Medical Literary Messenger

An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts



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FOREWORD

Most of us come into this world in a hospital. It takes a village, doesn't it? The many hands that deliver us from nothing into love are just one side of the story. All too easy, as practitioners of medicine, to get caught up in the science and machinery of it all. The other side being the human experience: the fear and hope, the gratitude and grief. One could argue the peaks and valleys of living are magnified in these spaces that thin between life and death. This issue comes out of a season of change, which is reflected all too well in the pages that follow: transitions, rebirths, and mirrors held up to the range of experiences so many of us live through. Sometimes just barely. Sometimes for the rest of our lives. We hope that this issue will bring you some solace, will complicate, in the best of ways, the picture painted in our minds of what medicine can be, and what it means to both providers and patients. In the thinning space between life and death, it is the concentration of countless hearts that makes up the fabric of what allows for us to witness our own humanity reflected back at us. We hope you'll enjoy these pieces as much as we do.

Matt Schroeder | Managing Editor

MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

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Angina

J.R. Solonche

It is a hand on the heart,
a greeting.
It is mortality grinning,
dumbly, with its big,

hearty hand on the heart,
mortality in person,
squeezing the heart
with its big, hot hand.

And then it becomes
remembering,
the heart remembering
painful experiences

from its infancy,
its childhood and its youth,
separations in the dark,
nightmares of falling

and chases through forests,
unrequited love for heroines
of books and movie stars,
an ache in the shape

of a hand holding such
a heavy heart heart-level
and too long to bear.
It is Latin for *torture*.

An Origin Story

Carolyn Martin

Everyone wants to know what's to blame:
dehydration, a-fibrillation, a too-peaceful life
that needed stirring up?

Or was the stroke aimed to teach what
I couldn't learn from raking leaves, writing poetry,
or playing at any meaningful thing?

I'd like to think I'd have mastered asking
for help or letting love flood my heart
without clotting my brain.

I could have muscled up my stubbornness
without heaving myself from couch
to wheelchair to toilet seat

or climbing two dozen steps for showering each week.
Add the dishwasher's emptying, checking plants
for watering, preparing meals on my timeline.

Every day I explore more empowerment
like dressing myself, squeezing into tieless shoes,
making sure my teeth are flossed and brushed.

Truth be told, I concede this episode arrived
in the grand scheme of my charmed life
without any reasonable wherefore or why.

From Hospital to Rehab

Carolyn Martin

(Abandon all hope of modesty you who enter here.)

After the brainstorm, ten days in the hospital
without a washcloth, slip of soap, toothbrush,
or deodorant. Ripeness is all I have
when I arrive at my new home and learn
I've been scheduled for a shower tonight.
A wheelchair arrives to usher me
into a room six times the size of my shower
at home where two big, beautiful Ethiopian men
appear with towels and washcloths.
There's respect in the way they wash my hair
and offer me soapy cloths to cleanse my private parts.
Wash, rinse–again and again–until the hospital
flows down the drain. They dress me in a T-shirt
and shorts to return to bed and I thank them
for the first of a hundred times to come.
No baptism ever felt so divine.

Memory Care

Jennifer Campbell

Some days it's still you before you went
Today I see discerning eyes, steady voice
Others I can't see you through the sediment

Memories eroded, unnaturally spent
Yet you supported my path, every choice
Some days it's still you before you went

You built a business from nothing, you sent
Me away to college and rejoiced
At the strata formed from sediment

I turned words over in my hands, hell bent
On letting memories sift, unvoiced
If only to learn your ways before you went

I recite Hamlet's lines without a dent
Worry how long my recall spells release
I still try to see through the sediment

Things you need to say, trapped in intent
You ask me to give love to both the boys
Some days I see you before you went
Others I love you within the sediment

Feathers

Kathryn Temple

Do you remember being sedated
in a house with a view of the bay,
you dozed in an old leather chair,
woke when a bird struck the window,
a small bird, still the glass trembled.
When she flew away unharmed,
a few blue feathers fell to earth.

