

VOLUME 13

2020

# The Human Touch

THE JOURNAL OF POETRY,  
PROSE AND VISUAL ART



THE JOURNAL OF

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Poetry,  
Prose,  
&  
Visual Art

---

University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus

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**Lattes For Two**

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**Choice**

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THE HUMAN TOUCH

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# Volume 13 2020

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## PREFACE

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Welcome to *The Human Touch 2020*—the annual anthology of prose, poetry, graphic art and photography created by and featuring the contributions of the students, staff, faculty, alumni and friends of the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus.

This volume is a celebration and showcase of the amazing talents and unique perspectives of our contributors, and we appreciate their support of and involvement in another stunning compilation of work. But behind the evocative words and compelling images is the commitment and creativity of our editors and board members. From inviting submissions to devising time lines to reviewing materials to working with graphic artists to endless proofreading, they devote many hours to producing the volume that you now hold in your hands. And they do all of this in addition to schedules packed with class meetings, study sessions, high-stakes exams, residency interviews and resident duties! We are deeply grateful for their dedication and energy.

One of the biggest challenges of any literary and arts magazine is securing the necessary funding for the enterprise, no matter how big or small. We are extremely fortunate and especially thankful to an alumnus of the School of Medicine who, with his family, has committed to ongoing annual financial support for *The Human Touch*. Their “gift” enables us to create what we hope is and will continue to be our “gift” to the community of the Anschutz Medical Campus: a beautifully rendered and emotionally powerful representation of the artistry and the diversity of our colleagues and friends.

We are, as always, proud that this volume originates from the Arts and Humanities in Healthcare Program at the Center for Bioethics and Humanities. The program’s mission is to realize the universal appeal of the arts and humanities and their power to connect student and teacher, patient and professional, citizen and artist, benefactor and institution. *The Human Touch* serves as a tangible means of making such connections.

Finally, on behalf of the editorial board, I want to thank and congratulate our 2020 Editors-in-Chief:

- **Allison M. Dubner**, CU Graduate School
- **Carolyn Ho**, CU School of Medicine
- **Priya Krishnan**, CU School of Medicine

As noted, our editors have worked very hard over the past academic year and have produced a volume of which they (and we) can be very proud.

**Therese (Tess) Jones**, PhD Director, Arts and Humanities in Healthcare Program

*\*This edition was published during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. We are incredibly proud of and thankful for all the healthcare staff who are bravely providing care to their patients at the front lines, in addition to other front line workers – sanitation workers, service industry workers, small business owners, delivery drivers, public transit operators, and grocery store workers. With this publication, we hope to be able to bring some solace and hope to our communities during this difficult time. The print volume of The Human Touch 2020 will be available as soon as possible for distribution and pickup.*

# When I was Born

JAMES CHIN

---

When I was born I cried and the world rejoiced.  
These dual threads of joy and pain meander through my life  
like lazy rivers through the valleys to the ocean.

And in these valleys of wildflowers and trees stand the mountains  
towering above, sculpted by ice and wind  
and my thoughts turn to the people and events in my life  
who have sculpted me.

And I think of the people who have traveled with me,  
from those barely walking  
to those who have walked a long ways already.

And they traveled with me sometimes for a moment or a season  
or if I am fortunate, for a lifetime of footfalls  
on forest trails to see the dark running waters lit  
by the pregnant moon or the glacier fed lakes of  
turquoise and jade under acres of clear blue.

These visions I desire but what do I long for?

I long not to be young and be deluded by illusions of love  
nor do I long to be old and be afflicted by cynicism  
But I long to be surprised by joy in all of its embodiments of  
people and nature and to live each day as each day is given.

And when I die I will rejoice and the world will cry  
as I close my eyes to dream of those places  
where the lakes are the kisses of the mountains and sky.



## Duffy at Ten months (first child)

KATHI BRITTAIN

---

*Written in the spring of 1975. This poem was written about my brother (now 45 years old) whose apparent nickname "Duffy" we discovered for the first time upon reading this. Her journal entries from this time described the difficulty in advocating for herself to have natural childbirth which was unheard of in 1974 Texas. She was very proud of this and I've always considered her a pioneer for women.*

Soft

and warm

and pink

You are this, my child...

—So much more—

Yet...no words

There were never words created for you  
for experiencing you

For feeling you slip

warm and wet

From inside of me

For the sweet ache of releasing you

Joy in your sight

Sorrow in my loss.

No words.

No words for your nightly escapades

Jiggling on the inside of my belly

Safe in your small, dark world

Turning,

Twisting

Hiccupping

To my sheer delight

Now you are butterflying to the boy.

Infant—boy—baby

My son.

Your sweet full face

Smiling and spitting your great joy of life

You cannot know—

Of those endless moments I spend

Concentrating on your small head—trying

with all my being

To memorize every crease, curl & expression

---

*continued on next page...*

Begging time to stand still long enough to truly capture you  
at this precise moment  
For all eternity

My yin and yang spirit cries out  
"world! This is my son!  
MY SON!!  
Child of hope and light and love.  
Look at his face...  
He's perfection and beauty"

Only to recoil

"I will not let you have him  
To harden and chill"

But reality always breaks through

I'm lost in the anguish and thrill  
That when I pushed you out from my womb  
I lost you to life  
You are no longer mine  
You are yours

And I cannot despair too greatly  
in this miracle of life  
My empty belly aches for you  
yet I do delight  
in the moments when I glimpse you  
—the man



# The Bridge: An Anatomy Lesson

---

ANNETTE HOUSE

Inside our brain boxes is a bridge

yours, because you are young  
is a rope bridge, pliant, swaying, playful  
connecting the two sides of a canyon

mine, because I am old  
is a weathered covered bridge  
connecting two withering villages

words tumble through the spaces  
in the rope  
in the sagging slats

wondrous words from the right  
sunshine splendor starstruck  
angular words from the left  
fractal fusion forensic

some words don't know  
where they belong  
east or west  
canyon or village

they wander on long  
stretches of the bridge  
some fall into the darkness below  
forever lost

melody martyr mother



## Status Asthmaticus

---

PRIYA KRISHNAN

As a kid, I always wondered  
what it was like to be a twin.

The closest I maybe ever came to this was  
snowed-in to my friend's tiny studio apartment  
for days, where we ate ramen for every meal,  
trying to catch every last sliver with our forks,  
and I slept on leftover fabric scraps-turned-pillows on the linoleum floor,  
when by the end of the storm, after a failed pie-baking experiment,  
shoving our blueberry-stained hands into mittens,  
lured to a corner bar with mulled wine,  
we watched our words make tendrils  
in the barren air – after picking apart the knots of our lives  
for so many hours,  
well, now we could finish others' sentences.

But forget the mind-reading,  
or the telepathy,  
It's more the fact that that after having shared the same  
soft purple uterine galaxy for nine months,  
having bloomed into existence together, even,  
how could twins feel anything but an atavistic loneliness  
when separated?

And here, now,  
one toddles down the hallway,  
clutching his stuffed tiger,  
shoes tap-tapping away from his brother -  
he's passed every screen, every test with flying colors,  
even his APGARs were higher,  
first cry sparking jubilant,  
eager to engage with the world.

And the other – he's here, on the exam table,  
frail and pale,  
tracheal tugging, subcostal retracting,  
cocooning away from my stethoscope,  
crawling parallel along the growth chart,  
arms wrapped around his knees as though  
he's still afraid of taking up too much space,  
but his body complains:  
the VP shunt, the feeding tube,  
the list of hospital stays so frequent  
mom moved the family so the drive didn't take so long;

---

his lungs are so tight almost  
no air passes through them.

There is only the heave of his chest,  
at once quiet and restless,  
and his mother steps to the window  
as still, between his spasms of crying, I listen.  
Perhaps her first – her only reprieve for a long while,  
she watches the sun illuminate the windshields of the passing cars,  
another mother grabs the hand of her yellow-raincoat-clad child  
as they splash through puddles together,  
into the strong, sure light of the day,  
a cloud of Canadian geese winging crookedly over a distant skyscraper.

His brother pushes open the door two-handed,  
ascends the step at the foot of the bed,  
clumsily pats the knee of his other half.  
His five-year-old eyes try to bridge a gap he cannot name  
across the cocoon of their strange, shared existence,  
the gap of how did we turn out so different,  
the gap of why him and not me?

And later this week, I'll walk  
through the snowy clay of the foothills,  
in the waning orange evening tones  
and the pearl earring of the moon barely appearing –  
I'll stop in front of a large cottonwood by the lake,  
its trunk forking almost at the base into two unequal trunks,  
both furrowed and ridged with wind-blown bark wisdom.

I'll remember how,  
when his brother arrived that day,  
came back down the hallway to open the door and sit beside him,  
cries turned to sobs turned to sniffles,  
turned to quiet.

How finally, he breathed.



## Night Bike Rides

CHRISTOPHER MULVANY

---

Like a beacon  
I seek these cities streets  
when concrete heart beats  
thump  
in unified cadence  
with our circadian rhythms

I ride  
pedal-powered  
down the middle of emaciated lanes  
grown turgid in the midday  
but now  
I'm feeling like a king

Dashing 'tween  
spotted yellow lines  
I'm flying so high  
with not a single soul to behold  
this illustrious majesty

A monarch  
I could never be  
akin to others who seek power  
and look like me  
I can only sow seeds of tyranny...  
so I speed

vacillating  
through thoughts of serenity  
yet to be painted guilty  
for having lived small glimpses  
of what it means to be free

Sans  
shackles and cages  
8 mental walls  
we strengthen  
with participation  
in the day-to-day

But I,  
I am aching  
for a change.

If I keep moving  
maybe I can lose these

---

immutable habits  
seemingly depleting  
yet reappearing  
every few miles;  
roadside adverts

I'm coaxing  
willpower to pull roots  
from soil  
toiling to molt  
holding on hard to hope  
it happens organically  
but the street  
she blows me kisses

Hissing nefarious intent  
for an involuntary rearrangement  
of flesh  
to be undressed by  
ravenous concrete...

Lady luck intervenes  
assuring me  
this scene  
will not become reality  
at least  
not on this particular eve

I press my cliched fist  
to forehead  
lips  
and chest  
In an offering of gratitude

For a near miss.

A new breath.

I expect  
the best  
is still yet to come

And I,  
I am aching  
for a change.



## Mother and Toddler in the Coffee Shop

---

ART ELSER

*Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread  
Our eyes upon one double string  
From "The Ecstasy" by John Donne*

It's eight-fifteen on a sunny spring morning.  
Against one wall a line of silent people slouch  
intently into the screens of phones and wait  
to order their lattes before they go off to work.

Here and there, others stare at screens, text,  
read email, ignore the beauty around them.

In the middle of the shop, in a splash of sunlight,  
a mother and toddler dance and play and laugh,  
glance love-beams at each other. The boy grins,  
runs off, spins, laughs back into his mother's arms.

While others continue to stare at their screens.



## Newborn

---

CAROL EHRLICH

His warm moist skin  
is smooth under my finger.  
I trace the tender curve of his cheek  
and purse of his lips  
and the moving arch of his arms.  
His fingers close around mine  
in trust  
in seeking human touch.

I would hold in my heart  
the wonder of this newborn babe  
before his sweet breath and smile  
are changed by the real grown-up world

and never forget.



# Dying to become woke

HELIO NEVES DA SILVA

---

Today I die on the ground of a medical campus.  
I die because I can't breathe.  
The daily complicity and inaction that surround me are suffocating.

They teach us that healthy gums are pink,  
while all examples of healthy skin are white.  
They teach us that our kidneys and arteries work differently,  
and that our lungs are not well-developed.  
They teach us that my race is a risk factor.  
They teach us that our genes put us at risk,  
But they themselves put us at risk.  
By believing that black skin is thicker  
and that black women feel less pain.

Meanwhile, our role models don't look like us,  
And decisions are being made without including us.

So we die.  
Today we die in honor of black men and women,  
who die because of the color of their skin.  
We die in honor of immigrants and refugees,  
who die because of the country they were born in  
We die in honor of our transgender patients,  
whose humanity continues to be challenged.  
We die in honor and in solidarity with those who do not have the privileges we do.  
We die today because we feel the weight of this burden.  
And we die because we acknowledge that we need to do more.

We know that change requires work and time,  
But we also know that our inaction costs much more.

Today we also rise.  
We will rise together and stronger.  
We will rise with our white coats, conscious of our responsibility.  
We will rise because your pain is also my pain.  
We will rise because now we are woke.



# Beggars

SHIRLEY SULLIVAN

---

*Patient as a border of beggars, each hand holding out its whole treasure - Merwin*

They used to clamor,  
this crowd of children—  
clinging to our knees,  
telling us their needs,  
begging for food, for a bed,  
for someone to see them at least.  
They hold out survival.  
We see empty hands.

Now, they are mute,  
too weak to importune,  
cling like oysters  
to a bit of ground,  
stare through wire,  
and we, turned inward,  
become self-wounding daggers  
shred what little remains.  
Speech, they've learned,  
can't reach our ears  
We sit like granite boulders  
asleep in the sun of privilege.

What is their treasure,  
held out in hope?  
Selfhood, courage, love?  
Blood tells the story words can't  
Cancer eats at us and we wonder why.  
We close our eyes to the treasure,  
surprised by our hidden stains,  
our rebellious cells – worse,  
we have no eyes, no ears, no hands,  
and our heartbeats slow.



# Immortalized

---

HOWE QIU

At times, I feel like

    a whisper of smoke;

        caught in the tempest's roar

    a wax candle's light

        met with a dark monsoon's pour

    a castle of sand

        in the blink of an eye, by tsunami, washed ashore

Yet I know full well

    I am seasoned charcoal

    I am an ember refusing to fade

        by lightning and thunder

            my perseverance immortalized in glass



## Turnover - A Haiku

---

JEFF DRUCK

Change is forever  
Always different, sometimes sad  
Opportunity



## Job Perks

---

ANNETTE HOUSE

My twelfth house astrology indicates that I am comfortable inside institutions. My eighth house suggests that I am not intimidated by death, and am intensely interested in theology and philosophy. These somewhat mystical indicators led me to the rest home for retired Roman Catholic sisters and brothers (and the poor who were souls of any faith) which just happened to be within walking distance of my home.

My interview with the Mother Superior was pleasant. I sensed her frailty was only skin deep and that she ran a tight ship that was both admirable and durable. To my astonishment, I discovered that my old friend from school had worked there for many years. She could orient me to the secrets of this lovely but somewhat intimidating place. I liked the statue outside the front door, the patron saint who greeted all who entered, who seemed to whisper do not enter here unless you do so honorably.

Despite being raised as a Baptist, and having thrown over organized religion as an adult, I soon found myself leaving small prayer requests at the foot of Mother Mary's statue or in the folds of her blue gown. I felt a bit hypocritical about this but not sufficiently enough to stop my new practice. I gradually came to feel a serenity among the statuary, and a kind of reverence for all the mysteries of this religion and its practitioners in the persons of the sisters and brothers.

---

They made me laugh as well, which is a great gift to a hard-working nurse. I began to see them as real people with all the same foibles as us ordinary folks. They whacked each other with forks or kicked each other under the table when they were displeased. They complained about each other's irritating behavior and gossiped freely over dinner. In short, I came to care deeply about them.

I loved how predictable they were. Predictability on the job can be a great comfort, especially when I, as a nurse, no longer crave the drama of the ER or ICU. One daily happening that I valued the most for its calming effect and the gentle nudge toward kindness it always evoked was The Grace and Eddie Daily Show as I called it. At nearly the same time every day, I would get a call from Eddie who lived on the second floor, inquiring as to whether Gracie was ready for her visit. Eddie would then stroll toward Gracie's room with an admirable elderly swagger, go into her room, sit in the easy chair, and visit with her for an hour or so.

After Eddie's visit, every day, every time, Gracie would call to me from her room honey, can you come in here for a minute? Every day, every time, she would say who was that man, he's so nice! And I would say that's your husband Eddie, isn't he lovely?

Perks of the job.



# The Forest

REILLY QUIST

---

standing here  
with your lungs  
held in my hands  
dissected out  
primary, secondary, tertiary bronchi  
I finally feel you here

I took and took  
each layer of  
skin, muscle, vessels, nerves  
to build a map  
in my head

but each step  
made you smaller and smaller  
until almost nothing  
was left

to take and take  
with no way  
to give anything back  
this is not me  
I don't want to feel you here

until  
holding your lungs  
I began to see  
tree roots  
and a trunk

and then I realized  
you are my giving tree  
selflessly showing me  
the inside of  
every patient I'll see

I breathe in  
and out easily  
for the first time  
in many weeks

when I hear  
my first heart murmur  
it's your heart  
I imagine  
grounding me

when I receive  
my first patient hug  
it's also your arms  
around me

these days  
I seem to feel you  
everywhere  
the one who helped me  
see the forest  
through the trees



# City Lights

LYNDY BUSH

---



# Old Souls

JAIME BELKIND-GERSON

---



## 13 Burr Hole Surgery, part 2

PAUL FLIPPEN

It would be dramatic to say he crashed. Implies beeping machines, doctors and nurses in white coats rushing around. Maybe that's how it was. I don't know, I wasn't there. My experience is that real-life drama is slower and quieter. The creeping tension of worry. Silent menace of not knowing.

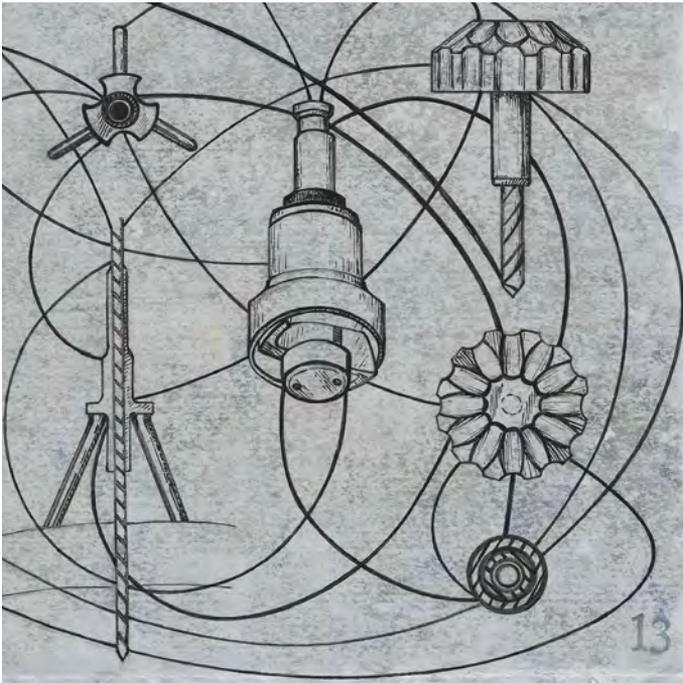
Mom calls. Dad is having brain surgery to alleviate multiple blockages.

I drive down, cursing myself for not driving down the day before. Misnavigate parking lots and hospital wings; call Mom for room numbers and updates.

