

# MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

*An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts*



Photograph by  
Jacqueline Oliver  
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# MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

*An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts*

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No one could have convinced me that my mountain home would one day be devastated by a hurricane. Helene did. As my husband hacked his way out of our driveway to attempt making contact with his parents, I fed our children melted ice cream and once-frozen fish for breakfast while reminding them to potty outside. We were the lucky ones. Meanwhile, there was no water at the hospital, whole communities were stranded amid downed trees and washed-out bridges, landslides buried entire families, and the outside world was unreachable. Chaos. Now, in the twilight of recovery, we tell stories. It is a relief to hear the stories of others and to tell your own. The stories tell us we are still here.

Rachel F. Van Hart | Design and Copyeditor

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# Waiting Room (a haibun)

In the waiting room, he finds himself among twelve phoneheads and only two booksters: Lone's a Biblist and the other is clearly an ancient Beatnik reading some Ferlinghetti. If he were home, he'd be enjoying his solitude. He'd be inhaling some sandalwood incense and maybe allowing a little Susumu Yokota to lift and float him away to a more perfect world. But he's not home. He's in a waiting room, waiting. He knows that when the door opens and they call his name he'll be moving into another world altogether. He can only hope that it will be a more perfect world. Or: he could just go home and be there.

The Waiting Room Blues  
overhead speakers silent  
time at a standstill

By Ron. Lavalette

*Ron. Lavalette lives on the Canadian border in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. His debut chapbook, *Fallen Away*, from Finishing Line Press, is now available at all standard outlets. In addition, more than 400 of his creations (poetry and short prose) have appeared in journals, reviews, and anthologies in both print and online formats. A reasonable sample of his published work can be viewed at EGGS OVER TOKYO: <http://eggsovertokyo.blogspot.com>.*

# A breast is bombed. He threds a worm through his palm.

## I. WORM

Hands toss my breast, a grenade  
to march my scar to the front,  
tattoo my torso  
with a thread unraveling  
as its flag.  
Fingers flick ash in my milk cup,  
carcinogens orange as post-chemo pee.  
Gray skin gauzes my post-mastectomy heartbeat,  
raising itself like elders' veins  
or confused worms dying on driveway concrete.  
If home is a body, then my skin is mud.  
My scar's a worm exiled  
in my no-good country.  
My husband's hands  
are always hungry.

## II. THREAD

My scar's a loose thread  
unraveling from patchwork  
in a failed attempt at quilt class.  
I am not my grandmother sewing patches together.  
I don't know how to sew a soft breast  
back onto this rock face, this granite wall  
near my ballooned right breast,  
a bomb enemy hands launch in war.  
If the body is home, then my torso's a wall  
at the edge of a country.

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My hubby's hands are refugees  
trying to scale my border wall  
but I've filled my trenches.  
I put my skin-colored bra on backwards,  
clasp metal hooks,  
then turn it around so my prosthesis is a sandbag,  
my rubber boob over my border wall  
reinforced to block two bullets:  
my hubby's searching hands.  
Talk about trench warfare.  
My hubby wants to jiggle the bomb in his hands,  
two shell fragments meant to pierce my broken heart.  
But jiggling my bomb can lead to explosions  
like dynamite near a "keep out" fence.  
17 years ago, a surgeon said  
I'd have to lose 70 pounds  
before he'd reconstruct my left breast  
and in the trenches what he left  
is a pink thread across my chest  
unraveling in tug-of-war  
between my hubby and me.  
Doctor, conscientious objector,  
you declared war  
on my no-good country  
when you refused my right to symmetry.

**By Lori Lasseter Hamilton**

*Lori Lasseter Hamilton is a 54-year-old breast cancer survivor, rape survivor, and rectal cancer survivor. She is a member of Sister City Connection, a collective of women poets, storytellers, and spoken word artists in her hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. Lori earned a bachelor of arts degree in journalism from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, with a minor in English. Some of her poems have appeared in SWWIM, Poetry Super Highway, Global Poemic, Avant Appal(achia), Steel Toe Review, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Birmingham Arts Journal, The Stray Branch, and Ghost City Review.*

# Miscarriage

Because when I was a young nurse,  
unwed sex was labeled  
immoral; there was little sex  
education or access  
to birth control.

Because adolescent sex drive  
is normal and young girls wanted love  
or boyfriends pressured or they were raped,  
they became pregnant.

