

# *The Awakenings Review*

Fall 2022

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Cover art: “Outstretched Clouds” by Richard Wu. The photographer has a passion for creating visual artwork, writing short stories and composing music. Richard struggled with selective mutism in his adolescent years, and also witnessed a sibling develop clinical depression. Many of his creative works draw upon these life experiences to address subjects such as mental illness, disability and related health topics.

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## Table Of Contents

Submission Guidelines .....	iv
Foreword .....	vi
Preface .....	viii

### *Poetry, essay, and short story by:*

Bibhu Padhi .....	1
Zac Walsh .....	6
Liza Potvin .....	13
Pauline Milner .....	19
Arya F. Jenkins .....	25
Zan Bockes .....	31
Eileen Coughlin .....	36
Sandy Olson Hill .....	41
Louis Girón .....	44
Lloyd Jacobs .....	50
Gerard Sarnat .....	55
Raymond Abbott .....	59
Skye Gill .....	69
Eoin Begley .....	76
Alan Sugar .....	79
Murray Alfredson .....	83
Aileen Shaw .....	87
Jennifer Cimmerian Urbanek .....	97
Benjamin Robinson .....	108
Julia Morris Paul .....	119
Christine Andersen .....	124
Janice O'Mahony .....	130
Kate Marshall .....	134
Marie Marchand .....	139
Elizabeth Kerlikowske .....	144
Tricia Himmel .....	148
A.L. Gordon .....	157
Joshua Gage .....	169
George Drew .....	172
Joyce Cote .....	177
Cierra Corbin .....	183
Mohineet Kaur Boparai .....	188

# *Submission Guidelines*

## ***Editorial Policy***

The Awakenings Review publishes original poetry, short stories, dramatic scenes, essays, creative nonfiction, photographs, excerpts from larger works, and black-and-white cover art—all created by persons who have had a personal experience with mental illness.

A writer for The Awakenings Review (AR) 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.

In most cases, at least three members of the AR editorial board review each submission that makes it beyond the initial yea or nay. We strive to give this preliminary review of a submission in as short a time as possible.

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 available at a discount.

Needless to say, do not send the AR the original or sole copy of a submission. The AR does not accept responsibility for lost or damaged submissions.

## ***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 [AR@AwakeningsProject.org](mailto:AR@AwakeningsProject.org) and the word “submission” should appear in the subject line.

## ***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, phone, and email address should appear at the top of the first page.

## ***Poetry Requirements***

The AR is looking for a representative body of work from a poet. This may be 3-5 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. Please 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 each submission.

### ***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.

### ***Artwork and Photography***

The AR reviews B/W photographs, ink drawings, etchings, charcoal drawings, paintings, and graphics to be considered for cover art. Send your work to [AR@AwakeningsProject.org](mailto:AR@AwakeningsProject.org) in a .jpeg format. Include "submission" in the subject line.

### ***Rights***

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

Material must be offered for first publication. In most cases, we do not accept previously published work. Simultaneous submissions are allowed. However, if a submission is accepted by another publisher as well as by the AR, the author should notify the AR of their preferred publisher.

### ***Privacy***

By agreeing to allow their work to be published in The AR, writers whose work is accepted agree to allow The AR to publish a brief biography of them in the print copy of The AR, and to permit The AR to publish their names and titles of their works on The Awakenings Project web site. With the author's permission, the work itself may also be published on The Awakenings Project web site. The Awakenings Project will take measures to protect writers' names from access by Internet "web crawlers" to ensure, to the best of its ability, the writer's privacy. Access to information published on The Awakenings Project site cannot, however, be guaranteed to be inaccessible to all web crawlers.

### ***Manuscripts can be mailed to:***

The Awakenings Review  
P.O. Box 177  
Wheaton, IL 60187

Upon a positive initial review, most authors who reach us through the mail will be asked to email a copy of their works to [AR@AwakeningsProject.org](mailto:AR@AwakeningsProject.org). No correspondence will be returned to the creator unless their submission is accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE).

## *Foreword*

What makes *The Awakenings Review* the award-winning magazine that it is? Excellent graphic design is responsible for the AR receiving the Gutenberg Award for our 2020 issue. But what of the materials that we present in the body of the magazine itself? What accounts for the caliber of the poetry and prose within its pages? The truth is that we receive hundreds of submissions for each issue that we produce. Careful consideration of each submission helps us cull the most promising work. Each of those submissions is taken through our rigorous review process. We have a staff of six reviewers three of whom read the piece and give it either a +, ++, +++, -- depending upon their personal response. Writers who receive a ++ or +++ make the cut and go on to further review. Fewer than half of the submissions are ultimately accepted – our acceptance rate is about 20-30%. Those who are accepted must provide a brief biography which demonstrates their connection to mental illness. Once these criteria have been met, we finalize our commitment to publish with the author.

As a reviewer for the AR for the past few years, I can attest to the fact that evaluating the submissions that we receive is a challenging task. Creative writing, poetry in particular, elicits a very personal and subjective response. I have found it difficult, at times, to judge work impartially. Always I must take into account the expertise with which the writer handles his or her genre, while at the same time keeping in mind that these are pieces in which writers have bared their souls, sometimes in heart-wrenching detail, about their experiences with mental illness. As a writer, I know the sting of rejection, and the thrill of acceptance, and I am acutely aware of how my judgement might affect a writer's ego. When a writer pours his or her heart out regarding depression, suicidal ideation, or schizophrenia, I want to be mindful of the impact my judgement might have on that writer. As one who suffers from alcoholism and bipolar disorder, I also know that I can have a grandiose opinion of my own work and don't take kindly to being criticized or rejected. I imagine there are other folks out there who can relate to this.

Our review process, in which each piece is looked over by at least two (and more often three) reviewers makes allowances for personal preference. We are also a staff of professional, if volunteer, editors who know our business. And the business of the AR is, yes, to give voice to those suffering from mental illness or its effects, but also to produce a magazine of the highest caliber. As difficult as it is to turn some pieces away – most of them, in fact—it is our professional obligation to make judgement calls. What results is, we believe, a magazine second to none in which experiences with mental illness and

recovery are explored and shared. Readers have the opportunity to experience the emotional, physical, and spiritual nature of a variety of types of mental illness through the gripping poems and stories within the review.

A little housekeeping note: we prefer to receive submissions via email, but we will accept submissions as hard copy, though this process takes quite a bit longer to respond to. Submissions received via email are generally reviewed for the first time within a week. We encourage writers at all stages of their careers to submit to the AR. As well, we are open to a variety of genres—poetry of all types, short stories, essays. The AR would not be the place to submit plays or screenplays. And, we do require that all writers have some connection to mental illness, whether personally suffering from a disease, being in relationship with someone who does, or being in recovery from the disease. So, if you have a piece of writing to share that meets these criteria, please consider submitting your work to the AR. We are always eager to hear new voices! Don't forget to refer to our submission guidelines at [www.AwakeningsProject.org](http://www.AwakeningsProject.org).

This year we are delighted to publish more work from celebrated Indian poet Bibhu Padhi; this is the third time he has appeared in our publication. We also will feature stirring work from Tulane professor Jennifer Cimmerian Urbanek, Colorado writer and clinical psychologist Kate Marshall, former psychiatric social worker Janice O'Mahony. Other of our writers and poets explore the ravages of substance disorder (Connecticut poet Julia Paul) and the insidious nature of eating disorders (Florida writer Tricia Himmel), the heartbreak of prison and psychosis (Maryland writer Aileen Shaw). Houston photographer Richard Wu's marvelous work again graces the cover. There is much in store for you in these pages!

Hope Andersen  
Assistant Editor



## Preface

Even in 2022 there is lingering stigma attached to mental illness. My former colleague at the University of Chicago, Dr. Patrick Corrigan, has spent years researching the stigma of mental illness and has gained insight into its nature. Years ago, he arrived at the conclusion that the simple act of sharing one's story has beneficial effects and promotes growth and recovery. So, and we hope this is true, being published in *The Awakenings Review* encourages wellness.

Over the twenty-two years we have been printing this journal we have long realized that there is depth in the writing we publish. The writers and poets we find, or find us, have abundant proficiency, they express themselves beautifully and, in many cases, profoundly. I believe, and of course I am completely partisan, that we publish a creditable and worthwhile addition to the literary community.