Surgery takes a long time. Four and a half hours. Difficulty ventilating him. Blockages in his brain. Fluid build-up. Pressure. Damage?

Procedurally, surgery goes well. Blockages cleared. Drainage stints working. But he won't stop bleeding. Not enough platelets. Doctors don't like his blood count. Platelets through an IV. Must balance it precisely. Enough to clot, to stop the bleeding. But too much clotting causes blockages. Again. He needs platelets. His body isn't producing them.

The leukemia is going to kill him before the leukemia has a chance to kill him



# Elk

STORM COWDEN

---



# Texas Creek

MATTHEW HICKEY

---

Black clouds queue in the distance,  
their path not yet announced.  
The wind is their herald,  
a stirring in the branches,  
and the dance  
of dried leaves in the grass,  
before it strengthens  
to announce  
the arrival of the gale.

Beyond the nearest range,  
grey curtains are drawn down—  
rain falls in opaque sheets  
that drape the peaks in shadows.  
But some windows in the vault  
are left  
open to the sun.

From the valley,  
snowcapped summits  
are hidden  
behind the dark veil.  
While others are aglow  
in sunlight  
prismed through fountains  
that slake the alpine thirst.

The light is different now—  
To the North,  
the dark shroud is tempered  
by the daylight—  
not the Stygian blackness  
of a midnight ascent  
of these peaks;  
it mingles promise and threat.  
Grey, ominous,  
yet longed-for,  
in this season of fire and flame.

The bright peaks to the South—  
still dry, stand silent in  
distracting illumination.  
Sunlight bent  
to the will of the storm—  
Moderated; a counterpart  
to the cloaked neighbors to  
the North.



## Faces

---

JAMES CARTER, JR.

I gazed around the room  
at all the Faces  
primed to discover truths that lay hidden  
beneath privileged shells  
Unconscious bias training  
for those unaware of microaggressions and silent terror  
Three hours  
Three hours to capture the essence of my experience  
as if I were a multicolored butterfly  
drifting past a distant sightline  
into their embrace

I looked around the room  
at all those tranquil Faces  
and wanted to tell them  
I am terrified of Police  
of firearms and helicopters  
I am terrified to walk down the street

*They will shoot you, Son*  
My Daddy used to say  
as he laid down his service weapon  
beside his badge

*They will shoot you*

I looked around the room  
at all those curious Faces  
and so wanted to tell them  
I am terrified of Landlords  
how securing shelter is a courageous act  
that flashing my bootstraps pulled high is humiliating  
a futile shield from their refusals to let me in

*They will shoot you, Son*

I looked around the room  
at all those introspective Faces  
and wanted to tell them  
I am terrified of Bosses  
of weaponized appraisals that my uniqueness  
brands me unfit for appreciation

---

*They will shoot you, Son*

I looked around the room  
at all the doleful Faces  
and wanted to tell them  
I am more than what they allow me to be  
how time and again  
they thrash my sapience and expertise  
I wanted to tell them every day I absentmindedly caress my scars

Every day

I want to breathe fairness and light  
deep  
reparative  
no more short gulps of fear  
I want to dance under stars with dreams deferred  
I want to cherish my belonging  
bury my shame  
and cleanse with the tears of my ancestors  
I want to exist  
inviolate and serene

*They will shoot you, Son*

I looked around the room  
at all the uncomfortable Faces  
I wanted to tell them  
everything

Instead I chose to remain steadfast and free  
regal with heritage and legacy  
steeled to endure each trespass that may come

*They will shoot you, Son*

*They will shoot you*



## Only Skin Deep?

JUSTIN HAUXWELL

---

This penetrating sadness  
Hypodermic suffering  
Circulating madness  
Chaos becomes smothering  
Numb and distant echoes  
Of who you were before  
Get lost in quiet hurricanes  
That hide behind your door  
Temples built to honor  
Who you thought you would become  
Collapse in dusty disrepair  
Your supplicants long gone  
These desperate shouts of silence  
Beg the ears of all and none  
This peaceful inner violence  
Separates the two from one  
You languish in a darkness  
That's both infinite and small  
Your brain is wounded, desolate  
Yet knows and carries All  
Vision broad and keenly keen  
Can't see past your saccharine sheen  
Can't see where your soul has been  
Blinded to the ghosts between  
The cracks, outside, aren't showing yet  
This shell demands attention  
But who is out there looking for  
The you that no one mentions?



## Manic or Mania

AMIRA ATHANASIOS

---

Thoughts thrashing, falling through the cracks.  
And I could feel his words pounding at my chest.  
An immanence so isolating,  
And wholly unjust.

Perseverance encircling, his reality twisting about.  
Turning tighter, pulling present and past.  
Wide-eyed and distracted, voices screaming in circles.  
Enthralled, he wouldn't stop.

Caught in his cloud of disillusion, our eyes finally met.  
The Voices, we named it, that treacherous storm:  
Consuming, at best, lost in disreality  
Satiating some deep unseeded dream.

His mania, now but a memory.  
The shouts but a whisper.  
A life continued instead.  
Imperceivable, only just, his sadness met mine:

Thoughts continued in small secret circles.  
An echoed question of when will it return,  
Or a hushed treasure, longing for imminence,  
Consuming or not.



## Two Hands

MADELINE G. HUEY

---

It was a Wednesday when a mother died on our service. Five minutes into my first-ever 24-hour shift and over the intercom came the announcement: “Code White”. Our chairs scraped against the floor and our feet went running down the hall.

Later in the day, I stood outside of another crowded OR as I listened to doctors and nurses attempt to re-start her heart. Helpless.

At first, I felt numb. Then I felt sad. Then I felt guilty that I was sad because I didn’t even know her name. I only knew her as the woman who had a complication with bleeding.

Heading into my third year of medical school, I knew I was going to experience death. It was just a matter of time. What I didn’t expect was to experience it like this. Not like this.

I thought labor and delivery was going to be magic. Like sunshine, rainbows, and newborn babies. Then a mother died on our service, and with a heaviness I’d not yet known I looked to my two hands, wondering what they could hold.

---

In just a few days I'd had many firsts. The baby born without a skull will always be how I remember my first C-section. My first stitch placed after we told someone their pregnancy might kill them. My first death, a mother to a new baby. Then, I helped bring a healthy baby girl into the world with my first surgical assist. There was tragedy, redemption, and personal milestones wrapped up in all of those experiences and I asked myself, "how do I hold, and honor, each of these things?"

I believe it's important that we lean into the grief, but for how long and how deeply? After my first week on labor and delivery, I wondered how I would be able to serve my patients in the midst of their pain and suffering without it consuming me. How I might hold grief while also remembering how to hold joy?

As I move from my firsts, to seconds, and thirds, I'm learning that this balance is a little different every time. I'm learning that it will never be easy, but it is necessary. My medical education had not yet prepared me for this, but now I'm learning that sorrow and happiness cannot exist in isolation, as one without the other would be like night without a day to follow.



## The Interview

---

KARIMA OSMAN

She flips the page.  
Her hands aren't soft or pretty.  
Maybe she too knows of hardship,  
but I can't be sure;  
I'd have to check her feet to see if they were cracked,  
like mine.

Maybe she didn't lotion her fingers to appeal to my struggles,  
a bit of dryness here and there  
because she too only recently discovered dish gloves.

Maybe she thought her hands would open me up,  
incline me to discuss.

She wanted to hear something valid,  
in the name of research,  
she ought to know of how I sit on fabric bus seats every day with disfavor,  
a wet wipe does nothing for where ineptitude leaves its stain.

She repeats questions that I've avoided responding to,  
I'd give her a good conversation but that won't earn me the promised gift card.  
So, I respond.  
I open up and discuss,  
of how I can't afford to go to my checkups,  
of how I make too much for Medicaid  
but too little to afford time off for sick days.

The interview is done and I want to take my turn interrogating,  
I'd ask better questions,  
some about who named her,  
and others on which worries distract her from the songs left unsung.

But what does reciprocity matter?  
This is an interview and I'm just participant #7002.



# Self-Doubt in the Land of Life and Death

BENJAMIN FULLER

---

Hopefully no one can see that I'm absolutely losing it under this mask and gown  
right now

Covered in sweat, 10 faces staring directly at me, judging every movement

"Just aim the needle downward, here hold it like this"

"Now, you're going to have to push pretty firmly to get past the ribs"

"No, no, no a steeper angle than that"

Is he going to gown and glove up? Nope, I guess not

Seems like the attending has more confidence in me than I have in me

I hope they all know this is my first central line

Maybe someone else should be doing this

She's well on her way to crashing

No time for self-doubt

The needle breaks the skin

I pray for the flash

"You're in"

Exhale



# One Eighteen in the Morning

FRED GUGGENHEIM

---

It's one eighteen in the morning in apartment 305 in the old persons' home, our Independent Living Facility. That means for me it's too early to go to the bathroom; that would be three or four in the morning. And it's far too early for the intermittent hum of traffic on the street below our windows to turn into a steady buzz.

The reason I had to get up out of bed, at one eighteen: to stop an irrepressible cascade of coughing from my chronic bronchitis. The coughing won't stop until I dislodge a pellet of phlegm from one of my bronchioles. The whole coughing episode can last up to half an hour. That's more detail than you probably ever wanted to know, even though most of us reading narrative medicine stories have a bit of voyeur in us, as well as a large component of a bleeding-heart-and-soul-full-of-milk-and-honey.

So, to keep from disturbing my wife's sleeping, I leave the bedroom and go to my MacBook Pro in the library. When I'm safe and alone in the dark of the night, a lot can happen. The good news is that it's a time for free and untrammelled thinking, even sometimes, for writing love poems. But this time of night can also bring out the bad news, depending on the particular day.

Today, however, it's the bad news. Earlier in the evening, while I was walking along the first-floor hallway of our building, I happened on Robert, a widower, polymath and former pioneer radiologist. He was placed near the middle of the first-floor lobby. This time, he didn't have his usual walker that helps his balance and carries a portable oxygen compactor. Rather, Robert was sitting somewhat slumped in a wheelchair. He looked even more pale and wan than usual. Robert was quiet, but apparently had been having an extended conversation with Kayla, the Associate Executive Director of our building.

As I approached, he murmured, "I'm moving over to Assisted Living." His voice was very matter-of-fact. I heard his statement with a loud thud.

"I hope it's only to be transient," I tried to reply respectfully.

"No, it's permanent. I was just in St. Josephs' for five days. It's right-sided congestive heart failure. Even worse than before." He looked quite glum.

Robert and I had spent many breakfasts together in the Independent Living dining room, talking about our lives, our past careers. Six months ago, he told me that his traveling-together-girlfriend of eight years decided to leave him because his health was deteriorating. Then, he shared, stoically, that he was "decathecting her."

---

In the prior month, we had talked about obtaining Advanced Directives. That's the bright green paper document that some residents of our Independent Living facility affix to their refrigerators with a magnet, in case they are found unresponsive in their apartment. He said then that he also was going to purchase a "Do Not Resuscitate" bracelet.

Now the facility's lobby, usually warm and inviting, seemed cold and desolate. I had so many feelings that the best I could blurt out was, "We all have to die sometime. But, please, not now." I started to leave him, lonely, seated in that wheelchair, with the Associate Executive Director beside him on a sofa. I figured that it must be her job to help manage these "life transitions." it must be her job to help manage these "life transitions."

In parting, I assured Robert "I'll still continue to bring you my copy of the Sunday New York Times each week, after I'm finished with it."

Me, a research thanatologist when I was in Boston, a Visiting Nurses' Association Hospice Board member when I was living in Dallas, and a psychotherapist working with the medically ill when I had moved to Little Rock: I didn't know what to say.

I still can't get that brief encounter out of my mind. But writing, even if it's now after one eighteen at night, does help me to process the event.



# The Letter

---

ANNETTE HOUSE

A Letter came today  
heavy ivory colored paper  
    embossed letterhead  
    hand-canceled stamp

We wish to inform you that  
    death will be coming  
    for you soon

you will however have sufficient time  
    to request a meeting place  
    of your liking

please inform us  
    in a timely way  
    of your chosen locale

On the old train to Upper Egypt?  
In the abandoned embassy's ballroom?  
On the echoing expanse of the Acropolis?

On the hill beside the rose bush  
    at the first house I can remember?  
In the kitchen at the old farmhouse with  
    buttered bread just out of the oven?  
Among my own books searching for  
    a last great read?

Dear Sir  
    After deliberating on this matter  
    I have concluded

you choose  
surprise me



# Unnamed

JAMES CARTER, JR.

---

I prefer not to name it  
If I were to name it  
Agony,  
for example,  
I fear I would breathe it into consciousness  
that I would coax life into insentient talons  
by branding this ache  
I would animate misery  
that would sway with the beat of my stumbles  
whisper  
when I try to ignore the tap, tap, tap  
of sorrow  
paint pain with unrelenting torrents  
that would never cease falling like acid bled from the heavens  
NO!  
I prefer not to name it into life, into my life, into our life  
I would rather extricate from suffocation  
and list onward  
as sadness rolls towards the ossuary of remorse

I prefer not to name it  
Anger  
Torment  
Despair  
If I name it,  
for example,  
Guilt  
I fear I would breathe life into its stone fingers  
by labeling this ache  
I would cajole it to reel with my falters  
distract and misdirect  
when I resolve to ignore the scratch, scratch, scratch  
of rumination  
searing my skin like hot teardrops that never cease falling  
and never soothe  
NO!  
I prefer not to name it into life, into your life, into our life  
I would rather unweave its bind  
and journey forward  
letting sadness roll past the portal of regret



## His Seasons

---

GAY WILLIFORD

The best was summer...

his languid mood  
warm as the August sun—  
guarded self relaxed,  
welcoming chatter,  
inviting measured nearness.

The fall was discouraging...

his shortened discourse  
cooling with autumn winds,  
dry and crisp as fallen leaves,  
chilling as October nights  
pushing me away.

The worst was winter...

his widest distance,  
a solemn, stone-like shadow,  
his terse, sharp mumblings  
frigid as January frost,  
locking me outside.

Spring was hopeful...

his pond ice cracking,  
edges slowly thawing,  
buds of initiated goodwill,  
sprouts of kindly gestures,  
all as capricious as March winds.

Wishful am I...

to think we can connect,  
to believe he has a soul,  
to believe he needs me,  
to keep searching for a bridge  
to span his seasonal spaces.



# Father How Will You Leave This World?

---

ERIKA D. WALKER

Will you lose your breath  
forever, in this cough  
that will not stop?

Will your heart give up, erupt  
into a fury that launches you  
into heaven?

At night, alone  
in your house,  
I wait.

Across town, wires  
clipped to your chest,  
you wait.

Machines measure  
your oxygen, the nurse listens  
for your beating heart.

I listen for the mountain's  
breath, the song of the trout  
we brought back for breakfast.

I remember cold mornings, how  
you taught me to study the water,  
feel for the faint tug on my line.



# The Stone Garden

ALICE MARILYN ABRAMS

---

Assured that no burials were in progress, I slip through the entry gate, bicycle wheels spinning beneath me. The gravel labyrinth, among the tombstones, crackle under my weight...morning sunshine casts shadows...my darker self rides in tandem. The cemetery proves solemn and silent, as chiseled lettering on polished yet weathered granite speaks bravely from a distant era; the stones appear like a gathering of round-shouldered and tipsy old men.

To arrive at the Highline Canal Trail I meander past the graves ornamented with forlorn fading flowers, dated photographs encapsulated in embedded glass frames and carefully carved words mysteriously whispering...words spanning more than a century.

The gathering of the Theis Family tombstones greets me as I turn swiftly and come to an abrupt halt. The stones bear a marking, 1885. An elaborate musical score is carved onto two small stones, perhaps for lost children, just in front of the large granite tombstone with intricately carved letters. I read the words casually...I bike onto the trail.

I am thirty-two.

With each excursion I pay homage to the words. One morning I cautiously make a rubbing of the silent musical score and rekindle the melody, first in my mind, then at the piano...grand scale chords.

As the years elapse I find myself whispering their words to myself.

Sometimes my husband rides and reads with me, and as the years progress, one son, then another and another. Our Sunday safari always begins at the Theis Stone Garden, contemplating words simple yet profound. They become a silent mantra though I do not realize it at the time.

I am forty-two.

As I linger at the stone garden of a Sunday, I sense a gap in what I read. There is more to express, to contemplate. I take the liberty of adding another phrase. This new engraving, is my personal mind-scribe. As the years reel by, other concepts find expression.

---

I am fifty-two.

The gravel path has been paved. I return from the bike trail to a long steep downhill run; no pedaling required. I glance quickly to be sure that no obstacle will impede my run, then surrender to gravity, earth flying, eyes closed, wind streaking through my hair. One second, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten and I emerge from my free flight intact, in front of the Theis Garden. I greet life, vibrant and appreciative.

There are more thoughts to add to the mantra of life...time will add them...I  
ife will add them, you may add them.

I am seventy-seven.

No longer do I speed down hills flying freely with closed eyes.

The Theis garden has been photographed and placed in a computer file.  
The rubbing has been scanned and resides beside it. Words first taken  
from a diligently carved stone, now digitally pollinate cyber space. One need  
not seek out the stone garden to share the reflections of another time,  
but it would be nice to pay a visit.

*I am eighty-eight.*

*Perhaps I will.*

*The Universe our God*

*Nature our Temple*

*Love and Duty our Religion*

*Knowledge our Happiness*

*Beauty our Joy \**

*Wisdom our Fulfillment\**

*Compassion our Hope \**

*And Consolation*

*Death the Dissolution of the Ego*

*and the Return to Eternity*

THEIS tombstone

Fairmount Cemetery

Denver, Colorado

\*Addition



# Hope is the Thing with Feathers

---

ART ELSER

*after Emily Dickinson*

Hope is the plea from a young woman,  
who has a job interview today, for me  
to write a poem about hope, as if that  
might create some magic in her life.

Hope is the sparkle in my dog's eyes  
as he starts jumping when sees me open  
the cellar door where I keep his leash,  
thinking I'll take him for a walk.

Hope is the tulip bulbs I plant in fall  
while the ground is soft enough to dig  
and winter has not yet marched down  
from the mountains on frozen feet.

Hope is the grasp of a toddler's hand  
on his mother's finger, feeling loved  
and protected, as they cross the grass  
in the park to the playground.

Hope is the cry on a black mother's lips  
as she tells her nineteen-year-old son  
to be careful and kisses his cheek as he  
heads out the door for the evening.

Hope is the feet of the desperate souls  
who endure the scorching Chihuahuan  
Desert as they trudge to the wide river  
between Ciudad Juarez and El Paso.

Hope is the feathered thing that perches  
in the soul and sings the tune we want  
to hear, the tune that creates magic  
for our children and those we love.



