was an accident, she let him know—no harm meant, no grudges, no turning away from each other.

Leo let April love him, never realizing how hard he was falling for her. One night, he opened his backpack and announced, "April, I made something for you." He pulled out a thick piece of rope thread through two chunks of a rubber tire that were tied to each end. April was beside herself, tugging and growling with puppy enthusiasm harder than ever before. She was tugging more than the rope. April was tugging Leo through a psychological developmental milestone.

THE RED BALL

Imagine that you are sitting on the couch playing with a baby and a red ball. The baby is giggling as you roll the ball back and forth to each other. Then, with the baby watching, you pick up the red ball and hide it behind a couch pillow. The baby starts screaming inconsolably. The red ball is gone. That was a mistake; you think as you pull the ball out from behind the pillow and show the baby. Like magic, she giggles, and you continue to play.

A few months pass, and you are on the same couch playing the same game with the same baby and the same red ball. After rolling it back and forth, you, again, hide the red ball behind the pillow. The laughing baby points to the pillow, insisting that you retrieve the red ball, and the game continues.

Replace the red ball with a mother, and you can understand the volume of the baby's wails when the mother leaves the room. The mother is gone and will never return. Fast forward a few months and, like the red ball behind the pillow, the baby knows the mother continues to exist, even if she can't see her.

At around eight months of age, the baby begins to have the ability to hold an internal image of the mother. The mother is present, even when she can't be seen.

Leo had begun to take April with him when our sessions ended. He thought about her, and his body experienced her loving presence all week long. When he returned the following week, he knew that April would be there.

This took two years.

Now, after a half hour of play, April jumped up on the couch, indicating that Leo should join her. He and I had 15 minutes left, much of it spent in silence because it continued to be a struggle for him to speak—although not more so than his struggle to remember to eat. He rarely had lunch or dinner, and when he came home from work on Friday, he was unlikely to eat again until breakfast on Monday morning. Food might not cross his mind. He had survived by training himself to have no needs, no wants, no desires. If he didn't need light or air or company, he surely didn't need groceries.

As Leo sat in our 15 minutes, April dog-mothered him, licking his face, his hands, and his neck. Leo's frozen internal structure was shifting, revealing a moulin. Moulins are deep, circular holes where the ice has melted. As to what is inside that hole, scientists claim that they know more about what is on the moon than they know about what is in a moulin—except for the potential danger.

Small openings in the ice, if you dare to descend, might lead to stunning 5,000-square-foot caves or sub-glacial lakes. At other times, the unfrozen past surges up and explodes through the moulin. Robert MacFarlane tells of a day he watched with others as thick, black muck from inside the earth shot up out of a moulin like Old Faithful. He says that he and his companions were both horrified and unable to look away. At another site, one that was not ice but a deep crack in the earth, the team found broken chariots along with everything else that was tossed away for centuries as trash.

In 1861, Frederic Edwin Church painted his most famous work, "The Icebergs," depicting several of them in the afternoon light. Our retinas have photoreceptor cells that respond in different ways to different wavelengths of light, and in Church's painting, the sunlight refracted through the ice appeared as two mock suns, flanking the real sun on both sides. Optical illusions created by the scattering of refracted light through the ice, the fake suns, are called sun dogs. Sun dogs got their name from the Greek myth that Zeus walked his dogs across the sky. At the right time of the day, the sun dog that sits on the right side of the real sun is as round and as red as the red ball.

Even with April's intensive work melting the numbness that shielded Leo from all he'd lost, I remained a sun dog. Leo could see me, but he couldn't use me. I could not be trusted to help him find his way. Every time Leo and I skimmed the edges of his thoughts or feelings, I became dangerous.

Almost three years in, I began to experience insecurity and doubt. When Leo left, I turned to April.

"Why is this taking so long?"

She rolled over on her back and demanded a belly rub.

She was infuriated.

***

One afternoon, Leo got off work early. He decided to hang out on a bench in Central Park until it was time for his appointment. He noticed a father playing with his toddler son in the grass nearby. The father began tossing the boy up in the air and catching him over and over. The boy was screeching with pleasure. Like the scientists who could not stop watching the unknown muck surge out of the moulin, Leo did not want to watch, yet he could not look away.

Over and over, the father tossed his son until the boy's glee turned into a pneumatic drill jackhammering its way toward Leo's bench.

Leo began to sob uncontrollably.

***

He was never late for his appointment. April's ears strained to hear him in the elevator while her nose tried to catch his scent. Five minutes, ten minutes—no Leo.

No Leo.

No Leo.

No Leo.

Then, Leo appeared, tears streaming down his cheeks. April slowly and gently started licking his tears, pleased that she'd done her job.

The ice had melted, and Leo emerged.

With his arms around April, he began to talk.

Sharyn Wolf *is a Clinical Social Worker in New York City who has spent decades on both sides of the couch. She has published books with Penguin/Putnam. SoHo Press published her memoir,* Love Shrinks*, the story of a marriage counselor who couldn't keep her marriage together. With a Bipolar II diagnosis, far too much of her life has been spent searching for the right combination of medications to help her manage her sense of self and her work. After a long hiatus and with encouragement from her psychiatrist, David Brody, she has returned to writing. She is working on a collection of essays that includes a section about her decision to have animals in her treatment room. Her current co-therapist, April, is a gifted Cairn terrier rescuer whose specialty is connecting with those the world seems to have forgotten.*

Patty Somlo

WATCHING THE BREATH

When I finally reached out after dropping into a deep depression -- far from the first time and also not the last -- I found help at the end of the J-Church streetcar line. The sky was gray, caused by the fog for which San Francisco is famous. The weather matched my mood, dulled from lack of sleep and food. I was also depressed, with a capital D, and anxious, with a capital A, though I'd need many therapy sessions before I understood and accepted this.

The office where I was scheduled for my first-ever therapy session was located in a grand, once-white Victorian, up the hill from my shared flat, the final stop on the J-Church line. Along the way, the car skirted the western edge of Dolores Park, where shrubs failed to completely hide guys all in black trading cash for drugs.

What awaited me up a tall set of concrete stairs and down a narrow hall, my heels click-clacking along the bare wood floor, was a way to break through the dead end I'd run up against. Later, I would learn the dead ends had names and diagnoses – chronic low-level depression, known as dysthymia, that occasionally dropped down to major depression and generalized anxiety.

That morning, I entered into a relationship with a therapist, Barbara, and something called Integral Counseling, therapy that combined Western Psychology and Eastern practices, such as meditation and mindfulness. After a series of sharp questions – "Were either of your parents alcoholics? Were you ever sexually abused?" – my first session began the way I would start each succeeding one: feet flat on the floor, hands on my thighs, palms open, and eyes shut.

Before making the call that led me to be sitting in a straight-backed chair across from Barbara, I had never seen myself as a person who needed help, especially in the form of therapy. Having grown up as a military kid, I thought of myself as capable and strong, assuming that seeing a therapist would naturally mean I was the opposite: weak. Up to this point, I had also never looked closely at how much time I spent trying to cheer myself up or calm myself down. That is until I finally hit the wall.

When the latest guy I'd felt certain was Mr. Right dumped me, just as the string of Mr. Rights had before this one, I tumbled into a depression. Unlike in the past, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find a way to crawl back up. Dark day after dark day passed, when I wasn't sure I wanted to go on. I had imagined I could change this defeating pattern of getting involved with men,

who, when it came down to it, didn't like me enough to stay. This had happened too many times to kid myself any longer. I couldn't, at least with the tools I had at hand, change my life enough to be happy and not depressed.

At just the right moment, my roommate, Lori, made a suggestion. "Maybe you should try some short-term therapy," she said.

Hours earlier, for the first time in my life, I had actually run a similar suggestion through my mind. Nearly all my friends had sought therapy at one point. So, why not me? Having Lori put into words what I'd timidly considered unlocked a door that had previously been closed to me.

In my first session, when I told Barbara about this latest guy, Carlo, not returning my calls, she asked, "What are you feeling now?" I thought for a moment and then answered, "Dead." She then asked, "Where do you feel dead," and I answered, "In my head." She told me to take the breath there, where I felt dead, moving the breath through my body, starting with my feet. So, I closed my eyes and watched the breath with my mind's eye, rise from my feet to the ankles, calves, and thighs, to my belly, and on up to my forehead.

Before I knew it, I felt a strange sensation in my stomach and started to cry. What began quietly, as tears filled my eyes, quickly moved into a deeply sorrowful state, where I was sobbing out loud, an outburst reminiscent of temper tantrums when I was a child. I was so overcome I couldn't speak. As the sobbing went on, I feared I might never be able to stop.

Barbara passed me a box of tissues but otherwise left me alone. I don't know how much time passed, but eventually, I managed to calm down.

"Boy, that really made me sad," I acknowledged.

I looked over at Barbara, nodded my head, and she solemnly nodded back. Then she asked if I wanted to talk about what happened with Carlo. And so, I did.

Now, though, when I talked about his abandonment of me, I felt sad and angry, not depressed. Some minutes later, when Barbara said our time was nearly up, I noticed that my head no longer felt dead.

This became the pattern of my sessions with Barbara, using the breath to unearth the feelings of anger, sadness, fear, and shame I had pushed away for so many years. The breath was the way in, to a deep grief I'd buried for much of my life, leading to the blocked-feeling deadness of depression.

Eventually, I was able to take this tool out of the Victorian into my life. Times I noticed my mood suddenly shift and I felt depressed, I would set my feet flat on the floor, close my eyes, and start watching the breath. Over time, the practice helped return me to my body, the home I had fled as a child when normal emotions felt unacceptable and dangerous. Gradually, I learned that my feelings weren't wrong or bad, allowing me to accept whatever I felt, a habit

that helped lessen the hold depression and anxiety, with their repeated negative thoughts, had had on me for so long.

The work within therapy and outside of it also gave me the tools I needed to make positive changes in my life. I eventually married and learned how to set goals and work to make them a reality.

Because of the work I have done over the years, following the death of my husband Richard a year and a half ago, I have been able to grieve the huge loss, instead of simply slipping into a deep depression. More than anything, the mindfulness and therapy practices have helped silence the negative and anxious messages that still occasionally arise, substituting acceptance for what can't be changed, gratefulness for the love I have enjoyed, and a commitment to try and find joy, wherever, and as often as, I can.

Patty Somlo's *most recent book,* Hairway to Heaven Stories *(Cherry Castle Publishing) was a Finalist in the American Fiction Awards and Best Book Awards. Previous books,* The First to Disappear *(Spuyten Duyvil) and* Even When Trapped Behind Clouds: A Memoir of Quiet Grace *(WiDo Publishing), were Finalists in several contests. Her work has appeared in* Guernica, Delmarva Review, Under the Sun, The Los Angeles Review*, and over 40 anthologies. She received Honorable Mention for Fiction in the Women's National Book Association Contest, was a Finalist in the J.F. Powers Short Fiction Contest, had an essay selected as Notable for Best American Essays, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net multiple times. She has suffered from depression and generalized anxiety for many years.*

William Leland

GOOD LUCK OR PERHAPS PROVIDENCE

It sometimes benefits people who have long lived with mental illness and those who are new to the experience to recall the traumatic events that have rocked their sense of self. All of us have lived through painful times, and remembering and revealing those times helps purge the shame and stigma that accompany them. It gets the pain out. There were defining moments in my psychiatric history that I have lived over and over, but each time I share them, they collectively lose their power to stymie my life.

My first critical incident with mental illness unfolded in 1979, at the age of 23, when I was a graduate student at Vanderbilt University. I remember the event clearly.

I had been experiencing mild delusions of grandeur and referential delusions* for weeks, maybe months, but this episode was acute and alarming. I was in my bedroom one evening, gazing into a louvered closet with a lightbulb illuminating the space. I had horrifying knowledge, as only a person experiencing paranoia and psychosis can have, that the light was the light of God beaming frightening thoughts into my mind. God was telepathically telling me that the city of Nashville was being attacked with nuclear bombs. I looked outside to see flashes of light (which were strikes of lightning from a passing electrical storm). This was proof. Subsequently, I was instructed by the light of God to find someone in authority to tell of this terrible calamity. I ran down the stairs, jumped into my car, and sped off into the night.

By good luck or Providence, I meandered around the streets of Nashville until I happened upon Vanderbilt University Medical Center's emergency room. Admitted to the hospital's psychiatric unit, I was diagnosed with a psychotic disorder, probably schizophrenia (later schizoaffective disorder), and thus began my 45-year history of living with serious mental illness.

Now, at the age of 68, these events are remembered clearly but are long gone. I sense I cope well with my illness; in fact, I feel calm, reasonable, healthy-minded, and responsible, and as my therapist recently told me, I live with vitality and purpose. It's not always been that way. Over the history of my illness, at one time or another, I have experienced stigma, mania, depression, psychosis, paranoia, and an arrest.

By some measure, being arrested was the most stressful and humiliating experience in my life. But, with some irony, had I not been arrested, I may not be alive today.

It was 2007. I had been complaining to my psychiatrist for months that I was troubled by the weight I had been gaining by taking atypical antipsychotics. He tried several new medications that were supposed not to cause weight gain, but none of them seemed to keep me from drifting off into delusions. Finally, he suggested perphenazine, an older typical antipsychotic, in a low dose. Over months of this therapy, I assured him that I needed less and less perphenazine to manage my psychosis until I had only a trace in my body.

With so low a dose, I began reacquainting myself with old friends—referential delusions and hypomania. Rather dishonestly, I was able to assure my psychiatrist that everything was okay (when hypomanic, you do think everything is okay). I kept my job at Evanston Hospital until after some mania-induced misbehavior, aligned with delusions, led to my being fired. In the following weeks, the delusions became worse, and I again began experiencing paranoia. I became convinced that I had stumbled upon a farfetched scam perpetrated by the Mafia, and since I was now a problem for them, they were going to rub me out.

At the same time, my father was lying in a hospital bed with pneumonia. One day, my mother and I went to visit him. At the entrance to the hospital, an SUV was waiting for a valet to park it. The keys were in it. In my state of paranoid unreality, I was sure that the car was put there by the Almighty for me to drive away to escape the Mafia, so I climbed in and drove off.

I had been gone 15-20 minutes when I realized I had made a mistake, so I drove the car back to the hospital where the police were waiting. I was arrested for criminal trespass in an automobile, a misdemeanor, and then admitted to the hospital's psychiatric unit. Finally, after endless months of mania and delusions, I wept with relief as I started to come down and regain reality. During a routine physical in the unit, it was discovered that I had a lump in my colon. Immediately, I went into surgery, and the surgeon found colon cancer that had progressed dangerously. But, to my great fortune, the cancer had not spread from the colon into the lymph nodes, so in surgery, it was entirely removed. The oncologist later told me that my cancer had progressed to what she called Stage 2.9 (Stage 3 is when the cancer spreads to other parts of the body). So, had I not been arrested and forced into a hospital, my cancer would have certainly spread to other organs in my body, and I might not now be writing this essay.

***

Over the years, what have I learned about mental illness? A lot. But to begin with, I'd like to share two truths: Even after years of suffering and illness, recovery is possible. Don't just hope for recovery; expect recovery. There's al-

ways that potential. When you suspect something is bringing you down, take action to heal and hope. Don't wait until the police put you in the hospital. Secondly, Providence seems to favor people who are actively working to recover. If you are determined to get better and have hope, I believe people will come into your orbit, and events will unfold that abet your recovery. I used to repeat these words like a mantra: "I will not not recover." In other words, I will recover! I did not know how that would happen, I did not know what my future would bring, and I did not know what treatment and medications would become available, but I was determined and confident that I would recover. With the right frame of mind, life does become better.

*A referential delusion is a type of delusion in which a person believes that seemingly unrelated or random events, objects, coincidences, or people in their environment have a special significance or connection to them personally. Examples of referential delusions might include believing that news broadcasts contain hidden messages explicitly meant for them, thinking that strangers' gestures or conversations are about them, interpreting song lyrics or book passages as having personal significance or conveying special messages.

A former freelance writer at the Chicago Tribune *and assistant editor of* The American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation *published at the University of Chicago,* ***William Leland*** *has openly talked and written about his own mental illness, schizoaffective disorder, which struck him in 1979. Leland's personal essays on mental illness have been published in* Schizophrenia Bulletin, Psychiatric Rehabilitation Skills *(the forerunner of* The American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*),* The Israeli Journal of Psychiatry, The Journal of the California Alliance on Mental Illness, The NAMI Advocate, *and* The Awakenings Review.

Alexander Etheridge

AN EXILE'S DREAM

—after Tu Fu

I dreamt last night of such strange flowers
wild on a hill, red-yellow moon flowers
taking the air slowly, drifting in shreds
of mist. They lit my way through a dim gorge

until I reached the shore of a pine-hidden
pond—The night petals glowed and hovered
over the water's jade-blue lotus blossoms.
I woke and knew I would find home again.

FINDING OUR WAY

Sometimes when alone we
speak to the night air

It's like praying as only
silence it seems

is spoken back to us
But night has its own language

with words behind
its deep hush

They come up to us
from our own depths

And the words
our not our own

Silence over silence
is an ancient road

slowly occurring to us
under waves of bluish fog

We begin to know long-dead
whisperers from

the deep end of time
They are us and we are them

We find between us
a common grief

and without knowing it
we are shepherded

by father dark
down the old road

WHERE TO LOOK FOR HOPE

A flutter of shadow over the veil
between life and death
A shadow

on borderlands of moonlight
where thin jackals
hunt in the dust
Shadows thickly

cover shadows in the forest
as a cold sun sets

We are all
alone
We are

bound to our shadows
and we sense the world
coming apart
in the war
between fire and dark
We sense ourselves

being torn by time by
silent fugues

But as we see the road
filling with hail
grief and fear refigures us
into new life
glowing blue
We find our eyes

can look into
a lifetime of shadow
at the promise of light

which is itself
a light

PROMISE OF PARADISE

—after the Ghazals of Robert Bly

We know when it's time to come up from
the dusky valleys, but we forget how we got there.
When tips of the willow branches begin

to shiver, we feel the Pure Land is near.
We know the weight of loneliness, that an empty page
from Nitzsche's journal weighs a thousand

lifetimes. The first tree was born learning of
the last, and the last tree senses Heaven is only
a promise of forests. We know we will be taken

by our desire—We know hunger began in the mind
of a fallen angel. Wandering through dreams
in heavy silence, we get lost along

the lake bed. But we remember joy cannot
be drowned, that love is like a roving tribe in
the kingdom of light. Christ knew when to stand up

again, but he forgot how he got into the tomb.
We came here from somewhere—Our fingers
feel the trembling willow branches.

