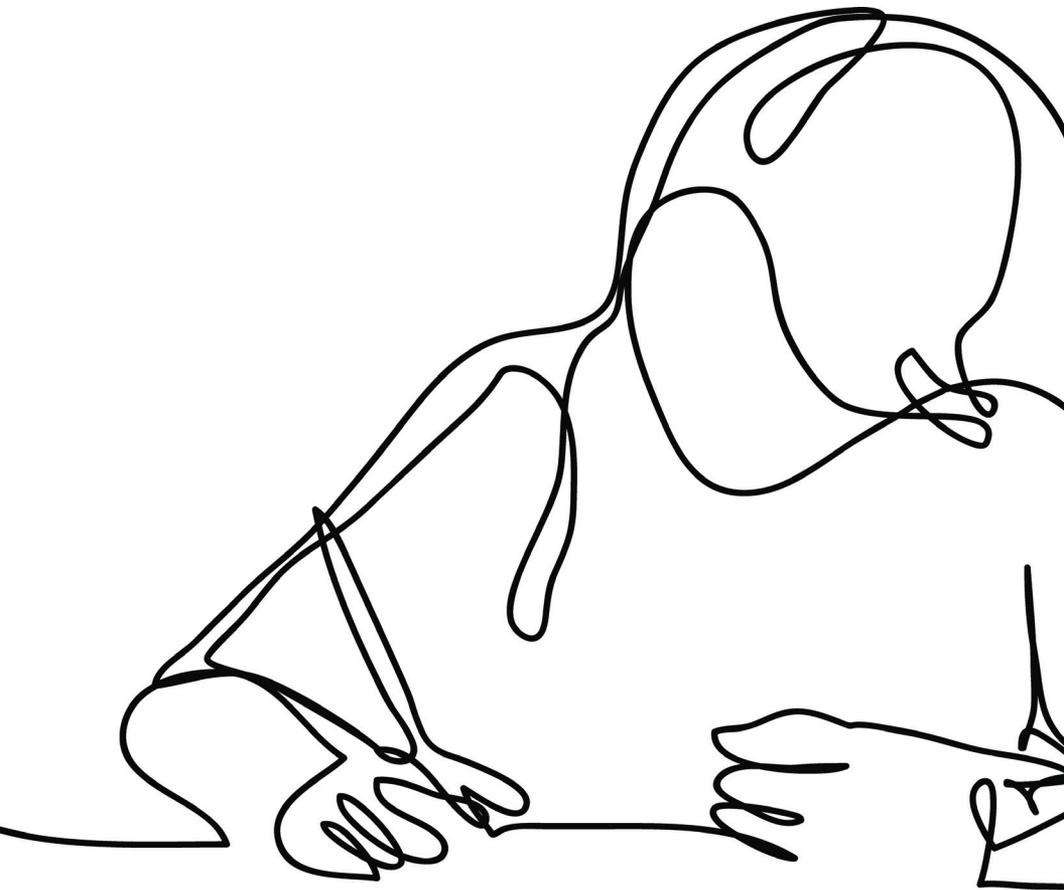


# Writing Through Life



Poetry and Short Stories  
Anthology Vol. I, 2020  
UC Davis Comprehensive Cancer Center  
Writing as Healing Program

On Wednesday nights for the past several years UC Davis patients, staff and community members have taken a few hours out of our schedules to write. We sit around a big table (and now on Zoom) and fill pages with our thoughts, our days, our illnesses and traumas. We write about the exquisite beauty of a morning in the garden and the terrible moment of the diagnosis. We each show up with words to give to the page, and we all find the time and space to let them happen. We bring our courage, too, as we share the words and get to be heard, fully, with no questions asked or advice given. Sometimes, as we read, insights and peace move into the space where sorrow and pain held sway. Our pens become tools to release our stories.

Our weekly sessions are guided by the work of Pat Schneider, who founded Amherst Writers and Artists, an organization dedicated to a writing method that helps people find their voice by writing in a safe community. We leave critiquing for other writing groups and instead focus on the positive: what we liked, what was strong and what stayed with us in the writing we heard. Pat wanted it that way, so that workshop participants can preserve the writer inside of each of us. Although Pat died August 10, 2020 at the age of 86 years, she left an enduring legacy of groups gathering to write and share and give voice.

The pieces in this book come from the moments around the table when pens moved across the lines of journals and notebooks. These are early drafts, yet they are perfect in that they tell the stories the writers needed to convey. We don't focus on grammar or literary perfection, instead we focus on the what the writer had to say and the words used to say it.

Now we share these words with you in this, our first anthology. You will get to read what you would have heard inside our writing space and we hope you, too, will be mesmerized and moved by each writer's honesty, courage, and insight.

Terri Wolf, RN, MS

Facilitator 2008-present

Brad Buchanan, PhD

Facilitator 2018-present

## Table of Contents

### Writing Through the Darkness

8	I Hope It's Not Too Late	Aida Saldivar
9	Loneliness	B. Bella
10	Dear Mother Earth	Elizabeth Maw
11	Daring the Darkness	S.J. Koller

### Writing Through Cancer

16	I Wish I was an Assassin	Barbara Dellamarie
19	Layers	Barbara Dellamarie
20	Letter from God	B. Bella
21	Blood Palimpsest	Brad Buchanan
22	You Aren't Dying Today	Cheryl Paletz
23	Surrender	Cheryl Paletz
24	Remission	Cheryl Paletz
25	The Capital City of Cancer	Rebecca Cahill
26	On Finishing Chemo	Rebecca Cahill
27	Transformation	Rebecca Cahill

### Writing to Overcome

30	I will not Die an Unlived Life	Aida Saldivar
31	Broken Holy Warrior	Aimee Harper
33	Washed by Beauty	Aimee Harper
35	Two Ducklings	B. Bella
37	Cinnamon Bark	Elizabeth Maw
38	Prolepsis	Brad Buchanan

### Writing to Reflect

42	Reflection	Claudette Cervinka
43	Prescription	Claudette Cervinka
44	Regrets	Pat Murphy
45	Rollercoaster	S.J. Koller
47	Silence. Stillness. Space.	S.J. Koller
50	Rosaceae	Seanain Snow
51	I will Sing You	Terri Wolf

### **Writing into Gratitude**

54	Now	Elizabeth Maw
55	The Reason I Get Up	Brad Buchanan
57	After a Long Day	Dick Maw
58	Diamond Dust	G.B. Lindsey
59	Practicing Gratitude	MacKay O'Keefe

### **Writing Through Illness Experiences**

62	Illness	Claudette Cervinka
63	The True Sound of a Helicopter	Seanain Snow
65	I Didn't Know It Could Be This Black	Terri Wolf

### **Writing About Relationships**

69	Donna Looked Like She Wanted to Cry	Cathy Tkach
70	Hypothetically	G.B. Lindsey
71	Relics	G.B. Lindsey
72	A Necessary Life Skill	Melissa Blevins Bein

### **Writing About Dying**

76	Natural Selection	Barbara Dellamarie
79	Heirlooms	MacKay O'Keefe

### **Writing Life Stories and Memoir**

82	Broccoli or Blue Eyes	Dick Maw
83	Passion for Ice cream	Dick Maw
84	Color Change	Melissa Blevins Bein
85	Handbell	Melissa Blevins Bein
86	Striped Pajamas	Pat Murphy
87	Dear Dad	Seanain Snow
88	The Best Part	Terri Wolf

Dedicated to, and in memory of, Rhoda McKnight



## **Writing Through the Darkness**

# **I Hope It's Not Too Late**

Aida Saldivar

She was at her therapist today. She needed that time so bad. She was able to talk and cry about the loneliness of the holidays. She felt lonely and abandoned.

She had been dreaming about going to another country. But the reality of her feelings would also travel with her. Distance is not going to cure her sadness and loneliness.

Her therapist suggested that she go to a support group that would allow her to share her feelings, to open up and not keep it all trapped inside.

She already knows things that make her feel better.

Being in a forest, going near the ocean, inviting friends to lunch. No more letting the phone ring and ring to avoid talking to a friend. These friends will help with the loneliness, and typically she is very social.

The darkness sucks. She has a solar light that makes her feel better, she just has to use it every morning for 30 minutes. Tell her to not be afraid and venture out to do the things that make her feel good.

Don't delay and don't let this darkness overcome her. She will go to the beach soon, even though it is cold: the grandiose picture of the ocean will fill her heart and spirit.

# Loneliness

B. Bella

What does loneliness feel like? Do we all have the capacity to feel lonely? Are we all self-aware enough to recognize what “lonely” feels like? Is it a room full of people, as they say, and your soul not flourishing in connection with anyone else’s? Is it feeling the betrayal of family or friends you counted on to fill that darkest of voids? Or is it a precious gem to help us learn something important.

Is it teaching us to find a deeper love for ourselves? Or that we are all we need? Is that the intended lesson when “lonely” comes calling? Is it teaching us courage, resilience - that by digging deep inside of ourselves we will find the answers to this feeling of “lonely”?

Does feeling “lonely” make us stronger, or is it something we just brush aside or endure without giving it much thought? It can creep up at any moment. It has no timetable, no rhyme or reason, no agenda. It just is.