## Big Red Bear

LISA KURTH

---



# A Cuban Man Playing Solo Guitar

MARK RUSH

---



# Cochleapus

STORM CROWDEN

---



# Waterfall Serenity

ALEXANDRA FRAZIER

---



## A Fleeting Glimpse

GAY WILLIFORD

---

At the nursing home  
she sits by a sunny window,  
eyes empty, staring blankly outside.  
My usual hug and cheek-kiss greeting  
evoke no response, no smile,  
no recognition of me, her daughter.

I busy myself with setting out our ritual,  
teatime, my last-hope tactic  
for reaching into her clouded memory  
and arousing a spark of awareness.

Two rose patterned china teacups  
a small bowl of sugar cubes  
petite sterling tongs  
grandma's delicate silver teaspoons  
lace-edged napkins  
a glass plate of lemon wafers  
a thermos of hot tea

Pouring her favorite raspberry tea  
I glance down at her face,  
searching for any slight reaction.  
It isn't until I place the tongs  
in her frail hand and the sugar bowl before her  
that she seems to come awake.  
As two cubes are grasped  
she looks up at me,  
a warm glint in her eyes  
igniting a sweet grin.

I joyfully smile back,  
cherishing this rare moment—  
my visitation reward when briefly  
our family history is rejoined.



# Julien's Castle: The Way of Grief

NANCY SHARP

---

He was young and French. Perhaps he didn't understand. "I said I'm widowed," loud enough this time to make myself perfectly clear. "Okay. So?" he asked, with a bemused smile.

"And I have three-year-old twins."

I expected him to run. Hadn't I frightened him away?

"What are you doing here," he wanted to know, the crisp night air making some moke between us as he spoke. We stood under a streetlight, the din of a raucous Oktoberfest party at Zum Schneider, an indoor Bavarian biergarten in lower Manhattan, still in earshot.

It was a curious question.

I might have told him that I was only escorting my friend Lisa that night because Lisa was missing Germany, or that I didn't actually drink beer, or that I was obviously too old for him, which if he only stopped to look, he would see.

The eye sees what it wants to.

"No, really, what are you doing here?" he asked again, sweeter this time.

He seemed to be looking through me. It was piercing without being lewd.

The heat of his gaze embarrassed me and I blushed.

"How old are you?" I blurted out.

"Twenty-seven. And you?"

"How old do you think I am?"

He cocked his head to the right, reddish-brown curls sweeping his ear. He was fixing hard on my face, his hazel eyes flickering under the street lamps.

"Twenty-nine."

"That works."

---

And yet, crisp jeans and glossy lipstick did nothing to mask what little identity I felt beyond widowhood, even now, nineteen months after Brett died. Had he not been so boyishly handsome, I might have been the one to walk away. Dropping the Widow-Bomb on a twenty-seven-year-old was bound to burst this flirtatious bubble so what exactly was he waiting for?

I was certain he would leave, perhaps even stagger backwards and say, “Well, nice meeting you,” heels moving quickly as he politely returned to his drunken friends. Julien foiled all my preconceived judgments. He planned a romantic first date to a downtown French bistro. He wore a fine wool sports coat and loafers; I wore a rose knit top that revealed my neckline. His mother was a painter like mine. He wanted to know about my writing life and experiences working with UNICEF, where I had met Audrey Hepburn and traveled to Sarajevo and Myanmar. He patiently explained his job as a hedge fund trader though derivatives and arbitrage interested me far less than the buttery green of his eyes and full lips.

We fell into a quick and passionate romance. Julien was different, and not just because he was young. True, the idea that I was romantically involved with a boy-man twelve years my junior shed a mythical decade from my life. But with him I could forget all that had happened.

\* \* \*

Everything hurt after Brett lost his lengthy battle with cancer. My skull. My teeth. My calves. My brain was like a burst bag of frozen peas. The peas, which were my thoughts, scattered like loose pellets and jangled my insides like mini-glaciers. Life sucked me under the covers and for many days it was hard to see a future beyond my blue comforter.

A few times, at especially bad moments, I asked my mother to take the twins. This only intensified my helplessness and guilt because the children needed me. They needed me to dress and feed and take them to school, to play hide and seek, and chase them on the tot lot in Riverside Park. They needed for me, their mother and only parent, to absorb all the hurt and terror that they could and could not express.

I did feel and act crazy, the way the bereaved report. The smallest of things, like losing my glass of water, rattled me. I'd walk from room to room in our apartment, positive I'd left it on the windowsill, or on the bathroom sink, feeling as lost as the very glass I was searching for. I put milk in the pantry, eggs in the freezer, and nearly started a fire in the microwave. But life pressed on—small children and the responsibility of work made sure of that—

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*continued on next page...*

so somehow, I managed to function in this altered state. I went back to work at a public relations agency where I had launched my career more than a decade earlier because we needed health insurance. One day I sat in my boss' office horrified that I saw two of her—two blond heads seated on the same executive chair.

Being widowed at thirty-seven with toddler twins was the worst sort of crossroads. You are old beyond your years—overnight you become the friend with the same life experience as a grandparent—and yet you are still young enough to want a different future. More than anything you'd like to live a 2nd love again but you just don't know where to place yourself in this new world order. Case in point: you are the youngest person by decades in your bereavement group. A ninety-seven-year-old sweetheart named Ben is the person you feel closest to in the group; he is mourning the death of his wife of sixty years. How can anyone in such company relate to potty training?

\*\*\*

I fell hard for Julien because he dared me to dream. With him, I felt sexy and vibrant. Each morning, with my twins scampering around, I turned on my computer to find a "good morning beauty" email, a new one each day. Like a poet, he wrote his desires and sometimes even rhapsodized about butterflies in purple prose that I took to heart despite its naiveté. We went for long walks through Central Park, and once to the Morgan Museum so that he could show me his favorite Titian art. With the bright colors of autumn as our backdrop, he loved to run his long fingers through my hair and whisper French in my ear, some of which I understood, most of which I didn't, nor did I care.

A few times he came for dinner—but only after I'd shelved some of our family photographs and put the twins to bed. I remember the gentle way he crept into their room to watch them sleep, lingering there until I tugged his arm. "Cherie, they are so beautiful, just like you," he mouthed. I led him back into the bedroom and he cupped the palm of his hand against my cheek, smiling through me, for what felt like minutes. He wanted to make love on the rug so that the ambient light from West 104th Street splayed across our bodies. He kissed every inch of me, naming my body parts in French. I didn't let him stay the night, to protect both of us from the reality of my life hours later—diapering my daughter, stepping over my son's trucks, the race to preschool. Had he asked me that night to marry him who knows what I might have said.

Whenever Julien asked, I slipped into his world, ready to escape mine. He had a roommate (a roommate!) and lived downtown. We had long talks about faith, spirituality and sex on the chair and a half in his living room. He was a brooder, dark and sensuous in temperament. He fretted about the world, about work,

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about his disposition. I could easily see becoming a mother figure to him, which I fought against but ultimately that was all part of the attraction. I wanted what he had to give: youth, sex, hope. He wanted what I offered: wisdom, maturity, experience. He had no idea what a gift he gave me—to feel alive and whole again, in body and spirit. Julien, Julien I said aloud to myself like an infatuated teenager. The sound of his name rolled off my tongue as I lay in bed at night. I even let myself dream of being with him in France and of spending summers at his family's castle.

It wouldn't last. About a month after we started dating, my young prince lost interest.

When he finally ended it one Saturday night after a distant evening together, it was as if all the grief of the past nine years collided. We both cried. He was losing, too. "So why are you doing this?" I kept asking, reality blurring as it had done so often since Brett's death. Weeks after the break-up I had to remind myself that no, I was not right back where I was before, that even though the two losses melded together like pools of rainwater, losing Julien was not nearly the same thing as losing Brett. One loss compounded the other, one month morphed into nine years, one sweet tease rubbed out after a long death. There was no separation, no sense of person, no boundaries between the living and the dead.

This is the way of grief. It follows closely and attends.



## Reflections from a Life in Practice: Memories

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BRIAN BACAK

I've been practicing family medicine for 22 years. Hazel stands out to me against a tableau of individual patients and their memories. Impressive in her resolve in overcoming adversity, I doubt she was an inch taller than five-two. Her inner strength initially seemed hidden by her small frame and unimposing presence. Until I started to talk with her. Learning about the tattoo on her arm. It's what we started talking about at her first visit with me. More specifically, the number stenciled on her forearm that she had carried with her for 58 years.

An elderly lady, in her 70's at the time, Hazel had been imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II as a child. She relocated after the war to the southern part of the United States, and by the time I first met her, she'd been an established patient at our clinic for many years. As a family physician in the US Army, I saw her once every couple of months in our clinic for several years. We discussed her hypertension, her osteoporosis, and her knitting. We discussed a few details from the war as time went by—notably the death of her sister and other family members at the hands of the Nazis. Understandably, our conversations drifted around many of the specifics, but what came through time and time again was the utter fear she experienced during that time in her life and how it shaped her present-day reality. During the time I worked with her, she was very active in her synagogue, and took great pride in her heritage and her relationship with God.

As we spoke over the years, I learned about her thoughts on growing older, the things that made her laugh, and the things that made her angry. One event that had us both laughing was the unfortunate time she became trapped in her synagogue services. After temple services had concluded, and everyone else had filed out, she emerged from the bathroom and set off the alarm. Such a thing had never happened to her, and her first thought was "how embarrassing." While she could appreciate the humor, the event also unmasked a deep fear for her. The local police department, responding to the alarm, wrenched her arms behind her and handcuffed her while awaiting the rabbi. This was profoundly terrifying for her, as that represented a loss of freedom she had not experienced since the days of her imprisonment. We spoke often about this incident and about her overwhelming desire for freedom: never again to be put in captivity, imprisoned, unable to move, and forced against her will to do the bidding of others.

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Several years after first awkward conversations about her tattoo, its history collided with my present. While teaching in the clinic, the residents on our inpatient service let me know that Hazel had been admitted to the Intensive Care Unit after suffering a massive stroke. After rounding on her in the hospital, it became clear to me that her prognosis was indeed grim. Unconscious, she had radiologic evidence of significant damage, and had lost the ability to breathe on her own. At this point, normally we would have called a family conference to go through the patient's prognosis and disposition filtered through their family's wishes about what they and the patient would have wanted.

This was different. Hazel had no surviving family. She didn't have clear advance directives. She hadn't discussed her wishes with her rabbi. As the ethics consultation evolved, however, it became clear that she had been able to express her wishes for care to someone—me. It was as if she'd been preparing me for what to say, and what to do, when she no longer had a voice.

I was able to speak up for Hazel that fateful morning. Against imprisonment. Against being held in a suspended state of animation against her will. Against being strapped down. Against the forced indignity of being without clothes and without control of bodily functions. No doubts and no hesitation about how she wanted to depart this world.

That conversation still holds a place in my heart. The memory of speaking with the ethics committee by her bedside is of time standing still. Of the hum of machines, the smell of the ICU, and her frailty under the sheets. Looking back, it is the memory of a higher calling. They say that the value of Family Medicine lies in longitudinal continuity with patients over time—continuity that fills the emotional void and that helps patients feel safe in that very private of spaces, the exam room. I'd like to say that I fulfilled the role that Hazel deserved from her personal physician. I hope that I provided for her the dignity, love, and compassion borne out of my responsibility to do the right thing for her as her physician and her friend. I can say with certainty that never have I been more humbled in my calling as a family physician than I was on that very routine, yet singularly unique, hospital day.



# Laminated Menus

SPENCER POORE

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## Chapter 1:

He had a way about him as he churned the eggs against the skillet, watching the flow of yolk float and slap the iron as it thickened itself together. I felt him bury himself in this process, working in a rhythm that created little room for error. He moved amongst the gas fumes that distorted the air around him, giving an almost spiritual contour to his sun-soaked skin. He muttered a word or two amidst his rhythm, but seemed to be saying it from another face to help hide the world he had become. I could hear the rain pouring down against the hot asphalt outside as the steam coated the windows around him. Thunder cracked as light filled the diner and echoed off the fog above the grill. It was in this fraction of a second that he became illuminated, greased to a holy and spiritual shine that hung in the air long enough to sting the back of your throat. Soon it was gone, but we knew we saw it and he too knew what he'd become. We paid our bill and rushed into the downpour towards our car. As we pulled away, I could see the glow of the man shining through the stain glass portraits of that highway diner. I wanted to say I could see him smiling, but in the end I knew he wasn't. I pulled my belt tight across my chest and closed my eyes with my head against the rain-dripped window. I wondered what I'd dream about tonight as I drifted off to sleep in the hum and flow of an Arizona downpour.

## Chapter 2:

It stands on the back of your neck, a 5:30am sugar cane flat  
Running under the highway  
Between islands of salt.  
I stood in the parking lot as my breath floated up around the neon,  
Fogging up the windows as my hands stopped moving.  
I looked out of you and saw myself,  
Twice.

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### Chapter 3:

I said 'piano' between my teeth as I thought of you in the Chicago theatre with your hands behind your head watching the screen come down. You ate all your candy in the bathroom waiting on the show to start because she told you that you had to get there early.

She put everything on your waffle and called you out because you couldn't look away. You ran to the bathroom and slipped on the wet floor sign as you rounded the corner. Everyone laughed. The manager called the police.

There is a picture of you looking out the car window like you know something we don't, except in reality you really had to go to the bathroom and were so impatient I thought you were going to have a panic attack. Check one two, she said, reading French poetry in Arkansas while talking about Atlanta over and over again.

You slept with the blankets on one side of the bed.

You told me I should get it checked out.

It could be everything.



## Boundaries

AMANDA F. TOMPKINS

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I met Mr. O when he was admitted to my Internal Medicine inpatient team during my first week of my third year of medical school.

Third Year: the year I had been waiting for. I had completed two years with my nose in books and studying for tests and this monotony had left me starved for patient interactions. And now, as a longitudinal student, I would be able to follow Mr. O's case throughout the academic year.

When I first met him, Mr. O had just had a near-death ICU hospitalization for a GI bleed and was on our service for about one more week while he stabilized. During that week, he and I spent hours chatting in his hospital room. Day after day, we talked about his health, but also about his drinking, what life was like for him on the streets and how much he wanted a relationship with his adult children. He told me about how he was teaching his youngest son, a teenager, how to box. And how he would surprise and embarrass his daughter at her job at the local pharmacy. He told me about his ex-wife; still after all these years, he described her as his best friend. He regretted not being able to give up drinking for her.

On discharge, he told me that he was done drinking. It was going to be hard, but he felt optimistic. He had already done irreversible damage to his liver and GI tract but as I reported to my team on that last day of his admission, I felt optimistic, too. I told them, "I don't know- I think he can do it this time." My attending laughed and gave me a one-armed, sideways hug. "That's great Amanda. I'm glad you're so optimistic right now." I felt irritated.

In the months that followed, I couldn't catch up with Mr. O. He "No-Showed" an ophthalmology appointment, a GI appointment, a PCP appointment. My calls went straight to voicemail. And then I saw a note from an outside hospital populate to his chart. He had been admitted for intoxication and GI bleed again. I felt defensive as I read the notes about his abrasiveness with staff. I cringed as I saw he had left "Against Medical Advice".

Today, I woke up, checked the chart and saw Mr. O had been admitted, yet again. Throughout the day, I had been checking on his chart which was looking more and more hopeless and grim. Mr. O was now alone and intubated, gravely ill and with his Total Bilirubin rising by the day. Another GI bleed, another intubation. I thought to myself. But I should go see him. I should go see my patient.

As I walked across the hospital to see him, I remembered all these interactions. I wondered what I was doing. He was intubated, it didn't matter if I went to see him or not. As I rounded the corner approaching his room, feeling completely foolish, I was surprised to see a small woman standing by his bedside, holding up a homemade display of pictures and words of love.

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It was his ex-wife, Rosa. I knocked on the door frame quietly and asked her if I could come in. She was grateful for the company and proceeded to tell me about their life and the happy times they'd had together. I looked down at the polaroids on the small display she had made. He looked almost handsome. Without the puffy, swollen facial features, yellowed skin and distended belly I had come to know, there was a life in his eyes I had never seen before. Pictures of a young, happy man playing with his small children and smoking with friends. She gently stroked his hair as she talked about their life together and cried. Now, his skin looked waxy and I could see his yellow sclera through a half-opening eye. His brow furrowed slightly anytime she took her hand away from his forehead. She asked me if it was her fault. "I should have stayed with him" she said through the tears. "He could have gotten better if I hadn't left him." I held her hand.

That weekend, Mr. O was extubated and moved to the floor. His family, had decided to pursue comfort care and to spend some time with him while he was still awake and alert. I went to go see them before it was too late to talk to him. When Rosa saw me, she was thrilled I had made it back to see him. She told me how well he was doing and how she felt sure that he was going to get better. She wanted him to come home with her so she could get him healthy once again. Meanwhile, I could see his vital signs deteriorating as the nurses charted one bloody stool after another.

He was dying.

I met his adult children. They seemed despondent and detached. They asked me about medical school and how I was enjoying it. In that moment, I felt I was carrying more sadness in that space than they did. I looked at them and saw the years of dysfunctional parenting, pain and resentment etched onto their faces. I was even more grateful for Rosa and her affection for Mr. O, even if it came from a place of guilt or misinformation. He died the next day.

I called Rosa several days later to express my condolences and see how she was doing. "Thank you so much. It meant so much to me to know that he had someone at the hospital who really cared about him. Are you there for the rest of the year? Maybe we can get together and chat sometime. It would mean so much to me."

I froze. Where is the boundary? Is it okay for me to do this? She may already struggle with codependency- could I be stepping into a toxic dynamic? Or would it be healing for us both to talk about the short, pain-filled life that Mr. O lived. Here was a human seeking out true connection and I felt that I needed to take a step back and consider my professional role. Now that our patient, our friend, had died, was there still a role for me to play?

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*continued on next page...*

I loved being able to talk openly and bluntly with Mr. O about his substance use. I loved being present with him and his family at the end of his life and getting to meet his children; a great source of pride for him despite all the pain wrapped up in those relationships. I loved being a support for his family members. I loved building the trust and connection with someone who was often described as abrasive or aggressive by other members of the care team.

And I hated this reminder that this connection was artificial in some way. I was able to walk into his hospital room without carrying the pain, hurt and anger that his children did. I didn't carry guilt or grief or misguided hope. I carried sadness, compassion and no baggage.

Perhaps this is the power of boundaries. That we can stand with someone through their struggle and still let their dysfunction be their own dysfunction. As a human, I'm liable to pain and struggle, but as a physician, can I be excused from it? Giving me the power to love patients unconditionally because I'm not weighted down with the baggage that true connection and messy, true relationship can bring?



# Life is Mysterious

MIREYA ORTIZ

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Leaves have fallen  
imminent arrival of winter,  
the branches are dancing gracefully.  
From my window I can see  
streams full of stars.  
Turning and twisting in the air  
sweet thoughts emerged  
in the silent of this room,  
each night is a poem of hope.  
Every life is mysterious  
as the vast Universe.