POETRY AS A MAP

In twelve lines I'll find my way back
though I stumble in the outskirts
on a plane of thorny stars and wolf tracks

The fourth line is a primitive map
The fifth is a kerosene lamp

and by its light I can sense
being quietly shepherded

The eighth is a promise
my only possession now

The way back is through grim frozen peaks
I was always ready
Now I take my leave

Alexander Etheridge *has been developing his poems and translations since 1998. His poems have been featured in* The Potomac Review, Museum of Americana, Ink Sac, Welter Journal, The Cafe Review, The Madrigal, Abridged Magazine, Susurrus Magazine, The Journal, Roi Faineant Press, *and many others. He was the winner of the Struck Match Poetry Prize in 1999 and a finalist for the Kingdoms in the Wild Poetry Prize in 2022. He is the author of* God Said Fire *and* Snowfire and Home*. Also, Alexander has lived with depression for decades, and many of his poems reflect this struggle.*

Elizabeth Rae Bullmer

WHEN LOVE SEEMED TO BE ENOUGH

if i could go back
in time change things
would i even want to impose
happiness compel you to
polka with me
in the rain but that
was before that
was before that was
before you looked at
me with eyes of
flint heart of some
things are better left we

could go back to that
beach in Jamaica where
the canoe man called me
princess impossibly aqua water
asked you to buy a bracelet
hammock scavenger hunt we
could take all the photo-
graphs in one day your
wild eyes and subtle movements
my teeth flashing under
the orange sun do you
remember do you remember
do you remember

how you hurried to hang up
the phone to listen to me
sing lullabies my daughter's soft
sleeping face how
you woke early
the next day i saw you
standing at the window starving

animal stalking sunlight as if
you simply could not wait
to do it all again

VAN GOGH PAINTING SUNFLOWERS

There is a moment of gathering blooms
the choosing of imperfection, enough
to capture interest, enough to stand all day
before fading youth— the life cycle of beauty.
To stroke into existence the shades of daylight,
today so yellow, tomorrow orange or green or
brown—the eyes play tricks. Reality a magician
making everything an echo of what we have
seen before. There is a madness to repetition.
Sometimes I cannot do it enough
to make it mean anything at all.

THE ONE WHO COMES FOR US ALL

once came to me creeping,
like the vine that covers rotting
tree stumps, trying to convince me
of her beauty. Wrapped her
prolific strands around each
of my organs, began climbing
the winding staircase of my throat.
And just before full bloom,
my mother reached in and ripped
her out by a twist of wily roots.

Now she shows herself in the
flat, white wax of dead-face, almost
plastic, odorless except for the faint
mist of mildew. Always in dim

fluttering fluorescent backlight,
dressed in snarled cordage, she edges
around my bedroom. Patiently pacing,
expecting me to speak when I know
she won't answer; her mouth hangs,
a slack black-hole, mesmerizingly empty.

Someday I hope to meet her whole,
unbroken and ready to cross that river
of stars she guards so passively. I'm sure
she will know me by my scars, the imprint
of memory in my eyes. Perhaps
she's not as cold and silent as they say.
She may not even care for the color black.
Maybe we'll find one another in a field
of wildflowers in early Spring, dew clinging
to our ankles like pollen sticks to bees.

I hope she knows how to polka;
I'd like to dance my way back home.

Elizabeth Bullmer *has been writing poetry since the age of seven. Her poetry has appeared, or is forthcoming, in* Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality and the Arts, Peninsula Poets, Her Words, Sky Island Journal *and* Rockvale Review. *Her most recent chapbook,* Skipping Stones on the River Styx*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. Elizabeth has lived with the challenges of depression and PTSD from an early age; her partner of 18 years also struggled with mental health, sadly ending his own life in 2017. Bullmer's recent writings on the topics of loss and grief have been essential in her healing process. She is also a licensed massage and sound therapist and mother of two phenomenal humans, living with four fantastic felines in Kalamazoo, MI.*

Sean McGrath

SUNDOWN, REDONDO

The marine wall poured onto the coastline
  this evening's moving mountains—
went the sailboats, went the doves,
  lines of sunset streaked through
like tunnel paths for the seagone.
  More boats, droves of pelican and cranes
fleeting from sight, making their winged exit;
  the air was wet with longing.

I shivered on the shore
  underdressed, ill-equipped to harness
all the heaven before me,
  so much of it leaking out,
coming in at once.

I can't have a cold room when it knocks—
  I should have fire in my lungs
and only a little fear in my heart,
  I should learn to warm myself
amid the wavery sea,
  to be still in the absence of light.

NOTES FROM THE COAST

What is your penance?
What do you owe to the sea
for all you've left on her shores
—the years of junk,
every trashed weekend,
the decades of nights
lost in smoke and asphalt and
the lines you broke

without ever going back
to edit?

Are these sore wet legs enough?
And what for those who
aren't me,
not then not now
not never,
whose contaminant was dumped
at your feet
like some bleak offering to an
untouched hope?

Is the sweat in my head
and fire in my breath
enough to keep us moving
along and awake?

CAR POEM #2

I hadn't thought
it would be so much time circling
parking lots,
it would be so much time in the rocking
chair with his paws latched onto the neck of my shirt
in the dark hours of morning,
so much time chasing him around
knocking rocks out of his mouth,
chasing him around with a tissue to get his nose,
so much time sharing colds,
I hadn't thought—

I guess I had little interest in forecasting
the future.
I lived one page at a time, trusting
it was a good book probably, and no
need to skip ahead.

The last chapter was all
beer glasses and long runs, longer drives,
coastal shores and a wife worth every
mile.

Some days I wonder
is this a punishment
or a reward
for all that good living?
maybe both
and probably neither,

it is just a life,
hardly a page turner,
to extend that metaphor—
though a stone on the beach
may be more fitting,
something tractable
and battered slowly and certainly
by the endless waters
which then
dust by dust it becomes
part of and maybe remains;

I'm not sure, it's all so uncertain
and I hadn't thought
to give it much good thought
until now with a life more precious than mine
asleep in the backseat.

Sean McGrath

SONNET AT SEA

At five I land to walk the wat'ry line
To see what the brewing tides turn over.
If my spirit along the sand aligns
It shall know by touch I'm getting older.
And what the wake reveals in frothy time,
Jellies and whips and translucent wrangles,
I'll feel it beneath my striding mind,
Each step a punning way to untangle
The sharpened blender that I've been in:
The bloody nose and crumbling ankles;
Her waves free me from that vicey grim
When I gaze across her endless spangles,
  For what out here I bring forth in sin,
  Like corpse she locks up cold and deep within.

Sean McGrath *is a poet, writer, and educator who has resided in the Northeast and the Southwest of the United States. He began drinking at 13 and has struggled with drug and alcohol addiction and the accompanying depression throughout his youth and early adulthood. He now lives in Southern California with his wife and two young sons, who have given him a new lease on life. He has published three poetry collections:* Untitled Baby Project *(2023),* From a Balcony in Palos Verdes *(2022), and* Oculus *(2016).*

Wendy Patrice Williams

HAUNTINGS

I am six years old, entering my parent's bedroom at night when, in the light from the hallway, I notice the goose-neck medical lamp that my father salvaged from someone's garbage and fixed for our use years ago. If I look directly at the lamp, it will send a terrifying pulse of energy at my body that will kill me. I am paralyzed with fright.

I am eight years old, lying on the rug in my family's living room, watching TV. Suddenly, I curl up into a ball, hugging my knees tightly to my chest, and begin to hold my breath. I challenge myself to hold it for as long as possible because if I don't, I tell myself, I'll slide on my back down a giant razor and into a pool of acid and die a terrible death.

I am thirty-eight-years-old, enjoying reading a book of poetry. Suddenly, I realize that my awareness is hovering in a kind of blank space, no longer focused on the poem. I put down the book and allow breath to flow. Grief overwhelms me, and tears come. I am not crying because of something that I read. I am crying from a past place, a time when breathing very shallowly lessened my stomach pain. Since I was a child, holding my breath back and losing focus is a habit I've struggled with. While I don't have a verbal memory of what is bothering me, my body is remembering something terrifying.

I am fifty years old, visiting an out-of-town friend and staying over for several days. The first night, I turn on the heat lamp to warm their basement bedroom, and immediately freeze. The orange glow of the lamp has transfixed me, and I am caught in deep fear, my body frozen. I understand that the intense glare has triggered a traumatic memory. To break the spell, I make myself look away and burst into tears.

Does the lamp remind me of the hospital lights in the operating room? The glare of lights in recovery? As I consider the possibility, I hold myself and cry for the little baby I was who had stomach surgery for pyloric stenosis, a stomach blockage, at twenty-six days old without anesthesia or pain control, which was standard practice up until 1986; doctors believed babies did not feel pain. I am also crying for the little baby I was who endured life without my mother for two weeks while in the hospital. The operation was fifty years ago, but my nervous system is still reactive. To calm myself, I tune into my breathing and slow it down.

I call these experiences hauntings. Some might call them triggers, but I prefer hauntings. They are surfacings of fragmented, unintegrated memories from a preverbal past that have yet to be integrated, so they cause distress and disconnection in the present. Many of us have these types of moments of reactivity and dissociation that haunt us and intrude upon and interrupt our lives. And so often, we don't know where they've come from or why.

These strange, disturbing hauntings undercut confidence and well-being. They are relentless, uninvited ghosts that continue to pop up unpredictably and that will not quit until we face and integrate them. One of the ways that have calmed my hauntings is my work in EMDR, Eye Movement Desensitization, and Reprocessing, a therapy that has proven to be very effective at soothing trauma. It has helped me understand that those frightening experiences are remnants of trauma that happened in the past. The traumatizing event is over. There is nothing to fear in the present.

Middendorf Breathwork is another tool that helped me find more peace in my body. By understanding the ways that I learned to breathe in order to avoid stomach pain, I began over time to feel safe enough to bring more breath into my body, allowing my diaphragm to move freely. I felt the relief of breathing freely, moving my abdomen and allowing my belly to fill out. In this way, I found my way back to my natural ease of breathing.

For those of us who experience hauntings, our lives are interrupted in unique ways. But if we don't know that they are reactions based on past traumas, they will continue to terrorize us and unhinge us. Our nervous systems have to finally get it that our reaction is based on a remnant from a past event that is no longer happening in our present.

Even if I don't understand what caused the haunting, it's a relief just to know that it is a symptom of PTSD, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. I can stop worrying that I am crazy and know that unresolved trauma is having its way with me, but only temporarily. This realization alone is empowering. I don't know if there's an endpoint, a life free from hauntings, but I do know that I have many more tools in my toolbox with which to deal with them.

Perhaps most rewarding of all is that I have begun to feel compassion for myself on my journey toward healing. I have come to embrace the sick baby who I was instead of rejecting her. And as I feel safer in my body, it reveals more to me. The hauntings take on a less prominent role, leaving me to discover more of who I am. It's taken a while but finally, I am settling into feeling at home in my body. At long last, I am moving in.

Wendy Patrice Williams *is a retired educator, having taught English at a community college for twenty-five years. She lives with her wife in southern Oregon, continually uplifted by the surrounding natural beauty and wildlife. Wendy has suffered from PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder due to an operation at twenty-six days old in 1952 for pyloric stenosis, a stomach blockage. Before 1986, it was standard in medicine to withhold anesthesia and pain control for infants under two years old and instead give them a paralytic drug. The story of her experience,* Autobiography of a Sea Creature: Healing the Trauma of Infant Surgery*, was published by the University of California Health Humanities Press in 2023. You can also learn about her story and the stories of others in Roey Shmool's 58-minute documentary* Cutdown: Infant Surgery without Anesthesia*, available for free at cutdownfilm.com. To learn more about Wendy's work, go to https://www.wendywilliamsauthor.org.*

Linda Scaffidi

THAT DEATH DOES NOT LIVE HERE

There is no place to go
when loneliness seizes you
in the corner of its eye. Some
mornings lapse like the ebbing tide of a
wave draws back the living to sea

leaving behind mouths of algae on the sand.
I rise early not to think or to speak,
to be quiet. Yet today I saw only the

shadow curve over the light
of the yard, amnesia shivers
like the distinct dew in the
cool air over the river. I never asked

this world in sorrow and joy to be
beautiful. It does that all on
its own. I've been here before, this
dance known as disengagement
does not last though. A solitary

bird call startles the woods and
like a light spreads its restlessness
to the others. Death is not
imperative now but tomorrow who knows.

Were it not for the intimacy of one bearded
Iris outside my window sharpening its
chivalrous flower upward, declaring
see me, see me

or for the sun gleaming
inside the clouds or distant thunder
startling, there would be no
reason to continue the unutterable

upward way into the world….
Yet the sun's sharp-witted light
breaks through and hope
goes where it is most needed.

RED-HEADED WOODPECKER

The red-headed woodpecker
picks at the fat swinging along
the side of the sac of suet.
He fights with the starling
They push each other back.
They are bullies. But the effortless
act of a chickadee watches, waits
stands, the upside down acrobatics
of the nuthatch wait too
Nothing is going to waste,
in the scattering chunk of suet.
The messy mouth of the woodpecker
feeds the ground squirrel below who
chucks his cheeks and runs back
to the cave under
The rock pleased.

IN THE WORLD

In the world beyond the door
I shall have life, life of my own
fly above the earth in silent cool air

see blue and green oceans meet
and curve around the lands, snow-
topped mountains feed

the rivers cutting Into deserts
opal sands flattened across the land
I shall see all trees new, racketed in
green and gold, an inexhaustible

cry of birds rise as the wave
of seasons begins to turn
across the earth. An old woman comes
and goes as she bends down to pick the weeds
between the last season of flowers.

She ruminates on the last time
she was happy and then It comes
to her at last. Another year has gone by
you are no longer an amateur in the world

Flying is for eagles wind filters through
the matted sky. Warm water rain runs
down her back sustains the weariness

inside her. No rest for dreamers…the long
lingering words of memories fade away.
In the end we all wander step back the some way.
The distance from them to us is too far away.

DURING THE NIGHT, WINTER

During the night a
thin layer of snow
has fallen and sprinkled
its imagination,
across the fields.

Snow on branches hold up
the world showing little signs
of leaving. Frost landscaped
on windows tell stories

in streaks of ice. In this month
of frost moon I am a lone
follower, holding my own
like the traveling
howl of the distant wolf

finding it's way into the
language of winter. I do not
dread this time of year,
although it is not easy.

I know this language
of winter well, and ask why
am I not prepared for it..
Quiet, yet beautiful.

a sanctuary exceeding
the imagination of God
in his glory.

Linda Scaffidi *lives and writes in the backwoods of northern Wisconsin. She earned graduate degrees in Education and English. Her career included preparing teachers to teach literacy in their classrooms. As a person with manic-depressive disorder, she learned how living one day at a time has moments of despair and moments of joy. Balancing between the two includes accepting help and believing in a power greater than herself. Her place of recovery and security lies in observations of nature. Her thoughts are like incomplete sentences until they, fortunately, ease their way of prose and poems. She lives with her husband Sam, whose own love and knowledge of nature has deepened her desire to explore the intricacies of listening to trees stretch their branches in winter but also how people have learned to live in their environment. She currently works with refugees teaching English and helping them acclimate to their new world.*

Margin Zheng

THE FIRE-BEARER

It was an unusually cold winter, and people were dying. The Homo erectus community of the Shen Xian cave lost another member every few days, to illness, to cold, to hunger. The medicine people worked day and night to tend to everyone's ailments, but they dwindled in number, too; just half a moon ago, the eldest of the medicine people passed on to the heavens. The furs that the last hunts of bear and cattle bequeathed these hominids allowed for extra warmth, but they weren't enough. The cave was frigid, and the days were dark.

Huo, a seventeen-year-old girl, lay underneath the bear fur, half-asleep. It was midday, but she had neither energy to get up nor to eat the day's meal. Her body was relatively well, given the circumstances, but her spirit was heavy. Death weighed upon her soul. With her mother dead from childbirth, half her siblings gone, and her father coughing up an earthquake multiple times a day, it felt pointless to be attached at all to life. The darkness of the cave was comforting in its realism. Life began in the cave of the womb; life ended in the cave of the tomb; there was no light to be made of it.

Huo's maternal aunt, A-yi, tapped Huo on the shoulder. "Are you well? Have you eaten yet?" said A-yi

"I'm okay," Huo whispered. "I don't feel hungry."

"Sweet niece, you've been tired every day since the last full moon. You need some food to make you stronger. Plus, your second cousins are speaking falsehoods about you. They rumor that you are greedy for the warmth and too lazy to get up."

"A-yi, you know that is not true."

"I know, Huo. But they don't know. Hunger and illness make many a man callous and bitter. Huo, sit up. I brought your favorite, boar's belly."

A-yi handed Huo a chunk of meat. Huo touched it. "A-yi, it's too cold."

"Huo, everything is cold nowadays. It's winter. We just took it out of the snow. Stop complaining and eat."

Huo pushed herself into a sitting position, fatigued from the effort. She ate a few small bites of the frozen boar and handed the rest back to A-yi. A-yi sighed. "May the spirits protect you, sorrowful one."

The next morning, before the sun peeked its reddish-orange light just above the eastern horizon, Huo's eyes burst open. She was awake, more than she had ever been. It was as if her spirit was the sun, and the light shone so strongly inside her that it pushed her eyes wide open, ready to receive the beauty of the world. The cave was still pitch-black, but there was hope. There was hope!

Huo scurried out of the bear fur and ran to the mouth of the cave. The air smelled fresh and tingled icily on her face. Huo reached her arms towards the skies, laughing. The stars laughed back in joy. They danced while Huo danced, sang while Huo sang. The ancestral spirits were calling to Huo, coming to her protection. Everything would be right. The days of dark and death would end.

"Huo, how are you awake?" said a hoarse voice. It was A-yi who rubbed her eyes open.