Let's forget that metaphor, instead
imagine you're a guest at a party
who may have had too much to drink,
you bounce off a sliding glass door,
then stumble away on the deck.
That eye will be black in the morning.

Do you keep throwing yourself at glass
that never shatters? Look through the glass.
Know who is watching. He smokes his pipe
in silence, as if enjoying the show.

Your world is paved with feathers, do you see them?

Denial

Kathryn Temple

I write to you today which is your yesterday,
living in your future while you cling to the past when
you hiked in California under the sun,
never thinking it could end like this and still
you do not think of endings but only

new beginnings, ambitions, what you will write, where to go,
this is denial which they say is part of the disease, I wonder
what to do when no one will state what's true or what the greater truth?

I am thinking that truth-telling may be overrated,
denial might be a trait we should cultivate,
I am wondering who profits by the thought of her own impending death.

Today you said "I was a scientist now I'm a poet and an artist"
which is the sort of thing denial permits us
when hope has become a duty so instead of hope
we have a list of tasks before us.

I deny accusing you of denial, it must be terrible to find your own children
mocking you, worse than losing your freedom or needing a walker
which you forget to use or wondering if you relieved your bladder
in the john or the corner of the room.

We aren't playing misery poker here, you say,
day five, you cannot get out of bed
and I think of others who could not get out of bed,
who stopped talking and eating and sank into sleep
or pneumonia and couldn't breathe
but hospice wouldn't come and what I thought of that

when I first began caring for you, I resented your denial,
what did you mean telling your children that you would make it
when no one ever had?

I wanted you to see what was right, to make videos
with messages for the future, like someone in a sitcom with leukemia,

but now you say this will all turn around, I ask you
to show me your art and you send fifty-two slides
each different and yet of a piece in forms
that cannot be explained, only experienced,
denial becomes affirmation, the colors all bursting
out of frames and so much movement, everywhere.

