

# Ars Medica

A Journal of Medicine,  
The Arts, and Humanities

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Volume 13  
Issue 1

## New Dress Against Disease Guylaine Couture

This artist book shows the link between women's cancer and various ways to help them. Six women have six different cancers. They are next to six dresses that can help and perhaps protect them: art therapy, philosophy, economics, technology, et cetera. The research is multidisciplinary, and it involves what the patient and the team around her must face. The piece is made of two books intertwined, to show the relationship between women and science.



Guylaine Couture lives in Montréal, speaks French, teaches graphic design, and shares her discoveries on her blog. Each book attempts to create a fusion between the contents and the container while questioning the manipulation of the object by the reader. Browsing slowly through any of the artists' books is an experience, a conversation, a relationship with her and her concerns. Guylaine has participated in exhibitions in Canada, the United States, Europe, and Australia.  
Website: [www.gycouture.com](http://www.gycouture.com)

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## Contents

### Volume 13, Number 1

#### EDITORIAL

- The Sur/Real of Dis/Order  
**Allison Crawford** 1 – 6

#### FEATURE PIECES

- Gnarly Hearts by **Martin Edward Springett** 7 – 39  
The Mind Sees Many by **Brandon Michael Muncan** 52 – 53  
Farinata After the Flood by **Garry Thomas Morse** 119 – 128

#### PROSE

- Downsizing by **Gordon Sun** 40 – 51  
Herbert Saffir, Measurer of Hurricanes  
by **Mary Hutchings Reed** 56 – 62  
More than Skin Deep by **Saber Shaikh** 63 – 66  
On Sleeping In by **Julie Hein** 97 – 98  
Long Life! by **Ann Starr** 105 – 117

#### POETRY

- The First Shadows of Dementia by **Alan Steinberg** 54 – 55  
The Come from Away / Stitching Simon Strugnell /  
Eighth Day / Sounding / The Men Who Dug  
by **Lois Leveen** 67 – 72  
South Granville, Saturday Evening / In the Year of the  
Rooster / Hiking in the Forest / Father Knows Why /  
To Be Continued: A Portrait Of a Poet Getting Newly  
Old by **Changming Yuan** 99 – 103



*Volume 13*  
*Issue 1*

Crow / Francis Bacon's / The Blind Birdwater / Don't Bend Over / Dornen / Fun And Games / What's Left / Bindi / The Second Coming / Inimates by <b>Crystal Hope Hurdle</b>	73 – 96
Blue Johnnies by <b>Jennifer Markell</b>	104
Transplant Surgery by <b>Rebekka DePew</b>	118



Volume 13  
Issue 1

## Editorial

### *The Sur/Real of Dis/Order*

In this issue of *Ars Medica* there is an unsettling and productive thread of what we might call disrupted vision and narrative rupture. When rent, the body, heart, and soul require new forms to express their fragmentation and, in turn, new forms to approach wholeness again. Within the health-care humanities, we often speak of narrative coherence—of the ability of the well-told story of illness to help us make sense of and communicate illness experience. Yet, tidy stories with beginning-middle-end resolutions belie the often chaotic, fragmenting, and corporeal oozing of the body and mind in disorder.

In Guylaine Couture's *New Dress Against Disease*, on the cover of this issue, a cut and re-assembled book is required to tell the story of six women with different cancers. The viewer must make sense of this fragmentary narrative, and “try on” different story frames to (re)dress the illness—from science, philosophy, art, and other disciplines. It calls to mind the paper doll books of childhood in which the punched-out clothing can be laid over the doll figures, but in this case from a more knowing, adult vantage. These dresses offer new and hopeful layers of narrative and meaning, but cannot reverse the red dots of cancer that blot the women's bodies underneath.

Couture's cutouts also call to mind the scissors and collage so important to surrealism. From the 1920s, surrealism was associated with artists and writers such as Andre Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Desnos, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí. The movement is often understood as a response to the bodily and psychic trauma of WWI and to the increasingly mechanistic reduction of modernization. The surrealists' adventures into the psyche, and into territories of dreams, desire and the unconscious, released objects from everyday life, and repositioned them in unexpected combinations and juxtapositions. Surrealist art practices often cut and tore things apart and recombined them in ways that were startling, raw, and transgressive. According to Breton, the aim of surrealism was to, resolve "two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*" (Breton, 1924).

Very little has been written about the relation of surrealism to the medical and health humanities. Many facets of surrealist practice and representation offer potentialities for new expressions of the body that are in excess of linear language and reason. Despite major critique of surrealism by feminists, who cite the dominance of male artists and the tendency to use the female as muse and the female body to fragment, dissect and reassemble (such as in the collages of Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer), Whitney Chadwick (2017) observes that many women surrealist artists resisted this idea of passive muse. And later, female artists built upon and re-appropriated surrealist techniques, tech-

niques that resonate within Guylaine Couture's collage book art, and which allow her to imagine alternatives to the female body struggling with cancer.

Martin Edward Springett's *Gnarly Hearts* uses the form of the comic book to document his experience of cardiac surgery. Comics also evokes childhood, as he recounts, "instinctively ... creating a 'comic book'; a form of visual storytelling that I have loved ever since I was a child." This form allows him to put a "frame around what would otherwise be a roiling sea of emotions." The majority of the pages of this visual narrative contain few words, seemingly depicting nonlinear temporal sequences and multiple subjectivities and vantages. The images offer a lyrical story out of the author's fragmented visions, turning delirium into the magical as patients and hospital equipment are relocated to natural settings, and as vines twine themselves along hospital corridors and beds.

Brandon Michael Muncan uses pop art in his *The Mind Sees Many*, reproducing and manipulating a CT image of the brain to create tension between similarity and individuality; the disembodied and familiar outlines of the brain conceal the individual and lived realities of patients struggling with the personal meanings of their diagnoses and illness. Muncan's artistic mode of reproduction confronts us with a vision of the dehumanizing aspects of technology within medicine.

In her series of poems, Crystal Hope Hurdle uses language to simultaneously evoke and disturb vision, which accompanies the narrator's recovery from eye surgery. Through her poems, which range from ekphrastic readings of the paintings of Francis Bacon, to engaging with poems by Ted Hughes, and Sylvia Plath, "the eye eye eye becomes its own hot dark panting muse."

From his collection *Yams Do Not Exist*, Garry Thomas Morse's "Farinata After the Flood" ventures into mental order/disorder, an area too infrequently explored in *Ars Medica*. Morse, who has been described as a poet of prairie surrealism, depicts Farinata struggling to maintain mental composure and stability, using the vast and open prairie landscape to anchor himself and avert "another mood coming on." As Farinata contemplates the landscape, he alludes to Saskatchewan born abstract painter Agnes Martin "who had striven so hard—all her life in fact—to think of nothing," even as he wards off his own thoughts that "br[ing] back the trauma ... like some unidentified but almost fathomable speck on the horizon that was approaching at top speed."

Morse's syncretic style defies this attempt to "turn the mind to anti-matters," drawing in Farinata degli Uberti, who appears in Dante's *Inferno*; musing over his own misquotation of symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud's "tout se fit ombre et aquarium ardent"; and Cecilia Bartoli's rendition of Vivaldi's *Cessate, omai cessate*. Vivaldi's words, not included in Morse's story, suggest an intriguing intertextual subplot to Farinata's

wish to blot out the trauma of memory and  
achieve a quiet mind:

Cease, henceforth cease,  
cruel memories  
of despotic love;  
heartless and pitiless,  
you have turned my happiness  
into immense sorrow.  
cease, henceforth cease  
to tear my breast,  
to pierce my soul,  
to rob my heart of peace and calm.

As Farinata struggles to quiet the mind, and to  
steel it against the piercing of memory, Morse's  
narrative erupts with the language of neuroscience,  
proliferating in this already flooded space:

neuronal production ... sudden glut of  
neural data in terms of image, sensa-  
tion, and mood. ... the rough-and-tum-  
ble *a posteriori* arose from the  
imbalance of glutamate promoting irri-  
tability, to dip our beaks even deeper in  
the elemental chemistry of Farinata's is-  
sues, postulating in step with the school  
of thought that dopamine agonists have  
a starring role in precipitating mania ...

These very different contributions, by couture,  
Springett, Muncun, Hurdle, and Morse, each  
demonstrate the power of narrative and visual *in-*  
*coherence* to convey psychic and corporeal trauma.

Through the imagination, however, these fragments are stitched together in a way that at once retains the *stice*, or puncture, and the reparative thread that sutures the wound, retaining the tension between fragmentation and wholeness, meaning and lack of meaning, certainty and uncertainty. As Springett writes, “the blow to the body caused by” his surgery leaves a residual anxiety that he “would fly apart.” This anxiety of disintegration is tempered by the “imagination ... a refuge to soften the blows of the world.”

Ultimately, even as these works represent blows to the body and psychic ruptures, they grasp at and cling to imagination and creativity. This power of the imagination in the face of illness is boldly celebrated through the other contributions to this issue: in the prose of Gordon Sun, Mary Hutchings Reed, Saher Shaikh, Julie Hein, and Ann Starr; and the poetry of Alan Steinberg, Louis Leveen, Changming Yuan, Jennifer Markell, and Rebekka DePew.

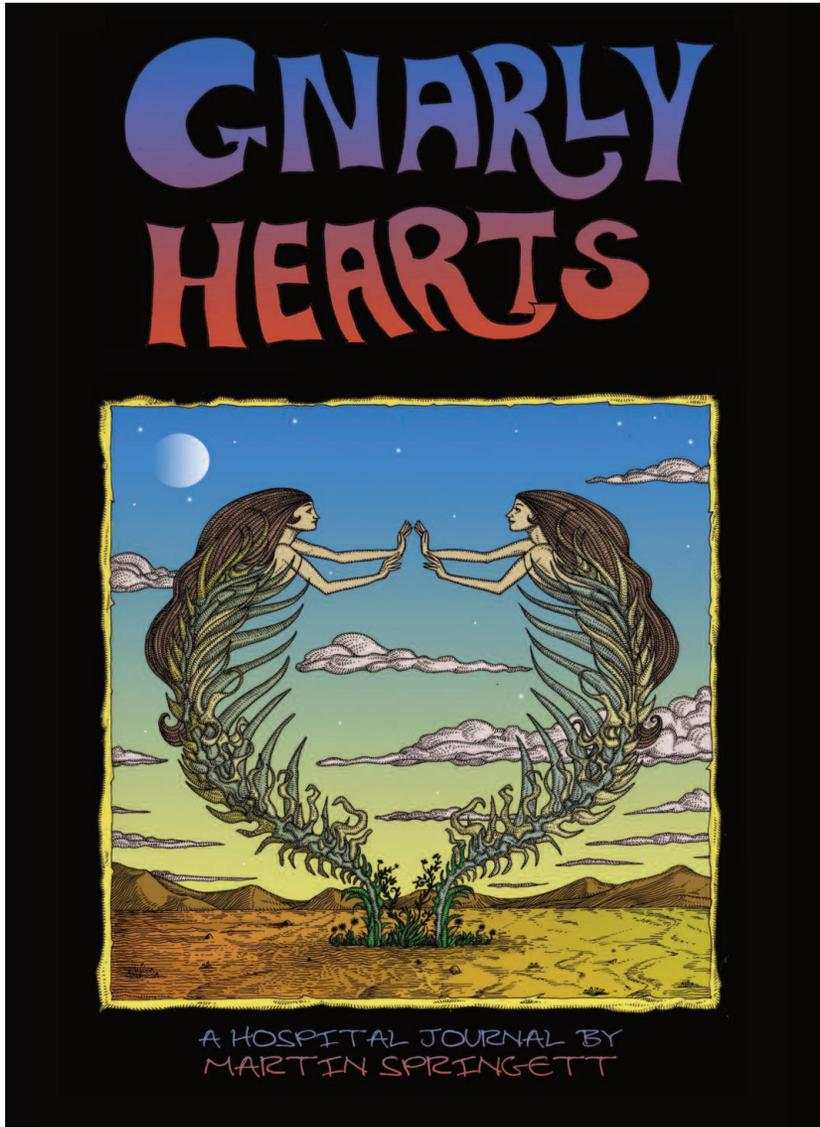
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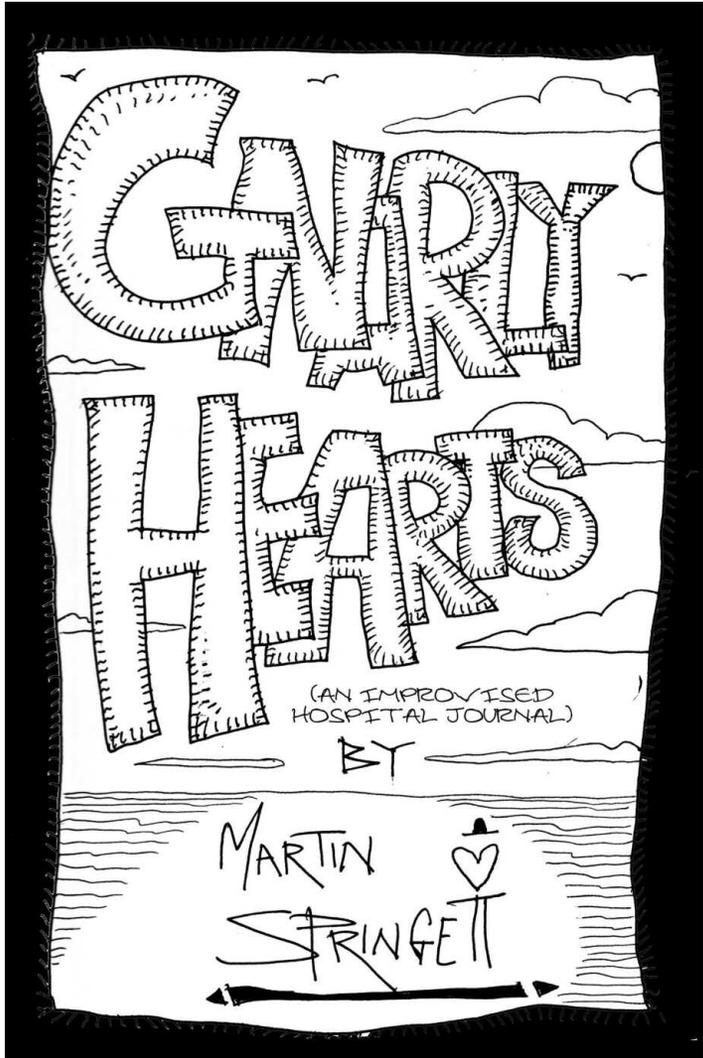
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*Allison Crawford*, Editor-in-Chief, *Ars Medica*



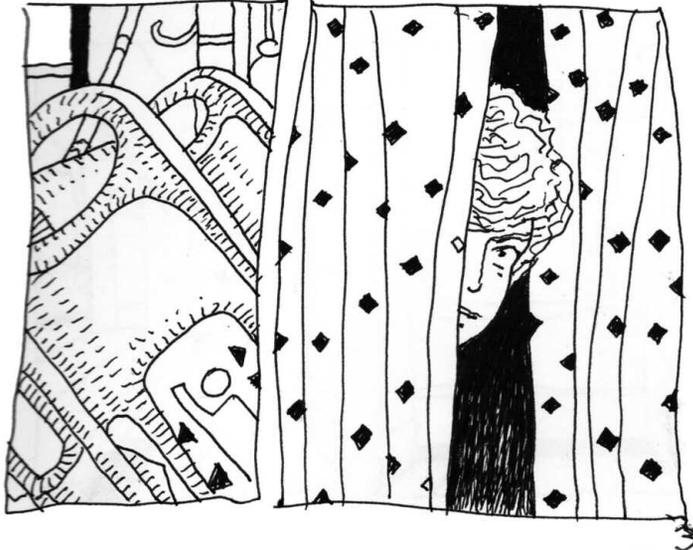
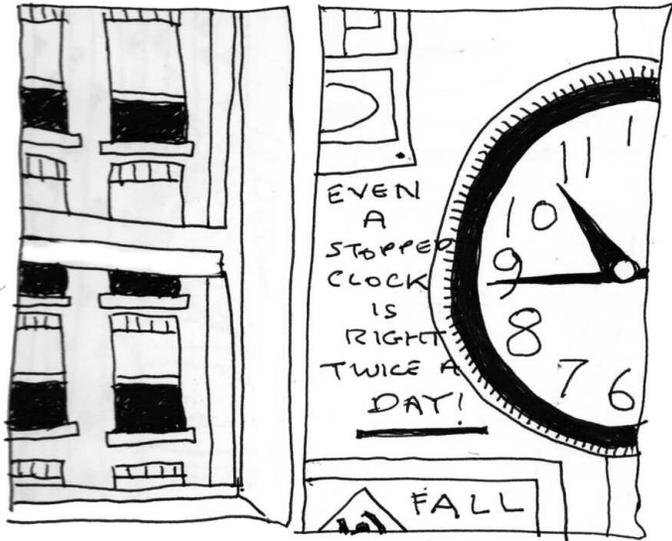
Volume 13  
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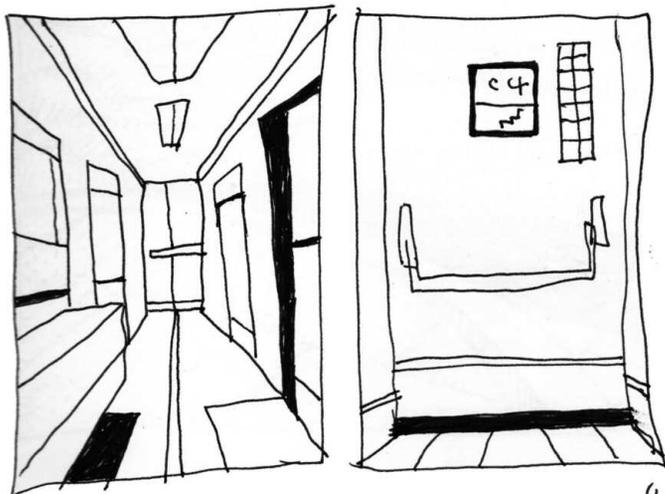
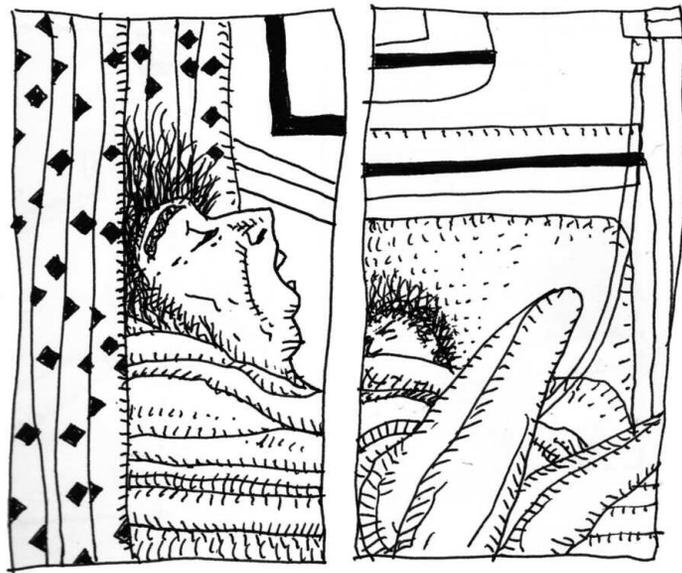




