

# Jonel Abellanosa

## The Price

Cream-faced clown, cherry hat over  
almond eyes, red syrup tatters of  
his hobo sleeves, pineapple arches on  
thighs scooped from yellow and brown.  
The oarsman rows with banana  
splits. I carve the peach seat under a  
parasol of toothpick and crepe paper  
and melt the stolen moment  
on the palate. Glass gondola  
transports the secret from my doctor.

Sugar found my blood early in  
life and refuses to leave. It rolls  
on memory's tongue like the sweet promise  
that kept mom, the dentist and  
her assistant from chasing me  
down the hallway. I work out and eat  
less Monday to Saturday to pay for  
sundaes of back to childhood  
trips. To tongue more voluptuous  
melts, I've to die a bit more inside.

Jonel Abellanosa is a Type 2 diabetic and, before he embarked on a strict regimen of diet and regular exercise, suffered from diabetic complications like hypertension, retinopathy, erectile dysfunction, chest pains and neuropathy. His abnormal anxiety over the onset of diabetic complications has perhaps turned him into a hypochondriac who also lives with the morbid fear of cancer, especially stomach cancer. He diets and exercises because as a diabetic he doesn't want to miss out on the sugary pleasures of living. His poems have appeared in *Poetry Quarterly*, *Burning Word*, *Fox Chase Review*, *Red River Review*, *Qarrtsiluni*, *the Philippines Free Press* and *the Philippine Graphic magazine*.

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# Shahd Alshammari

## Desire

Swimming alongside your sparkling skin  
Your eyelashes filled with tiny droplets of seawater  
I kiss them ever so softly,  
Wanting to taste your flavor- though I have tasted it before- this time is different  
You dipped in saltiness.  
I hold my breath  
You come closer  
I cannot touch you  
Insanely jealous of the fish  
I squirm like them.  
The waves decide  
With a forceful thrust  
You fall into my arms.

Shahd Alshammari is a PhD candidate at the University of Kent, UK. She was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis at the age of sixteen. She is now 27, and is working on a thesis concerning madwomen in literature. Alshammari is especially interested in the concept of hybridity, having been born to a Bedouin father and a Palestinian mother, and educated in American schools. She is also interested in disability studies and the correlation of disability studies with identity in the Arab world. She also writes for *Arab Women Now*, an online magazine which gives voice to Arab women and current global issues.

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# Cathy Barber

## Self-Portrait as a Tree

The bark is spotted.  
The branches stocky  
to match the trunk,  
squat on the earth.

Not a baobab,  
a chestnut,  
not a willow,  
or an elm.  
I am my own species,

but I have a tribe.

We are the diseased.  
The woodborer eats  
our wood, chews  
with impunity,  
piles sawdust  
in his wake. More  
and more dust  
less and less tree.

Cathy Barber is a poet and blogger living in San Mateo, CA. Ten years ago she was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. The diagnosis was a relief at the time, after years of wondering what was wrong. Fibromyalgia symptoms are an odd list from debilitating pain to dry eyes, and symptoms can change from day to day, so back then fibro patients were sometimes told their problems were psychosomatic. Because of the fibro, she finds it impossible to hold a job but lives a full life of writing, family, friends, and travel.

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# Deborah Bayer

## I Make My Team Cry

So, say you're 30 years old,  
and you want to help people,  
not by being a nurse  
or occupational therapist.  
You want to be a leader  
and decide to be a doctor.  
You map and take the steps.  
Then you start to write again.  
You discover that being a doctor  
is a shadow for what you want,  
which is to be a healer,

a crucible for pain.  
Once it seemed so noble  
to dedicate a decade  
in training to be a shaman,  
one with social acceptance,  
an internist who knows enough  
of HIV to accompany  
James and Vincent and Sonia  
to the border of the underworld  
but not across the river.  
You find out:

healers are wounded.  
I'm starting the staff meeting  
at the Hospice. I always begin  
by reading a poem.  
I need to treat myself.  
Today I'm reading Mark Doty.  
When I look up, I see  
everyone is crying.  
We regain our composure  
as we meet the needs  
for the consolation of grief.

## Your Choice

I happen to be there when you're admitted.  
My job is to keep you alive at any cost.  
Lucky for you that I have experience  
& I'm really good at diagnosing

the opportunistic diseases of AIDS.

So when you have the bad luck  
to have a rare pneumonia  
& a virus attacking your eyes,

I load you up with several toxins  
to save your vision, to save your life.  
You're ambivalent about being treated.  
I'm sure you won't be when you feel better.

In time I get to see you in the office.  
You've gained weight and look healthy.  
You wear a beaded & embroidered  
white sherwani & matching kufi

over your neat & corn-rowed hair.  
You look resplendent. You've come to tell me  
that after long thought & deliberation,  
you've decided to stop taking meds

that I prescribed so you can pursue  
q'uranic healing under the guidance  
of the mullah at your mosque.  
My job as your doctor is to let

you make your own informed decision,  
even if I know it means  
you'll die. I tell you I disagree  
with your choice. I tell you

I support your decision & I'm  
still your doctor. That was the last  
time I saw you, except in the picture  
over your obituary in the Press.

Dr. Deborah Bayer graduated from UMDNJ School of Osteopathic Medicine in 1989. She has a private practice specializing in Infectious Diseases, and she is Medical Director of a hospice in Atlantic County, New Jersey. Her own personal experience with breast cancer treatments two years ago caused her to deeply reassess the trajectory of her life. As a result, she has made more time for reading and writing poetry.

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# Diane Hoover Bechtler

## Plane Ride

Ironically, on the first plane to Mayo, I sat beside a young man in his thirties who had MS. We shared stories of exasperation about doctors and illness. He told me of his complex road to diagnosis, a journey which took years. I told him I'd exhausted all medical resources in Charlotte and had to look to Mayo for help, that I probably didn't have MS. He was certain I did have it.

He spoke from his experience. "From now on in your life people will fall in two categories: Ones who open doors for you and others who barge past you so you won't be in their way. The second group will be larger than the first."

He told me his secret. He had a legal prescription for cannabis. It relaxed his muscles and enhanced his sleep. I was amazed. Here I was a flower child of the 60s, sitting beside a man 25 years my junior who was legally holding.

Diane Hoover Bechtler lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with her husband, Michael Gross who is a poet with a day job and with their cat, Call Me IshMeow.

She has had short work published in journals such as *The Gettysburg Review*, *Thema Literary Journal*, *Everyday Fiction*, and *The Dead Mule*, School of Southern Literature.

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# Peter Bradley

## Cardiac Event

You surprised me then at 53,  
with the party in full swing  
and everything music to my ears.  
Your light tapping caught me unawares.  
*May I have this dance, you said.*  
Trip the light fantastic one last time,  
as you led me by the hand upon the dance floor  
and wrapped me tightly in your cold embrace.  
Looking deep within your lifeless eyes,  
a slow death in quarter time,  
the proposition I hadn't bargained for.  
Not tonight I thought,  
but you swept me off my feet anyway,  
trying hard to steal my heart.  
Later, when I came to my senses,  
I watched through misty eyes as you spun  
and twirled away,  
off to find another to hold you close,  
to feel your cool breath,  
to hear your soft whisper.  
*Dance Thanatos, dance.*

Peter is retired and a cardiac patient. He has survived two heart attacks and two heart surgeries. Illness and personal tragedy have marked his life, but have never controlled it. He is currently living peacefully in New Hampshire and writing poetry, with his wife Janice and their female German Shepherd, Zoe the Wonder Dog.

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# Marian Brooks

## The Red Devil

On May 23, 2007, I nearly fell off a chair in the oncology exam room. Dr. Renninger (who is no doubt younger than my son) told me I'd be dead within a year if I refused treatment for IBC, Inflammatory Breast Cancer, a rare but very aggressive intruder. Treatment would mean half year chemotherapy, a bilateral mastectomy and radiation 5 days a week for 6 weeks. When the breath came back into my lungs, I asked when we could begin. Two days later, we began.

The chemo room was filled with 15 other cancer patients attached to tubes of various colors, reading, watching TV, sleeping or chatting with their support people. Me, I was crying. Within a very short period of time, I was hooked up to a bladder of Adriamycin, otherwise known as The Red Devil. It was red of course and looked suspiciously like Cool Aid. Within two weeks, I had no hair, anywhere. The chemo techs were kind enough to stick me only once each of the 8 times I visited the floor, every three weeks for 7 months. The other good news was that my husband came with me every single time. He went to the cafeteria during my 4 hour infusions and bought me blueberry muffins and coffee. He looked pale and frightened. More good news - I didn't get sick, only looked sick. Water tasted like mineral oil, orange juice was too acidic and chocolate didn't tempt me at all. That's when I realized how sick I was.

In December, I no longer had breasts. Both were removed for the sake of symmetry but mostly to reduce the chances of having this beastly disease recur in the healthy breast. There was considerable pain after the surgery but what was more painful was learning about the pathology report. Every one of the lymph nodes removed still had active cancer in them even after the Red Devil had done its worst. That's when I began taking antidepressants.

The doctors hoped that radiation would "mop up" any remaining disease. Since my chest looked like fried bacon after a few weeks, I hoped it was burning the aggressive little cells to death and I'm not a violent person usually.

So here I am, five years later, still vertical and feeling good. My little granddaughter is coming to visit for a week. We'll be going to the zoo, the bug museum, the movies, eating pizza, playing games and doing puzzles.

My five wigs are still in a box. I hope I never have to re-open it.

Having recently retired, Marian Brooks has begun to write some short fiction. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband. Marian graduated from the U of P (Eng. Lit) and Villanova University (Counseling). She was a family psychotherapist for many years and volunteers now at a hospice facility. However, this is not fiction. Five years ago Marian was diagnosed with Inflammatory Breast Cancer, a particularly aggressive form of breast cancer. She lived through chemo, surgery and radiation. She's in remission now and doing fine.

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# Paul Brucker

## A Necessary Intensity

There are reasons to hang on —  
A chance to pay our light bill on time,  
A new TV season on the way  
(with a couple of shows you might like)  
And my firm guarantee that no one (i.e., me)  
Will touch the dental floss you left on the shelf.

I know the whole thing is a tad inconvenient.  
In fact, years too soon —  
“One last variation of failure”  
Is not something you had penciled in your Day-Timer.

But, why hold the blanket so tight? You can't keep it.  
Someday it will be the blanket's turn.  
And the night shift going past your open door —  
Someday each of them, blessed and unblessed alike,  
Will have his turn  
And I, too, will have my turn.

So what good does it do to always eat your vegetables  
And make your own salad dressing,  
To run around the track each Tuesday  
And cease smoking well before the Surgeon General's warning?

So what difference does it make to know that East Brady is in Western Pa.,  
That saccharin is 500x stronger than sugar,  
That safe liberalism, party loyalty and a swell war record  
Made Rutherford B. Hayes an acceptable candidate in 1876?

And how does it help to try and try to understand it all —  
The limitations of science, the fallacies of philosophy,  
The sound the wind makes when it scratches  
Its fingernails across our unraked lawn?  
(Sorry, dad, no extra points given for phoning  
In your answers with a smile in your voice.)

Speaking of help, your doctor is due  
To give us the nightly play by play —  
The blood count, pulse rate and temperature  
Of a body beyond repair.

Nearing the end, your aspirations remain beyond reach.  
Your music never found its audience  
And never will. But, it's just.  
Your teacher (he had his turn) told mom who told me —

You were gifted but not gifted enough.  
Your playing lacked a certain oomph,  
A necessary intensity.

So it's no surprise you have nothing to impart.  
No lessons on how to live.  
No tender father-and-son scenes  
Like those in movies.  
Just a look that says, "Son, there's something very wrong with you —  
That's why you elicit no praise."  
(And I suppose I deserve no better.)

Oh, did I tell you how mom spent the morning  
Picking out your coffin?  
(It's made of polystyrene so it looks expensive  
Yet costs less than the average wood or metal unit.)  
She will bury you  
In the suit you said I could borrow for job interviews.  
As planned, your eyes will be scooped out and donated to science.

Since I have only ten minutes left on the parking meter,  
I look into your face and try to cry.  
I think of my sad things, like watching a squirrel  
Dart into the middle of the road,  
Hesitate a second too long and get run over.  
I try to cry  
But my watchdog of despair lets no tears slip by.

By the bye, dad, did I mention my new hobby?  
Watching the starlings outside your pale window.  
They hop from branch to branch, apparently at random.  
(Someday it will be their turn, too.)

Paul Brucker, a marketing communications writer, lives in Mt. Prospect, IL, where "Friendliness is a Way of life." Active in the early 1980s Washington, D.C, poetry scene, he put a lid on poetry writing when he went to the Northwestern University grad ad school in a questionable attempt to think like a businessman and secure a decent income. Nevertheless, he has succumbed to writing poetry again and has been recently published in *Audio zine*, *Barefoot Review*, *Borderline*, *The Clackamas Review* and the anthology, *The Pagan's Muse: Words of Ritual, Invocation and Inspiration*.

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# Sabrina Bullock

## Diagnoses: An Unwanted Collection

Another health crisis yet again.  
Back at the doctor's office waiting.  
This is life with chronic illnesses.  
My husband has many, but he is my husband.  
He is not his diagnoses, even though we never know when one will act up.  
Sometimes it feels like we collect diagnoses.  
It started when our daughter was eight.  
Hypertension, angina, and atherosclerosis were first.  
Heart surgery was needed, yet he resisted.  
Tried alternative therapies,  
Chelation and supplements to no avail.  
Angina became severe, he consented.  
Faith of a child, daughter believed he'd be all right.  
I feared he'd die and I'd be raising our child alone.  
Triple heart bypass, weeklong hospital stay,  
And another diagnosis added as well.  
Atrial fibrillation was here to stay.  
Recovery took quite a while,  
Seemed I forgot how to smile.  
His appetite was off and he slept a lot.  
I was so afraid, but said nothing aloud.  
Hid in the bathroom, laid on the floor quietly crying.  
The tears stopped and he got better.  
Started to adjust to a new life, not normal.  
After all, "Normal only exists as a dryer setting",  
Says my friend's mother.  
Learned new medicines, but far from through.  
More diagnoses, more trauma to put us through,  
My husband had strokes times two.  
One at a time, yet the lingering damage was done.  
Thankful, yes. It could have been worse.  
Easier for me to say,  
He has to deal with the after effects that stay.  
We go to physical therapy, each week an improvement.  
Our special goal set, we wish to waltz again.  
Not as graceful as once we were, but we get our dance.  
Discharged from outpatient,  
Resume at home the best we can.  
Life and time both go on.  
I'm still scared, but learning to live again,  
And sing a different song.  
The peace would not last too long,

Another diagnosis soon made its way.  
Heart failure and another new medicine.  
Luckily it improved his heart function.  
Time moved on and we adjusted.  
I don't remember where they fell,  
But we picked up a few more diagnoses as well.  
Cataracts in both eyes made it hard to see.  
Easily fixed with surgery.  
A couple of bouts of pneumonia,  
And a urinary tract infection.  
Short hospital stays, but these go away.  
Thankfully some diagnoses do not stay.  
Hold my breath, maybe life will give us a rest.  
Not admitting defeat, but know things will never be the same.  
Trying also to raise our daughter and remain sane.  
More is yet to come, the diagnoses collection is not done.  
Always had trouble hearing, yet now add cholesteomas.  
Benign growth eating away the bones of the inner ears.  
The words of my daughter and I become harder to hear.  
"Not a surgical candidate", says the doctor.  
More frequent ENT visits, ears seep fluid often,  
And antibiotics if infection is too bad.  
Left knowing will continue to get worse.  
Somewhere along the way, I lost track of when,  
The diagnosis of COPD entered in.  
Lifelong habit of smoking had caught up with him.  
COPD is one of those, which stays till the end.  
It is a harsh enemy, in no way a friend.  
Brings shortness of breath, coughing, and loss of energy.  
Changed our lives in so many ways, which hurt me.  
Tissues and trash cans in places for easy access.  
Daily coughing up phlegm, his body produces in excess.  
More medicines to take, inhalers to help breathing.  
Every task made more difficult.  
Nothing is as it was before.  
Always on the alert for signs of infections.  
Visits and calls to the doctor's office occur so much more.  
No reprieve in sight, has intense foot pain,  
Results are there is no fracture, a different diagnosis to collect.  
It's gout. More medicine, the list is not quite long enough yet.  
Calm spells are short it seems,  
In this craziness called life.  
Here we sit, waiting to be called once again.  
We've seen the nurse so much, she's a friend.  
He's been worse, trouble breathing, balance off, and pain.  
Lab work done and come back next week.  
Only kidney function down some, but doesn't account for symptoms.