Fundamentally, our aim is to be a forum for literature from contributors who have a relationship to mental illness, be it self, family member, or friend. Frankly, mental illness is a troubling and painful experience, sometimes horrible, sometimes appalling, and always distressing. At *The Awakenings Review* we are able to convey its exact nature because our contributors write clearly, sometimes ironically, always genuinely. We're not here to sugarcoat mental illnesses, we're not here to stick a cheerful finish on every submission—that would be disingenuous.

So, *The Awakenings Review* tells it as it is; it's fair to say we're a hard-hitting publication. This is something I've known for years but only recently fully understood. While we welcome submissions that are positive and uplifting in nature, we are not afraid to publish contributors who write about the turmoil they have experienced, who tell a story or write poetry that communicates the unrest and upheaval that mental illness has brought to them.

Of course, contributors to this journal need not write about mental illness, we have made that a clear and a long-standing practice. But in all cases, we ask a contributor to write about their experience with mental illness in a short biography which we attach to their work. Without exception they are willing to do so. It takes some gumption to share this personal information; I believe our writers and poets are extraordinary.

One of the reviewers for our journal, Dr. Lloyd Jacobs, believes firmly that after medication and therapy, writing about one's mental health journey is the most beneficial means to recovery. Dr. Jacobs also believes that one must struggle with the words one uses and through this labor a writer or poet participates in an act of disclosure and growth. However, Dr. Jacobs asserts, almost



in a transcendent way, that it is only through the sharing of these writings with a reader that recovery comes full circle. That is the mission of *The Awakenings Review*: to provide the fullness of the writing experience, to let the fruits of the contributor's work be consumed.

We have published writers and poets in more than one issue. We've seen some of them willing to share more of themselves in later issues. I think of the celebrated Indian poet Bibhu Padhi who, with this issue, we are delighted to have published three times. Three submissions ago, Mr. Padhi wrote in his biography a vague reference to mental illness, saying only that he took tablets for insomnia. In his second biography (and in his biography in this issue) he shared that he has coped with bipolar disorder for decades. This is a revelation, a disclosure of his personal struggles. We're honored that he has chosen our publication to make this admission.

So, there we have it. Writing leads to disclosure which leads to discovery which in turn leads to recovery. It's both a simple yet weighty concept. Is recovery a valuable goal? Do we want our contributors to experience recovery? That's true without saying. It is embedded in the title of our journal, "Awakenings," and in the intent of our efforts. We hope to awaken a new sense of self in our contributors (and in our readers), one that might be subtle or might be robust. In any case, we hope *The Awakenings Review* leads foremost to discovery, to positive changes in attitudes, to edification, and to a deepened sense of recovery and growth.

Robert Lundin  
Editor



# *Bibhu Padhi*



## FAITH

However you try, the surrender  
is hard to come. All aspirations  
have touched only the periphery  
of the place where she is believed

to stay, have stayed back with you  
or dissolved in the long night sky.  
The stars might have seen these  
just as the heart somewhere here.

How does acceptance come,  
in which miraculous way, which  
modes of faith and submission,  
which postures of prayer?

You have merely heard about  
the subdued matters, the last  
line of giving oneself away,  
the first words of superior grace.

Waiting is not the only answer.  
It should have been over by now,  
given you enough to live with  
and distribute, to live for.



## NOTHING SHOWS CLEAR

Summer is large over the small  
town. March is hardly here.

Margosa buds have shown themselves  
earlier than it has been in years.

I touch my dumb eyes behind which  
another pair rests, ready to take over.

How far is meditation from a mere  
closure of the eyes, a stiff brown gaze,

the inspiration of the first view  
of transparencies, heaven's gate?

The answer seems nowhere near, like  
the last winter, the first rains of the year.



## THINKING OF NOW

What comes is only other than  
what you thought you would receive.  
The struggle for the whole continues  
beyond the boundaries of reason.

Some say that is how things come,  
even delay in arriving where  
they are awaited by eager hands  
and minds, all that is darkened

by the world's grim ways, useless  
intent for passions and possessions,  
blocked by the mind's old habit of  
looking back and discovering the lost.

You have to be cautious in choosing  
things, shed your past and memories, all  
that you held so proudly as your own—  
your body's performances, mind's dreams.

You must know that you might lose  
what is with you now, under a sheet—  
the half-line that would not come  
to completion, the likelihood of its loss.



## LUNAR VISITATIONS

The moon would be nearest  
to the earth in thirty years.

I thought the prediction  
had lost the moon's moments,

its ever brightening yellow-ochre  
as the night quietly grew dear.

As the night traveled  
over the impatient earth,

its white grew upon hills  
and trees, my brown colours.

I spent the night under  
the margosa tree, my limbs

and face taking the leaves'  
colour, my lips tasting the flavour

of moon and midnight, my eyes  
closing to earth's darker quarters.

*The Awakenings Review*

I wait. My dead brother's face  
Shows, freckled by moon and winter.

Then, a darkening over the last  
hours, the first morning. There is

a waiting everywhere. And now  
a vivid government of vanishing acts.

I imagine the comings and goings;  
the half-morning waits for

a reappearance, someone moving  
just short of being too near.



## THE EXACT HOUR OF SLEEP

This hour of brooding will never go  
even as the mind almost drowns  
under the shadows of sleep.

The decision to leave the bed  
sharpens, becomes the time for  
a drunken walk, a drowsiness.

Who else is with me? Whose  
presence makes the whole time  
easier to forget, leave behind?

Night grows, turns into a quiet  
hermit whose cottage invites  
birds and beasts, warm like life.

*Bibhu Padhi*

The earlier hour returns, tells us  
how far we are from love and sleep,  
how dates and days change without

asking us whether they should, ought to,  
how your long illness of the mind settles,  
without notice, into a nameless sleep.



***Bibhu Padhi** has been suffering from bipolar disorder for thirty years. He has published seventeen books of poetry. His poems have appeared in distinguished magazines, such as Contemporary Review, London Magazine, The Poetry Review, Poetry Wales, The American Scholar, Atlanta Review, Commonweal, The Manhattan Review, The New Criterion, Poet Lore, Poetry, Rosebud, Southwest Review, TriQuarterly, New Contrast, The Antigonish Review, Dalhousie Review, Queen's Quarterly and Indian Literature. They have been included in several anthologies and textbooks. Five of the most recent are The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets, Language for a New Century (Norton), Journeys (HarperCollins) The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry, and The Penguin Book of Modern Indian Poetry.*

*Zac Walsh*



## RESCUE CLUB

*This is the point which counts. Examine yourself, and wherever you find yourself, then take leave of yourself. This is the best way of all.*

- Meister Eckhart, “The Talks of Instruction”

“Think about it, Hoof. That guy back there, that guy was a junk yard man through and through. You could tell he’d been there decades. Couldn’t you tell, Hoofman? But damn, you even had that guy spooked!” My father says these words to me with what he hopes to come off as deflective pride, making the most out of a piss poor situation, doing what my dad does in these situations I keep putting him in – finding a way to make me okay with me even though I keep me-ing everything up.

“Yeah, dad. Guy thought I was making some sick joke when I told him I was the driver.”

“No shit! He thought maybe it was my other kid or something and they were obviously dead and he was like ‘why are they here getting these clubs’ and the whole thing, Hoof, right? Total shit show for that guy.”

We were at the junkyard just three days after I had achieved flight in my brand new Mazda 3 while trying to use a freeway onramp like a launching pad, according to the official report at a clip of 110 on a 25 mph limit C-curve, me full of toxic amounts of Lithium, Seroquyl, Latuda, Vodka, a mouthful of THC lemon drops and a belly full of magic. When the two police cars chasing me finally caught up, my slate-grey Mazda 3 had become a smokey 1.5 and when I came bouncing out of the non-door with one arm hanging down like an elephant trunk, they had their guns pulled on what they later told me they thought was a ghost. It was just one of countless “it doesn’t make sense I am alive” personal narratives that can make one feel special and touched, in a good way. But for me, surviving yet another one of my directed pursuits into the bosom of oblivion felt like yet another punishment, yet another being spat out of the Great

Fish's mouth, and here I was so vehemently against heading off to Nineveh all I could think about was getting my dad to come help me rescue my clubs.