Because they were bleeding,  
hearts racing, hands clutching  
cramped bellies  
they were sent up to the floor  
from the clinic or ER,

Because unfinished babies slipped  
from between their legs  
in a stream of blood and clots,  
they sobbed or were silent,  
with anger, sorrow or relief.

**By Kay Peters**

*Kay Peters is a retired RN, APN. Her poems have appeared in Philadelphia Poets, US 1 Worksheets, Schuylkill Valley Journal, Philadelphia Stories, More Challenges for the Delusional, Poetry Ink, Prompted, and Mad Poets Review.*

# Peacocks

By Janet Goldberg

It wasn't far from the iconic Bay Bridge, where I taught, a low-rise, dank building squatting among the city's sparkling skyscrapers. Most of the students there were unprepared—young ones who'd screwed up in high school, foreign students who barely knew English, aging housewives who'd reared their children and hadn't read a book since. But Thea Johnson, an elderly woman, was another matter. Smiling warmly and making eye contact during our first class, she seemed the happiest woman in the world. In that sense, she was the perfect student.

That night, though, I left campus worried.

Home in my flat, I lingered on the landing, listening, my bag heavy with textbooks, leftover syllabi, and other paperwork. Living alone, I harbored fruitless fears, an intruder lurking in the shower or under the bed. Sometimes it was the image of my ex-husband—twenty years ago he'd left for work and never came home—though usually it was just a faceless man that looked like every other man. But now all I heard were the cars passing out front, so I went into the hallway. The worn tapestry rug, the yellowing pine table, the fine cracks running down the pale plaster walls—all was as it should be in my ancient abode, mahogany floors, double-hung windows, leafy bay laurels spiraling outside them. Nothing was better than living alone; nothing was worse. *Do you agree that the worst form*

*of loneliness isn't when we're alone but when we're with others?* Every semester my students wrote papers on this after reading May Sarton's "The Rewards of Living a Solitary Life."

Besides Thea, four others had shown up for class. Two I'd recognized—guys from the college mailroom—squirming, looking down, clearly anxious to return to what was familiar, the mail—the third, a Japanese girl named Keiko with red-streaked hair, and the fourth, Pearl, plump, gray-haired, with a pained, creased face, and large, black-rimmed glasses held together by tape.

I went in the living room and sat on the couch, dropping my bag on the floor. Here too I was surrounded by loneliness, more windows, two of which framed a large fireplace. But the tile on it was painted over in a garish bright white. And after several months of back and forth, the landlord finally agreed to let me strip it, to find out what lay buried beneath. That's why a large plastic tub of Peel Away sat in front of the hearth. "Inhale too much and your heart can go kaput," the hardware store guy had warned as I'd perused the toxic choices. "You'll need protective gear. A respirator." With Peel Away, though, an N-95 and thick gloves would do.

On the couch, I reached down to my bag and pulled out a manilla folder, "Student Surveys" written on the front. I started skimming. *When did you last take an English class? Do you work? Do you enjoy your work? Do you read? Briefly describe the last book you read?* All standard stuff on the first page. I flipped to the second, to the last question: *Any-*

*thing else you want to tell me?* I started with Pearl's.

• • •

My husband died two months ago. He was an electrician. He accidentally electrocuted himself. He was abusing my children all his life and I didn't know how to get him to stop. Kill him I thought but then he went and did it himself. Ha! Ha! I'm really looking forward to your class.

• • •

You might not recognize me. The mailroom guy who puts mail in the mailboxes. I love my job. The little slots. So cool how the envelopes fit in. I'm really shy. Please don't call on me.

• • •

I was from Japan and have multiple personalities. Sometimes one get up and go the corner. Please misunderstand me. Oh, my favorite foods is potato chips!

• • •

Hey, Mailroom guy Ted here. The older one. Really like the sound of your voice. Are you available for dating?

• • •

Hi, I'm Thea. I love you.

Love,  
Thea

• • •

Thea was the one I was most worried about. After I'd reviewed the syllabus today, she was the only one who'd raised her hand to ask a question: "Hi teacher, are you going to teach us?" The class cracked up, and I couldn't help laughing myself, a nice

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icebreaker, but then I wasn't so sure she was joking. She didn't say my name either, even though I'd just written it on the board, making a big deal of saying it—Susan—aloud, even though it wasn't hard to pronounce. But there were always students that just never called me anything, never once saying my name the whole semester. So I'd shrugged that off too. Then Thea pushed her chair back and suddenly scuttled up to me. "Teacher. Teacher," she whispered. "Here's my grades." She handed me a stack of computer paper, a lengthy, dot-matrix printout, a transcript, some three decades old. I handed it back to her. "Thank you, Thea, but I don't need to review it. You're in the class."