I think *I will always have these*

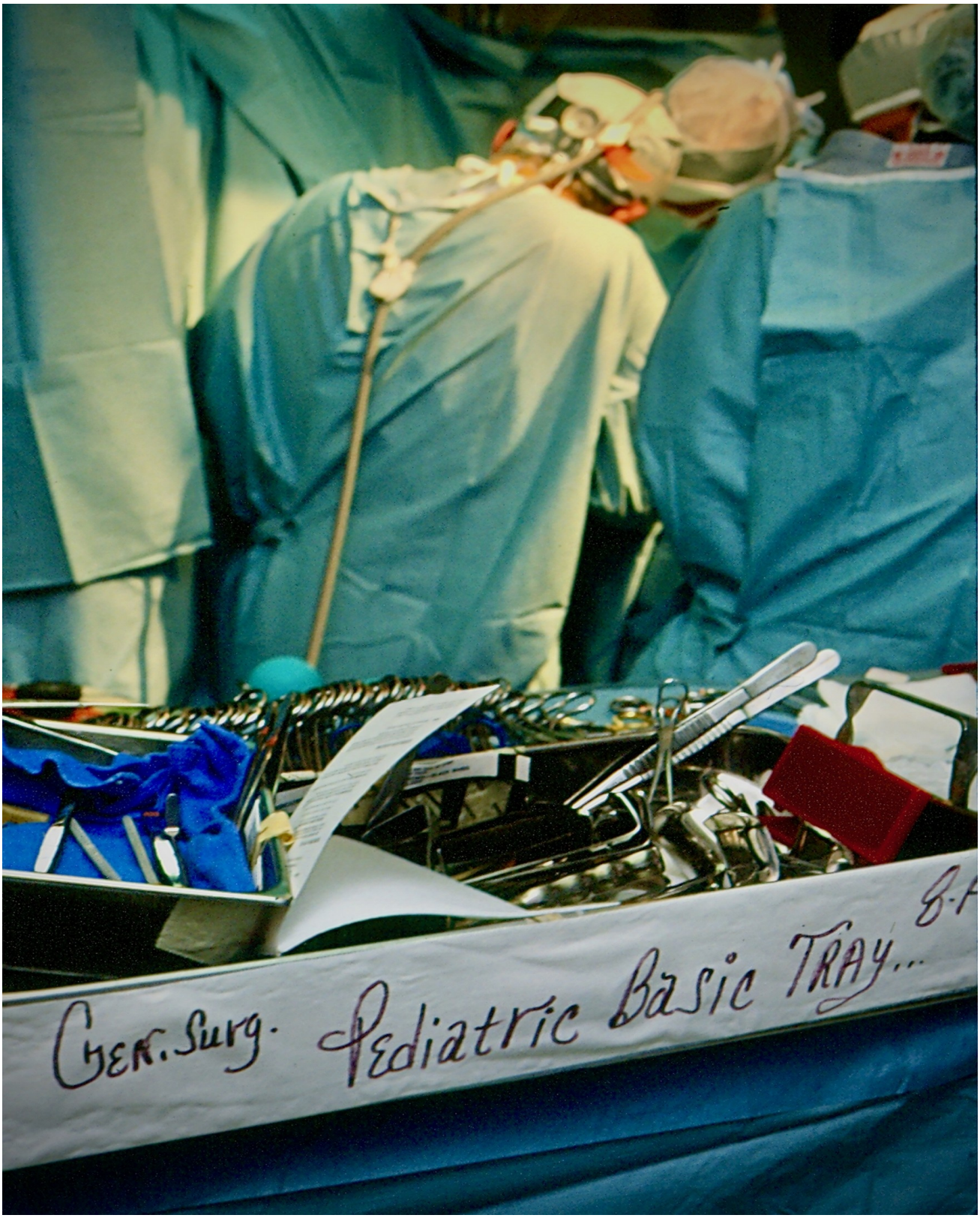
Prepped Sutures, 1984

Willy Conley



Pediatric Surgery Tray, 1984

Willy Conley



Rushing to the Hyperbaric Chamber, 1984

Willy Conley



Human Heart, Tricuspid Valve and Trabeculae, 1982
Willy Conley



Neurosurgery, 1979
Willy Conley



If You Give a 75-Year-Old a Contrast Dye

Judith Shapiro

The past few months have been eventful, one might say, like a 75-year-old's off-kilter version of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, without the treats. The new year started off with the flu that led to pneumonia; followed by a fall when I tripped over a wooden palette that yielded a fractured pelvis, cut knee, sprained ankle, and oh-so-sore shoulder. The shoulder MRI without contrast revealed a cyst that led to, at my request, a referral to a sports medicine doc for ultrasound-led aspiration or steroid injection. He took one look and said, nope, that's not right, which led to a second MRI, this time with contrast, that suggested a mass; that led to the oncologist; that led to the interventional radiologist who extracted a part of it to biopsy with the help of a CT scan and anesthesia; all of which led to, it's time for a therapist.

Monday I met with my second new therapist. She was great, chicken shit and chicken salad, compared to the one I spent three fifty-minute hours with on the phone the previous month. That one was somethin'. Suggested I take up a hobby. How about I knit or crochet, she said. Call a friend when I get sad. Told me it's okay to feel gloomy when the weather is bad. Lots of people do, she said. Sunny days they're sunny; grey days they're blue. And when the day gets off to a bad start, you spill your tea or drop your scone and the dog eats it before you can stop her, it's natural to be upset. Some people stay upset for the rest of the day, she said. That's normal. She didn't actually say the dog part. I added that in my head for my own amusement. I stopped her. Can we please skip what other people do? And no, I don't do all that. It doesn't work that way for me.