That crash sent me off onto a wilderness wandering far longer and dryer than the few ego-deaths I naively thought I came through before. At the time of what should have been a cinematic wakeup call to put to dark my daily projections of abuse and annihilation, I was flying perilously high. My first book had just been released and I was being asked here and there to read and sell. Instead, I would go and rant whatever manic lust and metaphysic bullshit I felt at that given moment, to the crowd and publisher's chagrin. I was still a respected and admired college humanities teacher, a guy who had students follow him through the catalog and often say such nonsense about their personal transformations thanks to him that he was able to believe, in all his truths and sickness, that he was a demigod in the classroom, on the page, and in any space he entered, especially the outer-space of his own mind.

The fall, graciously, was deadly.

\*

Meister Eckhart was born around 1260, during what were called The Dark Ages when I was a school kid, and now are called something else. It is a trend I must respect (as a person who writes), the need to rename things and call that naming understanding. Eckhart was an intellectual success in the system of the Church in Germany. He made his mark, rose the ranks, climbed the rungs. However, he seems to be one of the unfortunate who was both a very capable academic and a true metaphysical seeker, who once he came out with ideas regarding being a finder, of sorts, the water began to bubble, the tar heated and poured, the feathers plucked and gathered. At his first hearing where the mortal charge of heresy was brought against him he quipped, "If they charge me with heresy for the words they have cited then I charge them with stupidity." Eckhart, through his inward pilgrimages, came through believing in the reality of spiritual Oneness, similar to the ancient gnostic Christians in the early Church who were tossed out as devils, their beautifully written esoteric gospels relegated to the trash fiction heap of history, until very recently, that is. Like the gnostics before him, Eckhart saw through the concrete and gold-plated veil of systematized, mandated faith and on the other side he found a noble, warm oneness with creation possible. Eckhart saw the Creator very much at one with the creation, and all the distinctions humans make for the good intentioned sake of understanding what it is to be a human being as the very problem, in and of itself. And there is nothing the Church, or any system, loves more than distinctions. Awards are even called such things – such a fine *distinction*.

For these simple humanistic hopes, Eckhart was condemned. I'll begin



by quoting from his “Talks of Instruction” as it feels pertinent enough with my flying car anecdote still so near in the rear view: “Truly, if your attitude were always the same, then no one could prevent you from enjoying the presence of God...this cannot be learned from taking flight, that is fleeing from things and physically withdrawing to a place of solitude regardless of where we are or who we are with. We must learn to break through things and to grasp God in them, allowing him to take form in us powerfully and essentially.” As I sat in the prison cell the night of my impression of Icarus, quite literally the same cell I had spent the night three weeks before because I called the cops in a paranoid delusional state saying that “an army of angry unpaid pimps were coming to my gates and I do not know how long I can hold the hoard of Shafts off!” and they promptly came over and arrested me for being drunk in the privacy of my own manic, schizo-affective hallucinations. The next morning, after being released, I took an Uber to campus and taught English 4, easy peasy lemon squeezy, to find my students with a cake singing Happy Birthday to their favorite, if not somewhat unpredictable, professor. Sitting in that cell with no right to life, one would hope one would find themselves in a state of gratitude, contrition, and directed absolution, but none of the selves I had been juggling like a chainsaw spastic for the better part of a year found themselves in those pious camps. I sat there, alone with my thoughts and Will-Bone’s whistling, thinking about what a shame it will be if I get to the crushed shell of my recently purchased new (but no longer 3) Mazda and my golf clubs that were damaged. That medievally wacked summer I was playing nothing but inspired rounds, in my head, if nowhere else.

About a week after rescuing my clubs out of the mangled frame with my father, I found myself in a hot tub with a lady named Linda who was old enough to be my long since dead grandmother and high enough on meth to normally make me hesitant to share a soak. However, my standards for normally acceptable were highly malleable at the time with the Spokesman for my ethics being Stretch Armstrong, the head of my PR firm being Shredder and my campaign song performed on a loop by the Spin Doctors. My plan was not to be with this old gal in a hot tub in the middle of the night in the backyard of the house cleaner’s home an hour from my townhome that she and Linda cleaned that afternoon. She, the much younger owner of the cleaning company, had told me about a club she was going to, an exclusive type club that she could get me into if I went *with her*, and how this club saved her life. I asked if it was a cult, and when she said “no” she was surprised that I looked disappointed.

“Why didn’t you go with Crazy May to the sex thing?” Linda asked as we sat passing a pipe.

“Uhgm, seemed like a place where I would end up with all kinds of

creatures around me, writhing tailed things, snouted and snorting, ripping off clothes like molted skin uncovering raw flesh made ready for sacrifice to some stone-carved deities. After my last few trips, getting stoned with a stranger in a hot tub seemed far more salvific.”

“I can tell you something about creatures,” Linda laughed. She died before the week was out.

What Linda shared that night was simple: she had worked at a woodsy resort in Colorado where they filmed several movies while she was a room attendant there. For one film, two young brown bears were caged and fed in the basement for a month or so. Linda told me how she befriended the bears with beers she would sneak and how she and these two beasts became friends, getting drunk on the sly, sharing stories of their various wilds. The last thing she told me before going to bed that night was, “You know, Cool Head Nuke, those bears saved me for a long time, the memory of those bears. You might say they were a coupla’ rescue cubs. And now that *you* know about ‘em, they gonna’ last a spell longer. That’s nice.”

Some seven years later, nine months sober and spending my Thanksgiving break from Junior High English teacher duties at a respected Catholic School (of all things) reading Meister Eckhart, his words bring Linda back, her special angle on wisdom. Eckhart writes, “Truly, it is impossible for God or for the whole world to console someone who seeks consolation from creatures.” Eckhart is big on this notion of creatures, and by “creatures” he seems to mean and include all the voices in our heads that are not connected to what he can only term as “oneness” – anything that tries to convince us we are indeed only a singular ego wrapped in a sack of protective skin, us versus the outer world, the individual trying to find meaning and purpose amidst the vast cosmic and material chaos swirling all around us all of the moments, our consciousness a poor and porous shield we are given with which to fend off all arrows humming through the air and directed into the primest rib caging our solipsistic souls.

For addicts, the creatures procreate like coked out rabbits and their progeny are so dangerous because they are so cute because they look and coo so much like us. Addicts like me feel themselves to be creatures not of this world, that we very much do not belong, not in our family, not amongst our peers, not in our workplace and certainly not inside of our own bodies or heads. Everything is a battle. The ego is our only defense and this is why we will marshal a veritable army of any creatures we can create or call forth that we might command against the war the world is waging against our own sense of self-importance. It is one reason it is so impossible for someone who loves an addict and who is not an addict to understand why the person they love is surrounding themselves with so many monsters that are so clearly out to destroy them. For

our eyes only, they do not look like monsters; they look like centurions. The addict's pond loyally and unfailingly transforms creatures into companions.

In the beginning, the creatures are friendly and mostly singular. The creaturely experience is more like that with an imaginary friend than it is a host of pernicious, sniping, insatiable fiends who sound eerily and convincingly like you and/or any other human you know, knew or might know later and also a lot like God and usually also much like his counsel who always plays devil's advocate because he is in fact the Devil. No, at first it is just you and your new friend, and for me at 11 my new friend could only be played with on rare occasions which made this friend, this creature, already feel extra special and important and mine. In a world gone mad where God was lying to me and the woman who raised me is dead and always will be and I am forever a fat 7th grader and everything is forever, finding a magic way to make all that fade to black and my imaginary friend come in its place to tell me I should write a poem or touch myself to hell-worthy thoughts or eat too much sugar and absolutely everything would be not only okay but far better felt truly like the salvation I heard about so often in Church, Sunday School, regular school, and youth group, yet had never felt. My new creature made me feel temporarily whole.