“Things look fine”, doctor says, “Could do echocardiogram.”  
Almost fell and pain worse, so chest x-ray to begin.  
While awaiting results, cardiologist does echo in the afternoon.  
Later speak to the nurse on the telephone.  
Discovered two fractures, though has had no fall.  
Not much can be done at all.  
Pain meds for comfort, breathe deep often, and 6 to 8 weeks to heal.  
Not much change does his echocardiogram reveal.  
Day in, day out are difficult.  
Hard to get comfortable and breathe.  
Stays tired and sleeps often.  
Good days are less and bad days more.  
When he’s awake he does what he can.  
Life runs at a slower pace.  
Reaches for me less often.  
We don’t talk as much.  
There was once upon a time,  
Couldn’t wait to touch.  
Now we’re living in the moment,  
Our hopes have changed.  
Our daughter is now eighteen.  
Time has passed in a hurry it seems.  
With our collection nothing will ever be the same.  
More diagnoses will be collected.  
Added to our unwanted collection.  
Doctors will treat what they can.  
Yet broken hearts and shattered dreams,  
No cure for the diagnosis of those things.  
This life, it’s not cruel.  
It’s just life and we do the best we can do.  
Till it’s time for us to say adieu.

Sabrina Bullock is a nurse, family caregiver, and writer living in Kittrell, N.C. Her husband has many chronic health problems and both live each day as it comes. He had triple heart bypass surgery in 2003 and has had atrial fibrillation since as well as a couple of strokes along the way. His most difficult diagnosis has been COPD, which makes breathing and normal activities difficult on a daily basis. Both look for the simple joys in life.

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# Terri Clary

## Voyage

We study over steeped hands the distant  
dark horizon; all uneasy pilgrims  
upon this leaky skiff. Whispering for  
calmer seas we sail without a sextant;  
no stars or charts to steer our course toward  
some safer beach. We've stirred alchemy  
with science, infused blood with ocean yew;  
all our psalms are incantations and our  
pleas are wrapped in prayers which we raise up with  
wavering conviction in the hope our  
sails will fill with a slightly stronger breath  
than the faltering gasp that brought us here.

Terri Clary is a poet and writer who resides in Waxahachie, Texas with her husband, Jim, on a small farm. Terri was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer in January of 2011. After chemo-therapy, a mastectomy and radiation failed to cure the disease Terri entered into a more-or-less continuous course of chemo-therapy. Today Terri runs her small dog boarding business, loves her husband and their farm and his happy to be well enough to keep writing.

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# Carolyn Dille

## Seed under soil

Memory, the most intimate muse. — *Thomas DeBaggio*

In that time you can't remember  
was it a yesterday just now  
you came around the corner  
singing the words you knew  
and the music before your knowing  
below the soil the magma music  
you sang so clear we could hear  
the heat of your voice crooning the frogs'  
chorus in cress creeks back to Iowa  
and taste the basil-lover's ancient hymn

In that time you can't remember  
you'd gone to a place we hadn't  
you saw the words burn  
red and cool to black  
writing *Losing my Mind*  
Any moment you walk  
to the straight-sided  
pit and look down  
thin loam layer red clay yellow  
clay aggregate all the way  
down  
to a corner seep of water  
reflecting the patterned  
black contracting your heart

In that time you can't remember  
you hear the cries of the present  
in the silence under the current  
fish sleep the rosemary forgets  
where you left the spade  
bent to a glitter

## Before the wake

The undertaker  
the undertaker came by.  
He was slender and well-dressed but not in black.

He used to be  
a postman.  
He undressed my mother

with delicacy and  
the carefreeness that comes  
with long practice  
long practice.

He cleansed her vagina  
her rectum under her  
arms with anti-  
bacterial wipes  
with tender  
professionalism  
with tenderness.

He ministered to her  
cooling flesh as if  
it were warm  
as if.

When we asked the usual—  
how long can she stay  
in the cool box  
how long  
what's its temperature  
how long have you  
been an undertaker—  
how long  
he spoke easily.

One of us made a nervous joke:  
“This is better job security.” He  
laughed—not loud but from  
the belly  
from his belly.

We went up to find  
the final clothing.  
Almost all too large.  
We came down with  
the aqua silk blouse  
the dove gray trousers  
the sweater of woven pastel  
ribbons. The last  
my sister had bought her  
the last.

She loved the colors  
would say again and again  
what beautiful colors  
what beautiful colors.

As he dressed her  
a transparent sliver entered  
each aqua and peach pierced  
the jade and lilac  
of her skin cooling  
silver cooling silver.

We didn't weep then though  
we knew the transparent  
glass would home its way  
through our green  
veins our green veins.

Carolyn Dille's friend and mentor, Thomas DeBaggio, was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's in 1997. Her mother-in-law, Willy Walvis, was diagnosed in 2005. Carolyn and her husband Dick moved to Holland to take care of Willy in her home, as she would not move and would not have outside caregivers at the time of her diagnosis. Willy died at home in 2007. Tom died in an Alzheimer's care facility in 2011, after writing two critically acclaimed books, *Losing my Mind* and *When the Dark Comes*, about his experience of the disease. He and his family did much to dispel public ignorance and fear through NPR interviews conducted over several years.

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# Robert Duffley

## Missouri, Milkshakes

No time for telephones,  
You race north along the highway,  
To a shiny hospital where a young doctor  
might answer the old question  
of a mother and a sick child.

You hope for an answer maybe  
the ages can't give after all.  
Though this time they've got a big, new scanner.

Maybe you're just rural,  
but there among their colored bio-blobs,  
you never seem to see when he'll get better,  
big, normal, strong, not teased anymore  
by the switchblade comrades in homeroom.

Overwhelmed by it all,  
you pull into McDonald's.

He'll have a medium vanilla shake.  
He never did like strawberry.

You can give him that.  
You can pay the \$3.50  
to the easy teenager  
at the window with cash,  
and without any outbursts.

And no one there  
in the soybean loneliness  
of the south Missouri freeway  
will see or discredit your discount efforts,  
unplugged among their machines  
and your misfortunes.

Robert Duffley is a senior English student at Georgetown University. His youngest brother was diagnosed at age 13 with Neurofibromatosis and continues to undergo periodic testing and treatment at Washington University Medical Center in St. Louis. Though not always focused on medical experiences, Robert's work focuses on his family members and influential moments in their lives. Robert grew up in Memphis, TN, where his family still lives.

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# Robin Wyatt Dunn

## The Aesthetic Response

Say you had a symphony  
Only it wasn't mine.  
And you get older,  
Older,  
The songs you knew that thrilled you,  
And now they do still,  
But it's not the same,  
Like an addict,  
You need more and deeper pain:  
Man, Oh Man: And Why else?  
Why else for a forefather or a long divorce?  
Why else to the mat and the axe,  
Why else to your long hard reckoning  
In your head,  
This reasoning,  
That you can mull and slip out:  
Impregnating a pause with your breath.  
What's it good for, if all are found wanting?  
You must strengthen.  
You must find these ways to strengthen.  
Did you ring it right the first time?  
Did you swallow it?

Was it purity?  
Some nascent god in your head?  
Athena angry and whiny, bitch in heat?  
Your solution was elegant:  
Unwavering,  
Unsympathetic,  
Unvarying.  
The straightheads can be hard.  
They can be long and raw.

Robin Wyatt Dunn lives in The Town of the Queen of the Angels, El Pueblo de la Reina de Los Angeles, in Echo Park. He is 33 years old. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 2011.

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# Jéanpaul Ferro

## Something Happened

When I couldn't even go out anymore, only *Heartache* and *Grief* came to visit.

*Heartache* putting her long, red coat away in the closet like she would be staying for a while,

*Grief* stripping my soul right off my bones, kissing my body up and down like a girl from the Mediterranean who knew too much.

Each one would stay with me in twelve-hour shifts. The sallow tiers of sun that used to filter all day soon turned into 4 a.m. all of the time.

Words became echoes.

Echoes became those people who you wanted to leave.

You could only see the world in all of its chaos.

You became troubled that you would lose all those whom you once loved.

The day seemed as though it could only sit there down on its knees.

I asked *Grief* about God, but she told me that it wasn't time yet;

We both sat there in the parlor, making fishing wire out of our own brown hair;

wringing down the darkness into this glass of wine that we would both share right before we both went to bed.

## The Sweet By and By

The neighborhood kids are knocking down at the front door again, at first like banging orchestra drums, but later as haunting as piano keys right after you lose someone;

in the middle of the night they awake you, awake you to a blood red sky that should never be allowed to live at night—

is this another planet? can a kilogram of pain hurt this much?

I know why men and women run now. You see them running before dawn along the streets like they are on their way to meet ghosts for the sunrise.

If you look at them you can see yesterday stained to their faces  
like silver in rain, cold like the skin of porpoises going too fast  
under water.

—The covenant has been broken. The levees have been breached.  
You can see all the souls stranded up there on the high places if  
you look long enough.

I don't want to know; but I know. Like steel that has been gathered  
from far away to build a bridge, but the bridge is gone now too.

If only I could love the status quo. If I never had to go out again.  
If the waves of the beach could wash me away until I drown.

I can see the ocean from my bedroom window at night, the waves  
moving gold tip to gold tip, breathing your name like a rhythm,  
more naked than blue, where it joins up with the sky, the heart,  
and all the threadbare of the mind,

never letting me go, like a distance that you know you have to  
run too,

a place that you've always known, that you have always been  
afraid of,

especially in the middle of the night when you are hiding, when  
you are truly alone across the entire inhabited earth.

Jéanpaul Ferro is a novelist, short fiction author, and poet from Providence, Rhode Island. His work has been widely published and has been both nominated and won poetry prizes. His website is [www.jeanpaulferro.com](http://www.jeanpaulferro.com).

Jéanpaul's life has been touched with sorrow. The poem, "Something Happened," is about his experience with depression after his girlfriend died suddenly of bone cancer. "The Sweet By and By" is about her mother going on and surviving after her death.

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# Gina Forberg

## Last Night in Own Bed

When my mother knew  
it was her last night in her own bed  
she had me put on the Egyptian

cotton sheets and dress her  
in her silk white pajamas.

I smoothed the wrinkles

in the sleeves, held her arms firm  
and said, *There, that should make  
you more comfy.*

When my mother knew  
it was her last night in her own bed  
she picked up her wedding photo

rubbed her finger over my dad's face  
and said, *He was so handsome*, then patted  
the empty space next to her and said, *Sit.*

*This was his side*, she said and when  
I asked her if it was always that way,  
she said, *As long as I can remember.*

And quite often these days  
she couldn't remember.

When she tried to retrieve

a word there was always that long pause  
followed by *that, that...* until she gave up,  
pointed and shouted, *That thing!*

and I would deliver it to her  
like the most delicate flower.

When my mother knew

it was her last night in her own bed  
she had me line up her medications  
in alphabetical order on her night table.

She looked at me and said, *Can you believe  
all these pills? I never even took a vitamin,*  
licking her lips asking me to massage

her cracked mouth with ice chips  
and moist swabs. All those lipsticks,  
wasted and when I asked her if she wanted

me to put some on her, she said,  
*What for? Where am I going?*  
When my mother knew

it was her last night in her own bed  
she raised her hands in the air  
as if conducting an orchestra.

I said, *What? What is it?*  
and she kicked the covers off  
and rolled on her side, the bottom

of her pajamas soaked through.  
I cleaned her like I would clean  
my two-year old daughter, powdered

her privates  
and put her in a fresh nightgown.  
*Better*, I asked, and she nodded.

When my mother knew  
it was her last night in her own bed  
she pointed at her rosary beads

and prayer book.  
She asked me to read the prayer  
to Saint Jude, patron saint of hopeless

causes, she, belly full of tumor  
rolling her fingers over the pearly white beads,  
her bones digging into the down of the duvet.

When my mother knew  
it was her last night in her own bed,  
she removed her hand from beneath

the covers and I held it, brushed her blue  
raised veins as we laid on our backs  
like two lovers in a field studying the stars

wishing for a wish that didn't exist  
and when her breathing became labored  
I was grateful for the thunder

of the subway, passing, silencing her body  
and all night I laid there and when I heard  
the rails rattle, I wanted one train

then another.

## Swinging for The Fences

My brother plays baseball to run from my mother's cancer. He thinks each crack of the bat can resection her liver, pitching no-hitters will reduce her white

cell count and stealing bases will bring her home. As she sucks on ice pops, he practices his swing in the batter's box, fields grounders on green diamonds,

kicks dirt in the dugout. I know she knows he will never come into the room and I shake my head saying, "It's not right," and she says, "No, he needs this."

In the garden hydrangeas bloom; pink, blue, white, purple. "Some of them will make it to Fall," my mother says.

And I remember reading in "Gardening for Idiots," it is the acidity of the soil that determines the color of the flower. A neutral acid creates cream, white.

And here they are, these creamy white blossoms hoping to turn pink, red wine, dry into beautiful, long lasting bouquets.

Outside in the parking lot the halogen lamps hum and the crickets insist on their summer song while my brother waits in the car listening to the Met game.

Gina Forberg is a teacher and poet from Fairfield, Connecticut. She is a graduate of the MAW program at Manhattanville College. Gina's mother was diagnosed with colon cancer in the early '90's. After several attempts with experimental drugs, chemotherapy and radiation she passed in 1996. These poems are a representation of her experience and time with her mother during her illness.

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# Kathryn Goloski

## The Next Time You See Me

Now I'm all kinds of altered  
A young body with an old mind  
No sense of time  
Waiting for the next time I see you  
Being caretaker, it was hard to take care  
But I never dared let you know  
How quickly I let my 20s go  
Before I was 22  
But I think you knew  
"The next time you see me,"  
you said,  
"You'll be an old lady."  
The next time I see you I'll be dead  
An old body with a young head  
  
Hopefully            time            flies  
  
Slowly

## Hurting Eyes

My eyes hurt  
And so I'm scared to kiss her  
To get close  
Because mine could be the kiss of death  
My eyes hurt  
And I'm scared to love you  
To let go  
To free fall  
And I am scared  
Scared to spend her time with someone else  
And because my eyes hurt  
They hurt so much I could cry  
If only that would help  
So placid; distant I remain  
Sitting on the couch with her,  
thinking of you  
wondering what to do  
about my hurting eyes

Kathryn Goloski moved back home to Baldwinsville, NY after completing her BA in English Literature and in order to commence her Master's Degree at SUNY ESF in Syracuse, NY. In December of that same year, (2008), her mother, Margaret Fowler Goloski, (a non-smoker), was

diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. Kathryn, and her, father James, were Margaret's primary care takers until she passed on the eve of Kathryn's 22nd Birthday, June 15, 2009.

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# Alan D. Harris

## Pearls

In the nursing home cafeteria  
she wears her pearl necklace to breakfast  
her fingers caressing each gem  
like it was Aladdin's lamp  
and as each wish is granted  
she travels through time  
from pearl to pearl  
secretly opening  
doors to the past

The staff physician blames her age  
falsely accusing longevity  
for suspending her belief in tomorrow  
and precluding any coherent  
interest in today  
But if only science understood  
she doesn't simply  
recall and remember  
she returns

to call out her lover's name for the first time again  
to calm her newborn's fear of the light  
to caress her mother's hand for the last time once more  
re-living moments that made a difference  
moments that prove to her heart she was there  
moments that shall ensure her humanity  
moments that shine forever  
like pearls strung along the thread  
of her life-story

Alan D. Harris has worked in the home care field for 17 years. His clients became his extended family and often he was blessed to be the last friend they ever made on this earth. He currently assists older writers to explore memories, lucid or not, and put pen to paper.