"I feel amazing!" said Huo. "There is so much energy in me, and there is so much energy in the stars. They are dancing! Our ancestral spirits are dancing! They are dancing in hope! There is hope for us, A-yi! Our community will live!"

Huo ran around the cave, shaking everyone's body to wake them up. "There is hope for us! There is hope for us! The stars are saying so! Our ancestors are saying so!"

The hominids confusedly crawled out of their furs, shivering with cold and fright. A-yi went to the Matriarch, whose eyes grew wide with shock as A-yi described Huo's changed mien.

After all of the hominids were woken up, Huo began to speak in verse:

Stars sparkling,
Darkness twirling,
Birds singing,
Hope twittering!
Come dance with me,
Come sing with me,
Come laugh with me,
Come live with me!
Ancestors whispering,
Ancestors shouting,
Ancestors encouraging,
Ancestors…

"Listen!" the Matriarch yelled. Huo stopped speaking.

"Huo," said the Matriarch, "you are much changed in spirit. Did you feel like this yesterday and not tell us?"

"No," said Huo. "Yesterday, everything was dark and cold, and I was dark and cold. Today I am warm and bright. Tomorrow we will be warm and bright!"

"I do hope so," said the Matriarch. "Medicine people, do you know what is going on?"

"Sometimes people make a sudden recovery," said a young traditional healer. "Huo might just be feeling better."

"But people don't recover and start dancing and singing with the stars!" said an older traditional healer.

"But Huo wasn't sick when she lay under the fur all day," said the young traditional healer. "We checked her. She had an illness of the spirit only…"

"I know what's going on!" a broad-framed man named Qiang exclaimed. "An evil spirit possesses huo. The evil spirits want us to be too hopeful so that they can crush us with more death. Huo is possessed and no longer herself. She either needs to die, or to be cast away."

"No!" cried A-yi. "She is barely grown and has not yet had child. If there's an evil spirit, surely our medicine people can chase it out of her?"

The old traditional healer shook her head. "I have never seen a case like this. I can try, but it might not work."

"Then she needs to be killed!" said Qiang. "Killed — so no more of us will die!"

Huo screamed. She had listened quietly until this point but could not bear it any longer. She charged towards Qiang, kicked him in the groin, and ran out of the cave and into the snowy forest.

A-yi began to chase her, but the Matriarch grabbed hold of her arm and stopped her. "If the community won't accept Huo," the Matriarch mused, "she has to find her own way."

Huo ran in twists and turns through the forest until she was confident that any pursuer would be lost. She then hopped up and down, barely tired. If she couldn't live with the community, she thought, she'd just have to fend for herself. It would normally scare her, but today she felt bold.

A squirrel ran by, and Huo chased after it and deftly caught it in her hands. Her senses were sharper than usual; normally those scurrying small creatures were hardest to get. Huo killed the squirrel and took a bite of its warmth. Savory. Scrumptious. She finished the squirrel and felt deeply satiated.

Huo spent the bright days arranging twigs and branches on the ground into evocative designs, using them to communicate with the ancestors. She spent the frigid nights running around the forest, keeping her body warm and calming her agitated spirit. When she was hungry, she hunted for rodents and

boar. When she was thirsty, she ate scoops of snow. When she felt particularly crafty, she examined the plants in the forest and tried to recall bits of knowledge that the medicine people once shared with her. But she felt very well and did not think much of the danger of getting sick.

All the while, Huo was getting sicker and sicker. The cold began to ail her body, and her spirit fevered. She could no longer feel her toes, and her fingers often lost sensation too. Her nose ran constantly, and her body shivered and shook. She began to see colored lights around her, multiple colors: red, green, blue, and white, but particularly orange and yellow. They would appear in the air, on the ground, on the trees, and Huo would ecstatically chase them. Then they would disappear, leaving Huo confused as to what they were.

After a few days of living on her own, a bitterness budded in Huo's spirit. The existential wonderings of her days of fatigue returned but with anger and bite. What was the point of living now? Everyone and everything will die. Maybe it was her time. She welcomed it, even craved it.

One evening, as she restlessly ran around the forest, Huo began to scheme. She would bury herself in the snow and let her spirit rise to the heavens from her frozen bones. She would do it tonight. The ancestors were waiting.

Before Huo could perform her self-burial, she needed to communicate with the ancestors one last time. Huo grabbed a handful of sticks and scattered them on the ground. She looked to the heavens in anticipation, only to feel nothing. Something was wrong. Huo grabbed more sticks and tossed them on the ground. Still nothing.

Frustrated, Huo picked up some stones and dropped them among the sticks. Two stones landed on top of each other and created a small burst of light. Huo stared at the stones, fascinated. She picked up one of the stones and dropped it on the other. The tiny light leaped again from where the stones touched. Huo yelped with joy. She didn't know what this was, but it was beautiful.

Huo abandoned her self-burial plans and spent the rest of the night playing with the stones and sticks. By the time the sun emerged at the horizon, Huo had created a sun of her own. A glowing, warm, yellow-orange light.

"Beautiful!" she exclaimed. She touched the light with her hand. "Ow! Hot!" Immediately, Huo put her hand into the snow, which soothed the pain in the palm. She took out her hand. Her skin was bright red and peeling. Her hand still hurt but was usable.

Huo looked intently at the heat-light, scared but hopeful. She knew what she had to do.

Huo ran gleefully back to the Shen Xian cave, sticks and stones in her hands. The community was having its morning meeting, with everyone sitting in a circle just outside the cave. Just as the Matriarch was about to address the group, a child yelled, "Look! It is my cousin, Huo!"

The hominids turned in the direction of the child's pointing finger. Huo was now standing just outside the meeting circle, still holding the sticks and stones. A-yi rushed by her side, feeling her arms and legs. "Oh heavens!" she exclaimed. "Your feet are almost frozen to death!"

"You evil spirit," Qiang growled, "you who disrespect the dignity of men: get out!" He charged towards Huo and A-yi, only to be restrained by two other men. A-yi stood up, shaken.

The Matriarch walked towards Huo. "I am glad that you are alive and have returned," she said. "But why with sticks and stones? Do we not have enough sticks and stones?"

"You certainly have sticks and stones," said Huo. "But you do not have this."

Huo crouched down and placed the sticks on the ground. She held the two stones just above the sticks and rubbed them against each other until they generated a small light. Quickly, she transferred the tiny light to the sticks. A most beautiful orange light grew from the sticks, dancing.

The hominids gasped. A-yi began to cry. "It is so bright!" she exclaimed.

"It is so warm!" Huo's young cousin shrieked.

"It is so useful!" the Matriarch proclaimed. "We shall call it huo, after the bearer!"

Everyone cheered. Some began to hug and even kiss Huo, crying.

"But wait!" shouted Qiang, silencing the group. "What if this is dangerous? What if Huo is still possessed by an evil spirit, and that evil spirit blights us with this creation?"

Anxious muttering spread through the group. Huo raised her wounded hand and pointed to the red, peeling skin. "It is dangerous. This is where the heat-light hurt me when I first created it last night. You are not to get too close to it; you are not to touch it."

Huo turned towards Qiang, whose eyes were wide with fright. "It is like the sun. You are not to look directly at the sun, or else you become blind. Too much sun is dangerous. But it gives us light, and it gives us warmth."

Huo walked in front of the Matriarch and knelt down in supplication. "I bring you sun in the dark and cold of winter. Sometimes, I love the sun too much; sometimes, I love it too little. Please protect me. Please help me love it just enough."

Huo looked up at the Matriarch. The Matriarch smiled. "Welcome, Fire-Bearer."

Margin Tianya Zheng **|郑天涯** *graduated from Haverford College in 2023 with a degree in music and in mathematics and is still in the process of figuring things out. They have bipolar disorder and probably a few other neurodivergences not yet diagnosed, and they are a survivor of multiple psychiatric hospitalizations. Margin is an interdisciplinary artist who creates in any medium they are called to at the moment; they especially like to compose music, write poetry, and create performance art. Their writings have been published by Fifth Wheel Press and Mad in America, as well as in their personal Substack newsletter, "Marginal Notes." Mildly quaint, massively quirky, and madly queer, Margin is a proud owner of emotional support stuffed animals and high-fidelity earplugs. Born in NYC and raised in Newtown, PA, by Han Chinese immigrants, they seek to grow as philosophers, artists, and awakeners.*

Kristy Snedden

WORDS FROM A TRAUMA THERAPIST HEALING FROM PTSD

First, ***you are so much more than a diagnosis.***

The DSM-5 is the diagnostic Bible used in the U.S. If you have the chance to read it carefully or research its roots, you will understand why behavioral health practitioners are in conflict over its use. The conflict stems from the pseudo-science that built the book, the insurance companies that cover and don't cover specific diagnoses, and political maneuvering within the culture of providers.

But let's pretend for a minute that the DSM can accurately diagnose conditions. *You are so much more than a diagnosis.* As a trauma survivor and a trauma therapist, I believe that many so-called symptoms are the nervous system's attempt to adapt to traumatic conditions. For me, this means that despite the horror of flashbacks, insomnia, hypervigilance, and other symptoms, I am grateful that my nervous system protected me when I had no other escape. These trauma adaptations are only part of my life, but they have informed my work as a therapist, and they feed my development as a poet. I hold these adaptations in two hands: a hand drenched in gratitude and a hand reaching to the sun, saying *now let's see how deeply we can heal.*

Second, ***it is essential to seek out a competent therapist who is trained and experienced in helping people with similar conditions and (equally important) can attune to you and your healing needs.*** It's a good idea to start by identifying standards of care (easy to google) so you have basic information. Second, don't be fooled by a provider's ability to train or teach others. Teaching is a skill set that is different from a healer's skill set. At the very least, look for competence, read reviews, ask friends for recommendations, and work on a list of questions to ask your potential therapist.

Basic questions may include:

What is your perspective on helping people with my symptoms?
What are your office hours?
How frequently do you see clients?
What is your policy about between-session contact?
Approximately how many people with my constellation of symptoms have you helped?
What theoretical perspectives or models are you trained in?
What is your relational approach as a therapist?
What are your fees?
If insured, do you accept my insurance or can you refer me to someone who does?

Think about what is important to you and keep these things in mind as you get to know your therapist. For me, this list includes respect, seeing me as a whole person, flexibility in my treatment approach, the ability to attune to me and help me feel safe, attention to basic boundaries like timeliness, clear payment and cancellation policies, and keeping the healing focus on me.

These are all important. When I sought therapy in 2015, I made the mistake of seeing a therapist who was mostly a trainer in an approach I liked. As it turned out, she struggled quite a bit with boundaries and basic respect for me as a person. Even with my years of experience as a therapist, I stayed with her for three years, hoping our relationship would improve despite the clear boundaries and lack of attunement. I mostly blamed myself for the therapist's errors. Unfortunately, it's all too common that we feel guilty about things that are not our fault. It's also common that we hand our power over to authority figures (in this case, the therapist). The happy ending to my story is that I did stop working with that person and subsequently sought therapy, keeping all of the above questions in mind. For me, the difference between a grounded and strongly attuned therapist has been life-changing.

Many clients have told me about negative experiences with mental health providers. The most common concerns/complaints I hear are about therapists who forget appointments, change appointment times frequently without awareness or acknowledgment of how this impacts the client, forget important things the client has told them, disclose personal information that is not related to the client's situation or helpful for the client to hear, tell the client "You are my favorite," and therapists with unclear financial policies. All these issues can be hurtful, they are inappropriate, and some are downright unethical. You deserve good treatment!

I know that it is hard to find a therapist taking new clients, and you may feel desperate to find someone, but please learn from my experiences as a therapist and a provider. If you begin working with someone who is not a good fit, you can stay with that clinician (if they are helping you at all) while you look for someone who really gets you in your totality. It's important.

Third, ***find and express your creativity!*** Expressing our creativity is an essential component of healing. I didn't find and begin writing poetry until 2018 when I began seeing a therapist who is deeply attuned to who I am as a person. Writing poetry and developing as a poet has become a central part of my healing and my identity. Like many, my creativity has been present but unattended to all of my life. Because of the positive impact exploring my creativity has had on my healing and my life, I have learned to ask all of my clients about their creativity. Many respond that they don't have any creativity. I have found that if I ask them to think about what they enjoyed creating as a child, many immediately identify an area of creativity. For others, I just patiently keep inquiring, and eventually, a creative outlet emerges.

Our culture is in a state of sympathetic dominance. In other words, our culture is in a chronic state of flight or flight. This cultural state and our culture's ubiquitous prejudice against people perceived as "mentally ill" create a barrier to expressing creativity and living life fully. Many creative people have had their creativity ignored or squelched in childhood.

Most creatives are highly sensitive, particularly about our art, and an attuned therapist can become our biggest support as well as a resource to help us develop a supportive group of fellow creatives. Eventually, creativity becomes a shelter from the culture's state of sympathetic dominance. Your creativity belongs to you and is an expression of an essential part of you. It is well worth every minute you devote to it.

In closing, I share a poem I wrote that encompasses and demonstrates the advice I've given in this essay. I hope reading it offers you enrichment and confidence to pursue your own healing and creativity.

THE THERAPIST

(for D.G.)

How does the sea
recover from defilement?
Typhoons? Hurricanes? Tides?

I know an honest human
who restores brains for a living.

A shore in his eyes
to meet the ocean in mine.

I watch him
putting on his glasses
to read my poems.

Oceans, cliffs, whales,
the tide —
a shift in the silence.

A silver ring on the back of a bear.

“I like to see a brain heal,”
he told me once, his eyes
wide to take it in.

CHICKS

The chicks this March are sly, wily eyes watching
the farmer who brings the feed and water.
They rush the coop door, tumble like they’re drunk
maybe they are, remains of corn cob strewn

on the ground and coyote footprints still fresh
under last night’s moon we didn’t lose
any chicks or hens and my favorite
white rooster crowed at dawn these tiny chicks

know how to cozy up to me, make me
late for everything else in life their open
beaks call ministrations for my ailments they
step on the smallest the one whose black eyes

are dark with tenderness. On wobbly legs
she climbs into my palm, chest puffed with purrs.

LOVE CONCEIT

When people say
they love me,
I think I love me too.
Me, with beaus beaucoup,
multi-lingual, shy me,
hiding in a forest tree,
mountain laurel translates
me, as if I don't know how
to speak without a pencil.
Microsoft & Apples
always try to teach me.
Ocean swimmer, turtle kisser,
whisper to my dog me.
Twirl me without
the costume,
chants and prayers
to start the day.

Applause for Wiley
Coyote, hiding behind
my peacock, feathers
up, watch me strut.
Call me desire
and a faithful liar.
Regale me. Make everybody
want me. Dope breaks
& nicotine shakes, money grabber,

litterbugger. Watch out!
Brother's ghost and Daddy
drought outrun my rabbit heart.
My body is a candy-sneaker,
death-seeker, night thief,
moonsinker, mouth
a brazen word-breaker.
No Facebook me, or Twittering,
unless I'm fooling you, again.
Renegade me. Poser me.
Pretend to know the rules me.
Twin me, infinity, double helix
floating in the back of my chi
somewhere in the light._

OLD WOMAN POETS

Inside the soul body,
a young child creates
yoga poses, ways
this aged body can praise
the cat who became
a bright-eyed kitten.
My half-moon
now a full sun
I salute with words
from dead woman poets.
These old poets with no
internet to catch their falls.
I bow down to them now,
slither into a snake
coiled at their feet.

I already went to heaven

when I met the cow who lives in the neighbor's field
and on the day I swallowed the sun. Me chasing the ice cream truck
every summer afternoon with quarters pried from my mother's
clenched hand. Children wading into the lake after dark.
We didn't care if we swam in water or the heavy night air.
Dinner bells rang as we cupped our hands to cradle the moon,
watched it move in and out of the frame, ripples in the atmosphere.
And tonight at twilight, the calf's chin resting in my open palms.

HIDDEN SOULS

God loves mystery. Why else the hidden soul?
How to explain my love equal for my family
and for exile. Or you, fishing in the Sea of Cortez
after you won the 5K, now a ghost who reads
memoirs in between forgetting to eat. I think the dead
Edna St. Vincent Millay lives in my sister. Last week she
hid behind the small secret smile and incisive blue eyes.

DISAPPEARANCE

The battered cat I found
hides in the closet
so she is not seen.
After days of hiding,
she sits in the sunny window,
eyes closed so she is not seen.
When she licks the scar
of some old wound,
her eyes are open and blank.
Sometimes her body
disappears.

Her pale pink collar
hovers in the air.
Each day she plays
with the art of disappearance.

CAT

I watch the beach from my car and when the tide is low, my belly
is smooth on the inside. I like the warmth of the dashboard under
my paws. A young girl walks her cat on the boardwalk. The girl turns
down the lane to the bird sanctuary. A pelican dives into a fish.
Maybe I look out of the car window too much. Sometimes I envy
the places I think the other cars are going. Some days my world is flat.
Once when I looked into the car on my right, I saw a parrot perched
on a bar that stretched across the back seat. We were on a busy four-lane
that runs along the ocean. I wanted to bang on the driver's window
in celebration. The parrot in the backseat was a Macaw. The cat on the leash
walked down the boardwalk with mostly smiling white teeth.
I watch the beach and the tide grows higher in my belly.

Kristy Snedden *(she/her) works as a trauma psychotherapist and is a trauma survivor. Her poetry and her therapist's validation of her poetry as an essential part of her recovery have been integral to her healing journey. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in various national and international print and electronic journals and anthologies, most recently* Contemporary Verse 2 and Story South. *She is the recipient of several awards and a Pushcart Prize nominee. She serves as the Book Review Editor for* Anti-Heroin Chic *and is a volunteer reader for* Persimmon Tree*. In her free time, she loves hiking in the Appalachian Mountains near her home in Georgia or hanging out, listening to her husband and their dogs tell tall tales.*

Nancy Kay Peterson

RELATIVE DANGER

Every year the same: dust-layered carpets, long-unwashed curtains, and a kitchen calendar forever set on December 79. But, this time, down dark narrow stairs, in the musty bowels of the house, I must spend a moment admiring a new furnace and watch my uncle, age 68, execute an effortless chin-up on his basement pipes.

A cold spark shimmers up my spine.