In the program it is said that addiction starts out as a solution, then it becomes a solution with some problems and ends up being only problems. It could also be accurately said that it starts out as a chill fluffy squirrel/boy that tells you everything you want to hear while you write atrocious adolescent poetry, then it becomes a larger sharper toothed and less furry man/wombat with dark wings who reminds you hourly of how deep your ignorance goes concerning the way of the cosmos, people and yourself and then it grows into a murder of crows with serpent tails reminding you each sober moment of each betrayal, each failure, each cowardice, each buried sin-filled nut. The friend who waited inside the bottle or the rig patiently before, like a beloved dog wagging its tail behind the front door, inevitably and cruelly turns into an ancient and well-trained hellhound keeping you from leaving what you no longer even desire. The only hope, the only way out according to all the anecdotes and literature and brain science is that the addict can only be rescued by being repeatedly clubbed over the head with utter emptiness and desperation, or as Eckhart puts it, "Possessing nothing, being poor and empty, transforms nature. Emptiness draws water uphill and causes many other miracles of which we cannot speak here." And as any one who loves an addict knows, sometimes the club must be administered far more than once and often, the club treatment must be meted out to anyone left around the addict as well. All love, support and grace given to the addict will be devoured by carion, feeding those crows that torture the little boy or girl who only wants their imaginary friend back.

\*

To draw water uphill is a miracle, one of the truths that got our friend Eckhart in trouble so long ago, but that is true simply because the world of systems fears miracles *because they are real*. My favorite Eckhart sermon comes out of the twelfth chapter of Paul's very esoteric and sometimes mystical (these categories being very heretical if you are not already *in the Bible*, of course) letter to the Hebrews. Chapter 12 is the one in which Paul tells his audience that present troubles are a rebuking from God, and just how our earthly fathers punish us because they love us, how much more so our Heavenly Father. Paul softens the blow (ever the thoughtful boxer, St. Paul) by reminding us that God is hard on us because God has made us a part of God's unshakeable kingdom, and as always, a reward is coming soon. We addicts are all about rewards, but soon is way too long for our breed. Now might as well be later, later never and never an unacceptable personal affront. As naturally as water flows downhill, an addict's emotional reasoning with the outer world will always flow down to the certainty that they, the addict, is being attacked and is consequently in need of rescue, right now. This is true regarding office lunch orders, let alone when it is the addiction itself being threatened with starvation. A miracle is needed. Water must be coerced against its nature and go beyond its level and it is only the addict who can do such courageous coaxing.

By the time a dutiful reader reaches the end of Hebrews 12, it is clear how much uphill water is wanted for. Paul ends this chapter with patented Pauline gusto: "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire." There they are, the three words that make up the miraculous potion for our needed anti-gravitational living water, the water that puts out all the hot coals of anger that keep the addict's lunatic train careening down the track, the water that cools the fiery tongue hell-bent on scorching every person who did or could do them wrong, the water that washes the grime off the bare feet cracked and bleeding from endless sojourns in selfish circles: gratitude, service and awe.

I began trying to get clean 20 years ago, but I inevitably kept going back to look for my creatures because I could never be grateful that they stole from me. Instead, I worked so hard to will what was stolen back into existence, back into my control, one glug or snort or push at a time. It was not until Little Boy Me could accept that all which I felt was stolen from me were truly, and not just aphoristically, gifts. The world itself is a consuming fire and some of us have more chaff to flame away than others. Call it character, I sure as hell give you permission. And the truth all the sages keep on teaching us is that you must go down before you go up, you must die to yourself before you can lovingly live

## *The Awakenings Review*

amongst other selves and you cannot live life until you give control of your own away. Once that gift is accepted then service to the life the addict can now see as walking trees is natural, even in a world that looks and acts so awful so many times.

Whoosh. There it is. The past just went by with all its awful portences for repeated futures and ahooooo, there goes that rascal the future now, with all its awesome nothingness and never will be's. We are left then inside the third word. We are left inside what we have been inside of all along. We are left in awe. Not the awfulness of regret or the awesome illusions of ambition, but through gratitude and service we addicts are allowed to live within awe. Our heads might feel as battered as my golf clubs should have been, but there will be time for all that mending. Awe, it is the natural noise all tongues make when they are faced with the purity of a new being made human in this world. Now, go on. Say it to yourself. Commit it to memory. Commit it to your heart. It is the password to the Club you seek.



***Zac Walsh** is the former Editor of Arroyo Literary Review and author of An End of Speaking and Love in the Utmost. His work has appeared in journals such as Cimarron Review, Alligator Juniper, and The Platte Valley Review and in the anthologies Blood on the Floor and Small Batch. “My essay ‘Rescue Club’ reflects on a time during a psychotic break with the help of German mystic Meister Eckhart. I am a bipolar schizoaffective man and the son of a bipolar woman who took her life after years of struggle with her mind. After 20 years of heavy substance abuse, I am sober now and much of my creative work deals with topics around recovery.*

*Liza Potvin*



## HONEY LOCUST

Ben lives in a condo. There are few trees around him in downtown Vancouver, except those sanctuaries remaining beside old manors, or planted between cement blocks in front of office towers: temporary trees that will be removed when their roots inconveniently raise and crack the pavement blocks with their upheaval. Recently Ben learned that trees send sugar through their roots to the trees that are ailing, a nonverbal support system. Sometimes they lean in one direction to leave a little extra light for another tree, singers willing to share the limelight. He admires the way they grow right through fences and cling to rocks as though nothing could stop them from spreading their inquisitive small suckers. He often walks alone and imagines how they are communicating underground all around him. In places he is carried across the iridescent moss so that he doesn't so much walk as glide between the trees, supported by many layers that seem to guide him toward an encounter with the next tree, and then the next. Getting to know trees is a lengthy journey, and he envied them for being able to outlive humans. He knew that their real mission was to build mass in preparation to lie in the yoga pose called Corpse on the forest floor so that they might feed other creatures long after they stood on guard upright. As a boy he'd dismissed such ideas as fanciful. But he also remembered a day he spent with his father as they strolled through the alder grove in the long shadows of late afternoons, making their way between Ben's elementary school and their suburban home. Each tree has a heart, and there is a special tree designated for every person on earth, a tree that will be yours for life. Watch for yours, he told Ben. How will I know? he asked. It will speak to you, his father said. His father's tree was a gnarled old oak tree he said he'd met in Stanley Park when he was himself a boy. He revered it. But he never showed it to Ben. Private, he said.

Ben surveyed the lonely mature trees that remained standing in Stanley Park after a recent storm: wise and proudly solitary soldiers, breathing in unison in the dark pulmonary forest. Where a damaged tree had been cut down and its recent lacerations were exposed to sunlight, he could see its whole history in-

scribed in the disk of its trunk. The rings of its years revealed its battle scars: all the distress and illness, all the joy and prosperity, the violations withstood, the storms endured. The exposed heart of a cedar tree was as red and as vulnerable as human flesh. Warrior trees, he thought when he was young, were the ones with the hardest and noblest wood, the narrowest rings. It seemed to him then as if a nugget of thought lodged itself at the very centre of the rings. The soul. He found himself praying for some sign of hope: hope that Stanley Park would be restored, that his own life could be restored to the kind of innocent faith in nature that he once cherished as a child. He was weary of feeling alienated and anguished, tired of hearing the clanking claim that this was simply the modern urban condition and that he needed to adapt. In the aftermath of that storm, he'd felt a strong need, nearly a hunger, to connect with the tree his father had spoken about when he was younger. It hollowed him out. Would he ever find it? It must exist somewhere.

It came as a surprise when, some months following the storm in Stanley Park, Ben realized that he'd already met what he thought was the kindred spirit tree his father promised. Only one tree had ever spoken to him: the bright green leafy tree he could see from his kitchen window, a bold thrust of colour between a stately character home and a unit of grey concrete lawyers' offices. His office partner told him it was called a honey locust. It must have been a remnant from a time when the house's owner looked forward to small saplings filling out the vast expanse in the view between land and sea. A large cherry tree stump remains beside it, its hollowed-out centre filled with trash. Ben can't remember how many years it's been that he's lived here, gazing out the window at the tree that was always there, just on the edge of his awareness. There might be an anniversary, but he's always forgetting important dates. Except he can remember precisely when his brother Alex pulled the trigger, because he was in the room next door and heard it, felt it echo through his sternum and thud off the walls. November second. His ears were ringing for an entire day afterwards. Would the tree have felt it too?