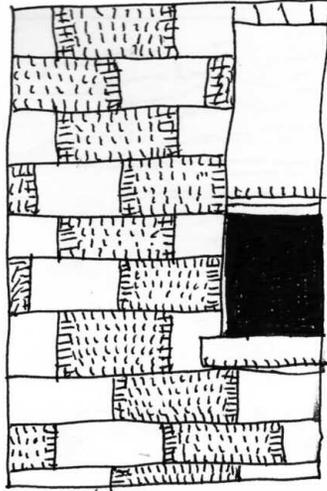
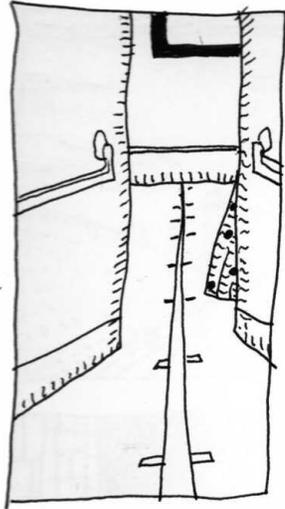


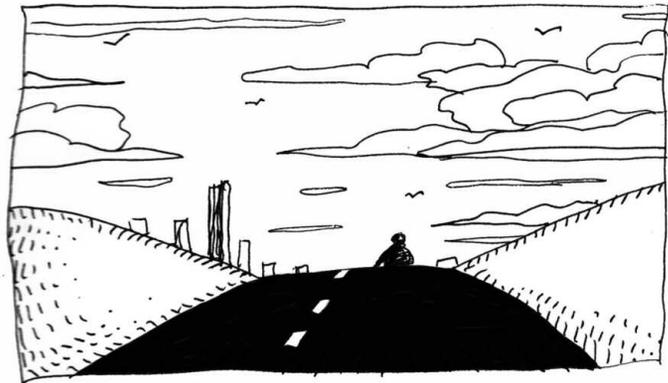






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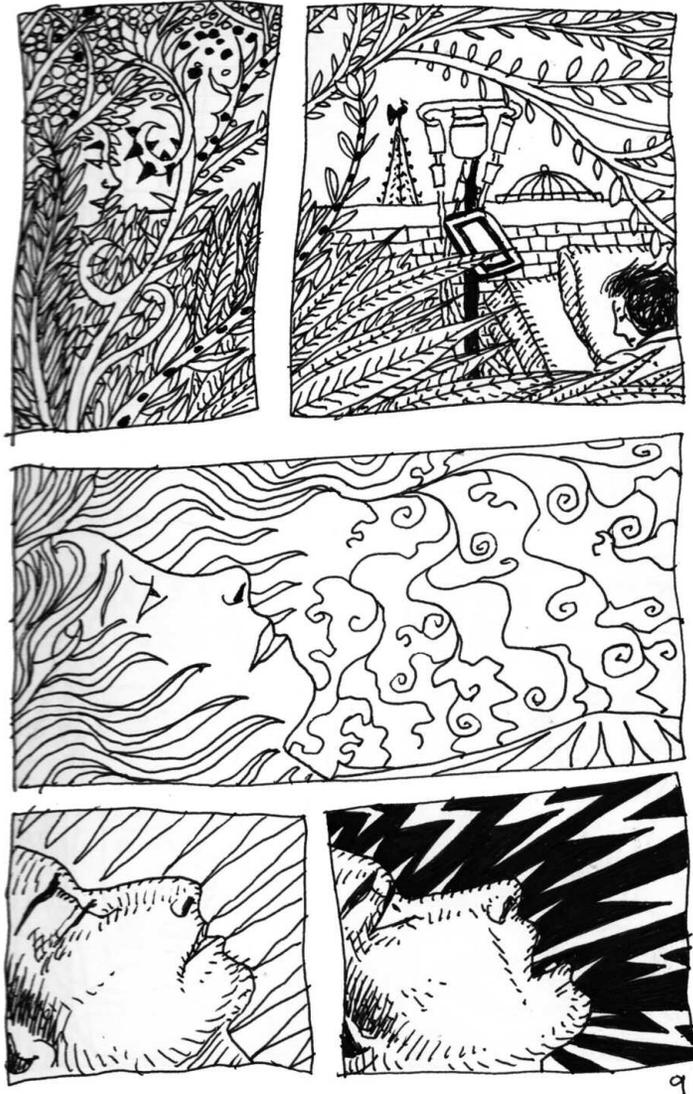
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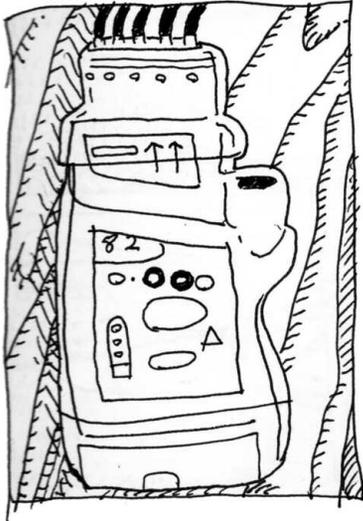
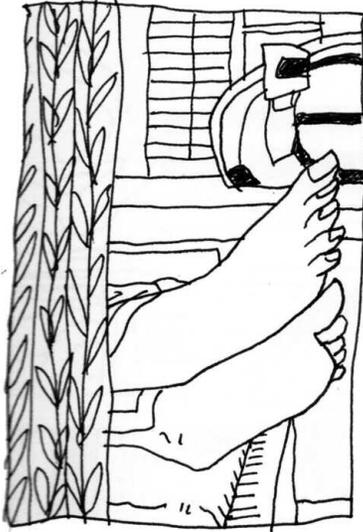
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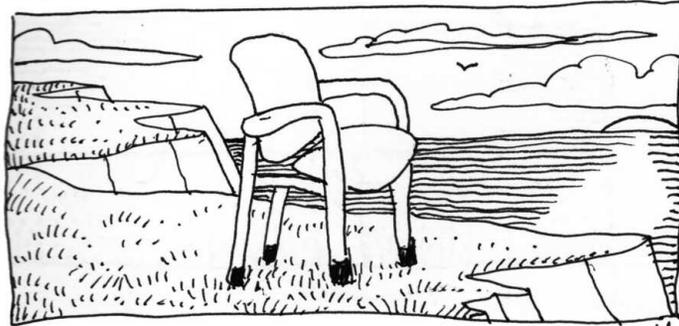
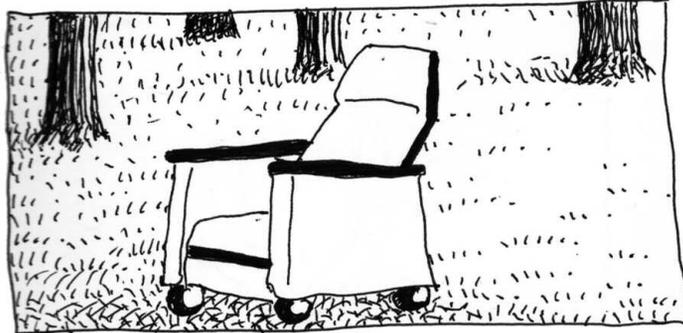
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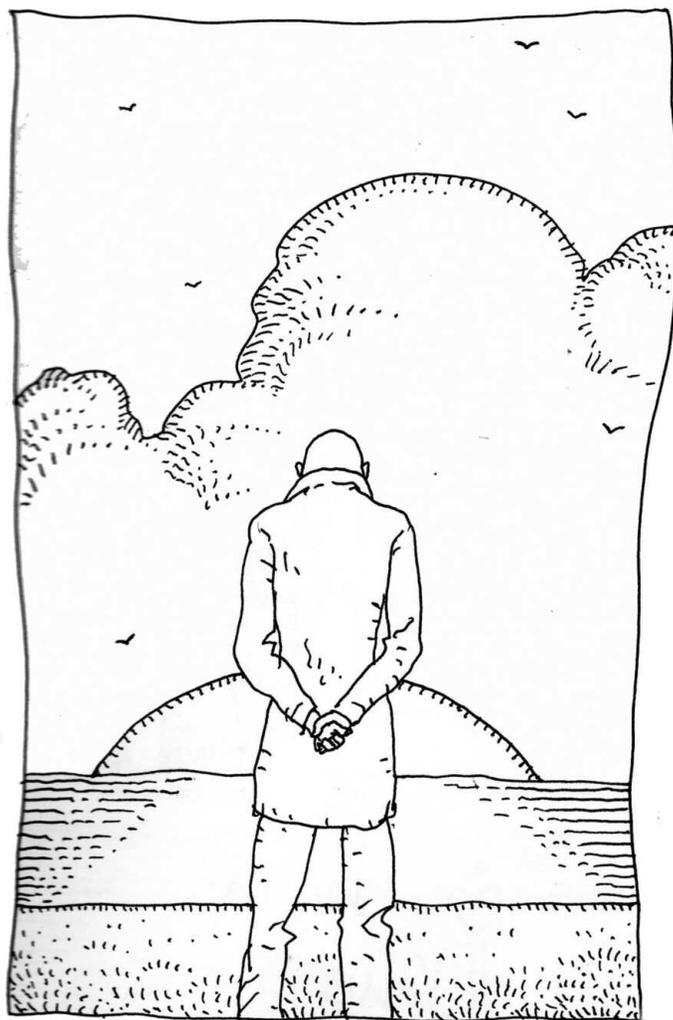


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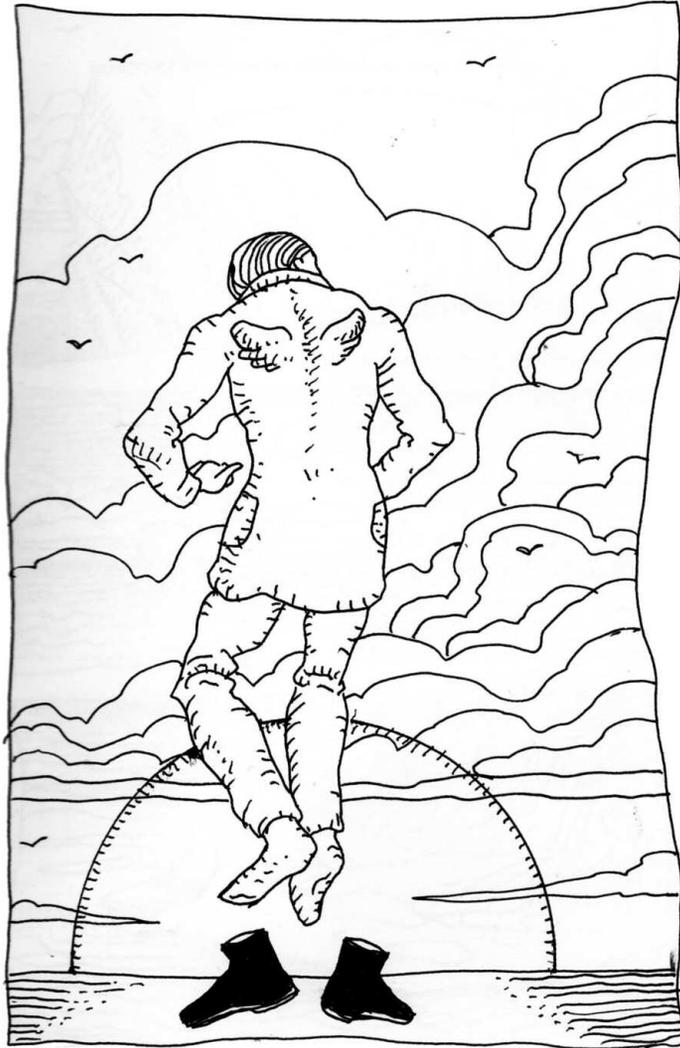


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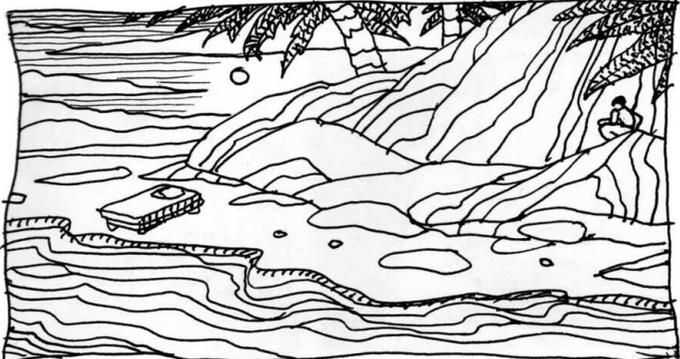
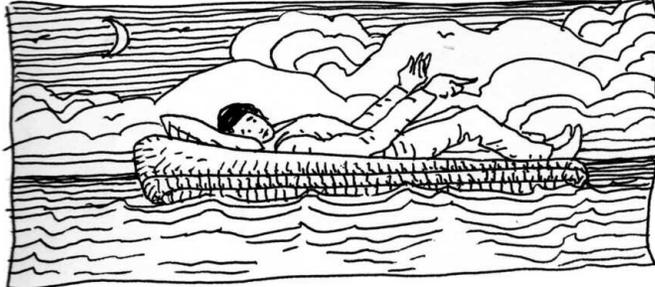
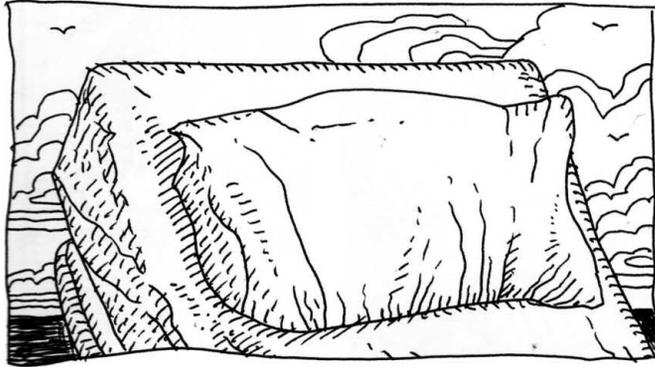