Uncle hangs there, barely swaying, like laundry drying in a feeble breeze, and he watches me. He takes a deep breath, sets fleshy lips tight over gapped teeth, and raises his legs to form an L, the scuffed toes of his sole-split work boots pointing toward the fruit cellar.

He is after all a ward-of-the-court, certified crazy.

Back down on his feet, without a word, uncle rolls his barbell from under the work bench, fusses with the weights, hitches up his baggy pants, and squats for the lift.

My leg muscles tighten. My knees bend slightly.

Uncle thrusts the bar high above his head, holding it there, holding it there, so damn steady, so damn long, then he drops the bar to chest height.

Nonchalant, I ask, “How much?”

“One-eighty,” he says. He lowers the weights to solid floor with a soft clank.

I stand light on my feet -- ready.

MY EPIPHANY DAWNED GRADUALLY

The quaking aspens
shimmer in the morning breeze.
A crow caws constantly.
The blue lake sparkles.
Cool air caresses my arm.
I no longer remember when I knew.

There was a time I wanted to
kill myself, but it was snowing.
A time I analyzed
the bathroom ant colony instead.
Days when I'd drive country roads
crying and drinking scotch.
I do not know when I realized I was
more than different; I was wrong.

Between womanhood at age 14
and antidepressants at 34,
I was not who I am.
The me then and the me now co-exist.
At times it is difficult
to distill one from the other.
I choose not to disturb their equilibrium.

But, maybe the real me is that occasional
twinge that is part of the disease,
that part sleeping deep underwater
at the bottom of the lake of my soul,
that part that sometimes surfaces
as poem.

A HUG FOR JAMES WRIGHT

When I first heard the line
I have wasted my life
my heart leapt, because
someone understood.

I was glad to learn later
you also knew that moment
when a horse's velvet nose
was all that mattered.

Nancy Kay Peterson's *poetry has appeared most recently in* The Bluebird Word, Dash Literary Journal, HerWords, Last Stanza Poetry Journal, One Sentence Poems, RavensPerch, Spank the Carp, Steam Ticket: A Third Coast Review, Three Line Poetry *and* Tipton Poetry Journal*. From 2004-2009, she co-edited and co-published* Main Channel Voices: A Dam Fine Literary Magazine *(Winona, MN). Her work has been included in two anthologies:* Haikus for Hikers *(Brick Street Poetry, Inc.) and* Play *(Outsider Press). Finishing Line Press published her two poetry chapbooks,* Belated Remembrance *(2010) and* Selling the Family *(2021). In terms of mental illness, her uncle, after serving in WWII, experienced a schizophrenic episode and was hospitalized and given shock treatments long before they knew what damage that could cause. She suffered from untreated depression for 20 years before a counselor suggested taking antidepressants and discovered her suffering had a biological cause.*

Lauren Bundy

CONNECTING THE DOTS

"Adopt the pace of nature; her secret of patience."
-RALPH WALDO EMMERSON

In a filmmaking class I took at my first college, the instructor defined creativity by drawing hundreds of dots on a whiteboard. She then put her marker on one dot and drew a line from that dot to the next dot. Then, she drew another line connecting the lines and dots just drawn with another dot. Her point was that creativity is about making decisions, and while there are an infinite number of choices for each decision, i.e., a multitude of dots, the one you have drawn on is the path you commit to and is what becomes reality.

There is never just one way to win with a mental illness, and this is true with life as well. There are many ways to win, but only one choice becomes your reality, and once you've chosen, you know if it's a loving choice. Mainly because you'll hurt less and feel stronger, or you'll hurt more but feel freer. Life is complex and ever-changing. There can be both terror and liberation in that fact. As a peer, I have worked to achieve profound yet ever-evolving stability. Achieving a sustainable recovery has been my greatest triumph, and my mental illness my greatest teacher. And the choices I made determined everything.

Like any legitimate challenger, having a mental illness can teach you how to live a better life than you had before. It is an endeavor and a worthy one. I have lived with a mental health diagnosis for twenty years, as of this past May 4th, 2024.

I do not know what kind of life I would have led without having this diagnosis, but I doubt I would be as compassionate, kind, or resilient. My condition teaches me daily to summon compassion so I can choose resilience, leading to growth and change in a move toward greater freedom.

My advice: If you want to maintain mood stability and be well enough to graduate, hold down a job, etc., then take your meds. Adjusting to them may require fine-tuning. You've got the music in you.

Tactically speaking, Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) saved me.

"When Things Fall Apart" by Pema Chödrön is my north star text.

"Manifest" by Roxie Nafousi helped reinforce self-love, gratitude, and resilience.

Taking time to self-educate is imperative. Identify books, podcasts, audiobooks, websites, blogs, and audiobooks relevant to your mental health diagnosis. Knowledge is empowering when adjusting to life with your mental health diagnosis.

Remember that your healing will unfurl as needed, and heed Emerson's words of wisdom about patience because you will surprise yourself along your healing journey. What you might expect to happen or want to happen may not happen in the time you foresaw. And that's okay because what's meant to be will happen at the pace of nature, meaning it will evolve gently, wisely, and precisely when the time is right.

Trust yourself and your journey. It will not be what you expect, but it can lead you where you envision yourself landing, especially when you hone your resilience, self-compassion, and ability to let things go.

Let's live our best post-diagnosis lives together—for ourselves, our loved ones, our communities, our country, and our world. We can give that to us, collectively and individually, especially when we give ourselves the gift of grace and self-love. We can be even more impressive than we were without our diagnoses because there is tenderness and strength in growing into our post-diagnosis selves.

I can't wait for you to discover yourself now that you can get support. You have so much to learn and even more to gain.

I'm so proud of you for taking the first leap.

See you on the other side.

Lauren Bundy *is an emerging writer and an ex-graduate student in the MFA Nonfiction Writing program at The New School. She earned her bachelor's degree in Comparative Literature from UC Berkeley. You can find her nonfiction self-help book,* Hot Damn Bipolar*, on Amazon. Lauren lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.*

Elizabeth Brulé Farrell

THE LAST DAYLILY

Standing before the last yellow
daylily, a benediction. The lone
flower a gift at summer's end,
thinking that beauty was all gone.

I thought I knew what was next,
but found a kind of courage opening
within myself as it slowly uncurled.

THE RIGHT ENDING

I vacillate between fairytale
and factual when imagining
the ending. It keeps changing
as each moment does, too.

Without magic power we cannot
control the outcome of what
is wished. Only bring endless
amounts of compassion.

SKYLIGHT

The full moon at night
is a beacon over my bed.

I cannot close my eyes
for long against its glow.

My prone body illuminated
feels like a magic trick.

Childlike, though at the other
end of life, I am enthralled.

Ancient mariners, shamans,
astronomers know the thrill.

Fatigue takes hold as it moves
and the light changes.

Drowsy as its caress dims,
I am finally free to sleep.

LOVE, AD NAUSEAM

I want everyone to have no doubts
that they are loved, that they shine
in my heart. We are the nexus

joined together to help move
each other from the stuck places
when we ask for help. We hold on
believing in what is possible.

I admit this could be too much talk
about the various kinds of love
in this world, but I needed to say it.

ANOTHER WINTER

The blessing of a change of season
makes this snowfall seem important,

the ritual of flinging rock salt
along the walk way, the sight

of the shovel ready to clear
a path from the door to the driveway,

our footsteps that leave their mark
and are quietly reassuring to see,

the sudden urge to stick out our tongues
and catch the falling flakes

ageless in our curiosity and desire
to feel fully alive accepting what comes.

Elizabeth Brulé Farrell *has experienced free-floating anxiety since childhood. Raised by a mother with mental instability, the environment was always chaotic and uncertain. She tries to look for the positive, making the best of any situation. She has been an advertising copywriter in Chicago and a writer-in-residence in public school systems in Massachusetts. Her poems have been published in* The Paterson Literary Review, Poetry East, Another Chicago Magazine, Except for Love: New England Poets Inspired by Donald Hall, The Comstock Review, Pilgrimage, The Awakenings Review, Stronger Than Fear, Spillway, The Healing Muse*, and more. She has been the recipient of the Louise Bogan Memorial Award for Poetry.*

Warren Rogers

LISTS

I remember him primarily from a list of questions on my phone:

- What can I do to help you?
- What am I to you?
- Why does it seem like you're afraid to talk to me? To be emotional with me?
- Are you willing to change the way you communicate to stay with me?
- You've never told me that I'm beautiful.

The last point is not a question but it just seemed like an important thing to add to the list at the time. Every anxiety-inducing event in my life comes out in this form. Questions that rarely get answered, revelations that don't seem like a big deal until they're written down, months of my life reduced to a series of bullet points, it's the only way I can process things. I deleted every photo of the man who inspired the list above. I returned his Christmas gift the night he told me it was over: a box of artisanal pasta and a jar of Scillian pesto. I even found the strength to throw away the parking garage ticket from when he took me to the nice Trader Joe's downtown, a scrap of paper that I kept in my wallet for months after he left. I've just never been able to delete his list.

I have an uncle who induced a similar list, though his is angrier, angstier:

- Why'd you have to be such a jerk all the time?
- Why'd you blame all of your problems on Mom?
- Do you know where I live now? Do you care?
- What would my life be like if you stuck around?
- Why did you never call me?

That list had the edge of a teenage girl that I haven't been able to recreate since. The anger has faded over the years and the list has evolved as I do.

- I can't watch Arsenal games anymore. My boyfriend is a fan and keeps me updated. You would like him.
- I never thought I would have a stronger relationship with my Dad than I do with you.
- Who filled my place? Did anyone?
- I hate that I want you to know I'm doing well.

I only remembered why I started making these lists recently, about halfway through a suspiciously strong gin and tonic. *Mara* had been floating around in my head for a while now. Sometimes it would bump into another memory,

even a new thought, and I would feel her influence again. Mara was a plush, gray couch, a colorful wall calendar that I eagerly awaited to be flipped every month, a large sheet of paper filled with my hopes and dreams, and a soft, low voice that told me there was so much more to life than depression. For a severely mentally ill seventeen-year-old girl, my mind was incredibly active. I could barely leave my house without having a panic attack, but I wanted my own apartment. My hands shook with anxiety when I wrote, but I wanted a career in journalism. I wanted to feel safe in my own body but there was nothing in the world I hated more than my own body. I was stuck in an endless cycle of climbing out of a cold, dark place, just to fall back in a rock that slipped underneath my feet.

Mara would set a comically large legal pad on an easel in her office, a thick magic marker in her hand. "What are places other than your bedroom where you feel safe?" a seemingly simple question, but one which took me an incredible amount of thought.

- the coffee shop near my house
- the restaurant down the street from that coffee shop
- my Uncle's house

Through every thoughtful "um" and awkward pause, Mara wrote down the only three places I felt like I could be a normal person. I looked at the list in front of me, the dark black ink that drew out my incredibly small universe. To see that little universe as a physical thing made me reconsider the world I wanted to live in. Our lists weren't always as concise as that one; the lists that pertained to my future were far-off ramblings of a life that I had to tell myself was in reach to keep going. "Where do you want to be in a year from now?"

- an apartment in the city or mountains
- waitressing/online college
- control my panic attacks
- stable meds
- be more physically fit?
- dating?

Of course, none of those things would happen in the next year or even in the next four years, but Mara never told me no. Everything was written down and given gentle consideration, all on that same massive legal pad. I didn't understand what she was doing at the time, I just thought she believed in me more than anyone else, even more than myself. Many years after I stopped seeing her, out in the world making lists all on my own, I realized she just wanted to give me the space to imagine a world where things were better, where I was better.

She kept everything we wrote down, every tattered and messy piece of paper, neatly folded in the drawer of a metal file cabinet. Towards the end of my

time with her, I told her that I wasn't angry at my dad anymore and that I had reached a place of, at the very least, understanding the illness that addiction is. She looked at me for a moment in silence, her eyes kind and low. She slowly reached into that file cabinet and pulled out a list we had written together a few years ago, a list of things I wish I could have said to my dad.

- why do you stay when it hurts us so much?
- I hate when you hug me
- please don't make me talk on the phone with you anymore
- why do I have to fix myself, but you don't have to?

There was much more to that list, angry and desperate and so unbelievably tired. I had never imagined at the time of writing it that I would grow past that anger one day, that I would gain a deep empathy for someone I had hated so much yet barely understood. I had felt stagnant for so many years, both physically and emotionally, so to see the work I put into myself pay off was one of the biggest accomplishments of my entire life.

I don't hold any anger towards my uncle, I don't wish him to appear in my life once again, apologizing for the years he missed. I will simply hold onto his list as a reminder of the freedom I feel now that I have unburdened myself from the weight of my disdain, of my need for a happy ending. I will live happily whether I get to break down in tears in front of him, every bullet point spewing out at once, or simply never see him again. My pain was validated on paper, and that's where it will live forever, just as the anger I had towards my father and the heartbreak I still tend to feel from the boy I loved in December.

I walked home from the bar, I remembered Mara's name and created a list for her. Everything I had accomplished because of her guidance, questions about the small details I knew about her life, where I confidently see my future going, and over all, a thank you for allowing my feelings and aspirations a place to feel safe and valued.

- It took me a few years, but I moved to Boston, I'm about to graduate with my B.A. in writing!
- How's your family? Your son? Did you have any more children?
- My dad and I are really close now.
- I use the tools you taught me nearly every day, and I'm a better person for it.
- I finally like myself.
- I didn't realize how much you did for me until quite recently. I'm starting to get my memories back from that time in my life, and I wouldn't be here today without you.
- I can set goals now and actually accomplish them; it's crazy!
- For the first time in my life, I'm really excited to be alive.

Warren Rogers *is a writer and poet from North Carolina whose work is heavily influenced by her rural upbringing, naturalist curiosity, and life-long battle with depression, anxiety, and reproductive health. Rogers credits her love of writing as the most powerful moving force in her life as it's given her solace through the isolation depression, which brings her motivation to pursue higher education and a purpose to move forward, both through her career and personal life.*

W. Barrett Munn

WORDS TO A FELLOW ASTRONAUT

You've probably heard it said,
This too shall pass.
Don't believe it. It won't.
But that's OK. Stand tall.
That thing that causes you trouble,
is a part of you; sometimes that can be
a good thing, other times, not so great.
And that makes us both exactly like
everyone else who rides along
on this small planet.

Look up when it's dark and be amazed
by the dazzling blinking foreverness
and the darkness in-between the lights,
and realize that in darkness there are
bright patterns, and that light is light
only when surrounded by the dark.
Let's all look up. Looking up requires raising
our heads, holding our shoulders back, standing
straight and tall.

It's an honor to share with you this brother and
sisterhood of togetherness; we are, along
with the undiagnosed, a gathering of the luckiest
astronauts ever, who just happened to land
on this bright blue planet and together stood tall.

THE MORNING AFTER AN ARGUMENT

Our argument hangs upside down like bats
on the ceiling of my man cave; on the way to pee,
invisible guano crunches under my feet

where your finger has written, *You're full
of it* in the same invisible language spoken
by parquet floors and argument bats.

The unconscious groping for deep rest comes
harder when afloat on a couch, with a blanket
not warm enough to cover a heart exposed to ice.

Dreams are a projectionist in charge of showing
a broken home movie, the suddenness of whiteness
on the movie screen is matched by the curtains

yanked open. Last night is lost in a fog of coffee,
toast, and eggs. Seated together, a soft smile says
I'm sorry. A gentle laugh and nod accepts.

COOL

I'm not from a cool place like
the Jersey Shore or New York City,
not even from L.A. I'm small town.
Think Kansas. Think Iowa.
Think about the mastodons that
roamed the earth until they stumbled
into the pits of La Brea. Maybe then
you won't think small towns are all
that bad.

I've heard the genuine Hollywood
closed shop years ago. Now it's
a new era, and hip hop has replaced
car hops; electric is on its way to eliminating
gasoline; wind still whips through
Laurel Canyon but now it's called Santa Ana.
It sets the hills on fire.

I'm not from here. I'm from a long ways
away. A small town in a small state with roads
in a state of disrepair. You LA types can keep
your beaches and your earthquakes, your smoke
and your fire. Besides, none of us is really from
anywhere. We've all from the nine-month bellies
of a mother. And that's no small thing.

W. Barrett Munn *is a poet from Tulsa, Oklahoma whose life has been intertwined with mental illness. He had an uncle who spent his adult life institutionalized, while his own battle involved PTSD as a result of a shooting and high-speed car chase. Both his wife and his wife's sister are bipolar and have been hospitalized more than once due to that condition. His poetry has found avenues for publication many times, including previous issues of* The Awakenings Review*, and journals such* as Copperfield Review Quarterly, Sequoia Speaks, Book of Matches, San Antonio Review, New Verse News*, and many others.*

D. Walsh Gilbert

REGENERATION

Sunlight loves the marigold—
kisses it awake in May.
The enduring
maternal presence
touches the flower
so tenderly, tells it
how its petals will be fed to hens,
how their eggs will glow gold
with rich, yellow yolks.
There will be chicks, it says.
They will grow and walk.

REHABILITATION

In the rain and wind,
an oak tree thunders
to earth—quaking
Alsop Pond, shaking
minnows into a mad
bacchanalian frolic.

A gray squirrel nest
shatters to the ground.

The crow has lost
its scouting perch.

The poet takes notice.

And the red-shouldered
hawk, atop Talcott
ledge, can watch

the shivers of misplacement—
a hole made where
once there was shelter.
Now, erasure.

Not that it's been
waited for, but it's a chance.

Thorny brambles, pushed
away or crushed,
yield possibilities
not attainable before.

When the wind dies down,
the minnows stop their shudder,
the squirrels climb an ash,
the crows fly maple-high,
and the hawk sees
an owl just awakening
to the opening.

The poet takes notice.

BUILDING

The graphite of the carpenter's
pencil is a pure carbon, soft solid,

slippery and lubricant and able
to leave traces of itself,

shedding its atoms onto blank
façades and empty surfaces

the way a poet sheds her skin
when rubbing fog, starlight, or ghosts.

After the awe of a calamitous journey, remember this if the words won't come

All the wild was shook
from the air in last night's gale.

This morning—nothing more
than breezes. And the fallen

twigs. The poets try and try
to keep their gardens tidy,

and in one fierce-blowing night,
the brittle pieces snap.

Roofing shingles scatter.
The prized cedar begins to tilt.