The therapist idea isn't new. I've considered getting one numerous times over the past six years since my

2020 bout with COVID, which led to long COVID, my constant companion. But finding a therapist takes energy. When I'm sick, too much energy. When I'm well, okay, maybe later.

I'm often sickly with long COVID, with a myriad of symptoms—fatigue, POTS, GI issues, post-exertional malaise, brain fog, and others that come and go. I flare from doing too much. Take Monday. I saw my new crochet-less therapist, had physical therapy, then I met with my friend Evie at a county park. Evie also has long COVID, a surprise to me when her name popped up in the comments on a social media site five years ago. The group had over ten-thousand members, people sequestered in their homes, bewildered by long COVID symptoms, seeking cures, camaraderie, community. There's comfort in being with someone who understands that cancelling at the last minute may happen, that slouching on a bench instead of sitting up is not weird, it's necessary, and that walking fast or far may or may not be in the cards.

When Evie introduced me to this park years ago, it felt too curated, polished for my taste. I was a rugged outdoorsy type that hikes in the woods, I thought. I've come to love it now. I appreciate the extraordinary beauty—ninety-plus partially tamed and thoughtfully planted acres, with trees and flowers, paths, benches, and chairs, and a huge grassy hill; a pond with turtles and koi, lush with lotus blossoms and leaves the size of elephant's ears in summer. A pond that we sat next to one cold spring afternoon, when an osprey hovered overhead, and dove for food, over and over again, for an hour. An osprey. Imagine that. I swear it looked me right in the eye.

After Monday's activities, I was spent. Totally horizontal. Stacked my pillows to prop up against and found myself flat on the bed. How many times must I learn, that doing a lot, a lot of anything, lands me velcroed to

the mattress. As usual, I thought maybe I'd caught something. I'm coming down with the flu. Fool me once, fool me a hundred times. After a few days it'll lessen. I'll return to my new normal. Upright, with long COVID, a fractured pelvis that's on the mend, and a mass in my shoulder that will be what it will be.

And this morning I did spill my tea. Caught the handle of the mug, full to the brim, with my elbow as I stood up to grab my toast, knocked it over, the whole of it onto the table and the floor, producing a pond under table and chair legs. Oh well, that happened. No hurry. It's not going anywhere. I've got bigger concerns than that in my life. After I cleaned it up, albeit slowly, I admired how spotless the table and that portion of the floor were.

Six years and counting, I no longer list the ways in which I once was able and vital and vibrant, ran on fields, plunged down snow-covered hills, walked miles along the edge of the surf to the inlet, cells of my eyes full to bursting with the beauty. No. I don't talk much about that past. No more than I recount how when I was young I could do cartwheels, fashion a Superman cape with a towel pinned to my shoulders, dive headfirst off the bed to fly. Years later, stay up all night having fun and greet the day with coffee and a scone and play on.

If I wallow in the past, or embrace how sick I often am of my sickness, what am I left with? Sick of being me? Sick of being? Better I make a cup of tea, toast with apricot jam and climb back into bed. And put on socks. New, thick, tight socks that gently hug my calves, a tiny deterrent to my intermittent POTS. Damn, new socks are a joy.

between off and stop

Allison Whittenberg

pull the plug means
stop the ventilator from ventilation
but it's not as quick as flipping a switch
it's slow like a record player:
off doesn't mean stop
the disc still circles as it slows
as it stops.

I Mean, Hope

Allison Whittenberg

anxiety is chronic and incurable
maybe
I've slain it,
I think, I mean, hope
fighting through the flux
till the outrush, the drilling panic
that used to stalk away my nights
rest was a stranger
what I did to make that drifter drift
was face my biggest fear:
what if it never gets better,
nevertheless,
in that pursuing grief
I found what
I am

The Waters of the Rhine

Jefferson Singer

Music soars like the waters of the Rhine,
our father riding the Wagnerian waves,
Jon sailing beside him,
a sheepskin like a warrior's robe
draped over the wood-ribbed Scandia chair;
our father, sole commander of the Sony Hi-Fi,
shaking the house with trumpets' triumphant cries,
sopranos' glass-breaking notes,
Bruce and I escaping to Korvette's Discount
for 45's to play on portables;
our father, who in daydreams floated
to opera's center stage,
a World Series batter's box,
a lab bench of great discoveries,
who had wished his first born
a hero's life like Siegfried,
bathed in dragon's magic blood,
save for a single spot on his back
where a linden leaf
had strayed.