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13

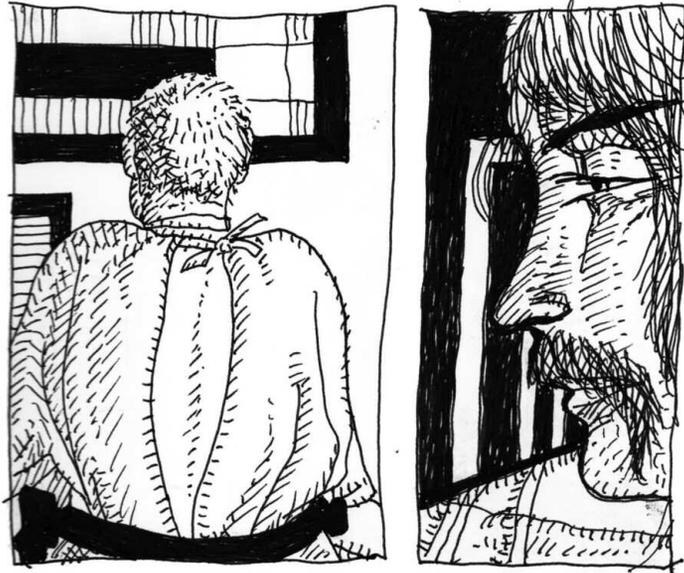


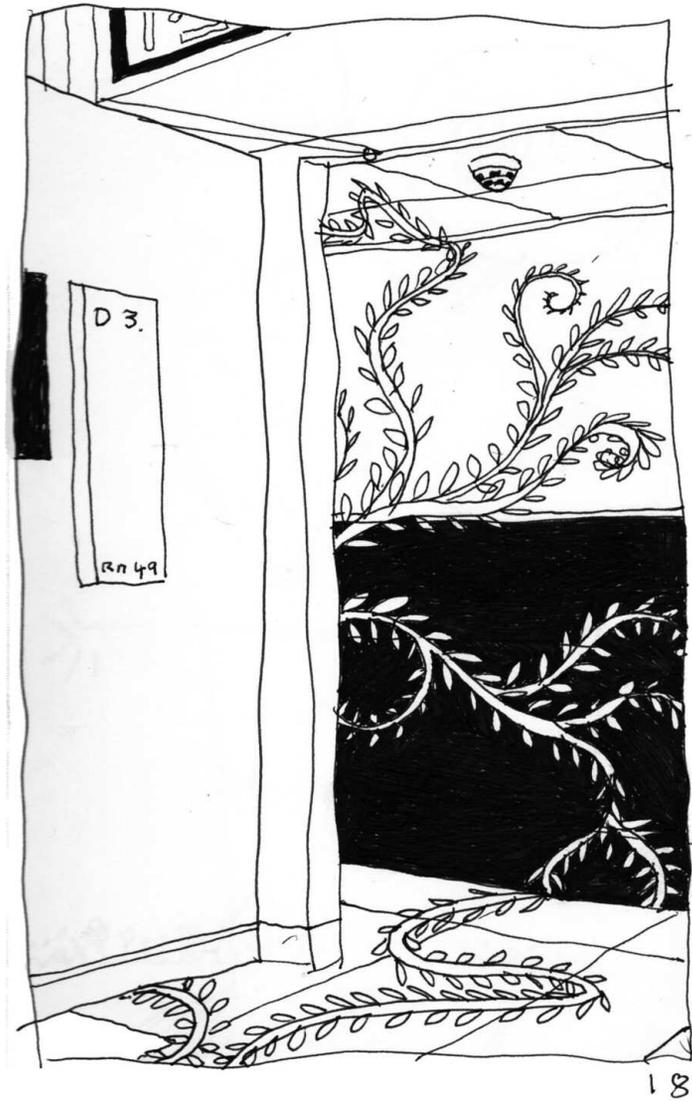
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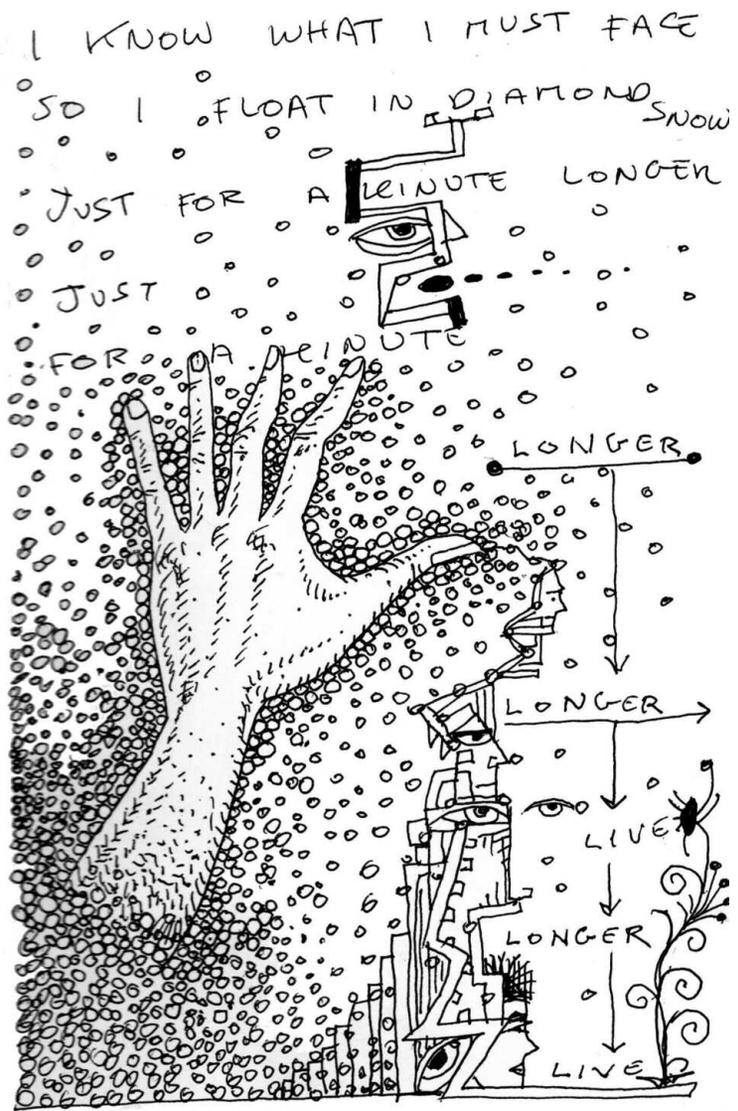


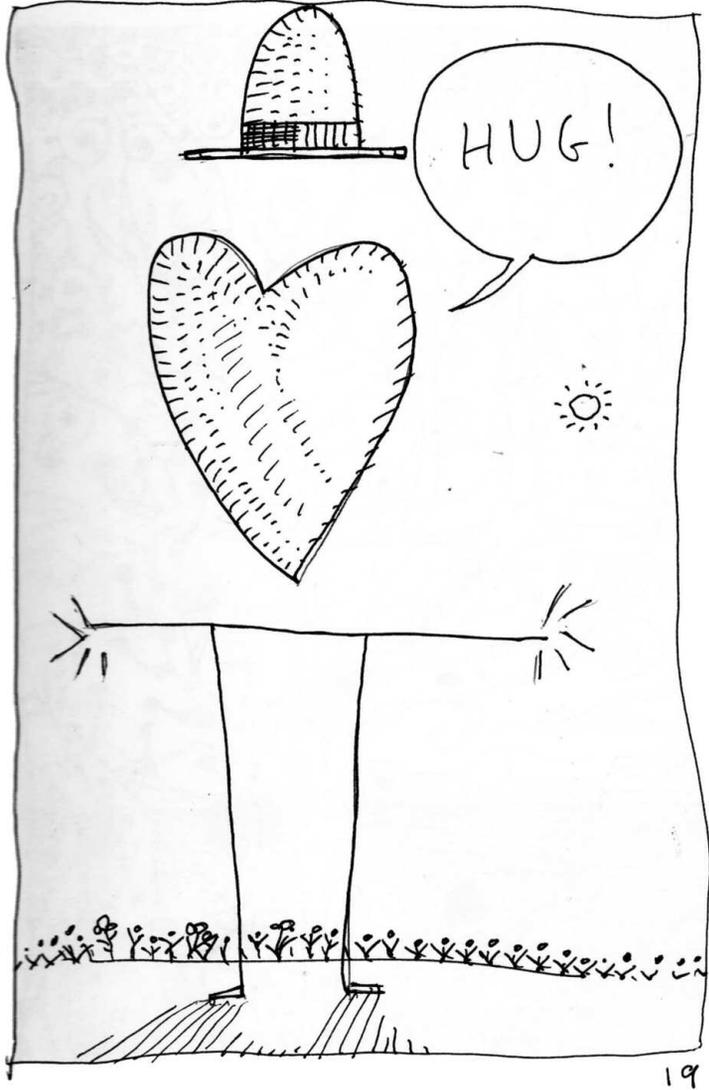
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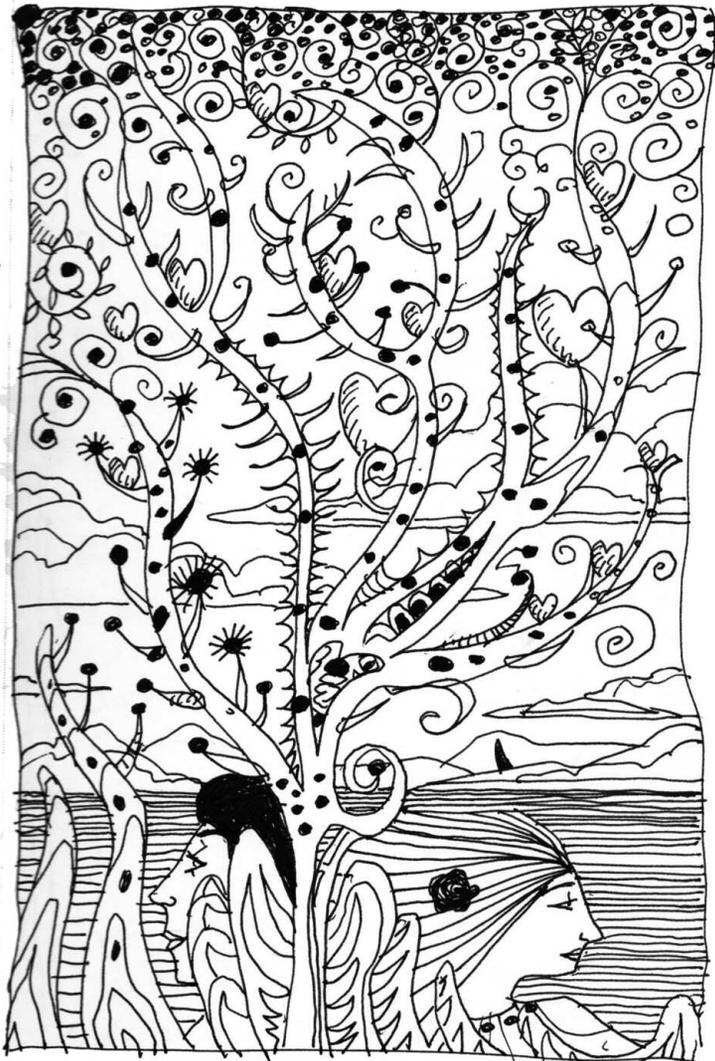












20

## THE DREAM

I HAVE HAD MANY  
STRANGE DREAMS SINCE  
MY HEART OPERATION

A SEDUCTIVE BRIDE  
IN RED SILK AND BLACK  
LACE APPEARS

HER BRIDESMAID  
IS MELANCHOLIA

I AM QUESTIONED AT  
SOME LENGTH ABOUT  
MY HEART'S DESIRES

I AM AT A LOSS  
FOR WORDS

THEY HAVE ME  
FIGURED OUT

I TRY TO TALK TO  
BOTH OF THEM

THE BRIDE SMILES  
ONE SWEET KISS  
AND SHE IS GONE  
IN A CLOUD OF SILK  
AND LACE

MELANCHOLIA SITS  
AND STARES AT ME

THEN

SHE LEANS FORWARD  
AND PINCHES MY CHEEK

THE SLIGHTEST SMILE.

'WAKE UP M.  
WAKE UP'

I WAKE UP

I AM IN TEARS  
I DO NOT KNOW WHY.





MY WIFE WAS ALMOST  
A WIDOW  
I SAW HER  
VEILED IN BLACK  
BUT SHE WAS SO BEAUTIFUL  
HOW COULD I LEAVE HER?



I FOLLOW HER BECAUSE  
I MUST  
I DO NOT KNOW WHERE  
SHE IS LEADING ME  
THE ONCE FAMILIAR GARDEN  
IS FULL OF SPIES,  
OR JUST PRYING EYES  
I AM NATED,  
SCARRED, FRIGHTENED,  
GRATEFUL TO SET FOOT  
HERE AGAIN, EVEN IF  
IT IS FULL OF FEARS  
AND FOREBODING

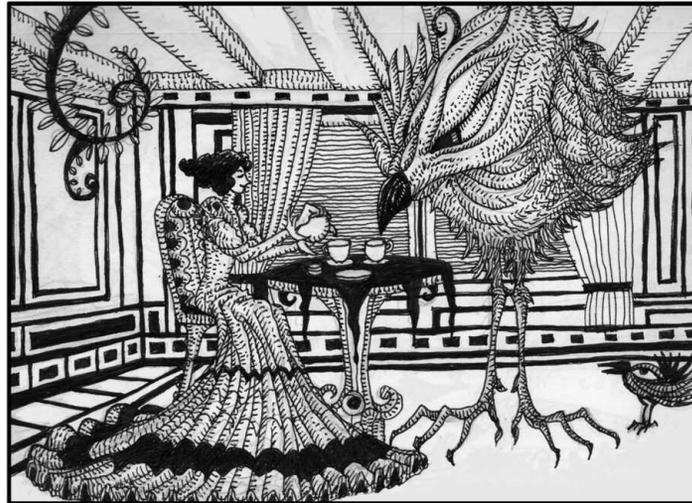


I ROAM THE GARDEN AGAIN  
FREE FOR A MOMENT.





MY SWEET COMPANIONS  
HAVE WAITED FOR ME  
AND WE HAVE TEA TOGETHER.





## AFTERWARD

ON FEBRUARY THE 8TH I SUFFERED SEVERE CHEST PAINS WHILE OUT WALKING. I CHECKED MYSELF INTO EMERGENCY AT SUNNYBROOK HOSPITAL, AND AFTER VARIOUS TESTS IT WAS DETERMINED THAT I NEEDED A TRIPLE BY-PASS HEART OPERATION. I THEN SPENT TEN DAYS ON THE CARDIAC WARD AWAITING WORD ON WHEN THE OPERATION WAS TO BE SCHEDULED. TO DEAL WITH THIS SURPRISING AND FRIGHTENING DISRUPTION IN MY LIFE, I BEGAN DRAWING IN MY SKETCHBOOK. I INSTINCTIVELY STARTED CREATING A 'COMIC BOOK', A FORM OF VISUAL STORY-TELLING THAT I HAVE LOVED EVER SINCE I WAS A CHILD GROWING UP IN ENGLAND. I WAS ON SOME LEVEL OVERWHELMED BY THIS TURN OF EVENTS, BUT DRAWING HAS ALWAYS BEEN A WAY FOR ME TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS BY MAKING A STORY I CREATE A FRAME AROUND WHAT WOULD OTHERWISE BE A ROILING SEA OF EMOTIONS. I CAN THEN HANDLE THE SITUATION BETTER AND ALSO BE INVOLVED IN THE MAKING OF SOMETHING, THE ENDING NOT BEING CLEAR, JUST AS IN ANY STORY I MIGHT WRITE IN MY CHILDREN'S BOOKS OR THE GRAPHIC NOVELS I HAVE BEEN CREATING LATELY.

NOTHING COULD HAVE PREPARED ME FOR THE GRUELLING AFTERMATH OF THE OPERATION. I WAS REDUCED TO A HELPLESS BEING; AT THE SAME TIME I HAD SURVIVED AND WAS 'FIXED'; DUE TO THE ASTONISHING SKILL OF THE SURGEON, DR FUAD MOUSSA, WHOSE OPERATING ROOM CHAT TO HIS TEAM I FOUND INCREDIBLY REASSURING. THE PRE-OP IMAGES AND THOSE CREATED POST-OP REFLECT THE CHANGE IN MY MENTAL AND PHYSICAL STATES. ACTUALLY I COULD NOT REALLY SEPARATE THOSE STATES OF BEING. I CONTINUED TO DRAW IN MY SKETCH BOOK AFTER BEING DISCHARGED FROM THE HOSPITAL, AS I STILL NEEDED TO WORK THROUGH MY RESPONSES TO MY NEW STATE. I FELT GREAT ANXIETY - EACH TIME I WENT FOR A WALK I FELT I WOULD FLY APART. THE LOGICAL SIDE OF ME REALISED THAT MY HEART WAS NOW IN GOOD SHAPE, BUT DEALING WITH THE PHYSICAL TRAUMA, THE BLOW TO THE BODY CAUSED BY THE PROCEDURE, WAS ANOTHER MATTER ENTIRELY. SO I CONTINUED TO DRAW AND TAKE THE JOURNEY I NEEDED TO TAKE - MY IMAGINATION HAS ALWAYS BEEN A REFUGE TO SOFTEN THE BLOWS OF THE WORLD.