Daylight and the crisp blue sky
can't set the tree upright,

restore the prehistoric
flat-scale needles.

But at the break of day,
the birds don't care.

A dual citizen of Ireland and the United States, ***D. Walsh Gilbert*** *lives in Farmington, Connecticut, on a former sheep farm at the foot of the Talcott Mountain, previous homelands of the Tunxis and Sukiaugk peoples, near the oldest site of human occupation in Connecticut. She's the author of seven books of poetry, the most recent,* Finches in Kilmainham *(Grayson Books), and the forthcoming* Bleat & Prattle *(Clare Songbirds Publishing House). She serves with Riverwood Poetry Series and is co-editor of Connecticut River Review. These poems are part of a collection about writing poetry in her ancestral place. For three years, she lived there with her brother, who died by suicide in 2012 after a long fight with addiction and bipolar disease. She still finds him among the living things—plants and wildlife they nurtured together. His animal was the white-tailed deer. One visits her nearly daily.*

Alan Sugar

THE MIRACULOUS PLAGUES

-- Passover

I spill ten drops of wine upon my plate,
reminding me of plagues from long ago.
I wonder if someday I'll liberate
myself from all the many plagues I know.

I think about them now and ruminate.
Am I the one enslaved? Am I the foe?
Where is the God who chooses to create
these plagues that rain where flowers will not grow?

These are the lonely places where I roam
beneath an open sky where seabirds soar.
Free from remorse, I long to make a home
upon another new and hopeful shore.

Unburdened by my worry, I will live
and count the blessings that I have to give.

MIKE ROBINSON

What happens to the phrase that you forget?
Where is it now-- that word you can't recall?
You bow your head in shame and with regret.
But in the eyes of God, you're standing tall.

The dreams that come so easily in sleep
return so rarely in the light of day.
The shining pearl that hides in waters deep
is there inside its shell where it will stay.

You work for hours, practicing a speech,
but on the stage, it fades and falls apart.
That poem you wrote is suddenly out of reach,
but it remains forever in your heart.

The farthest star above the peak you climb
is right there in your pocket all the time.

TIM REMEMBERS

Is that the way it goes-- the days, the years?
The months, the same that follow one by one?
We count on them, but who can count the tears
or buds of red that open in the sun?

How does it happen? How does it go on--
until it's here-- the day when you were born?
When summer comes, it seems you've never gone…
along with these-- your shoes so old, so worn.

So many mornings, in those moments brief,
I polished them-- white polish on a brush.
You left for work and now I'm left with grief.
Not polish white, no, just this dark, cold hush.

I stare into the starless winter sky.
When will they come-- the warm days of July?

TOM ZUIDERVELD

-- my contractor

You're there to meet me at my door each day.
You tear down walls, and you expand my view.
You are so very much my Dutch Don Q.
You right all wrongs; you haul them all away.

"A challenge is an opportunity," you say.
And with each one, you make that statement true.
You take away the mold and make things new.
And you apologize for each delay.

You change a world that's real but undefined.
Upon a rooftop, you behold the sky.
Repairing damaged souls so long resigned,
you open doors to dreams that pass us by.

You patch the walls and ceilings in my home
and plaster over cracks in heaven's dome.

ORION'S CHILD

The moon shone brightly-- high above and new.
And in its glow, I waited for the day.
And though the sun did not come shining through,
I knew the dark of night would never stay.

The world was like a scene inside a box--
the kind I made and proudly took to school.
I prized my dinosaurs and painted rocks.
And in the woods, some tadpoles in a pool.

And by the light of fireflies in a jar,
I stacked the easy readers on the shelf.
In Blake and Whitman, there again they are--
the songs of innocence inside myself.

Connect the dots of all the stars you see.
That's how the constellations came to be.

Alan Sugar *has lived with mental health challenges since late adolescence. He was diagnosed as bipolar after experiencing a major mixed episode in the spring of his twenty-ninth year. Now retired from a career teaching special needs children, Alan works as a writing tutor at Perimeter College of Georgia State University. His poetry has appeared in such varied publications as* Atlanta Review, RFD, Autism Parenting Magazine, The Lyric, *and* The Awakenings Review.

Cassie Burkhardt

THE TREE

Everyone should love a tree at some point, a big old, gnarly one—
keep a piece of its bark on your desk, say,
and examine the grooves, the textures of a life.
I started experimenting with cutting when I was in college.
The urge for pain had been growing inside me like an itch.
I remember stealing a razor blade from the art room.
All around campus, students tossed frisbees and licked ice cream cones.
Gorgeous maples fanned their colors. I was jealous even of trees.
There was one sugar maple that stood alone, red leaves all around it like a cape.
I wanted to be as strong as that tree, rooted against the swirl of life,
knowing when to bloom, when to rest, when to eat, when to stop,
but my brain was full of noise, life- a syrup I couldn't tap,
college- a party I missed purging calories on a treadmill,
blood-a way to liquify the screams inside me,
Hack hack relief. Little deeper this time. All forms of expletives
howled through my mind. *Loser, idiot, failure*.
I would slice right through it— my addiction, my slave.
High on my own dopamine, I'd admire the abstract expressionism
of self-hate dripping elegantly onto paper towel.
My soak-stain, my cross-hatch, my artist rendering of emotions
swelling inside me like a paint-filled balloon, erupting up, out and through me.
Pretty soon, I could no longer hide my habit under a sleeve.
Even my ex-boyfriend had called my parents
to inform them to pick me up. What was I doing?
I kept losing things: people, weight, hair, lucidity,
all the while trying to read *Middlemarch*, conjugate French verbs,
attend a kickboxing class, dress up for Halloween. My whole life felt like
a ridiculous costume. I'd run to the tree and there it would stand,
dancing in the wind making poetry with its branches for students
huddled in camel coats with steaming to-go cups, my longing
to be normal, to be loved so intense it bled across the sky.

One night, after a particularly deep cut, I panicked,
wrapped myself in gauze, ran to the Evanston ER.
It was February. A bitter wind pushed my dizzy form
into the triage room, then another room where I was locked in
for observation. I panicked.
What was I thinking going to a hospital?
Let me out, I pleaded. *I'm not crazy I swear. Wait—*
I mean, I know I'm crazy and I'm getting help.
Door closed.
Arm throbbing, hungover in its oozing impasto,
I cradled it, looked out the window— there was my beloved tree
in the distance, bare as hell now, not a single leaf on it.
I watched twig fragments swirl in the icy wind.
skinny arms braced against a world of weather.
The sky grew dark, then darker still.
I dozed off against the cold hospital glass.

At dawn, they let me out.
My therapist had struck a deal.
I tore through the double doors,
practically heaving as I sucked
the delicious air into my lungs.
I was no stranger to hospitals
and air was still my favorite food
after all these years.

I decided to run by the tree one last time,
rip off a hunk of its bark to keep forever.
(They'd be sending me home
and I felt the urge to at least take something with me.)

Heavy breathing, I held a piece of the scored wood
to the sun, stuffed it in my bra—
same piece I'm holding
in my hand right now, decades later.
Big hunk of scarred,
resilient, beautiful, goddamn tree.

THE TRUTH

When I was in eighth grade I had a terrible
eating disorder and was hospitalized for most of it.
When that didn't work, I was admitted
to a treatment center in Utah called
The Center for Change, three thousand miles
from home and everything I'd ever known.
Eventually I got out, but I still looked
like a scarecrow with braces.
My parents, bless them, decided to give me
a fresh start, sent me to a private school—
an artsy, alternative one where I could hopefully be myself,
whoever that was.
Ms. Johnson was my English teacher and she
introduced me to poetry, to form and meter,
a structure for my feelings.
She encouraged us to keep a journal,
a marbled composition notebook (you know the one)
and write in it every day.
Fold any page you don't want me to read, she said.
At first the book was all folds,
an accordion of secrets.
I asked for another book.
At about the same time, I was gifted
a CD of Pablo Neruda's *20 Love Poems*
and a Song of Despair, read aloud to the soundtrack
from the movie *Il Postino*
and I think the combination of those two
things that year may have saved my life.
Let's be honest, who knows.
Recovery took years.
But it set something in motion inside my ravenous heart,
gave it words to eat.
I remember sitting in front of the plastic Sony CD player
in my room, door closed, propped up on my hipbones
scrawling in the notebook *those first faint lines.*
Pure nonsense, pure wisdom, just like Neruda said.
It was probably a lot more nonsense than wisdom. In fact,

I distinctly remember writing a poem called “The Sounds of Silence”
and thinking I was an absolute genius to have
come up with such a phrase.
But listen, there was also a poem I wrote
about a tulip, a pale pink tulip that
wasn’t ready to open so everyone should just give it
some water and sunshine and leave it alone and
that was the first time I felt something break loose inside of
me, just as it had I imagined for Neruda, and just as Ms.
Johnson hoped would happen for us ninth graders, for us poets
in the class, whoever we were, if we just kept writing, kept
writing, kept writing.
And writing is what I’m still doing now, these thousand years later, a
grown woman with a husband, a house,
three children and 5 bags of groceries, home from Trader Joe’s where
I sit in the driveway, motor running, listening to a single surviving
Neruda/Il Postino read-aloud from a YouTube video that just surfaced,
my two-year-old is still buckled, wondering what’s going on and tears
are welling up in my eyes,
rolling hot down my cheeks.
That little girl in her room.
The notebook.
I want to unfold all the pages.

LOVE SONG TO MY ANOREXIC FRIENDS

I want to write a love song to the girls I met on the ED ward
when I was thirteen years old,
I want to set music to those months,
those Christmas months in 1998.
Feeding tubes in our noses, no contact with anyone,
we spent our days eating, meal planning, eating, cheat sit-ups on the side,
telemetry suction cups stuck to our chests
to make sure our hearts kept beating in the night
even when we said we didn't care if they stopped.
This is a heavy-metal drowning-out of the Ensure we chugged under watchful eye,
group therapy endured, behavioral modification that doesn't stick,
tutors who tried to keep us up-to-date on the quadratic formula
while we clutched stuffed animals to our chests late at night,
pondered loftier subjects—
the Long Island Expressway in crisscrossed desperation,
human emptiness and how to fill it.
This is the tension in the music looking for a release,
looking for an epiphany, a symphony of voices.
Thirty years later, I still can't get you out of my head.
When I sit down to write you seep through the lines of my poems
to remind me, disturb me, comfort me?
Here is where the music swells—
That last day. We clutched each other, hip bones knocking,
hands freezing, we gave each other permission
to do the things we were scared to do ourselves— eat, gain weight, live, get out of here!
Stacy, Karen, Cody, Emily, this song is for you, did you get out?
I got out. I got out. I'm forty years old and I'm singing for you at the top of my lungs.

Cassie Burkhardt

SOLILOQUY OF A SEAL

All morning I sun my smooth flanks,
feeling sleek, feeling velvety.
I like to get an even rotisserie going when I sun myself.
The warmth feels so good on my face,
I close my eyes and take it all in,
there's so much good in the world
and I want to feel it intensely deep in the core of me,
on all my sides, gosh I have many —and in between my flippers,
fan-tipped and strong enough to propel me through
anything-- water, the rush of life.
I yawn loudly, sneeze, roll over,
I don't have much on the docket for today,
which feels good, you don't always need to have
something to do. Later my friends and I will take a swim
in our favorite kelp beds,
rocky tunnels, water gymnastics,
but for now I balance on my belly and pose
in the shape of a croissant.
The sun is so nice, it's really all that matters,
my long sausage body tells me so and
I always listen to my body, what else is there?
Rolling and sniffing, arching my back,
stretching opens up worlds inside me
My body is really beautiful. All natural.
I'm a California centerfold, a puffed pastry of the Pacific,
smooth as a speckled river rock
you'd be tempted to take home with you,
but you'd never take me anywhere else
because I'm precious
and I belong right here where I am,
look-
my friend is nestling her head on my neck
as we speak.
We are all coating ourselves in sand, what fun!
Every day is a sun-drenched love-fest,
a pebble-crusted blubber-ballet with barks and claps,

I love to point my nose to the heavens, don't you?
tilt my velvety neck in case anyone wants to admire me from the pier,
or just for myself because it makes me feel beautiful,
water droplets clinging to my whiskers.

Cassie Burkhardt *is a Pushcart-nominated writer based in Philadelphia. Her work can be found in* The New Ohio Review, Rattle, Philadelphia Stories, The Good Life Review, Ethel Zine, Cleaver, Misfit, Sad Girls, *and* Cagibi. *As a teen, Cassie battled anorexia and bulimia and was hospitalized twice. For over a decade, she suffered periods of self-harm, alcoholism, and sex addiction, mostly in the shadows of a seemingly normal life. With the help of DBT therapy, she finally found the path to recovery. Writing was (and always will be) a huge part of her recovery and evolution. These days, you can find her practicing yoga, writing poems and swinging from a trapeze at the Circus School in between raising three children with her husband. Keep an eye out for her forthcoming poetry chapbook,* Ode to My Minivan. *Cassie would like to credit* Cleaver *magazine with first publishing "The Truth."*

Dana Yost

SUPPOSE

Suppose i had a hammock in the backyard.
Suppose i slept there in the afternoons.
Suppose i woke for supper and to light
the fire pit.
Suppose this was the way my days went,
calm, relaxed, predictable.

What a change it would be from
those anxiety-riven days that buckled me,
drove the breath from my lungs.

Suppose it really is this way now,
hmm?
Suppose my doctor has found the right
combination of meds, that I've found
the right therapist — one who
doesn't just listen but advises, who
says days like this will be good for me.

Suppose my son has a dog, small, little
thing with dark fur, who climbs on my lap
afternoons in that back yard, who nestles
against my chest, who falls asleep,
the warmth of his body a comfort.
Suppose I say to him, ''these are the days,
these are the days.''
And suppose that means something good,
something better than what was,
maybe not complete recovery,
but something now that was not before.

GOOD THINGS

Someone asked me if all I am writing
now are topical or political pieces,
or poems observing the misery
of the downtrodden, and I say
we have an obligation to be witnesses
to the plight of the world. But, no,
I can still see beauty and goodness,
can savor it, tuck it into memory.
For instance,
in the way the slender stem of a martini glass
and the gauzy red and blue of a floor-length curtain
refracted through the drink itself remind
me of the long legs of a tall woman
in a drowsy evening gown.
Or the way deer prints on a dusty state park
path make me wonder what happened
over night — was a doe frolicking
under the moon, was she foraging
for food, or did she buff her coat
against the hard bark of an oak tree?
Or be reminded of the volunteer
driver who, twice a month,
picks up an elderly woman
from her apartment and takes her
to the clinic for her doctor's
appointment. She is dying,
and she knows it, but each time
she tips him a dollar
and each time he says thank you
as he walks her to her door.

Dana Yost *was an award-winning daily newspaper journalist for 29 years, leaving the industry after a severe spike in his mental illnesses. Since 2008, he has had nine books published and been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes. He lives with four mental illnesses, including severe anxiety disorder and major recurring depression.*

Lesley Warren

FOUL WEATHER FRIENDS

It is six minutes to twelve when I arrive at the psychiatric outpatient clinic. It is almost mid-December. The florist at the end of my street is selling clusters of scarlet candles, and the golden stars have taken their annual position atop the local lampposts, but the weather is unseasonably mild today. I've changed back into short boots and a lighter coat and am grateful for my decision to go scarfless as I take my place in the queue at reception. They don't bother sticking my health insurance card in the reader but wave me through to the waiting room. The multilingual sign sports seasonal sprigs of holly at each corner.

By now, I'm in the privileged position of being able to drop by this place every couple of months for a quick chat and a refill of my meds. Where my head was once a hopeless mess of scrambled hardware—spikes I would use on myself, padlocks that had sprung open without warning—these days, it's mere maintenance, nothing more drastic than an occasional tightening of a couple of my loose screws. I got my (hopefully short) absence signed off on by the team's deputy manager before I left work. My boss is off sick today – something I can't help but be grateful for, though I wish her no harm. Annual review time is coming up, and although she's outwardly understood my situation, nobody likes to be perceived as weak.

Christmas always brings traffic to the clinic. I can understand that, what with the shortening daylight hours and the way work and financial pressures always ramp up towards the end of the year. In summer, I sometimes have the waiting room to myself, but today, all of the seats are full. Their occupants ignore each other politely, some thumbing nervously through their phones, others staring blankly into space. One woman's trained foot vibrates vigorously on the opposite thigh, making her entire body shake. I look past them all through the window that faces the courtyard.

It's funny (funny strange, not funny humorous) how much power that single piece of dividing glass holds. Being on this side, the clinic side marks you out as someone who (however begrudgingly) has chosen to live. However, that side, the one with the benches, uniform lawns, and ornamental rocks, is captivity. Nobody is out there today, but I don't need to see them to remember it myself – pacing the well-worn circle like a wild animal, triangulating the doctors' upstairs window and the gate barring me from the outside world and wondering how hard it would be to scale it, how far I could get before they caught me. Wondering if they would. And not knowing which was worse: being out

there or in here. Years later, I still don't like to think about it. A video unexpectedly popped up on my TikTok a while ago – some girl's video diary of being on the same psych ward, snapshots of white lunch trays and medicine cups—and I closed the app immediately. It's strange. Sometimes I can talk about it quite candidly like it's fiction or something that happened to someone else. Other times, it's just too real, and I can't look at it head-on; I have to skirt around the edges of it, a slumbering monster in a dark forest.

One of the most soul-destroying things about being dangerously mentally ill is how alone you feel. On the ward, there was never any danger of that. The bedrooms were double occupancy (except for those first couple of nights when they didn't think I could cope). You're forced to lay yourself bare when you're at your most vulnerable—and much as I hate to admit it, it probably helps. We were forever dragged outside to bang drums, toss beanbags, and name five things we could see, smell, and touch.