Those rare afternoons spun Jon
on his own lifelong frantic quests,
mastering each Norse god's myth,
poring over Tolkien's tales,
cosplaying a Visigoth,
while often awash and foundering
in daily life's most simple tests.

Together, they followed a different cycle–
Jon as Siegfried's shadow self,
with only one invincible spot–
his *leitmotif* of dreams,
where he wore the horned helmet,
lifted by the Valkyries
above the perilous waves
to Valhalla's golden throne.

Voices

Jefferson Singer

Jon's late evening phone calls
came high-pitched and pressured,

as if he'd inhaled helium
and exhaled his pending fame,

limo visits from Madonna,
Tom Petty sending coded tunes;

in the background,
heavy metal thrashed—

Slayer, White Lion, Anthrax,
like flame licks from his brain.

The psychiatric firefighters
emptied their hoses,

trying every hook and ladder,
from Thorazine to Haldol,

then next-gen raw recruits,
Clozaril and Olanzapine,

until his embers finally cooled,
subdued by the meds' relentless wash.

Years later, driving somewhere,
I asked about the voices,

his answer hit me hard;
sometimes he missed them,

the way they charged
the lonely passing hours,

then he asked to hear the Beatles,
as he often did.

I wished I'd probed, why them?
He never listened as a kid,

but maybe it became
a safer way of fitting in,

of sharing something with me,
since I'd sing along,

or an anodyne
to take back time

before sparking voices singed
and spoke to him.

Burying Our Father

Jefferson Singer

We three brothers
stand under the black awning

that keeps the cold
light rain away,

even as it moistens
our overcoats' wool sleeves;

the rabbi has finished speaking,
the diggers turn the winches

to lower the coffin,
he lifts the shovel,

reverses its head,
before throwing the blade of earth,

modeling how each of us
will file forward

and let the soil fall
inside the grave.

Jon's face turns stone,
his body freezes.

Just come with me,
do what I do.

He does and returns
the shovel to its mound,

moving back with me
to the awning's harbor,

his face relaxes
he is a son,

who for, this moment, has done
what was asked of him.

Sunset Dinner at the Nursing Home

Ellen Sazzman

Without dentures my mother's mouth collapses.
Her lips tuck in, a blanket
around shrunken gums that gum
complaints barely comprehensible.

Her mouth, in constant motion, slurps
globules of chicken soup, green jello cubes;
spews half-chewed pieces of diet chocolate,
phlegm, and guttural insults at the nurse's aide.

Hers was always a mouth hungry for attention,
for conversation my father dispensed sparingly,
a mouth that poured out criticism
and drank in compliments.

No longer primed in Midnight Satin and plumped
to pronounce, her lips cannot purse into a kiss.
God help me love that mangled mouth
before it caves in, goes slack, silent, still.

Hazmat

Cathy Barber

The treatment center has private rooms with
recliners, TV sets and friendly nurses
who will tell you how their weekend was and
what their dog's name is. They wear hazmat
suits so they don't burn their skin. They leave
the room for a while to mix up the cocktail,
return with syringes of different colored drugs,
flush the line, and inject the chemicals
one at a time into my carotid.

It takes all day.

Port Triolet

Cathy Barber

Nurses swab and flush and fill the port.
Chemicals search every fourteen days.
It's almost like hunting, almost like sport.
Nurses swab and flush and fill the port:
good cells v. bad cells, on a mission to sort,
a mission to save, local crusade.
Nurses swab and flush and fill the port.
Chemicals search every fourteen days.