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# Iris Graville

## You're Welcome

I never knew what to expect when I visited David during his last months of life. Sometimes he said little more than hello, dozed off, and woke only to ask for something to eat or drink. Other times, when he'd slept well the night before, he'd ask about my kids or tell me about his travels in Mexico or skiing at Mt. Baker.

Just two years earlier, despite the gray sprinkled in his blond hair and beard, David, at fifty-four, had had the strength and stamina of people half his age. He was a downhill skier. A mountain-climber. He'd paddle his kayak a couple hours from his island home to another island. He'd spend the day doing carpentry and painting, then paddle home. Until the day he had a seizure and lost consciousness. Then a week later, his doctor delivered the diagnosis: glioblastoma. An aggressive, invasive brain cancer.

David followed the doctor's prescription: surgery, chemotherapy, radiation implants, gamma knife surgery. He and his wife and their two sons added their own medicine: intensive yoga practice, diet changes, prayer, and singing. We, their friends, prepared meals, washed laundry, and shopped for groceries. We built a septic system. We dug a peace garden. When it was evident none of this would stem the cancer's growth, we took shifts at David's bedside around the clock. Mine was one afternoon every week.

Caring for David was hard work. His legs and torso remained strong, but they didn't always move the way he wanted. It took two of us to transfer him from couch to wheelchair, then to commode, and back to wheelchair and couch. As his left side weakened, positioning him became a duel between gravity and pillows, propped so he could eat, drink, watch videos, and talk.

"You know what one of my pet peeves is?" David asked me on one of his good days. "When someone says 'thank you,' and the other person says 'thank you' back. They know they're supposed to say, 'you're welcome.'" It especially miffed him when he heard it on public radio interviews.

I had noticed it, too, but it hadn't risen to the level of a pet peeve. Besides, I was as guilty as many.

That day as I was leaving, David, as always, said, "Thank you, Iris."

"Thank, er, you're welcome," I said back. We both chuckled.

That became our new ritual.

Once, I tried to convince David that people really were thankful for doing or giving something that someone else appreciated.

He didn't buy it. He remained peeved.

As the days went on and David became less responsive, I missed his thank yous and our ritual exchange.

At my last visit, he never opened his eyes. His breaths were shallow, irregular. His grip, nonexistent. I closed the front door quietly and stepped onto the front porch with a weary back and an aching heart. And the only words there were to say.

You're welcome, David. And thank you.

As a nurse, Iris Graville relished listening to the stories of patients. Forty years later, she gives voice to the untold stories of ordinary people in her profiles, personal essays, and opinion pieces ([bloggerbyconvincment.blogspot.com](http://bloggerbyconvincment.blogspot.com)). Graville also works as a school nurse in Washington's San Juan Islands and is a student in the MFA in Creative Writing Program of the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts. She was honored to be part of the cluster of family and friends who cared for David so that he could live and die at home.

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# Aviva Grossman

## the picture framer's patient

*diagnosis*, you recite—a pencil behind your ear—:

(during a hiatus from one of my many visits to doctors  
with accomplishments in artless frames lining office walls)

- 1 a the identification of a disease by means of a patient's symptoms  
b an instance or formal statement of this
- 2 a the identification of the cause of a mechanical fault, etc.  
b an instance of this
- 3 a the distinctive characterization in precise terms of a genus, species, etc.  
b an instance of this

*portraiture*, i gesticulate, wrapping myself in rolls of butcher paper—  
hiding my skin in the stolen skin of trees—thinking to disguise my disease;  
my mechanical faults; my genus.

*pale*, you diagnose—measuring the lightness of my skin—:

(when i emerge, one morning, from one side of our bed,  
sliding off the frame ghost-like, and cold in my extremities)

fatigue.

*dreams*, i yell, but there is no medical term  
for nightmare (and from my lips emerged only empty air).

*fatigue*, you diagnose— explaining the slanted position of my eyes—:

(after nighttime roaming becomes a slot, like any other,  
in my claustrophobic schedule book)

anxiety.

*pressure*, i weep, the walls  
closing in, but there is no medical term  
for emotional claustrophobia (and suddenly the distance  
seems much too small, but also infinite, between you and me).

*anxiety*, you diagnose—encircling me in steady arms to stop my shaking limbs—:

(we seek shelter under a pile of crumpled plans, ideas, and expectations  
i threw at you, enraged, after learning the word 'catharsis')

*perfectionism*.

addiction to... i start to spit, thinking of the self-destructive patterns and cycles

of psychological incontinence, but then i see  
there are no framed certificates of excellence on your wall—

you are the carpenter that builds the scaffolding  
for others' self-ennobling displays—

no gleam of collegiate expertise—

meaningful in some objective scientific way  
but one-sided in any exchange  
of understanding; simply an expert's  
analysis of my emotional landscape  
—in your eyes and

*i know you,*

so i let you diagnose me.

Aviva has suffered from a chronic illness for the past ten or so years, but also draws upon the challenges of others to inspire her writing. She has been, at points, severely debilitated due to a gastrointestinal illness. The eating disorder and depression of her closest friend when she was growing up has also been traumatizing and frustrating. Also a visual artist, Aviva is constantly writing and making artwork that both addresses and distracts her from the medical troubles she experiences in herself and in others close to her.

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# Kathrin Harris

## Namasté

I don't mind that you exclaimed  
"That's my elephant!" when they asked you who I was.  
I could see you groping for the words  
in that faded robe and a beard you never wore before,  
your eyes giving up what you knew.

You once ran beside me through billowing leaves,  
my two wheels faltering, your strong arms secure.  
Now down a passage restful and green I steady your gait,  
as we stroll past the vacant expressions of those who have preceded you  
back to where they began.

You clutch the same familiar faded photos  
and mutter recollections too old for me to share  
until they drift beyond your shrinking reach.  
Then you alone must collect the shards of your fractured world.

But today we laugh.  
For this sinister cloud that spares your form but dims your light  
and reduced a parent to a child  
has not taken you yet.

And in brief flashes of clarity, when  
I can see your synapses firing like fireflies in a jar,  
in its unwitting benevolence it reveals,  
stripped-down and elemental,  
the inimitable essence of your being.

Kathrin Harris, a "third-career" creative writing student at Northwestern University, lives in Grayslake, Illinois. She often describes the year she lost her father to Alzheimers Disease as the "worst/best year" of her life. Although the disease took its inevitable course, it fostered a relationship that was profoundly rewarding and granted an opportunity to give back to someone who, like many men of his generation, never felt comfortable on the receiving end of affection.

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# David M. Jackson

## Sweet Survivor

So sweet to see no tube  
in her nose  
no oxygen in use  
no catheter  
so sweet to see  
three meals today  
and water being drunk  
with the words  
I love water  
Yesterday she babbled without words  
today she babbles  
with words  
and rhymes  
playfully  
but answers questions  
what's your name  
moonrock  
so sweet to  
hear my name  
Little Man

David Michael Jackson is the pen name for an engineer turned artist, poet, and musician, a publisher of Art Page Images at Artvilla.com and Moongate at Motherbird.com. These two poems were written while his wife, Mary Janet Jackson, was in the second hospital after breaking her pelvis and hip, illnesses to which she succumbed in 2006.

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# Richard Jacobs

## That Friday, February 12, Seth heard.

He took the bus to the hospital, alone, in the morning, returning to meet the head of hematology/oncology. A week since he was discharged. The merlot-colored pee no longer flowed from his penis to greet him first thing in the morning (and with it, strangely, the taste of blood in his mouth). It was crystal clear again, and the pain, like his guts being wrung through an old towel press, was gone. So the call, from the Great Man, himself, came as a shock. They knew, and it was time to tell him. He could walk almost easily again, had enough wind to make three transfers getting there from deep Hollywood. Now, right in front of it at Beverly and San Vicente, he still had to navigate on foot the interminable detours around Cedar's Sinai, necessitated by its interminable growth. This, just to find an entrance he could legally use other than the now-familiar ER, and then, once inside, to find the one chamber among the seeming millions within this hive. For all its light, Chagalls on the walls he passed, bright colors, and mounted names of donors, nothing softened the experience of what it was, a city-sized factory of birth, health, sickness, and death.

Seth found it, and, told to wait, his aloneness sunk in on him. His mother couldn't make it. She said she was sorry. There was no one who could come with him. By the time he was called, he needed to pee, and rushed to the restroom, sweating and exhausted. In the mirror, the green around his eyes was as vivid as Robin's mask. The Boy Wonder. Seth was thirty-eight years old. He found himself overjoyed to see his pee so like water. It gave him hope, confidence, that whatever it was had passed, even as his terror remained fixed. Now, being led into the doctor's office, all greens, browns, reds, leather and wood, only to face an empty desk, he took his seat before it, and, again, waited. Here, he could smell nothing of the plastic sugar death scent permeating the floors upstairs. He noticed it only by its absence. He didn't notice if there was anything to read, or pictures and plaques to gaze at; he looked at nothing.

So the doctor's good cheer came as a jolt. Stopping beside Seth as he moved to his desk, he shook Seth's hand with a vigor Seth associated with good news. *Congratulations.* Still in his white coat, steth round his neck, Dr. Richard Lilly, maybe ten years Seth's senior, had a thin balding head, fancy glasses, a bland, friendly face. Sitting, he laced his fingers on his desk, and stared at Seth with a teeth-exposing smile, saying nothing, but nodding his head with what looked like admiration. The split second before this became awkward, Dr. Lilly said, "You know, you're kind of a celebrity around here."

As though this was a good thing. Of all the doctors he'd encountered here, of which there were a dozen, he'd not met Richard Lilly, and, so, not here for pleasantries at all, he fidgeted, lifting his butt and sliding against the back of his chair, like he imagined a celebrity might sit. Whatever.

How are you feeling? Oh, good. Four reported cases in all of Los Angeles. Only ten thousand in North America. Took days to determine for sure. Yes. You have PNH,

short for Paroxysmal Nocturnal Hemoglobin-urea. Yes, a long one. No idea. Not genetic...No cure...

Seth's pants felt loose around his waist. He felt the bones in his body naked against his clothing, as though he were a skeleton sitting here, nodding, trying to remember questions he'd written down but forgot to bring, startling the doctor by his abruptness. Or, maybe he'd expected something else.

"Will it affect my ability to be a father?"

"You mean to have children? No. Not at all. You can't pass it on."

He was still here, all of him. They could talk about the Lakers now. Maybe he could go eat something. Why the hell not. He could get out of here and never, ever, come back. Have lunch with me, Doc. I FUCKING LOVE YOU! O.k. Good. Wait! One more, then out of here. Even Dr. Lilly's smile was warmer.

"So, what's the prognosis?"

"Usually, five years." Dr. Lilly adjusted his glasses, looked at his desk, and his smile tightened into something else, "At most, given the information we have now, ten to twelve years."

*How could this be true after what he just said?*

"You mean, I could have this thing for ten to twelve *years*?"

"No. I mean you have ten to twelve years to live."

Richard Jacobs was born in Los Angeles. He is a storyteller. He was diagnosed with PNH paroxysmal nocturnal hemoglobinuria in 1999. He has largely shunned Western Medicine and instead relies upon Chinese herbs and knowledge of self to heal and transcend this condition. He lives with his wife and stepson on Cortes Island, B.C.

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# David Joy

## Our Crooked Little Angel

It started as a healing. We had already lost one.  
We were so happy to see those two little pink lines. You were coming.  
34 weeks in. Something's wrong. It's too early.

They tell us you're sick. We don't want to believe them.  
You are out. We don't hear a cry. We can't even pronounce the name of it.  
Hydrops Fetalis.  
So many tubes. So many wires. Will we lose you?

1 month old. You're coming home. We are so nervous.  
A miracle. You're all smiles and giggles.  
Tiny and kind of weak. But here. A fighter.

A bath at 6 months. What's this?  
It doesn't look right. We'll ask the doctor.  
He says I'm right. Here we go again. What does it all mean?  
Infantile Scoliosis

How much can one little body take? I pray we never find the limit.  
Doctor visits. 78 degrees. Now we panic. They aren't doing anything.  
We go to other doctors. Casts and braces. X-rays and screams.  
But they help. We find a routine. And we see others that are so much worse.

We have you. You dance. You play. What more could we ask for?  
The road is long. But we are with you. You break my heart, and give me courage.  
Our crooked little angel.

David Joy is a writer and high school teacher living and writing in Ogden Utah with his wife and two daughters. His oldest daughter survived Hydrops Fetalis at birth, and is now living with Infantile Scoliosis. She is a vibrant and happy 6 year old, who continues to surprise doctors all the time.

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# Jacqueline Jules

## 70% Chance

70%. It used to be enough.  
Each time clouds, grey as my cat,  
pushed down from the north  
and the air made frosty bubbles  
when I breathed. Snow!  
I could smell it. 70% chance!

Still, I slept with pajamas inside out,  
two spoons under my pillow.  
My backpack stood beside the door,  
homework neatly finished.

I took no chances jinxing joy.

70%. It used to be enough.  
Back when my cat  
still waved her long grey tail  
and a day's release from school  
was high delight.  
But the cat was buried years ago,  
along with my faith in 70%.  
Remaining odds fill my nostrils now,  
as I speak with doctors, research on the net.  
Home from final chemo,  
I brood by the window,  
waiting for white flakes  
to smother brown grass  
beneath a pristine promise.  
Recovery. 70% chance.  
Now that my homework is done,  
can I turn my pajamas inside out,  
place two spoons under my pillow,  
and dream of white joy in the morning?

## The Night After the Diagnosis

The night after the diagnosis  
I dreamed of you  
at three years old,  
spinning on the sidewalk  
in red shorts and a sleeveless white tee.  
Your small arms whirl  
like helicopter blades.

I scoop you against my cheek  
and cover your giggles in kisses.  
Your skin is warm and sweet.  
Then I set you down to spin away,  
knowing the joy you gave me  
will always be mine.

Jacqueline Jules is a poet, children's author, and teacher who lives in Northern Virginia. In 2005, her husband underwent treatment for prostate cancer and has been cancer-free since. Last June, a week after his graduation from law school, her 28-year-old son was diagnosed with colon cancer and is currently under treatment. To learn more about her, visit [www.jacquelinejules.com](http://www.jacquelinejules.com)

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# Katie Rendon Kahn

## Learning Disability

I never could get through to you.  
I tried to teach you things  
the way I had learned them  
but you just didn't "get it."  
I would get frustrated and angry  
and said things I regretted immediately.  
I tried new ways, new styles, new methods  
when what you really needed was a routine.  
I was stern when you needed kind  
and soft when you needed stable.  
I was unprepared, it wasn't your fault.  
When I read to you in clear print,  
black and white  
you saw rainbows  
showing me spectrums  
when I was color blind.  
I tried to teach you to write neatly  
and color inside the lines.  
You showed me that those lines were too narrow  
and drew your own.  
I told you to use your inside voice,  
you exploded in symphonies  
that made my world sing.  
Your teacher asks me,  
"Have you had him tested?"  
I tell her, "There is no need, I know he is brilliant."

Katie Rendon Kahn is a student, wife, office manager and mother of three. Her oldest son has dyslexia and reading comprehension problems. Raising a child with learning disabilities has been both a difficult and rewarding experience. Katie often finds that she learns more from her children than she teaches them.

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# Wendy Kennar

In July 2010, my left calf suddenly became swollen and unable to bear weight. I was hospitalized for four days, and spent more than a year, visiting one specialist after another, each trying to solve the “medical mystery” I represented.