My first roommate was Charlotte. She was a soft-spoken meteorology student with long blonde hair, cuddly toys on her bed, and a weakness for Ritter Sport chocolate. We sometimes went for walks around the hospital grounds, talking about superficial things; she would gently correct my German, but not unless I asked. One day, we were coerced outside to throw softballs at each other and catch them on Velcro pads in full view of passing nurses. Dazed and medicated, I was beyond embarrassment, lumbering and awkward, but Charlotte moved with fragile and balletic grace, diminutive in thick scarves and leggings. I never quite found out what her problems were, but I knew she had been here long enough to complete two fabric face masks with elastic ear loops in art class and a ceramic bowl. I also knew that talking to her parents on the phone made her anxious. When she left the room for these calls, her face as set as one condemned to the gallows, I would curl up in the window seat and stare at her motivational posters, all carefully hand-lettered in bright felt tip pen: NEVER GIVE UP. YOU ARE STRONGER THAN YOU KNOW. BE THE SUNSHINE IN SOMEONE ELSE'S CLOUD. We ordered pizza and played card games the last night she was in the clinic, as though it was some strange jailhouse birthday party with a random assortment of guests: elderly, young, parents, singletons, gay, straight, foreigners, Germans, first-time prisoners, and repeat offenders.

My next roommate was wheeled in on a gurney. When she regained consciousness, she cut my attempts at small talk short. I don't blame her. Subject to longstanding depression that nothing seemed to lift, not even six lengthy residential stays' worth of daily shock treatments, she was the veteran of all veterans. I soon realized there would be no more sunshine in this room and that the darkness surrounding her would drag me in and engulf me, undoing all my fragile progress if I let it. That realization and the screams at night made it clear

to me that my old life was now safer than my new reality. It was time for me to leave.

We did meet a couple of times on the outside – not the electroshock girl, I mean me and Charlotte, me and Kai, and one time me and Charlotte and Kai all together. We'd go for long walks and talk about how it felt to reintegrate, to recalibrate to normal life. I remember how we promised to stay in touch but knew in our heart of hearts that we wouldn't and that that was probably for the best. We'd each served our purpose, and our relationship, borne of necessity rather than choice, was complete. Any extra time spent in the company of my partners in misfortune, my foul-weather friends, would probably only have reopened old wounds on all sides, rehashed memories we would rather forget. That doesn't stop me from wondering about them sometimes, though. Did Charlotte ever finish her degree and mend her relationship with her family? Did Kai ever find happiness, or at least enough of a break in his depression to find life worth living again?

I muse in silence until my name is called.

My doctor is young, attractive (am I allowed to think that?) and married (his wedding band glints on his finger) with at least one child. I only know this because he once took an emergency call from the nursery during my session. Today, we're both wearing masks: him due to winter COVID protocol and me because I have a slight cold.

"How have you been?" he asks me, taking a fresh sheet of paper.

"Fine, thanks," I say, and I mean it. The only slight grey cloud on my horizon (wispy, barely there) is a mild sense of panic on public transport in the Christmas rush, which used to plague me during my worst times—a self-consciousness, oppression, as though strangers were staring at me as I struggled for breath. It's something I recognize as a relic from back then, the bad old days, but I am trying not to entertain. After all, I still have to get to places – I'm flying home for Christmas on Saturday – and it doesn't affect me at all when I'm being crushed half to death at a rock concert. I use headphones and a podcast on the commute, and I'm pretty much okay.

The doctor says it doesn't sound severe enough to be a phobia or panic disorder, and I should keep doing what I'm doing. I agree. The sides of his mask rise as he smiles at me. He rolls over to the computer to bring up the calendar and type in my next appointment. There's nothing but a couple of biro squiggles on his paper.

They've decorated for Christmas since I came here last, and there's a bowl of mystery treats on the reception desk as I come forward to collect my prescription, each individually packaged. By now, it's break time, and my doctor vanishes into the lunchroom, clicking his tongue absentmindedly. As the

receptionist leans over the printer, I snaffle one of the brightly wrapped bags, marked only "Frohe Weihnachten", because why not? Today, I like myself enough to believe I deserve it.

"Und das Rezept," the receptionist says, handing me the little pink sheet.

"Vielen Dank," I say, and then I'm out and unmasked in the December day, walking briskly, breathing in deep lungfuls of the crisp winter air that is clean, fresh, and full of possibilities.

A translator by trade, ***Lesley Warren*** *lives for language. Her chief aspiration is to become a published author of contemporary fiction. Her creative work draws on her ongoing experiences with clinical depression and undergoing treatment while resident in a foreign country. Her poetry and prose, which encompass a variety of themes, have appeared in a number of print and digital publications.*

Paula Goldman

WHAT LINGERS

Why doesn't my heart open? Daisies dot the late Wisconsin spring. Closets burst; I keep buying, wanting to be put together. How will my head come together? No suitors waiting for me unlike Penelope, unweaving a shroud nightly. Is that what I'm doing? Unweaving my life? Growing up on the Jersey shore, deep hues, roaring waves enliven my heart. "Where have all the young men gone?" Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Judy Collins, linger along with Viet Nam protests, Jack Kennedy's death, his brother's….Where does life take us? Where do we take life? The journey, lengthy, hard, depression derailed me, disease and despair. I am lost, bewildered, surprised. I've been down that "long lonesome road," fortified by a loving husband, diligent grown children, joyous grandchildren. Low for so long, exhibiting an exuberant me, the child wants to survive, the one who dared to swim far out in the ocean, the one who carried her quarter, squeezed in a sweaty hand for five rides on the boardwalk amusement piers, the one who stole candy from Fralinger's salt water taffy store, the one who came home to sleep in a room with a porch over an alley, listening to cats' meows, the one counting the light beams coming from Convention Hall where Miss America reigned in the dazzle of photographers, the one who coveted her queenly position.

TRAVELING

I want to be embalmed.
I want to be recognized
    in the afterlife,
    to look beautiful
with a gold mask, amulets
leading the way to judgment
where my heart is weighed
against Maat's feather,
Maat, Egyptian goddess
of order and truth, harmony

and balance. Could my heart
be lighter than a feather?
This heart containing intelligence
and emotions? My poor brain
drained from my nose? The afterlife
needs no brain? Where am I
headed? All my viscera,
stomach, liver, lungs, intestines,
contained in canopic jars
in my casket. I am going
to eat and drink well.
What can I say of my heart?
A just heart, a giving heart, a stubborn heart,
a loving heart, regretful heart, broken heart,
beloved heart.
Embalmers understood
beauty goes a long way.
Seventy days of preparation?
What's that compared to hair color,
permanents, facials, Botox, fillers?
Who should I bring with me?
My hairdresser, manicurist, facial
technician?
I shan't need them.
What shall I bring?
Golf clubs, a 5 wood
with a putter.
Playing cards.
A wig box.
Coin purse for mahjong.
A whiskey shot glass.
A carry-on.
I shall be traveling.

FIRST FUNERAL

"Your mother's left. Your aunt is dead," he says
one morning early. He goes on, in his usual
deadpan way, "took the train" - his eyes red
and veined - "you're old enough for a funeral."
I climb the stairs and sit on my pink bed,
swallowing tears, not wanting to seem juvenile.
Inside the open wardrobe, my yellow dress
stands out, starched fresh and summery sleeveless.

Inside the funeral parlor, a wave of black
protests my dress and then forgets, rushing
up to see my aunt inside the coffin. I can't
go up there. My legs won't take me. The chanting
in Hebrew and in English takes me back
centuries. I'm ten years old; my first ring
is heart-shaped. "Why," Mother scolds, "when someone dies,
do you come dressed like Madame Butterfly?"

HEART SCARAB OATH

"O my heart which I had of my mother, O my heart which I had on earth, do not rise up
as a witness in the presence of the Lord of Things, do not speak against me…."
The Book of Going Forth By Day or The Egyptian Book of the Dead.

How I want my heart to be a going forth before death's day,
a light heart, unburdened by a wayward past which cannot be changed.
To seek and give love unwaveringly to my family, loving husband,
grown children, lively grandchildren, trusted friends. O, heart, remember
my devoted mother who worked hard in a butcher shop, wearing
bloody aprons, smelling of chicken schmaltz, of which I was ashamed.
O, heart, I loved her so, she who tried to protect me from a mean father
who worked his whole life providing housing and food for his family.
O, heart, I find forgiving difficult, weighing down my heart for a lifetime.
O, Maat, goddess of wisdom, balance my heart with care for I, too,
have worked to overcome my stubbornness, my lack of forbearing,
my want of the material world. How can my heart be lighter than Maat's
feather on the scale of justice? Let not my soul be devoured by the monster
Amit, waiting below. My steadfast husband, whose calm countenance
I treasure, would be mournful. I have borne a saddened heart for so long.
O heart, let me walk out into the sunlight, unafraid of shadows following me,
for I have been kind and generous, coming out of hateful indulgence,
swallowing darkness, into a world of light.

Paula Goldman's *book,* The Great Canopy*, won the Gival Press Poetry Award. Her work appears in* Visions International, Rattle, Across the Margin, Oyez Review, Slant, Briar Cliff Review, Calyx, Passager, Ekphrasis, Prairie Schooner, Manhattanville Review, Cream City Review, Comstock Review, Harvard Review, *among others. She was the first prize winner in INKWELL's (Manhattanville College) poetry competition and the Louisiana Literature Award for poetry. She holds an MA degree in Journalism from Marquette University and an MFA in Writing from Vermont College. Former reporter for* The Milwaukee Journal*, she served as a docent and lecturer at the Milwaukee Art Museum for 25 years. "Late Love," a book of poems published by Kelsay Books in Utah is her most recent book. She lives in Milwaukee, WI with her husband of 58 years, streaming love and movies. After an adult life filled with depression, several psychiatrists, including analysis and medication, she is coming into a life of fullness and light.*

Cynthia Good

I LOVE MAY

A full moon and a fish feeding frenzy
On water. Dizzy night, like there's a snake
In my gut biting his way out. With fingertips

Numb, J, a guru from my Surrender
Dynamics session, says it means
I am unable to grasp what I want.

But the next morning at the coffee shop
With my yellow and green notebook
  Wearing a blouse Meg gave me

With bows on the sleeves, the dog
Laid out on dirty pavement as I sip
Cappuccino beside a business of flies,

Friendly customers smile and nod,
Wear bargain perfume that smells
Like a peach lollypop, and the early

May morning is neither hot nor cold—
And I am alive, and brown birds
Are pecking up scraps of toast at my feet.

ONE THING FOR ANOTHER

It's easy to confuse the muttering of a dove
With the sound of an owl, jasmine for orange
Blossom. I once took a swordfish for a shark,
Its fin visible a mile out, a shiny black triangle
Slicing the ocean, the way I've confused sex
With love. I've blended freedom and fear,
Like a yard without fences and coyotes
On the hill. I've confused words—Hebrew
For Breath, *neshama,* with *neshēma*, for Soul.
I've misjudged a stealthy copperhead
For a kingsnake. I mix up days of the week,
Wednesday for Monday. I've misconstrued
The sound of my son's voice for a kettle,
A phone ringing, my own feet rushing
To burning toast, hard to distinguish plastic turf
On a patio from actual grass when I lie on it,
The irregular, soft blades skimming my cheek,
Almost the way he did as a boy when he'd
Place his hands on my face—that I knew was real.

DAYBREAK IN THE GARDEN

Standing in the muck with the broken irrigation
And a mosquito revving on my shoulder,
I can't help but think of god, and where
The plumeria she's gone. The almond tree
Has sprouted another version of herself,
And the bougainvillea buds cling to twigs
Until they're all done. Only then, they let go.
  The frangipani keeps on blooming, even after
I've given up on it, when its leaves run dry
And it's wearing a crown of sunburned
Branches. As I dig out a dead palm root
Tangled in jasmine, I can see, standing
With them in the dirt,with my filthy hands
And sopping socks, what I've ignored for so long.

Cynthia Good *is an award-winning poet, journalist, and former TV anchor, for years recognizable on Atlanta's evening news; she is also a known women's advocate who launched two magazines,* Atlanta Woman *and the nationally distributed* PINK *magazine, to advance women at work; both won awards for editorial and design. Cynthia is the author of eight books, including two collections of poems,* What We Do with Our Hands*, and* In the Thaw of Day *published this fall by Finishing Line Press. With a Poetry MFA from NYU, Cynthia's poems have appeared, or are forthcoming, in numerous acclaimed journals, including* Book of Matches, Chiron Review, Free State Review, Green Hills Literary Lantern, La Presa, Main Street Rag, Open: Journal of Arts & Letters, Silver Birch Press, Terminus Magazine, Tupelo Quarterly, *and* Waxing & Waning *among others. One of Cynthia's brothers is bipolar, and she lost her father to suicide.*

Linda Conroy

AT SCHOOL WE LOOKED LIKE WE'D FIT IN, BUT

we grew up across the sea,
things North American to be absorbed
from scratch. Perhaps

our accent was too strange;
that's the tale we told. Maybe gaps
in knowledge were to blame.

People saw her as a quiet one
who didn't speak in class
and when she did they laughed.

She didn't grasp the culture of the place,
the need to talk a different way,
to know that laughter wasn't bad.

CAMERA ANGLE

Time to go and you're still on the floor,
knees bent, arms at your sides, eyes closed.
Mother warns me, *don't say a word*.
Your look reveals its customary blank,
Are you picturing what face to wear?

What are you doing there! I ask. I'm on my way
to college now, holding steady my clear lens.
Philosophy's not easy in this real world.

What's your excuse? Mother reads my mind.
She doesn't need to study, not like you, she says.
Her aperture is fixed. I roll my eyes.

You didn't tell me you'd quit school!
Where is your focus? You don't like the cover
of an apron, or to scan the public's eye!
What image do you bring, who only likes to dream?
It's no one's business but my own, you say.

HAPPENSTANCE

She lay beneath the table in the dining room
and when the day was done she left that space
and went to ride the rush of evening's surf,
miscellanies that splattered past. She waited
by the wood beyond the firehouse, watching
what life was about as couples strolled and
children ran. She never learned that rambling
was no cure, a territory with no guide. She had
no model that made sense, gave any comfort
in places that she'd been. She stayed beyond
a passion for the world, next year a distant map,
a plan drawn faintly then erased, didn't speak
or find a way to ask for help. She didn't mean
to keep on waiting until her luck ran out.

CHOOSING EARTH

You grew lively when you saw the land,
said yes to seeds of hope,
to that calm green.

We'd lived in cities all your life
and knew the crush of town
was your defeat.

A spaciousness of grass and trees
holds silences that concrete
never could.

You saw a life that might prevail,
of dogs and horses, llamas,
donkeys, garden beds

for beans and roses, treasure
to sift and sort, to make dark
more hospitable

while holding tight to fluid memories,
times when living every day was easy
put in place by childhood rules.

Touching earth
you reset the balance
with new dreams.

STILL RUNNING

Her legs, opposing pistons,
pushing past the story of her frame.
She's light and likes to go alone
and round and round the track, her face
a mask, a neutral countenance, a blank,
as if all sign of effort stays inside
her cautious mouth, eyes fixed ahead,
no pain, just muscle in those legs.

Long ago, in Wales, she won two shillings
in a children's race at Sheep-dog Days.
How she moved on that uneven earth,
the ease with which she passed
the envious local boys and girls!
She didn't care to celebrate.
To me she said, "You've never seen me
run my best," as she disappeared.

No one sees her now in early morning
when there's grey shadow in the light.
The slowest wind, stones of stoicism
weathered, lonesome, in this rural vale.
She runs daily with two herding dogs,
hair tied back, lined face still bland,
ignited by her drive to move beyond
the haunting visions, history's ghosts.

***Linda Conroy**, a retired social worker, likes to write about the complexities of human nature and our connection to the natural world. Her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, and she has self-published two poetry collections,* Ordinary Signs *and* Familiar Sky. *Her interest in mental health and neurodiversity came from growing up with a parent and a sister with autism. As an adult, she enjoyed working with people with different abilities.*

Kate Falvey

ACCEPT AND ADAPT, MY MOTHER ALWAYS SAYS

I like my inner life a lot.
I've made my peace with what
ailed and dogged my steps,

all I didn't
achieve,
didn't do, didn't have.

Now it's my own life force
still here doing its thing,
contributing more light than not,

and flickering a bit longer than I
thought I
had energy for.

That seems to be enough.

THE LITTLE BOOK OF I DON'T CARE

Once upon a very long time ago –
this storied start has always baffled me.

Are we upon time? I mean, as if we're
riding it like a wave or horse or as if it's

a dresser top on which we pitch our things –
coins and keys and stubs of near done

cherry lifesaver rolls, receipts, regrets,
random remarks over the last of the mango

gelato or maybe on which we arrange our
sprayed-out scents, woodsy or citrusy with

notes of bergamot, vetiver, and musk or maybe
there's more aggression in the phrase: once

upon a time – coming from behind and leaping,
bearing down, finally getting onto its back

as if we'd tried repeatedly to gain purchase,
and finally achieved – through sheer doggedness,

our aim. Or, could it be a voyage that we are all
upon, as if time were a type of boat like a skiff

or a scow, a ketch, or some kind of cruiser
which we by and by got to board and there's

the end of it. A lifeboat, maybe, but that's
a little dreary, fatalistic. Upon time, once,

I tried to leave it, as in being out of time
before my time, no time like now but I

digress which is a way to make a mess of my
good fortune and good sense. Readjustments

take so long, but here I go again, back to the
fits and starts of all that holds me to coherent

narrative, a story maybe worth recounting but
maybe not, and there's the rub. I am indifferent

to myself. No, not depressed, just winded
from exertion. And so once upon a time,

I…. egged myself on, to be, once again, continued….
not The End.

MY LITTLE GRIEF

Once a day like a prayer or like ritual flossing I
take pity on myself.

This assures a freshness of spirit, free from the detritus
of sappy concealed particles of mawkishness,

and also that any intercessing paraclete that happens
to be passing overhead might break its holy heart and try

to perk this poor me up and give
a no-strings lift into a very comfy and divine lap.

There is never a way to tell
what affections might be strewn

if you let the cosmos know
you've had a rather afflicted go of it.

And, besides pity, being suspect
when lavished on the self, even if the self

is very miserable and in need of it,
must be done in the dark away from

the less-evolved judgment of confused
pity-repressors, people who are certain

that loving the self is a worthy aim
but who cloddishly forget that pity is akin to love.

So you have to sneak it when
others are around if you are

ill-adept at showing a poker-face
while you inwardly wring your hands.

Better still, you can practice looking sly and beatific
while you murmur “there, there” to your wounds

and no one will be the wiser. You’ll be mysterious
this way and, amazingly, it’s always possible to vamp

people with a mysterious self-containment.
They’ll wonder at it and think you have answers.