I play *Le Carnaval des Animaux* for the first-year residents

Stacy Nigliazzo

and they smile,
bearing
briefly
the weight
of pecking chords,
clangoring keys—
a heaving double bass.

Saint-Saëns
tucked it away
for thirty-six years,
thinking it foolish—

if he could
see them listen
in this cramped space,
over cold pizza,
ahead of evening rounds—

what would he say?

When they hear
his glass harmonica
in the seventh suite,
Aquarium,
every eye shines blue.

Schizophrenia, Unspecified

Stacy Nigliazzo

I know it when I wake—

when I stifle the keening kettle,

de-clot the honey jar in a boiling pot,

sift and splay the crumb cake—

There is not a woman without a face

in the mirror on the mantle.

She does not call my name—

Ode to Apretude *

JC Alfier

What saves us in the bed we make for ourselves in the bodies we can't bring out of the dark.
— Beckian Fritz Goldberg, *Egypt from Space*

It launches its small vessel.
Slipped deep into the body's quiet harbor.
A needled spark meant not for burning
but a vigil in the dark caves

of blood and bone—those deep corridors
smoldering for weeks, letting appetite
move toward touch. Knowing the body better
than it knows itself.

Outside, tides carry touch and long breaths are held
because the world still needs nearness,
its unshadowed kiss. Hunger that turns want
into rooms that darkness cannot enter.

So lean your heat into me,
the slow bloom of your needle. Your indulgent stride
to outlast my calendars of doubt.
You make flesh safe enough to want again.

To make us mercifully unafraid.

*Apretude is an HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis medication provided as an intramuscular injection every two months.

Transition: Self-Portrait in Disavowal and Becoming

JC Alfier

The woman your disavowal hid finally synced with your flesh
—opiate and alchemy of estrogen and surgeon's knife—

a synchrony deeper than exhaustion's consent to sleep,
the cantillation of a chanted psalm, so much scent

and hunger. How long had the huntress waited
in the dimming male forest of your denial?

For it was she who looked back at you in the mirror,
not a playacting God whom you thought

had warned you with false wrath that you got her wrong:—
that doppelganger, shadow mistress,

the incarnation who dared look square into your craving
to release you and say, *You are she*,

that anthem you knew suddenly was all yours to sing.

Contributors

JC Alfier's (they/them) most recent book of poetry is *The Shadow Field*. Journal credits include *Copper Nickel*, *Faultline*, *Fugue*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *River Styx*, and *Vassar Review*. They are also a collage artist after the styles of Francesca Woodman, Brittany Markert, Alix Cléo Roubaud, and Katrien De Blauwer.

Cathy Barber's poetry has been published across four continents, including in *Stone Poetry Quarterly, Belt Magazine, The Australian Medical Journal, Chest, The Journal of the American College of Chest Physicians* and *The Hopper*. Her work has been anthologized many times, including in *Rewilding: Poems for the Environment* and in the *Octopus and Other Cephalopods Anthology*. She is a graduate of the Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA program and makes her home in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, where she served on the board of Literary Cleveland for many years. She lived for twenty years in California where she taught with California Poets in the Schools. Her first full-length book is *Once: A Golden Shovel Collection* (Kelsay Books).

Jennifer Campbell is a writing professor in Buffalo, NY, who served for nearly 20 years as a co-editor of *Earth's Daughters*. She is the author of two poetry collections and a chapbook of reconstituted fairytale poems titled *What Came First* (Dancing Girl Press, 2021). Jennifer's work has recently appeared in *North Coast Voices 2025, Healing Muse, Cumberland River Review,* and *Timberline Review*.