I was eventually diagnosed with an autoimmune disease (Undifferentiated Connective Tissue Disease). My life had gotten out-of-order, and I needed to try and organize it. The only thing that made sense was the alphabet. I attribute my need to alphabetize to my years spent working in a library and teaching kindergarten. Consequently, I have written the A to Z List of My Disease.

## The A to Z List of My Disease

**A** Autoimmune. For no apparent reason, my body is attacking itself.

**B** Biopsy. January 2011, I underwent a muscle biopsy in my upper-left-calf that I believe may have actually weakened my leg. Doctors believed that by examining a piece of my muscle, they would be able to solve the mystery of my ailment. (They were wrong).

**C** CAT Scan. Another way doctors have of trying to look inside my body, decipher the symptoms, and offer a diagnosis.

**D** Discoloration; the bruises that remain on my arms after nurses have acted like vampires during my monthly blood tests.

**E** Experts. I have told my story to numerous doctors. When one doctor couldn't figure out my condition, I'd be referred to another, repeating my story, re-explaining my symptoms, and undergoing some of the same tests. I've seen a geneticist, a neurologist, an ophthalmologist, a neuromuscular specialist, a vascular surgeon, and a rheumatologist.

**F** Frustration - at what I can no longer do, my limitations, my weakness, my constant pain, my continuous search for answers.

**G** Gratitude. I am grateful that nothing life-threatening has been diagnosed.

**H** Heart Test. That's what I called the EKG (electrocardiogram), one of the least-painful tests I've experienced.

**I** Invisible injury. Others can't see it - I have no cast or outward sign of an ailment, save for occasional limping. I care for my son, work, and go about my daily routines, trying to mask my daily discomfort.

**J** Justice (or lack of). Bad things sometimes happen to good people. Life isn't always fair. And I have to leave it at that.

**K** Kinesiology. The human body is miraculous - with all its strengths and weaknesses.

**L** Lab Work. That's what they call it in the doctor's office; I call it blood tests and pee-in-a-cup.

**M** MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging). From a science point of view, I can look at that machine in wonder. From a personal point of view, I look at the machine and panic. I'm uncomfortable with the idea of my body being "put" into this extremely loud, very constricting tube-like machine.

**N** Never. Never did I fear problems with my legs. (Because of family history, I always feared breast cancer). Never did I think my first night away from my son would be spent in a hospital room.

**O** Ophthalmologist. On my quest to find out what was wrong with my legs, I was referred to an ophthalmologist. Apparently, certain cancers first make themselves known by appearing in eye exams.

**P** Prescriptions. I take pills throughout the day. I constantly monitor the clock and my meals. Some prescriptions are taken with a full stomach, some on an empty stomach.

**Q** Questions. During these two years, I have more questions than I have answers for. "Will this condition get worse?" "Will it spread to other parts of my body?"

**R** Referrals. Before I can see a doctor, I need a referral. A referral that can take weeks to process, making me wait before I can schedule an appointment. So, part of the reason I believe this whole process has taken so long is because I have spent considerable time waiting for "necessary" paperwork.

**S** Side effects. For every pill, there's a side effect. And no matter how "tough" I try to be, how much I try to ignore them, some of them are impossible to ignore, namely my nightly wake-ups due to night sweats and my upset stomach. And, of course, there are the long-term side effects that are on a wait-and-see basis.

**T** Terror. I've heard possible diagnoses ranging from cancer to rheumatoid arthritis to blocked arteries to leukemia. All results have proven negative. But it's the waiting for the results that produces full-on, crying, howling terror. My number one thought, "I've got a young son."

**U** Ultrasound. When I was pregnant, I loved my ultrasound appointments - it was an opportunity to see my growing baby. Now, each ultrasound appointment I attend with trepidation. I don't want to hear bad news, but I do want news, I want answers.

**V** Veins (and arteries). They're not blocked, and although I do have some varicose veins, they aren't the cause of my pain. Yet, my legs now look like a map of a busy interstate - red and blue and purple trails criss-crossing my skin.

**W** Walker. I was released from the hospital in July 2010 dependent on a walker and wheelchair. After my biopsy, the walker came out of the closet. It's folded and hidden back in the closet, and I hope it remains there.

**X** X-rays. One of the first ways doctors try to determine what's going on inside my body. No broken bones, no clear evidence showing the cause of my underlying problem.

**Y** Yearn. I yearn to be “me” again. The person who didn’t have a multitude of prescription bottles on my countertop, could go for long walks with my son, and felt young and healthy and without worrying about “What if...”

**Z** Zap. In yet another test, my left leg and back were subjected to a series of zaps and shocks in one more attempt to discover if my condition was more muscular in nature.

Wendy Kennar is a mother, public school teacher, and writer in Los Angeles. After being hospitalized for a mysteriously swollen left calf, she was finally diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. She continues to try and adapt to her condition, recognizing that she is no longer the same Wendy she once was. Wendy writes a weekly blog at [wendykennar.blogspot.com](http://wendykennar.blogspot.com).

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# Chris Kuell

## Fishing Blind in Obx

I stood against the railing, drenched to the bone in my three dollar poncho, casting again into the pounding surf. Three hours in the pouring rain, 45 mile per hour winds, and I'd only caught 2 small blues. Several of the other contestants had thrown in the towel, but I hadn't come 550 miles not to fish.

"C'mon," my friend Ronnie said. "Let's try further out on the pier."

I reeled in, grabbed my cane and gear and followed Ronnie about halfway down the 1,000 foot cement pier. Not thirty seconds later I heard my friend Allan saying he had one. I cast, waited, jigged, reeled in a little. Bam—I got a hit. A small trout, but every fish counted. Ten minutes later I had another fish, but by the drag I knew this one was significantly bigger.

"Keep your tip up," Ronnie cautioned. "Keep reeling... holy sh\*T—you got a skate!"

The tournament leaders had told us to cut the line if we caught a ray or skate. With 480 blind and visually impaired anglers in the competition, they didn't want to risk an injury. Since the prizes were based on total weight caught, I hated to let the ten-pounder go, but those were the rules and a trophy just wasn't my destiny that day.

In 1992, a group of North Carolina Lions Club members decided that rather than simply raising money to help visually impaired people in their state, they wanted to actually do something with them. Something fun, something that's maybe a little out of their comfort zone, something mutually rewarding. That year the First Flight Lions Club held the first VIP (visually impaired people) fishing tournament on the Outer Banks. Twelve blind and visually impaired children participated. In the 29 years since, the tournament has grown to nearly 500 participants coming from 8 states, with over 450 volunteers. The tournament is now a 3-day event, which includes not only fishing, but dancing, education, independent living training and much-appreciated socialization.

"I've fished in the tournament for the last 12 years," said Kim Nolan of Greenville NC. "Besides Christmas, it's my favorite time of year."

The 2011 tournament took place October 17-19. Participants arrived in the Outer Banks on Monday and were housed in local hotels. On Tuesday they fished from four ocean piers and two 55-foot fishing boats. Poles and bait were supplied, and most participants had sighted guides to help with tangled lines and hook removal.

Tuesday was the NC state tournament, while national representatives, who placed first, second or third in their home state tournaments, just fished recreationally. I came in first in the Connecticut VIP tournament back in April, but in eight hours of fishing on the Crystal Dawn, which chased fish in waters South of Obx, I only managed to catch a single croaker and a sunburn. We fished with drop lines and squid, and while I almost got skunked, several anglers on the other side of the boat

landed over a dozen. Betty Walker, assisted by her husband Harold, caught five blues, 3 croakers and a pompano.

“It’s fantastic to see the thrill, the excitement in the faces of the VIPs when they haul in a fish,” Ken Barthelemy, Lion group leader from Rhode Island said.

On Wednesday the national representatives fished on the newly built Jeanette pier. The weather took a turn for the worse, with over an inch of rain and strong winds causing tournament officials to cut the fishing to 4 hours instead of 6. New saltwater casting reels, red worms and shrimp bait were given to the VIPs, who spread out along the north side of the 1000 foot pier. I caught five fish, totaling 1.9 pounds, which was respectable, as even the locals on the pier weren’t doing much better. The highlight of the day for me was when Janice Musco of Lincoln, RI, hooked a twenty-something surfer who was riding the powerful waves alongside the pier. Musco, who is deafblind, couldn’t hear the screams of the surfer and she “was reeling in like she had a marlin,” said Ronnie Gross, who asked the surfer how much he weighed as he cut the line.

At the end of the day, Brandon Reece, 39, from Anderson, SC, took home the first place trophy with 3.4 pounds of fish. Reece, who has been visually impaired since birth, also came in first in the South Carolina VIP tournament. “The important thing is not to pull too hard when you first feel the line twitch,” he said. “Let the fish swallow the hook good before giving it a yank.”

Allan Golabek of Bethel, CT, came in a close second with 2.9 pounds of fish. Golabek, who lost his sight in 1993 after a motorcycle accident, has always enjoyed outdoor activities. In 2000, he set the world record for blind water-ski jumping at the World Championships in Melbourne, Australia. “Nowadays, I prefer fishing with friends or hiking with my guide dog, Rocky,” he says.

Despite the scanty catch on the day of the national tournament, more than 500 pounds were caught totally during the tournament, most of it off the Kitty Hawk pier, where participants averaged 20 pounds of fish on Tuesday.

“It really is a massive effort by the Lions who volunteered, the countless others who helped raise funds (the tournament cost approximately \$200,000) and the community partners who were so giving,” said Gwen White, executive director of the VIP Tournament for the last 18 years. “But it’s more than just a fishing tournament. It’s a fantastic experience for all. It’s truly an honor to be there with the VIPs. It makes us proud to be Lions.”

Chris Kuell is a blind freelance writer and editor from Connecticut. A diabetic since age nine, he lost his sight at 35, had a kidney transplant at 40, and is still rockin' and rollin' at 50. He is editor-in-chief of *Breath and Shadow* ([www.abilitymaine.org/breath](http://www.abilitymaine.org/breath)), an online literary journal written and edited exclusively by people with disabilities.

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# Gina Marie Lazar

## The VA Hospital

And there you stood, late 40's, living among men twice your age—  
Men who would one day grow to outlive you.  
Your pale, middle-aged body withered prematurely  
From a condition no one wanted to talk about.  
A condition whose name we would not learn  
Until we saw it on your death certificate.

But while you were still with us, living in a hospital with  
These white-haired old men, how your eyes would light up  
Whenever you saw us, your three fresh-faced children,  
Off from school for a long weekend, making one of our  
Twice-yearly pilgrimages to see our dying dad.

You held out your arms in front of you  
And embraced us weakly.  
You told us about the dreams you'd had  
While still a young man.  
You spoke of your passions, your memories.  
You made us laugh.

And as you faded slowly over the years,  
Your body a mere shell of its former self,  
You sometimes wondered aloud: "What happened to me?"  
And we, your three children –  
Our faces as smooth as the surfaces  
Of three summer-ripened peaches—  
We didn't have the answer.

We wondered, too,  
What had happened to you,  
And whether we would someday have you back  
In your former capacity.

Even at that age, we knew:  
Odds weren't stacked in our favor.  
But we never stopped loving.

Gina Marie Lazar is a Philadelphia-based writer and artist. Her father, Peter, was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis circa 1990, when she and her siblings were still in grade school. He died in 2004. After struggling with his death for years, Gina finally came to accept that with every profound loss comes the opportunity for profound compassion.

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# Aviva Leah

## the picture framer's patient

*diagnosis*,        you recite—a pencil behind your ear—:

(during a hiatus from one of my many visits to doctors  
with accomplishments in artless frames lining office walls)

- 1 a the identification of a disease by means of a patient's symptoms  
   b an instance or formal statement of this
- 2 a the identification of the cause of a mechanical fault, etc.  
   b an instance of this
- 3 a the distinctive characterization in precise terms of a genus, species, etc.  
   b an instance of this

*portraiture*, i gesticulate, wrapping myself in rolls of butcher paper—  
hiding my skin in the stolen skin of trees—thinking to disguise my disease;  
my mechanical faults; my genus.

*pale*,        you diagnose—measuring the lightness of my skin—:

(when i emerge, one morning, from one side of our bed,  
sliding off the frame ghost-like, and cold in my extremities)

fatigue.

*dreams*, i yell, but there is no medical term  
for nightmare (and from my lips emerged only empty air).

*fatigue*, you diagnose— explaining the slanted position of my eyes—:

(after nighttime roaming becomes a slot, like any other,  
in my claustrophobic schedule book)

anxiety.

*pressure*, i weep, the walls  
closing in, but there is no medical term  
for emotional claustrophobia (and suddenly the distance  
seems much too small, but also infinite, between you and me).

*anxiety*,        you diagnose—encircling me in steady arms to stop my shaking limbs—:

(we seek shelter under a pile of crumpled plans, ideas, and expectations  
i threw at you, enraged, after learning the word 'catharsis')

perfectionism.

*addiction to...*        i start to spit, thinking of the self-destructive patterns and cycles

of psychological incontinence, but then i see  
there are no framed certificates of excellence on your wall—

you are the carpenter that builds the scaffolding  
for others' self-ennobling displays—

no gleam of collegiate expertise—  
    meaningful in some objective scientific way  
    but one-sided in any exchange  
    of understanding; simply an expert's  
    analysis of my emotional landscape  
—in your eyes and

i know you,

so i let you diagnose me.

Aviva has suffered from a chronic illness for the past ten or so years, but also draws upon the challenges of others to inspire her writing. She has been, at points, severely debilitated due to a gastrointestinal illness. The eating disorder and depression of her closest friend when she was growing up has also been traumatizing and frustrating. Also a visual artist, Aviva is constantly writing and making artwork that both addresses and distracts her from the medical troubles she experiences in herself and in others close to her.

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# Nancy Smiler Levinson

## Your Illness Speaking

“Where are the damn frying pans?” you ask.  
Recently you bought three spatulas. That makes six.  
You punch our telephone number in the alarm system  
at the front door, ask after our brother-in-law,  
“What’s Mario up to these days?”  
“He died last winter.”  
“Oh, right.”

In a parking lot you turn the car the wrong direction  
on a one-way stretch. When I try to stop you,  
you growl, “Shut up!”

You lose papers, your checkbook registry,  
months of bank statements,  
then accuse “someone” of stealing them.  
You can’t find a barbecue appliance  
and insist the gardener entered the house  
and threw a party when you were gone.  
You never liked playing games, but now  
you enjoy sitting with me at the Scrabble board.

You are still socially charming, well-mannered.  
But you stay quiet for long periods,  
listen and wait until something makes sense,  
then join in or laugh, even add a witty remark.

A geriatric specialist discussing memory loss  
at a lecture I attend says,  
“Intelligent, educated people  
sometimes continue an appearance of wellness  
longer than others.  
They are adept at using  
the part of their brain that remains intact.  
And they cover up well.”

I remind myself every day  
that you cannot help it, yet too often I snap:  
“listen to me,” in staccato sentences,  
hoping the words, or a command will take hold  
Once I grabbed your chin, forcing you to face me  
so I could clarify a telephone bill that puzzled you.  
Enraged, you snarled. “Don’t ever do that again.”

That night I dreamed of someone using dental floss;  
half his or her tongue fell off  
It could only have been mine.

– first published in Vine Leaves Literary Journal.

## I Do Not Recognize My Voice

My anger rises at you, injured sea serpent  
thrashing above the water. I cannot bear to hear you  
ask the same questions over and over.  
Stop!  
How can you not remember  
three words just spoken—  
To answer yet again  
saps the stores of energy I use to stay afloat.  
I gasp for air when you follow me from room to room,  
Unable to fill your time, when you come anxious  
in a parking structure you think you have not seen before,  
or in the bank when I glimpse  
Your trousers slipping to your ankles—  
robbing me of flashing moments  
to lie to myself, blink with a denial of my own.

Your shell cracks at my inference:

“Are you crazy?” you bellow.

“What is wrong with *you*?”

“What is *your* problem?”