I put the surveys down and went over to the fireplace. The square tiles were solid, beveled, had wide grout lines, except for two decorative ones, carved into both a pair of ornate peacocks drinking from a tall, leaf-shaped fountain.

At the start of the next class Thea's transcript reappeared. "Teacher. Here's my classes."

I started to object, but then said, "Thank you, Thea." I put it in my folder, thinking it better to get the thing out of sight. Then I turned to the blackboard and drew a baseball diamond, three bases, and home plate, a metaphor for the stages of the writing process, theory English instructors like to teach at the start of a semester. "If first base is brainstorming and second base drafting, then what is third base?"

Thea raised her hand. Sitting upright

and smiling, she shouted, "Homerun!" and once again the class broke into laughter. Thea looked around the room as if to check herself, then cupped her hand over her mouth, trying to hide her giggles.

Next we read Natalie Goldberg's "The Rules of Writing Practice" from her book *Wild Mind* and then, applying her rules, particularly "keep your hand moving," we tried some freewriting, a brainstorming technique designed to generate ideas sans censorship or second guessing. We did an open freewrite, that is, wrote for ten minutes on whatever came to mind. The first couple of minutes everyone was looking good, hunched over notebooks, moving pen across paper. Then Thea lifted her head, and with her head came the inevitable pen lift. Even though Goldberg tells students to write "Nothing comes to mind" when they go blank, some students won't do this. Instead they'll pause, trying to think of something, and then eventually go back to it. I assumed that's what Thea was doing, but some five minutes later she was still staring at the wall, so I went over and whispered, "Something wrong, Thea?"

She looked at me and smiled sweetly. "Oh no, teacher."

"Did you run out of ideas?"

Her brow furrowed.

I nodded down to her pad. "You're supposed to keep your hand moving."

She looked down at it. "Oh, okay, teacher, I will," and started writing again.

A few minutes later I stopped everyone, then asked for readers. Thea's hand shot up.

Jimmy and I had a fight today. Jimmy wanted to eat pancakes. He wanted me to make them, but I said no. He invited me over. He wanted to sit on the couch with me, but I told him no. My husband doesn't like Jimmy. He's too fresh...

• • •

The freewrite went on about Jimmy trying to make the moves on her.

Over the next month, in old pajamas, an N-95, and rubber gloves on the weekends, I worked on my fireplace, troweling on the viscous paste before pressing the large sheets of paper on it, then the next day peeling it off, all the old paint layers adhering to it. And for a time, I felt important, like an archeologist unearthing an ancient civilization, dating its existence. Of course, turn-of-the-century paint probably contained lead, "brain damage," the guy at the store had said. "Like asbestos you want to keep it contained." But I think he must have meant children. Old as I was, it was probably too late for me. Either way, contained was how I planned to keep Thea. From day one I'd had my suspicions. Sadly I wasn't a novice at this. But did it really matter? Thea, just auditing, thrilled to be in the class, who'd want to give up on a student like that?

But as the semester progressed, I noticed how more and more Thea was leaning on Pearl, Pearl often whispering instructions, and then one day Pearl got mad. It was during a vocabulary exercise. In teams they had to come up with at least three action verbs that fit the intent of each sentence. Across the top of the board, I'd written 1, 2, 3, 4

• • •

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and drawn columns so everyone could come up and pool their verbs. At the board, Thea started writing down verbs when Pearl, chuffing loudly, got up and marched to the board. “Thea, you’re doing it wrong. See the numbers. They go with the sentences.” She erased the verbs, and Thea started crying.

After class Pearl came up to me. “I have to tell you something, and I don’t think I should. She looked off to the corner of the room, avoiding my eyes. At first I thought she was going to confess that she’d lied on her survey, that she’d really killed her husband. “You know,” Pearl said, “that man that always waits outside the class? Thea’s husband. He said Thea has Alzheimer’s and not to tell you.”

An image came back to me from the first day of class, a face, an old man barely tall enough to see through the door’s glass pane.

A week later all the paint was stripped off except for the two decorative tiles—the peacocks. It had been messy work, but the smell wasn’t too bad and my heart hadn’t stopped. The actual tile was prettier than I’d expected, a charcoal gray with a yellowed, off-white grout that had probably once been white. There was a residue left behind though, what looked like talc, the slightest white veil of it lingering on some tiles, like ghosts, that no matter how hard I scrubbed wouldn’t go away.