What do we do with this feeling? Curse it... manage it... accept it... embrace it?

How does one best try to feel gratitude that we may know ourselves a little better when in the throes of the deep, darkness of “lonely”?

## Dear Mother Earth and Father Time

Elizabeth Maw

The slow, heavy drone of the train as it lumbers by. I feel like this train. I drop to my knees in exhaustion and never stop this mental deepness of thought that won't stop taking me down. No amount of positive imagery or accelerated thinking will save me. It's just a foregone conclusion every time. This body of mine is heavy. I'm not like a drone light and flying. I'm like a rock, glued to the ground with the weight of gravity. How will I continue to plod through for another 50 years? It's hard to survive for another 24 hours let alone the thought of 50 more years. I am not death, I am the opposite, a flighty spirit like the mosquito eater fairy bug. I meter myself with thermometer greatness. I fluctuate with the energies that pass by. But I am conceptualizing a new way. I really just want to honk by with my friends like the Canadian Geese do. But is anything or anyone really my friend? "Shelter in place," they say. I need an alone place to exist. They all eventually turn against me. But further I trudge on. I feel I am a soldier fighting each day to keep afloat instead of down in the doldrums of the ether lands. Oh Mystics, come to me in my spirit mind and egg me on to a lighter existence of soul. The clatter of humanity must quiet a bit for me to battle on. I'm getting a taste of this aura of new air to breathe in this time of isolation. Relaxing to me in a way, and I am normalizing to a certain extent. I'm taking this as a good omen sign from both of you. My Adirondack chair awaits with mystical book in hand. Thank you for your blessings, both of you.

With grateful Salutations,  
Elizabeth

# Daring the Darkness

S.J. Koller

The dark street stretches out  
like a lazy cat as I stroll  
down the sidewalk,  
a cigarette in my mouth and  
a lighter in my fidgeting hand.

It's daring,  
    I tell myself,  
                    not knowing  
what that means.

Alone.  
At night.  
Walking.  
It's when I feel  
most alive  
in my solitude.

I light my next cigarette  
from the dwindling light  
of the last.  
It burned out too quickly.  
I swallow the heat and the ash.

It's a different kind of quiet,  
when everyone else is asleep.  
Like a graveyard of dreams.  
And here I am,  
slipping unseen among the nightmares.

It's daring,  
    I tell myself,  
                    not willing  
to admit it's dangerous.

I walk the line between fear and bravery,  
a razor's edge.  
Will I even be able to tell when it cuts?  
Or will the pain blend in with the horror  
I'm ignoring.

I let the pain in and it feels  
like ash in my mouth.  
My body is a scar-torn battleground  
for a war that only happens in my mind.  
Somehow, both sides are losing.

It's daring,  
    I tell myself,  
            to stare at death  
and watch it stare back.

And now I'm running  
down the street,  
the cigarette no longer adequate  
to keep out the chill.  
My footfalls clamber  
in my head,  
a voice of their own,  
blending in with the others  
that I'm trying to outrun.  
I'm like the man who jumped  
off of Golden Gate Bridge,  
even the wind through my hair  
feels like falling,  
but when I open my eyes  
I see lampposts  
and a silent street.  
In my mind I'm still  
standing on the bridge  
looking down.

It's daring,  
    I tell myself,  
            not knowing  
when to stop.

Now  
I walk  
alone at night  
with my cigarette and my thoughts.  
Wavering on the invisible line  
of daring and danger,  
dreaming and disorder,

safety and sanity.

I stop  
and drop my cigarette,  
grinding the cinders into dust  
as I step away;



## **Writing Through Cancer**

# **I Wish I Was an Assassin**

Barbara Dellamarie

I want to be an assassin. Not a hired gun. I would do my own jobs. And I would target a specific enemy. People would laud me as a hero. But most of all, people would feel safe and happy and healthy after my targets were dead. Despite my liberal leanings, I have always had a fascination for weapons, especially guns. I can shoot a pistol, a revolver, a shotgun and a rifle. I've tried my hand with a bow and arrow. Knives, I admire the craftsmanship but they don't have that cathartic appeal. Maybe if I took up knife throwing I would change my mind about that. But my weapon of choice – a gun. With a gun, I'm a good shot. The clang of a metal target satisfies me. I would love to blast the head off someone holding an innocent person hostage.

There. It's out there. I do have violent fantasies. Key word, fantasy. The only thing violent I have done recently is smash up a block of ice and a clay pot in my back yard. It felt good but it wasn't the enemy. And I had a reason for feeling angry.

I've talked with a few people about what a great idea it would be to have a place one could go to safely smash things. The appeal, so far, is universal to those I've discussed it with.

But back to the assassin. My sister, two years older than me at 51, has cancer. Not just any cancer but small cell neuroendocrine lung cancer, they said. She was diagnosed on August 12, 2009. Just three days ago. I and my family, our friends, are still in shock. Stage IV? Not just the lung but lymph nodes, liver, abdomen, thoracic bones. Shot through with it but treatable. Not curable. Not. Curable. We don't ask "how long." No one should ask that and no one should tell that. Don't ask. Don't tell. Prognosis, OK, that gives an idea of what we're up against but we haven't asked that either. Google tells me. Google is a curse when it comes to illness. Symptoms, fears, anxieties, unnecessary doctor visits. Sometimes unnecessary. Or we think we can rationalize away the worst-case scenario. "I looked it up on Google, it's probably just the flu." And delay necessary doctor visits. Cyberchondria, fear of the doctor. Both bad. Very bad. Or no insurance, so the doctor visit is pushed aside so the family can eat.

In my sister's case, she went to the doctor. It was a violent cough. The doctor used "step therapy," try the lowest form of treatment, see if that works. It's a cost saver! Yay. So, several visits paying out of pocket, budgeting as best she could, three x-rays, done after a couple of months of this persistent cough, three rounds of serious shit antibiotics, and she doesn't get better. After a few more visits to the useless pay-out-of-pocket doctor, she finds an actual nice, clean low-cost clinic (shocker!) and finds a competent and kind nurse practitioner. Still

the antibiotic regimen continues. Until mom goes with her and insists she needs something more. Goddammit, I know my daughter! She's never like this, she says. He orders a CT scan. This happens at one of the county hospitals in Los Angeles. The results will be given to you within a couple of days if it's "something serious." Five days go by, at least. She calls the clinic, they don't have the results. She calls the hospital. Yes, they're here. She can pick them up at the records window. She goes. Waits in line, barely able to stand. Oh, did I mention that one of her symptoms from at least a month before was an inability to walk across her small house without becoming winded? Yeah, kinda serious.

A clerk hands her the report and she holds it, waiting to read it until she gets home. Scared. She is still waiting at the counter for paperwork to finish her application for Medi-Cal. The woman doesn't come back to the window. She stands, or leans, waiting. She scans the report absentmindedly. "Large mass highly suspicious for malignancy." Her body goes cold, numb. She walks, walks out the doors quietly to where our dad is waiting for her in the car. They read the report together, still in shock, not talking much on the ride home. I get a phone call at work, she tells me while I sit in my grey cubicle. I am sick. I live almost 400 miles away and can't hug her and tell her it will be alright. It WILL be alright.

A bronchoscopy is scheduled. A horrible procedure where a tube with a camera on it pushed into your esophagus to reach your lungs and take a look around, grab a piece of that mass to take a closer look. This is done while she is semi-conscious and I can hear her gag and cough from the waiting area a few feet away. My younger sister and my mom wait too, they don't hear her. I don't call their attention to it. Why would I? I don't always think sharing the pain is a good thing.

A week later, she is scheduled to see a doctor who will give her the results. During said week I look up "lung cancer" in every way possible on Google. Small cell, it seems, is the worst kind. Fast growing and virulent. A mass such as this can also be a fungal ball. That's my hope. It's a fungal ball, it has to be. I play with the words. "A fun gal ball!" It's a fungal ball. The doctor calls her name, after hours of waiting (at the county hospital everyone is scheduled at the same time, 7:30 a.m., just like jury duty). "Well," says the very kind doctor, "it is cancer. I'm sorry to have to tell you that." "It is cancer. I'm sorry to have to tell you that." It echoes back, sounding muffled. My other sister is with me in the room. We look at one another. I sit on the exam table, swinging my legs, numb, taking notes. "It is cancer. I'm sorry to have to tell you that." What kind, my younger sister asks. "Small cell," he says. Small cell small cell small cell. My sister and I exchange glances, she is a Googler too. I sense that she knows what I know. We are inwardly horrified and sick. We stay strong for our sister, who chokes up briefly, then stoically listens to him as he patiently answers our questions. We leave, walk into the waiting room and into the arms of our mom

and a close friend, both of whom know instantly by our faces that it is bad news. Bad news.

My sister's daughter, my niece, 19 and coming into her own after being raised by my sister without the help of her scum "father." We leave them alone upon our arrival home and she is told the bad news. Bad news, sweetie. Mom has cancer. Mom has cancer. Not usually demonstrative, my niece, she cries. "Is it too late? What if it's too late?" My heart aches, my stomach twists when my sister tells me this. "I have cancer, baby, it'll be OK. We'll fight it." They hold on to one another.