I cannot always hold my tears in your presence  
or keep a snide remark from spewing off my tongue.  
I swallow, sometimes frantically trying in vain  
to rationalize with the irrational,  
sometimes steeling myself against the tide.

I stand in front of the bathroom mirror  
At twilight— mirror, mirror on the wall...  
A thought flashes behind my mournful eyes—  
Would it be better  
if you went fast (dare I say die?)  
by a disease that takes its victims swiftly?  
No, I could not bear that either,  
But then, again—  
I rankle with the school child’s whine,  
“It is *not* fair.  
Do I think of a child on the playground  
because you are regressing?  
*It is not fair.*

How long must I take part in your charade?  
Play the role of Pagliacci?  
My stage is full of pitfalls;  
Sometimes I do not recognize my own voice—  
Is it an echo from the wings?  
A dybbuk taken up residency in me?

My steps are tentative, as I am now actor,  
coach, director and stagehand all in one,  
rehearsals scheduled every day  
So I can strut and toss my head  
speak lines with strength and surety,  
soothe you and keep you warm;  
While on my shrinking stage I plead to have  
at least a small life together than I can hold  
onto after our four decades—  
even though I am never without the realization,  
the overwhelming sadness,  
the gut fear of what lies behind the slowing falling curtain,  
as you are engulfed by a giant wave, drowning.

Nancy Smiler Levinson's husband of forty-six years was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease some twelve years ago. At their home in Southern California Nancy was sole caregiver for him, once a physician, with the assistance of their two sons and part-time home help when Nancy was diagnosed with breast cancer—twice. She found support groups an important benefit while both watching a loved one's gradual disappearance and dealing with erratic and irrational behavior.

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# Betty Lipton

## Faces

Faces, too many faces  
blurring my vision.  
Smiling, frowning, or blank.  
All around me walking  
in no particular direction.  
Almost knocking me over  
not seeing me or  
not noticing my cane.  
I can't keep up so  
for a moment stand  
at their periphery.  
Perhaps then a glance  
or an excuse me.  
As if they are glad  
it's not them.  
No, I can't keep up,  
but sure not dead.  
As if there's no enjoyment  
in my life like yours.  
Just a slower pace  
to look at your faces.  
Smiling, frowning, or blank.  
Smile back and  
perhaps then a glance.  
No, I'm not like you,  
just like myself.

Betty Lipton lives in New Smyrna Beach, FL, with her husband and assorted cats. After an accident in a local park, Betty developed fibromyalgia which is complicated by arthritis, asthma and osteoporosis. Writing gives her an outlet from her health problems. Betty's writing was sparked by a "Turn Your Memories into Memoirs" class.

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# Heather Logsdon

## Cancer and the Relationship

The closest we get to the stained intimacy, of our former days  
is the feel of my hands  
on your back, brushing your ribs, your spine, when I help you from  
room to room. Illness has forced us to be  
comfortable, more than we've ever been.  
I am acquainted with  
your bodily functions as well as your thoughts,  
and I do not love you less.  
This is not the life we dreamed of,  
but it is the life we chose,  
When we said  
in sickness  
and  
in health.

Heather Logsdon is a twenty year old writer who suffers from manic depression and severe anxiety. She also has a father with stage four lung cancer whom she helps care for. Heather writes poems about her disorder, her father's illness, and the relationships between her family members. If it wasn't for her own personal struggles she never would have began to write poetry on a regular basis.

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# Alice Longaker

## Lazarus

The gray,  
the dark  
in room so bare.

No breath,  
wrapped tight,  
no air, no air.

The burn,  
the pain  
at harsh light.

Falter,  
yet stand,  
so bright, so bright.

A voice,  
the touch,  
loosening bands.

Blessed,  
blessed,  
unbuttoning hands.

## Sorrow

Oh, I have known sorrow  
when quietly it speaks.  
And echoes, echoes that sorrow  
from deep to silent deep.

I have known a sorrow  
salty damp with tears,  
And I have wept that sorrow  
from year to longer year.

I have known a sorrow  
that wakes when clock strikes night;  
Searing, searing that sorrow doesn't  
lessen at first light.

I have asked the sorrow  
to leave for my heart's sake.  
What answers that sorrow? But to  
ache familiar ache.

Alice Longaker describes herself as a perennial late bloomer. Despite these delayed tendencies, she obtained her MA in English from the University of Northern Colorado and taught Composition, Research, and Literature to college and university students. A writer in several genres, she is at heart a poet. Now a ten-year survivor of breast cancer, she lives in Greeley, Colorado with two old dogs, one old cat, and her companion Multiple Sclerosis. More about Alice can be found on her website, [Alice Longaker](#), or on her blog, [Backstreets and Alleys](#).

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# Kevin McLellan

## Untitled

That one can go inward only so far  
and *so long* becomes most feared,  
and the heart —  
and the heart now doesn't know if  
or rather what it should follow and  
if this is strangulation.

## Untitled

Too much of inside can  
be irrevocable, and on a  
late winter day it's warm,  
but this stretch of sky  
has created a hole that  
fresh air from these open  
windows can not  
possibly reach, and I  
don't know how to spend  
today especially since  
street voices intruded  
upon this morning of  
iced coffee, and there's  
also the same dilemma  
of how to spend an  
evening.

Kevin McLellan is thankful for the orchiectomy. There's been no detection of cancer since, but consequently this surgical extraction also took one of his testicles. How does the mind come to terms with losing a (sexual) body part? He lives with these sociosexual implications. He lives with these psychological implications. Forgetting isn't an option, yet forgetting about sex isn't an option for him either.

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# RD McManes

## **a thawed mind in a frozen body**

i lay awake, unable to move  
eyes open, thinking  
this is a dream  
except it isn't

sounds of tractors  
deep plowing the earth  
and another sound  
blood racing  
through this maze  
i call a body  
and yet my muscles  
refuse to move  
confusion speaks louder than reason  
rumbling and roaring  
as if the world is ending  
and i am frozen while  
a billion voices murmuring  
muttering nothing  
and something  
simultaneously  
stammering and stuttering  
shocked echoes  
shouting voices  
lost in a lonely night  
music running backwards  
in my mind of minds  
messages unglued  
through the sympathetic synthesizer  
suddenly i can move  
back to the beginning

and we are there  
listening for whatever  
is next, wondering  
what is or isn't true

## **her voice**

she is the sound  
that little voice within  
sometimes filled  
with hope

sometimes filled  
with despair

but most assuredly  
always full

a heart breaker  
never mistake her  
and never ignore  
her voice is reason  
gentle in the calm  
louder than any storm

and at night  
when I am awake  
sometimes she snores

RD McManes was diagnosed with throat cancer in March of 2007. He chose an aggressive treatment course comprised of surgery, three weeks of chemotherapy, and seven weeks of radiation. The goal was to survive cancer. He recently passed the five year mark as a survivor and lives each day one at a time.

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# Ann E. Michael

## ICU

Last night, owls spent hours  
warning the damp dark  
of their presence and from the road  
headlights strafed the bark  
of hickories and birches, bare.  
There shone brief flickering  
like blinkers, buzzers. A man lies  
on a hospital bed, he's breathing  
through the hum of respirator,  
its gasp every two seconds—exhale—  
half awake, he's tubed and monitored  
as colored lights wink a trail  
along the black screen tracking  
his heart, lungs, blood in his veins,  
pressure and release. In another room,  
alarms are hooting. He strains  
against adhesives taut and sticky  
on his skin, needles, bags, ports,  
tubes, he cannot hear the larger silence  
of the world. He's restless, starts  
a frail shuddering in his legs  
and he is standing near the woodlot  
thinking of life's randomness,  
an idea he has almost got  
in his childhood mind. The irregular  
breathy pattern of owls' mating calls  
transcribed by a means he doesn't understand  
while his pattern, on the monitor, unrolls  
above him, for someone else to read  
as if there were a way to interpret  
his heart, its warnings, stabbings,  
a knowledge that has not occurred yet.

Ann E. Michael is writing coordinator at DeSales University in PA. She often works with students in the college's nursing program, where she finds young people developing compassion through the sciences and the process of clinical notes.

Her father underwent surgery for neurological pneumococcal meningitis early in 2012 and has been in recovery since then.

Ms. Michael's most recent collection is *Water-Rites*, available from Brick Road Poetry Press. Links to her blog and her books can be found at [www.annemichael.com](http://www.annemichael.com).

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# Cristina-Monica Moldoveanu

## Be aware

sometimes I shiver sometimes I freeze  
balancing on the spider's thread  
between church's chandelier arms  
the customs officer for all roads

it is bitter to smile or to cry  
I hide my helplessness  
like a dandelion globe in my bosom  
I can't abjure it

Christmas trees drip resin tears  
inside the font where I was baptized  
names of places where I stopped  
haunted by half-dead hopes  
dreams amputated without anesthesia  
crosses raised slanting in the storm

the sin of despair grew like a whale  
devouring all wrongdoings  
clasped in a shrinking carcass  
my name separated from myself  
like a poisoned bead of white mistletoe

at every crossroads my body or my word

Cristina-Monica Moldoveanu was born in Bucharest, Romania, in 1971. She dealt with abusive parents in her adolescence and was diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of 21. She has struggled to find a job and to avoid loneliness. She attempted suicide at the 28 and since is fighting both discrimination and physical issues. She lost a part of her left leg and uses a prosthetic limb. In 2007 she started writing poetry again and has been published in magazines and online editions, winning several awards. Some poems touch on the loss of her relatives, her hospital experiences and her struggle to be accepted in the society.

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# Susan Morse

## My Sister Sends Field Notes on Our Mother

*“When I arrived earlier, the paramedics were in her room, working with her roommate. They took her out on the gurney, but this will make her third replacement.”*

*“She was very sharp witted this morning. As soon as she heard my voice she knew who I was and was able to tell me that she did not know my face, but knew my voice. I took her to the common room for coffee and cookies where another woman was babbling in Italian.”*

It's late June. I'm staking up peas and beans, giving support.  
I think of her and of my sister's latest report.  
Mom doesn't know my name. Can't talk to me on the phone.  
She thinks my sister is her own mother come back from the dead.

Mom still has a survival energy that even plants possess.  
Like a blind tendril seeking sun, in her wheelchair,  
she gropes her way down to the morning room  
with the other old women seeking sustenance.

She still enjoys M&M's, her morning coffee and snack.  
But five minutes later she stares into the black hole of her coffee cup,  
at the soggy crumbs of doughnut that didn't make it to her mouth,  
wondering what they put in it, if they're trying to trick her.

Each autumn in my garden seeds dry and wither,  
are best left to go through a winter freeze cycle  
before spring planting, before they push themselves into new life.  
What about old ladies whose bodies outlive their season?

## What She Listens For

In her room where she rarely hears voices  
what she listens for is the sound of dragonflies.  
They come buzzing and looping,  
disperse, and reform in her dreams.

They're what she listens for,  
the music of flight.  
What she was capable of  
in the green thought of her youth.

Before the years came ravaging  
music was her companion and laughter  
but never the silence of just waiting  
in a room where there is no other sound.

Her skin, her smile, her eyes now finely crinkled  
like a paper wallet are thin with little content.  
She reminds me of mythic Amazon women,  
survivors of countless battles.

Those women were forced to kneel before the thrones of gods,  
and later, under the bootstraps of relentless raiders of time.  
They lost their homes, their children, and finally  
their minds.

Those ferocious, silent women gathered shells  
from ceaseless oceans, empty shells perhaps to others,  
but when held to their ears,  
it was as if they really did hear a murmur of distant seas,  
  
of flight, of loved ones,  
dragonflies they had known in another life.

## **Journey to Stockton**

*For Millie*

### **I.**

Birds shift uneasily in their thickets of dreams.  
I rise early to examine the ghosts of last night.  
It's another summer in Stockton.  
I have come all the way from Maine to see her,  
perhaps for the final time, and she knows it.

### **II.**

It is the unsettled quality, the stillness  
of her house which raises tiny needles of hair  
at the very edges of reason. Outside  
sirens blast into a hot, dusty wind.  
Old sycamores weep blind sockets.  
Silence spreads its trail right to the front door.

Inside where the walls arch overhead  
like barren trellises, traces of past lives reveal  
tiny wounds from paintings much arranged,  
indentations from lovers' quarrels.  
Only the brutal threads of skeletons remain,  
the scrapbook of many journeys.  
Each fragile stitch hinged on the turn of a single word.  
Whole histories were lost.

### **III.**

She is on her very best behavior,  
her watery hazel eyes worried  
as she cups my face between freckled hands  
and coos softly, asks trivialities.

Driving unfamiliar roads,  
we stir up the dust of memories.  
Her right hand clutches and quivers,  
signs her own private language,  
the things she cannot tell me.

Lunch is quiet as she eats chicken salad  
one teaspoon at a time. Furtive,  
hiding bits of chicken in the napkin on her lap,  
she tells me she no longer has an appetite.  
I remember the downed butterfly I saw earlier,  
mapping crazy circles on the sidewalk  
as I stopped to shelter it from a hungry sparrow.

#### **IV.**

And between journeys I realize  
there may be one special instant in time  
when you lose your sense of self  
inside the paperweight of the world,  
where if only for a second  
you are behind its convex lens.  
Through those glass walls  
you see everything magnified,  
feel more determined  
than Alice.

Susan Morse writes poems that seek to identify how people connect with their sense of place in the world. She writes about the pain families travel through when a relative is afflicted with Alzheimer's disease and loses that sense of connectedness. Her family has had several members succumb to Alzheimer's disease. Her mother suffers from it, and coincidentally she discovered *The Barefoot Review* on her 88th birthday.

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# Ben Nardolilli

## Talk About the Look

It was a beautiful thing to give our bodies to,  
The first skin, the covering which kept  
All the organs, arteries, and sinews in place,  
So tightly wrapped up, we became bags  
Mysterious inside and attractive on the surface,  
No reminders of mortal worlds exposed.

The covering had its flaws, time  
Especially liked to give flesh a wearing out  
And a light beating through the decades,  
Bringing out canals of wrinkles and sore spots,  
Along with a gaze into the splendor of veins  
Popping out and struggling for blood.

The greatest weakness? How wounded  
It could get, blooming full of leaks,  
The next solution to try: art as a second skin,  
A way to offer a mirror for all our atrocities  
While capturing them in a reflection  
Through choreography and costume drama.

## Year of the Tiger

I

I had a biopsy, discovery of spangled mass,  
Lungs like smoked salmon, I called my dad,

I should have lived in Europe, a girl in a beret,  
Ten books, \$21.65, a penny saved  
Medium room filled with bottles of sweat  
And spit,  
The scent of fish etched under the tiles,

Carefully carved wrinkles across her forehead, headache medicine,  
Do you mind if I say "Bob?"  
I called my dad a sweetie,  
Do what I like and I'll do what you like.

II

Priority seating  
For people with disabilities,  
Madness and shelter,  
It's not the Guggenheim.

Voice smooth  
(I'm still rosy  
From the weekend)  
As a glass of wine,  
The policy comes with a guarantee.

No money  
A penny earned,  
Merry Christmas,  
Nineteen Eighty-Six.

## Robot Pity

Are you receiving me now?  
How is your process going, strong?  
We got a few customers  
Thanks to your behavior before  
You had too much ethanol to drink,  
Those who departed early  
Were impressed by your endurance  
And each of them wants a model like you.

Most of them laughed and were amused  
That my newest replication  
Could have a breakdown in public  
So realistic, so hard to tell apart,  
You threw up according to the application  
So well I had to trip and bend backwards  
To clean up the technological mess  
You left behind of rusted bolts and bars.

Steam out your ears and sparks of stars  
Coming out of your head,  
Then I knew it was time to run you away,  
Your original intent of mocking  
The weakness of natural livers  
Was finished thoroughly on the carpet,  
You no longer had to demonstrate  
My replacement technologies.