And all the time I’d been scrubbing, I’d been thinking about Thea. Because of student confidentiality, I wasn’t comfortable talking to her husband,

and worse, I thought Thea might feel betrayed if I did. But then again we’d both been outed, and what if the dean found out. *An old woman with Alzheimer’s in a college writing class? What were you thinking?*

The next weekend I tackled the peacocks. After doing the usual application and stripping off as much paint as possible, I then pulled a stool up in front of one of the titles. Perched there, armed with a toothpick, I started flicking away at the flecks left behind in the crevasses, wings first, pretending to be an artisan now, a restorer of ancient architecture, anyone other than myself, as I was growing more and more worried as the semester progressed. Thea was probably in the earliest stage, but I knew from experience, from my mother’s dementia, that even a small thing could set off a blaze. Turning away from the fireplace, I looked around the living room at my comfortable sofa, my cherry credenza, my Marc Chagall replicas. My mother had left me some antique jewelry, but otherwise I was alone.

The next day I stepped into the dean’s office. She was large, red headed, fairly new in the position, and younger than me. On her desk, beside her computer, was a wedding photo, she, sausage-curved, beaming; her groom, stoic, frozen, just like mine.

“So how can I help you?” the dean asked pleasantly, folding her hands on the desk.

I couldn’t help eying her rings, mine pawned so long ago, as I shared my story about Thea.

Though the dean listened politely,

she seemed perplexed. “I’m going to call Thea” was how she left it.

A few days later the dean called me back in, explaining how she tried to reason with Thea over the phone. “I couldn’t get anywhere, and her husband was nearly just as bad. I asked them to come in for a meeting this Thursday before class. I’m going to tell Thea I’m withdrawing her from the college. Assuming they show up.” Frowning, the dean shook her head, clearly dubious about her own plan.

Over the weekend, the peacocks were really starting to emerge, quite striking, regal. I’d gone through two boxes of toothpicks just on the wings. But I was pleased with my handiwork, though well aware that my time here could be temporary. The landlord could sell; life wasn’t eternal. I looked out the windows. Shortly after my mother had died, I once saw her in a dream out there, hovering in the laurels, scratching at the window, trying to get in.

Come Thursday I approached my classroom. At the door I peeked through the window. Only Pearl and my two mailroom charges were in there. (Keiko had stopped coming to class weeks ago.) Awkward as it was teaching only three students, I was relieved not to see Thea there and stepped in and started class. But ten minutes or so in, the door opened and in came Thea, sobbing, wringing her hands. “Teacher, they’re trying to get rid of me. They’re trying to get rid of me.” As she passed

Continued, next page

each of the mailroom guys, she placed her hands on their shoulders and then finally sat down beside Pearl, wailing, "Please help me. Help me." Then, looking at me, she cried, "Oh teacher, don't let them get rid of me!"

"Thea," I said, playing dumb, "no one's trying to get rid of you."

"But they are." She started dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. "You don't want me to go, do you, Miss Susan?"

I tried to stay calm, but I was flabbergasted. Of course she was right. We were trying to get rid of her. The classroom door opened and in walked the dean, red-faced and panting. For a moment I thought she might faint. I walked toward her, leading her out to the hallway. There I saw standing against the wall with his hands in his pockets a small, bald man, the face from the glass pane, and beside him was Sergio, our security guard, towering over him, looking both amused and mildly insolent.

The dean, still panting, put her hand on her chest. She swallowed and then took a few deep breaths. "I told Thea she was not to come to class." She looked over her shoulder at Thea's husband. "I explained to them that Thea couldn't go back to class. But when she left my office, I saw her get in the elevator. I ran up the steps hoping to cut her off."

I turned to Thea's husband and extended my hand.

Stepping forward, he smiled wistfully. "When Thea sets her mind to something . . ." He scratched his head. "I don't know what to do. She's getting worse and worse."

*"I tried to stay calm, but I was flabbergasted. Of course she was right. We were trying to get rid of her. The classroom door opened and in walked the dean, red-faced and panting. For a moment I thought she might faint. I walked toward her, leading her out to the hallway."*

"She needs to be pulled," the dean said.

"Why not wait until the end of class?" I said.

"I explained it to her I don't know how many times."

"She probably forgot."

The dean put her hands on her hips.

I opened the classroom door. Inside I expected to see Thea still hysterical, but all was calm. Her notebook open, she was ready to freewrite.

Pearl and the two mailroom guys looked up at me expectantly.