# The Privilege of a Broken Heart

AMANDA F. TOMPKINS

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How many of you have sat in a quiet room with a teenager as she told the story of her abuse.

Who has watched as flesh has been torn open or as a fresh, new, small human has taken their first of what will be millions of breaths in this world.

Who has held the wrinkled, cold hand of a woman who didn't have enough time to see her dreams come to life.

Have you watched as a family heard the news of their dear loved one's final moments?

Have you been the one to tell them?

Was it you who told that man that he was cancer free? That he would walk his daughter down the aisle? That he would be a father at all? At last?

I know you have cried for the brokenness you've seen. You have questioned the meaning of suffering. You have heard a story that has made your heart sick, has made your stomach turn, has made your soul ignite with anger.

The privilege in these scenes is beyond what we can even grasp in the moment.

Daily, we ache with the pain of witness.

We weep in rooms filled with unspeakable sorrow.

We dance within the purest moments of complete joy.

We bring news of the human experience.

We work to keep disease at bay.

We strive to make life its best, its greatest... its fullest.

The privilege of a broken heart is to witness to what it is to be human.

It is a rare and precious honor.

And it still hurts like hell.

To engage with it day after day. Night after night. Year after year.

To remember that Life is a gift.

And Death is a certainty.

Perhaps others can keep the knowledge of death buried and hidden from their own conscious mind.

If they make a mistake, it won't kill anyone, won't destroy a family or damage the trusting, delicate soul of a fellow human.

I am only one person.

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I have no cloak for protecting myself from the darkness of this world.  
And.  
I am grateful.  
I am privileged.  
To engage with the brokenness.  
To see the best and the worst of life and to love people deeply and completely.

My heart is broken and I will keep loving the people I care for.  
I can only hope that my heart continues to break.  
Or at least continues to feel.  
Because it is only with this humility and brokenness that we can rightfully  
claim our place as mediators of this journey, honoring the human experience.  
In all its sorrow, pain, joy and innocence.

Pure and broken.  
Painful and complete.  
This is life.  
And it is a privilege to know the heartbreak of it.  
Completely.



## Comfortably Numb

ERIC OLSON AND CARRIE KNOWLTON

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My Mom got a call one morning in August, 2016, that her brother, Eric, was found dead in the parking lot of the motel in Kalamazoo, Michigan he had been living in. He died of a prescription drug and alcohol overdose. No one was sure quite when, probably in the middle of the night a few hours before he was found. He had just been discharged from a long-term care facility and had moved into this hotel that was right next to a liquor store. He had been treated for esophageal cancer and his pharynx had been removed a few years earlier - he communicated mostly with a voice software installed on a tablet someone had given him and a pad of paper. He was also an alcoholic and an addict.

In 1972, Eric was 12 years old and his older brother, Denny, was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Denny was 17. He lived for 11 years in my grandparent's house, dying of cancer while Eric grew up right next to him. Dilaudid and morphine were easy to come by, and nobody noticed if a little extra was missing. They used to listen to Pink Floyd records together and get high. Their favorite song was Comfortably Numb.

Eric was also an amazing musician. I was 7 when Denny died, so I can remember hearing Pink Floyd blasting from Denny's room, and I remember hearing Eric practice the guitar solo over and over and over again from his room in the attic and knowing how good he was, even back then. He was in a band that played bars all over Southwest Michigan, and he never went anywhere without a guitar, even when he was really sick, at the end. He said my Grandma cried the first time she heard him play that song. I loved that about him, even through all the other things that were hard to love, sometimes. When my Mom and I cleaned out his motel room, we found a paper bag full of meds that he was discharged with. Mostly benzos and mood stabilizers. A lot of the lorazepam was missing, and there was a half empty handle of vodka by his bed. He had also just bought a new toothbrush and some toothpaste. It didn't seem like he was planning on dying that night. His beautiful creative, sick brain turned his heart inside out, and he just wanted to stop feeling it and be numb. That's how he died, and I'm glad he's not hurting anymore. He was lost to everyone who loved him a long time before he died. What a shame that is when he could still be feeling music and making it to heal the rest of us. He left us this memoir that he wrote on the back of napkins and old receipts and hospital discharge paperwork. He wanted it to be shared, so here are parts of it, for you.



I FUCKING GO YOU GURE -  
HE DONT KNOW I SHOOTING  
UP HIS DRUGS. MAYBE HE  
DOES. IM FREAKIN NOW (50)  
I GRAB GUITAR PUT ON  
NEIL YOUNG AND SHOW  
HIM THE CHORDS CUZ  
NO WAY I TELLING  
I A FUCKING DRUG ADDICT.  
HE KNOWS. BUT HE DYING  
HE CANT HELP KIL BRO.  
THANK GOD FOR HASH OIL  
WE GOT STOMD AND -  
NO MORE CONVERSATION  
I WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO  
COULD ENTER DENNY ROOM  
AT ANYTIME. NOT EVEN MY  
MOM OR DAD COULD, BUT I  
JUST WALK IN AN SAY  
HEY YOU. SOMETIMES HE  
LOOKED SO BAD I HAD TO TURN  
AROUND AND SAY I SEE YA  
LATER DENNY. GH BTW  
YOU GOT SOME DILAUDID  
I GOT A HEADACHE  
I WAS A DRUG ADDICT REMEMBER

## 08 Phalanx

PAUL FLIPPEN

Dad takes a lot of pills.

Every meal, a phalanx of small colored dots next to the placemat.

Most taken with food, Dad lays them out in advance.

He once barked at my nephew for getting too close to his pills. I remember mostly because of the injustice. The boy was looking. Just looking, with understandable curiosity at the battalion of pharmaceuticals. Dad saw him get close and yelled, "No!" The command went beyond legitimate concern, colliding headlong into anger. Not an alarmed "it isn't safe to mess with those," but a righteous indignation that bordered on hate. My nephew retreated.

I can't help but wonder at the vehemence.

How much camouflaged shame? Shame of leaving dangerous chemicals within easy reach of children? Never occurs to Dad to adjust his habits to accommodate others. Shame of being so broken, so less than invulnerable? Perhaps. Angry at a body that failed to meet his standards? At pain that punishes constantly?

Dad's medical regimen treats symptoms, never addressing root causes.



## Boats

SERAPIO M. BACA

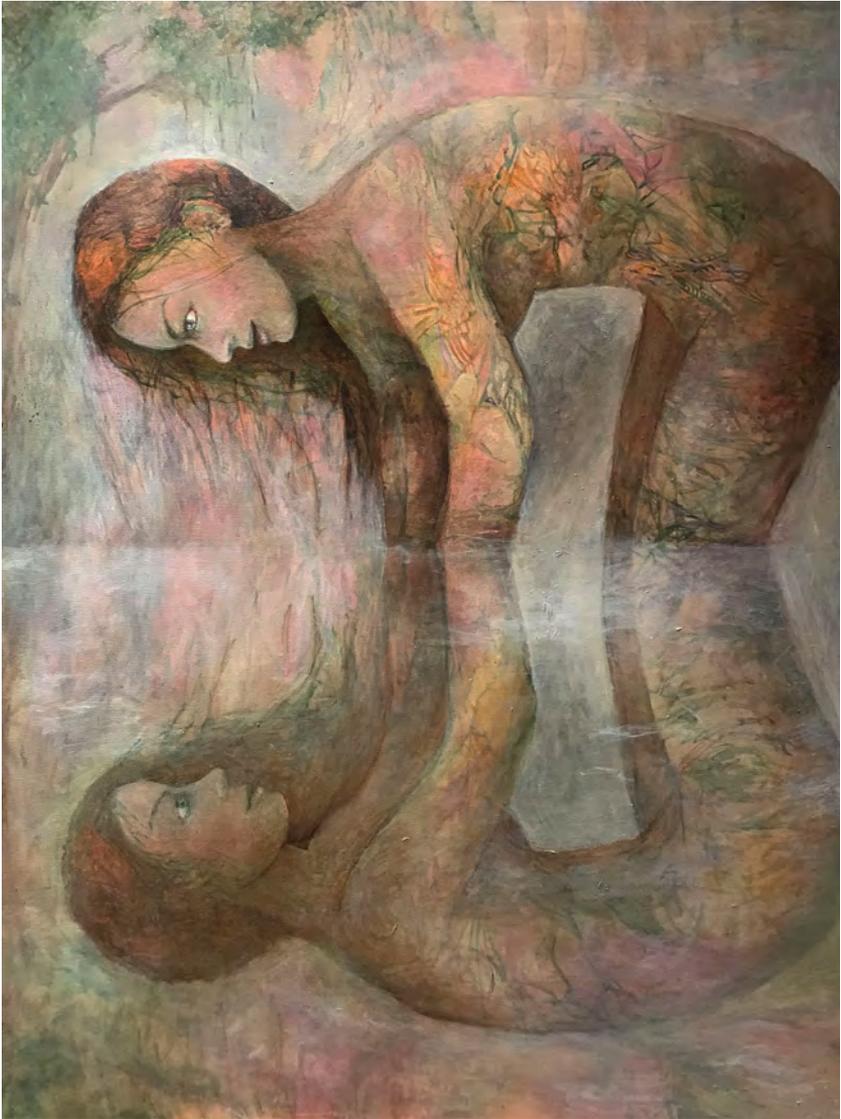
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# Early Morning Reflection

JAIME BELKIND-GERSON

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# Hey Ma,

NICK WILLIAMS

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Hey Ma,  
I know it's been a week of two  
Since the last time I called  
And told you the truth.  
I know you are busy  
And, yeah, I've kept busy too,  
But I'm hurtin'  
And I'm bleedin'  
And I don't know what to do.  
So, please pick up,  
Cause it's raining and  
The water's not the only one  
Blue.

Hey Ma,  
I'm in need of a hug.  
One arm around my back  
And one holdin' my head up.  
Cause my neck ain't used  
To looking so down.  
And my muscles have had enough.  
No smile,  
No frown.  
Just a half-hearted gaze  
Looking out,  
But never around.

Hey Ma,  
I'm tired of drownin'  
And screamin'  
About my day that's choking chins  
And losing meaning.  
Yeah, I got friends,  
But they got lives,  
And wives,  
And cheer.  
Yeah, I got you and the family,  
But no one that's near.  
So, call me back when you get this,  
Cause, your voice is a blessing to my  
ears.

Hey Ma,  
I finally reached out.  
I found a voice  
Followed by a friend  
That listened to my internal shouts.  
Pulled me from drownin'  
And stopped me from screamin'  
Till I forgot what it was even about.  
And the reason I'm callin'  
Is to stop you from ballin'  
Cause you didn't know what to do.  
Yeah Ma, I got me an outlet  
But that won't stop me  
From reaching out back to you.



## What Kind of Doctor?

AMANDA F. TOMPKINS

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We proceed around the table answering the age old question “What specialty are you thinking of going into?”. I am realizing that the answers have become much more pointed than at the start of our third year of medical school just six months ago. We used to say “Med-Peds or OB/Gyn” and “Emergency... or maybe Surgery” but now we know the stark differences between those specialties. We now know ourselves in those environments. We have a clearer vision of our futures and yet the details still elude us.

When the person to my left is done giving her answer I say “Inpatient Internal Medicine. Maybe Palliative Care or Addiction... maybe GI” This is as detailed as I can be right now. I silently look to my right for the next confused answer and I feel the frustration with how empty this feels. In these scenarios it would be so much more real if we were to go around the table and ask, “What are your fears? What are you still figuring out?”

Because what I really want to talk about is not how narrow I have come to be about my future specialty, but I want to talk about my current crisis. My current heartache. The last patient I really looked into the heart of and who made me question myself and my future trajectory.

I want to talk about the family I had to report to child protective services. And I want to talk about how much that has made me question my ability to work with high-risk populations. I want to talk about the homeless man I had to tell I wouldn't be able to be at his surgery because of my winter break... knowing that he wouldn't have visitors during his entire stay. I want to talk about the patient with Cerebral Palsy who I accompanied to her pre-operative appointment. We discussed religion, philosophy and her multiple degrees and then I was treated as her aide or caregiver when the docs walked in the room. She can talk, you know. She may have CP, but she's also brilliant. My mind had spun in helpless anger and despair.

Ask me what is in my heart.  
Don't ask me what kind of doctor I want to be.  
I want to be a good doctor.  
I want to know how much I am willing to sacrifice for that.

I have loved this opportunity in third year to sit at bedsides and in exam rooms listening to the heartbreaking stories of my patients. I have loved mundane, simple conversations and opportunities to show basic kindness and care. I have embraced incredible opportunities to discover intense bereavement within a chief complaint of “hypertension follow-up”.

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Each day I feel the weight grow heavier. I feel I am single-handedly responsible for discovering the hidden stories. I have more time and less responsibility than anyone else on this care team, I challenge myself. My notes don't even count for billing. If I can spend a little more time, build a little more rapport, instill a little more trust, perhaps I can uncover that elusive bit of information or emotion that is the key to this person in front of me.

Slowly over the months, this has evolved into a toxic process. I might be the only one evolved into If I don't, no one will which evolved into late nights sitting with my patient in the Emergency Department, sacrificing precious study time for the opportunity to go spend the evening at the hospital, heading home with my patients on my mind, hours of pre-charting hoping to find that one elusive bit of information that helped me connect better or understand better.

My grades never suffered, but my heart did.

My partner became tired of hearing the stories and of watching me bear the weight of it.

My budget weakened as I gave up on meal prep.

My writing, my friends, my family all took a backseat.

Because someday, I'll be a resident and I won't have the time to dive in like this. I'll be an attending and my responsibility will be so high that clinical details and technical skill might just make me forget the personhood of the individual in front of me. I might forget the power of the hidden secrets. I might forget what it's like to take 40 minutes with the hypertension follow-up patient who just lost her grandson.

In that moment she doesn't need your skill or your knowledge.

She needs you to stop typing and hold her hand.

It is a profound and sacred privilege to sit in these rooms, to hear these stories, to watch people die and to watch people be born. To hear about their relapse, their fears, their sadness, their worries. It is a deep responsibility to hold human stories and witness the complete and broken human condition. I don't want to forget that.

That is the kind of doctor I want to be. The kind of doctor who remembers.



## Down for the Count

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LIZ BETZ

The Grief Group or as we call them *the society of the damned* have lots of suggestions. Lists of ten help. Life is more than the event.

1. Day that changed everything.
2. Years ago.
3. Number dead.

How can we move beyond this?

Here. Backwards.

Me, Brian, my wife Ann.

Ten Thousand regrets.

Nine separate applications for assistance.

Eight years a military family.

Seven? Six, five or four? Times in the news headlines.

Three dead.

Two left here in our home of forty-five years.

Someone cleaned up after.

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It happened here but we don't know what it looked like. We can't move, can't afford to but we don't live here anymore. It's not living, it's not death. Here in each room is a shadow of death.

We're too dammed for the group. They've asked that we find help somewhere else. No suggestions where. We overshadow everyone else, those who can be helped, their wounds hopeful. We are raw, bleeding.

We try to keep going one day at a time. Two neighbors who still look us in the eye. Three that have moved away from us. Four times we've excluded from events where once we would have been welcome. Five minutes of normal too much to ask.

One fatality inquiry. A second Lawyer. Three determinations - the quality of the mental health services available. Whether occupational stress was recognized by the health-care providers. Did the military culture contribute to his illness?

One month, two weeks, three days until they answer. But we already know. PTSD destroys. Failed. No cage for the demons, no stop for the rage. Fucked. One funeral - three caskets. Our granddaughter, our daughter, and our soldier gone.

Forever.



## Heartbeats

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RYAN KAMMEYER

“Start at the level of the xiphoid process, then go down to the mid-axillary line.”

I felt the cold gel on my ribcage, and after several seconds of repositioning the probe, my liver and right kidney popped into view.

“Lucky you, it looks like you have both of your kidneys. And your liver isn’t as bad off as we might think.” I was more relieved than I cared to admit that my anatomy didn’t hold any surprises for us.

I hadn’t wanted to be the volunteer body for the ultrasound training, but I hated waiting awkwardly around a table until someone stepped in.

“Hold the probe overhand and point under the xiphoid.”

I was surprised by my heart’s appearance on the screen. We had done another ultrasound training a month prior, and my heart had showed up crisp that time, the valves flapping with each beat. This time, I could only see a faint, fuzzy outline of my heart, barely enough to see its beating motion. I wondered if these machines were different, or whether the other resident’s technique needed more practice.

At the end of the training, I stuffed a chocolate chip cookie in my coat pocket, popped open a Coke, and walked across the street for the appointment.

I had been scared the first time I listened to my wife’s heart. Starting my second year of medical school at the time, I had only used my stethoscope a handful of times and took pride in its application and its novelty. My wife and I had been dating a few months, and we were still in the joy of discovering all the quirks of the other. When she mentioned wanting to hear her own heartbeat, I jumped at the chance of a new form of intimacy.

Placing the stethoscope with a playful demeanor, my face fell as I heard her heart skipping beats. I spent the next few hours unable to sleep. I scrutinized all of my medical textbooks and convinced myself that her heartbeats were a normal variant, that we had nothing to worry about.

The experience impacted my life in two important ways. First, I knew that to be so worried about her and her future meant that I was really worried about us and our future. Second, I vowed to never listen to a friend or family member again after the scare I had given myself. A little knowledge was a dangerous thing.

---

A few years later, we were married and living in a new city, away from our families and our old friends. I was in the middle of my second year of residency, and she was continuing her work as a teacher. My head caught in other thoughts as usual, I almost didn't hear her casual mention of us as parents. It took both the brightness shining in her eyes and the sight of the pregnancy test to fully comprehend. Once it processed, I quickly calculated how far along the pregnancy was. I inventoried the vitamins in our house, read up on folic acid recommendations, and went out to buy prenatal vitamins that night when I was unsatisfied with the stock we had at home, assuredly a common response for all first-time fathers.

I met my wife at the door of the Midwifery Center with an uneasy smile on my face.

"You're drinking a Coke, knowing I can't have one?" she queried with an accusatory glance at my drink.

I pulled out the cookie and handed it to her. "I get the Coke, you get the cookie. Is that fair?"

She didn't reply but took a bite and smiled. She had given up a number of foods for the pregnancy, including her beloved Diet Coke, but chocolate was not among them. A few days prior, I bought a pint of chocolate heavy Ben and Jerry's at her request that vanished in two days. Flowers, also present, were less appreciated.

Being called by the ultrasound technician, my wife jumped up and walked purposefully towards the back office. Unable to match her stride, I fumbled my way through the door as it was closing. The tech gave a quizzical stare at my chest and let me through. Looking down and realizing my ID badge was still hanging around my neck, I quickly stuffed it in my bag.

Holding my wife's hand, I watched the ultrasound tech make her measurements of our fetus. Initially genial, the tech remained tight-lipped after starting the exam, with only occasional questions.

"What are your dates?"

"Have you had any cramping?"

"What about bleeding?"