Ben Nardolilli currently lives in Arlington, Virginia. He suffers from Crohn's Disease, and attendant bouts of arthritis, anemia, and eczema. His chapbook *Common Symptoms of an Enduring Chill Explained*, which deals with themes of sickness and disease has been published by Folded Word Press. He maintains a blog at [mirrorsponge.blogspot.com](http://mirrorsponge.blogspot.com) and is looking to publish his first novel.

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# Laura Orem

## Hijacked

The summer has been hijacked –  
not by a knife-wielding crazy who wants  
to crash in a blaze of Jihadist glory,  
but by ill-health, the disease  
that gives license for lurid tales  
of how grandmothers died of the same thing,  
mothers, aunts, sisters who were only thirty and left  
three small children.

*Not that that will happen to you,*  
they are quick to say, as if that erases  
the vivid detail of the kind of misery  
you might face,

*They Mean Well*  
a billboard on this road to hell  
that you will do your best to bail off  
long before it actually goes anywhere.

It could be worse.

*It could be so much worse,*  
you repeat like a Buddhist koan.  
You have that precious ticket so many don't,  
*Hope,*  
the way out, access  
to the exit ramp that leads  
back to what is normal. You look  
at the ticket to remind yourself  
by fall the treatments will be over,  
that your life will again belong to you,  
*that you will live.*

This is something.

No, it is everything,

but still this summer is a lost season,  
the birdsong minored  
by suffering and illness, even the colors  
of the flowers slightly off, as if  
they too are feeling it deep in their roots  
where the damage is invisible and does not heal.

## Speechless

All my language falls amiss.  
Illness amputates the tongue.  
There is no metaphor for this.

It empties every word, insists  
on facts, each ugly one.  
There is no metaphor for this.

I'm stupid as stone, a useless  
sheep, and just as dumb.  
All my language goes amiss,

choked by suffering's avarice.  
I'd say *the world's no longer young*  
but there's no metaphor for this

that won't go up in a smoky hiss,  
sleet upon a fire's prong.  
All of language falls amiss,

and echoes blank, ridiculous.  
*Each sinew of the heart's unstrung.*  
See? All my language gone amiss.  
There is no metaphor for this.

Laura Orem is a writer, artist, and teacher living in Red Lion, PA. In May 2010, she was diagnosed with Stage IC ovarian cancer. She underwent surgery and chemotherapy, and is now cancer-free. She is a featured blogger at *The Best American Poetry Blog* and is Managing Editor of Toad Hall Press. She teaches writing at Goucher College in Baltimore, MD.

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# Todd Outcalt

## Breast Implants

The plastic surgeon seems to enjoy his work:  
Holding the jelly orbs in his capable hands  
And telling my wife that after her surgery  
He will recreate what the cancer has taken.  
How strange these are, jiggling in the light,  
Resembling nothing I have cupped or kissed,  
Hoping that after our world has been shaken  
There is restoration in his expertise.

My wife selects her breast like a used car—  
Testing the various models for their heft  
And warming to the touch of one. We are  
Happy with the choice and sign the line.  
We trust there will be life in what is left,  
And after silicone, more time.

## Scars

Show me your scars and I'll show you mine:  
Your scalpels drawn through healthy flesh,  
Your broken half and half as more removed,  
And deeper cuts where mine remain unseen.

We heal each other in these tender wounds,  
Each sorrow shared, each bone our bone,  
Embracing what we cannot speak in sounds  
And naming what we dare not speak alone.

Todd Outcalt is the author of twenty-five books in six languages and has published widely in matters related to breast cancer following his wife's diagnosis and treatment some ten years ago. His experience includes helping his father through ataxia and otherwise serving as a helper to those in hospice care. Todd's CD, *Caring Through Cancer*, is a caregiver's guide. His most recent book includes *The Healing Touch* (Health Communications, Inc.).

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# Julia Penrose

## Neurapathy

When the numbness came  
along with the tingling, oscillating pupils, vertigo, fatigue  
one doctor named a disease, known by two capital letters,  
often mentioned in fund drives and telethons.  
Another said, No, probably not (Maybe a virus? he guessed).  
Still another said definitely not. Definitely not the disease.

I returned to the first doctor.  
He explained various levels of diagnosis, and this is what I heard:  
Possible means x number of “events” in x number of weeks over x number of months.  
Probable means x number of “events” in x number of weeks over x number of months.  
Definite means x number of “events” in x number of weeks over x number of months,  
plus visible spots on this test or that test.

He said: So you’re at *Possible*. You may be *Probable* if you notice x during the month of  
MayJuneJuly.

We will continue to monitor you.

An “event”, if you hadn’t guessed, was the numbness, tingling, oscillating pupils,  
vertigo and the like.

An event was dropped keys, over and over.

An event was barely making it home from work to collapse on the bed and watch the  
room spin.

Also an event: the emotional dissolution of my ten-year marriage.

This I did not think about.

This I did not admit.

But consider this: I thought I had to try harder.

I thought the love was up to me.

I thought if I worked and worked and focused, I could remain married.

Then my body turned numb from the neck down.

My body knew what my head refused to admit.

Once my head spoke the truth,  
the sensation in my body returned.

The vertigo, the oscillating pupils –  
It all faded away.

Or consider this note on my medical record from my neurologist:

Patient claims not to be depressed - though when asked the last time she cried,  
replied ‘this morning’.

Julia Penrose was born in Philadelphia and moved to California when she was eleven. At the age of 30 she began to experience neurological symptoms and began what was to become a year-long series of tests to determine their cause. She never received a diagnosis, and began to understand and investigate the nature of the mind-body connection. After ending a difficult relationship and beginning a daily meditation regimen, the debilitating symptoms faded away and did not return.

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# Connie L. Peters

## Head Wound

He was riding a bucking lawn chair  
and then we were pacing  
the length of the hospital.

Back and forth.  
Back and forth.

I told him about the nice nurses  
and the gentle doctors,  
the paintings on the walls.

Back and forth.  
Back and forth.

And that he needed  
to stay still when they  
looked at his head.

Back and forth.  
Back and forth.

An hour wait. Ten minutes in the ER.  
Nice gash. Keep it clean.  
It will heal. He's fine.

I'm exhausted.

## Not Quite Beethoven

The child-like man shuffles  
up and down the hallway  
rattling his maracas  
or jingling his bells.  
He bangs on a large popcorn tin  
and then sticks it on his head.  
He plays low soothing tones  
on a vacuum cleaner hose,  
like a didgeridoo.  
He sways in perfect rhythm  
to songs on the radio.  
Classical music makes him cry.  
His world is different than most,  
but in this he's the same—  
music is a part of him.

## It's Different Around Here

I say that quite often  
when a childlike man is leaning  
on my head trying to give me  
clicks instead of kisses while I'm  
trying to write, or talk on the phone.

When a little woman is telling me  
about her day—nonverbally.  
When it's hilariously funny  
when I drop something,  
stub my toe, or burn my finger.

When I'm standing in the bathroom  
with a naked thirty-five year old man  
and my husband doesn't mind.  
When a bowel movement  
is cause for rejoicing.

When I hear the DynaVox  
calling my name in my own voice.  
When grunts, gestures and grimaces  
become more understandable than words.  
When she pats my face while I brush her teeth.

When I'm being serenaded  
by musical maracas,  
a vacuum cleaner hose,  
or a chipmunk singing It's Raining Men.  
When I find a plastic banjo in my bed.

When it takes a good twenty minutes  
to assemble the things on her lap.  
When she gets excited about a holiday  
two months before it happens  
and she continually points to the calendar.

When he is leaping beside me,  
in excitement, while I operate  
the hairdryer or vacuum cleaner.  
When I have to lock the door at night  
to keep people in.

When my heart gets all warm  
as she smiles, hugs  
or laughs a deep belly laugh,  
or when he sits down beside me  
and holds my hand.

Connie L. Peters and her husband live in Cortez, Colorado and host two adults with developmental disabilities, Vanessa for ten years, and Justin for four. Both are nonverbal and have various physical and mental disabilities. The Peters' grown son and daughter live in Phoenix. In between times of caring for her individuals, Connie writes.

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# Sue Reeves

## last words

we know the time is near but she  
is not ready to be alone and insists  
we keep a vigil, as if that will stop the inevitable.  
i take first watch, perched on a stool  
at the side of the bed  
in the den-turned-hospice ward  
separated from you  
by cold steel bars, illuminated only by the dim light  
peeking through the open doorway.  
you are restless, searching,  
fevered whispers  
*help me help me help me*  
in the wilderness between life and death.  
a chain rattles, echoing  
in the shadows  
as you reach for the pull-up bar,  
arms too weak to grip.  
mickey mouse hands,  
sausage fingers and fleshy palms,  
big as ever,  
now cartoons attached to twig arms  
eaten away by cancer you could no longer  
bully and browbeat into submission.  
eventually she sees that  
sitting with you in the night  
won't keep you grounded to the day.  
she calls the priest  
i am denied communion  
and your last words  
*help me help me help me*  
echo in the bright October sun.

## seasons change

days shine long across golden grass  
seamless cerulean sky drifts overhead  
slow kisses in the shimmering heat  
i have everything i need  
a flickering shadow deflates the sun  
bedrock trembles, slides out of reach  
epicenter right below my feet  
everything is gone

cold wind blows, leaves fall  
what once was, will never be again  
blindsided by the unexpected  
aching in uncertainty  
floundering dreams fade to gray  
there's nothing i can do to change it  
wishing hoping praying  
pleading scheming screaming

freeze-dried soul slips away  
under the weight of winter's ice  
leaving only emptiness  
infinite and incomprehensible  
relinquish the then  
embrace the now  
not what i hoped it would be  
it is what it is

pale dawn illuminates possibilities  
surrender to the new normal  
see this for what it is  
a chance to get it right  
blue dragonfly escapes from the secret place  
wings churn an uncharted course  
within reach beyond fear  
wholeness

Sue Reeves lives and writes in the mountains of northern Utah. Her father was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2005, and she helped care for him at home, as was his wish, during the last 10 days of his life. More recently, she cared for her husband as doctors chased an elusive diagnosis for the illness that kept him away from work for almost six months.

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# Symanntha Renn

## My Shift at Grandpa's

Walking barefoot across the kitchen  
I let him sleep because  
You heal while you sleep  
I sweep the floor  
And do some dishes in case  
He gets visitors today  
As I wipe down the table  
I remember playing cards together  
Laughs echo down the hall  
That no one wants to be in anymore  
He can't hold cards  
Or cook meatballs or catch fish  
But that was never my  
Main reason for visiting anyway  
It is our turn to give now  
I give him his medicine and  
Cook his meals a few times a week  
I know that the weeks left  
Are growing shorter and dimmer  
The best canoe trip in the world  
Cannot compare to the gleam in his eye  
When he tells me about Pigtails  
And how he walked her to church  
Under a sign that said  
No Army Personnel Past This Point  
I smile at his old jokes  
Because I know that  
I'll never hear this voice  
Tell them again.

Symanntha Renn is a poet who is no stranger to physical pain, she deals with back problems every day. Her mother has Fibromyalgia, her brother has histoplasmosis and spending time in the hospital with him has inspired some of her late poetry. The summer of 2004 was spent caring for her dying grandfather.

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# Samantha Rose

2010

2010. I never liked the sound of that. It wasn't like 2008, or 2009 - the format I had been accustomed to. I suppose you could say two-thousand-and-ten, but it was much quicker to just say twenty-ten. I had never liked the sound of that.

2012: I lie in bed and think, unintentionally. Daydreaming - an accidental glimpse into the past, into another world that I know existed but sometimes feels like a whole life ago... and suddenly feels like no time at all. How did it start this time? I was propped up in bed watching television, absent-mindedly tapping the fingers of my right hand on the back of my left. Tap-tap-tap on the flat expanse of skin, fingertips coming down faster and a little harder. Thack-thack-thack. And there I was, no longer in my bedroom, but in the anaesthetic room.

Thack-thack-thack, the fingers of the anaesthetic nurse. There were two of them, both young men and attractive, friendly-looking guys. The room felt more like a cupboard from where I was lying, and was filled with equipment and supplies. Mystery and suspense. At least there was no epidural this time. I looked at the anaesthetist's bandanna. It was bright and multi-coloured, with yellow faces on it, all wearing stethoscopes. Very fitting, and it felt reassuring, somehow. Something friendly and unusual in this clinical, formal setting. I thought about telling him I liked his bandanna, but I didn't. Perhaps I didn't want to distract him. I don't remember everything, luckily. I just stared at it instead and smiled, while thack-thack-thack went the anaesthetic nurse on my left hand as he tried to raise a vein. He was making it sore enough before he even put the cannula in. Thack-thack-thack.

That was 2011. A better year - much better, in fact. Not perfect, with the remnants of 2010 trailing into January, but by February it was looking like it might all be over.

But it isn't, is it? Because here I am in 2012, only I'm not here, in my bed watching my DVD. I'm in hospital in 2011, and even though I'm only there for a few seconds, it leaves traces of itself behind for a while. And I'll be back again, to an only slightly different place. Maybe it'll be July 2010 again - the big one, trying to get out of bed for physio, taken back there all because I see someone at work looking like they're being helped along the corridor by someone else. She wasn't - they were just walking slowly, and that's just my head. That's what I'm like now, that's what it's done to me. Or it'll be a smell, a strange smell I can't quite identify, that takes me back to when the nurse was talking to me while I waited to go into the anaesthetic room, where we talked about holidays just to pass the time and take my mind off what was about to happen. A way to stave off the urge to jump off the bed and run down the corridor, desperately searching for a way out, rather than simply lying there, patient and obedient.

But I did go in, and I came out: here I am. Alive to tell the tale. And if you're alive to tell the tale, maybe that's a tale worth telling. Or maybe it's just one of those things I'm meant to tuck away, pretend I've forgotten and act like a person who has moved

on, while inside, just wishing I could show people my scars to make them understand me.

Samantha Rose is a 24 years old web content creator living in England. As a colon cancer survivor, she believes in the importance of raising awareness not just of the disease itself, but of the emotional distress it leaves behind, even when the all-clear has been given.

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# Cecil Sayre

## Angels Singing

Sometimes he hears angels singing, a better hallucination  
than the voices telling him to kill us,

we restraining him in his bed,  
one of us on each side of him like polar opposites,

his body drawn and quartered, strangled  
in the tangle of our arms and legs.

Our insides thrash and churn with his small thirteen year-old body  
when he finally stops and settles back against his mattress,

his head raised off the pillow, listening intently,  
hearing angels, as he has before, but this time

staring at the ceiling, and we know angels  
must hover there somewhere,

their wings brushing the white swirls  
my wife painted months earlier.

We cannot see them or hear them, but holding our son,  
feeling him relax in our arms, we cannot deny them.

We cannot deny them. And this must be faith, more than believing  
in what you cannot see, but believing in what someone else can see.

And so we pray, let there be angels, let there be angels  
covering this house tonight.

Let there be angels, let there be angels.  
Let us hear the angels singing.

## Tump

I met her at the town dance the night I turned twenty-one and became a man.  
She was standing against the wall with all the other girls, her dress like the white  
petals  
on a daisy, a beautiful flower in a field full of weeds.

We danced all night and two months later were married in my parents' front room  
where we came to live, Nancy helping Mama with the house  
while I continued working our farm with my brothers.

I can't remember when she first yelled at me, can't remember  
when she began crying most every day.

I won't remember.

I won't remember when she first threw a plate at my head  
and I won't remember the night I woke with her knees on my chest and a knife in her  
hand,  
and I won't remember what I did.

She now lives in a house I built for her out back. That's where we keep her.  
She still helps Mama, and she's still my wife,  
still my beautiful flower in a field thick with weeds.

Cecil Sayre is the 47 year old father of a special needs child. His son is bi-polar and autistic and also suffers from a metabolic disorder. Cecil is currently completing his MFA and MA at Indiana University.