Willy Conley, born profoundly deaf, is an award-winning writer and photographer whose nine books include *Photographic Memories*, *Plays of Our Own*, *Listening Through the Bone*, and *The Deaf Heart*. He is professor emeritus of Theatre and Dance at Gallaudet University, the world's only liberal arts university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, in Washington, D.C. For more info about his work, please visit: www.willyconley.com.

Carolyn Martin is a recovering work addict who's adopted the Spanish proverb, "It is beautiful to do nothing and rest afterwards" as her daily mantra. She was blissfully retired—and resting—in Clackamas, Oregon, until August 2025 when she suffered a debilitating stroke. In spite of physical limitations, she is delighted that she hasn't lost her love of writing poetry. Her poems have appeared in more than two hundred publications around the world. For more: www.carolynmartinpoet.com.

Stacy R. Nigliazzo is a nurse and the award-winning author of three poetry books. She is a founding member of the Humanities Expression & Arts Lab (HEAL) at Baylor College of Medicine, where she teaches poetry and art to physicians and students.

Ellen Sazzman is a Pushcart-nominated poet whose work has recently been published in *1455 Press*, *Judith, Bryant Literary Review*, *Loch Raven*, *Slipstream*, *Atlanta Review*, *Delmarva Review*, *Folio*, *Sow's Ear*, *Lilith*, *Peregrine*, *CALYX*, and *Common Ground*, among others. Her collection *The Shomer* was a finalist for the Blue Lynx Prize and a semi-finalist for the Elixir Antivenom Award and the Codhill Press Award. She was awarded first place in the *I-70 Review's* Humor in Poetry contest and was a finalist for *Southern Humanities Review's* Witness Poetry Prize. She was also awarded first place in the Dancing Poetry Festival, received an honorable mention in the Ginsberg poetry contest, was shortlisted for the 2018 O'Donoghue Prize, and was awarded first place in *Poetica's* 2016 Rosenberg poetry competition. Her debut novel *Wild Irish Yenta* was published in 2024. She has lived in Washington, D.C. and Montgomery County, Maryland for the last forty years where she raised her family and practiced law.

Jefferson Singer is a poet and clinical psychologist in West Hartford, CT and psychology professor emeritus at Connecticut College. The poems in this issue are part of a chapbook, *Welcome to the World of Jonathan Singer: The Unusual Life of My Oldest Brother*, forthcoming from Kelsay Books. His poems have appeared in *The Awakenings*, *Sixfold, The Orchards,* and *Medical Literary Messenger*, among other journals. His poetry collection, *In Common Things*, was published by Shanti Arts Press in 2024. You can learn more about his writing at jeffersonsingerpoetry.com.

J.R. Solonche is the author of more than fifty books of poetry and coauthor of another. His work has been nominated for the Eric Hoffer Book Award, twice for the National Book Award, and four times for the Pulitzer Prize. He lives in the Hudson Valley.

Kathryn Temple is a professor of Law & Humanities at Georgetown University, a three-term former chair of the English Department, and the current director of the Creative Writing Minor. The author of two academic books and many academic essays, she has published or has poems forthcoming in *Petigru Review*, *The Healing Muse*, and *ONE ART*, among others. Her work has been featured on *Poetry Superhighway* and nominated for Best of the Net by *The Inflectionist Review*. Support from several NEH fellowships, the Australian Research Council, a Mellon grant, and most recently, an International Research Fellowship from the Institute of Advanced Study in Essen, Germany, has funded both her scholarly and creative projects. Find her on the Chesapeake, where she tries to keep the ducks off the dock, or at https://medium.com/@templek and https://kathryntemple.academia.edu/.

Allison Whittenberg is an award-winning novelist and playwright. *Killing the Father of Our Country* is her latest novel. Her poetry has appeared in *The Columbia Review*, *Obsidian*, *Meridians*, *Feminist Studies*, *J Journal*, *New Orleans Review*, and elsewhere. *They Were Horrible Cooks* is her collection of poems. Her newest play, SLINKY, will have full run in 2027.