"Thea, can you come outside for a moment? Please bring your things." I was expecting a fight, but to my surprise Thea got up and followed me out. This only made me feel worse. Had she already forgotten we were trying to get rid of her?

The dean started in again. "Thea, remember the talk we just had? We said you weren't going to go to class anymore."

Thea narrowed her eyes, and she crouched a little. "You." She pointed her finger and hissed. "You. You're the woman from the church, aren't you?"

The dean took a deep breath. "Thea, remember we met in my office, and we agreed. You agreed. Your husband agreed. You were going to go home."

Thea waved her finger. "You, the fat lady from the church." She raised her

voice. "Fat lady from the church! Trying to get rid of me!" She started crying again. She turned to me and grabbed my hands. "Help me, please help me," she pleaded. "Don't let the fat lady from the church take me away. Please, Miss Susan. You don't want me to leave, do you?"

"Of course I don't, Thea, but this isn't the right class for you. We'll find something better. Something you'll like."

"But I like your class. Please don't make me go. Please don't. I promise I'll behave."

"Thea," the dean said, sternly. "Remember . . ."

Thea whipped around and sneered at her. "You shut up."

I glanced over at Sergio, but he was still beside Thea's husband, keeping his distance.

"Come on, Thea," I said. I put my arm around her, and I started walking her down the hallway toward the elevator. I glanced over my shoulder, Thea's husband trailing, Sergio behind him. Likely the dean had gone into my classroom to dismiss the class.

At the elevator Thea slipped her arm around my waist, and she seemed calm, almost serene for the moment. "Everything is going to be fine," I said. I pushed the down button. Then her husband came up alongside me as we waited. I

could hear the elevator climbing.

Thea turned to me. “Can I come visit your house? Please, can I see the peacocks?”

The peacocks? Had I mentioned them in class? I didn’t know what to say. I thought of the two lovely birds freed from their paint. I looked over my shoulder at Thea’s husband and Sergio again. It was annoying—having an audience trail after us. I turned to Thea again. “Maybe I’ll visit you,” I said.

“Can you come over tomorrow?” Thea’s eyes were watery again, and she sniffled. That look on her face—hopeful and hopeless—pained me. At the same time, I knew I could not keep Thea in my class. She’d entered a world neither the college nor I was equipped to handle—or so I’d convinced myself. Still, I knew I was cutting short her last wish, a relatively simple one, to take an English class. I’d been in memory wings, in nursing homes, to see my mother, passing the lost women hovering in the hallways or slumped over in wheelchairs.

Thea’s husband touched my shoulder. “It’s okay, Miss Susan. I’ll take care of her.” The elevator doors opened. Thea’s husband got on first, and I, taking Thea’s hands, led her on. Then, I got off. Both facing me now, Thea’s husband mouthed a thank you, and Thea, smiling through her tears, slowly waved as the doors slid closed. ✧

*Janet Goldberg's debut novel, The Proprietor's Song, was released last year by Regal House, and her story collection Like Human is due out fall 2025 from the University of Wisconsin's Cornerstone Press. She serves as the fiction editor of Deep Wild, a journal devoted to wilderness experiences.*

# Early Release Likely

Saturation Level  
Heart Rate  
Pressure  
everything on the board  
has an asterisk

Same old story:  
doze for an hour  
wake up stunned,  
pounding, breathless;  
ready to explode

He might go home  
(one way or another)  
tomorrow  
or maybe  
today’s tomorrow.

By Ron. Lavalette\*

\* Author’s note, page 3

# Prayer to Spinal Hardware

let's spoon  
my wife

our math  
the number *i*

a body  
bursts fuses

left arm across  
her soft ribs

right arm pulse  
elbow down

can you grant  
us summers

if so how  
many—thirty

or just one  
or none

where do my  
knees go

together or  
one forward

her warm  
backside

its little pores  
heat and swell

give me more  
minutes here

**Continued, next page**



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no mattress  
dips or shifts

let's solve this  
curve together  
bolt hexagonal  
drilled to bone  
what color are  
you what shade  
there's no  
deeper hug  
than your gun  
metal grip

we'll love this  
woman tonight

perfect neck  
pillow height

hips shifted  
ready to crack

tell me where  
our arc ends

you orbit  
*i* can bend

**By Ben Hyland**

*Ben Hyland's poetry is collected in four chapbooks—most recently, Shelter in Place (Moonstone Press, 2022)—and has been featured in multiple publications, including Beloit Poetry Journal, Hawai'i-Pacific Review, and Delta Poetry Review. As a career coach, Ben has helped hundreds of jobseekers find employment, even throughout the pandemic. Readers can connect with him and follow his work at [www.benhylandlives.com](http://www.benhylandlives.com).*