What happens now? A PET scan. This lights up the areas that are metabolically active, which is a characteristic of cancer cells. It will show if it has spread. "If." We hang on to that "if" like it's a plank from the Titanic, floating in the ocean, keeping our hope that the lights of a rescue ship will appear, closer and closer to save us. The ship doesn't come. The plank is dropped as our hands grow cold when we hear the news. Large cell neuroendocrine lung cancer. It's a mouthful. One we should not have to taste. But we taste it, the bitterness, the angry heat of it and the sickening aftertaste.

Stage IV large cell neuroendocrine lung cancer. That's my target, my mark. I want to blast its fucking head off, around my sister, the hostage, leaving her safe and the deadly enemy dead, gone. Dead and gone. Dead. Gone. The enemy. But instead, others have to try to kill it. And they can't kill it, only weaken it. They will weaken it. (Won't they? They will, right?) But I want to do it. Kill Cancer Dead. I want to kill it. With a gun, with a knife, with my bare hands, rip it out. Fix it. They have to go in for the kill, but they know it won't die.

# Layers

Barbara Dellamarie

What would you call layers of trauma? Hope springs eternal, isn't that what they say? Each new day brings me less and less hope. My sister goes to the doctor. She is told about the mass in her lung. Cancer. OK, there are treatments, cures – advances! Everyone says it – “there are so many advances.” But for me, my family, there are only layers. Layer upon layer of trauma. Trauma advances.

Lung. Cancer. Metastatic. Small cell. Non-small cell. Neuroendocrine. Lymph nodes. Liver. Abdomen.

Brain.

Incurable.

It's in the brain. Within a two-week span, layers. Yesterday, the brain. Learned right after a CT scan on the same day as her first chemo treatment. Now she needs radiation. Add a layer.

Lots of layers usually means comfort, right? Layers of comforters. Nice down comforters. Layers of them. Our layers are down. Down down down.

So the next news we wait for, the radiation doc looks at the CT scan again today to make sure the treatment really is an option. I expect it won't be. Why should I have reason not to? No good news has been reported. News. “Sad story, Bill, in other news, get ready for the State Fair!” Cut to commercial, switch to American Idol. But we are left behind, we don't hear the follow up. All in our private little hell.

We're sorry. We were wrong. Radiation will do no good. No good. Do no harm. We are so sorry. This isn't what I've heard. Yet. But I expect it. Layer it on. Bury us.

My sister, she is sorry. Not for herself, not all the time at least. She is sorry for the young doctor, a Fellow studying for his specialty, oncology. Dr. Sun. “He looks like a baby,” says a friend who took my sister to the first chemo and had to put the brain layer on top of the others, via text messages relayed between family and friends. No follow up, in other news. Dr. Sun. My sister, feeling sad for him, he looks so sad, having the task of telling her the second of the layers for which he was responsible. His first layer, on top of the “you have cancer, we're so sorry” layer, was “incurable, extensive, stage IV.” Second of his layers, it has invaded the brain. I am sorry. And he is. She could see it and she felt bad. For him. For Dr. Sun. Another layer for him too, a caring caregiver.

She felt bad for him.

## Letter From God

B. Bella

My Dearest Bella,

You are kind

You are thoughtful

You are compassionate

You are loving and caring

You are perfect in every way

You will be okay

You will be more than okay

You are stronger than you know

You will get through this moment in time

You will find the peace you strive for

Your light shines bright within you

Your inner joy will again shine through

You are loved beyond belief

I know this because you are me and I am you.

I will hold your hand and carry your burden

until you can stand strong once again.

Believe in you. Believe in me.

All my love always,

God

## **Blood Palimpsest**

Brad Buchanan

when his brother's stem cells go in  
he is the only drowsy one  
in the crowded isolation room  
worn out by all the anticipation  
the fluids and the Benadryl  
he has the most peculiar dream  
his skin comes loose  
and curls into scrolls  
of brown papyrus  
he writes his name  
then watches it vanish  
the next time he inscribes  
a pseudonym  
when that too is gone  
he begins forging other signatures  
William Shakespeare  
Emily Dickinson  
when he wakes up  
he is covered in red ink  
a text he cannot believe  
is his own

# **You Aren't Dying Today!**

Cheryl Paletz

You drop.....unconscious on the driveway.....Stone cold glacial fear engulfs me, the moment forever frozen in time. Pure panic overtakes....  
What's going to happen to me if you leave? What will I do? How will I survive without you?? NO you aren't going to die today, NOT like this!!!  
.....But what if you do? Just what becomes of me? How am I supposed to live without you?  
I can't.....

Reality is: I haven't really even dealt with the possibility of your death----denial is a powerful mechanism.  
"15" months in this leukemic horror show and you drop on me now? NOW after all the struggles, the changes, the sacrifices?.....  
You try to check out on me like this?  
NOT happening----  
Damn it, you Don't get to die today!

Death---the underlying theme in all this, whether I face it or not.....  
or bury it in the dark recesses of my heart.  
Even to breathe the possibility is excruciatingly painful. Just a glimpse at the possibility is terrifying.....  
Beyond terrifying.

So now as you lay there unconscious, I must face it head on, no option. Propelled into action, I shake you silly, screaming at you!  
-911-  
NO, you don't get to die today! Not like this.....  
As the ambulance pulls away, lights & sirens blazing, I am forced to see the possibility, BUT not happening today.

**NO, YOU AREN'T DYING TODAY!!!!**

## Surrender

Cheryl Paletz

“OK God,” Sadie softly whispers, “I surrender.” Living in leukemic limbo has drained her completely and she’s on empty. Exhausted on every level: even her hair is tired! They say, “Give it to God. Let go.” She tries but invariably takes it back.....maybe this time will be different? Sadie is drowning in a sea of chaotic destruction and unpredictability. She desperately needs a life preserver to hold on to. Her last ounce of courage is for herself, her very survival. She alone must win the battle.

Faith has always been a part of Sadie, however she can’t “feel” it now. Her world fractured and she only feels the disconnect. How does she find it again so she can tap into its comfort? Even in church she only glimpses that quiet peace.....and her heart yearns for more.

Perhaps, she thinks, her real issue isn’t so much the faith aspect itself, but the “feeling” component. After all, the walls she erected through her traumas are solid, almost impenetrable. They’ve protected her as she’s navigated stormy waters in foreign territory. As this realization washes over her, Sadie has an epiphany.....her survival necessitated the fortress she’d built: her way of coping with the multitude of deadly torpedoes firing at her. There simply was no time to indulge in feeling anything but the overwhelming fear. Paralyzing fear that drains....the last bit of adrenaline oozing out of Sadie’s pores. What’s left is a shell of the woman that was.....reduced to a terrified little girl. Outwardly the appearance is essentially the same, but inwardly she doesn’t recognize the person left in the wake of destruction.

Sadie hates floundering and flailing in this den of depression and nothingness. She knows that the challenge, the choice, is hers alone. But can she rise up? Conquer the unrelenting darkness? There is only one option: claw her way back. Quietly she inhales deeply.....breathing in the Serenity Prayer.... and exhaling the darkness trying to claim her. Her faith is there: hard to access some days, but it’s there! Armed with that faith she will climb the mountain until she is back to where she belongs.....one day at a time, heading forward. As the darkness dulls with her breathing, Sadie bows her head, clasps her hands together and surrenders. She gives it to God.....again.

## REMISSION.....

Cheryl Paletz

The landscape levels, remission achieved!

-REMISSION-

The sun shines brightly on this new territory.....energizing the soul,

Calming the chaotic waters of life.....

Until the ship wrecks once again.....tousled on the stormy sea.

Complications lurking, threatening at every turn.

Cumulative side effects invading. Time stops, freezes.

Life and death. Life OR death?

Labs tank. bladder bleeds,

Emergent pacemaker gives way to permanent.....

Aortic stenosis, ejection fraction,

Regurgitation, aortic valve replacement.....

Expanding vocabulary, a world imploding!

Stress exacerbating,

Panic overwhelming.

Amazingly, an eerie quiet descends.

No further physical assaults----yet!

Watch and wait. Wait.....

Freedom gurgling like a gentle brook

Peace invading, tentatively knocking at the door.

A “new” normal descending, a foreign territory---

The land of Remission!

REMISSION.....

Where do we go now???

What awaits???

How do we move forward, past survival to life?

Assimilate into living and

chart our new territory?

## The Capital City of Cancer

Rebecca Cahill

Striding down the endless pedestrian overpass, I avert my gaze from the shocking whiteness of the walls and focus instead on the neutral carpeting at my feet. I don't want to accidentally make eye contact with anyone. Outside are the many high rises of MD Anderson which, I think, is like the Hong Kong—Shanghai—Dubai, of cancer. An enormous vertical city built around this one industry. Square your shoulders and stand up straight, I admonish myself. I loathe to look like my fellow city dwellers who stalk the halls looking thin, glassy-eyed, afraid. I pick up my pace. I imagine those around me as zombies, lumbering with stiff arms, looking as though they're desperate to take a bite out of hope. I am not one of them, I tell myself. I'm strong. I'm otherwise so healthy. I arrive at the elevator and enter with one of the living, a young, vibrant man with a mop of curly hair. I wish to avoid eye contact, but he looks at me brightly and gestures to my head, bedecked in a red bandana. "It might grow back curly," he says. I catch my reflection in the mirror. There I am: glassy-eyed, thin, afraid. I stand taller, thrust my jaw upward. "I hope so," I say with a smile.