This may infuriate them at first
but if you’re nice enough in other ways they’ll feel

too mean to be jealous so they’ll start to
guard you and come to you as if you were a sage.

So self-pity can lead to other things.
Meanwhile, go underground. It’s safer.

Placate and plead to your sore heart’s content.
But limit it so it doesn’t become theatrical.

After all, your poor put-upon, kicked-around soul
isn’t starving for substitutes.

It howls plenty loud and often rather resonantly
for the real crisp agape-like thing.

OUTLIER

The cave wall is almost as soft as a cushion.
The impress of a plan is grayish, with veins of
imperious sodalite. I have yet to learn how to quarry
a result, how to nick into a crumble of feldspar and
activate a minor gem. The fault
is mine. Yet
I cave in and play my hunches,
stow my gear near splays of reddish flowstone
and peer over the ledge to
nothing fettered or convenient,
lodgepole and aspen thick with middle distance
and a chill, impenetrable sky.

I prise a flinty stone from the cave mouth
and wish for the patience to knap a keen
projectile, a blade with a will to survive.
My first hammer stone is small; frail flakes
shed with faint shell-like whimsy. Bashing
makes nothing but crumbs of my need.
Clumsy brute, there's no end to your disasters.

Wolf eyes this far south are improbable,
but I know what I feel.
And north is still north, no matter how southerly.
I try to gut the cutthroat but it is too slick
with my oafish hook and the dreadful tangle
of my finicky hesitation. It flicks
its deadness in my face.
Its silver scales stick in the pan
as I uproot a frizzled fin.
My teeth are coated with a
puny, skeletal remorse.
There are ghostly scales on my tongue
and flecks of scalded blood sticky on my hands.

I will never get the hang of this.
When I climb, I falter, kick loose

more skin and scree. What else eats
up here, what else dens and
dares to sleep?

I build elfin cairns from
piles of fractured chert.
There are no knives here, only
the dull hubbub of persistence
and a young elk scried in a cold
dream of fire and bloodless haunches.

There could be snow at any time
and I have stockpiled only
a mealy benevolence and
the foolish junk of nerves.

OUTLIER 2

The blown shingles are muted brown
and thick with the press of eighty years of sky.
They are chewed at the edges and remarkably intact.
One is shaped like Nevada.
One is shaped like a ferret's skull.
One is a bitter old lady lifting her dull skirts
as she climbs the stairs to bed.
One is flayed and cast-off,
another earnest and still inclined.
The hunk of stockade fence is cedar,
weathered to a stubborn grizzle.
A portion of a panel will do
to hold the shingle collage.
I walk the September back roads,
leaning against the memory of rain and squall.
The light is yellow and feline. The mud glistens
and roars softly with spent leaves and
broken burrows. Branches arc and
beckon, flung from the privileged sight
of swallow, kite, and hawk. This oak

limb lifted is a drama, perfect in its
dense, suggestive resonance and its
thinly curling final bracts.

Do I re-cut the shingles into face
of gnome or wood nymph or let them be
as they are,
with only a backing
of cedar planks to showcase their
rough salvation? Do I
heave the oak branch homeward
or let it glory in the stiffening mud?

OUTLIER 3

My daughter's Easter bonnet is
a top hat with a bright blue trail of sash
tied around the brim.
She peers from the car window
at a tangle of other twelve-year-olds,
fringed with awkward peek-a-boos.
My daughter sneers: They all look alike.
girls in small shorts and wedged shoes
with hair waved and long and
Every one of them. She tilts her top hat rakishly,
angles her long legs so she can take in the
Pippi Langstrumpf pattern of her socks,
sneaks a reassuring peek
at her mismatched skirt and tee,
then flips the fringe of her hat-scarf
derisively. I say something suitable
and inane about not being judgmental
and maybe they're nice and why be such a
snob and she dismisses me with penetrating
recognition. An old softy's babble about
benevolence is not the looked-for
soundtrack to her stand-off with the mob.

OUTLIER 4

Scavenging is what I do.
I drag things for blocks in the rain
because they have a certain patterned courage
rubbed in their stoic dark green paint. I find
rusted shapes in the side-streets
that are as beautiful as stones
and make archipelagos in my scrappy
low-lying side-yard with
wagons, tins, and birdbaths
too friable to hold anything
but cyclamen and wood fern.
Inside there are mirrors and bowls,
wooden Santas and other enchantments,
a dozen crudely carved silhouettes
of horses, bears, and wolves,
too many misses for the carver to keep:
a frieze now above my plank bed. This
is a world of light and finds
and I have never wanted; there is
always something
waiting
for my eyes.

OUTLIER 5

We only have one bird
in the scraggly huddle of beach bushes
but it is a northern mockingbird that gathers
what she finds into a thronged exuberance of song.

Kate Falvey's *work has been published in many journals and anthologies, in a full-length collection, The Language of Little Girls (David Robert Books), and in two chapbooks,* What the Sea Washes Up *(Dancing Girl Press) and* Morning Constitutional in Sunhat and Bolero *(Green Fuse Poetic Arts). She co-founded (with Monique Ferrell) and, for ten years, edited the 2 Bridges Review, published through City Tech (City University of New York), where she teaches and is an associate editor for the* Bellevue Literary Review. *Falvey writes: "I have family members and friends with moderate to severe mental illness, ranging from depression and anxiety disorders to paranoid personality disorder. I suffer from chronic depression myself -- what used to be dismissed as a form of deep sensitivity or 'melancholia' when I was young. I often fictionalize and use personas when I write, though the core emotions and repercussions of real experiences are preserved."*

Richard Risemberg

THE DOG AND THE FOUNTAIN

The observer had moved the most comfortable of the chairs to the window. Comfort was of minor but real importance on this morning. The observer might have to sit there for an hour, perhaps two. And it was raining: drops gusted against the window with a soft rattle now and then, but the building on the other side of the little park was clearly visible, as was the park. The park was of more importance than the building, but both were important.

The park was full of trees whose heavy green crowns obscured much of the terrain when seen from the height of the observer's window, but the fountain in the center was visible. The fountain was the primary focus of attention. It was at the fountain that the observer had encountered the woman with the black-and-white dog. The dog was neither large nor small, but perhaps on the smaller side of medium. It had a short face and large brown eyes that had regarded the observer with dispassionate interest during the encounter. The dog was perhaps the most important part of the encounter. The observer's family had kept a dog during the observer's childhood and adolescence, although the dog was long since deceased. The observer missed the dog now and then but usually did not think about it at all. Now there was the woman's dog, which intrigued the observer, as did the woman herself. The observer felt a persistent though not strong need to learn more about them. Hence the post by the window. Even though it was raining, the woman would need to walk the dog. The observer would wait until she appeared, most likely emerging from the building across the park.

The observer was not sure why this was important. The woman was attractive in a lanky middle-aged sort of physically relaxed manner, but the observer was not particularly interested in establishing a relationship with her. There was interest because the woman seemed to embody a sort of self-sufficient contentment, walking the dog to the fountain rain or shine. Of course she was not entirely self-sufficient; there was the dog, which must have served some emotional need, as well as all the mechanisms of civilization which made it possible for one to feel self-sufficient. These mechanisms included the buildings they lived in, the scurrying workers who maintained them, the surrounding community with its markets and its agricultural and industrial hinterlands, and the fountain itself, which served no purpose except to soothe the nerves. These thoughts occupied the observer's mind during the small hours before dawn in particular. The observer did not feel well-situated in the matrices of civilization

thus examined, and the woman with the dog did seem so situated. The observer had noted how she walked the dog to the fountain, whereupon the dog placed its front paws on the rim of the pool and turned its head toward the woman, evidently imploring to be lifted onto the rim, which was wide enough to serve as a bench for the woman as well. The woman would lift the dog onto the rim of the fountain and then sit by it, petting it now and then. Both sat with their backs to the fountain. The woman glanced regularly at an object in her hand, probably a smartphone with a clock display, but did not seem compelled to leave the fountain. Sometimes she read a book, sometimes consulted the phone. When others passed by, with or without dogs, she greeted them, and a conversation usually ensued. No other dog asked to sit on the rim of the fountain, nor did any other passersby sit on the rim, except for children now and then. This was a modest mystery that the observer wished to explore from the safety of the high window.

Many neighbors moved in or out through the entrance of the building. Some walked calmly through the rain, others scurried, hunched in nervous curves under umbrellas, or even bareheaded. A man followed by two children came out, strolling lazily; one of the children stopped and looked up at the sky, then held out a hand and appeared to laugh. The man turned around and spoke to the child, then they went calmly on, the man unfurling an umbrella as they disappeared beneath the trees. Two women came out with small dogs, but they were not the woman with the fountain dog. The observer began to feel discouraged when, at last, the correct woman and dog combination emerged. The woman's distinctive lanky build and the dog's black-and-white coloration confirmed their identity. The observer straightened in the chair and leaned forward. The woman carried an umbrella but did not unfurl it, perhaps because she was wearing a hat. The dog was, in effect, naked, though other dogs that had emerged from the building had worn little raincoats. The woman and her dog disappeared beneath the trees and were not visible for several minutes. No doubt the dog needed to urinate and then empty its bowels, a process the observer preferred not to think about too much. Then they appeared again by the fountain in the central clearing of the park. The dog accelerated its pace and put its forepaws on the rim of the fountain. Though the rim was wet with rain, the woman lifted the dog onto the rim so it could sit near the splash of the fountain as it seemed to favor. This time, the woman did not sit by it herself but permitted the dog to indulge in its quiet passion. She stood patiently by the beast, facing it and occasionally stooping to rub its head. The rain tapped lightly at the window; it was a light spring rain; the two under observation would not be soaked unless they stayed an inordinately long time at the fountain. The observer watched calmly. The very sight of the woman and dog in the rain was calming in some way that the observer struggled to understand.

After perhaps ten minutes, the woman stooped and appeared to speak to the dog, then petted its uplifted head. Subsequently, she lifted it down from the fountain, unfurled the umbrella, and walked on through the trees, emerging on the other side and disappearing from sight. She never hurried, though the observer noted that the rain was falling harder now. The observer stayed at the window for a few minutes, watching the raindrops as they flowed crookedly down the outside of the glass. Then the observer arose, put the chair back in its place, and went on with the day.

The next morning, the observer sat on one of the benches that faced the fountain from several steps away, under trees. It was no longer raining, and the benches had dried overnight. It was in some way necessary to observe the woman and the dog from ground level. Of course, the observer had seen her previously but had not at that time ascribed any importance to her behavior. Now the observer realized that there was something to learn from the way she behaved with the dog. The observer sat calmly on the concrete bench, gazing at the fountain. There were others who sat the same way: two old men sitting together and a middle-aged woman with a small white dog that did not seem interested in the fountain. It was the black-and-white dog's interest in the fountain and the woman's accommodation of that interest that held the observer's attention. The observer waited. After an indeterminate time, the woman with the fountain dog appeared from beneath the trees.

The woman led the dog to the fountain, and the dog exhibited its customary behavior by putting its front paws on the fountain and then looking up at the woman until she lifted it onto the rim. The dog then sat with its back to the fountain, and the woman sat next to it, petting its head briefly and then settling down to read a paperback. The woman sat with her back straight, her posture was impeccable. The dog sat calmly, its eyes following the neighbors who passed through the fountain park on their way to the tasks and pleasures of the day. The observer sat on the bench and tried to watch the woman and the dog without seeming to watch. This was not difficult as there were many older persons living in the two buildings, and they often sat on the benches in meditative respite, sometimes accompanied by small dogs of their own, who crouched on the ground at their feet. The observer felt that the fountain dog sat over them in the manner of a minor potentate, serene in its relatively elevated position. This thought amused the observer, who smiled inwardly and perhaps outwardly as well; the woman, who had put away her book after a few minutes, apparently noticed and smiled at the observer. This imposed a transactional burden on the observer, who then nodded and felt compelled to engage in a social interaction after all. "I've noticed how your dog seems to adore this fountain."

The woman laughed quietly. "Oh, yes. It's her peculiar obsession. Not that I mind. Who doesn't love a fountain?"

The observer nodded again and commented: “Yes, they show up in every culture that enjoys the benefits of plumbing. There’s something soothing about the constant quiet flow of water, I suppose.”

“Who knows what goes on in the mind of a dog?” The woman paused for a moment. “Or another human. I’d even have to say that I don’t know why I enjoy the fountain myself. Maybe it reminds me of the stereotypical laughing brook that shows up in literature. Though I’m a city girl. The closest I’ve gotten to a laughing brook in years is the sound of rain flowing along the gutters when I walk to the store.”

The observer chuckled at the image, and the woman smiled. The observer ventured an opinion: “And the dog is as close as you’ll get to a tame wolf, I suppose….” They both looked at the dog, who sat serenely on the rim of the fountain and was gazing at another woman walking another dog through the trees. “Yes,” the fountain woman said. “My little wolf. Terror of the tennis balls I buy her.” She pulled her phone out of a pocket and consulted it, evidently checking the hour. “And now I must tear her from her beloved fountain! Come on, Cookie. Time to go!” The woman spoke to the dog kindly but emphatically, and the animal rose to its feet and raised its head to the woman. The woman picked it up and placed it on the ground. The dog turned its head and looked at the fountain, then the woman tugged on the leash and said, “Let’s go.” She nodded at the observer and said, “It was good to meet you.” The observer understood that the phrase was formulaic and not literal and responded in kind. The woman smiled and turned away. The dog followed her away from the fountain and through the ring of trees.

The observer felt momentarily bereft and realized that the brief exchange had been somehow satisfying, though no important information had been transmitted. The dog, in particular, had sat mute and still during its tenure on the rim of the fountain. The woman had been polite and modestly jocular. The mystery of the fountain’s attraction to the dog remained unsolved. The observer decided to attend to the fountain more closely. Perhaps there was a secret to be decoded in the language of falling water. The observer sat for a long time listening to the fountain, but eventually became sleepy in a sort of wakeful way. The observer found this mildly baffling and continued to sit and ponder the phenomenon for nearly an hour, although the observer did not realize an hour had passed until the phone chimed with a reminder. At this point, the observer stood and prepared to leave the fountain. A relaxed reluctance to leave slowed the observer’s pace on the passage through the ring of trees. The fountain effect would bear examining at different times of the day. The woman and the dog did not need to be there. The fountain was enough.

Richard Risemberg *was born to a mixed and mixed-up family in Argentina, and dragged to LA as a child to escape the fascist regime. He's spent the next few decades exploring the darker corners of the American Dream and writing stories, poems, and essays based on his experiences.*

Lee Chilcote

9 THINGS ABOUT DEPRESSION

One
I stand in my bedroom, screw open the bottle, shake out a pill in my hand. It's slender, blade-like. A low dose, 10 milligrams. If I drop it, I could lose it in the carpet fibers, like a contact lens, like a SIM card. Is it anything, really anything at all? I take a swig of water, swallow it down.

Two
That Covid winter I woke up every morning at six AM. Stood in the shower with a drill sergeant yelling in my ear. Got dressed, made coffee with extra gravity weighing me down, chains strapped to my legs.

Three
Bodies in New York stacked in freezer trucks. People arguing over masks and whether Covid came from bats or monkeys. We baked bread, watched movies, played games. It was like being at a dinner party, and the host serves magazine-worthy risotto, Brussel sprouts and salmon, and there's good wine and everything is perfect, but it all tastes like childhood sadness.

Four
Things I'd filled my life with – swim lessons, fire pits with neighbors, family ski vacations, parent-teacher conferences, work, writing – disappeared and there was nothing to keep me from falling into the cracks.

Five
To cheer myself up, I did online yoga with a blond, perfectly toned woman doing downward dog on the flour-soft sands of Maui. Walked Maddie, our new pandemic pup, who was thrilled that my Covid misery meant long walks every morning at Edgewater beach for her. Body-slammed myself into a new job. Nope. Still sad.

Six
No one in my family ever said the words "depression" or "mental health." They were Chinese. They were a new language. I had to learn it.

Seven
In Zoom meetings, on Facebook, everyone was talking about mental health. Depression is one of the most common mental disorders; the numbers doubled, tripled during Covid, and they're still high. One of the positives is it's now more acceptable to talk about it.

Eight
With the weather colder and Covid numbers spiking, I set up an appointment with a new primary care doc. What's going on? Told him about my jackhammering heart, my sleepless nights, my low moods. He wrote me a prescription. Antidepressants only take care of 30-40% of symptoms at best, he told me.

Nine
After taking the pill, I come downstairs. Chop vegetables and make dinner with my wife and daughter while our two boys make a fort out of pillows and blankets in the living room. I feel a warmth, a helium lightness, fill my chest and begin to expand. Now, the cracks are still there, but they're smaller and I'm lighter.

THEY GROW UP SO FAST

I go to water the flower baskets that are hanging on our front porch. There's a robin's nest inside one of the plastic containers. When I see this, I pull back just in time to avoid dousing it with the watering can.

From twenty feet away, I hear birds angrily shrieking and cawing at me. A pair of robins are perched on a branch in the sycamore tree on our front lawn. They're singing loudly at me to protect their territory, twittering madly in an effort to scare me away from their nest.

Keeping one vigilant eye on the robins, who look angry enough to attack me, I stand up on the porch bench, sitting underneath the flower baskets, and peer inside. There, I see four thumb-sized aquamarine eggs nestled together inside a bowl-shaped nest made of mud and twigs. It's late April and warm now, warm enough that these robins can build a nest in our flower baskets for their babies. A fringe of purple and yellow pansies is growing up around the edges of this nature show scene, like a divider in a shared hospital room, giving the robin family a sliver of privacy.

When I lean over to take a quick picture with my phone, the robins dive-bomb towards me. I throw up my hands in self-defense, and they swerve away

just inches from my face. Then they fly back to their perch in my tree, where they continue making their fierce racket.

After that, my wife, kids, and I watch them from a distance, trying not to get too close so we don't scare them away. We check on them every few days. When we climb up on the bench, we cover our heads to protect ourselves from the robins flying at us like kamikaze pilots.

When the neighborhood kids come on our porch to ask our kids to play outside, the robins fly at them, too, and the kids go home with stories about killer robins which their parents aren't sure are real.