---

*continued on next page...*

As the questions switched from innocuous to ominous, I tried not to overthink the questions or the images I was seeing. At the end of the session, the tech flipped the ultrasound into M-mode, a common way to track the movements of a tiny heartbeat.

My chest and my hand involuntarily tightened as I watched the lines scroll past without change. I made a concerted effort to relax my hand slowly, hoping my wife didn't notice the change in grip.

"Are we able to hear the heartbeat?" my wife asked as the tech finished up.

She reassured us that based on the measurements that she had made, there might not be a heartbeat at this stage in pregnancy, and that the radiologist would be in soon to discuss the findings. She left the room quickly. As she closed the exam room door, my eyes remained fixed to the faint glow of the measurements left up on the ultrasound screen.

The next hour passed in a haze of half-hearted attempts by the radiologist and the midwife to reassure us. Calm mentions of "spontaneous abortion" and instructions on planning for such were floated in between reassurances and the scheduling of follow-up tests.

In their medical knowledge, the lack of a heartbeat couldn't be conclusive without additional data points. To those of us who had been with the pregnancy from the start, however, the meaning was clear. Their eyes gave away the future their mouths were reluctant to commit to.

Leaving the office, my wife again exceeded my stride, requiring me to grab her hand to prevent her from leaving me behind. I gave her a long embrace before feeling spots of damp cloth against my chest. I asked what I could do.

"French fries" she said.

Pulling up to our house, I found my wife's car sitting in our driveway, the headlights still on. I knocked on the window, opened up the passenger side door and sat down on top of a stack of her papers and school supplies. I stuck a fry in her mouth, put my arm around her and sat in the reflection of the headlights against our house windows until I could coax her inside.

Sitting down next to my wife on our sofa, I reached into the bag to pull out the fries so she had easier access to them, only to find that they had already vanished without my assistance. I slowly ate my value menu sandwiches, a cheap comfort food routine I had established in med school.

---

My wife was the first to break the silence. “Can I have a bite of the McChicken?”

I offered it with feigned reluctance and was rewarded with a wavering smile on her face.

“We will make great parents someday,” I reassured her.  
“Someday. I don’t want it to be ‘Someday.’”

The dull oceans swirling in her eyes were finally freed. Her weeping was interrupted by sharp inhalations and gasping, trying to catch her breath. With my face touching hers, her tears became my own. I stroked her hair, murmured soft declarations of love, and tried to match her breathing with my own, until her gasping subsided.

Placing my head on her chest and closing my eyes, I heard a familiar rhythm, faint, but steady.



## Haiku to Cancer

PHILIP "FLIPP" SHERENGOS

---

Red laceleaf shrivels  
Blemished pears rot at the seed  
Dank flesh radiates



## 2,015

EMILY LEFFERTS

---

I've never cared for a patient

At least, not directly

But in about 15 months,

I've called 762 people

Mailed 986 people handwritten thank you, thinking of you and birthday cards

Sent 258 people emails

Met 9 people face-to-face for a tour or cup of coffee

And I'm not sure if I cried just for you,

For each of those 2,015 individuals,

Or the amorphous all that have entered any set of hospital doors at any point in time  
or space

When I saw in your obituary that, among your surviving loved ones,

Was your dog

Your "best little buddy"



# The First Day Of The Rest Of My Life

DUNCAN HONEYCUTT

---

At last, they opened the last set of doors to the parking lot. I was allegedly free for the first time in decades but didn't feel better. In fact, this was the most disruptive day I'd experienced since I was transferred to this shithole.

My sister (God bless her) was waiting to pick me up in a beat up orange civic. Her kids were staring at me like the sun was too bright for their eyes, their eyes narrowed and suspicious. I hugged my sister, and she cried. She asked me how I felt, and I said "great."

But I didn't feel great. I felt terrified and detached. But why would I say that to her? She had sacrificed so much to help me get to this day, it would have been an insult to her.

Once you've been inside that machine, where you can feel the walls and chemicals chew you, soften you, make you digestible to the institution, you can't forget it.

I thought of my final debriefing: the constant reminders that I was being watched, that my freedom was still on loan from society. Now every stop sign and bad customer would chew me, mold me into a tolerable citizen, a cell within the social body

So my incarceration continues: I enter a cell and incubate for years, my mind assumes the shape of the cell, and I leave to become a cell in the world. Shaped, singular, solely responsible.

I felt massaged, subtly corroded by the home as I re-entered. Pictures had been rearranged to maximize their emotional impact on me, fake smiles and platitudes were adorned as substitutes for trust and forbearance.

All were cues that I should behave, that I should change, that my bed had already been made for me - persistent reminders that I could not make it myself.

I felt no guilt for what had started this. Maybe I'm biased and don't remember correctly, but at this point, what difference should that make?

---

So I wait, like a transplanted kidney, to be rejected in 5 or 10 years, replaced by a better model. My life has already ended, that is why I'm being digested:

I'm dead, waiting to be absorbed, assimilated, rehabilitated. I contemplate the perfect neighbor, a psychogenetic experiment to combine Mr. Rogers with the parts of Bill Cosby that didn't rape people, to implant empathy in us like it was one of those parasitic symbionts from Stargate.

I express my gratitude to my family, again, and again, and again, like some mantra to an nationalist dictator. The debt I can never repay, the misery I will never express, the stifled dreams which will probably never matter to anyone else.

And so I wait to die.



## Many a Touching Moment

FRED GUGGENHEIM

---

In our senior independent living facility, during dinner with James, a fellow resident, our conversation veered towards influences during our growing up, and how to put all that into perspective. That got James to reflect on one of his college professors, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, an internationally renowned theoretician on adult development (author of “Childhood and Society”). With a wink, James told me something that he had learned about the personal life of Erikson. “We’d heard that the Eriksons take a walk, hand in hand, every evening at 5:30.”

That was the buzz of some of the undergraduates in Erikson’s Human Development 101 class. So, James and three other members of that Harvard class of 1962 went by Erikson’s Cambridge house one afternoon to see for themselves. “Could you believe that a 65-year-old man and his wife would be holding hands?” The students were astonished that this rumor proved to be correct.

What is it with love and physical contact, even sex, with the elderly? The New York Times recently noted in several articles that the 1,100-person Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale encourages appropriate intimacy in its residents: “Residents have the right to seek out and engage in sexual expression, including words, gestures, movement or activities that appear motivated by the desire for sexual gratification.”

The Times even covered a court case in Iowa in which adult daughters challenged the capacity of their rather recently re-married but then soon demented elderly mother to give informed consent to have intercourse with her new husband. The court sided with the husband, vacating the charge of third-degree felony sexual assault.

Concerning the senses and urges of the elderly, I write here not as a clinician scientist nor as one about to expose the connubial secrets of this happily married writer. I write merely as a peripatetic observer of the (ageing) human condition.

As we age, our hearing, especially for high pitched, low decibel sounds falls off rapidly. Speech, especially in noisy settings, becomes less decipherable. Consonants become blurry and some hilarious malapropisms arise. Many of us in this senior independent living facility use \$3000-\$5000 hearing aids. Some aspects of ageing are not inexpensive and Medicare doesn’t cover it.

---

Vision also becomes an issue. Macular degeneration, even glaucoma, put a number of our residents into the category of the “legally blind”. Which means shopping at the grocery store is a challenge, and driving can no longer be an option. Then there are cataracts: everyone eventually gets them. For some cataracts are merely present but not a major issue. But for others cataracts begin to obliterate sight. Cataracts turned the blue of my blue and white striped shirt to grey and white. Evolving cataracts may also mean failure to pass the vision exam for the elderly during re-registration at the Division of Motor Vehicles.

Taste becomes somewhat muted, so rumor has it. But this does not dim the enthusiasm for dining out, if it's within the budget.

The sense of smell remains unimpaired, as when a partner during pillow talk says, “Your breath smells bad! Was it the onions or the garlic this evening? Please turn over the other way.”

The good news is that the sense of touch continues unimpaired. Just ask anyone, ages 15-95+, if she/he enjoys: snuggling in bed, feeling that connectiveness, getting the “tinglies” or getting a massage

Along with “touchy feely” needs, sexual urges in the elderly also continue, though without the fiery persistence of prior decades. I certainly cannot attest to the sexual urges in my fellow residents in our facility, but I have occasionally heard their vocalized interest in sexual issues.

Here's an example. It was after a Sunday's Happy Hour. The crowd dispersed; we slowly walked towards the elevators to our own apartments. There happens to be a large tank of exotic fish near those elevators.

My wife and I were patiently waiting for an elevator to descend from the 5th floor. When it did, Nancy's husband dutifully held open the elevator door while we stepped in. But Nancy, a very slender woman with stringing white hair, still studied the fish tank, to her husband's impatience. After a moment more, she walked unsteadily to the elevator, with the blithe comment, “I was just looking to see if any of the fish were mating.”



## Sonata

RACHEL PAULEY

---

June. And summer hits  
with all its luxurious discomforts.

Cherries ripen and mold on the counter.  
Beer heats up before we can drink it.  
Life slips by steadily.

Friends call me to tell me stories  
of people I've never met  
dying while afternoon thundershowers  
roll over the foothills,  
the relief of rain through the window  
a final forgiveness.

Almost a physician,  
I am an unsteady consultant  
asked to evaluate lost time.

The neighborhood stirs at night,  
cracking open windows and bottles,  
drowning plants with garden hoses.

The laughter a few houses down  
is sudden and indistinguishable  
from heartbreak.



## S.A.D.

NOEL TORRES

---

Look how beautiful we are in sadness  
See how our imbalanced brain chemistry  
pulls us into each other's arms, like kids  
groping for that last branch before we fall  
through the winter months, where the hardness lives.  
The sad months where sun fails and night shivers  
us into oblivion. Where breathing  
is a chore and waking is a battle.  
I wake in your arms and find strength to stir.  
Your heart's continued pulsing pushes me  
to remember winter can be beaten.  
It does not control the rising tide of breath,  
although icy winter air stings our throats.  
It may depress our minds but together  
we find what it means to fly through darkness  
into the light of coming spring. Of life  
renewed from another SAD episode.  
We hold hands and squeeze through the emptiness  
to find our hands are not frozen. Our souls  
kept each other warm in the winter months.



## Pantoum for a Lost Christmas Syllable

NOEL TORRES

---

I woke to gifts 'neath a tree bathed in light.  
It was our first Christmas after you died.  
Mom cried quietly on her pillow, tears  
falling from the weight of your absence, (Dad).  
It was our first Christmas after you died.  
All I could think was, "Where is my Daddy?"  
Mom fell from the weight of your absence.  
Christmas carols rang loud through the halls, (Dad).  
All I could think was, "Where is my Daddy?"  
as I tore open presents from Santa.  
The halls were bathed in Christmas caroled loss  
three year olds should never understand, (Dad).  
I tore open presents from Santa and  
Mom hugged me tighter than I've ever felt.  
A three year old should never understand  
what it feels like to lose a parent, (Dad).  
Mom hugged me tighter than I'll ever feel.  
Pain-filled tears thumped drummer boy beats on me.  
What does it feel like to lose a parent?  
An empty chair. A noteless song. Me, (Dad.)

*Originally published in Thin Air Magazine*



## Seasons

---

HOWE QIU

Petals of rain bring to me fragrance, refreshing my soul  
The season of my blooming is now

Dew dressed grass  
Soft spoked leaves  
Snow showered pine  
Sun-glazed flowers

These things will be  
And I will patiently wait



# Journal Reflections: Panic or Freedom?

LISA DIAMOND

---

January 4th

I am ill today. The 3rd panic attack of my life. All triggered by his leaving. I look fine, healthy even...on the outside. But inside my atomic particles are splitting. I have never been alone. Although the desire for it is palpable, I am petrified of it. I've always thought I was a survivor and yet, am I really? I've never challenged it. Never lived alone. I have traveled alone and enjoyed it, looked forward to it even. I have driven through neighborhoods and wished I lived there among the throngs of people, alone. I have spent decades fantasizing about living alone and yet, now that I am faced with the reality of it, I have never experienced such fear. I run through the big empty log house, up and down all the flights of stairs, to the windows and back through again. As if I can escape the anxiety by running fast enough; leave it on another floor. I would take my running outside if it weren't snowing flakes big enough to hitch a ride on the wind. It is difficult to keep my orange alpaca shawl around my shoulders as I run. Anyone who witnessed this would surely think me insane. I think I'm insane. My rational mind says to calm down but I cannot stop the fear; I try to outrun it until I am physically burnt out.

I collapse on the red sofa and pull the fleece around me. I am not cold but it comforts me. The animal that gave up its fur for me. She has surely regrown a thick fleece by this winter day and I hope she's snuggled warm inside a barn. I say a silent thanks. She doesn't know how much she's comforting me. Female to female.

---

The panic suffocated me like a thick shroud. I thought people who had panic attacks were weak or unbalanced, unable to cope with everyday life. Is this everyday life—the end of 40 years?

I have learned from this. I am more empathetic to people who suffer as I cannot grasp a world where this is a common occurrence even if brought on by weakness, which I now disregard. Perhaps that is why I am going through this—to learn empathy. I have not been kind in this regard and I am sorry. I wish I had hugged more of them, the sufferers. Perhaps I will knit alpaca shawls for them.

January 5th

I am free. This realization comes slowly before I open my eyes to the bright sun as it ricochets off the mounds of snow. The house is blanketed in a shawl of it; its own hug. Together, this house and me. This is all we need.



# The Realist Place

STEPHANIE ERDMAN

---

mourned perhaps  
our gratitude  
belongs here  
hanging unworn  
like old  
clothes. this  
permanent part  
our place  
our universe  
midnight already.

mapped parabolic  
sweep of  
stars; rituals  
of children  
grown too  
big & pagan  
for domestic  
pleasantries. promise  
to come  
Home someday.

the cold  
exorcised from  
our mottled  
bodies, periwinkle  
rising from  
snow this  
persimmon season  
the hard-won  
and hard-loved  
fruits of  
Autumn, Beatitudes  
of becoming.

the hardest  
places to  
pray for  
light, deepened  
pitch of  
inky night  
the secret  
slopping of  
bat dung  
its ammoniac  
punch. we  
grateful for  
pacemaker scars  
battlewounds of

our era  
of glass  
and steel.

remember our  
once thankless  
tails, our  
plaster walls  
blessed with  
immured bones  
the mortar  
pink still  
with enemy  
blood in  
the twilit  
hours of  
our advancing  
age. depths  
of primordial  
oceans in  
us, seamed  
gills, pods  
of idle  
evolutionary pleasure  
beating inside  
our pelican  
hearts. firelit  
skins pending  
rain-slicked in  
the chasms  
of unsung  
Selves. regress.

plunge into  
this primitive oneness.



# Walking the Streets of Lisbon

LAUREN ZAUSMER

---



# Disappointment

JULIA MICHIE BRUCKNER

---



## Pen and Ink

FRED ABRAMS

---



# Evolution

VLADKA KOVAR

---



## When I Am Old

MICHELLE HARRIS-LOVE

---

When I am old  
Filled up with years and memories  
Take me to the sea  
Sit me on a chair  
Bury my feet in the sand  
And I will sit all day  
And let the wind and the sun  
Touch my course gray hair and loose skin  
And listen to the children and the birds and the sea.

When I see the water touch the sky,  
Tears may form in my dim old eyes -  
Salty drops to join the salty sea.

Know then, that I am not sad -  
But that life is salt -  
And life is those hours,  
Late in the day,  
When the sun turns the world to gold -  
Richer and deeper as the hours pass,  
To red, purple, deep blue,  
Black.



## Domum Amplexus

---

KELLY STANEK

The front of my house is like a secret.  
I feel enclosed and protected by the arms of my home.  
As I pull into the driveway, it is like the moment before you embrace your mother,  
When her outstretched arms encircle you but have yet to pull you in.  
When you know you are loved and you know she wanted to engulf you with  
affection but you still have room.  
You have a choice in that moment to open your arms back or simply allow her  
to hold you tight. It is a balance between equal and lesser.  
Between adult and child.

While I treat NMS, there's a squeeze in my chest  
And my heart rate and blood pressure rise  
Then off in the distance, a nurse screams, "Dehiscence!"  
"He's open from thorax to thighs!"

Didn't want to admit it, but, whoa, now I get it  
What I'd thought was just old superstition  
The things that go crazy and causes are hazy?  
Precisely the goblin's main mission!

No use in complaining; it's part of my training,  
This equal opportunity criminal  
Each minute, each night, it wrongs all my rights  
In ways both direct and subliminal

My thought all along: "Now what else can go wrong?"  
A question I know not to ask  
I cannot deny it, when I say, "It's quiet"  
I've given the goblin its task!



## She's Dying

PAUL ROUSSEAU

---

My wife is sick, a rare disease. She's in an academic medical center eight-hundred miles distant. We speak on the telephone. Her voice quivers. "I'm never leaving the hospital alive." My palms dampen. I try to console her; I blurt lip service words. "You'll be fine." A few hours later, a nurse calls. "Come as soon as possible." I collapse to the floor and cry. The dying know.

I meet with her doctors in a small room. There are ten, maybe twelve, I don't remember. They tell me her heart, lungs, and kidneys have failed. Her left arm and right hand are gangrenous. She's comatose. They tell me she's coming home—after a left arm amputation. They tell me so. I want to believe them. "Is she dying?" "She's very sick; we'll do the best we can." "But is she dying?" No one answers. My head and heart are conflicted.

It's been two days. She's scraping along the edge of life, tilting towards death. There will be no amputation. She's not coming home, not alive. We begin a bedside vigil. We sit in old metal chairs, heads hung like wilted flowers. The thick density of death settles in my lungs. My breath struggles. I step outside the room. The cardiologist pulls me aside. He's a tall man with sparse hair and a high forehead cut with creased shadows. He's seen suffering. "I think it's time to deactivate her defibrillator." I stare at him, transfixed. "Is there ever a time to allow death? Purposely?" His lips curl into a grimace. "There is." I tell him no, not today. I need more time. He grabs my arm tight, so tight I can feel his fingers on my bone. "I don't want her to suffer." Am I making her suffer? I don't think I am. Perhaps I am. I don't know. It's hard letting go.

The cardiologist greets me in the visitor parking garage. He doesn't park here; he's waiting for me. His stethoscope dangles from his neck like a noose. "She's no better. She may be worse. I think we should deactivate the defibrillator. I don't want her to suffer." He leans close, so close I can feel the wetness in his breath. "She's dying." I utter pared words. "Not now. At noon, when my daughters are in the cafeteria. They mustn't know." He nods, pats my shoulder, and walks away. He's done his duty. The doors to the hospital slide open. The fluorescent glare of the corridor hits my eyes. I steady myself with a chair. I see a hospital acquaintance. His wife is in the intensive care unit, next to my wife. His lips move. "How is your wife?"

I crumple against the wall. "She's going to die, today."