# Open Letter to the Donor Who Bled for a Stranger

By Tracie Adams

Dear Hero,

You don't know me, and I don't know you. I'm writing to tell you about how your sacrifice changed lives. I think about you often, wondering why you did it. What compelled you to even go on the donor registry website in the first place? When you received the kit in the mail to swab the inside of your cheek, what was on your mind? Maybe you had lost someone you love, and that loss left you with a void that nagged at you until you realized you couldn't outrun it because there was no place to hide from the emptiness. Or maybe you're just extraordinary in an ordinary world.

Did you close your eyes and imagine my nephew's unknown face as you gave yourself the injections of Filgrastim, the drug that would stimulate your bone marrow to produce extra blood-forming stem cells? I wonder what you did to pass the time for three hours while the apheresis machine hummed along collecting your lifesaving stem cells for a complete stranger. Perhaps you watched funny YouTube videos about cats, or maybe you read poetry or prayed or listened to your favorite playlist through headphones. I like to believe you did all that.

I know you're young since that's a requirement for donors. You might even be the same age as my nephew who was lying in his hospital bed on the tenth

floor anxiously anticipating the gift of your blood that would restore his hope and his life, at least for two more years. He and his father, my brother, clung to that hope, following its bright light down dark paths through chemo treatments, immunotherapy, kidney biopsies, esophageal ruptures, spinal taps, and dreaded reports of new complications like blindness, Graft Versus Host Disease, and Thrombotic Microangiopathy.

You couldn't know that your blood infused hope into hearts of grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends, coworkers, and a mother who never left the battlefield in the midst of her eldest son's suffering. In case you wondered, and I'm sure you did, he was grateful. Grateful for the opportunity to celebrate birthdays, holidays, and each new day. He spent at least half of those days in the hospital, but he never complained. He was determined to not waste the gift you gave him. He invested all his strength and energy into loving those who loved him, and there were too many to count. All he ever wanted was to see his own niece and nephew grow up and be happy. He delighted in showing them his bug collection and patiently cherished every word from their toddler-sized mouths.

You might be glad to hear that I saved a life today as well. It was a large ghastly looking beetle, turned upside down on my deck. I'd never met him before, and honestly I hope I never see him again. I tried to identify him from a

***You couldn't know  
that your blood infused  
hope into hearts of  
grandparents, siblings,  
aunts and uncles, cousins,  
friends, coworkers, and a  
mother who never left the  
battlefield in the midst of  
her eldest son's suffering.***

lineup on Google, but I couldn't discern the difference between the Earth-boring Scarab and the Antelope beetles. My nephew would have identified it at first glance. He was smarter than me. I couldn't save my nephew, but the least I could do was flip that bug over and carry him back to the garden. There's something tragically sad about watching someone lying there helpless, arms and legs flailing, desperately trying to latch onto something, anything to save himself. Sometimes self-preservation instincts aren't enough, even with a helping hand.

There were dreams left unfulfilled when he was gone, like that food truck he always wanted to own. He was going to teach me how to make crab chowder from his own secret recipe. The closest he ever got to traveling was through the videos he watched on his phone while hooked up to some chemical that flowed

**Continued, next page**

through his body, attempting to bolster the gift you had given him, to shore up that defense so that his immune system had a fighting chance. He never returned to his job, but he often talked about the day that he might. He was too weak to make that trip to Florida for his friend's wedding, but his friend made the trip to see him with his new bride and little girl. It's all he talked about for a solid month.

The gift of two years was spent wisely, cooking and eating good food, relishing the company of those he loved, singing karaoke, quoting movie lines, loving on his cat, asking for forgiveness, praying for mercy, and giving thanks. He threw everything he had in him at recovery but it all refused to stick. He was braver and stronger than all of us.

If you felt tired or sore when you returned home after the donor procedure, I can imagine it wasn't easy. I suppose you took time off work for your heroic act. Maybe your friends and family thought it was a crazy thing to do for someone you hadn't met and never would. I've prayed for you so many nights as I laid in bed thinking about him and you and all of us, strangers bound together forever by a sacrifice that stretched time to its limit. And when the time lost its stamina, the season for grieving overtook us. But still we remember you.