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# Jonathan H. Scott

## Uncle Ben and the Eye of Charley

Uncle Ben, unrelated, just a friend  
Of the family: his tumor grew too large,  
Too fast, I learned

Of his death too late  
To love him more. To catch  
One more croaking cat from his Pop's  
Pond deep in the Carolina  
Tobacco acres, or another stringer  
Of pompano from the Nag's Head surf.

We tripped along the rows  
Of his Pop's farm—unearthing arrowheads.  
Uncle Ben chunked our wishful  
Thinking back into the field, spat  
Upon the genuine articles, like Christ  
For blind eyes, and presented  
Them as if now a buffalo stampede

Would surely follow.  
Those were all the early years.  
Fish-fries and whacking thick brush  
With his gleaming machete.

It's fine if other things happened,  
It's fine if that was all.

\*

Uncle Ben's pick-up woke  
Up angry and stayed sour all day.  
Me and Christopher  
Rode with Ben. Rain pelted the window—

Splattery novae keeping  
Me wide-eyed. I tried to see the lines  
Uncle Ben claimed to see  
Clear as day.

The hurricane shoved us,  
Lane to lane. Eastbound the bridge  
would close, said the radio.

Ben leaned forward,  
An earnest effort to gather  
Momentum. We had come too far

To turn around. Tire-spray and fumes  
Sneaked through the broken floorboard.

\*

We burst through the rain—  
One second in, the next second out.  
The bridge rose, brilliant,  
In front of us, stretched beyond sight  
Toward the Outer Banks, toward  
Another orbiting terrace of charcoal clouds.  
A caravan of evacuees jammed  
The mainland route and Uncle Ben  
Laughed. *That's right,*  
*That's more fish for me.* He punched  
My thigh (a bruise I cherished  
For a week's worth of showers).  
*More fish for me! More fish for me...*  
He kept saying as the sun  
Sparked the chopped-up sound.  
I pictured him jabbing marlin,  
Mid-Atlantic, with his pants rolled.

\*

The radio called the storm Charley.  
My grandfather's name.  
My father's name.  
A cousin's name.  
Ben was just a family friend  
Whose tumor came on fast,  
A misfired cannonball to the head.

In the eye of Charley, on the closed-  
Down bridge, which of our brains  
Had begun to betray us?  
Neither would know until long  
After the junk-covered beach streets  
And the shaking shack  
On stilts, bearing Charley's brunt.  
Long after fish-foul shores—

A wreckage of dead horseshoe crabs  
And battered jellyfish—the cold walk,  
All of us, grit-shot and gust-sprayed,  
Toward the lighthouse—the pride  
Of Hatteras, the pride of us,

Having ignored the storm.  
Having braved the bridge.  
Having caught no fish,  
But in theory, oh in theory—the fish  
My Uncle Ben could've caught  
One man left to his ocean, pant-legs hiked,  
Spearing marlin, laughing,  
*There's another for me!*  
*And another for me. And another...<*

And so forth, forever, or as close  
We come—Ben as far as he could,  
Me as far as I can. And so forth, all  
Of us, toward the lighthouse.

## The Playground

I have not said enough of the bed  
Or the five weeks I spent there  
Daily funneling through the slender  
Middle of an hourglass  
until the end when all of me  
Had settled in the bottom.  
Five weeks and I've only a few lines  
To show for it. The comforter—ha!—  
Was red, faded from use and ultraviolet  
Rays. Windows are crap for stopping  
Light and no great conquerors  
Of playground sounds either.

Children slide, sling gravel, sing.  
Songs of their own invention.  
Swing.

The great triumph of some days—  
Crawling to the bathroom; the white  
Flag of most days—pissing in a bottle.  
Family bought CDs of jokes, L'Amour,  
Music interposed on lapping waves.  
For calmness. For calmness slows  
Funneling grit. That was the theory.  
At last, I lost my mind. Five weeks  
Finding shapes in the ceiling:  
Horses, mostly, horses on a carousel  
Without poles, without children—  
They were all outside in gambols.

Children slide, sling gravel, sing.  
Songs of their own invention.  
Swing.

What else? It's important  
To be forthright. As I gathered  
At the bottom, pinned by the Wrestler,  
Watching my million grains cascade  
Upon me. Me in the third person—  
Out of body because in of it reeks

Of sweat, fear, the last several meals  
And unwashed armpits. To be forthright.  
It's important. What else? Envy.  
Sadness. Radish-bitter daydreams,  
This one of many: Me in a tree,  
Limbs like a ladder, up and up.

Children slide, sling gravel, sing.  
Songs of their own invention.  
Swing.

Sometimes, I sang. I've written  
Hundreds of songs but none  
Of them came to mind. I sang the hymns  
Of my youth. God on a horse  
On the ceiling, me and the comforter—  
Faded, stitched together; it cannot  
Budge beneath me, I cannot rise  
Above it, we are each others' jailer.  
No bars. Just keys. Jangling  
From the ceiling. Do I remember  
Any psalms? The twenty-third, is all.  
It's enough. For an hour. Then not even close.

Children slide, sling gravel, sing.  
Songs of their own invention.  
Swing.

## **For Once**

I confess. For once, let me start with that.  
Secondly, there are the gifts of God  
Like the promise of death, like the air on which I  
Will never fly. And in conclusion,  
Autumn.

But wait, remiss if I fail to mention  
The months in bed—the soreness, the tears

Loosed from clinging when the room was dark.  
I confess. Because now it might be safe.

I hope for more yellow-finches to bend  
The furry stalks of the zinnia, playing hummingbird  
As they do, keeping time on slower wings.  
I hope in the meantime. Between  
One magnetic resonance and the next.  
Now and again in the spaces left open  
By slumbering grief.

Fifthly, because I'm on a roll,  
There are the pillories of God—  
Those AWOL urinations unstaunchable  
In the twist of white linens. Head and hands—  
A puppet show, or, better yet, the symbol  
Of prayerlessness. Of waiting, dumbfounded,  
To inherit the earth.

Of waiting in general.

Here's one too:  
The wail of babies makes me glad, I admit,  
But not for evil reasons. Not for the fact  
Of my jealousy, or for the falsity of my cynicism,  
But because I know they will soon  
Suckle and burp and gleefully  
Kick their doll-baby legs.  
It's the same as with the finches,  
As with the night-sessions  
Of doused pillowcases, as with  
Autumn.

As with autumn in general.

Jonathan H. Scott lives in Birmingham, Alabama. His ongoing struggle with a brain tumor (oligodendroglioma) informs many of his poems but by no means consumes them. Over the past 15 years, he has been on a steady diet of magnetic resonance and anticonvulsants—splurging once on radiation and now on chemotherapy.

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# Heidi St. Jean

## Grief of the Banshee

I.

I lie like seed  
scattered over earth, freshly  
turned, above her, reaching  
down.

II.

Falling, flailing, failing  
from the sky  
like dry rain,  
the crows come -  
  
pecking, noisy -  
fighting to gnash the last  
smitch of life.

III.

Like a dog, I have buried my beloved  
as if the weight of the hole  
could ever be filled.

IV.

I yank sobs out  
like weeds,  
hurl them  
to the corner

where they cluster, but  
refuse to rot -

they pull back together – as strings, stripped – pulling taut

refusing to sever.

V.

I drag my throat, like a bow, across  
them - howwwling

## Lines

I.

The longest line attached to her

is clear, soft tubing -

open like young

veins.

Its brutal clarity holds  
the life-giving oxygen  
that denies even as it gives –  
her broken lungs are too full  
and Death in its irony  
will come from her inability  
to expire.

II.

She is folded back into herself  
and her center is a secret  
lost in the wind that no  
longer moves through an  
open field.  
Instead, she lies in triangular  
lines, a broken kite  
on the bed, hard as earth,  
unmoving –  
but her hands still  
flutter like bows.

Heidi St. Jean received a Master's of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing with a concentration in poetry from Fairfield University in July, 2012. During the course of her graduate studies, her mother became terminally ill, and Heidi became primary caregiver. Heidi's thesis work was shaped significantly by her mother's declining health and subsequent death in 2011.

Heidi has been working professionally as a writer and editor since 1991. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Inklight*, a publication of *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*; *Theodate*, the online poetry journal of the Hill-Stead Museum; *Long River Run*, journal of the Connecticut Poetry Society, and *The Lyon Review*. She has served as Poetry Editor for *Mason's Road*, and as Managing Editor for *Drunken Boat*, and is currently the Assistant Editor for *Theodate*.

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# G. David Schwartz

## The Genius

He wrote epic volumes  
of insight and surprise  
Truly mad with analysis  
You could see it in his eyes  
Darkened volumes of lore and wit  
Too quaint, the world's angry cries  
Several thousand essays  
to fellow intellects  
Sent into scholarly vestals  
to act as his credentials  
as proof of his genius  
for solving future problems, eventually  
truly mad, overrunning with words  
which attached but aren't controlled  
until one decision one day  
he descried to create  
he decided to create writing for the public  
Some sayings on small outlooks  
to end their strife as well as chaos  
he set his mind to speak to them  
In and on their terms  
And one could have guessed that then  
his genius simply dried up  
Some say he was never really wise  
some others said he was  
Why his mind went simply bland  
we have never found the cause  
For me to try to explain  
Would take too much analysis

G. David Schwartz is the former president of Seedhouse, the online interfaith committee. Schwartz is a survivor of anoxia and currently a volunteer at Drake Hospital in Cincinnati. He is the author of *A Jewish Appraisal of Dialogue* and *Midrash Working Out Of The Book*. He continues to write, his new book is *Shards And Verses*.

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# Carol Smallwood

## Between Rocks: A Pantoum

Waiting for a stop light I read: For Weed Control Call Today  
and remembered hanging clothes over porch rails to dry:  
the long stem daisies, the Queen Anne's Lace beginning in May,  
catnip flourishing between rocks that made Minnie play.

Some leaves the size of paddles topped with flower displays  
flourished as if determined to reach the sky  
contrasted with low thistles keeping grass at bay  
while the occasional dragon fly and white moth passed by.

Growing through boards on the steps was a stray  
branch of something wild with a look very spry:  
I'd cut back its parent crowding the rails saying it was okay  
and was amazed it'd found a path—but could guess why.

Breast cancer encourages desire for life to have its way,  
seek things that strive to live and be glad when weeds defy,  
rejoice at growth between rocks each day  
sights that amaze, give will not to die.

Seek things that want to live, be glad when weeds defy:  
the long stem daisies, the Queen Anne's Lace beginning in May,  
sights that delight, give will not to die.

Waiting for a stop light I read: For Weed Control Call Today.

Carol Smallwood is a cancer and trauma survivor. She started to write poetry after her retirement and learned how to write formal poetry following directions found online.

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# Maranda Stewart

## Father Stories

\*\*\*

The phone was my worst enemy  
because he couldn't stay sober  
enough to visit, to make the drive,  
to sit still enough without falling over,  
but he could still pick up the phone  
and blast himself across the world  
to me at anytime and I was always  
unprepared and so never answered. He'd  
leave me a message and it's red eye  
would blink at me from  
across the room, across the yard, in my sleep,  
and I desperately wanted him to stop trying  
but I think that's all he knew  
how to do and I 'd answer once or twice  
to hear nothing but the try.

\*\*\*

My sister comes up to ask  
me why I never visit,  
and I say,  
because I hate our father.  
She disagrees as if  
she knows.  
I want to tell her  
blue-eyed dancer legs  
to go clean out her gerbil's cage  
or worry about homework,  
cleaning her room, soccer practice,  
anything that's not making  
me sick of myself.

\*\*\*

My stepmother comes upstairs  
and sees us sitting there  
on the bedroom floor,  
she never says a word  
she is after all only  
a step mother  
like only a half of something  
not quite good enough,  
none of us really ever were.  
Maybe that's what my father

always needed, that constant half  
step to keep him  
from realizing the ground.

\*\*\*

The three of us get ready together  
even though I want to leave,  
but we know this  
is something none of us can  
run away from anymore, as if  
the air has turned into him  
his breath right under our noses  
soaked in familiarity so close  
that we can hear the clinking  
of ice in his dead weight glass.

\*\*\*

“Your father was...”  
my stepmother starts as if  
she needs to tell me, but I’ve  
been here the longest, I was  
the first,  
I know his thoughts, which never got  
me anywhere, I cleaned up the blood,  
I unloaded the gun, un-poured the drink,  
I am him  
and everyone else  
is nothing to me.

\*\*\*

Everything happens for a reason  
especially Jack Daniels,  
I water my flowers with it, watch  
the peppers pop up %80 proof,  
caramelized oak wood barrel blueberries,  
it’s how I wash my dishes, my daughter,  
it’s how I remember everything tucking  
me into bed at night so that I can get  
her on the bus in the morning.  
My father leans over and kisses  
me on the head and that’s  
when I realize that I’m already sleeping.

Maranda Stewart is a current MFA student at Rosemont College concentrating in poetry. In order to survive the emotional displacement that she had suffered as a child because of her father’s severe alcoholism Maranda turned to poetry in order to heal. She has been writing since the age of twelve and can’t imagine another media that has helped her to find the words in situations when no body could offer her anything else. She writes about surviving alcoholism with strange and juxtaposing images against a narrative voice. She relates that every day is a gift, a song, a poem.

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# Rachel Sutcliffe

## Curtains

Inspid  
Pale pastel  
Flower patterned  
Curtains,  
Hang lifeless  
From the stark metal  
Rails.

Screeching  
They slide,  
To form flimsy cubicles  
Of sanitized space.

A vain attempt  
To offer  
Some privacy,  
Some escape  
From the noise;  
The bleeps  
The questions  
The chit chat.

United,  
By a common illness  
Here on this ward  
Where these curtains  
Divide.

Rachel Sutcliffe has suffered from an atypical form of lupus for the past 12 years, since her early twenties. Throughout this time writing has been a great form of therapy, it's kept her from going insane. Her website can be found at [projectwords11.wordpress.com](http://projectwords11.wordpress.com)

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# Guy Thorvaldsen

Daniel Hammond is 25 years old and has Asperger's Syndrome. He is a college graduate, helps fundraise for disability centers, and cares for his dog Lucy. His father, Guy Thorvaldsen Teaches English at Madison College.

## The True Story

My son, autistic,  
slow to the punch,  
easily left behind  
by witty rejoinders,  
ironic refrains,  
those clever twists of language  
meant to undermine the target  
and entertain the rest of us,

except him: curious, intelligent,  
but for whom the literal world is more  
than enough.

A young man  
who prefers to spend time alone  
while in the company of others.  
We are told that his brain works  
like a Polaroid camera, needs time to develop  
pictures, a thousand snapshots,  
then order them into a story.

Yet, when my son, lovely,  
is told the straight story,  
is invited to laugh at what actually is,  
his eyes become wide and surprised,  
his brow uncreases,  
his body shudders with giggles  
that begin deep down.

And when he is alone,  
I imagine he wonders why  
these others with their word-drenched brains  
fully equipped and entitled  
to spin and bend language,  
at the speed of the world,  
so easily forget  
the ones they are leaving behind.

## Healthcare Plan

All day, my chest has been taped and wired  
like a fault line monitored for seismic shifts.  
A revolving cast of MDs., RNs, PA.s, CNAs  
have squinted at my charts,  
grilled me about my smoke and drink  
then used my neutral lap as a stage  
to place their latex gloves,  
scissors, white rolls of tape.  
Each one reaches behind me  
says it will be a little cold,  
then asks me to breathe deep  
while they gaze off,  
listen for signs of the good life.  
But now I am alone, can stand upright  
in my sexy, open-backed gown  
and do my own gazing at the world  
water-colored outside my window.  
The broad snow-covered lake blushes  
pink, then lavender, softening  
its exotic necklace of red  
rush hour brakelights.  
Closer by, a red-tail hawk slides  
by the hospital,  
not above, but below me,  
and I wonder  
if this room with a view  
is part of the plan,  
a panacea for aching, racing hearts.  
Or is it simply a way to foreshorten  
the eventual journey  
upwards,  
when the weight  
of one's life becomes less  
than the desire to set it free.