# Whippoorwill Hill

---

KATHI BRITTAIN

Wind

Overcame me

Passed me by surprise

Gathering

And seducing

The leaves

And my hair

As it went in the opposite direction

Very secretly

*(oh so privately)*

My soul went with them



## Adhesions

---

SHIRLEY SULLIVAN

the scar is tough  
sore and bruised  
tissue radiates  
out from it and  
pulls at muscles  
between ribs and  
when I massage  
and soften it  
the pain eases  
and I learn  
how simple it is  
to touch a wound  
to knead my breast  
to feel the soreness  
to cup pain

SS 2/17/15, 3/9/15



## Disfigured Maymuna

KARIMA OSMAN

---

*You are the fountain of patience that the inflicted wish to borrow from,  
and you are the night star that the dweller longs for.  
Teach me to be more like you in a world foolish to think you should be more  
like them. Verily anyone who seeks to change you is misguided in thought,  
if only they had a share in the immense joy to me you've brought.*

1949

Seven weeks after the troops left, Hibaq became pregnant. It was as though her body knew not to bring a child into the world until the clouds of destruction no longer blocked the starry night. Her husband Adam fell to prostration when she told him, such news was deliverance from the hardship they endured—fallen livestock and moving to the outskirts of the land, away from the cities engulfed in the most turmoil. While clinging to her gown like rope, he returned to his feet—repairing the roofs of destroyed homes had damaged his knees. Adam pulled Hibaq close and wept into her shoulder, repeatedly whispering, "Alhamdulillah" praise God.

The two had been married for seven years and the possibility of bearing a child became less like thirst and more like the third meal of the day in which you could skip without feeling deprived. The two learned to see through windows rather than colored idealities.

In a way, they were grateful to not have children when war did not have careful regard for whose life was stolen. And it was the war that had allowed them to suppress such insecurities. For in the early years of their marriage, when houses stood upright, and people had gardens, not having a child to bathe or take to gatherings for the elders to bless was a great deprivation. Yet it was something that was never openly discussed between the two, partly because they still had hope, and partly because both did not want to explore the issue only to discover that it was their own reproductive system at fault. For Hibaq, she did not know what womanhood meant beyond sustaining life, and Adam never hinted that it deeply troubled him, as it very well could be a fault in his seed and not the soil. But at last, this was their time.

1950

Hibaq screamed, but no one was home to hear her. The house helper had left to buy watermelon and tangerines as Adam went to the city to trade. The two had not moved back into the inner town, and the closest home was at least two kilometers away. Hibaq had been perfectly strong the day before but was now overtaken, governed by what beat against her abdomen and ribs. Sweating with fever, she left her bed and crawled past the hall and towards the door.

---

Each motion forward was at war with the overwhelming contractions that overcame her—feeling more like convulsions. She had made it to the door, it suddenly opened, and there stood Adam, both surprised to see the other, she then collapsed.

At dawn, it was born.

Hibaq had lost liters of blood and could no longer separate what was being said among the voices outside her room from the whooshing sounds of dizziness, it all was outside of her, her true self was outside of this body—a spirit wanting emancipation but confined to this bed and to the debilitating pains of a stomach that had been ripped open. She could not muster the energy to engage with those who stood on the other side of the door, and to others, this was best, as they needed time to decide on how to tell her. No time would be enough so long as traveling back in time remained an impossibility.

As the daylight waned, Hibaq's consciousness improved, and by night, her speech was in communion with her thoughts. Everyone had left the hospital besides Isra, Adam's youngest sister. She was heavysset for a nine-year-old but made crude jokes like the khat vendors, and for that, none of the children picked on her, for their esteem could not withstand the blows of a girl who had a way of making their private affairs the punch line of her jokes. Isra was not unkind lest she was provoked, she did well for those who meant well. She was born during the war, and it was as though the fallen rubble found a use, the broken stones sharpened her tongue. The remnants of childhood within Isra were hushed by what a post-war society demanded, the need to survive.

\* \* \*

While struggling to sit upright, Hibaq called to Isra, startling the young girl. Isra stood and hastily rushed to Hibaq's bedside, kissing her hand in respect and relief.

"You're awake! How are you feeling habo macaan, my sweet aunt?"

"Isra is my child a boy or girl?" Hibaq's lips were cracked from dryness.

"Habo, I don't know."

"What do you mean you do not know?"

---

*continued on next page...*

“Nobody let me see her, they all left to the mosque to pray for your child, but they would not let me come, I wanted to come, but they said I must take care of you. Adam told me to tell you that your baby is a gift and that he will come back to you soon, but he was about to cry when he said that, so I was confused.”

Hibaq’s dizziness began to return, and the color drained from her face. Isra motioned a cup to her lips to help her drink. Hibaq stared blankly at the open door before her and drank from the cup. The water then came back up from her esophagus and into her eyes, letting out a large single tear. She would rather be cut open several times over than be withheld from knowing where her baby was. The little energy she had was converted into overthinking, and after each racing thought stripped from her sanity, soon after there was nothing left, she passed out.

Isra ran into the hall to retrieve the nurses.

#### **1954**

“Maymuna my love, are you ready to go?”

Hibaq put Maymuna on her hip and placed a shawl above her as to cover her small body completely before opening the door. “The sun is hot so we must give the princess her shade,” she said to her daughter.

When buying from the women at the market place, no one ever made the effort to say Masha’Allah to Maymuna, as to invite that she be protected from the evil eye as they would do for the other children, the pretty bride, or the intelligent student. To them, Maymuna didn’t need protection, she was not wanted by the evil eye, by them.

No one would address Maymuna, and the lack of notice was often more painful than the stares the younger children would give when they saw Maymuna’s face. Maymuna was blind and did not see what her mother did, but stark silence transcends ability, and it hurts the same.

When the shawl is not drawn over Maymuna, and the children or strangers see the disfigurement of her face, Hibaq smiles and tells those who stare too long, “Say Masha’Allah”. Sometimes they’ll immediately comply and say Masha’Allah with an embarrassed smile for having stared unabashedly, and other times, people will say some variation of “I’m sorry this happened to you”, or that

---

“this life is full of tests and the child will at least be granted heaven for having been this way”.

Knowing that she cannot change the way other’s see her daughter, her gift, Hibaq puts her lips to the ears of Maymuna and whispers, “you are the fountain of patience that the inflicted wish to borrow from, and you are the night star that the dweller longs for. Teach me to be more like you in a world that is foolish to think you should be more like them, verily anyone who seeks to change you is misguided in thought. ”

Hibaq does not wish for things to have been different, only that her daughter grows to see no wrong in being different, for surely there is no wrong at all.



## The Ethics Committee

---

ELMO FRICKMAN

In a room with no windows  
fluorescent lights whine and the advocate  
fingers his hair and takes notes.  
The conversation is nasal and correct and

awaits a miracle while the futility of faith  
transports a boy down off his cross and  
opens his eyes to let God off the hook.  
In this room safety is darkness,

life is blood and hormones, the vegetative  
state is complacent, action is feared and  
policies and procedures stagnate in  
current case law and spiritual warfare.

Legal opinions are safety nets  
in a room of bodies and donuts,  
formica tables and stain-free carpet  
and the hum of brightness.



# I'm Coming Momma!

JOHN SLADEK

---



# Gharial Crocodile

JUSTIN HAUXWELL

---



# Pink Clouds

LYNDY BUSH

---



# Place of Prayer, Grand Teton National Park

LISA KURTH

---



## The Healing Poetry

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MIREYA ORTIZ

I'm the forest,  
the mountains, rivers and flowers.  
The veins of the trees,  
the wind and the leaves.  
I am the moon and the winter nights.  
I'm a strong wave from the ocean.  
I'm the rain drops.  
The sacred water,  
I'm the spring and my heart blooms within.  
I am alive and my soul is free.



# I Ran Away

ERIKA D. WALKER

---

from Father's strangled cough,  
the crumpled bed, his dark room,

away from the grey face I wanted  
to forget. Seeking something

that would not die, I ran  
to the prairie, where distant

mountains do not end, forever  
and ever, amen. A bitter winter

wind laid down the brown  
grasses. Old snow settled

in shadows beside the empty lake,  
a fractured map I could not read.

Feet pounded my prayer on frozen  
ground: don't let him die, don't let him

die. From the top of the cottonwood  
a blue heron rose on the wild wind,

great wings sliced the sky, lifted  
past the tangled branch.



# Caged

SIERRA KELLER

---

Sierra Paige  
Lived in a cage  
And nobody knew where to find her  
She had the key  
But she didn't see  
That her very own voice could unbind her

She had studied the cross  
But she dwelled in the loss  
Of a loved one she just couldn't save  
She stayed silent for years  
Speaking only in tears  
A goodbye was unwillingly waved

Relief didn't come  
So she settled with numb  
And the cage slowly started to shrink  
"Dear God, is this me?  
Will I never be free?"  
She didn't know what else to think

He answered her then  
Said, "I know how you've been.  
I've been sitting with you this whole time.  
To be free of your past  
All you must do is ask  
And then from that cage you may climb".

So she fell to her knees  
And she prayed to him, "please,  
Will you show me the way?"  
Then the cage disappeared  
With the things she had feared  
And she promised to live for today

At the end of her rope  
She finally found hope  
She saw love instead of loss and rage  
She can laugh, she can dance  
Takes a positive stance  
She is me, I am Sierra Paige.



# Not My Patagonia

MADELINE G. HUEY

---

I slowed my pace as I walked from the Emergency Department CT scanner back to my computer in Care Unit 1. My shoes briefly disturbed the down that had settled on the floor. Gravity pulled it back to the ground.

As I passed the recess bay, my eyes turned to where more feathers rested amidst the gloves discarded in haste and drops of blood left behind on the sanitized stage. He was in the hands of the trauma surgeons now with act two listed as a pelvic artery embolization, followed by an appearance in the operating theater. For a moment, the emergency department had returned to calm as the actors dispersed at the end of a rehearsed performance.

He came to us for help after he was struck by a car. The charge nurse told the room as we prepared for his arrival by ambulance, “pedestrian versus motor vehicle”. My preceptor would later draw an image on a sticky note for me; pictured was a car and stick figure as they made contact. One of our learning points for the day would be the classic pattern of injuries seen in these types of situations.

Who was he, our main character? John Doe, a man who happened to be wearing a blue Patagonia jacket when he became the victim of an unfortunate accident. The EMS team wheeled him in and the room sprang to action; a dance unfolded before my eyes. We methodically assessed his airway, breathing and circulation. “Do we have a blood pressure yet?” 80/40. “Let’s get some fluids running.” He shouted in pain when we pressed on his pelvis. We wrapped him in a pelvic binder. Abdominal ultrasound didn’t show any free fluid, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t there. We rushed to the scanner in search of more information. There was a blush down in his pelvis on CT, a sure sign of ongoing bleeding and an explanation for his soft pressures.

---

It was almost a comical scene as I recalled the feathers marking his path through the hospital, the lead trauma surgeon failing to remove them from his pant leg while we waited for the scans, the suppressed laughter from the staff watching these repeated attempts, the EMT apologizing for creating this mess.

But, what was this mess? Would John have made a different decision on his choice of outerwear had he known that he would later be center stage?

In the wake of John's appearance in the ED, we lamented the inconvenience of the feathers and commented on how we would continue to find them in various corners of the department for weeks to come. My preceptor and I discussed the sticky note. I wondered how he was doing in the next act. In the midst of this tragedy, I wondered if John would be upset upon finding his down jacket ruined and scattered across the hospital halls? Would he find some humor from the way he entered from stage right? Or would it not matter that his coat was destroyed in the effort to save his life?

It wasn't my Patagonia, but it's caused me to pause all the same.



# The Uncertain Journey Called Life

ADRIANA SOLANO

---

One day, I woke to the light of dawn with the dream to fly..  
But as reality faced me, I found my wings broken.

As I looked at the old cage, the bars seemed unbreakable.  
The wind whispered...  
You are not meant for the skies.  
With tears in my eyes I trained to fly,  
My wings were weak but they were meant to soar.  
Soar the skies, touch the heavens and cross the seas.

Every night, I used to ask,  
Heavenly father, is this just a foolish dream?  
Should I call this hope,  
Should the day of freedom ever come?

I felt forgotten in the cage,  
My chirp was turning weak and after many tears,  
The cage eventually rusted...

So with all my strength I pushed and pushed,  
The cage fell to the ground and I had broken free.

Where would I go now that I'm living the dream?  
Many fruit trees to taste but many more foes to face...

Will the cat ever catch me?  
Will the rain ever drown me?  
Will the wind take from my flight?  
Will I go without the chance to fight?

Every day is a challenge even in the path of a dream,  
And in the cage I had promised that I would always remain free.

Let the colors of spring dress me and the warmth of summer bathe me.  
May the falling leaves of autumn provide me with a place to rest  
And may the winter winds have mercy, so once again I can build my nest.

Little bird keep chirping that life is just a test.  
A test of endurance,  
A test of love,  
A test of will  
And a test from above...



## The Test

ERIKA D. WALKER

---

First thing this morning,  
I tested myself again.  
I heard my father  
say my name  
and, for a moment,  
the world feels right.

But then, I'm not sure.  
Did he say Riki,  
a quick two beats  
same tone or was it Riki,  
a high pitch,  
then a fall?

I'd call him every day.  
Hola Papa I'd say.  
Hola he'd say back,  
sure, strong, like  
the old days, as if  
he weren't dying.

How goes it  
on the western front?  
I'd say, and he'd say—  
but now I can't remember.  
Was it okay or fine  
or pretty good, I guess?

I want to believe  
I'll always remember  
his voice, even if—  
the morning comes  
when I can't hear him  
saying my name.



# The Experience of Pokes

---

DIANA LUTFI

The Experience of Pokes  
does not have to be painful.  
It can be pleasant.  
Just like the friendly tap on Facebook  
It's an introductory connection.  
That penetrates  
Deeper than skin

The Experience of Pokes  
does not have to involve trauma  
That creeps because of surprise  
or misguidance due to lies  
that reduces feelings  
and rejects control

The Experience of Pokes  
should be wonderful  
like humans are  
instead of clinical  
and gazed with numbness  
that erases the metaphors of  
behavioral responses

The Experience of pokes  
needs to be approved  
and welcomed by the one poked  
just as a tattoo or piercing of ear  
the experience of pokes can be ender

The experience of pokes  
causes excitation  
of nervous energies  
that should look more  
like thrill  
from a roller coaster ride,  
Instead of punishment  
that guilt or shame  
try to hide

The Experience of pokes  
Is a sensational experience  
That can lead one to cry  
Or feel more alive  
Let it be about the latter.

---

“Pokes” refer to ‘needle pokes’. They are what Pediatric clinicians associate with needle procedures. They would say “it’s just a poke” to unknowingly scare kids. It was never “just a poke”. It was intentional harm to my 10 year-old self. Yet as I’ve grown older, I began to speculate that my aversion to “pokes” did not have to be the norm and that the experience of pokes could actually be a pleasant one. If I had control of the process, I might actually like it. If everyone had control of the process, they might also see it as a joy instead of a dread. I wanted to test my theory by receiving a flu shot on my 22nd birthday. It would involve my beloved RN friend administering the vaccine. He and most others doubted that I would be able to insist upon it. I went to three different pharmacies, two urgent care centers, and the CU employee health services. All of their responses were discouraging. I got used to hearing “absolutely not” but I did not give up. I finally mustered up the courage to ask the medical director at my workplace if I could take the flu shot home to test my theory and appease my RN friend who had been begging me to get a flu shot. The medical director’s response was an enthusiastic “yes, of course and free of charge too!” So on Nov 9, 2019, I sat on my comfy bed and happily handed him the flu shot supplies. He was surprised by my persistence to have this done my way, without the administrative oversight of healthcare strangers. As I shared my relief, he quickly prepared the injection and without warning, shot my right arm. I felt the sharp poke but instead of it being painful, it was exciting and worth the trouble! I naturally smiled as the needle punctured my arm and stinging liquid shot through it. The event gave me confidence to believe that my capstone project hypothesis was correct! Research also suggests that the vaccine was even more effective because I was glad to receive it!



## Menuedo

ROOPA GANDHI

---

The slow and steady beeping of the heart monitor fell into an alternate rhythm with his deep, labored breathing. Their newly assigned patient lay on the bed, guardrails up. In the few spaces that could be discerned between the gauze wraps that had been layered to make his bandaged body, his skin resembled yellowish mush. His brown eyes bulged from their skeletal orbits. His mother, a tanned woman with dark brown ringlet hair that fell to her shoulders, sat at his side with her right arm over the rail. She stroked his fingers and stared blankly at the monitors.

“Hello mom. My name is Dr. Klemmer and this is Dr. Ganeshan. We are from dentistry. We are here to see Cedro.”

“Okay. You need me to move so you can look?” Her eyeliner was smudged under her eyes and onto the sleeves of her sweater.

Dr. Dmitri Klemmer had reviewed the case with Dr. Rama Ganeshan just twenty minutes prior while they walked across from the single story building of the dental clinic to the main hospital. He explained that with the few burn patients seen annually this unusual case could be an opportunity for Rama to write a rare case report. It was her third year at the hospital and she had already lost three months to pregnancy leave. Rama listened to him, distracted by an impending sleepiness and a subconscious stream of thoughts that gushed towards her six month old daughter whom she had left at home with her mother. It was almost three o’ clock in the afternoon and the dental clinic would close in an hour. She had planned Priya’s annaprasanna ceremony at the temple that evening. There, the priest would invoke the Gods to be present and Priya would take her first spoon of food like the countless generations of babies in their family who had done so before her. As was their custom, it would be cooked rice that had been mashed for her toothless mouth to swallow.

She had hoped to leave as soon as the clinic finished but Dr. Klemmer, her department chair, requested her presence at this case and now she was the sole member of his retinue. As they proceeded to examine the mouth, she was the assigned flash light, adjusting its circumference as Cedro thrashed, unwilling to open his mouth while Dr. Klemmer tried to coax the plastic mouth mirror between his friable lips. The vermilion border, that architectural splendor delineating the very beginning of his digestive organs and usually separating his mouth from his face, had been destroyed. As they wrestled to even start their evaluation, their little patient finalized his protest with a swift slap of his bandaged hand across Dr. Klemmer’s face.

“Well, I think it will be better if we will look at his mouth while he is asleep.”

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Recovering from the minor assault, Dr. Klemmer went on to explain that he would fabricate an acrylic device that encircled the patient's lips, extending inside and out. They would examine the mouth and take an impression under general anesthesia with Dr. Davis, the plastic surgeon, during the next graft procedure. Rama foreboded her fate – the spatula mixing powdered dental stone with water, the thick slurry poured into the alginate impression, acrylic particles flying into her hair, and alone in the clinic in another extended evening without Priya.

"What is the cost? I have no insurance right now. The hospital said they will help me to cover the payment."

"I'm not sure. Dr. Ganeshan will check for you. She will go through the consent forms with you now so that we can do our procedure during the surgery."

He left, shutting the room door, and almost immediately, as it swung to a close, Rama yawned.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do that. I just didn't sleep so well last night."

"You have a baby?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"How old is your baby?"