All My Love,

A Grateful Aunt

*Tracie Adams is a writer and former educator in rural Virginia. Her work is in BULL, Cleaver Magazine, Bright Flash Literary, Discretionary Love, and many others. Read more at [www.tracieadams-writes.com](http://www.tracieadams-writes.com) and follow her on X @1funny-farmAdams.*

# Light Dying: A Tanaka Sequence

Under fluorescent lights  
I see his blond hair  
Growing back after chemo  
Treatment failed he said good bye.

Spring leaves filter sun  
She lies pale without a pulse  
We in white coats kneel  
On blacktop with O<sub>2</sub> IVs  
Ambu bag she died quickly.

Her light on all night  
Afraid she would not waken  
If she closed her eyes  
Oxygen did not pink up  
Her bluish lips and nail beds.

We stand by her bed  
Midday sun falls on white sheets  
She could be sleeping  
A deep breath her final sigh  
Father holds her hand his tears.

Slumped against the wheel  
Head lights on motor running  
He did not respond  
We laid him on autumn leaves  
That quilted the parking lot.

By Kay Peters

\* Author's note, page 6

# Entropy

Within me a microcosm  
where white blood cells and viruses  
the forces of good and evil  
fight to the death  
And evil always wins, eventually  
the degradation of my body  
the triumph of chaos and decay  
over all I create  
I surrender; I fail  
yet from my crushed bones  
comes new life  
the stardust swirls  
and good wins, again

By Jessi Waugh

*Jessi Waugh's poetry is published in Last Stanza, Kakalak, and various North Carolina literary journals. She can be found at [Jessiwaughwriter.com](http://Jessiwaughwriter.com), where she blogs about the collision of life and literature.*



# Father Time

Antiseptic air  
Fluorescent lights  
Clinical white walls  
Under pristine sheets  
His vulnerability amplified.

I step in; my heartbeat quickens  
The rhythmic beeping of the machines:  
An unsettling soundtrack to our emotional reunion.  
Tubes crisscrossing, medical equipments cooing  
His eyes, without the familiar vibrancy, lock onto mine.

I freeze; my breath stops  
Lines etched on his face narrates a lifetime  
Of his laughter, the warmth of his embrace . . .  
Of his fears, his restless nights, balled up in the corner . . .  
I reach for his hand, once firm now a delicate grip.  
The bittersweet communion silently unfolding through unspoken words,  
A language forged over years of shared experiences.  
The final room reflecting love, loss, and the relentless march of time.

By E Kraft

*E Kraft is a poetry editor whose poems have been nominated for the 2024 Pushcart Prize and published by The Hanging Loose Press, The National Poetry Quarterly, and others. She is grateful for everyone who has read her poems or attended her readings, including her favorite dog from the local shelter.*

*“When I’m really depressed, I think about death. A lot. And all of the afflictions that could speed me across life’s finish line. But more often, I live with a kind of functional denial that no one here gets out alive. Maybe we all do just so we can get out of bed in the mornings. But denial is also a cheat. And an enabler. And on most days sends me sleepwalking through the routines of my life.”*

## My Six Seconds

By Anonymous

The door latch clunks loudly as she enters, rupturing the silence. She’s pretty, blonde and bubbly. Her ID badges clack off of her enormous belly as her baby blue Crocs squeak across the polished linoleum floor. A few shivers move through me. She clicks my name and date of birth into the system and reviews with me why I’m there. Does she worry about her baby in this room, awash in radiation?

This is not my first rodeo. Three decades ago, I lay on a padded table in a basement procedure room staring up at two surgical residents, backlit by OR lights, poised to take a piece of me. They took turns plunging a hollow core needle into my right breast, using a crude tool that looked like a hardware store caulking gun. When the biopsy was complete, a sturdy nurse steadied me to my feet and out onto a San Francisco street. I stood there in the low October sun, waiting for the MUNI bus, and wondering what all this might mean for my wedding that was just two weeks away.

That lump never showed on any mammogram. But everyone could feel it. It was the first of many.

I startle with the opening of the door as perky pregnant tech reappears. Her voice is positively lilting as she positions me in front of the imaging machine. She glides around the room like a gravid ballerina, gracefully pulling levers, cranking compression, and clicking her computer keyboard. She’s got the low waddle of someone due in about four weeks. The machine releases me and again the door clunks closed behind her. Silent again.

I’ve been an unwilling patient of the breast biopsy for longer than I want to remember. No matter how advanced the technology becomes, it never seems to remember that there’s someone’s trembling mother, wife, or daughter on the receiving end of it. During my last biopsy, I contorted myself around a cold metal machine while a disembodied voice instructed me to hold my breath while across the room, a baby-faced radiologist drove something resembling an X-Box controller. He guided a needle in, dropped a titanium chip, and guided a needle out, presumably filled with cells. This chip lights up on my mammograms now like stars in the night sky.