THIS IS MY INTERIOR JOURNEY, BUT I WAS SO LUCKY TO HAVE MY FAMILY, FRIENDS AND THE WONDERFUL CARE OF THE NURSES AND DOCTORS AT SUNNYBROOK HOSPITAL, AND THE GREAT STAFF AT TORONTO REHAB, TO HELP ME DEAL WITH THE PHYSICAL HEALING THAT I NEEDED TO GET ME BACK TO THIS PARTICULAR GARDEN! martin springett





MARTIN SPRINGETT IS AN AWARD  
WINNING AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR  
OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS AND A MUSICIAN  
HE LIVES AND WORKS IN TORONTO

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## Downsizing

*Gordon Sun*

I rolled into the first floor pulmonary clinic for my monthly visit. “I’m here to see the docs,” I said, as soon as Dana, the older nurse with the 1960’s bob cut, girly pink scrubs, and too much lipstick, appeared behind the registration window. I had to look up at her from my wheelchair. “Nine-thirty appointment.”

“Johnny O’Brien, right?” Dana confirmed.

“Yep, that’s me.”

“You have your card?”

I gestured with a clenched right hand toward my chest, where I was wearing a yellow lanyard and badge holder with my hospital identification card tucked inside. “Sorry, can’t get it out,” I began. “My hand is acting up...” I felt my face redden just a touch.

“That’s okay, I can see your ID from here,” Dana said. She typed something into her computer. “The reason for your visit?”

“The trach. I come here every month.”

“So a tracheostomy check?”

“Yep.”

“Any pain or shortness of breath?”

“No, just a little sore throat.”

“Fever?”

“Nope.”

“Any falls recently?”

“Nope.”

“What medications are you taking?”

“You always ask that,” I said. This question’s always so annoying. “Don’t you have that on file, on your fancy computers and whatnot? Can’t remember all their damn names. Something for spasms...”

“That’s fine, I’ll look it up later,” she interrupted. “Allergies?”

“Nope.”

“Alright, I think that’s it,” the nurse said, typing some more. “Just stay here in our waiting room until you get called.”

“Fine, fine. Thanks.” I prodded the joystick by my right hand, spinning the wheelchair around. Half of the waiting room was roped off with yellow construction tape and piled high with wooden slabs, but I managed to find an open area in another corner of the room. I settled in next to a cheap-looking, fake potted plant covered in a thick film of sawdust and powered down the chair. With my left hand, which fortunately was not clenching up this morning, I punched in a couple of keys on the large phone sitting on my lap and started up the music streaming service. Simon and Garfunkel began flowing through my earbuds.

A few minutes later, a young, tanned guy with slicked-back black hair rolled over to my corner in a powered wheelchair covered in colorful bumper

stickers, accompanied by an even younger blond kid wearing navy blue scrubs. “*Hola, señor,*” the guy in the wheelchair said, smiling. He was wearing a grey hoodie and sweatpants stamped with a local college logo. I wondered briefly if he used to be an athlete. The kid in the scrubs sat down in an empty plastic chair and began toying with his phone, ignoring us.

“Hey, there,” I replied, taking out my earbuds. “Don’t think I’ve seen you around before.”

Wheelchair guy was examining my chair. He also had a trach tube, but his had a red cap on it. I used a green device on mine, what the speech therapists called a “speaking valve.”

“*Primera vez aquí,*” he said. “Very exciting.”

“Good for you,” I replied.

The guy was looking closely at me now. “Why you here?”

Was it not obvious? “This ol’ pain in the neck.”

“*¿Qué dijo?*” The guy looked puzzled.

“This pain in my neck. The trach,” I repeated a bit more loudly, pointing to the tracheostomy.

“*El tubito, sí,*” the guy said, nodding. “*Yo también. Espero que van a quitarlo.*”

“What?”

“Sorry. I...I hope they take out *el tubito,*” he said. “*Con permiso.*” The man hit a switch by his left hand, gradually tilting back in his power chair until his white-and-red sneakers dangled higher than his head. Time for pressure relief.

We paused for a moment as he settled into his new position. Then, feeling a little guilty, I spoke up. “Buddy, I don’t think that’s gonna happen.”

“What’s happening?”

“They won’t take out your trach,” I said, pointing at the guy’s neck.

“How you know?”

“I’ve been coming here for a long time and seen a lot of people. Almost no one ever gets it taken out.”

“¿*De verdad?*”

“I know for sure. The docs have been here for years. No, decades. Things don’t change.” I nodded in the direction of the blond kid in scrubs, who was swiping away on his phone, totally oblivious. “Is he your caretaker?”

“*Es el enfermero. Se llama Chris.*”

“You know that if you don’t have a trach, they’ll probably take away a lot of your home health hours,” I said, lowering my voice to a whisper. “Think about it. They aren’t gonna pay for Chris to watch you twelve hours a day just to flush a G-tube and check your Foley.”

“Foley?”

“Yeah. It’s that tube they put in your... uh, down there.” I pointed to his crotch.

He glanced down, then nodded in understanding. “*Comprendo ahora,*” he said. “*El otro tubito.*”

“Sorry, buddy.” I shrugged.

“How about you?” he asked. “You want *el tubito* out?”

“The trach? Maybe someday.” I exhaled deeply. Honestly, I didn’t like talking about that too much. Still, the kid seemed nice enough, and I wasn’t sure how much of my conversation he understood anyway. “They say I could get sick if they take it out,

so I told them to just leave it in. Lung infection's not worth it."

"*Se suponía que iban a quitar el tubito antes de salir del hospital, pero los médicos no estaban disponibles,*" the guy replied.

"Uh, English, *por favor,*" I said. I know maybe ten words in Spanglish.

"*Lo siento...*ah, supposed to take out *el tubito* in hospital. But doctors not there," the man continued.

"Not there? What do you mean?"

"Told me no doctors available to take out *el tubito.*"

"Really?" I asked. "How long were you in the hospital?"

"*Tres o cuatro semanas aquí.* Three, four weeks. I leave hospital last week."

"There's always a doc here. Doctor Grayson never takes a vacation." I was genuinely curious. "You know what happened?"

"*No sé, señor.*" He twitched his shoulders.

We didn't say anything for a while. Eventually Chris got up, glanced around, and went to the registration desk. "Where's the bathroom?" he asked.

"Uh, down the hall. The one here's being remodeled," I heard Dana reply.

"Cool, thanks." Chris hastily returned to our corner. "*Mateo, necesito ir al baño. ¿Va a estar bien por sí mismo?*"

"*Sí, por supuesto,*" Mateo said.

"*Un momento.*" Chris walked quickly out the waiting room.

I nodded and grinned, trying to resume the conversation. "So I take it you're Mateo? I'm Johnny."

“*Mucho gusto.*” Mateo smiled pleasantly.

“Nice to meet you.” But before I could continue, Dana poked her head out the registration window and called out, “Johnny!”

“Yeah?” I yelled back from the corner of the room.

“Doctor’s ready!”

“Thanks.” I powered on my wheelchair. “See you around, Mateo. And good luck.” I meant it.

“*Hasta luego,*” said Mateo.

I pressed forward on the joystick, rolling swiftly toward the registration office. Suddenly, the office door opened and Dana appeared. I screeched to a halt. “Holy crap, you scared me!” I blurted out.

“Sorry, dear. You mind if I go in with you?” she asked.

That’s strange. The nurse never comes in the room. The docs did everything. “Sure, I guess.” I followed Dana as she led me past registration into one of the exam rooms. I never liked the rooms; they were too small for people in wheelchairs. They probably were built in a time before people cared about patient feedback.

A guy in a white coat was already in the room, staring at something on a portable computer workstation. He swiveled around on his stool to face me as Dana and I entered. The guy was young, tall, and muscular with light brown eyes and crew cut. He wore a starched white shirt with a tightly knotted striped red-and-blue tie and matching brown khakis and loafers. The guy adjusted a pair of thin, wiry glasses on the bridge of his nose as he sized me up.

Dana spoke first, somewhat excitedly. “Johnny, this is Doctor Phillips. He’s our new lung doctor. He just started in July, a month or so ago. He’s even volunteered to train me to assist with these tracheostomy changes, so that’s why I’m in the room now.” She turned away and began opening the cabinets, assembling the equipment for the tracheostomy change.

Now that was a surprise.

“Hey, doc,” I said. “No offense, but...where are Doctor Martinez and Doctor Grayson? Why can’t I see them instead?” This new guy was probably young enough to be their grandson.

“Oh, they don’t work here anymore,” Doctor Phillips answered vaguely. He spun toward the monitor quickly, pointing at something on the monitor and muttering to himself.

What the heck? I was shocked. “They never said they were planning to leave,” I said, stumbling a little on the words.

“I think it was a bit sudden,” Doctor Phillips agreed, turning away from the computer and looking at me. “Anyway, as Dana said, I’m Doctor Ron Phillips, and I’ll be taking care of you from now on.”

I was quiet for a while, trying to digest the news. Dana finished laying out the new trach tube, lubricant, and gauze on a clean towel and stood off to one side, silently watching us. “Then, you’re in charge now, doc?” I finally asked.

“That is correct, Johnny.”

I snorted. “Don’t take this the wrong way, doc, but you seem kind of young to be taking over.”

A grim expression, with maybe a hint of melancholy, flitted over Doctor Phillips' face, but he recovered quickly. "Is that so?" he said slowly. "I hear that a lot. Regardless, it does not change the fact that I am the new Chief of Pulmonary Medicine at this hospital." He reached out purposefully and grasped my hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

So Doctor Martinez and Doctor Grayson were really gone. That was a big change.

Doctor Phillips was looking closely at me, probably analyzing my reaction. If he knew why the other docs left, he wasn't saying. But maybe he really didn't know what was up. Or maybe he didn't want to gossip.

Either way, I realized that I was probably being a little hard on the guy. It's not like I had anything to gain by pissing off the new doc. "Okay, then," I replied. "So I take it you've probably read my file and know why I'm here. I've got some soreness here in my neck."

"Your trach site? Sure," he replied, almost casually. "But let's not rush things. I have some questions for you first."

"Questions? Okay, let's hear 'em."

Doctor Phillips cleared his throat. "I was looking at your chart just now, and I was trying to figure out why you still have that tube in your neck."

"Excuse me?" Has anyone ever asked me that question? I can't remember.

"Let's start from the beginning. The chart says your spinal cord injury is C-seven, incomplete," he continued. "Is that right?"

“Yep.”

“And you’re not having trouble swallowing or anything like that? You eat by mouth?”

“Sure do, I eat fine. Lots of tacos and pizza. Probably more than I should.” I grinned. “They took out the G-tube a long time ago.”

“We can discuss your dietary choices later,” he said. We both laughed. “Have you been hospitalized in the last year or two? Pneumonia, anything like that?”

“Nope.” I was pretty proud of that fact, actually. I’ve had my fill of hospitals, having spent the first three or four months after my accident in one or another. “At least not since my initial injury.”

Doctor Phillips nodded encouragingly. “Do you use a ventilator at home?”

“Heck no. I hate that damn machine.” I was a little surprised to hear the words escaping my mouth. “I hardly even need to suction. Like once every couple of months or so.”

“Huh. That’s interesting.” The doctor tilted his head. “Have you had any recent surgery? Do you have any surgery coming up?”

“Nope.”

“Great. Then let’s see how strong your lungs are. Please go ahead and cough as hard as you can for me.” He leaned forward on his stool, his hands folded under his stubbled chin.

I clenched my neck and chest muscles like the therapists taught me and forced out a dry cough. I thought it sounded so-so at best.

Doctor Phillips frowned. “That’s pretty good. Quite good, actually.” He picked up a red-capped

tube that Dana had set out on the countertop and held it out in his fingertips. “Have you ever used a red plug? Like this one?”

“Sure, once or twice,” I replied, wondering where he was headed with this conversation. No way he’s thinking of taking the trach out. I added, “Doctor Grayson said before that my cough wasn’t that good. He told me that I should use the green speaking valve instead of that red cap. So I use the speaking valve all the time.”

“Is that right.” It came out more like a statement than a question. Doctor Phillips set the red tube down. “And you don’t smoke or drink alcohol?”

“No way. Bastard who ran me over was drunk driving.” Surprised myself again. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to open up a bit to the new doc. Can’t blame him for not knowing about my history yet, like Doctor Martinez or Doctor Grayson.

“Alright. Let me look at your neck. Don’t worry, I’ll change out your trach also.” I cleared my throat and exposed the trach. Doctor Phillips swiftly pulled out the old tube and pointed out that I had some granulation tissue around the trach that was probably the cause of the soreness in my neck. After cauterizing the granulation with one of those silver nitrate sticks, he lubricated a new trach and replaced it in my neck. I reflexively coughed a bit when he put the thing in; I noticed Doctor Phillips nodding to himself. Without delay, Dana expertly slid a new split gauze sponge underneath the trach.

The entire process took less than a minute. The doc was efficient, no question about it: definitely

faster than either Doctor Martinez or Doctor Grayson.

Doctor Phillips pulled off his blue gloves with a loud snap and tossed them in a trash bin, while Dana began cleaning up the trash left over from the trach change. “Like I mentioned before,” Doctor Phillips began slowly, leaning back on his stool, “I don’t know why you still have that trach tube.”

That’s the second time he brought that up. “Sorry, I don’t think I heard you right. It sounded like you’re saying that you want to take this trach out.”

“That’s right,” he said, more assertively now. “It needs to come out. I don’t have a good reason why you need it at this point.”

I blinked in astonishment. “Hold on a sec. You really do want to take it out?”

“Yes, I do.” He raised his eyebrows slightly. “In fact, you’re probably at higher risk of complications from leaving the trach in unnecessarily. Scarring of the windpipe, skin infections, bleeding—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I interrupted him. “I’ve had this damn dog collar around my neck for ten years, and Doctor Martinez and Doctor Grayson kept telling me all this time that I needed it. And they’re experts. Now all of a sudden you’re saying I don’t?”

“Well, not right away, Johnny,” he said, putting his hands up in what looked like some kind of appeasing gesture. “I’d probably downsize the trach first. You know, get you a smaller size tube. We

might have to do one or two quick tests also, but nothing that would require anesthesia. But yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. You don't need that trach. Period."

I sank back in my wheelchair, stunned. "Heck... is that even possible?" I managed to say. "The other docs wouldn't ever consider it. And they had good reasons. At least I thought they did."

"The other doctors were good people and had their way of doing things," Doctor Phillips said, with the barest hint of a smile. "This is my way."

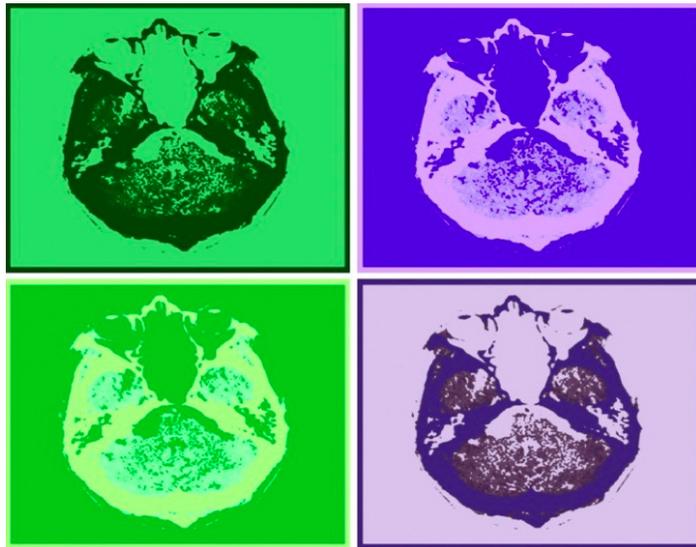
I stared down at the floor. This changed everything. I wondered just how much Mateo had heard about the new doc during the last few weeks. "Gotta say, doc, this wasn't what I expected. I come here every month, and it's always the same old, same old."

Doctor Phillips leaned forward on his stool, straightening his glasses and folding his hands together. "Well, then. Are you ready for change?"

**Gordon Sun** is an otolaryngologist. He enjoys writing short fiction and listening to electronic music.  
Email: Gordon.H.Sun@gmail.com

## The Mind Sees Many

*Brandon Muncan*



The evolution of abstract expressionism to pop-art was characterized by heightened cultural response, as well as increased perspective criticism. This work is no different. In *The Mind Sees Many*, I strive to use the principles and techniques of pop artists such as Rauschenberg and Warhol to con-

vey a message of normal perspective-differences in medical care.

I created *The Mind Sees Many* through online photo-editing using an axial-view computerized tomography (CT) image of a human brain. Much like Warhol's famous pop-art works, I created multiple panels of the same, copied images and only altered the background colors, tones, and textures in order to push different sentiments and viewpoints towards each image.

*The Mind Sees Many* strives to communicate the phenomenon of multiple opinions in the process of treating disease. The patient, the patient's loved ones, and the patient's care-provider all have different views on the same situation: what is the best step forward? What treatment is most adequate? How will a patient's life change? Ultimately, the disease process is one-and-the-same, but the approach to considering the impact of illness can differ greatly based on experiences, much like how each panel in *The Mind Sees Many* differs in background color and tone. The striking similarity that ties all the perspectives together is a common goal of healing and survival: of treating both the ailment and the soul behind the mask of disease.