## On Finishing Chemo

Rebecca Cahill

“When do you finish chemo?” they all ask.

“I’m done,” I say. “My last one was Thursday.”

“That’s great news!” they all say.

What I don’t say is how when my doctor told me I was finished, I cried in her office and asked for another round. I don’t say that for people like me, whose cancer, I am told, is certain to return, chemo is a security blanket. How do I tell them that chemo is the easy part? That without chemo, every sensation in my body becomes cancer. Was that twinge in my stomach something I ate? Or cancer, planting its seeds in the soil of my tissues, unfurling its malignant tendrils in my abdomen? That pain in my hand? Cancer, coming for my bones. I don’t tell them that without chemo, in my dreams I’m separated from my family by a deep chasm. I call their names, but they can’t hear me. I awake in pools of sweat and wonder what it’s like to die.

“Yes,” I reply, pulling a smile over my mouth like a hoodie. “I can’t wait for my hair to grow back.” I stifle a yawn, because I haven’t slept well since Thursday.

It’s November now and I wonder where I’ll be next fall. I don’t wonder about how long my hair will be by then, or how curly, or if my eyebrows will have sprouted. I wonder if chemo, my old friend, will be with me again, and if that means I’ll be sleeping through the night, curled up under its strange safety.

## Transformation

Rebecca Cahill

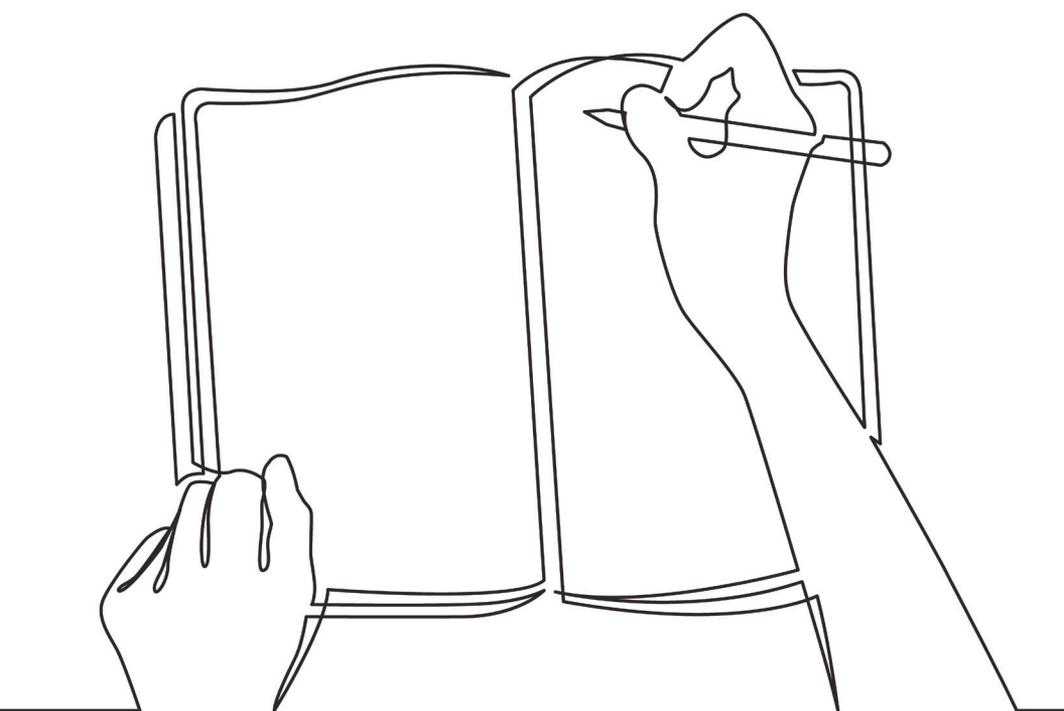
Here I am, four months into chemo, gazing critically at my reflection in the mirror. What I see is a distant relative of myself, transformed by the drugs that will also save me. My eyes stare back, looking masculine without the jewelry of eyelashes to soften them. The space where my eyebrows should be is forlorn, a barren landscape interrupted only by wrinkles, newly appeared. My scalp is a hillside stripped of vegetation.

I'd once worn my hair like armor, welcomed its shelter for my cheeks, which flush easily when flustered. I'd let my hair fall over them like a curtain, closing off the performance of my face to curious onlookers.

I remember the early chemo days when my hair was falling out and how I knew, and my family knew, it was time to shave it, but no one could bring themselves to say so. I remember how one night I went out to the patio to clear off the hair clinging to my shirt. I shook it like you'd shake a picnic blanket to clean it of crumbs, and watched as my hairs floated dreamily through the night air. They looked like ethereal sea creatures, appearing golden under the glow of the patio light.

Next, I shook my head, tossing it like a horse tosses its mane. I felt the strands loosen from my scalp, unrooting themselves and floating away on the breeze. With each toss of my head, more and more strands unmoored themselves. Like a creature with dozens of undulating tentacles, the strands stirred through the night like a single living beast.

The next morning, I swept my hair off the patio. The strands were no longer otherworldly sea organisms, but matted dead matter tangled in the broom. *Perhaps a bird will take it for its nest*, I think. And my hair, which once shielded me, will harbor new life.



## **Writing To Overcome**

## **I Will Not Die an Unlived Life, I Will Not Live in Fear!**

Aida Saldivar

Here she goes again, another PET scan, half a year of 2 years to go.

And she says to you: “I will not be ready to die until I say so! I’ll be ready when I am ready!!!”

Fear filled her when she felt a little something behind her ear close to her head. She prays that it is just a little nothing. But actually the surgeon found another little something on the site of her erased breast.

Yeah, let’s see what the PET scan shows. She is not afraid but every now and then she thinks she is. Well, she’s had cancer 3 times now. Hey, maybe she can set a record. Somewhere it was written that a woman had cancer 10 times! Can you believe it?

Despite everything she decides to blossom. To not waste time thinking that something bad can happen. To live in the now, today.

First she saw today as a heavy day, but now as the day is coming to an end, she wants to blossom, to reach the stars, to scream. She is strong, a unique human being. She is not going to fall. She will free her heart until it grows wings to the universe.

## BrokenHolyWarrior

Aimee Harper

She was hopin' to be happy by 47. School was a sharp checkmark against her. They called her stupid deaf dumb spaced out strange. Her 3rd grade teacher Ms Hutton asked her why she done breathe like that – the way she gasped for a breath like she done been drownin' in the deep sea caught in the jaws of sharks beating thrashing whipping her body bloody ravaged by it all. It weren't no sharks nor sea. Just life. And truth is she ain't stupid at all but genius as it come when ya wanna grade survival. Yep, she was hopin' by 47 she'd learn about that thing called happy. She reckoned happy meant no more breaths of terror beltin' ya in the face and no more chasin' mama's car as though she'll stop this time 40 some years on down the road. Stop. See her. Find her worth keepin' safe. Truth is some brands of fear-stricken memory don't seem to know how to die, but keep livin' hard between the lines of bone and blood and shattered lives. She that way of many inside one body. How it do with small babes that got no words and little child that got two ways of keepin' alive - that happen either by dyin' back home to her maker, or that there brain shatterin' into lotsa lives just to ration the horror and survive. Ya see there are different makes of hero and to me she got the makings of hero in a gazillion fold. I done look at her and tears bust out lump throated burnin' eyes just tryin' to muster a moment of comprehension how she still here breathin' life. No, she ain't stupid at all. Just that she live in a blind world - blind to the makings of her brand of success called survival. She's a master. God call her hero of the highest kind. And ya see even so she ain't found the brand of happy she dream of by 47, she still a hero – a warrior – an angel with mangled wings saturated in light. She don't see it, but I do. And I pray one day she find that kinda happy – that kinda peace – that kinda quiet holy that rest in the knowing that God sees. Sees her real beautiful - real kind. Sees her battle life with a hijacked brain and fight every breath to save her shattered heart from dyin'. God see her and call her by name. Hero, his child of broken holy grace. Nah, she ain't stupid at all. Just that this here world is blind to her struggle – blind to her strength – blind to what make her one broken holy warrior every breath broken beat of her life. And you know what Ms Hutton say when she didn't respond to her question 'Aimee, why you breathe like that'? She somehow just knew without knowing that it wasn't stupidity nor bein' deaf that she didn't talk. It was plain ol' fear beatin' her up and beltin' her

silent, except for the screamin' chasin' after mama's car. Ms Hutton just say 'Aimee, you come walk with me out on the recess and say nothing at all.' And that what Aimee do so she wouldn't run away to hunt for mama to make her safe. She just walk real quiet by Ms Hutton.