When Ben picked up the phone to dial 911 that day, he'd been riveted by the sight of the honey locust's limbs, black veins in bas relief against the brilliant lime green foliage, as he stared across the street, consumed by its preternatural glow. He was still mesmerized by it after he hung up the phone, transfixed by its incandescence, a puce candle blazing on an unusually warm fall afternoon that ought to have had the decency to turn dark to solemnize his fresh sorrow.

At that moment he'd remembered his father's words. The need for reverence and gratitude. Right after the funeral he'd made a pilgrimage to the tree, not knowing where else to go or what to do with himself. He remembered how



perfectly still the tree had remained although his weight leaned heavily against it. He gripped the tree by its rough bark and slid to his knees. Unfair that it should reach toward heaven, that its chartreuse boughs should rustle way up there in the sunlight, while he was condemned to kneeling on the hard dark earth. He raked his knuckles along the bark that, like a cheese grater, shredded his skin. His palms were in tatters, taut and painful wounds that reminded him of the time he had shingles. The fresh blood revealed the fact that he was still alive, and this enraged him. What right did he have to live? Why was he still here? Why was grief so hard to endure?

That night when Ben couldn't bear his life, the tree had something to say to him: Hold your tongue. Look at me! It's childish to think of anything as either easy or hard. Just do.

Back in his bedroom, listening to rustling in the wind late in the evening, wanderlust tore at his heart. Not so much a longing to escape, to forget his pain, as a longing for home, and some memory of their mother. Had his father spoken of his love for trees with her in the same way? Now that they have both passed on, how could he ask them these questions? Odd to be stricken with thoughts of her now when it's Alex who was newly gone. He felt his family fading away from him, one by one. He knew that every path leads homeward, that every step is birth or death, but he was sad that he'd never talked with his entire family about these tree relationships, hadn't learned the language in time. Looking at the honey locust outside his window, he was alert to its inner spirit. It would also die. Then his body began to hum as he sensed the impermanence of everything and everyone. The tree animated this difficult knowledge and shared it with him, reminded him of the sad but thrilling emergency of the present, of moments that each day come to the surface and then are burned off by the sun. Each leaf was a bright jewel of sadness that signalled to him that it would soon be gone. The leaves would fall and the tree would lose its illuminated exterior. Home is neither here nor there. He remembered the kernel at the centre of the tree stumps in Stanley Park. If home isn't at your core, it's nowhere at all.

From that day forward Ben had changed. Alex had always joked that Ben was born a tree hugger. Turned out it was true. Not that he'd seen his conversion coming, lost as he'd been in his faithlessness, estranged even from himself. The honey locust had remained particularly vibrant the year after Alex died, and clung to its fluorescent electric green foliage well past the season when most trees lost all their leaves.

Here he is with his tree again. It's been nearly two years since Alex's death. Ben visits the honey locust around dinner time these days, making sure that no one sees him. His friendship has built up slowly but the connection has been powerful. He admires its longevity and patience, which seem to increase



when he reveals his own vulnerability. His father had maintained that trees console us in our sadness with the joy of meeting them, and that we feel regret when we separate from their green world. Ben feels the wisdom of that truth.

What fulfills a tree? Does it gain its strength through trust, or simply through endurance and longevity? How can the honey locust know its ancestors or its thousand offspring carried away in the bellies of birds? Is it all the rebirths of this honey locust that give it such self-assurance?

This morning Ben heads across the floor to read his early morning emails. The sun has not quite risen. The kitchen fluorescent is too bright, so he's turned on the stove light to grind his coffee beans and to boil water in the kettle. As the coffee sits in the French press, he switches on his computer and leans in against the glare to see how many messages are waiting for him. It must be spam, although the sender is someone from his meditation group who generally sends only notifications about upcoming meetings.

"Have you had periods of really intense grief, anger or fear? This is happening as the increasing energies activate unconscious thoughts that need to be released. The more unconscious it is, the more powerful and extreme it will feel. Remember that emotion is Energy in MOTION. Accept it all. It will pass and every episode will ground you deeper and deeper into the Earth. Then, as your tap root extends, you will be able to hold the higher frequencies."

Why does he take his coffee to the computer desk so early in the morning when he'll be spending the next 12 hours sitting at his office computer anyway? Why not gaze longer at his Honey Locust? His cynicism flourishes only in air-conditioned rooms. Like any true place, the forest offers risks. He remembers getting hurt by Devil's Club and stinging nettles and poison ivy as a boy. But his father also taught him to chew on nearby yarrow leaves, then apply them as a poultice to relieve any pain he encountered. For many years, Ben feared being touched - not just by prickly things, but by anything and anyone. This has made him detached, lacking in conviction. He knows this when he regards his tree. Yet he feels awe at the moment when his ego surrenders to wonder. Was this his inheritance, this terrifying beauty right in front of him? It makes him want to cry out in anguish.

It must be the meditation group coordinator who has sent him this particular email. His grief counselor had referred him to the group, and he didn't mind the exercises or the brief check-in before they began breathing deeply, but didn't want to connect with any of the people who met in the church basement that smelled of burned coffee and winter boots. He liked the idea of retreats where he could observe silence for longer periods. After his first group meeting, he'd signed over his email address in order to receive notices of upcoming events. Big mistake. Now he is overwhelmed with cute sayings and photos that

group members feel they just have to share, as if everyone were waiting on uplifting aphorisms to get them through their days. He hates cuteness.

Odd though that there was a reference to a tap root, just as he'd been feeling a greater affinity with his tree every day. As though its roots extended under the ground, crossed the road, and wrapped around his heart. When he considered his friends' well-meant advice about moving from the place where "the tragedy" had taken place – no one was so indelicate as to use Alex's name or to refer to his suicide – he realized he couldn't leave his daily sightings of the tree behind. It was true: the tree rooted him in place. Now the first rays of the morning light gave a vibrant shimmer to the pale green buds, defying the grey winter dullness with hints of the coming spring. The softness of the green shoots is almost unbearable. He loves this tree. In the early fall he always admires the brilliant yellow luminescence of leaves that make it stand apart from all the surrounding conifers, so that it seems illuminated at dusk even after the sun fades from the sky. It alone holds the light, just for him, like a tall tapered candle, its colours derived from the heart of burning flames. Maybe his father had been right after all: he really does have his own personal tree.

At the meditation circle last week, a middle-aged woman wearing a drab brown sweater spoke of the stress of caring for her elderly mother, who pretended she was hard of hearing whenever unpleasant topics arose, such as the selling of her house. It was a common avoidance tactic with the elderly, others sighed in agreement. "Except that when she's lucid, she's evil," the woman added. It was a comment that seemed out of character, coming from such a mild-mannered woman, and it stayed with him. Especially the word "lucid." That was the word he would use to describe his messages from his honey locust tree, which were the opposite of evil. Light does not recognize the history of the darkness it illuminates.

He turns off his cell phone, shuts off his computer. These days his daily life seems to fray or rewire his outdoor world. He finds himself walking after dinner in Stanley Park, looking up at the graceful old cedars. His counsellor once told him that forest aromas contain phytoncides, chemicals that lower stress hormones. Forget what they smelled like. There was no tree in Stanley Park as bright or as forgiving as the Honey Locust.

It would be good to be a tree. Trees have long thoughts, slow and restful exhalations to match their longevity. Their hearts are bigger and their lives are longer than anything humans can attain. If he could learn how to listen to trees, then could the brevity – the callow hastiness – of his thoughts be transformed into longer, slower and more sustained ideas? Maybe once he learned how to listen to his honey locust, he'd no longer want to be a tree. He'd want to be nothing except what he is, just as the tree is content to be a tree.

## *The Awakenings Review*

He looks at his honey locust and then turns toward his home. To gain insight is one reason he loves her, he thinks, climbing the cement stairs to his building. It is possible to receive authentic love from a tree. Slow down. Breathe. She speaks to him, glows for him every morning. This is a different kind of love: Slow. Deep. Rooted. His tree vibrates her whole substance to him, makes her entire being visible to him, and communicates her warmth. The Honey Locust reassures him that he belongs right here.