Within a few weeks, the babies hatch. They're tiny hairless worms that huddle together for warmth, their necks outstretched waiting for their next meal. The mama and daddy robin fly out from the nest and circle back again, dropping worms and insects into their beaks. In between ferrying kids to soccer practice and ballet lessons, we watch the baby robins from our picture window.

Soon, their feathers have grown in, like sixth graders that have suddenly shot up six inches and are about to start shaving, and they're ready to fly the nest. When I peer in, my hands protectively covering my head, I see there are two left … then one … then none.

Wheeling the trash can out to the curb one evening, I see a clump of dead feathers lying on the pavement – others were watching, too.

AT ROBERTO CLEMENTE FIELD

At Roberto Clemente Field, the pitcher stands on the mound and gets in position, ready to throw. A kid steps up to the plate and takes a few practice swings with the bat. He hitches up the pants that are sagging off of his bony butt even though he's wearing a belt, and lifts up the big batter's helmet that keeps falling down over his eyes.

"Keep your eye on the ball!" I say, and he looks over and nods. In the distance, a summer anthem pounds out of a car door flung open in a bakeshop parking lot. A toddler falls off a slide and starts crying, and a parent picks them up and soothes them.

Sitting on the new wooden park bleachers, the ones the city paid for after we fought them to invest in this forgotten neighborhood, I see there's two balls, one strike, then another – the count is 2-2. The pitcher throws the ball and the kid swings and smashes it into left field with a crack of his bat.

He stands there frozen at first, not believing, and then I yell at him, *"Go!*

Run!" and he throws the bat and starts chugging down the first baseline. Parents and coaches like me rise in the bleachers, putting down their phones, leaving text messages unsent, abandoning work emails, and clapping and cheering for the runner. The noise from the highway, the one that carved our neighborhood in the '60s, leaving dead-end streets blockaded by guard rails, that noise fades; we don't hear it anymore.

In left field, the outfielder digs for the ball in the shaggy grass. As the kid rounds first, the throw to second goes long, so he keeps running, his skinny toothpick arms pumping up and down. The first baseman picks up the ball and throws it to third – a little high, but the third baseman reaches up and nabs it with the tip of his glove.

It's too late, the boy sails past him and he's heading home. His face is as red as a maraschino cherry, his chest thrust out like a soldier. The throw comes but the kid slides headfirst, ducking the catcher's glove, and the umpire yells "Safe!"

The kid's entire team is on their feet, running out of the dugout, jumping up and down. They crowd around the batter and hug him, clap him on the helmet so it falls over his eyes again. It's Tuesday practice, it will not be counted, but we rise and make a circle around these kids at Roberto Clemente Park, forming a fence that protects them, shields them from the streets, then ride home blaring music out of open car windows so the whole city can hear.

Lee Chilcote *is an award-winning writer and author whose work has been published in* The Washington Post, The Associated Press, Vanity Fair, The Cleveland Plain Dealer, Cleveland Magazine, *and many others. His poetry chapbooks are* The Shape of Home *and* How to Live in Ruins*. He is a founder and past executive director of Literary Cleveland, an organization with a mission of "developing writers, amplifying voices, and transforming our community through storytelling," and founder and past editor of The Land, a nonprofit news organization whose mission is to report on Cleveland neighborhoods. He has dealt with depressive episodes his entire life. He lives in the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood of Cleveland with his family.*

K. Ralph Bray

SCENES

ACT I

"Islam is here," Stuart told his wife.

"Where? Who is here, dear?"

His wife walloped a wooden spoon inside a silver metal mixing bowl, smoothing lumps in pancake batter and adding more dents to the bowl's heavily pitted skin.

"The burkas. The women in them. They're at the beach," he said.

She smiled at him and drew the spoon from the bowl. Blobs of golden batter flew from the bowl and landed on the kitchen floor.

"Are you going to clean that up?" he asked. She was a messy cook. She splattered the fridge with crimson shots on spaghetti night and greased the backsplash on fish-and-chip Fridays. He suggested they get a cleaning lady once a week, maybe the same woman who worked on the house next door, but his wife said they couldn't afford it.

"Nonsense. I'll pay for it with my next screenplay," he said.

"Yes, of course, your movie. I forgot you were still working on that," she replied.

"Damn it, Muriel, I'm not working on it. It's done and in the bag. You know that."

She was hard on life and judgmental as if she'd suffered some hardship in childhood as if her stories about growing up in the Depression were true. She treated his creative work like lumps in batter, something to beat down. She ignored him, too, but not in the way she once trapped his words in apathy and disinterest. He'd tell her something useful, like the schedule for garbage collection, but she'd put out recycling. Her cognitive chain was slipping off its sprocket.

"We talked about the movie Muriel. Did you forget or just not listen? And I'm putting Bark in it."

Stuart pushed himself up from the chair and slowly shuffled his slippered feet through the batter. "I'm going to my study," he said.

He found Bark sitting on his desk.

"Get off the desk ya filthy animal." He remembered a similar line from a movie, a pretty good one he thought, but the title eluded him, as did the actor.

"Muriel, this cat won't move!"

Bark was a mess of matted fur and inertia, who slept most of the day, or skulked about the house, but was quieter than a dog or children.

"Is Bark a Persian, Muriel? Maybe he could be a terrorist in my movie, a suicide-bomber cat."

Muriel came into the study and waved a tea towel at Bark.

"He's Siamese, and he's only a terrorist as far as birds are concerned."

"I'm having a short bourbon and going to do some work. And then a nap. I don't care what you think." She'd lectured him for years about health and longevity and recently started sharing snippets of useful information she gleaned from the Mayo Clinic website. He hated these intrusions into his pleasures, and when she'd told him that "every drink cuts five minutes from your life," he replied, "I'd rather die a year earlier than spend my final twelve months sipping Club Soda." Muriel reluctantly stocked the liquor cabinet in his study with his favourite bourbon, Four Roses, kept a record of his consumption, and replenished the bottles slower than a nurse providing a new IV drip.

"I'll pour it for you," she said. "Two fingers deep and no ice." She prepared the drink and sat it on his desk.

"That's fine; we'll leave Bark out of the movie. Let's hope they don't take over the beach."

"I doubt those women are interested in ruining things for anyone. That's why they're here."

"Don't underestimate imagination, Muriel."

The studios clambered for his scripts, and one of them had recently started sending monthly royalty payments to him in cleverly disguised envelopes. "They look like they're from the government, Muriel. This'll keep the neighbours from knowing about my business."

"I don't think they care, Stuart. They all have busy lives."

"Busybodies, Muriel. Too much money and time on their hands."

ACT II

When her two girls were young, Muriel spent afternoons sewing costumes and dresses in the dining room. Three mannequins of different heights stood in the corner of the room; Muriel used them to fit the clothes she made, moving from one mannequin to another as the girls grew. Stuart denounced her when she made a crisp white dress shirt for him, arguing that the shirt billowed where breasts should be and that they weren't so financially constrained that he needed to wear homespun clothes. After the girls left home, Muriel substituted sewing with a cooking campaign and hired a handyman to paint the dining room walls white, replace the carpet with hardwood, remove the humming halogens and install LEDs, and replace the solid French doors with glass ones, and moved the mannequins to an empty bedroom on the top floor.

"This is your new office, Stuart," she told him, escorting him around the repurposed dining room.

For three months, he refused to move out of his basement office, ignoring her entreaties and advice.

"You need to be on the main floor, Stuart. Easier on your back, and you're less likely to fall." She recited statistics about the frequency of falls in the elderly and the death spiral that often accompanied broken hips.

"You live longer if you use the stairs," he countered. "Maybe you want to kill me."

The bay window in the dining room funneled the sun's rays onto his tiger-maple desk, revealing its shop-worn scratches and indents. He liked to rest his right arm flat on the desk to loosen the muscles and contemplate the story he'd write; his aged, brown skin blended into the wood grain like a snake on desert sand. If he was stuck on an idea, he'd take off his socks, prop his feet on the desk, and imagine ancient tortoises resting on driftwood.

For the past three mornings, Muriel gave him tasks without a clear purpose.

"Photos again, Muriel?"

Muriel fanned out twenty family photos on his desk. She did this every Tuesday.

"They're a nudge to help you remember, Stuart, and I thought you might somehow include them in your writing."

"Who's this?," he asked, pointing at a curled black-and-white print.

"Your mother. Wasn't she a looker!"

The woman in the photo looked nothing like him; her hair was blond and his father's was red and Stuart had improbable black hair.

"And this one?," he asked Muriel, testing her enfeebled mind.

"That is me, just before we got married. I was nineteen."

"Muriel, you never looked that tall. Are you sure it's not your mother? Or one of our girls?"

"I know my own image, Stuart. I know who I am."

A day earlier, Muriel had brought a sheet of chart paper, the kind he once used to sketch storyboards, to his desk.

"I'd like you to draw a clock, Stuart. And show me 2:15."

She can't read the clock on the kitchen wall any longer, he thought.

"We have a digital clock in the bedroom, Muriel. Why can't you just use that?" His patience had thinned after enduring a dozen requests for assistance in the past week.

Muriel handed him a Sharpie and watched as he swung his arm in a wide arc to make a near-perfect circle.

"You do that so well, Stuart! Just like a matador."

At least with the photos, he could pretend Muriel was herself, maybe a little forgetful, needing only a tweak to her eyeglass prescription, but drawing clocks (or naming the days of the week for her, or organizing his socks into matching pairs) saddened him and he grieved; she was very much a character being written out of a show over a few episodes.

ACT III

Muriel was turning eighty and scheduled to renew her driver's license.

"We should go for a drive, Muriel. See what you can do."

"I'll drive to the cheese shop. It's only three blocks."

Stuart predicted the challenge would turn into a set piece.

Muriel started the drive with a brake-and-go lurch as she backed out onto the street, narrowly avoiding a boy on a skateboard.

"Use your mirrors, Muriel!" Stuart pulled his shoulder belt forward like suspenders.

"Watch the curb."

Driving habits that should be ingrained and done without willful intention now required purposeful energy. Stop, turn left, turn right, slow down; he'd become a human GPS and her driving instructor.

"There's a spot," he said, pointing to a slot between two towering SUVs.

"That's not a good one. Too far from the show," she replied.

Stuart noticed these malapropisms: audible sounds of her chain slipping.

"Store, not show," he corrected.

After three aborted tries, Muriel got the car into a parallel spot.

What the hell is that?" he shouted.

A young man, maybe in his twenties, Stuart judged, stood on the sidewalk with a towel draped over his shoulders and was flapping his arms like a bird fleeing a predator.

Stuart lowered his window six inches.

"There's an argument, Muriel."

The man spoke loudly to a thin woman wearing a sensible skirt and boots. Her entire left arm was tattooed in vibrant colours that reminded Stuart of a macaw.

"I'm going to direct this, Muriel. They're getting this all wrong."

Before Muriel could grab his arm, he heaved himself out of the car and collapsed onto the curb.

"Are you all right?" the man asked Stuart.

"Damn it, the girl needs to cry a bit. Show some emotion, make the argument worth something." Stuart looked at the macaw while he spoke.

Muriel walked around the car to help Stuart to his feet.

"You're not a superhero because you have a cape, or a towel, or whatever it is," Stuart shouted. "Just a guy yelling at a girl."

The young man smiled at Muriel and held the girl's hand.

"Glad I'm not old," he said to Stuart and walked across the street and around the corner. The macaw waved goodbye to Muriel. Stuart clapped and yelled "Bravo, bravo."

ACT IV

"That was something, Muriel. That show on the street earlier today."

Muriel set a wooden board heavy with cheese and crackers on the coffee table and bookended it with two vodka martinis.

"Here's some brie, Stuart. Cheese is good for the mind. B12."

"You can eat most of it then. You need it more than I do."

Stuart clutched the slender stem of his martini glass and carefully tilted it to his mouth; he didn't want to dribble any and incite Muriel's ministrations, constantly dabbing his chin with a napkin.

"Tastes a bit watery, Muriel. Did you put shaved ice in the shaker, or ice

cubes?"

"I make it the same way as I always do," she said, although she had reduced the vodka by a half ounce and added the same volume of cold water.

"I'm going to my office to review a script. I'll come back for a glass of wine when I'm done."

"Yes, that's fine. I'll have my martini and read the paper. I might go upstairs to clean up my sewing."

Stuart sat down at his desk and decided to call the youngest daughter, the one who had an unhealthy interest in their health.

"Hello, kiddo. It's your father."

"Dad. Is everything OK?"

He answered her questions about the weather and pills, and she said nothing when he told her about his idea of putting Bark in a movie.

"Listen, I need to know where your sleeping bag is. The one you used as a kid for camp."

"I never went to camp, Dad. I backpacked. Why do you need it?"

"Your mother is complaining about being cold. She's turning up the heat, and I'm roasting like a peanut in this house. Maybe she can wrap herself in it when she's sewing. Like a burka."

"That's not quite a burka, Dad."

"No? Well, she won't know the difference."

His daughter's voice hummed along, bored and disinterested, and they ended their conversation with a perfunctory "Talk soon."

Stuart drained his martini glass and yelled up the stairs.

"Muriel. Where can I find a sleeping bag?"

She didn't answer. She didn't approve anyone in the family yelling up, or down, the stairs. "Lazy people yell, ambitious people whisper," she said.

He heard a loud thump on the floor above; Muriel was moving her mannequins, possibly to vacuum the floor or search for dropped needles.

Stuart returned to his office, drew clocks for a half hour, and went to the kitchen to pour their wine. He found a bottle of red, a label he didn't recognize, and prepared two generous glasses.

"Muriel, I'm starting without you."

No reply.

"Fine, I'll bring yours upstairs."

Stuart spilled a third of the burgundy elixir down the front of his plaid shirt. "Not much left for you to drink, Muriel," he said as he arrived on the second floor.

He found Muriel lying face down, burrowed into the carpet. Her legs and arms lay straight alongside her torso as if she were a plank. She looked like

a human about to be shot from a cannon. He touched her cheeks and noted that death felt plastic and cool. I'll need to put that in my script, he thought.

"Well, no more clocks Muriel. Or photos. I'll call someone."

He found Muriel's telephone book in the kitchen and under "H" he located the number for the hospital. They'd made a dozen trips to the hospital in the past year for Muriel, although he sometimes participated in the visits to offer her support ("Stuart, you should let the doctor take your blood pressure so I know how bad mine is" or "we need bloodwork for both of us, in case we need to donate to one another").

"How do you donate a body for science?" he asked the hospital receptionist.

She provided a long explanation about protocols and processes and funeral directors.

"What if you want a fresh body? Aren't the scientists waiting for these?"

The receptionist asked if he was sure there wasn't someone else whom he could talk to, someone who might be able to interpret his request.

"I don't have time and neither do your scientists," he said and hung up.

Stuart went to the guest room and tugged the quilt away from the neatly manicured bed. Muriel had sewn the patchwork when the girls moved out. Stuart thought the quilt was a nice homage to both the girls and Muriel, and the hospital would appreciate a finely wrapped gift. The sleeping bag might have been easier to use, but it was less festive. It took him ten minutes to roll Muriel into the quilt and move her downstairs. He'd kept a fair amount of muscle by doing a few pushups every day and was impressed with his feat. He thought Muriel might be heavier, but it had been years since his arms had held her or he'd appraised her weight.

Stuart placed Muriel lengthwise on the back seat of the car and took the four-lane avenue to the hospital. He knew the route well; he'd chauffeured Muriel many times, riding in the passenger seat to keep an eye on her driving. More than once, he'd grabbed the steering wheel when she overshot the hospital driveway. Even with a dead Muriel in the back of the car, he committed his hands to a ten-and-two position (no point in both of us being killed in a car crash, he decided), but still missed the curve into the hospital and drove the car onto the curb.

Stuart kept his foot on the brake, turned the car off, and got out. The Emergency sign, a marquee inviting people inside to witness scenes of drama and heartache, shone as bright as a bonfire. Stuart walked towards the light and through the glass doors that parted for him in a gracious, mechanical gesture.

"Stuart? Can I help you?" Are you OK?" A thin woman wearing a uniform, younger than his daughters, stopped him.

He instantly disliked this one. He'd met her before; he was sure of it. She was a nurse.

"I'm here with my wife. She is being donated to science." Stuart pointed outside. "She's in the backseat. Perfectly preserved."

Why had Muriel agreed to donate her body to these butchers? They'd put her on a rendering table like the one in a hunting lodge and cut her into pieces.

Stuart looked around the waiting room. An age-spotted woman, opening and closing her mouth like a dying trout, lay on a cot in the hallway. A grey sheet was pulled up to her collarbone and blue slippers poked out from the bottom. Stuart moved past the nurse, walked to the cot, and pulled the grey blanket up the woman's face to the bridge of her nose. She fixed her eyes on him and wiggled her feet.

"It's too cold to go to the beach," he said to her. "But my movie needs a hospital scene, so stay alive until I can get something set up."

The nurse hovered beside him, compelling to sit down.

"Stuart, we'll check your car, OK?" she said.

"Send a paramedic," he said. "They'll confirm it."

How was it possible that people could occupy the same space and time and create wildly dissimilar worlds? For fifty years, he and Muriel often disputed facts or truth and were never able to agree on how they met, where they went on their first date, why they had children, or who made worse financial decisions.

The nurse sat beside him while they waited for Muriel to be brought from the car.

"Stuart. This is what you brought us."

The paramedic held in his hand a severed arm.

"This is horrific," Stuart said. "You can't just start chopping her into pieces yet."

"It's plastic," the paramedic said. "This isn't Muriel."

In what alternative realty could the nurse and paramedic tell him a story that the body in his car was a mannequin? Or that they'd phoned his house , where Muriel was alive and had fallen asleep in the spare bedroom? There was no accounting for critics who didn't "get" the film. Stuart knew he'd rewrite the scene. With Muriel's part resurrected.

K. Ralph Bray *is a former teacher and lapsed economist. He studied at the Humber School for Writers and the Vermont College of Fine Arts. His father died in a car crash in the early 1960s when K. Ralph was three years old, and a year later, his mother suffered a "nervous breakdown," a catch-all phrase from that era. She lost her children, spent the next few years in forced care, and was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic. In the early aughts, the author reconnected with her and discovered a vital woman who was active in community politics and women's groups and who lived independently. She passed at the age of 91.*

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