## Washed by Beauty

Aimee Harper

Crimson rose rising into sky piercing anguished howl - the way fire purifies what is left of these storied bones. I wonder if it works best to soften one's gaze - peripherally balanced with joy. How this stealth vigilance staring into savage wounds only seems to grow them bigger. I wonder if talking is meant for the hollow vacant place between words where connection is born. I wonder if others feel less heard the more they try to express the place where grief lives. I wonder if others feel unseen the more they try to clothe experience with these vacant impotent things called words. I wonder if others feel more profoundly misunderstood judged and unbelieved when they attempt to reach touch blanket these naked places with words full of petrified famine longing to be seen through eyes unveiled and welcoming. Maybe it works better to tend the silence and ask the sea "How is your life?" How tide breathes moon and sky speaking a language less foreign and desolate than this human thing we do that makes noise and pretends to understand. Consider the lilies of the field the lupine poppies and christened blue banks spreading their vast harsh wings etched soiled soft chiseled elegance that speaks inside acres of sky crimson blood echoing in these veins. How she longs to lie down and be washed by beauty and let all of suffering go. How pain grips between rib swollen archway sternum vised crush - the pain just to breathe thoracic slavery free. She wonders about God living in that rod clear channel of sunshine impaling fiercely soft through her center her body bridging earth and sky her home on the other side she pleads for entrance - to set it all down - all of this life, and go gaze at its intricate mosaic from the other side. It is important she said to remember we are broken and holy and ugly and lovely and all of everything breathing with the lilies of the field befriended by sea and lupine blue banks and poppies. She said it is important to soften the gaze to notice what is good of grace and shattered holy. She said it is good to notice what lives unraped unbeaten untarnished untouched and untouchable by evil. She says evil is live spelled backwards and the way of wounds fester silenced infected too long and deeply confused longing for justice. There lives potential for evil in us all - spouse it but a heart broken too often and buried too long. The dark wolf in us all you see. Nothing to fear ...and maybe everything. She says the best medicine is to soften the gaze peripherally balanced to take in all the beauty the joy the lilies of the field and blue banks of

camas opening and pause long enough to ask the sea “How is your life?” And to really listen and to feed the tender creature of goodness howling from the deep. The white wolf she say – feed her – she is hungry. And from soft greenish blue eyes she began to see as though for the first time. And she dared to lie down and be washed by beauty and she knew even in suffering her life shined. Make no mistake she say – your life is your work and it will always matter. She began to see there was really nothing to say of value that lived in noisy words. She knew now why it never worked and only left her unseen and misunderstood in the deep where she longed to be seen. She saw how her language wasn’t translatable in the human realm. So she got real quiet and realized where she belonged. Her tribe lives in lilies blue banks poppies and sea. She rides peace like a river rapid soft holy unforgiving and fiercely strong. She lives at home somewhere between earth and sky and longs to return to the other side. And so for now she makes friends with her longing and softens her gaze and asks the sea “How is your life?” She lies down into soft sacred earth and lets her hold ALL of her broken and holy ugly and lovely and lets all of her be washed by beauty. Even in sleep you shine she say. Your life is your work and it will always matter.

Her grief grew wings along the blue banks of camas opening into sky.

## Two Ducklings

B. Bella

The two baby ducklings continued their quacking, interrupting my sleep, my haze, my depression. I could hear them below my balcony near my back door, having snuck in the back gate. Their insistence for attention was annoying.

I crawled out of bed, weak and groggy. I found my robe and slowly made my way downstairs, hoping they would be gone by the time I reached the back door. Instead they seemed to get louder as I approached. One really small duckling and a bigger sibling stared back at me through the glass door. Something in their determination propelled me to my freezer. Wetting two slices of bread, I opened the door, realizing I hadn't done that in a while for anyone.

They ate hungrily and, after giving me one last glance, waddled off out the gate and into the canal where all the spring ducklings waded with their families. I watched as magpies circled above waiting for a chance at a baby duckling meal. Resigned to the inevitable, I went back to bed.

That same afternoon, the same baby ducklings, one bigger than the other, began once more to quack outside, their volume rising with my non-responsiveness. Once again, muttering under my breath, I made my way downstairs. They came closer this time as I fed them the same mushy wet bread. And once satisfied, off they went, seeming to quietly quack to each other as they awkwardly waddled down the pathway.

They came back the next day, three times, and for the next two weeks like clockwork. Somewhere in between I started to look forward to their arrival, my bed not harboring me completely during these small joyful moments. A nurturing seed had started to sprout within me.

One day, the quacking sounded different. I hurried downstairs to find only the bigger duckling at the door. My heart sank. I fed him and as he made his way back to the water, I followed, hoping to find his younger sibling. I never did see the little one again, or at least did not recognize him among the many baby ducklings that made the canal their home. But in my mind, the baby had just joined one of the families that swam back and forth in a V formation behind their mothers or was sunning himself in the cool grass with his new family.

The bigger sibling never came back to my back door either. It was as if he was saying goodbye on the day he came alone. Some days later, I witnessed the most spectacular and deeply moving sight. The bigger duckling had found a new family. He stood much taller and quite bigger at the end of a line of small baby ducklings, wading in the water as if he always naturally belonged. My heart soared with tears of joy. He would be their protector and he seemed to relish his part. There is a purpose for every living creature on this earth. A lesson that didn't escape me.

I slowly made my way home in deep thought. I knew why the two ducklings had entered my life. It was the Divine Spirit's way of moving me, of showing me, of letting me know he was with me. Inspiration and guidance doesn't always come in the packages, or in the form, we expect. The trick is to recognize the gift when it happens.

It was time for me to eat...

It was time for me to live.

## **Cinnamon Bark**

Beth Maw

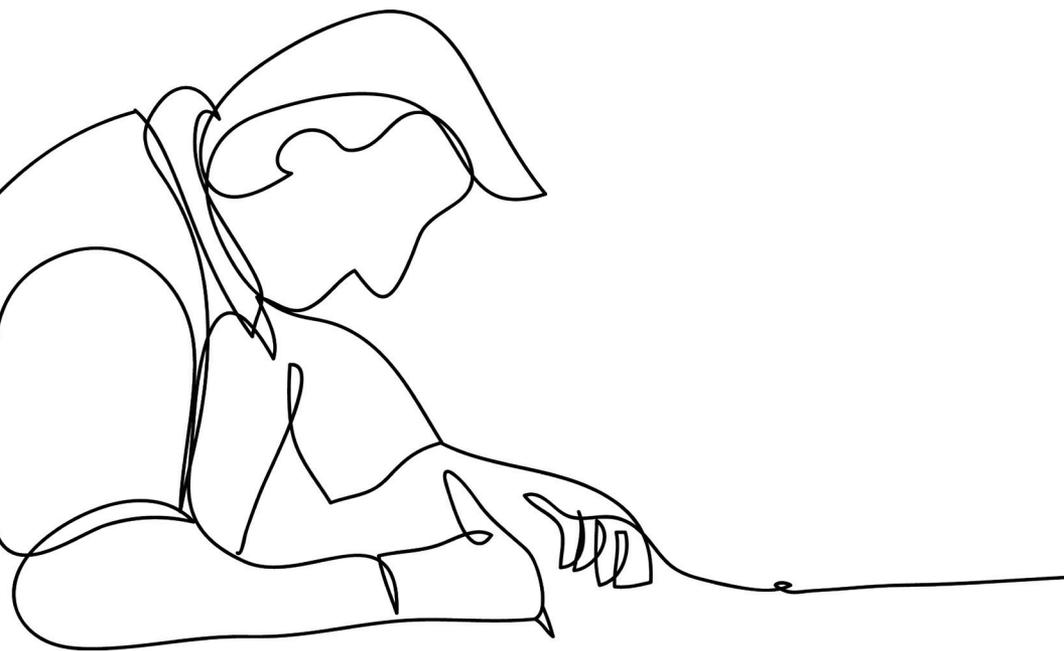
That fragrance of cinnamon in the forest always hit her and then calmed her. She knew at that moment that she was safe and, in an atmosphere, grandiose and intimate. Those waiting woods yet to be discovered haunted her dreams. Although she knew well that it was only fear itself that she did not know about, always horrific dreams of which path to take. The roads less traveled while smelling that fragrance of cinnamon emanating from the tree trunks. Guide posts of strength through harrowing unknowns. Why couldn't they just be quiet fragments one at a time instead of giant leaps and bounds of boundaries to her soul? "Trode along!" Oh! She encouraged herself. "You are safe and never alone!" This thought always cured her like that fragrance of cinnamon emanating all around and intending to secure her surroundings even further. She added burning sage to that fragrance of cinnamon. In spite of herself, she found herself finally walking through those scary, wicked woods. Crunching all her fears up under the carpet of dried pine needles on that forest floor.