***Liza Potvin** was born in France and studied in Denmark, France, the U.S. and Canada. Her books include *Dog Days* (Louise Hamilton, 2009), *The Traveler's Hat* (Raincoast, 2003), *Cougarman Percy Dewar* (Trafford, 2005). She won the *Edna Staebler Creative Nonfiction Award* for *White Lies* (NeWest, 1992). "Honey Locust" fictionalizes her friend's death by suicide, which followed her mother's suicide, providing a lens on the ways that nature sustains both the dead and the living.*

*Pauline Milner*



## SHORT TERM MENTAL ILLNESS LEADS TO LONG TERM PERSONAL INSIGHT

Recently, I was prescribed a drug known as a Cox 2 Inhibitor for treatment of pain. Given primarily to treat inflammation, the medication caused debilitating side effects. Though the Cox 2 group of pharmaceuticals should not affect the nervous system, the medication certainly could have interfered with the absorption of other medicine in my system, reacted with an ingredient in a food I had eaten, or any number of environmental factors. For the next five days, I took a trip down the rabbit hole into an abyss of suicidal thoughts, seemingly involuntary tensing of my muscles and wretched feelings of constant unexplained anxiety that included irrational thoughts.

My journey started without warning. I was watching a Big Bang Theory TV show marathon with my husband, engaged in toggling between games of tug and fetch with our dog, Casey, and enjoying some grapes coupled with a variety of cheeses. In between the character Bernadette's asking why Sheldon could not sit somewhere other than his self-designated spot on the sofa and Penny's impressive and lengthy reply, my entire muscular system tightened involuntarily and I felt unusually very anxious.

After about an hour of random thoughts racing through my mind like a bullet train, my muscles aching from the constant tensing, and my increasing inability to sit still, I decided to go to bed. When my husband inquired as to why I was going to sleep at such an early hour after a relatively relaxing day at home, the only truthful reply I could give was that I just did not feel well.

I lay in bed for what seemed like an eternity, but, as evidenced by the glaring and mocking red numbers on the digital clock, was only two minutes. After numerous changes from side to side and pillow rearranging, I turned the light on to read. Two pages into "The Girl on the Train", the book on the top of my ever growing reading pile, I knew something was terribly wrong. I was re-reading sentences over and over again, all the while the position changes and pillow shifting continued.

My mind was racing, switching between random topics that were making me sad one second and furious the next. Inexplicably, I was now terribly upset that I had thrown away the left over scalloped potatoes and ham, wasted them, but they had been in the refrigerator for over a week. I was suddenly angry that there had been only four out of the six speedy check outs open at a department store earlier in the week. I felt claustrophobic in our spacious master bedroom with overwhelming feelings I could not find an explanation for, much less banish them from my mind. I had no logical reason to be in that state.

Deep breathing brought no relief and my efforts to imagine myself relaxing on a hotel room deck in Mount Washington Valley in my beloved New Hampshire only made me enraged that due to Covid 19, the Canada-USA border was closed to all but essential travel. Welcome to my world for the next five days.

Nothing I could think of could explain the psychological turmoil I was enduring. My husband stopped asking what he should do to help and observing me like an animal in a lab experiment as his efforts to assist me only added to my constant anxiety.

During those tumultuous days, I flitted from one activity to the next, slept only a few hours and ate little. I had no interest in doing anything and I had no patience for any task. I was constantly fighting off thoughts of suicide and I was convinced I was going to feel that way forever. I tried to calculate how many tablets of my various medications I could take that would not result in death but, instead, a sound sleep for several days, with the hope of waking up back to my usual self. My thoughts were so muddled that even a calculator was useless because I literally could not concentrate long enough to work out an equation. Living was impossible.

I had a pile of writing projects in various stages of completion, but there was no way I could be creative. Also, the thought of scrolling through my thesaurus looking for just the right word, something I usually found both challenging and fun, I knew I would have no patience for.

My family doctor was not in her office until Thursday, but by Wednesday I was contemplating a trip to the emergency room. Only my fear of being admitted to the psych ward was holding me back. I decided to call my pharmacist out of desperation for a solution to my mental anguish and even a possible explanation.

My well-educated pharmacist was able to determine the Cox 2 Inhibitor I had started taking approximately four weeks earlier was the most likely culprit for my symptoms. For some unknown reason, my brain chemistry had been adversely affected over the course of a month leading to the probable answer to the horrible psychological symptoms I had been enduring for days.

In the most simplified definition, chemical imbalances cause neural conduits in the brain to produce varying forms and intensity of emotional turmoil. Mental illnesses are much more complex than the misfiring of transmitters in the gray matter, but this, essentially, was the most likely culprit of my excruciating mental distress.

I discovered later the side effects I experienced, though not listed as a risk on the patient monograph handed out by pharmacies when prescriptions are filled, had also afflicted many other users of the drug as evidenced by the multitude of online accounts similar to mine.

My pharmacist advised me to stop taking the drug immediately, but said though the side effects would dissipate it could take up to 40 hours before relief finally set in. He used the term “half life” and based on the dosage I was taking and when I last took the drug, it could take up to three days for it to be completely out of my system.

I was able to see my family physician the next day and our lengthy discussion about my wretched mental side effects led to some realizations on my part and I have become quite philosophical about my own nightmare reality that occurred during that time. Even with my doctor’s assurances that I would soon feel normal, I was still doubtful that I would ever feel like myself again.

Thankfully, well before my pharmacist’s prediction of 40 more continued hours of misery, at about the half way mark my distress evaporated as quickly as it started.

I am still thinking about a word my doctor used - “normal”. I wonder what the real definition of “normal” is. Online, [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) defines “normal” as - conforming to the standard of the common type, usual, not abnormal, regular. Used as an adjective, it says “normal” is free from any mental disorder, sane. These representations, in my opinion, are inaccurate and invoke more questions than answers. Who sets the standard for these interpretations? I suppose it may be based on the majority but since there are an unknown number of people who would be diagnosed as having a mental illness by medical professionals, if they sought treatment, how can one be sure how many people actually suffer from some form of psychological affliction? In fact, for fear of being labeled as “abnormal”, do most people stay silent due to the possible, and often probable, societal implications?

Was I abnormal for five days and then normal again because my brain chemistry readjusted? I do not think so. I knew there had to be some explanation for my disquietude. But, wait. At the age of 47 years, I have premature peripheral and carotid artery disease that is hereditary and went undiagnosed for many years while I endured intense and increasing pain that forced me to leave a lucrative full time career that included extensive travel. Since my situation

does not “conform to the standard of the common type” whereby most people my age do not have a debilitating condition and have full time jobs outside their homes, am I abnormal? I certainly do not consider myself abnormal and I do not believe people who suffer from mental illness are abnormal either. They are, like me, their own normal.

Perhaps a more appropriate definition for “normal” would be “the whole of any person, not determined by any one circumstance or affliction, but an accumulation of their entire life experiences.”

In addition, my unfortunate ordeal gave me much more insight into those who have mental illnesses. Being convinced I was forever going to feel the way I did for those five days and still doubtful about my recovery even after promises from trusted professionals, I could easily understand how someone with untreated or undertreated mental afflictions would view suicide as a viable escape from their constant suffering. I did not act on my suicidal thoughts and never seriously considered doing so but I do not know how long I could have gone until my own thoughts turned from contemplation to reality with real planning and possible execution.

Until my own debilitating mental distress, I had empathy for those afflicted with mental impairments. I could imagine what they were going through but I had no actual personal perspective until I struggled with what must be a daily reality for many. Now, I feel I can say I at least have a mental rapport with them because while empathy is a worthwhile, even necessary, human emotion, one can only imagine another’s distress. I am sure that is where the expression, “Do not judge someone until you have walked a mile in their shoes” comes from.

I use the word “impairment” due to my own inability to accomplish anything useful during my own ordeal and hold even more admiration when I learn about people overcoming what are, most certainly, monumentally more challenging hurdles than I had to overcome.