Guy Thorvaldsen's partner Mary Paulauskis is a four-year and counting survivor of breast cancer. She an Academic Advisor in the University of Wisconsin School of Social Work and worked for several years as a social worker in Hospice Care. Gratitude has become the center of her spiritual practice. Guy teaches English at Madison College.

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# Lisa Tobe

## Fault Line

“Have you been paying attention?” This I yelled to the gods as I threw my arms up towards the sky, slate blue. I pedaled my bicycle furiously away, away from my duplex, a brown and white box, away from the silence and away from the phone call where the doctor just told me I had cancer. November leaves scattered in my wake. I had been waiting for this call, an answer to all the testing I had been through in the past week to determine why I had a lump under my left arm.

“Lisa, this is Dr. Bingham, I’m an oncology fellow—”

“Okay.”

“I have an opening on Wednesday.”

“Tell me the results.”

“I’d rather wait until we’re in person.”

“Listen. You’re an oncologist. I’m guessing I have cancer. I don’t want to wait. Tell me.”

I had already been told by the surgical oncologist that he thought the look of the lymph node they’d removed indicated I had leukemia or lymphoma. The first meant I’d probably die, and the second, well, it was better.

“You have Hodgkin’s Disease, Nodular Sclerosing.”

I wrote it down. He told me about follow-up tests that would dictate treatment. I wrote it down. He told me many words I didn’t know. I wrote them all down and then circled, Wed 2:00.

I had just started a Master’s program at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, something to look forward to after a year of severe depression, a new-found eating disorder and a suicide attempt. I had little income, no insurance, a slew of new friends who knew this Lisa, the one without a history of child sexual abuse. They were fresh, newbies, not exhausted yet and waiting to hear about the call.

Others, veterans of Lisa trauma, the kind they thought was always of my own making, did not know of the potential cancer diagnosis. Safe, they thought, me and them. They no longer waited for my calls, the kind that reeked of desperation and liquor where sobbing tears interlaced with words of hopelessness, death, something I would choose, they thought. Out of their control, they thought.

This latest diagnosis, out of my control, I thought, not my fault, I thought. I felt a relief like I had when I was a child diagnosed with kidney infections after months of not knowing. I’d been having pain in my belly, a zing, a fire that grew until I just wanted to sit down and cry. And finally I had, at school, bare legs against asphalt as I folded then beneath me and crunched up in a ball, pony tail and tears. I’d had this pain for a while, but knew my Mom didn’t like babies or hypochondriacs, things she called my best friend Kelley. Later, I would learn that the kidney infections, which reoccurred for years, were most likely a physical sign of the sexual abuse from Kelley’s family. And like the victim being blamed by the perpetrator, I spent years being re-victimized by people, well-meaning folks, when I recounted recovered memories of abuse. They reacted perhaps out of naïveté or ignorance often by saying things like,

“Why didn’t you tell someone?”

“Right,” I think. “Shouldn’t the question be why didn’t they notice, my parents, the schools or the doctors?” I had been to the hospital once for internal bleeding when I was 9. My bike tire had gotten stuck between thick, black metal grates covering a drainage ditch. I’d fallen on the handle bars. As I doubled over in pain, my mom brushed my hair so I would look good at the hospital. The doctors, suspicious of internal bleeding in a child so young, asked about abuse. I looked at my parents, whose eyes had grown big. “No.” It felt honest, my answer. My parents weren’t abusing me. And the other people, the bad people they were asking me about, I didn’t remember them, not me the little girl with her blonde hair brushed in shiny, straight ponytails.

In 2011, 8,830 new cases of Hodgkin’s Disease were diagnosed. Just over 1,300 died that year. The same year, authorities substantiated 63,319 cases of child sexual abuse. My case has never been substantiated. As adults 25% of all women will report child sexual abuse, almost three times the substantiated rate; of those 4.4% will try to die, because they think the abuse and the depression are their fault. I am one of them. I attempted suicide 8 years after the abuse stopped and then 7 years later. The abuse changed my brain and its chemistry. I produce more Cortisol and less Serotonin, which translates into a horrible memory, worse responses to stress and less of a chance to be happy.

In my twenties and thirties, people wanted to know when I would get over it, the abuse that had happened for almost a decade. Nobody asked this about the cancer, when I would get over that. If they had and I had known, I could have said 3 months. Three months where: I underwent a twelve-hour surgery to take out my spleen and parts of my liver to confirm that I had early stage cancer; I had 21 days of radiation chin to sternum, my throat became so raw I couldn’t swallow my own spit; three months wondering if when this was done, someone would tell me that I’m cured. None of this compared to 8 years of fear, of being raped again and again, thinking I would smother, being told I was worthless.

I am indelibly marked by two blue dots, tattoos on my chest the techs placed to line up my radiation day after day and fading pale scars on my arms I made to release invisible pain. Sexual abuse caused my brain to grow underdeveloped and predisposed me to clinical depression. Cancer made my cells grow rapidly out of control. Both could kill me, the slow and the fast, so I wonder why society treats these two illnesses so differently.

Lisa Tobe, a bright athletic young woman, had just begun her first semester as a public health graduate student at the University of North Carolina, when doctors told her she had cancer. Over 500 miles from home and still struggling from the effects of child sexual abuse, Lisa found herself inundated with support from her graduate school program, friends and even strangers, a welcome response to her previous bouts of suicidal depression. Fifteen years later, grateful for her survival from both cancer and depression, Lisa contemplates the different responses society has to these two illness. Now a mother, professional public health consultant and a Master of Fine Arts graduate student at Northwest Institute of Literary Arts on Whidbey Island, WA, Lisa is working on her first memoir about her experiences with cancer and depression.

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# Kenneth Tyssen

## Miss Special

Trouble waits  
in her nerves  
in her legs  
in her arms  
in her mind.

Wonder shines  
in her eyes  
in her smile  
in her heart  
in her dreams.

Some evil strips her nerves,  
Its nature well hidden.  
Some day we will catch it.  
But for now, medicine  
Knows little, helps not much.

She relies  
on her eyes  
on her smile  
on her heart  
on her hope.

Beautiful:  
She is  
So.

Kenneth Tyssen is a graphic artist, photographer, and webmaster by day, but he dabbles in writing by night. Poetry is not usually his preferred style, but this poem, "Miss Special," was inspired by a close friend, a wonderful woman who is afflicted with multiple sclerosis. She has been diagnosed for nearly ten years. At first she succumbed to anger and depression, but now she lights up the world for those around her. She recently suffered the transition from the relative freedom of a walker to a wheelchair. She is a published writer herself and prefers to be known as Daughter of Arabs.

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# Kris Underwood

## What Was Found (After the MRI)

It had been there all along, unknown,  
Unseen by machine  
Or anything else:

A mass of scar  
Tucked in the back of the skull  
Folded into layers  
Of tissue-  
The crux of it all.

They say it's "very old,"  
With whispers of *stroke at birth*,  
*Not enough oxygen* and the ever-vague  
*Distress*.

Strange to see your brain,  
Dissected in halved images on the screen-

The scar moves through  
The crevices of the brain  
Like the legs of a spider.

I imagine  
The electrical activity of a seizure  
Is a thousand spiders scattering.

There is some satisfaction  
In that there is an explanation for it-  
Physical Proof-  
After years of hearing,  
"We don't know why."

Though, how can I settle  
When, at 32 years,  
I still shake and rattle?

Kris Underwood is the Social Media Manager for Hunger Mountain, journal of the Vermont College of Fine Arts. Some of her work has appeared in Literary Mama, Poetry Midwest and others. Find out more at her blog, [krisunderwood.blogspot.com](http://krisunderwood.blogspot.com) . She's been dealing with Epilepsy her entire life.

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# Megan Volpert

## **The hair has stopped falling out**

Deliberating over then declaring this was an exercise in a gray area. Probably I shuddered at making the call that scheduled the appointment that resulted in diagnosis. Certainly I fell down wormholes of chronic pain and crossed minefields to sign the treaty that accepted this disease. Wear my intestines on my sleeve and they will bleed all over you. But it was just water, rising around me in the shower when the simple remnants of my vanity would not let it pass, which finally broke me. We do not ever refer to these tiny nets of sanity as clumps. I look terrible in hats, but rather cool in a helmet.

## **There's a difference between familiar and recurring**

It was in a store full of ominous things, this giant butcher knife painted with orange flames and a googly-eyed cartoon face. It was some kind of sick sculpture, and the knife was holding an equally large gun in its silly Mickey Mouse hands. Both gun part and knife part appeared to be in working order, a surreal weaponry combo meant to aid me in disemboweling myself. When I have chronic pain at night, this is the kind of ugly thing my unconscious will often produce. I always wake up before the part where I get into the bathtub, but that part is nevertheless implied.

Megan Volpert is a poet and critic who lives in Atlanta, where she teaches high school English. She lives with ulcerative colitis. Predictably, [meganvolpert.com](http://meganvolpert.com) is her website.

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# Janna Vought

## For Kamryn

I

Sleep, my child, soon night  
arrives. Swallow your magic  
beans that grow spindles  
of reason in your head. What happens,  
my sweet, when the magic ends?  
I dread the dark coming. I watch you  
breathe, chest expands and constricts  
like a snake swallowing a mouse  
into its belly, and wonder  
when it was I stopped believing  
in Heaven. I hold your pieces  
in my hand, puzzling, pondering  
genealogy, the mismatched chromosomes,  
white and blue striped socks thrown  
together, that created you. Some days  
I wish you weren't mine, days when I blame  
God for His wondrous blessing.

II

I sit bedside,  
stroke your hair wet with panic  
and perspiration. Dream of turquoise  
hummingbirds small as a bumble bee  
and you, fairy queen, ride them across  
the buttered sky. I wish to set myself on fire,  
absorb your pain, make the voices stop  
screaming. I long to rest my cheek  
upon your shoulder, touch your princess  
skin, ivory and smooth as a polished  
wishing stone skipped across the water.  
Your flesh recoils from my touch, a rattler  
set to strike; motherhood  
is a charade. An army of plush animals  
unify at the bottom of your bed, stave demons  
creeping along the walls; glass eyes  
keep watch over you as you rest.

III

I waved goodbye to the little girl  
in my dreams, flaxen hair a flowing

golden eddy, eyes the blue of robin's  
eggs bright and glistening, waved  
so many times, until nothing  
remained. I remember days we watched  
a color wheel rotate across the summer sky,  
your hair wet and salty from ocean water, seated  
in our lawn chair thrones, wrapped  
in your favorite Winnie the Pooh towel,  
baking cookies, dough spackling your cheeks stained  
with curiosity, tiny fingers searching  
for chocolate treasures. My mad girl, you fear  
everything but yourself: vipers entwined  
beneath the covers, piranhas in the bath water—  
my embrace.

#### IV

You forget your name, soaring  
in and out of lucidity a wingless dove  
adrift on a fickle breeze, eyes open  
and shut, detached from reality  
you float in yourself, unaware.  
You act strange, a little off, unscrewed,  
dented—broken. You throw toys  
against your splintered door, feet stomp so loud  
the floors shudder in your wake. I tell you  
to whisper; you scream.  
I wash your hair every day with fingers stained  
with my contempt, banana scented shampoo  
lathers, conceals what slithers beneath. I gather  
your hair in bundles, silk tendrils in my hand,  
scrub each tuft with all my might; I cannot scrape  
the filth away no matter how I try.

#### V

When God kicked  
the chair out from under me  
I cried for your ruined life, ash sifting  
through my fingers. Family and friends offer  
forced condolences as though you passed,  
purchase cards, peddle advice  
and personal tragedies strung  
together like a noose  
of black pearls, trying to ease  
the pain. My house bursts  
with hollow blessings as they turn away  
for a better view. No one can return you,

my daughter. They say there is nothing worse than death, but death is final. I have stooped low, entered caverns of grief swallowing as I watch you die every day. They want me to meet other mothers gathered at the wailing wall, weep for children who will never know love or disaster shrouded in veiled pain, pennies collected to pay the reaper to carry their offspring to the other side.

VI

Your t-shirts tattooed with cartoon animals, their plastic smiles stretch across your blossoming figure, remind me you are becoming a woman. I wish I could keep you encased in glass, protect your bone china frame from their hands. God entrusted you to me for protection. I raise you in isolation, the chill too brutal to remain outside. My heart dives off cliffs chewing up the rabid tide. Guilt perforates my paper heart like sharpened pencil: I was too lazy to read you a story every night before I tucked you in. I got angry, pulled just a bit tighter when I braided your hair. I am sorry, my baby; how could I let this happen? I plead with Heaven, grant you reprieve from the unforgiving madness. If I don't find happiness, my girl, what is a life?

Post Script: To those who stole my daughter, run away, hide. I'm coming to find her.

Janna Vought is an MFA graduate student at Lindenwood University in Saint Charles, Missouri. She lives with her husband and two daughters. Her oldest daughter was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and Bi-polar mental illness three years ago. Janna draws upon her personal experiences with mental illness to create many of her creative works.

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# Nells Wasilewski

## Every Heartbeat

The rhythm of a heartbeat,  
like an old record, is the same  
throughout the years—  
dependable,  
constant  
and beautiful.

One scratch on the  
much loved record  
ruins its performance, as  
does a blockage to the  
heart. The pain gathers  
and spreads in intensity  
as time passes—  
growing,  
gnawing  
and ever present.

Slowly admission rises  
above the surface of denial,  
as I begin to face the truth.  
I feel weightless, my  
mind is sluggishly caught  
between a narcotic haze  
and consciousness  
This place is unfamiliar  
it's too bright, sterile, cold  
and buzzing with a  
cacophony of foreign sounds.  
My eyelids feel heavy  
like elevator doors sliding open.  
A stranger in a mask nods,  
random words drift by—  
blockage,  
bypass  
and surgery.

I reach out in my semi  
state of oblivion searching  
for what I so desperately  
need. The stark room begins  
to dissipate and Mother's kitchen  
comes into view,  
a safe place to regain—

strength,  
hope  
and courage  
with which to embrace  
a second chance.

Nells Wasilewski is a poet and writer from Tullahoma, Tennessee. She has undergone heart, aorta femoral and carotid artery surgery, a total of ten bypasses. She has a pacemaker and diabetes (under control). She leads a very active lifestyle and since retiring, at age sixty nine, has been pursuing her lifelong dream of writing.

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# Theresa Wyatt

## Brain Waves Over Dinner

As far as destruction is concerned, I can't tell  
the difference between a hurricane or tornado,  
depends on confluence, which I'm told lies  
on my seventh cranial nerve

But I do know this – the worry in your soft voice  
coming 'cross the table toward me is warm  
and real and not all in my head

Either way, I hear you, no matter numbered  
cranial nerves, no matter outcomes  
or the waiting     like being underwater

love not altered  
by the pin dropping stretch  
of silence

## Anxiety

Through the window, in the distance,  
fierce waves are roaring in as beach  
birds scatter and kitchen kettle  
whistles, white foam

of high tide pulls me forward,  
reminds compression and  
erosion not a choice,  
wings and spines  
off course

Tea leaves showing daily  
in a clear cottage light  
just how easy  
gravity

can shift

## Traversing

On the underside of your arms,  
a necklace of blue veins  
traverses

the subterranean you

Do not look away during  
the capture contained,  
lean into this observation,  
silent though it be

Hold the beauty and wonder  
of this network of blood sea  
close to your heart  
of understanding

Call for results  
sometime  
next week

Theresa Wyatt is a retired teacher. After a lengthy career working with students at risk in various settings including the NY State Department of Corrections, she has wholeheartedly embraced creative writing. Following a single sided acoustic neuroma brain tumor when she was 35 years old, Theresa was subsequently diagnosed with Neurofibromatosis Type 2 when a bi-lateral tumor emerged 11 years later. She considers herself fortunate to have found a creative pursuit that is both therapeutic and engaging and thanks the editors for promoting a deeper empathy and understanding of the human encounter with illness. She lives with her husband in Buffalo, the city by the Lake.