## Prolepsis

Brad Buchanan

a dead man before  
I knew what had hit me  
I woke up in advance  
of my nightmare's  
anticlimax  
my winter thawed early  
and left me in a puddle  
of terrified memories  
of what never happened  
I tried fast-forwarding  
to the last scene  
but the fingers  
that scrubbed me  
rubbed it out  
I am suddenly  
out of step with my destiny  
so far over my limit  
I don't know how  
or when to stop  
things that are timely  
and things that are not  
(interventions and executions,  
warnings and recriminations,  
stitches and justifications)  
they all look  
the same to me  
since I have imagined  
where they are tending  
a destination  
we all see coming  
and can't avoid  
the ultimate word  
we learn is an elegy  
for the sensation  
we have yet to find  
in any object  
the final simplicity

of a shortcut  
in a dream  
that gets to the best part  
where you slay the enemy  
you have just  
discovered  
for the first time



## **Writing To Reflect**

## **Reflection**

Claudette Cervinka

Writing is another view, where I can see myself outside my usual circles of judgements. It's like holding up a mirror to see what may actually be there, rather than the intangible partial-strands of my fleeting thoughts. It is a discovery of where the words from my deeper self may lead; to perhaps find some way from which to head forward again. Writing helps me locate places of contraction, contradiction, or expansion, from which I can diagnose my internal "weather." Like preparing a roadmap to this one unique heart. For me, writing is another way I take time to honor myself.

## Prescription

Claudette Cervinka

Can't remember the last time I smiled at myself in the mirror (but am always ready to smile at others). Could I come to focus on believing in myself, in spite of the mess going on around me? This is no time for small kindnesses. To become real, like that Velveteen Rabbit, is going to take some responsibility for a lot of loving—this time from the inside out.

I want to return from the grip of all those mindless thoughts; return back to my breath, back into the heartbeat of my soul. To turn in and revisit the substance of solid knowing arising from the depth of my belly, making the “second brain” first again—at the start of the day, the year, the decade. To visit the still depths and chart my course from there; remembering to consult the light of stars on this journey. To drown doubt in an ocean of gem-quality light, reflecting in all the pauses I remember to allow myself. To witness, without judgement, the myriad multiplicities of life force, and connect there, in each breath, again and again, re-filling constantly, so the charcoal darkness cannot prevail. To intentionally set a background current to be running and grounded, through the peaks and valleys bolting through the day. Maybe even pause during the day to check in with that original potential, hardwired from birth, and check that out. Then choose which current to re-set.

My challenge is to mine deep, all the way to my original cells, and to that spark of Light when this “adventure” began. So, I follow the music of my breath, and wander inside. I check behind one corner, then another. I become aware of the throb of my throat, the inner alive movement around my breath. I feel the beat of my heart, pumping life to all corners of “me.” My solar plexus is quiet, but there's a sensation of a glowing residing there. In the deepest part of my belly, below the pain, is a reservoir of warmth that I rarely remember to visit.

How new it would be for me to actually stop my cycle of “what-if” thoughts, and ask myself, what is going well for me? Checkpoint.

## Regrets

Pat Murphy

We all have them. Regrets are always there, but don't let them hold you back. Look at them, sort them, deal with them, and then let them go. There is nothing to be done about them anyway, so don't let them be in charge. Time is not limitless, and who knows how much is yours still?

Mind you, I am not saying try to forget them, because you can't. They are part of the fabric of who you are today; but tuck them away and move on. They don't know, or care, that they are part of your misery – only you do.

There is a secret to forgiveness. When one forgives, it is not about the jerk; it is about letting go of his control over you. Bitterness eats at you, but the object of your bitterness is either unaware or doesn't care. So . . . the only one suffering here is you, pal.

Same with regrets. You lived through it once; why torture yourself by insisting on reliving it again and again? You don't want it coloring the rest of life's gifts. Live BIG, not compressed by regret. Breathe in newness. Breathe out your poison. Claim your joy. Then go stand on the corner and watch all the people go by. They all have regrets, and some are still prisoner to them. If they happen to meet your eye, give them a kind smile. They may need one today.

## Rollercoaster

S.J.Koller

The bar lowers,  
the bell dings, and  
the chain pulls the car into motion

Whose crazy idea was this?  
It was mine?  
Well....shit...

I'm still contemplating my folly  
as the cart reaches the top of its climb and  
for a moment  
I can see the world in its entirety;  
or, at least, as far as my out of date glasses let me  
It's beautiful and

OH MY GOD I JUST LIFTED OFF MY SEAT!

The bar is digging into my legs  
but I'm too distracted by the absurd "whoohoo"ing and flailing arms in front  
of me to care  
I'm tossed  
left to right  
and back again,  
the sharp angles of life and the choices we make  
rattling around  
in my head.

Am I upside down?  
I'm upside down.  
And the couple in front are still "whoohoo"ing away

What did I do to get me here?  
I must have taken a wrong turn.  
Made a bad decision.  
Surely I didn't think this would be fun?

Finally!  
Only one more corkscrew and it's over!

My vision starts to fade and  
I realize I've been holding my breath.  
I let it out  
as the cart rumbles up to the gates.

My legs are shaky  
as I get up and walk out, mumbling  
"I'll never make this mistake again."

*Life is weird like this sometimes;  
It tosses you around and brings you back  
to the same place  
over and over again,  
I think,  
as I line back up for the ride;*

## Silence. Stillness. Space.

S.J.Koller

I dreamed of a mountain  
so green  
and alive  
that its breath  
became my breath.  
The sound of the wind,  
    the fauna,  
        the rushing water  
flowed unobstructed  
across the peaks and valleys of my lips.  
The rhythm of life  
that sounded across the slopes  
followed the same beat  
as my heart.  
And when I closed my eyes  
the stars exploded across the night sky  
in colors I only dream of.  
In that silence,  
    that stillness,  
        that space  
I found something I had lost.

Upon waking  
I realized I had not brought it back with me  
and I felt its absence.  
But the thought was fleeting,  
as the days' obligations crowded my mind.  
I gazed around  
    longing  
as I shoved coffee and a bagel down my throat;  
and cast glances  
    seeking  
as I rushed about my day.

Before I knew it my eyes were straining  
again  
searching the screen  
for meaning  
that was not there.  
My coffee cup  
held no comfort;  
my deadlines,  
no room  
for delving.  
Each tick of the clock,  
another second  
I didn't have.

Quick walk to the car  
and a flash of green  
caught my eye.  
For a moment  
I recalled my dream  
and breathed in a mountain.  
I exhaled  
a strong breeze  
and the stars shone  
through the blacks of my eyes.

Time is irrelevant.  
There is only ever now.

I cling to this  
as I continue  
my journey home.  
Others fling their emotions around  
and the overflow breaks and crashes  
among the cars on the freeway,  
the spray touching everything in its wake.

I let it flow by  
without taking it in.  
Others are not so lucky.

But my breath  
    is the breeze  
            traveling among treetops.

My pulse  
    is the beat of the earth  
            turning minerals to gems.

In that silence,  
    that stillness,  
            that space,

I find peace.

I make my way home  
to my safe place  
where I can sit  
and just  
be.

## Rosaceae – The Family of Rose

Seanain Snow

(Note: Botanists divide plants into “families,” and name each family for a representative member. Pronunciation is correct as “Roh-zay-suh-ee” or “Roh-zay-see-ay.”)

The seed goes to the sprout,  
the blossom goes to fruit,  
which drops her seed.  
In a wet year,  
those seeds may sprout  
when the temperature,  
the oxygen, and that water  
conspire to ignite the processes,  
those gazillion processes that,  
coordinated by the code of life,  
play out into something  
so amazing  
as an apple.

That apple will drop her seed,  
which might grow to offer shade  
at the end of a hot autumn day,  
might help sweeten a cake  
laced with crushed cardamom  
and chopped walnuts,  
might teach someone the beauty  
of the roseaceate fruit –  
embedded with their five-pointed  
stars.

Slice that apple in half, cross-wise,  
and, dipped in deep-red paint,  
make me a print,  
so I can see how blood  
runs through an apple.  
Pop out those seed for the chickens –  
they love them in their morning mash  
–pass on the wisdom of the bite

in the deep, deep nourishment  
of their yolk,  
embedded with the code of life.  
Not much goes to flower  
where my chickens roost;  
they see to the cotyledons,  
see to the sprouts.  
But apple cores, now there’s a hen’s  
delight.

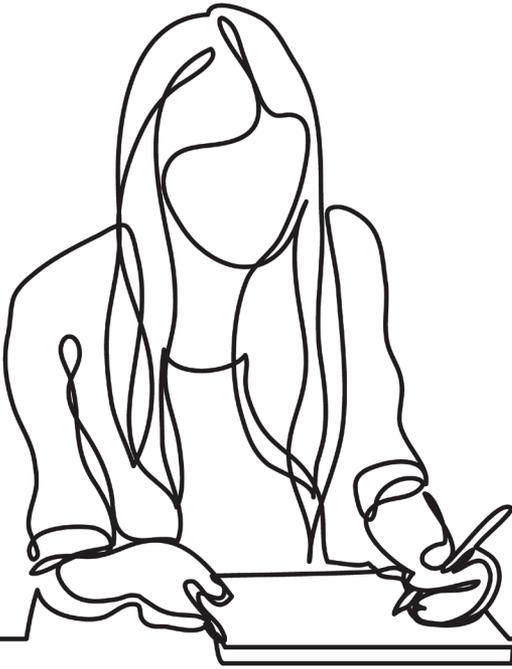
The seed goes to the sprout,  
the blossom goes to fruit,  
and all along,  
what do you nourish  
with your code of life?  
I will dip my feet in the creek,  
wash away the sweat,  
after working a day,  
pruning the orchard,  
then sit in the shade  
of the rose-cousin trees,  
and ponder the stars  
in our heavens  
and the ones right here  
on our earth.