My thoughts fixate on death at this moment. Specifically, my own. And

those of my very first dying patients, the ones I met as an idealistic nursing student 25 years ago. The shy and lanky 16-year-old boy with bone cancer that had taken up residence in his lungs. The tanned and handsome 47-year-old devoted husband, father, and amateur beekeeper whose open and shut belly case revealed an encasing stomach tumor. The 70-year-old sweet-faced widow holding the hand of her middle-aged son, learning that her pancreatic cancer was inoperable.

These patients were my first real experience with death at close range. They rocked my world and exploded my idea that life conformed to a neat calculus. It failed to compute how these people got awful cancers without having ever smoked a single cigarette or breathed in asbestos dust. How could the universe heap such suffering on these soft and undeserving souls?

With miles of life in my rearview, I now understand that illness can come for anyone. At any time. And watching these people taught me that nearly all souls soften when it does, no matter the bodies they inhabit. The decorated war heroes. The street-hardened sex

Continued, next page

workers. The prison inmates living out their diagnoses behind bars. These have also been my patients.

When I'm really depressed, I think about death. A lot. And all of the afflictions that could speed me across life's finish line. But more often, I live with a kind of functional denial that no one here gets out alive. Maybe we all do just so we can get out of bed in the mornings. But denial is also a cheat. And an enabler. And on most days sends me sleepwalking through the routines of my life. The mammogram call-back slapped me awake this week, and I'm painfully, gratefully wide-eyed to the certainty of my impermanence again.

At some forgotten point in my reading or training I learned about an exercise called The Sixes. It goes something like this: Imagine you were told you had six years to live. What would you do and with whom would you do it? How would you spend your time? What would you prioritize? What would you make certain that your loved ones understood?

Now, imagine you have six months to live.

Same questions.

Now, six weeks.

Six days.

Six hours.

Six minutes.

Six seconds.

Alone in the mammogram room, I rummage in my purse for my phone. And reach out to my people who made the six second cut. I text a silly GIF to my son of a possum riding a Roomba with the message: Hoping this makes you smile... know that I love you! I text a picture of a sloth to my daughter with the message: I love you S-L-O-W much!

It takes me six seconds. ✧

# Departure's Early Arrival

After his sixth day  
listening to beepers  
tangled in wires  
plugged into monitors and  
injected and injected again  
and again and again  
his seventh day dawned.  
He closed his eyes  
and it occurred to him:  
it was only Tuesday,  
not his usual day of rest.

By Ron. Lavalette\*

\* Author's note, page 3

# Play Your Hand

These are the cards  
You have been dealt  
You need to play your hand  
Blood-red bowtie, outstretched arms, he awkwardly arches my way.

Chemotherapy calibrated for your veins  
Nausea, refugee hair, metallic tastes invade your trembling mouth  
His thin-lipped litany makes him strong  
And I, anesthetized by fear.

Sliding out the window past honking streets, gravel paths  
My thoughts turn to a cool, deep meadow  
'Neath weeping willows, my palms need not sweat  
Nursed by morning dew, feverish flesh finds comfort.

The filtered sun makes me smile  
Yet, as I ready my eyes to rest  
A razor-sharp Ace of Spades  
Crashes through the branches  
Puncturing my vein, injecting that metallic taste,  
Invading my trembling lips.

By Mary McCready Schulz

*Mary McCready Schulz was born in Western Pennsylvania, reared in Carnegie libraries, and now wrestles with words in St. Paul, Minnesota. A Penn State graduate, her writing has appeared in After Happy Hour Review, CURE, Wildfire, So It Goes, and the Chicago Tribune.*



## ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

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### *Recovery*



**Photograph by Jacqueline Oliver**

Artist and gallery owner Jacqueline Oliver restores the art of Heather Ward-Migner, which was recovered from floodwaters that ripped through the River Arts District in Asheville, North Carolina, decimating this artist hub and destroying countless unique pieces of artwork. Ward-Migner's tiny wooden houses were part of a "seedling" project to help fund the Asheville area's Habitat for Humanity—a need even greater after many area residents have lost their own homes in the wake of Hurricane Helene.

To support the recovery of Asheville's River Arts District, visit [www.riverartsdistrict.com/donate](http://www.riverartsdistrict.com/donate).