**Brandon Muncan**

is a biology student at Stony Brook University. He enjoys music and writing.  
Email: brandon-muncan@yahoo.com



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## The First Shadows of Dementia

*Alan Steinberg*

She walks with one foot here, one foot there,  
my sister of so many years, my beautiful sister,  
caught between certainty and disaster,  
the clarity of the moment before her,  
but which one—which one?  
And all the promises of tomorrow—  
what of them, what of them?

It's soon to be my birthday, she knows,  
her calendar full of dates and obligations  
she cannot remember.  
With a smile and a frown,  
she tells me how memory  
can fade like the moon in clouds,  
and asks if she has sent me a card.

I tell her if she has it has not landed.  
I tell her it does not matter.  
I tell her we are beyond  
such signs and symbols;  
that we love each other in the here and now.

I tell her that to love like this  
means we have loved for many years,

for love doesn't grow in clouds  
but in the heart's dark soil,  
and it takes a long time to grow,  
and a long time to wither.

A few days later the card lands,  
full of printed words of devotion  
and my sister's own strong hand  
telling me the words are real.  
And she sends a picture of our mother  
long gone, who loved us both,  
telling me she understands,  
telling me she knows  
the past is only a mirror  
and love the open door.

Alan Steinberg works  
at SUNY Potsdam.  
Email address:  
steinbal@potsdam.edu



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## Herbert Saffir, Measurer of Hurricanes

*Mary Hutchings Reed*

“Herbert Saffir died last night,” John’s mother said. Her voice startled him. He was sitting next to her on the maroon loveseat in the large common area of the assisted living facility where his mother had lived for more than three months now, and he’d been watching another woman at an old oak vanity pawing through a pile of brightly colored Mardi Gras beads. Today, in honor of the Thanksgiving holiday, one of the nurses had draped green, gold, and orange beads on all of the women residents and some of the men.

John’s mother was a sweet woman whose only vice was a snobbishness in education and jewelry. She preferred unique designer pieces from stores like Tiffany and Georg Jensen, and was proud her son had graduated from Country Day and Northwestern. She would be appalled, he thought, to find herself adorned in plastic beads, and she wouldn’t have been too happy, either, to be caught sitting in what she would’ve called the “parlour” in her gardening clothes, black polyester slacks

and a zipped pink sweatshirt. It amazed him that these things didn't seem to bother her now; that she, who once had been so neat and orderly, was not disturbed by the eclectic busy-ness of the common room and its unused activity center: a toy workbench, a baby doll and cradle, a cold iron and ironing board. Nor did she seem to mind that some of her fellow residents wandered the room in constant circles mumbling to themselves about lost keys while others slumped in wheelchairs in front of *The Sound of Music*. They were always showing *The Sound of Music*, it seemed to him. It must drive the staff nuts.

He didn't know Herbert Saffir. "Did he live here?" he asked. When she didn't answer, his thoughts drifted, and he dreaded the worst. If the man had lived there, then his mother might have seen his body bag wheeled out the front door. The place claimed to have no back entrance, although there must've been a rear exit for the kitchen and the trash. When John had asked about using a freight elevator for moving his mother's bed and bureau, the administrator, a specialist in public relations and "sales," said, without apology, "They come in the front door and they go out the front door." At the time, John had wondered whether they wheeled a resident out pretending it was a run to the hospital or put a telltale sheet over the face. Even though he'd come to believe that most residents wouldn't connect a gurney to sickness or death, the image troubled him every time he keyed the code to leave the building. There would be no other way out for his mother.

John was not naïve about her memory loss, although he thought it had come on quickly. Looking back, he saw that for several years she'd outsmarted the disease and her family, laughing off lapses of memory as the price for living to eighty.

“Gotta forget some things so I'll have room for the years to come,” she'd say gamely.

She'd stayed active, too. After his father had died seven years ago, every Sunday in the summer he and his wife and three kids would go to her house on Little Green Lake and while they swam and kayaked and sailed the dinghy he kept there, he would take his mother for nine holes of leisurely afternoon golf. She was pretty good—“for an old lady,” she would say—and she could both correct his swing and encourage him with the same intelligence and love that had gotten him through schools at the top of his class, all the way to his PhD in education. One of the last times they played together last the previous summer, she'd lined up a six foot putt and then swung her putter like a drive, digging an unforgivable three inch divot in the green. John had been horrified, but his mother calmly replaced the torn grass, stamping it down to repair it. John had tucked that incident away, not connecting it to the hints he'd often found in the kitchen: a baking sheet with hard biscuits browned the day before in preparation for his family's arrival; a plate of packaged cookies wrapped in plastic with a slip of paper, “Pecan Cookies Made With Real Butter;” a note on the microwave, “100=Power=On,” which John finally

recognized as his mother's method of cooking one minute at a time, avoiding the complexity of time and power options on the control panel.

There were few men in his mother's facility. "Did Herbert live here?" he braved again. He didn't particularly want to talk about death with his mother, but any coherent conversation, however brief, whatever the topic, would be a great improvement over their past visits, when her response to the simplest "How are you today?" was often, "Oh, yes."

His mother turned to him, as if the sound of his voice reminded her that he was there. She nodded and smiled. Herbert's passing didn't seem to have registered as "sad" in his mother's lost vocabulary.

"That's too bad," John said, keeping his voice low, "but I'm sure he is at peace." He glanced around, hoping none of the other residents had heard him, for fear of starting a general keening. He smiled to himself that it would again be news to many that Herbert had passed—if they remembered Herbert at all.

He changed the subject. "My youngest daughter Jenny won her swim meet." He'd gotten used to the need to identify himself and the members of his family.

"South Korea confirms bird flu outbreak," his mother said, and John finally understood: his mother was reading the headlines from the newspaper open on her lap.

November 24, the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Although the man was important enough to make the front page of the *Tribune*, John had never

heard of “Herbert Saffir, Measurer of Hurricanes.” Must be a slow news day, he thought.

His mother studied his face, and he met her gaze with his own, balling his left hand into a tight fist. Neither of them could comprehend the other’s incomprehension, John thought. He wasn’t even certain that she recognized him, her only son.

She turned her attention back to the newspaper. “Structural engineer created 5 category system used for C-L-A-S-S-I-F-I-C-A-T-I-O-N of storm strength,” she read, spelling out the longest word. She looked up at him, her eyebrows raised, her green eyes glistening. That she didn’t wear glasses, that she could still read, that she could still recognize words that had no meaning for her, was something. He smiled back and then gently took the newspaper from her, “May I?” Still holding his other hand, she let the newspaper slide from her lap as if she’d forgotten it was even there.

John scanned the story. Saffir had died of a heart attack in a South Miami Hospital. In the 1960s, under a commission from the United Nations, he’d created the “Category” scale that describes the strength of hurricanes. The scale was intended to measure the structural damage that the winds of each Category storm could create, and it had later been modified by a guy named Simpson to measure tidal surge, storm surge, and possible flooding.

A colleague at the National Hurricane Center in West Miami-Dade County was quoted in Saffir’s obituary as saying he was “just such a nice, sweet man.”

A nice, sweet man with a front page obituary, not because he was sweet, but because he “cre-

ated” a scale, not unlike the earthquake scale, and topped it off at 5. Why not 6 or 10 or 100? Katrina, Rita, Wilma, all those hurricanes from a few years ago, all Category 5, according to the article. John had been to the Gulf Coast with a group of Rotarians; he’d seen buildings splintered and swept away. He’d seen the remnants of lives heaped eight feet high and bulldozed into piles awaiting removal; lives totally wiped out. He’d seen the trailers, he’d seen nice homes abandoned, he’d seen blue tarp roofs and schools and hospitals closed. And he’d seen faces. Clerks in stores smiling forced smiles, their shoulders rounded, their eyes dull.

John looked up from the story, and saw that his mother was asleep, but still holding his right hand. Some friends’ parents had heart attacks, some were eaten away with cancer and comforted with morphine, some failed to see the red light or the oncoming truck and left without a chance to say good-bye.

A caregiver came by and asked how he was. “I’m sorry you have to work the Thanksgiving holiday,” he said.

“Oh, I love working holidays,” she said. “And Christmas, too! You know they ask me twenty times a day what day it is, and on Christmas I tell them and they light up, ‘Oh, Christmas!’ each time! It was like that Thursday, too.”

John laughed heartily and turned to his mother’s sleeping profile, his eyes filling.

“Let me know if you need anything,” the caregiver said.

You had to have that kind of attitude to work in such a place, John thought. To act as if plastic beads were white gold and *The Sound of Music* your wedding song. To ignore the structural damage, to love in the moment, knowing there might be a hurricane, destruction yet to come.

His mother opened her eyes but didn't notice him. He put the newspaper back on her lap. Without looking at him, she read, "Herbert Saffir," and started to spell, "M-E-A-S-U-R-E-R ..." John put his arm around her.

"Of Hurricanes," he said out loud.

**Mary Hutchings Reed**  
is a Chicago novelist  
and retired lawyer  
whose mother, a librarian,  
suffered from Alzheimer's. Email:  
mhreed3@gmail.com.  
www.maryhutchingsreed.com



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## More than Skin Deep

*Saher Shaikh*

I developed eczema in my twenties in Pakistan. The dermatologist said it was stress or maybe the handle bars in the university bus as a student. This is how I was introduced to my life companion disease, something of an enigma. Something that had a name but no definite reason. I changed doctors and with it changed the shape of my medicines. White circular tablets or rectangular cream tubes, sitting on my bedside, each one holding the potential for a miraculous cure. But with repeated disclaimers from doctors, hope boiled down to controlling the spread rather than the permanent disappearance of eczema.

What was alarming in the beginning—the roughness and itchiness of the skin on the index finger—became the new normal as years passed by. There were months of relief, when I developed a new soft skin needing nothing more than an occasional moisturizer. But there were more months when the seasonal dry spells within and outside of me took a toll on my hands. One doctor said my body thought of my skin as a foreign enemy and

my autoimmune system was attacking it. My inner core would have bursts of energy when it vehemently was on the offensive and the eczema spread, like a creeper on a wall, from one finger to many, and with it the public shame.

Rashes, bumps, cuts, darkening and paling of skin, dry scales, swelling—all these words I needed to hide from the people on the bus, at school, at parties, and on subways. I could tell when people tried “not” to look. Not looking was worse than the stare: The agitation in the eyes shifting towards and away from my hands. The maintaining of the facade of “not my business,” yet the face contorting to surprise, sympathy, curiosity, mild disgust, and confusion. All that for something that did not define me.

With all the reactions that my hands provoked, I learned the subtle art of concealment. My hands would automatically slide beneath the purse I was holding. My better hand would overlap my “other” one. I would look down at my hands through outsider-angled eyes—which parts can they see? Are they looking? A disease magnified by stress can become the cause of stress. I knew that strangers’ assumptions, made in seconds, should not matter. But assessments of the whole are made on parts. And where the eye focuses can make the part seem like the whole. And more than that, I was an equally guilty accomplice in judging my hands. I silently grudged my hands in water, cooking, picking, holding. My hands, my action figures always calling attention to themselves. But there was an added awareness of the changing states of my

hands in different seasons and mediums maybe not consciously felt by others. I was careful to hold the dishwashing sponge with minimal contact to that part, and when winter winds reached my heart, the hand lotion stayed in my purse.

I learned to let go of things that were once a life ritual. I miss henna designs the most, a must when Eid came. Intricate patterns on both sides on both hands coupled with colourful glass bangles, making soft musical notes when they moved. The application of brown tattoos would sting my affected skin. But for many years I tried stubbornly to create designs and worked around the patches, like a maze leading the eye away from a darkened alley until there was not enough landscape to work on.

Over time, unused nail polishes dried, and rings sat on the silver platter on the dressing table, gathering dust. Less attention to the hands was better. You couldn't make something that was crumbling pretty with accessories. To be a woman with eczema defies the stereotypical concept of a woman's body as soft and smooth. Oh, how I wished at times that gloves would come in vogue, so that I could hide the band aids on the cuts patched on the side of my hand. So that a handshake would not be hasty and awkward, all the warmth I wished to convey replaced by the anxiety of offering a rough textured hand. The wondering if the other person thought I was a semi-civilized ignorant woman from the East who did not know the purpose of a hand moisturizer. Or worse, their having the fear that it was conta-

gious. I swallowed explanation in my mouth, knowing that talking about it would be more awkward than letting the moment pass. Bits of ourselves that we allow people to misunderstand because talking about it would take so much emotional energy. The barriers we do not remove because social decorum is important, and awkward open conversations that connect us to the mutual current of humanity less so.

The acceptance of disease is a difficult inward admission that takes years to seep in, because the person must learn to accept the changed self. Yet denial has a limit to its elasticity and caves in eventually to skin marks that intensify over time.

In a visit to the doctor, I wished there was more to it than, *Let's see your hands and feet. Do you have it anywhere else?*—accompanied with instructions to moisturize more and the final rip of the prescription page of the doctors' pad. I wished she saw more than my skin, like everyone else at the first glance. There was a neutrality in her tone which was a relief, but she did not see how the skin covered not just my body but also my identity.

**Saher Shaikh** is a York University, Development Studies graduate who likes to explore themes of intersectionality in her writings. Email: shaikhsaher5@gmail.com



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The Come from Away / Stitching Simon Strugnell  
/ Eighth Day / Sounding / The Men Who Dug

*Lois Leveen*

The Come from Away (St. Mary's River, 1941)

She is older and smaller  
than me. Than what I  
expected. Doesn't smell  
like Mentholatum, Mercurochrome,  
medicine. Carrying the scent of  
someplace-else. A place a man  
could walk for weeks from,  
and never see an ocean. I see  
this sea every day, know wave  
and wake and wonder at  
this creature. Want to know her.

Twenty-eight to my  
nineteen, and not the migratory bird  
I imagined, come for a summer  
and with a flap of a wing,  
gone again. What she flaps  
is a crisp white sheet.  
Hospital corners they call it,  
though it's no hospital, no  
doctor here. Just a clinic,

a nurse, come for a summer but  
staying forever.

She doesn't know that yet.  
Neither do I. We only know  
our hearts, beating  
flapping like bright white  
birds inexplicable against  
gray winter sky. Not expecting  
how like a pair of birds  
we'll make a flock. How like  
a flock in flight, we will grow  
older, smaller, together.

### Stitching Simon Strugnell (Port Hope Simpson, 1946)

Two-years-old and twenty-six  
stitches. Brought by motor boat  
four hours from William's Harbour,  
bit and cut and bleeding, to what  
passes in Port Hope Simpson for a surgery:  
Gas to put Simon Strugnell  
to sleep. A flashlight  
his mother holds, illuminating  
his small body. And my  
two hands, taking  
tiny stitches, twenty-six  
stitches to Simon Strugnell's  
head and neck. Back  
in William's Harbour, his grandfather  
shoots the untamed huskie pups. He shoots all  
the full-grown sled dogs too.

### **Eighth Day (St. Mary's Bay, 1950)**

It is the eighth day  
of our second son  
and we are on the ocean.  
The minister is nine  
nautical miles away today.  
Tomorrow he leaves  
for the season. We are Church  
of England, Anglicans  
on this inlet of ocean,  
bringing our newborn son  
across these waters to that  
blessèd water to be baptized.

At first the nurse didn't like  
to let us go: new mother and new baby  
leaving harbour for  
where bay broadens into sea.  
She could not see how we are now,  
new father the skipper  
of family skiff, guiding  
proud peaked prow  
as it cuts across  
whatever waves come up.  
Our son, curled in receiving  
blanket, tiny and mighty in  
the way a baby is.

*It's too soon* Nurse Jupp said.  
But eight days is echo  
of the ancient covenant  
that saved Abraham's son.  
And it is eight days longer than  
we had our last baby,  
dead before he was born.

### Sounding (Mary's Harbour, 1954)

A standing tree is no more silent  
than a sleeping child. While ours  
murmur and stir four to a bed  
in Battle Harbour, I go by boat  
and foot into St. Mary's woods.  
Over soft forest sough  
sounds the thwack of my axe,  
the broken-branched crash  
of what is felled.

Sawing, planing, the soft-pitched  
screaming that transforms logs to lumber.  
Long hours hand-sanding while groves  
and children shudder, slumber. The staccato  
of measure, mark, cut, nail up  
clapboard walls and rough plank  
floors and shallow-gable roof.

When the two-month song is done  
I load boat with wife, children,  
everything we own. I bring them  
home. This is the last house  
I will build. Nancy, come too quick  
for us to get to the nursing clinic, will cry  
her way born in it, here Samuel will be  
quietly conceived.

This first night, as family  
and framing together  
creak to sleep, I hear echo  
of the house I built ten years ago.  
The roar carried over the Bay, as every  
house in this harbour  
burned to the ground, including that one  
we never had a chance  
to make our home.

## The Men Who Dug

Deep-voiced in the near-dark  
he will tell of how, ten years ago,  
while you mourned beneath  
Los Angeles sun, he put shovel  
to unfrozen Labrador earth  
to bury her.