"Six months."

"I remember when Cedro was that age."

"I'm so sorry for what has happened. Do you have any questions about the procedure?"

No, no questions. She just couldn't believe that she would end up here.

Here, facing each other with the walls around them slowly dissolving, Cedro's mother relived the previous forty-eight hours for the hundredth time, only this time with Dr. Ganeshan. She had been cooking for the family in the backyard using the forty-quart aluminum stockpot on their portable camping stove that they had set up on the sandstone patio. The evening sun cast a bright orange shadow across the summer sky. Axel, her youngest brother helped her by chopping onions while directing Javier and Damian, her older brothers, as they strung up the lights around the makeshift pergola that they had built together in the spring. Axel, six feet tall and a splitting reflection of her dead father, had Papa's wide smile and that same dimpling of the right cheek whenever he broke out into laughter.

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*continued on next page...*

The chunky beef pieces had been floating in the boiling water for an hour, and she now added the onions, garlic, and the seasoning. Cedro had a fever and her Mama now asked her to carry him after pacing back and forth with him under the pergola. She had tried to distract him with the lights but he kept crying unrelentingly for his mother. It was his first birthday and it was too late to cancel the party.

“El Son de la Negra” started playing and Javier and Damian, tipsy from their beers, began impersonating the YouTube video of the song. As she stirred the hot soup, the broth bubbled up and burst into a smooth red liquid and she was transported back to a year ago. She had chewed on ice for eight hours while Mama and Axel waited with her in the labor room. The doctor said she might need a cesarean section but she wasn’t going to have anyone cutting into her belly so she decided to push harder. Just like she pushed Cedro’s father out of Mama’s house after the last quiet beating, with his hand tightly clamped over her mouth. The heart monitor rapidly increased its beeping and Cedro was in danger so she pushed like crazy and he landed into the doctor’s hands like a slippery seal; her blood ridden and glistening baby with no papa of his own in town.

The strong scent of onions wafting out of the steaming pot brought her back. It was then that she felt like someone pushed her and she lost her grip on Cedro. He tumbled head first into the dark red broth. There was very little splash and he sunk in like a hermit crab retreating into its shell. His hands flailed, the pot toppled, and Axel was there to grab her baby before she could recover from the shock of what she had done. Her other brothers kept dancing and everyone else just watched.

In Guadalajara this would never have happened. Mama’s sisters would have made the soup and she would have been inside the house. Upstairs in her old room where the orange colored walls were decorated with posters of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, she would be stroking Cedro’s soft olive cheeks. When he would restlessly raise his bottom towards the ceiling with his face planted into the soft white sheets, she would pick him up and rock him in her arms until he fell asleep. Stepping out onto her balcony, she would only have to ask now and then if they needed any help.

Cedro’s mother starting crying and reflexively, Rama placed the palm of her right hand onto the dorsum of the mother’s left. There the texture in the center of that hand was like a sponge cake with a baked crust edge. She too had been burned but hadn’t she noticed? Yes, only when she was at her cleaning job yesterday, stirring the bleach into the water of the mop bucket.

---

Let it scar so she could always remember what she had done.

Sidelined by the recounting, Rama had lost track of time. Seeing that it was now five o' clock, she set aside her emotions and politely rushed out of the room while reprimanding herself for not telling Dr. Klemmer about her event that evening. He could have easily stayed to complete the paperwork. Now she would have to pull everything together haphazardly; her plans disrupted by yet another case.

That evening Priya was seated on her father's lap. Her soft, pink lips framed her wide smile. As she reached forward to try and grab the small silver-colored plate filled with turmeric, sandalwood, and vermilion, her gold bangles tinkled with delight. The priest lit the ghee lamp before the Gods and asked the mother to feed the baby. Instinctively, she took a little rice between her fingers to check the temperature and make sure it wouldn't burn Priya's mouth. It was only then that Rama began to cry.



# My Mother, Her Sons

SPENCER POORE

---

## Chapter One:

I caught you running through Payson down highway 47 when I first heard  
my voice go off key with the radio station.

I started to roll the window down to help drown myself out as I began to shift  
into the girl I saw in my high school portraits.

I meant to sing louder and soak in the blur of a 75mph gust, but when you  
have thickened your skull as hard as I have, turning yourself inside out takes  
more than just noise.

I began to pretend again and thumbed your name through my fingers as I felt the  
hum of the world around me work up my spine.

It was here that I felt stuck,  
locked in gray  
with my shoelaces tied together.

She spoke the way I wanted her to  
And kept me closer than she had to.

God told me I was perfect,  
I just ain't convinced yet.  
Maybe she can prove me wrong.

---

Chapter Two:

They say I got corn stalks in my soul and fennel in my heart.

I hope that don't mean I be blooming anytime soon or sprouting that is.

They say I got my brown eyes from the dirt in my skull and the worms in my tongue.

I don't believe them though.

They only speak when I'm sleeping

And they ain't got lips to spit with.

Chapter Three:

I ain't never left.

I been here since the day run long and the wheat come in.

You ask if I got scars; I got scars.

You ain't got soft hands but they sure ain't rising on my palms.

She stitch that palmetto good, but she ain't got soul like I do.

She ain't got a wind pipe like mine to blow the Earth out.



## Endless Jackson Pollock

---

CAROL EHRLICH

As I lie in bed at the end of the day, thoughts scramble  
like children bursting out in all directions  
through the school door when the closing bell rings—  
no order, no peace, no resolution—  
a splatter painting  
that flies too fast, too impatient in the race  
too scattered to be seen  
to be heard  
to be dealt with.

I want quiet, a blank slate,  
a calm white canvas  
so my body will relax and rest will come.  
I try to tame the chase; catch one thought and tie it down—  
reduce the clamor one piece at a time  
so sleep will come.  
I want to control my muse  
but the party inside has a mind of its own.  
It will carry on till dawn  
despite all my efforts.  
It's a losing battle.

Good morning, I guess.



## False Summits

---

REILLY QUIST

My body  
ravaged by storms  
became this unescapable trap

Months of energy  
desperate to get out

my heart races and lungs sting  
with memories  
of crisp morning air  
when reaching false summits  
meant extra adventure

But now  
there's just fear  
maybe disappointment  
has recovery gone awry

What a thing  
to be free  
of this energy inside  
with nowhere to go

except shoved deep inside  
to fuel the next  
part of this climb



## Dead Painted Ladies

LISA DIAMOND

---

Southern mansion.  
Black iron fencing protects nothing now.  
Peeling paint. no longer a painted lady. dead. hot. ghosts.  
Remnants remain of parties, long tables laden with china, crystal.  
Creaky stairs. many levels.  
Dust, oh so much dust.  
Pieces of the walls are gone.  
Cold empty fireplaces charred from coal. one in every room.  
More china in the bedrooms? patterns with swirls and birds - chamber pots.  
I don't like it here.  
Outside a courtyard formed by a U of buildings. they are both green two-level  
buildings.  
Stable. laundry. kitchen.  
Upstairs many tiny square rooms, fireplace. missing pieces of ceiling lay crumbled in  
corners. No windows.  
Room after room lined up like prison cells. sadness.  
Bright pink sunglasses hide sadness leaking from my eyes.  
Death. pain. torture.  
No books, pencil or paper allowed. beatings.  
Little girl not allowed to learn...anything.  
What if I were her? why am I not her?  
No reason...  
except that I am white.



# Welcome to the Carnival

KELLY STANEK

---

Modern day gypsies,  
The stringy-haired nomads,  
Following the Ferris wheels and rides that make you nauseous.  
They are not what they seem on the surface:  
Laughing with crackling voices  
That remind you of cinders in the fireplace; cigarette smoke intoxicating.  
Yet, they have a heart.  
They have hurt, joy, pain;  
They have shining eyes for the sad child and tender compassion at the end of the  
night for one last ride.  
When you get close to getting the ring on the bottle they'll still give you  
the teddy bear  
and when you vomit into the trashcan they say "oh darling feel better!"  
So I ask myself,  
I ask myself,  
What does it take to get past the outward appearance; to look past the missing  
teeth and sun darkened skin?



## Seadog

AMITY HELZER HARARI

---

The lights were dimmed for evening rest, and the ward was quiet, with the exception of his barking. “Where are my men?” “What are you doing over there?” “Get in here!” In his mind he was back on his ship, Chief Petty Officer medals on his lapel, giving orders to his underlings, except this night he was on the 4th floor of the hospital, in the bed nearest to the nurse’s station, so that the charge nurse could keep a closer eye on him. He had demonstrated a propensity for trying to get up out of bed in an urgent rush for reasons no one could know, despite the procedure that he’d undergone two days earlier for the vertebral fracture that occurred when he fell for the fifth time at home.

His next home was a stark two-story facility, with rows of rooms like a hotel, doors with dummy knobs, and bland meals on bright yellow trays. He didn’t like the activities, and kept largely to himself. I would visit after work most evenings, to take him to supper in the dining room, or shave his whiskers, or ust to talk before tucking him in to his too-short bed. This became a routine we both looked forward to, or at least I imagined that he did. One morning his wife arrived for a visit, which happened every couple of weeks due to how far away she still lived from this nursing home. He called her “Goose” and kissed her with familiarity. She asked how he liked this place, how did he like the food? Staff came and went while they chatted. He noted that this one nurse had been quite attentive, but, he admitted, “I just don’t want to get married right now”. Shocked, his wife set about grilling the nursing supervisor about who might be inappropriately interacting with her husband. It didn’t take long after hearing about this drama for me to realize that I was the Lolita in question, and no longer bore any resemblance to the granddaughter that he used to know. I was a sweet source of affection that generated different emotions in him than had ever existed between us previously. His wife and I laughed it off, but it was secretly painful to know that I now had to be careful not to confuse him further in our evening routine.

His wandering began to increase, and following a visit to the business across the road, it became clear that he needed to move to the locked ward. Here he would venture into the office of the nursing staff and rummage the drawers of the desk, looking for “tools”, to fix something he perceived to be broken. He learned that weekly weigh-ins were an opportunity for praise, and despite the failings of his mind, the engineer in him devised that the hollow of his cane was the perfect diameter to conceal dimes. He took to asking everyone he passed for spare change, filling that cane in hopes of concealing his progressive weight loss in ten-cent increments.

---

His needs continued to grow, and he was moved again, and again, increasing the level of confinement and attentive care each time. Once this occurred after he pushed his wheelchair out a set of double doors that only opened from the outside, after a deliveryman entered. In the parking lot, he waved his cane at anyone who approached, belligerently resisting return to the musty common living room where he sat for hours every day, keeping inventory of the busy-ness of the staff. The parking lot became his battlefield, and when men in blue arrived with flashing lights, these were his infantry and the orders began flowing in gruff barks, just as they had on the hospital ward, just as they had on the bow of his Navy frigate. The scene was poignant, and painful, and distressing for all involved. This once strong man, powerful man, was reduced to restraints at the hands of medics.

As he weakened further, the battles came to an end. The random episodes of problem solving ceased. The initiative to resist, and ultimately even to engage, waned. His 80th birthday came on a chilly February day, and he allowed his wife to feed him a few bites of ice cream but turned his nose at the cake draped in sugary frosting. Seventeen days later he appeared on my arrival to be in a deep sleep, skin still warm, but no longer with the breath so shallow it was hardly perceivable. He had slipped effortlessly away, to a place where faces had names and problems had solutions, and I smiled with relief for his peace.



## Haunted

SHIRLEY SULLIVAN

---

they do memorials well in central Wyoming—bright room  
big windows giving onto a sweep of plains toward the mountains

the AAs spoke with compassion  
they hadn't known why he was so strange

and when they knew they spilled  
kind messages toward us

they had to make a new chip  
for 43 years sobriety

no one else up there had ever lasted that long  
one young man a few weeks from his 5 year chip

vowed to see more of his children  
100 miles to the East—not far in Wyoming—

my 2-pack-a-day brother with ruined lungs  
lived to 85 smoking and dead for a week

still sitting at his computer—coffee pot on—  
left us the death smell mixed with cigarette ash

bacon grease clogged toilets and black mold  
creeping up and over basement walls

his real hurt was genetic—his son named it  
and after they heard it the men were kind

he'd reinvented himself up there  
cursed to go on forever spinning

spinning himself into worth in someone's eyes  
100 miles from anywhere tucked into

the Wind River Reservation  
proud of his ditch rights unaware

that mold could grow in the arid West  
it's not Massachusetts after all

---

so he diverted the flow flooded the meadow  
neighbors saw him mowing by hand

—said his wife died young and he'd raised two kids  
these same grown children told me with jaws agape and small eyes

after the divorce they hardly saw him resented him  
his quarts of beer and steamroller voice—

did the few reluctant visits because their mother said  
our family had money and they deserved more but

he was just walking around trying not to bump into things  
alone with the ghosts so many ghosts always

so many goodbyes  
you never think it'll be  
the final one  
no more stories  
he's no longer there  
spinning new truth  
reinventing himself and us  
making it harder to confront  
our own haunting

Shirley Sullivan  
Response to Stella Corso  
12/15/19



# Death at the Ballet

ROOPA GANDHI

---

She died in the morning. I am sad  
and I don't speak good english.  
This was the text.

You are sad and I am bewildered as I drop my heart,  
Stand up, step onto the cold hardwood floor, shaking,  
not knowing if this is a typing error,  
a non-English speaker's ominous forecast of the truth  
I evade like those shadows lurking in downtown alleys.

Call the hospital now and confirm.  
Two rings, Three rings, Four.  
No one is at the door,  
to pick up my fallen pieces, my shattered heart,  
my hot, broken tears; while my daughter circles  
crying and imploring,  
Mommy what happened to you?

She, who swept my floors with pirouettes.  
She, who with an adagio, picked up the vomit,  
In arabesques threw out our trash,  
And over four long years  
Would plié to the unknown waltz of a child's whims,  
to discover cups and bottles hidden in secret places.

There is the piggy bank she gifted my daughter.  
Here are her texts to me that believed in a God.  
And to every corner that my eyes dart,  
Blurred by the aching discomfort of the unknown,  
And unanswered,  
I can only see the disbelief that an invisible string  
Could lure my very best performer from me

Before she could watch her five children reach college,

Before I could make her an album of our memories.

Before I could tell her,  
That without you, my life was an uphill battle  
Of careers, dishwashing, and spousal wars.  
Without you, there is no peace.

---

Five rings, Six rings, Seven.  
There is a clear, soft voice that answers my calls.  
She is dead.  
She is no more.  
Your ballerina has left the shore.

In the last movement, she was taken.  
Her imperfect grace devoured  
by a headless demon that attacked  
her chest, her hips, her spine.  
She became weightless and flew into the morning light.  
To your fearless dancer you must say good night.

Without you there is no peace  
I say, but there is still the music,  
And I still search,  
for a new ballerina,  
To complete the work we started,  
Before the text.



## Change

CAROL EHRLICH

---

My knees know the meaning of decrepitude.  
My mind dithers with strands not remembered,  
not understood.  
My face wears crags and leather,  
not the satin glow of youth  
back when he eyed me with desire  
and we blossomed in the joining.

Impatience to see, to do, to know  
that drove my waking hours  
that sparkled my eyes  
and bubbled smiles from eager lips,  
his and mine,  
is gentled now.

The knowing has become wider, deeper.  
Patience settles my brow and being.  
Solitude among a crowd  
gives me time to understand  
that grains of sand shift and change  
in the winds—and so will I.  
I sigh,  
then shrug.

These are the rewards of living.  
They are mine, and I will celebrate!



## To My Loved Ones: A Thank You

---

CAROLYN HO

The soft morning sunlight flickers  
Gently welcoming across the glistening grass  
Amidst the steady hum of voices  
Their excitement nearly palpable across my skin  
As I quietly adjust the sleeves of a gown  
That feels almost too large  
With its sense of finality  
Of accomplishment  
And most of all  
Its sense of unspoken expectation

They say that the practice of medicine takes a team  
Where a single presence is never enough  
And one is never alone  
And behind every proud healer  
With their polished stethoscopes  
Their pressed white coats  
Are the shadows of those who have bled  
Who have cried, who have sacrificed  
And fought bravely along their winding journey

And as I stand here today  
I catch the eyes of those who have always been there  
The ones who walked this road with me  
The ones who stayed

To the mother who loved selflessly  
Who always gave herself fully  
Without expectations of anything in return  
Who spent late nights waiting up with dinner  
For a daughter to come home from work  
Thank you

To the father who stood staunchly at my side  
Let me make my own hard choices  
But never turned away, never let go  
Even during my darkest storms  
Thank you

---

*continued on next page...*

To the sister who fought off the demons with me  
And spoke the harsh words I needed to hear  
Who pushed me to my limits  
Because she wanted me to aim for the stars  
Thank you

To the brother who quietly protected me  
From the threats I did not see  
And often went out of his way  
To bring me little comforts and simple joys  
Thank you

To the nephews who always believed in me  
Who looked at me with pride  
Even during times in which I failed  
And gifted me with their innocent faith  
Thank you

To the woman who kept my heart safe  
Who heard the words I did not speak  
Knew the fears I kept buried  
And gently reached out to hold me in my weakness  
Thank you

To the teachers who were endlessly patient  
And generous with their knowledge  
The ones who taught me to heal  
Both the open wounds and invisible hurts  
Thank you

And to the ones who were once here  
But have since been lost  
Yet will never be forgotten  
Their memories, those little moments  
Scattered amongst this long journey  
Tiny flecks of light within the midnight sky  
Thank you

The ones who saw the open wounds  
Beneath unbroken skin  
Beneath that professional veneer  
Who touched the hidden scars  
And never saw me differently

---

Every patient I have touched  
I was able to do so  
Because you reached out to me  
Every obstacle I have surpassed  
I was able to do so  
Because you urged me on when I fell

Every moment, every struggle  
Every step of this journey  
You have taken with me  
And been at my side

And now, as I stand to walk across the stage  
To end one segment in my life  
Before starting the newest adventure  
I turn to you all, sitting proudly in the crowd  
Though words will never be enough  
And nothing I do will ever make up for your love  
Just let me take this moment to say  
With all my heart, and everything I am  
Thank you



## My Doctor

JAMES CARTER, JR.

Each day she felt progressively worse. The transformation from hope to jeopardy was cruel in its subtlety. She did not recall when the end began. On that cold October night in 1986, at 2 am, she was hard-pressed to remember any worthwhile details. She could barely communicate her symptoms to the two dreary-looking individuals sitting in front of her. To my right, was my senior resident. In the middle of our interviews with patients she had a bad, annoying habit of switching mid-sentence into her native dialect, moments before her eyes would flutter, eyelids would droop and fall, and the peace of the ambient noise of nurse chatter, instrument clanging, and patient rustling was shattered by a locomotive rumbling from her wet open mouth. My senior resident. My teacher and mentor.

The patient did not seem to notice or mind. She was that short of breath. Her tachypnea, her hyperpnea, unnerved me. Fortunately, I was taught early in my training to recognize...sorry...diagnose, respiratory distress. I leaned forward and asked, "M'am, do you know you cannot breathe?"