Which seed do you nourish  
to blossom,  
to fruit,  
to seed,  
once more?

## **I Will Sing You**

Terri Pauser Wolf

I will sing you. Yes, dear patient, I am your nurse and I will sing you the songs that are in me for your humanity. I will sing you the person that you are and all that has been taken away from you. I will sing you the losses. This medical center is a sacred volcano and you are here to bring an offering to quiet the gods. You give your leg, your left breast... the perky, full one, a piece of your brain, your future children. You drop precious parts into the flaming crater and hope the gods will let you live. I will sing to you when you come down the mountain. Perhaps my song will heal your wounds. Perhaps my song will make you whole.



## **Writing Into Gratitude**

## Now

Elizabeth Maw

Here and now. Upon waking agitation. Thinking, processing. Why is everything something and nothing all at the same time. Trying not to Zoom forward all at once. So that everything is over right now. I feel so tired but unable to somnambulate. Walking, walking. Nice breezy air. The trickling of the brook or river. These days of water wasting. Will the water run out? I hope for naught of that ever happening. But we must stop raping the land. "Please leave me fallow for at least a month or many!" says the Earth.

I sit in nature, in the Auburn, natural hills. A small pond sits next to me. The toads' baritone chirps at me. There is life everywhere. A tiny milkweed fluff floats by. Even this lightness of being has a life, a physiology about it. So it becomes a life form. Isn't that the way it works? As told by our fore Fathers and Mother of the earth.

I am now distracted of focus by the white puff of cloud ahead nestled in the hills' peaks. Granite juts out on the left peak with Valley Oaks and Digger Pines shading and decorating the peak's decent. Nature is so simply lovely beautiful. An oxymoron of the truest sense. Truest and realest and good-est sense. My calmness is here. It sits with me. How nice to know I can just be here and now with my Higher Power and it will just be. Literally just be with me. The ticking of the wind's cool temperature on the wavy metal enclosure roof above me. The breezes stiff and cold. I wear a red velvet hooded sweater and tights and jean shorts and walking tennis shoes. I walk onto the sunny, rocky path in front of me to warm my shoulders in the sun and to follow and dance, soar, glide as the free black and white butterfly with torn wings does. I am a butterfly with torn wings of spirit. But I am donning my fresh angel wings as we speak and write. I already take flight in my dreams of late night. In real life I still have training wheels on towards winged flight. But it will happen. News to me the more rooted and grounded you find yourself on the earth, the more your wings work and the freer you become. God is right there. She holds my hand so tight and pulls me ahead. Thank you. The falcon flies and soars and comes tornado-ing around, changing direction in the same juncture of conjunction of his circle. A meditative Zen flight he has. I revel in falcon's ability to fly. Flying is only something that I accomplish in my dreams. Envy, delight, joy are all of the emotions I feel as I watch

# The Reason I Get Up in the Morning

Brad Buchanan

always curious about  
how it will strike me every morning  
I roll slowly away from my pillow  
and prop myself up on my elbow  
to see what hits me when I swallow  
the first gulp of water  
life-giving but painful

I seek it hopelessly in the shower  
where my crawling skin  
meets the dancing water  
in a terribly rash encounter  
I know that I will regret later

its itching is like an unhappy lover  
who is never satisfied  
even with pain  
whose sadness inevitably boils over  
and adds an insult to injured laughter

it comes to me finally  
from my daughter  
who needs me to cut up her apple slices  
who can't find her Hydroflask  
who is in crisis for unknown reasons  
who only wants to take me for granted  
the way she did before I was haunted  
by this chronic disease  
by this thing that is killing me every day

I wanted so much not to die  
not to sleep forever  
not to lie all day in a bed in the basement  
not to be free  
of the obligation of being myself  
in this watered-down capacity

she departs for school  
leaving her umbrella with me for safekeeping  
like the thing that I must suffer today  
sheltered from the gathering rainstorm  
to be a diminishing part of her future  
a witness to what she aspires to be

## AFTER A LONG DAY

Dick Maw

It had been a long day and clearly time for a big unwinding. As he entered the kitchen, the screen door gave him a screeching reminder of that blue and yellow Can of WD40 on his workbench in the garage. It would fix that little item on his “to do” list. That door was just another notch in the gun of this stressful day. Suddenly, everything changed as the aroma of freshly baked bread filled his senses. It was just the desensitizer he needed. His mind filled with memories.

He was transported to the kitchen of a farmhouse next to the wheat and corn fields where he’d spent his childhood. His mind was filled with images of his mom, in her flour sack apron, kneading bread dough into loafs for the baking pans awaiting their turn in the oven of the old, black, woodfired stove. This process, so often repeated, was clearly etched in his memories.

Shift forward some years and it’s a Thursday in California during those high school days when he always seemed to have a troop of friends follow him home after school. They all knew it was baking day and warm slices of homemade bread slathered with butter were not to be missed.

Somehow these images completely deflated the stress of his day and caused him to revisit that question that always came to him when in the presence of fresh baked, homemade bread – What is better than the aroma of fresh baked bread? Maybe the first bite? He mused about how fortunate he was to have a bread machine these days, though it fails to compare with those images that had just transformed him and his day.

## Diamond Dust

G.B. Lindsey

The gift of winter is the darkness: the world narrowing ever further at each end as the weeks slide by, until the sun is granted mere hours and little of the heat it has so long poured down upon dry, cracking earth. As moisture once seeped out and up, the darkness now seeps in and down, under the dirt crust. There it solidifies, brittle crystals that pack ever tighter beneath each careful step. It trembles down there as it glitters overhead, a lacy veil between earth and space. It shifts, turns the starlight into winking baubles, high in a fiercer cold.

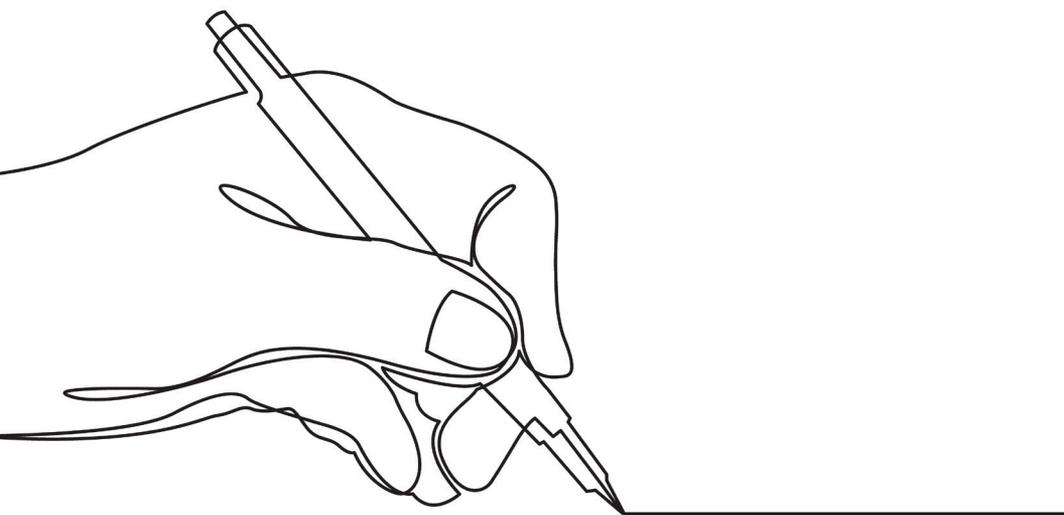
The darkness cloaks, muffles like a fall of snow until the streets are quiet and sleepy, their vanguards of trees stretching fingers against the moon, and all there is, is a drip, drip, drip of unseen water.

I like the lights in the darkness: rainbow specks and white webs, a single lamp behind lowered blinds, the dulled and silent flicker of someone's television, headlights cutting through crystalline air before the car takes the next left and vanishes. Light and sound are swallowed. Ornaments of blown glass, mercury glass, wavering candles, the flashlight of a dog walker four houses down, the scent of burning cedar and pine from a nearby chimney, the glow of a phone lighting someone's cheek and ear. In winter, the darkness does not smother. It cradles, cups, shields from the world.

## Practicing

MacKay O'Keefe

Grateful for the action  
Of one foot in front of the other.  
Being able to lift my shoe  
Propel it through the air  
Strike down  
And move forward.  
Across cement, cracks in the sidewalk  
Surface undulating beneath my feet.  
Grateful for the balance  
My feet right themselves,  
Gentle force up through my ankle, to my knee and hip  
So I can keep moving forward.  
Grateful for the strength of each muscle fiber  
Working in concert.  
Grateful for my breath  
Variations in tempo,  
Changes in intensity.  
But it is the constant  
Always there: in and out.  
The pushing out creates space  
For air moving in,  
Partners in negative and positive.  
Appreciate the energy  
I generate just by going, by moving ahead  
It's as simple as one foot  
In front of the other  
One foot, then the other  
One step and another  
And another and another.