He waits the whole week  
of your first visit back  
in sixteen years. Is waiting still  
this last night, sitting  
thick-bearded in your cousin's  
near-dark kitchen to tell you,  
her full-grown grandson  
of Halifax, Boston, California,  
Oregon. You who adored  
a woman you saw less in your  
whole life than anyone here  
might see her in a month.

His reverence so strong  
he needs you to know how he,  
how all the men who dug,  
men who've lived here all their lives,  
remember her, who lived here longer still.

Lois Leveen is a poet,  
novelist (*Juliet's Nurse*  
and *The Secrets of Mary*  
*Bowser*), and medical  
humanities scholar. Email:  
Lois@humanities  
forhealth.org



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**Crow / Francis Bacon's / The Blind Birdwatcher /  
Don't Bend Over / Dornen / Fun and Games /  
What's Left / Bindi / The Second Coming /  
Intimates**

*Crystal Hope Hurdle*

**Crow**

black dot black dots, spotting  
pebbles dislodged from the macadam  
running the other way  
hands in front of my face  
to protect from Corvid onslaught  
I know they know me  
recognize me  
have done one of their members ill  
something with a hose, I think  
a harsh onslaught of water  
the fierce stream hissing like bullets from a gun  
and this is the repayment  
as I return home from laser eye surgery  
corvus cunning  
they can master tools  
what have I left out in my back yard?  
not the hoe, oh, not the shovel!  
the nozzle grows wings

*m m m*

a sudden sweep out of the corner of the eye *m mmm*  
a flock of “m” birds *m m m*  
crows? an elongated wing span  
as if in the drawing of a child

I think of Ted Hughes’ *Crow* poems  
is this “Crow Tyrannosaurus”?  
primeval, it wants to become more and bigger  
hulk lurking into recognition?  
is this “A Disaster”?  
the spreading oozing lamprey body  
vindictiveness cleverness  
streaking through the retina  
a close-up of all black  
black as purity  
black as death  
what omen?  
crow, perhaps raven  
a large wing  
a midnight winging of crows  
sheeting down  
crow, trickster god

not a murder but an ague  
a plague of crows

or

sweet cease  
a restful primed gesso black canvas  
ready so ready  
awaiting the light

not just the *Crow* poems after all  
a conjurer’s trick  
behind the ear

coming from the back of my brain  
opposite movement of “The Thought Fox”  
violently malevolently  
the eye eye eye becomes  
its own hot dark panting muse

**Francis Bacon's**  
*Three Studies for Figures*  
*at the Base of a Crucifixion*

triptych  
elongated necks and limbs  
having eaten and drunk too much  
like a perverted Alice  
X-rated Tenniel pieces  
disembodied  
not one has eyes  
one is blindfolded  
what's beneath?

bend sinister synecdoche  
piece of tail  
tail of piece  
misogynist, misanthrope  
equal opportunity hater  
nihilist existential gloom  
blindness

for protection?  
can't see the horror?  
or is it punishment itself?  
the sightlessness  
a crucifixion

rows of teeth and open mouths  
where the eyes should be

the frantic malevolent teeth of his screaming popes  
as if the world is something to be consumed  
and voraciously  
predator predator  
ingress egress

impacted wisdom tooth  
wicked incisor  
uvula trembling like a constricted eye  
clarion calling all  
down the fanged esophageal tunnel  
Alice forever falling  
dark constricting dark  
to the beguiling ranks of blood-leached blindness  
all fall

## The Blind Birdwatcher

he trolls woods parks meadows  
for a startle of song

each unseen colour  
emerald magenta sunrise yellow  
their sibilant plumage  
the lemon pucker of flight

the brain's neurons fire  
along the slow tunnel of the dormant optic nerve  
like water buckets hand to hand  
a frisson of sound

bird song he sees  
and vividly in the mind's eye  
birding by ear

stumbles over roots for a nuthatch  
a pileated woodpecker  
feels the cadence of a hummingbird's quick wings

several feeders in his backyard  
well away from threatening windows  
peels three bananas  
smells their sticky sweetness in the feeder  
hears the tortured wings of fruit flies  
who cannot believe their luck  
the soft swish of their wings  
even softer than the hummingbirds'  
protein in their feeding on the fruit flies  
bloated with sweet and savoury submission  
higher in the food chain  
small and smaller still

buys unshelled peanuts by the kilo  
the taste of peanut on his tongue  
makes specialty blends of suet and feed

marvel:  
Black-Capped Chickadee  
Sharp-Shinned Hawk  
Double-Crested Cormorant  
even the names are musical

so ordinary but still his favourite  
a Steller's jay  
a cunning thief  
punked out bird  
electric blue  
with a black Mohawk  
beak bulging  
its nut-brown proboscis  
cartoon of the thieved nut  
sports a Mick Jagger swagger  
sound, a frayed amplifier on fry  
the blind bird watcher flaunts a similar haircut

he feels the birds' footprints on the railing  
after the bird bath  
steps so close  
he gets feathered in the spray

their sounds like tiddly winks caught up  
in his eye's cup

birds can't taste the hot pepper in purchased feed  
no such sense receptors  
squirrels can, repellent  
just rats with pretty tails, dirty

at Maplewood Mudflats  
he snacks on the pellets  
believes you are what you eat  
winces at the searing pain  
has not yet become bird himself

he can feel the murder of crows blotting out the sky  
an eclipse he senses in his body  
the thwack as the bird hits  
the Nature House's window  
eerie silence heightens  
the elegiac wailing choir of its compatriots  
stumbling, he toes the small corpse  
the dead bird like a sandbag with tied-on feet

the body in his knapsack  
along with his wax-papered sandwich  
far too busy to eat  
a dignified burial later in his backyard  
garden trowel and a flower bulb on top for new life

dawn chorus  
evening chorus  
the parentheses of his day  
so full of

now, at the bird sanctuary  
on the white board  
he traces the magic-marker letters  
of the birds sighted that month  
grins at the pun  
and hears each song  
the letters thrum to life, leaping, rustling, flapping

though he prefers to birdwatch alone  
sometimes he goes with his sighted friend

—he hears more; his partner sees more—  
it's like an equation or a musical composition  
birdwatching sharpens the mind  
good for the body, the soul

he watches birds with his heart and brain  
also his ears and tongue  
fingers nostrils  
even his penis though it's not perverse  
much less perverted  
an involuntary stiffening  
like a wet dream  
when a song always beautiful  
is more than usually so  
a thrum  
a recognition of wonder  
of small beauty almost divine  
some might cry

the Organization of Blind Bird Watchers  
he is head of his chapter  
the paperwork pains him  
but he is conscientious, passionate  
this, too, part of his life list

there are deaf bird watchers, too  
he is going to meet the local branch now  
When they go out after for coffee  
their fingers will move like the flights of small birds  
and he will listen to the faint slaps and thwacks  
smile at the sounds  
as identifiable  
as arresting  
as any unsung songbird's

## Don't Bend Over

the old joke about the soap in the shower  
but I'm not allowed to shower anyhow  
no shampoo for three days  
smell like chicken manure  
dream of Herbal Essence  
the green fields, misty meadowy  
Vaseline on the lens

I unpack Easter decorations  
look straight ahead  
box on table  
do squats to chin level  
let the packing paper fall to the floor  
don't look down!  
don't want my new implant to slip out  
hold bunnies and eggs and egg cups in front of me to see  
the peachy artificial grass of the coops so cute

eggs the same shape as illustrations of a myopic eyeball  
dotted lines show where the shafts of light meet  
in front of the retina  
no longer orb but as elliptical as an egg  
representational, but still

eye cups for washing  
—a teeny bird bath!  
such delighted splashing  
with its miniature wings  
though right now I can have none of that  
as gritty as my eye feels—  
and egg cups so similar  
though mine are less utilitarian, prettier,  
all floral curvature and spring-like colours

one falls on the floor  
if I aim just right  
I could have a hole in one!  
don't think on that!  
look up! look up!

it's the season of rebirth  
not all grass is pink and plastic  
what visions will hatch from my new eye?  
a small cheep  
the rustle of fissured ice, out of season  
the sound of squawking  
fierce enragement  
my eye cracks open

ugly duckling  
beautiful swan  
rooster caruncle  
gizzard  
avian flu viruses  
the floor beneath me cackles to life  
pecks at my ankles  
a feathery fleshy swish  
I'm too afraid to look down

## Dornen

raindrops in triplicate  
political imbroglio  
my simple Courier font has become Gothic  
letters like an unset jelly

reading writing both lost in translation

thorns reflections silhouette shadows  
all at once  
Hazard a guess  
translation is everywhere  
even in my muttersprache!

In *The Bell Jar* when Esther went crazy  
she couldn't read  
letters grew "barbs and rams' horns"  
Rams Horner Widerhaken  
but James Joyce is always impenetrable  
and German a rusty chain link fence Kudzu tall  
barbed wire above

Maybe it's not in my eyes  
but in my head?  
Stacheldraht?

Plath honeymooned in Benidorm  
Did Joyce ever visit Santorini?  
I can't read what Google claims

Sporting antlers like elk  
surly mountain goats  
walk on black lava cliffs  
far above me  
in the swirling eddies

or are they pack ponies with tie-on antlers?  
intractable bleating  
cheating? deleting?

I flail and flounder  
they mock me  
as I wait and wait some more  
warten ausbrechen  
for my volcano to erupt

## Fun and Games

makeshift  
plump chair as for chemo drips  
warehouse for abandoned furniture  
desk cornea-curved

this waiting room needs more than  
a re-face to bring it up to speed  
Renovate!

Let's rock and roll, the O. R. nurse says  
squeezing eye drop after eye drop  
*there's a party hat in your lap when ready*  
ready for what?  
I think of conical paper hats  
bright Crayola colours  
kiddy birthdays  
presents desired and unwanted  
New Year's Eve celebrations  
inebriation, pursuit and capture  
midnight kisses  
eyes wide open

it's all good fun and games until someone cries

but it looks more like a shower cap  
to keep out the reno's dust  
maybe it's happening earlier than I think  
the sedative is taking effect  
wheeee!  
a buzz saw in the background?  
or is that a chop saw?  
can't shower or shampoo for three days  
no water in the eye  
surely the tears won't be that big

this is all my protection?

it's all fun and games until someone loses an eye

dimly, a parade of Stepford patients post-surgery shuffle  
careful not to look down  
leis that look like nooses  
a conga line of party hats, noisemakers, blowouts  
only the O. R. nurses and doctors kick extra high  
their laughter balloons up and up  
suspended, a hush, an intake of breath

suddenly the ball drops  
the door slides shut on the lingering patient  
last in the line  
it darkens  
serpentine streamers  
siren song  
an abandoned lei, not mine?

Ready or not, here I come

fuck, it's all fun and games until someone dies

## What's Left

myopic child  
so close to the chalkboard she might have been velcroed  
white on black so hard to see  
but see and read and write and do she must

coke-bottle glasses and then contacts

years pass  
she looks  
intently  
wilfully  
longingly  
hopefully  
at the world, at its wonders  
throws herself into dance, hiking, birdwatching  
leaps into marriage, into parenthood

then ALS entombs her  
a slow weakening, melting

now the only muscles left are in her eyes  
she looks at letters on the board  
spells out

i

love

u

## Bindi

before follow-up laser surgery  
a stick-on yellow plastic dot on one cheek  
to make clear  
at which eye the surgeon should  
aim his laser ray  
blasting the monsters of scar tissue  
so that there won't be a never event  
a video game, low art

the lone dot like slippage  
an out-of-place bindi  
a fallen coloured tear  
a faltering third eye  
displaced  
chakra not sure where to go  
oscillating aura  
mysticism on the move

around the periphery of the eye clinic  
in a slow-moving meditative trance  
we walk  
marked, dilated, we of the pineal eyes  
waiting waiting for the surgeon god  
whose hand and word are wisdom  
what will spill into our too-open pupils?  
enter our torpid brains?

we are a tribe set apart from normal routine  
the quotidian is beyond these walls  
though it seems as if we have been here forever  
so long that we'll need to get another  
referral from our family doctors  
or a walk-in clinic for **this** appointment

ritual, repetition  
perception, hubris, injustice  
the eye clinic now a special satellite of the VAG  
we will soon become a new Bharti Kher performance art piece  
our affliction high art

## The Second Coming

to avoid marking  
stacks of incomprehensible poetry analyses  
sullied student logic like hieroglyphics  
Yeats' rough beast as a celebrity rocker  
I'd joked about what a rough ride his Mary would have  
as he slouched into the holy city

I'll get some cleaning done  
floors washed and waxed  
pet hair sucked up  
dishes dried and shelved  
surfaces immaculate

now what?

in my absence  
the paper piles have grown to a teetering height  
so I mop myself into a corner of the bathroom  
housework to bodywork

clean it up

what might be found in the hidden recesses of my body?  
drug runners cross borders with drugs in rectums, vaginas  
like so many Benwa balls but probably not as titillating

fornix fun fact,  
this from a spectacularly weak student,  
prostitutes used to ply their trade under the arches  
of Ancient Rome  
the question: fornicate in your vault or mine?

I try to turn myself inside out  
but it's a chore and a bore

the hand mirror a too-teeny speculum  
not much bigger than a Q-tip  
and no chance of hitting my G-spot

cakes of earwax plucked  
look like floating candles wickless, witless  
I really should be getting back to work  
but what might be wrested from my nose with a finger?  
circlets of gold?  
the lost scrolls of Ancient Somebody-or-other?  
maybe an essay that reveals Somesense?  
(I should be so lucky)

while examining a wrinkle  
I pull down my lower left eyelid  
some woman had 27 contact lenses hidden in hers  
not urban myth—  
I've seen the pictures!

wrinkled dingbat, her deep-set eyes  
like treasure chests  
pirate fortune  
17 lenses, 17!  
becoming a thin pearl  
mucous shielding the irritant, its shimmer coating  
a gem, a halo

I'm vigilant about good lens hygiene  
but what the hell  
I excavate my left fornix ... and find  
—I'm as surprised as anyone when out fall—  
two turtle doves  
four calling birds  
and a partridge resembling a falcon  
in a desiccated all too-familiar pear tree  
which scratches and burns a little  
as it exits

I have to back away from the sink  
the bathroom is crowded!  
all those wretched birds in the Jacuzzi tub  
too loud for a solitary Tuesday afternoon  
Christmas yet months away  
so this cache is from last year?

if this is the secular, where's the sacred?  
will frankincense, magi, and a baby Jesus  
plummet from the right eye?  
That rocking cradle will have awfully pointy corners

Well, I'd rather leave something for tomorrow  
wait on the advent  
everyone needs someone to love  
something worthwhile to do and  
something to look forward to

so I'll put the cotton balls away  
go back to my marking  
surprisingly refreshed and weightless  
if it weren't for all the squawking  
the gnashing of beaks  
and the unsanitary, slippery  
bird droppings  
that I really should clean up

goose grease as lubricant  
a fornix is as a fornix does  
maybe the Immaculate Conception  
was through not the ear but the eye?

suddenly the disturbing flutter of wings  
how big is that bird?  
oh, Geez, a ministering angel?  
not the dawn of a new-fangled Gabriel  
blethering about another Annunciation

Yeats clearly a little off  
with the timing of “The Second Coming”

though I doubt it will do much good  
—egress, ingress, don’t you know—  
I step away from the sink  
make an emergency rain hat of a small clutch of essays  
double-lock the bathroom door  
avert my eyes from the too-yielding expansive mirror  
my face leonine, hooded

close my eyes tight tight  
turn out the light  
and pray

## Intimates

at the eye doctor's no stirrups and speculum  
no probing pink canals and narrow cavities  
no thin fishy leakage  
but a deeper intimacy

she stares into my inner orbits  
curvature of each retina  
orbs' hydrostatic equilibrium  
back of my brain  
a planetary pull  
getting close to the soul  
her Ekleburg eye looms  
aperture

she commands  
my eyeballs move as the hands of a clock  
look to three o'clock  
six o'clock  
eleven o'clock  
what time is it, Mr. Wolf?  
oh, grandmother, what big eyes you have!  
putting me through a long day  
I've been in this chair forever  
soon into the seasons  
don't want to lose an hour  
will I see better if I gain one?  
daylight savings time?  
I struggle to remain stationary  
compliant

for today's children  
analogue as ancient as Sanskrit  
what does she bark to them?  
I recall a Beverly Cleary story

mother tells Ramona to leave home  
at quarter after eight  
She knows a quarter is twenty-five cents  
so she leaves at 8:25  
doesn't understand how she can be late for school  
runs and runs but can't catch up

sure don't want that kind of miscommunication  
when the cataract surgeon marks my eye  
for implant placement  
six o'clock, he says and marks below my iris  
six? is that a.m. or p.m.?  
time for a drink?  
it's cocktail hour somewhere

don't fuck up  
don't want my eye to be a cinematographic photograph  
no camera obscura for me  
how obsolete is that?  
no aqueous humour leaking through a pinhole  
like a blown-out Easter egg  
my vision like a Jeff Wall lightbox  
do not desire to stand on my head to see everything  
my life unfolding as a photo-conceptual performance piece

is Pluto even registered as a planet anymore?  
things can change in the blink of an eye  
don't blink!  
my eye jerks into readiness—fuck!  
Spring back!  
Fall forward!