"Are you my doctor?", she replied.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you my doctor?"

"Why...yes."

"Good."

She had no idea that I hadn't a clue what was going on beyond the obvious or what to do next. She had faith in me. Blind faith. I had...a degree.

It was at that moment that I actually figured out what being a doctor meant. You would have thought that it would have occurred to me when I took premed classes, the MCATs, or proudly recited the Hippocratic Oath. I knew my chosen profession required aptitude and responsibility. I just assumed that when faced with this type of challenge, I would be ready to do whatever was required. But those were steps on a winding rocky path. A mission. An expedition. I needed to be humble enough to acknowledge intellectual frailty. I needed to know what I did not know.

"My Doctor."

---

\*\*\*

The night she died I heard her calling me as I stepped onto the ward.

“Where’s My Doctor?” “Where’s My Doctor?”

She was inhumanly swollen. Worse than I could have imagined. Far worse than 12 hours before when I had left her. She was vacant. Flat, gray eyes. She kept whispering, “Help me, My Doctor, help me.”

I could not. I did not.

Over three decades later, I still reflect upon her sacrifice. She graciously allowed me to palpate her suffering, so that I could never forget the humility of ineptitude, so that I would never be so sure of myself that I would become dangerously arrogant. After lifelong learning I understand that my experience dealing with this rare case of phlegmasia cerulea dolens was my first foray into the anguish of tragedy. I experienced what a grave prognosis looks like, feels like, smells like. If I had a time machine I would go back, caress her brow, and thank her. And try to save her.



## Accent

---

KARIMA OSMAN

You may ask me to repeat myself,  
but must you furrow your brow?  
I split my tongue to speak to you.  
If you care to know, I'll show you how.

Watch.

Down the middle of this pink sponge, there are peacemakers.  
They don't have to work hard when the listener knows of laxoox and ghee,  
but when it's you,  
this pink sponge expands and shoves against my teeth.

The sponge splits you see?

The left is sharp with its grammarian formalities,  
and as for the right, well it retreats to familiarity,  
to laxoox and ghee.

The two are not yet used to each other,  
so they tangle and delay delivery.

Watch.

The peacemakers will declare unity.  
They will march down the middle  
and pull from both the left and right forcefully

They will then sew the two so tight, you will not see the red that trickles,  
but I will taste it, the iron, the trial, I will taste it.  
When speaking to people like you I always do.

So, spare the furrowed brow just because you're confused  
I'll repeat myself,  
but don't you forget,  
I must split my tongue just to speak to you.



# Frida Kahlo Teaches Me Acceptance

AMANDA SAVINO

---

and for the first time I understand  
that acceptance is not passive  
nor always so clamorous.  
I don't always learn my lessons the first time.  
I have been loud in ways that belied my shrinking,  
have tried to dance around the reality of my body.  
These are lessons all the same, for which I am grateful  
but since then I have been learning

to be deliberate in how I present  
myself, like Frida  
with her skirts and portraits, mirrors  
and eyes which seem the loudest part of her—  
revealing nothing she does not want them to.  
There is a reason we give stories a spine  
and don't require them to walk on their own.

Frida, you did not let things happen to you  
the way you happened to the world.  
The way you made your paintbrush a limb  
and painted your corsets as you did your life:  
bold, demanding to be looked at. A challenge  
to the world in its comfort. Your body, a rebellion  
that you gracefully hid at curtain call  
without hiding the truth of what you are.  
Thank you for being a mirror and saying what  
I could not before I had your eyes to tell me:

There are other ways to dance with your body  
and challenge the world.  
Take what's inaccessible and paint it  
in bold colors on the easel of your discomfort.  
Let joy live in your spine and befriend  
the pain that resides there.  
There is no greater rebellion than this.



## Hands

---

FIONA HORGAN

"Those are piano hands!" my mom loved to enthusiastically declare  
While swooning over a small child  
Revealing her joy in showing tiny hands how to dance along the ivories.

"Look at those hands; he is going to do something great with those hands!"  
the elderly gentleman exclaimed  
Peering over my infant son in the bookstore  
Oblivious that my heart was both swelling and throbbing in response.

She will never place his long, little fingers on the piano keys  
Or teach him the importance of offering a simple kindness to a stranger  
But when he puts his sweet hand in mine, we try to dance away the sorrow.



## Time Slips

PRIYA KRISHNAN

---

It's the way they hold hands,  
knotted bark and arthritic pine,  
a jangle of bones and gaunt along  
the eager evening lights of the walk,  
that makes me pinch the supple  
peach-flesh between forefinger and thumb  
to remind myself of substance, youth.

Life whittles us away  
soundlessly, in the moments  
of clipping laundry to the line  
and scrubbing marinara lakes  
into the sink. The only hint a  
sharp wind chill carving the contour  
of a thinning cheek,  
or squinting at a traffic stop  
while waiting for the lights to change.

Later, in the operating room.  
the almost imperceptible click  
of a diligent needle-driver,  
drawing and redrawing thread.

The knots tighten to the beat  
of a steady ticking rhythm,  
each a thorny newcomer to the supple skin,  
each a notched bookend to the mundane.



## CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

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### **Adriana Solano**

Adriana is a PRA at the University of Colorado Alzheimer's and Cognition Center. Raised in El Salvador she was exposed to literature and arts since a very young age. She has been writing poetry, fairy tales and short stories since the age of 10.

### **Alexandra Frazier**

Alexandra has always been fascinated by the peace and beauty that nature brings. She hopes that this picture can evoke a sense of serenity and awe.

### **Amanda Savino**

Amanda is a poet and social work student from Brooklyn, New York. She writes about the intersection between chronic illness and mental health, and how she misses the ocean. Amanda currently lives in Denver and works in the Dermatology department at CU Anschutz. Her poetry has been published in the True Girl Anthology.

### **Amanda Tompkins**

Amanda is a rising fourth year medical student who enjoys travel, writing and social justice work. In her future career she hopes to continue working with underserved individuals as an internal medicine physician, especially around issues of substance use and end-of-life care.

### **Amira Athanasios**

Amira is a medical student at the George Washington University, pursuing psychiatry. In 2015, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in biology and religious studies from Scripps College. She is passionate about the intersections of gender, culture, philosophy, and medicine.

### **Amity Helzer Harari**

Amity is a Physician Assistant, practicing Oncology for nearly 20 years. She has walked the path of progressive memory loss and dementia with multiple family members..

### **Annette House**

Annette is a 1965 graduate of the University of Colorado School of Nursing, now retired after a 40-year career in nursing. She has been writing poetry since 2014.

### **Art Elser**

Art Elser's poetry has been published in many journals and anthologies. His books include a memoir, *What's It All About, Alfie?*, five poetry books, *We Leave the Safety of the Sea*, *A Death at Tollgate Creek*, *As The Crow Flies (Haiku)*, *To See a World in a Grain of Sand*, and *It Seemed Innocent Enough*.

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

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### **Benjamin Fuller**

Benjamin is a medical student at University of Colorado. Originally from Cincinnati, OH, he enjoys spending time with his family, running, reflecting, and working in the community.

### **Brian Bacak**

After his medical training, Dr. Bacak served as a Family Physician in the US Army. Now at the University of Colorado, he sees medicine as a “calling” and enjoys helping students, residents, and others unearth their potential as they make the world a better place.

### **Carol Ehrlich**

Chair Emerita, Audiology and Speech Pathology, Children’s Hospital, distills 93 years of living in her poetry. She loves her family, mountain cabin and classical music, but worries about the state of the world.

### **Carolyn Ho**

Carolyn, a California native, is currently studying medicine in the beautiful state of Colorado. In her free time, she enjoys being able to share her appreciation of the world with others through her writing and art.

### **Fredrick Abrams**

Dr. Fred Abrams, while an undergraduate at Cornell class of ‘50, in addition to Pre-Med courses, studied Methods and Media, Sculpture and Comparative Religion. He then went on to Cornell Medical School, class of ‘54. As a Founding Member of the Center of Bioethics and Humanities he was aware of the importance of the Arts.

### **Gay Williford**

It wasn’t until she retired from teaching that Gay Williford had time for reflection and became interested in writing, specifically in the challenge of poetry. She belongs to two local poetry groups, is grateful for the efforts and camaraderie of other poets, and benefits from their critique and workshops.

### **Helio Neves da Silva**

Helio is a medical student at the University of Colorado, who tries to spread awareness of systemic racism and bias that, openly or not, often pervades medicine. He hopes to use poetry to spread the word.

### **Howe Qiu**

Howe, a former biology graduate from the University of Colorado Denver, Howe enjoys the outdoors and the changing of seasons. His hobbies include writing, taekwondo, and movies.

### **Jaime Belkind-Gerson**

In Jaime Belkind-Gerson's recent work, he has strived to balance abstract elements with representational ones. He is also a doctor and scientist and at their simplest, his work represents the communication between two or more living organisms attempting to capture the intangible connections between all living things—whether they be between cells, trees or people.

### **James Carter**

Dr. James Carter, Jr., MD, Asst Professor of Medicine/Cardiology, University of Colorado/Anschutz, is board certified in internal medicine, cardiology, and vascular medicine. He focuses on social determinants of health, nutrition, and wound healing.

### **James Chin**

James Chin is a financial and data analyst in the Department of Family Medicine. He was born in Burma and has lived in Brooklyn, Hong Kong, Taipei, Oberlin, Los Angeles and now in Denver. He is kept grounded by a loving wife and two impossibly inscrutable yet adorable daughters.

### **Jeff Druck**

Dr. Jeff Druck is an Emergency Medicine physician as well as filling roles as the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs and Co-Director of the Office of Professional Excellence.

### **John Sladek**

Professor Sladek enjoys nature photography and learned his skills during graduate study in Chicago involving photo-microscopy of brain transmitters. Living in Evergreen affords him opportunity to capture images of deer, elk, bears, lions, birds of all kinds, and Colorado's natural scenery.

### **Julia Michie Bruckner**

Julia is an instructor in pediatrics in the CU School of Medicine and attending physician at Colorado Children's Hospital. A self-taught artist, she rediscovered her childhood love of art while in medical school, finding drawing the best way to learn anatomy. She finds creating to be an essential way to cope with the emotions that come with the practice of medicine.

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

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### **Justin Hauxwell**

Dr. Justin Hauxwell grew up in rural Montana. This unique upbringing fostered deep appreciation for not just the 'what' others think, but the 'why' and 'how.' In his writings he strives to maintain this awareness of the what, why, and how of thought.

### **Karima Osman**

Karima studies Public Health and Health Humanities. Through storytelling, she connects with her ancestral home, Somaliland. Her work is also featured on her blog, Nomadic Intuition. She wishes to attend medical school and is interested in Psychiatry.

### **Kathi Brittain**

Kathi was a dedicated caregiver. She devoted 20 years to caring for developmentally disabled adults in Arizona state group homes. She was their unwavering advocate, particularly in preserving dignity. A member of the Woodstock generation, Kathi had a life-long love of poetry. After losing her battle with cancer in 2011 at the age of 60, Kathi's children discovered a cache of poetry. Much of this was written in the 1970s and is very reflective of that time.

### **Kelly Stanek**

Kelly is a 2nd year MD student at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. She enjoys writing poetry, running, snowboarding, classic literature, and snowshoeing with her family and fiancé. She conducts research on type 1 diabetes, behavioral health or developmental disabilities.

### **Lauren Zausmer**

Lauren is a senior clinical research nurse in the perinatal department at Children's Hospital. She worked in high risk Labor and Delivery for over 12 years before making the transition into research in 2015. She enjoys traveling to new unique places, spending time with her family, photography and cross country skiing.

### **Lisa Diamond**

Lisa Diamond, DNP, FNP-C is an assistant professor in the College of Nursing at the University of Colorado, Anschutz Medical Campus. Her writing has appeared in various journals and newspapers. She enjoys hiking, travel, reading, and knitting. She is a member of Lighthouse Writers Workshop.

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

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### **Lisa Kurth**

Lisa has a BFA in Fine Arts Studio from CU Boulder, is a clinical health psychologist and faculty researcher at UCSOM. She uses a colorful impressionistic perspective in her artwork, relying upon nature as inspiration. Her prolific creativity provides balance to her scientific endeavors.

### **Liz Betz**

Liz is a retired rancher who finds great pleasure in a self-directed study of human nature within literature. She also writes short stories.

### **Lyndy Bush**

Lyndy is a Native New Mexican oil painter. Her work is predominately landscapes and still-lives. She moved to Colorado in 2014 and fell in love with the Colorado scenery. Although she works in administration full time, she always finds time to paint and grow as an artist.

### **Madeline Huey**

Madeline is a medical student at the University of Colorado. She first started writing as a way to explore the world and her purpose was to uncover the overlooked beauty of life. With time, she's found writing to be a therapeutic means to process the uniquely intimate experiences she's part of.

### **Mark Rush**

Mark is a retired clinical psychologist. He has interests in music (plays jazz guitar), photography, travel, and other cultures. He greatly enjoyed his 2 trips to Cuba.

### **Matt Hickey**

Matt is a husband, father, teacher, and book lover. His academic interests include both STEM and humanities (ethics) concerns. Poetry is a relatively new adventure for him, inspired by the beauty of the natural world.

### **Michael Aubrey**

Michael works finding transplant patients their best donor. He also hikes, botanizes, and photographs; often all at once while pondering Imogen Cunningham's quote: Which of my photographs is my favorite? The one I'm going to take tomorrow.

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

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### **Michelle Harris-Love**

Michelle is Associate Professor of Bioengineering at the University of Colorado, Denver—Anschutz Medical Campus. She is a physical therapist with doctoral and post-doctoral training in human neurophysiology and post-stroke movement recovery.

### **Mireya Ortiz**

Mireya is a poet, author and a proud mother. She enjoys spending time with family and friends. Her hobbies include writing, reading, watching foreign movies and traveling. She believes in the healing power of love!

### **Nancy Sharp**

Nancy Sharp, MFA, Creative Nonfiction, sits on the Community Board for the Center for Bioethics and the Humanities, and is the author of *Both Sides Now: A True Story of Love, Loss, and Bold Living*, winner of the Colorado Book Award, and a book for grieving families called *Because the Sky is Everywhere*.

### **Nick Williams**

Nick is a graduate of the 2019 Physical Therapy Class and writes between class, clinicals, and board examinations. Writing helps him work through difficult situations to stay optimistic towards the future. He also loves dad jokes and dogs.

### **Paul Flippen**

Paul was born in Berlin, and as an Army Brat bounced between Germany, Texas and California at the whim of the Pentagon. Paul's work features layers of pattern, abstraction, and imagery that invite the viewer to enter a dialog with the work. \*36days\* was published by Shanti Arts Press in 2019.

### **Paul Rousseau**

Paul is a semi-retired physician and writer, published or forthcoming in *The Healing Muse*, *Blood and Thunder*, *Intima. A Journal of Narrative Medicine*, *Cleaning up Glitter*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Hospital Drive*, *JAMA*, *Tendon*, and others.

### **Philip "Flipp" Sherengos**

Philip is a cancer patient at Anschutz. Love of description, the physicality of nature and the taste of the words on the tongue have all been a guiding lights in his writings and are the inspiration of this poem.

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

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### **Priya Krishnan**

Priya is a fourth-year medical student and aspiring general surgeon. She is grateful for how CU's Bioethics and Humanities offerings have enriched her personal and professional life. She loves adventuring in the mountains and playing violin.

### **Rachel Pauley**

Rachel is a cat person, tango dancer, and watercolor painter who is passionate about communication and looks forward to a career in critical care and medical education.

### **Reilly Quist**

Reilly is a student in the CU SOM Class of 2022. After being diagnosed with hip dysplasia and undergoing surgery midway through medical school she began writing poetry to help navigate both experiences in medicine. She grew up in in Delta Colorado and is passionate about rural primary care.

### **Roopa Gandhi**

Dr. Roopa Gandhi is an associate professor of Pediatric Dentistry at Anschutz Campus. She seeks to upturn the myths regarding oral health through creative fiction inspired by her patients and her global life experiences. Roopa lives in Denver with her husband, daughter, and chocolate Labrador.

### **Ryan Kammeyer**

Ryan is a fifth-year Child Neurology resident at Children's Hospital Colorado. Life during residency has been colored with both bright and dark times, as illustrated in Heartbeats. He and his wife live in Denver, and now have a beautiful, yet mischievous toddler son.

### **Serapio M. Baca**

Serapio is an Asst. Research Professor in the Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences Dept. He uses optical imaging methods where changes in color and intensity reflect changes in brain activity. Digital photography—using standard and experimental hardware—is an ongoing passion.

### **Shirley Sullivan**

Shirley has been a trail cook, a student of French clowning, and a classical singer. She has studied Carl Jung for over 20 years and leads spiritual retreats. Find Praise for January, her book of poems, is forthcoming from Book Bar Press.

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

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### **Sierra Keller**

Sierra is an Administrative Services Coordinator at Children's Hospital. She has a joy for art classes and has always found that her voice is best heard through her writing. She hopes to connect people to each other and inspire them to see from new perspectives.

### **Spencer Poore**

Spencer is a pediatric pulmonary fellow at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. He is currently learning how to play a saxophone from a pawn shop and spends most of his free time watching Frozen, re-enacting Frozen, or singing songs from Frozen.

### **Storm Cowden**

Storm is an Audiology Tech at UC Health. She specializes in art about animals. Although a Colorado native, she travels a lot and likes to enjoy a good brew wherever she might find herself. Her spirit animal is a gorilla, if you were going to ask.

### **Subbiah Pugazhenth**

Subbiah Pugazhenth PhD is an Associate Professor in Medicine. He studies the interactions of diabetes and Alzheimer's disease. Painting is more than a hobby to him. He believes that art complements science and helps a researcher to see the big picture.

### **Vladka Kovar**

Vladka is a preventive medicine physician/epidemiologist with a background in psychiatry and a "side" degree in Art History, Theory, and Criticism. She is originally from the Czech Republic and currently works for the Community Epidemiology and Program Evaluation Group.

## MEDIA SUBMISSIONS

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### **Additional media submissions can be found online:**

**Transparent Lotus** by Justin Hauxwell  
<https://soundcloud.com/thehumantouch/transparent-lotus>

**Comfortably Numb** by Eric Olson and Carrie Knowlton  
[www.ucdenver.edu/thehumantouch](http://www.ucdenver.edu/thehumantouch)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Editors-in-Chief:

- Allison M. Dubner, CU Graduate School
- Carolyn Ho, CU School of Medicine
- Priya Krishnan, CU School of Medicine

All other members of the Editorial Board

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All our readers, who continue to read our journal and care about its future.

Thank you!

# *Graduate Certificate* **Health Humanities and Ethics**

Designed for health professionals and graduate students, working clinicians and community members to provide the skills required to navigate our increasingly complex healthcare landscape.

- Small seminars
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- One evening course per term
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