“Sympathy” is a word I avoid using and an emotion I try not to feel for those plagued with psychological conditions. Those possessing a brain that “misfires” for any number of reasons do not need others to feel sorry for them. I think sympathy keeps people down. As long as someone feels sorry for them, people are garnering attention, something they desperately need, but it is the wrong kind of attention. They need others to assist in giving them the tools they need to lead productive, happy and self-fulfilling lives.

I have personally been on the receiving end, on occasion, of accusatory stares and outright rude comments when I have used my disabled parking permit. In fact, the permit name should be changed to “differently-abled” to better reflect one’s limitations. In my case, walking is possible, but painful and less



steps make for a more pleasant excursion. At 120 pounds with no discernible limp I do not “look” disabled when I get out of my car. However, after about 25 steps, as my legs demand more oxygenated blood and the occluded stents in my left ileac artery stifle the blood flow, pain and then numbness set in. As a result, my gait slows and I begin to put my hand out to steady myself. Inevitably, I have to sit down before I fall down. Doing errands is far from an enjoyable task for me.

Having inherited my father’s stubborn streak, my walker, that has a seat, usually remains at home in its designated spot hanging on the storage room wall. However, after my recent journey, my walker is getting out more. Why have I been compromising my own comfort, and often safety, to avoid the disapproving faces and comments of others? In fact, the next time someone mumbles that “those spots are for disabled people”, I will hand them my card, telling them they are welcome to take a few steps off their trip into the store, but they have to take the excruciating agony that comes with the privilege of having the card. That ought to give them something to think about.

Over time, I am not sure what my forage into five days of messed up brain chemistry will bring. I have certainly developed a literal understanding of how mental illness can affect a person, if only, thankfully, for a very short amount of time.

I have always been kind and eager to lend a helping hand to a friend or stranger. Though I have been on the receiving end of meanness, I have also discovered great love. I have been not so happy, at times, and blissfully over the moon with delight. I miss our dog Bullitt, but am blessed to have our little guy Casey, who was a rescued puppy from a terrible situation. I have an awesome husband and family and I am fortunate to have an extended support system of people very willing to help, when needed.

Perhaps my five days in what I describe as living mental torment will simply join with all my other experiences, good ones and bad, that have formed a soul that loves life, is cautiously optimistic about the future, believes love really will conquer all and the world will be a better place but we are going to have to do a whole lot of compromising and work to get there.





***Pauline Milner** has been a freelancer for over 20 years, composing a wide range of works for an assemblage of clients. Recently, she pivoted and now concentrates on her own writing which includes composing short stories and working to complete two screenplays. Though friendly and outgoing, she is in almost constant physical pain caused by premature peripheral artery disease, arthritis and damage to her left femoral nerve caused by a basketball sized ovarian tumor that went improperly diagnosed for five years. After she endured an incident of severe mental trauma, Pauline questions what it means to be normal and how many people have to hide their internal anguish in a society that struggles to understand and assist those living with mental illness. Pauline lives with her husband and dog, Casey, in a restored farmhouse in rural New Brunswick. She covets writing surrounded by nature and the nearby farm animals.*

## *Arya F. Jenkins*



### BELIEVE ME

I realized early in life my mother didn't have the courage to off herself although she threatened to plenty. She was scared of my father, doctors, nurses, and especially of the Almighty himself, having been raised a Roman Catholic who was made to attend Mass every Sunday. It was religion saved her, I believe, her daily ritual of reciting rosaries on behalf of us, her family, that helped her endure being married to Dad and endowed her with what people called a *special grace*.

My father did not harbor a fear of death or make threats like Ma did, far as I know. He was a Vietnam vet who received medals for his valor and never spoke either of war, killing or the afterlife. Even so, one Saturday, after mowing the lawn, while Ma was visiting her sister in Berlin, and my sister Amy at a sleepover, and I myself helping my buddy Brian paint a shed in his backyard down the block, my father hanged himself from a garage rafter. I was 15 and by then long accustomed to my father's unique brand of tyranny, his dark side, so to speak, so his suicide came as no surprise to me. I took it to be payback, pure and simple, his own conscience retaliating.

Whenever I close my eyes and think of him, the first thing comes to mind is his dangling legs in green khaki on that day. I knew better than to look up, although I felt my inside pulse of life beat so hard I expected an alien to pop out of me. Inside I heard his voice, *Take charge, boy, you're the man now*.

I called the cops and they summoned the medical examiner. "Any idea when your mother will return, son," a heavysset cop placed a hand on my shoulder. I told him soon, Berlin was only a couple of hours away. On the phone, Ma's normally high anxious voice went dead. "You'll be all right, won't you, until I get home. Microwave something."

I had stabbed the meatloaf and baked potato dinner I'd burned in the micro about a 100 times by the time Ma returned, set her luggage aside and looked around the place like things might have changed or moved of their own accord while she was gone. I came over and she grabbed my face and looked into my eyes. Spontaneously, we rested our heads on the other's shoulder. Then she looked at me again, with such sorrow and compassion, a lump rose to my

throat. She stroked my arm, "How's about we get Amy. Go get your permit."

At the Forrester's, Mrs. assisted Amy, who was sobbing like a cripple, to the car while her daughter Jenny waved to nobody behind a window.

We waited until Amy was in the car and we were heading home to tell her he had died by hanging himself. "But why, why, why?"

Ma kept repeating, "We don't know, honey, probably never will," which to me was a lie.

"Did he leave a note?" Amy wanted to know.

"Not to our knowledge."

"Not anywhere in the house? Or his laptop?"

Ma shook her head.

"Can I see him?"

"You don't want to see him, honey."

"Nobody wants to see a cadaver. What's the point? It won't bring him back," I sounded like an expert on dead bodies or someone wanting to spare my sister horror, neither of which was true.

"Oh, Perry, how can you be so cold?"

"Your brother's right. There's no point, Amy."

"He's blue. Do you want to see him blue?"

"Stop it, Perry," my mother admonished me gently.

"Oh, I can't stand it, I can't. What will I do?" My sister let out a heart-rending cry to which Ma and I responded with silence. There was really nothing much we could do.

The harder Amy cried, the more I wanted to just smack her still and yell out the truth. A normal person would have known. She should have known, I told myself, even if the reason she didn't was mostly Ma's and my fault. When our Dad was alive, there had been a kind of silent pact to keep Amy blind, deaf and dumb, the only one among us who saw him as a good guy.

Amy had always been the cute, spoiled one, the baby, who aced school and on top of that whatever else she tried, like soccer and violin. Dad was proud of her and attended her afterschool games and recitals. The main reason I think she never knew what went down was because she was never home.

Dad's was a small closed casket funeral as you would expect. His boss at the dealership, Mrs. Forrester, Jenny, Brian and his parents, a trio of Dad's army buddies, and Grandma June, his mother, whom we'd not seen since Grandpa's burial in Chicago when I was eight, and that was about it. Dad's best friend Skip, once a sergeant with him in his platoon, went on and on about Dad's courage and resilience and heroic antics that made me want to puke. Those VFW guys didn't have a clue. At the cemetery, Nana June took me aside. "I could see you didn't much approve of the eulogy. Why, son?"

“I don’t know. Some people just talk shit.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been around much, Perry. It’s taken a while to get over losing Grandpa.”

I hadn’t known much about my father’s father except that he was a hard drinker and a mechanic. In response to Nana June, I nodded, which was my stock reaction to just about anything adults said then. She went on, “I don’t doubt you had it tough. I’m not going to beat around the bush. Your grandpa was a mean bastard where Ted was concerned. Maybe because Ted was our only child, maybe due to the alcohol, he got whacked a bunch. His pop beat him to a pulp once for tossing a cigarette pack his way and hitting the corner of his eye instead of landing it in his hands as was expected. Stupid stuff that made your Dad grow up too hard on himself. I wanted to stop it, but couldn’t. It wasn’t my place.” I gave her a look like *if it wasn’t up to you, then who*, and for the first time spied a scar under her right eye. “He do that?”

“Oh no,” she swiped it with the back of her right hand like stray hair. “I don’t remember when that happened. No, it wasn’t Grandpa, no,” then gazed at the distance waveringly, making me think, *maybe forgetting isn’t an option, we do it because we have to*.