Author of *Teacher's Pets*  
and *After Ted & Sylvia*,  
**Crystal Hurdle** teaches  
English and Creative  
Writing at Capilano  
University. Email:  
churdle@capilanou.ca



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## On Sleeping In

*Julie Hein*

Every day, I adjust the alarm clock on my phone. Five minutes later, 15 minutes earlier, the exact time calculated precisely by me, factoring in the time of team rounds, the expected traffic on the way to the hospital, and the number of patients I have to see beforehand. As a third year resident, now finally a senior, the duty of pre-rounding thankfully passes over me, with one exception: if there is a patient in the ICU.

For days, weeks, that's where you've been: that cramped room in the intensive care unit. So earlier we round, and thus earlier I arrive each day, ready to tackle the list of overnight vitals and lines, decipher the vent settings and drips, update the team on your status. "She's the same, no big updates, nothing different than yesterday," I report, day in and day out. Stably sick, yet we all know, steadily dying.

Until one afternoon, a family meeting was called by our ICU colleagues and serendipitously discovered by my attending and me as we passed by your room. We immediately knew something

was different, seeing your family and friends gathered around your room, crying. We knew then you weren't stable. You were sick.

I sat like a fly on the wall in that meeting. Discussions of code status, of de-escalating care, of your wishes for life and death. Your family was brave, fighting back the tears as they spoke for you and listened. The ICU team was kind and calming; my own attending more eloquent and honest and raw than I've ever seen. I myself not speaking, partly because I didn't know the words to say, and partly because I did know but knew that if I said them I'd cry.

"Likely within the next 24 hours," they said. Your two young sons sobbed into their father's arms as they stared at this thin sliver of a person, their mother, and said their goodbyes. I said my own silent goodbye as I walked past your room one last time. Then, alone, I cried my own tears, followed by an impromptu therapy session by my attending, my mentor. His wise words stick with me: you were a part of her life, and a part of her death, and that means something.

Vulnerable and drained, I drove home. A quiet walk with my husband and a home-cooked dinner proved cathartic. Then two hours later, a simple text from my co-resident gave me the news I was expecting.

So I won't come in early tomorrow. I adjust the alarm on my phone. One less patient to see, one less note to write, one less patient to round on. I will sleep in, while you too finally rest.

**Julie Hein** is a third year Ob/Gyn resident at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center. Email: [jhein@mednet.ucla.edu](mailto:jhein@mednet.ucla.edu)



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South Granville, Saturday Evening /  
In the Year of the Rooster / Hiking in the Forest /  
Father Knows Why / To Be Continued:  
A Portrait of a Poet Getting Newly Old

*Changming Yuan*

**South Granville, Saturday Evening**

All construction noises gone. Except fewer  
And fewer cars swishing by. A veggie dinner  
I watched wolf warriors. She stared at  
Her smartphone. No visitor as on every  
Other eve. I thought of making love  
*I want. No!* She is no longer a woman  
Let alone mine. No internal communication of  
Any kind. So aged we can no longer go to bed  
Earlier or later. I wandered awhile online  
Trump again. Doklam standoff continued  
No fire between Guam and NK. No body  
Contact either. No more. The bed is too small  
For two big different dreamers. However  
Always too large for a small stanza

## In the Year of the Rooster

This is not really Chinese zodiac  
But born in a year of the rooster last century  
I was fated to crow aloud to summon  
The first morning glows above the

Rice-fields, constantly pecking here and there  
For a seed or a pebble bit within the walking  
Distance of my grandma's straw-roofed  
Cottage, ready to put up a chicken fight

With my fleshy crown standing up straight  
Although never able to fly higher than a broken  
Fence, since my body was winged  
With more fat than feathers

Only after I died did I manage to travel afar  
To an exotic land, when my naked being  
Was minced and served for a minor course  
In a recyclable plate as in this little poem

## Hiking in the Forest

I stepped aside to let the cyclist pass  
*You are welcome!* I said. He actually  
Had said nothing, but I assumed he had  
Said *Thanks!* And a light feeling swept  
Through my heart, *You are welcome*  
As I continued to follow the trail  
Into the depth of Pacific Spirit Forest  
Each step trodden on the leaves  
And a breeze blew through the komorebi  
*You are welcome* in this kingdom of trees, the  
Whole natural world I was in, together with  
All my heart and soul. *You are welcome*  
To share the tranquility of an unmanned realm, where  
The entire physical world wraps itself up  
In me, and beyond all roads. *You are welcome*  
To penetrate my private moment of space and, in particular  
*You are welcome* to cut short this line of thought

## Father Knows Why

You know well where your son lives  
You forget his address, and each time  
Your birthday approaches, he forgets to call  
You. He is simply too exhausted by his job  
Too occupied with his own family affairs, or  
Too busy hanging around with his pals, while  
His baby daughter spends all his money  
Saved to pay his mortgage. You miss him  
A lot sometimes, but you don't want to go  
To California, or near where he dwells. You  
Know you always could—there's even no need to  
Apply for a visa; there will always be plenty  
Of time for travel. Your father came to visit  
You only once. That was a trip from the other  
Side of the world, to Vancouver, Westside.

## To Be Continued: A Portrait of a Poet Getting Newly Old

Born with half a dozen defects and deformities  
But always trying to be a damned perfectionist

Never able to pass any English test in a Chinese high school  
But managed to obtain a Canadian PhD in English literature

Growing up in the lowest physical conditions  
But having the highest quests for spiritual life

With much fewer needs for money than a true puritan  
But working like an unserviced coin-making machine

Deep in love with nature  
But prisoned in a big city

A man of few words by nature  
But making a living by teaching

Enjoys expressing himself most  
But has few readers or listeners

Cherished a young dream about becoming a political leader  
But living a self-exiled marginalized life most of the time

Never really cared for by any human  
But full of love for other fellow beings

**Changming Yuan**  
edits *Poetry Pacific* with  
Allen Yuan and hosts  
*Happy Yangsheng* in  
Vancouver. He has pub-  
lished over 1,409 poems  
across 41 countries. Email:  
changmingyuan@gmail  
.com



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## Blue Johnnies

*Jennifer Markell*

The woman beside me opens a vial  
of dirt scraped from Chimayo,  
sacred ground she rubs between her palms.  
She tells me her mother hung crutches

from an altar, but here we sit  
with clipboards in our laps, awaiting  
the radiologist's word, wondering  
how misfortune will divide,  
if our names will be written  
in the clean margins.

As girls we drew straws and chanted  
the luck of rock, paper, scissors,  
pulled brittle wishbones  
until they cracked and broke.  
Now we hold tight in shivering rooms  
where plates of glass slide between worlds.

Jennifer Markell is a  
psychotherapist whose  
poetry collection  
*Samsara* was awarded  
"Must-Read" by the  
Massachusetts Book  
Awards. Email:  
JenniferM7@comcast  
.net



*Volume 13*  
*Issue 1*  
*2018*

## **Long Life!**

*Ann Starr*

I was a chubby child and a fat adolescent, but it was clear to me that being fat made a difference to my parents, who were offended by my shape and weight. I was abnormal in their dream of the perfectly normal, middle-class, Midwestern family to which they aspired as can only those who had been raised as Poor White Trash. I was the bulging, throbbing red thumb that announced the family's advance before we arrived. Even worse, I was the only blonde of their four children, so my uncouth size was a particularly hurtful poke in the eye. When isn't blonde and blue-eyed beautiful? When it's fat. When it's me.

My brothers, four and six years older, would introduce my little sister as "The Pretty One." I was "The Smart One." I suppose I should have thanked them for substituting "smart" for "fat." Lacking captions, would anyone have drawn the true conclusions about us? My sister and I understood our labels to be mutually exclusive. The Pretty One suffered well into middle age the false conviction that she was intellectually inferior to The Smart One.



Volume 12  
Issue 2  
2017

Although I was the designated family blot, all six members of my family were squarely on the healthy side of the life-or-death equation. My parents were hungry children during the Depression, and I believe that they never filled up. Admirably, they never let their children go hungry. There would always be red meat in the center of the plate. At every dinner that robust serving of meat would be surrounded by two cooked vegetables, an over-dressed salad, bread with butter and jelly, and a buttery potato. A home-baked dessert or ice cream followed. Heaven help the child who might declare herself “stuffed” before any food placed before her was eaten: “Clean your plate!” It was only Christian. We were taught to override natural regulators of appetite to insure that no one wasted those calories our mere existence deflected from the world’s bloated-belly poor.

So I grew up cleaning my loaded plate while swallowing the commonplace, ironically fed me, which being fat resulted from eating too much food. When I was an adolescent and could go about the world on my own, I broke loose from tyrannical feeders by making my own *ad hoc* menu, indulging my freedom in candy bars, ice cream, and little cans of fried onion rings that called out to me. I fed mine in hiding. I was ashamed to have witnesses; my eating was masturbatory. My right to exist hadn’t been proven and I knew full well that I took up “more than my fair share” of space. On one hand I cowered; on the



*Volume 12*  
*Issue 2*  
2017

other I gave the finger to anyone who looked at me too long.

I wasn't born with pica or a deviant compulsion to jerk cookies to my mouth: This wasn't a pediatric medical condition. I was learning how to use my experience to solve a problem. When there's an external threat, an embattled creature does well to surround itself with a stout defensive wall.

Father monitored women. He noticed them with an anatomist's specificity. When we sat down each evening for our family meal, instead of asking what the children had learned in school, he debriefed his observations about the females his prurience radar had tracked that day. Each "broad" received a rating comment: whose ass looked like two pigs in a sack; who had no decency to be wearing jeans in public; whose stocking seams weren't straight, and whose dress must have been glued on. Even with my limited experience of fathers and dining customs, I often squirmed in my chair and gulped my food.

I never imagined becoming a woman because it was clearly too hazardous an aspiration. It helped in a way that my dad declared The Smart One a poor marriage prospect by virtue of her unappealing figure. Mother seemed not to disagree, but she wasn't one to speak up anyway. Where Father was pulled up to the table, salivating with his bib tucked in, Mother was out to lunch. I even had to suggest to her that I was probably overdue for a bra? The other girls were talking. ... She was so



*Volume 12*  
*Issue 2*  
*2017*

surprised that I actually saw her eyes refocus. For how long had she not looked up to think about it? “You may be right,” she allowed.

Bur Father never missed a thing and wasn’t shy about speaking up. The pleasure I took in an autumn afternoon, stretched out on the living room floor, basking in a generous patch of afternoon sunshine, was chilled by my growing awareness of Father’s crossed-arm presence looming behind me. I couldn’t see him, but I heard him turn away muttering in a stage whisper, “Just look at those thighs.” The disgust was as heavy as if he’d sniffed chicken putrefying at the back of the refrigerator.

\* \* \*

In the family photograph album were certain square, black and white Brownie snapshots with wavy edges that Mother passed over quickly because she thought they made her look fat. They were taken at the community pool on some occasion when she had taken my sister and me swimming. She just looked like Mom to me, and as a kid I didn’t get what I do now, that she saw her image as something grotesque and distorted. Maybe she considered that she still had postpartum weight to shed. At the least, she had been caught unawares and hadn’t been able to strike her best pose. I don’t recall Mother as overweight though, but as the opposite: I recall her as episodically thin tending to the skinny, as in long and neutral and slithering toward death.



*Volume 12*  
*Issue 2*  
2017

Mom's scrapes with death were always wind-ups to surgeries or the results of surgeries. She had ulcers several times, each time requiring an operation. Before the operation she'd be thin, I think because her gastric pain limited the foods she could tolerate, or she was on some special diet for ulcer patients. She couldn't drink milk or orange juice. But certainly when she came home from the hospital on Jell-O diets, she was even thinner. I was in elementary school in those days and didn't understand any details of the big picture. The thinner she grew, the more frightening the prognosis. But Mom didn't die. Slowly, she'd plump back up and life would go on until the next flesh-eating medical crisis.

By the time I was in eighth grade, Mother was no longer having ulcers, but was sick as a result of the past ulcer operations. Scar tissue had built up at the base of her esophagus, the site of several earlier operations, and it grew steadily more difficult for food to pass into her stomach. She was a trooper though and would not be deterred from attending a National Science Foundation six-week summer institute for teachers that she'd been admitted to. My brothers stayed with Father in Ohio while my sister and I were sent with Mother to Providence, where we stayed in Brown University dormitory housing.

Mom didn't last the course. We had to be evacuated because she was starving. For the couple of weeks we were there, she persisted in a conflicted,



*Volume 12*  
*Issue 2*  
2017

masochistic way. My sister and I would find her in the bathroom swallowing a Medieval-looking medical device—a thick, heavy rubber snake that, once swallowed far enough and placed correctly, she jiggled about in efforts to enlarge what small passage remained into her stomach. My sister and I were considered Big Girls, but, “Was this right?” we’d wonder, stranded and queasy. We felt little and vulnerable and tried to plan what we’d do if she died, but we didn’t have the first idea what we’d do. We weren’t keen on being rescued by Dad, who was terrified of hospitals, medicine, and operations, and made no bones about it. When he came to take us home, we were unsettled to find him not shocked, but unfazed by his failing wife’s shadowed pride in her new figure. When we were airlifted home, all five feet and seven inches of Mother weighed eighty-five pounds.

I’ve encountered women since who have, in compromised health, exhibited behavior similar to Mother’s. Her anorexic body invited sympathy for her illness, yet she was not inattentive to any expressions—muffled or exclamatory—of wonder or wistfulness for the transformation. The means of her achievement was beside the point: She hadn’t died, and she was thinner than anyone else. Once she was on her feet again, Dad extolled her figure, and I supposed then that she liked it, however cross this made me. I didn’t care how she looked; I didn’t even care about her feelings anymore. My sister and I had been set aside like props during the whole



Volume 12  
Issue 2  
2017

ghastly episode, left unplanned for, to depend on each other for comfort. In the bloody fervor of our wishes that Mother would survive, our comfort fantasies never led to the victory of her renewed sex appeal, but only to our own self-indulgent dreams that our mom would awaken to concern for her pubescent, newly bleeding daughters.

\* \* \*

In my forties, as the result of a very disorderly nervous breakdown, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I was as depressed as glue. My anger was as terrifying when quiet as when shrapnel explosions shattered all sanity.

These days, surgeries aren't often prescribed for conditions like mine, so electro-shock therapy was never mentioned within my hearing, and I believe lobotomy is a barbaric bygone. Gone too is the institution of *asylum*, open-ended time and a place free from daily noise, where the silenced inner voices can have a chance to be heard.

When I fell apart, my downfall was publically marked not as much by my becoming an unpredictable menace as much as it was by my simultaneous transformation to Fat Lady. There's no question that my fatness was the result of two drugs. Prozac was only anecdotally tied to weight gain, but it certainly put pounds on me. Since research didn't support the evidence I reported, doctors were free to believe I lied about my eating habits. I've found this to be a regular side effect of



*Volume 12*  
*Issue 2*  
2017

Prozac, that the people in regular contact with the patient suffer increased incredulity about her testimony on all reported experience. When I started taking Depakote, which clinic studies have shown to disinhibit appetite and increase weight, my providers were less tendentious.

But I'm talking only about side effects here. Getting fat was the least of my worries then. My concern was to last each day without causing or suffering mayhem. Because my family would need support in case I failed to maintain the household fabric; if my children or husband were infected by anxiety; if the girls were bullied about their crazy mother, or should I have a fatal accident; for all these reasons, I did not keep my diagnosis a secret. I couldn't worry about being scorned. But as I grew fatter, I realized that I provided something much easier than my diagnosis for others to cringe about. In a smart, wealthy community, gossiping about a person's mental illness is unseemly and makes adults feel small. Disapproving of the mentally ill is fraught, both socially and when you lie awake at night facing your failings across the counterpane. It's normal, though, to disapprove of fat people. Still, I was so grateful that Depakote controlled my mood extremes that I considered even the fat an absolute benefit to me, as good as bananas or coffee. My vanity was nothing compared to relief from the shifting winds of anomie and hysteria.

Yet when a door opened to let vanity peek in years later, I risked an experimental medication



*Volume 12*  
*Issue 2*  
2017

change. A new psychiatrist asked me to replace Depakote with topiramate, a new anti-convulsive that had been found to have the added property of effective mood stabilization. Incidentally, patients on topiramate lost weight: Maybe I could find two forms of relief from the new pill.

Topiramate held my moods and, with no effort on my part, my weight declined by over forty pounds in a few years. I was delighted with the way I looked and felt. Bipolar disorder is soul-crushing. Learning to gain control of one's moods and emotions without becoming a terrorist of the self is hard work from which there is no rest. To be granted a free pass in another struggle—one I'd decided to forgo anyway—was an inestimable good.

A slimmer body is a good thing, but it's no silver lining to the terrors of major mental illness. I assured well-meaning admirers that the assumption of a mighty struggle to discipline my body was absolutely incorrect: there had been neither intention nor effort on my part.

And for those who knew about my psychiatric struggles, the change of my figure "for the better" appeared to signal an "improved" outlook too. In fact, entirely unremarked or cheered by anyone, I had been recovering all along, even as Depakote expanded my girth.

But when I lost weight, I was easier for others to take in, and the health attributed to me increased as I grew less objectionable to the public eye. Once I lost weight, people fantastically regis-



*Volume 12*  
*Issue 2*  
2017

tered improvements of mood that I had already long since achieved. Worse, their assumptions that I was finally “returning to normal” blocked any appreciation for the magnitude of my work and accomplishments. Had I remained fat, I’d have been free to continue my recovery without being returned to the wrong box of normative and nice. Being overweight palpably reminds others that you are abnormal, and they remain wary. There is freedom in that.

\* \* \*

Isn’t it normal to want to be thin? Isn’t thin pretty and sexy? And doesn’t every woman, married or not, wish to be the envy of other women? Well, I did not.

Being thoughtlessly relegated to the sphere of the healthy and stable by weight loss, suddenly I was burdened by all the social assumptions that accompany slimming down. Bipolar illness labels one as avoidable; shunning provides its own little island of protection. But now I found that I was assumed to be a different kind of menace, one caused by a better figure on top of the divorce my illness had precipitated. What is more threateningly unpredictable than a mentally ill woman: A divorced woman who has lost weight. Then the history of mental illness becomes secondary to the politics of freedom and shape.

Had I been able to acknowledge how fragile I was in the first years of the millennium, I’d proba-



*Volume 12*  
*Issue 2*  
2017

bly not have made it. I was fighting bipolar disorder for control of my future and past while coping with a divorce that had uprooted me from my home and every familiar relationship. Living in a new place in another state, I was no longer a person with a history of mental derangement; I didn't even have a psychiatrist. In a new place, I was perceived as a high-strung divorcee of reasonable appearance. As such I was competition to other single women, ineligible for family invitations, and carefully kept at a distance by the wives of married men. Where was Depakote when I really needed it? My life would have been better with those thirty extra pounds to cushion and protect me against the psycho-social assumptions that obstructed on my uphill, invisible personal work of restoring and reinforcing my mental health.

"No rest for the wicked!" a friend liked to quip. How true. Illness, no matter how private to one's own body or mind, is always a public performance, and performance invites criticism whether or not you wanted to be in the public eye. At the height of my despair during my mental health crisis, even my husband had decided that I was "faking it" because I didn't "act sick" enough for his preconceptions. Nothing so wretched as the inscrutable world of the walking ill.

Everyone soldiers on in life, whether or not we are ill or feel capable of functioning in the world. It's not only the mentally ill who have to improvise their lives like this, but people with all sorts of



*Volume 12*  
*Issue 2*  
2017

invisible dysfunctions that absorb vast shares of their energies. I know as well as anyone the value of protective silence and invisibility where I can heal at my own pace, under the care of a trusted doctor, with the setbacks and victories that come slowly over time. I know that circumstances almost never grant these: insurance companies do not pay for asylum. Even more demanding are the curious and critical people with whom we interact in public places and our homes daily.

Society sees thin people in a way that it doesn't regard the overweight. Positive ideas associated with thinness form a trap of assumptions that extends to every aspect of the life of the observed: "She loves being looked at." "She is just who she appears to be; it's impossible that she could disguise anything—like illness." She is no trouble to the observer, who is comfortable with what he sees. If she goes off the rails; if she commits suicide, no one will have seen it coming: "She was so normal, so perfect." But then, she was left with nowhere private to place the other.

Weight, mental illness, or abnormality may all make me a dangerous person to the world, or unlikeable at the least. My experience shows me how valuable they are to self-protection and healing. Few people tolerate difference in others very well; we don't like to be disrupted, interrupted, or asked to consider a new flavor.

People with invisible ailments do well to make themselves conspicuous in a disruptive way.



*Volume 12*  
*Issue 2*  
*2017*

Normal people will whisper or mutter, disapprove, and steer clear, leaving the sick and tired blessed space needed for their thoughts and doubts, their trials and errors to play out in. Space to hear and talk with people. They can hear without the interference of unthinking wishers for the wellness of fitting right in.

**Ann Starr** is writing a personal history of embodiment. She is the publisher of Upper Hand Press. Email: [annstarr@sbcglobal.net](mailto:annstarr@sbcglobal.net)



Volume 13  
Issue 1  
2018

## Transplant Surgery

*Rebekka DePew*

Another universe stands behind the door as we wait between the worlds in a back hallway. We cannot be accused of asking for what is not ours if we are not in the room. There is a pause just long enough to talk about Halloween costumes and what my necklace says, the weather and weekend plans. We cannot be accused of taking what is not ours if we are not in the room.

Then we enter, and those behind the curtain know how to breathe for a dead man. I hold his aorta as it pulses out final heartbeats. Soon other stories take over: four people used to being in charge. Thoracic wants a longer pulmonary vein and the results of blood gasses that never got sent. He crowds the table with three others, all trying to reach into the same space and take what they want.

**Rebekka DePew**  
is a second-year at  
Vanderbilt Medical  
School. Email:  
rebekka.e.depew@  
vanderbilt.edu

The petty arguments that arise in these sorts of situations behind a surprising optimism for human potential – we are like the bodies that house us. Even when fragmented, we can be kept together just long enough to fall apart correctly. To live on, in pieces, elsewhere.



Volume 13  
Issue 1  
2018

## Farinata After the Flood

*Garry Thomas Morse*

The plane tilted its nose upward and quickly vanished. Farinata cast his eyes away from the disposable headline. Almost a hundred towns declared to be in a state of emergency. The headline guy or gal had to keep it going, the fear and the sense of infinite chaos. A job well done. Of course, he couldn't complain. The consensus was that he was staying in a place built on a slough that would sink into the gooey clay soil before too long. Eighty to ninety millimetres had fallen, and he had experienced a mild scare. The water in the storm drain had kept rising, and Farinata had regressed back to his sorry origins, even to the exact instant when the trauma had first formed. Then out of a cozy wet nook he had been heaved—screaming out into a world that probably did not have his best interests at heart.

Farinata sat on the live and dead grass and looked down into the shimmering brown water. Some kids had been wading in the impromptu pool only yesterday, terrified of eels, but was he adult enough to give them two bits worth of advice? After the mild scare, a raven had tired of flight and had walked around instead, picking up



Volume 13  
Issue 1  
2018

bugs and worms. During the rains he was not a threat, but a red-winged blackbird didn't split hairs—or feathers—and dive-bombed the bigger bird repeatedly. Often, the same bird could be found warding off iridescent Brewer's blackbirds on foraging missions. Farinata thought that the red-winged blackbird was exemplar of fatherhood, but that thought only brought back the trauma, or more accurately, its harbinger, like some unidentified but almost fathomable speck on the horizon that was approaching at top speed. Farinata felt it approaching and turned away, turning his mind to anti-matters. He remembered the celebrated painter from these parts who had striven so hard—all her life in fact—to think of nothing. Most folks didn't have to try quite so hard, but that judgment was only another mood coming on, or so he reckoned, like a funny cloud floating into view. He need not heed its shape nor pore over the prospect of its future outpourings. No, the sun was shining and, for the moment, he was happy. Not too happy, as that could knock him off balance just as easily. Climb no mountains and you will find no valleys. The hot hard flat of the path, that was for him, and in his estimation, long and substantive and relatively comma-less. Vast sections of this dry unforgiving place were submerged, but that did not matter. The landscape could not all *become ardent aquarium* because he knew that was only a misquoted line in his head. He knew that sun and land were altering him, too.



*Volume 13*  
*Issue 1*  
*2018*

You couldn't run from your problems, and yet, he had done so, or so he figured, and that was quite all right. He was a different person and that was also quite all right. He felt that he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, the (stupid) need for money, other needs he dare not name lest he disrupt his fine equilibrium under the sun. Various problems had stowed away with him, but they were friendlier once afloat, and besides, they had nowhere to hide amid all this openness. The trick was to give up everything, to live a life that most folks on two-thirds of the continent would consider a life not worth living, and to no practical purpose, living that "crummy" life for its own sake and somehow deeming it none too shabby. Indeed, he was pacing himself, and taking in things very slowly. Feel around—fumble if you must—for the present, then grab hold gently. That was the best he could do and that was quite all right.

A small grasshopper hopped from one plant stem to another. Then another. Then another. A while back, they had been tiny nymphs, clinging for dear life to a blade of grass. Now they were instars although the precise stage eluded him. After a long winter, the adults had appeared first, crepitating during spells of intense sunlight. They were band-winged grasshoppers, but their scientific name was like something out of a classical Greek play. The other day, he had seen a small specimen with an intricate pattern on its pronotum and abdomen. The professor's best guess was an immature clear-winged grasshopper, one of the two leading pests. Sharing that title, and sharing the same field of



*Volume 13*  
*Issue 1*  
*2018*

wild barley and thistle right near Urban Barn, was the two-striped grasshopper, who did small penance for wiping out crops by eating up herbicide-resistant kochia (originally a bit of tumbleweed rolling across the landscape, hell-bent on colonizing a relatively yellow landscape). In the same field, the lesser migratory grasshopper and Packard's grasshopper were up and about, and doing their part to eat everything in sight. As for the speckled rangeland and northern green-striped grasshoppers, they enjoyed singing in the live and dead grass upon which they dined, preferring this mound in the sun that encouraged their leaps of courtship. Yes, they were also quite all right. They could fly pretty far, but courting slowed them down. The males would crepitate with a flash of red or yellow wings, and then a female would either wave a suitor in or, in Saskatchewan fashion, get into the kick-off position, which as signals go was loud and clear. Anyway, they would all be dead soon. That was the brutal truth and not one of Farinata's valleys of mood getting its own back. He was all right with the brutal truth because there was by no means a shortage of them any given summer.

A light breeze blew through clumps of cattails in the middle of the slough, which was not really a slough. Soon, it would dry up again to a mere trickling. Memories would be reduced to garbage that perpetually floated in from construction sites and retail outlets. When the snows had first stopped, Farinata had been caught tidying up around a bush in front of his window and had been warned by passing neigh-



*Volume 13*  
*Issue 1*  
2018

hours that the city did that. Actually, there were two or three people who rode around in a little car to check on each plant. There was also one woman who was never seen doing anything but driving around in circles and talking on her phone. She had turned the role of civic worker into an art form, but she was not the special someone Farinata had taken a shine to when he was in a mood—or in the mood. She had given him the glad eye and had even gossiped about him—wait, that didn't add up to much. He must have heard a few things before his mood had taken him for a “joyride,” shooting off on a frolic of its own. In the interim, he had given up coffee, or more accurately, the place had produced a powerful disinclination for the stuff within him. Irish breakfast did the trick, in the rotation with green, jasmine, lemon, hibiscus, blueberry superfruit, chamomile, and licorice spice for those frequent occasions when he required an adaptogen to deal with startling new situations. Passionflower before bed was now reality and not a come-on, honest.

Farinata would have been happy—but not too happy—to explain to the young lady his working theories, were they not an epidemic of overshare or TMI, thanks to her caffeinated contributions and extra-strong cups of Kicking Horse at home, combined with the seasonal shift around the time of, say, a recent stabbing in the downtown mall, which had increased his propensity for “manic” behaviour, turning slights real or imagined into gushing injuries—in that case, there was little difference, if an emotional injury birthed the suppression or eradication of a key gene for regulating



Volume 13  
Issue 1  
2018

neuronal production, or let us say, nodal dedication—so that her finger-to-nose pejorative retorts reached his acute hearing heightened by misappropriated adrenal purpose, and without even buying dinner first, took advantage of his flawed hippocampus—or let us say, cerebral seahorse—and recontextualized this sudden glut of neural data in terms of image, sensation, and mood. For argument’s sake, let us suppose that the aftermath from a string of unhealthy relationships, already glomming onto that common trait of Wagnerian heroes, that fear of abandonment engendered by progenitors who had left him on a wobbly hillock (or butte) that one time, or perhaps without umbilical for good, cultivating a neatly labelled neuronal garden to which the name of the fair-to-middling barista was appended, like a colourful species pinned right through speckled shield under glass, or a fickle noon-flower plunked down in the muck. Given such a loveless *a priori*, the rough-and-tumble *a posteriori* arose from the imbalance of glutamate promoting irritability, to dip our beaks even deeper in the elemental chemistry of Farinata’s issues, postulating in step with the school of thought that dopamine agonists have a starring role in precipitating mania. In other words, the red-handed culprit, happiness.

We would have a real story on our hands if Farinata were addicted to counting bathroom tiles, buying irregular shoe sizes, voting against celebrity poker players, or watching golden shower scenarios until his red eyes ached—or eked basalt, whichever comes first. No, he was merely excited by the thought



*Volume 13*  
*Issue 1*  
*2018*

of her and quickly upset by the absence of her, cast down into a despondent quagmire of confused interpretations, what with the mind being its own place, even if it was more purgatorial than ever before. Now he could watch joggers of all shapes and sizes jouncing past his window and no longer feel it was absolutely necessary to mate with each and every one of them, lest he perish before the summer ended. Now he would cease to swagger about playing tarnished knight for splendid ladies between the hours of ten and two on business days, splendid ladies who had already pledged their troth to unresponsive oafs. Now he would seek out his own borage—an abominable turn of phrase—in that field of wild barley where purple thistles nodded over sow thistle and buffalo beans, where he had spent many idle hours in contemplation of surrounding canola or mustard, or incestuous combinations of the two, ignoring that upstart mania waiting in the wings like a brash understudy ready to burst out at the first misstep, provided the killdeer did not kick up the usual fuss. After all, there were plans to move the #1 and lengthen his constitutional and that was quite all right.

Farinata was famished and that did not help. He opened a small bag of mountain trail mix and knocked back a few handfuls. Fatty acids and selenium, followed by naturally occurring lithium and magnesium, and sounding far more exciting than nuts, seeds, and a glass of fizzy water. His stomach brain would be free to give the all-clear to his “brain” brain, giving him leave to go on a vision quest although there wasn’t



Volume 13  
Issue 1  
2018

quite enough mix for that. Then again, no mountains, no valleys. In some ways, to examine the fifth instar of the infamous *cannula pellucida* had been his vision quest, a real vision only a few paces away that would lead to a luminous journey inward. Of course, it was not too late to catch a bus to the farmer's market. Then he could buy baby kale and pea shoots from the grumpy hippy type whose mustard green dreams are besieged by drifting canola and rolling kochia. Farinata had not dared to see if the purveyors of chicken and waffles were back—suddenly the image of Trish flickered seductively across the packed live screening just above his barking animal brain, downing a waffle that left traces of whipped cream on her lips, revealing the faint apparition of her tongue ...

Hang on, that had not even happened! False idols were a symptom of one of his moods gearing up—yes, the sun was already at a certain angle of intensity. The lone noon-flower had shut up long ago, and the grasshoppers around him were crackling to signify their half-mad interest in mating. Farinata heard rapid snaps and caught scarcely perceptible flashes of colour. No, the food truck might not be there. If the food truck was not there, he might sink into a valley and find himself unable to claw his way up and out again, and then the simple trip downtown would become a tragic adventure. No, he did not want to stray too far from the pseudoslough today. Perhaps he would go to the breakfast chain with the grandmotherly icon. No, they would only give him heaps of white flour with a few berries hidden somewhere in-



Volume 13  
Issue 1  
2018

side—practically a form of colonization—for an arm and a leg, and that too would be tragic. It would also be strange for him to observe countless families enjoying themselves in a great clamour, lifting those suspect objects into their “cakeholes,” as he reminded himself he was the one with the noggin problem.

Two of the city workers passed in their large orange car that saved them from having to walk more than a few feet along the environmental reserve. They did not return Farinata’s smile and, in return, he did not think much of them. Still, they were winning the war on mosquito larvae, or so he understood, and that was something. It was good to try and keep happy, but not too happy. Then he thought of the little bird. One night, he had been listening to Cecilia Bartoli’s forceful rendition of Vivaldi’s *Cessate, omai cessate* when he realized that one of the robin’s brood in the bush outside was trying to sing back at the voice it could hear, and with much difficulty. Would the trauma for the little bird be one day learning that Cecilia Bartoli was not its mother and could not—schedule permitting—bring food, perhaps not now or ever? This was not the first example of wildlife outside showing a keen appreciation for music of the baroque era. Why Farinata should feel paternalistic urges toward the tiny boreal chorus frogs and small grasshopper instars was beyond him; another working theory was that his unconditional love for them was connected in some way with his reptilian brain.

It goes without saying that if his thyroid tests came back okay and his endocrine levels were good, then



*Volume 13*  
*Issue 1*  
*2018*

his own metamorphosis might very well be at hand. As for his happiness problem, the field was scheduled to become the newest home for the most familiar shopping and fast-food experiences, and that was quite all right with everyone.

Garry Thomas Morse is a two-time nominee for the Governor General's Award for his poetry collections, *Discovery Passages* and *Prairie Harbour*. He survives in Winnipeg. Email: [morse.nomad@gmail.com](mailto:morse.nomad@gmail.com)