My parents had been high school sweethearts and got engaged before Dad went into the army. By then they’d moved to Ohio and I was on the way. Ma said his mood swings started after the war, and meds only made things worse because he drank on top of them. Even so, he was always fit, running and lifting weights, a stud with a blond crew cut and all-American looks. Amy’s preteen friends and their mothers all had crushes on him.

Amy had him wrapped around her finger and always got what she wanted from him, but for Ma and I, it was different. We belonged in the enemy camp.

There were no smiles and tenderness where we were concerned. If Ma didn’t bring him a drink right away or have the table set for supper when he got home from work, he took the nearest glass and smashed it. Broke a window once and a TV another time doing that, although over the years Ma and I took blame for all the unexplained accidents in our household. Our alliance was unspoken, and our deceptions about him, natural.

Fact was, Mr. Hyde had an ideal target with me. If I got anything lower than a B in school, which happened a lot because I was weak in Math,” he took me to the garage, where he whipped off his belt and told me to lift my shirt and bend over the barrel.

The barrel was waist-high, a storage unit filled with odds and ends. If I hesitated, he taunted me, “You’re not a sissy boy, are you?” Like that was the worst thing you could be that would merit worse punishment, or like I should be eager for a beating. He struck as many times as was my age, doubling up the

belt, leaving fist-sized welts across my back, although I never hollered or let go a peep. The thought of what might happen if I did kept me shut tight as a trap.

My punishment didn't last long and afterward I limped around the house like an old man because I was in such pain but couldn't say or do anything about it. Ma couldn't pay attention to me either, long as he was there, only after he took off to grab a drink, or pick up Amy. Until then, I was out of luck.

Ma kept what she called her *good sponge* under the sink in the guest bathroom and washed my wounds with warm water and soap, then poured on Hydrogen Peroxide, then dabbed on Neosporin. Despite her extreme gentleness, it felt like someone peeling layers of my skin every time. I let myself cry, my tears streaming into the sink, while I hunched over its cool hollows, my hands braced around the hot and cold handles. "I've had enough," Ma would announce then as if speaking for me. "No more. I don't want to wake up to another day. I wish myself dead. Lord, I've had enough," this being her way of supplicating eternity. At such times, we wept together, each taking in the full brunt of our joint reality, helplessness and pain.

I know you can't compare people's torments, but I always felt Ma had it worse. I'd be rich today if someone paid me a buck for every time she showed up for breakfast wearing sunglasses to hide a shiner. Shades were her telltale sign.

"Mommy has a condition that makes her eyes sensitive to light," was the b.s. she doled out to Amy. Sometimes her mouth and lips shone puffy and bruised too, but no one questioned that. Ma would say she'd slipped and fallen on her way to the bathroom the night before, or while vacuuming rugs, or pulling weeds in the backyard. There was no end to our creativity making excuses for him.

After Dad's suicide, we went about our lives, Amy enveloped in her solitary mourning full of questions, Ma and I silent and stoic, bearing the burden of Dad's real ghost. His false self lingered and I wanted to break the spell. After supper, Amy's ritual became sitting alone in the den before the TV, refusing calls from friends, constructing the precious tower of her grief, as if she was the only mourner in the household, which wasn't altogether untrue. I wanted to burst her bubble bad though, grieving someone who never existed, never mind that in her world, Ma and I didn't either. What was the point of keeping up the charade? The more time passed, the more I wanted to tell her what was. So one day, with the three of us home, we had a sit down.

"We need to talk," I said, putting on a deep, authoritative tone like I knew more. Amy deposited herself in Dad's chair at the head of the dining table with a sigh and Ma and I sat opposite one another.

"We know you loved Dad, but you need to know the whole story."

“Mom, what’s he talking about?”

“Just listen, honey.”

My face flushed with long suppressed anger and hatred, but I determined to do what I had to – get to the point and keep it simple. “Dad was a wife beater. He beat Ma all the time.”

“What is this, a sick joke?” Amy turned to our Mother.

She shook her head. “He beat your brother too. That’s why he stayed home so often from school. Perry wasn’t sick, honey, he was recovering from your father’s beatings.”

Amy looked from one to the other of us. “Is this for real? Are you guys just trying to make me stop feeling bad, or what? Because I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true,” I said. Despite what I had intended, I turned around and flipped up my shirt. Amy gasped. I sat on my hands, then I folded them in front of me feeling like a desperate ass. Ma must have read my thoughts because she covered my hands with hers then to show support.

“You people,” Amy shook her head. “And you too?”

“My eyes aren’t sensitive to light. I had black eyes and wore shades around the house to cover up bruises. It’s a story you believed like Santa Claus that we kept you believing. You’re old enough to know the truth now.”

I can still hear the echo of Amy’s why’s in my head, but at that moment my chest welled with pride for Ma, who was speaking up for herself for the first time that I knew, her voice sounding firm and strong. It only occurred to me then how I had helped her and we had actually been the other’s savior.

“But why? You must have done something really bad.” Amy kept bawling. “Why are you telling me? What’s the use? He’s gone, gone.”

“Because you need to know, honey,” said Ma, the unspoken being, *and we can’t keep it from you any longer.*

“So when you grow up and marry, you don’t give some bullshit line to your kids about who he was.” I looked at Amy then, sitting back in Dad’s chair in her defiant pose, arms crossed tight across her chest, and knew that was exactly what she would probably do. Maybe, I told myself, she just needs time.

The ironic end of my conversation with Nana June the day of Dad’s funeral came to mind then.

“One time, when Ted was in high school he took the car without permission so he could drive your mother out to the lake. It was the show of disrespect, I think. Grandpa made him dig his own grave in the backyard, threatened to bury him alive in it. But rather than let himself be shoved in, your father punched his old man out and left him in that ditch. That was the last we saw of Ted until you were born and he was back from being overseas.” She put her hand on my shoulder, maybe to still the quivering. “This might not make much

*The Awakenings Review*

sense to you now, but it's something you need to know.”

I kept my head low, for the moment keeping to myself my own tales about life with her son. Her last words were, “Don’t you ever be like that, no matter how you feel.” I nodded, mumbling incoherently, as if to defend myself. She made me promise, so I nodded some more.

\* \* \*



*Arya F. Jenkins is a Colombian-American poet and writer whose writing has been published in many journals and zines. Her fiction has received several nominations for the Pushcart Prize and one nomination in 2021 for the Best of the Net Anthology. She is the author of three poetry chapbooks, a short story collection, Blue Songs in an Open Key (Fomite, 2018) and a mixed genre novel, Punk Disco Bohemian (NineStar Press, 2021). A second collection of short stories is due out in 2022. She is a recovering alcoholic.*

## *Zan Bockes*



### THE OTHER SIDE

As Karen walked to the Reach Out office on a beautiful Midwestern summer morning, hundreds of birds filled the air with their musical cheeping; a damp rag of humidity hung from a line of clouds that spread across the gray sky. The day promised more oppressive heat, clamped down on the city like the lid on a pressure cooker.

Karen had been working at Reach Out for a little over a year and generally enjoyed the job. She felt confident in her abilities to help those less fortunate and sure about her mission to assist homeless people gain food, shelter and employment. At age 23, her life looked promising and full.

The office was on Jackson Street, across from the park with its duck pond and swing sets. Along the footpath, a secluded nest of bushes and trees shaded several wooden benches. On one sat a ragged man, his chin resting on his chest. He wore a thick, soiled cloth coat that he hugged tightly around him despite the heat. As Karen came closer, she recognized him as a man she'd spoken to yesterday on the other side of the park. She couldn't remember his name—Hank? Harold?

She'd been passing out fliers to people who seemed like they might qualify for Reach Out's services. She prided herself on knowing intuitively who needed what the most, and she avoided people who looked intoxicated or criminal. Today she had office duty and would be required to do paperwork at her desk. She preferred working in the field to being chained to the desk, but at least the office was air conditioned.

As Karen approached the man, she quickly assessed his condition. When she'd met him yesterday, crouched in front of an empty office doorway, he'd clearly been mentally ill. He appeared wary and frightened, his lips moving rapidly as he glanced around, jerking and shaking his head.

She felt an instinct to avoid him today and take the long way around his bench. But a sense of guilt arose. How wrong, to turn away from someone who clearly needed help, understanding, respect.