## **Writing Through Illness Experiences**

## **Illness**

Claudette Cervinka

Illness spells “can’t” and “separation.” The distance of the gap between self and others. Between what was, and is now. Between what was wanted and what is here now. Between bending and immobility. Between color and black. Between hope and confusion.

Hanging somewhere, trapped, in the space after one breath, before the next. Existing, between left and right; but not center. Wandering somewhere between life and death. Or, might I be a light, flowing between the notes in a song?

# The True Sound of a Helicopter

Seanain Snow

There was a time,  
when the helicopters flew by,  
we would say,  
“here come Zack’s lungs.”

You see,  
they had to be  
lungs for Zack  
that night,  
because Zack didn’t  
have much time.

His lung-o-meter  
was ticking,  
ticking, down,  
and the helicopters  
would come.

When this all began,  
at the building across  
the street, when it  
was supposed to be  
a routine aortic repair,  
we didn’t yet know  
that the sound of helicopters,  
that distinct whir,  
sometimes means  
that organs are being  
brought in,  
having been removed  
from a dead person,  
triple checked  
for compatibility,  
and designated for a  
recipient like Zack.

Or Tanner.  
Back when the silence  
between heartbeats  
stretched on too long,  
the phone calls began.

The cardiac surgeons,  
across the street,  
they were all summoned,  
adult and pediatric,  
to meet their calling.

All of them, it seemed,  
unless out of town,  
came into the space  
where the silence  
became their calling,  
and they became  
a mixed-care team,  
and they kept  
my boy  
alive.

Whoever might have  
been away  
at a conference,  
or a funeral, that night,  
was not part  
of Tanner’s team,  
but the rest were,  
when Dr. Raff asked for help  
rather than lose  
a patient.

And that team  
did their work,  
on my boy,  
and they were successful;  
they kept him alive.

The sound  
between heartbeats  
became a whisper,  
eventually,  
and that team agreed  
to hand him over.

At the end of

a bumpy ride,  
down the highway,  
with two nurses,  
an EMT, and an IV,  
another team  
met us,  
at two in the morning,  
and listened.  
And they too heard  
the sounds of silence  
between  
those faint  
heartbeats,  
and they answered  
their calling  
with the summons  
to find my boy  
a new heart.

They took us in,  
and we waited.  
And they taught us  
the true sound  
of a helicopter,  
flying by,  
when a 12 year-old boy  
named Zack,  
from Arizona,  
was waiting  
for a new pair  
of lungs.

# I Didn't Know It Could Be This Black

Terri Pauser Wolf

I stand in the darkness,  
in a black I didn't know existed.  
They say black absorbs all colors,  
but I see no color.  
It's a shade darker in here  
and darkened more,  
as the hours ticked,  
and the calls came  
with bits missing here and there.  
The subtle become startling  
when calls were frantic asks:  
"I'm in a pickle. Where is my house?"  
Her house, her home, gone,  
though she stands in its entry.

Her brain a circuit short,  
mothering a distant time  
her children's names ghostly,  
wisps she couldn't hang on to.  
How will she (and we) navigate a life  
darkened with disease,  
damaged by dementia?  
Her world, obliterated,  
returns in bizarre snippets,  
"Who is that old man?" she asks,  
pointing to her husband.

Today's call contrasts the good life, the good times.  
Her home, the center of celebration;  
she baked coffee cakes,  
only the sour cream coffee cake,  
and party mix,  
and never missed a birthday—  
always a cake, presents and a song.  
Her songs are gone.  
Her teaspoons and measuring cups

in the drawer under the mixer  
that's not beating.

Her life surrounds her,  
the collections and the obsessions:  
antique dolls, pewter, dishes,  
books, buggies, bears.  
Each picked out with glee at the bargain.  
She knew every price and what it was worth.  
Her thrill-of-the-hunt clutters the space  
she doesn't know.  
"Who brought all this stuff here without asking me,"  
she says to her daughter.

Proteins clump in her brain,  
sending memories this way and that;  
pairing the unexpected in today's breakfast.  
Spoonings childhood with present day and  
spreading some yesterday on toast, burnt,  
the darkness showing everywhere.

The frail, grayed woman rubs her gums together  
continuously, rhythmically,  
the frontal lobe stuck,  
unable to stop the movement.  
This imposter mother has a faraway stare  
looking back, not forward,  
retreating in time,  
shrinking, life pulling  
into itself.

Clouds gather over the house  
she cannot call home.  
The inside darkens  
to the indescribable black  
sucking all the colors into itself.  
Life as we knew it  
is a shade darker.  
I didn't know it could be this black.



## **Writing About Relationships**

## Donna Looked Like She Wanted to Cry

Cathy Tkach

Donna looked like she wanted to cry. Maybe these Friday-at-five-o'clock get togethers in the cul de sac weren't working for her. Organized at social distance. With wine or sparkling water in hand, shouting out to each other how our days are passing in quarantine. But then her husband Bill came out to join and the reason for her misery was obvious. Bill, he of the bald top and side gray hairs that had not quite given up, he had given himself a haircut. The irregular wispy top hairs and crooked back angle spoke to use of a mirror that was not three way, and to a dull instrument.

Poor Donna. She is working so hard at all this. She had shared a chuckle with the ladies last week, "I put on my topaz earrings and some lipstick, and Bill looked up and said, 'where are you going?' 'To the couch,' I said." Last week that had been funny. Now the grooming joke is on her. Bill didn't get the memo that said that shelter-in-place rules include not offending the eyes of those who have to live with you.

Patty is devout in her faith in a secular way that makes her liked by all the neighbors. She and Paul share lots of laughs at the neighborhood BBQs, holiday open houses, hand in glove marriage, so when she spoke to him in the cul de sac with a slight tone to her voice, ears perked up. She had turned to the ladies, "Paul is working so hard from home now, so busy, and after all those hours of zoom calls, he came into the kitchen wanting a snack. Can you believe it? Asking for trail mix. M & M's."

I said "Paul, our children are grown. We do not have that kind of food here." And then he opened the freezer to look for ice cream. Ice cream! As if."

Cracks are starting in the pristine kitchen of Patty and Paul, where meals, while well prepared by Patty, are devoid of bread, have scant fat, buckets of vegetables, followed by a one ounce square of chocolate, dark, split between them for dessert. They are both slim. And probably one of them is very hungry.

## Hypothetically

G.B. Lindsey

If we were still together, I'd take you to a bed and breakfast in Santa Cruz, a sprawl of a house at the end of a twisting driveway. We'd arrive at twilight, the gravel road shadowed by the houses on either side, and the windows all lit from behind drawn blinds. Somewhere over two roofs, three, the ocean swallows and crashes, but in this yard at the end of the drive are chirping crickets and the scent of star jasmine.

In a coded box sits a key; I'd let you into a quiet hall, plush wine-red runners underfoot, lamplight spraying gold up the walls. At the end of the hall opens another, each step a solid creak of rich brown boards. The room is small: more deep rugs, walls arcing lazily into stucco ceiling, a bed as tall as my hip and a bathroom with a clawfoot tub, tiled in abyssal green and cobalt. It's late in the year; the night gathers fast outside, and two blocks in any direction save the one toward the sea yield restaurants, late night coffee shops, noisy bars and dark, leafy avenues.

We'd lie on the rug on our stomachs, bare feet in the air, and read terrible books aloud until we choke laughing, vowing never to write like that, so in love with a backstory that should never have seen the light of a published page. You'd dig out chocolate, dark, salty, almond-studded, and I'd watch you lick each finger clean.

You'd say, it's okay if you don't feel the same, we can try things out, and I'd smile and say nothing, and know that you feel more than I am willing to play with, to gamble, to risk, and finally I'd say, let's not talk about it tonight.

We'd walk to the ocean through the dark, imagine the entire city sleeping, bump our shoulders and hips as we wander, kick off our sandals and dig our toes into crumbly sand and point at Monterey glowing gold across the bay. Your cheeks would go pink in the wind and I would blink again and again to un-dry my eyes.

In bed, the lights off, we'd whisper and laugh, facing each other under mounds of quilt, you curled into a C on the same lush mattress as me. Your knees would rest on mine, your curls a warm spill over the pillow. Your teeth would be white in the black, and your laugh a mere breath. I'd whisper the words to a poem I've known for twenty-three years, and maybe in the dark, you'd kiss me.

## Relics

G.B. Lindsey

I was reading an old notebook the other day, trying to find a scene I wrote, and I found an old letter to you. It was long, and good. It traveled a pointed path from one place to another, like a story, one of those love songs where the ending is ambiguous and not an ending. And yet, in that letter, everything was ending.

What surprised me was how many of the moments in that letter could have happened then or now. If not for the age of that notebook, if not for the well-worn snippets of stories that surrounded, cradled it, I would barely have known during which breakup the letter was penned. Did it take us ten years to circle the same rocky outcroppings, to climb the same hills, to tumble off the same cliffs? For all our efforts—improve, clean slates, talk this time, be honest—were we still intrinsically unable to learn?

Round two—the earth opened three years ago, swallowed us, and I still don't really know what happened. Which boulder gave way? Where was the trail duck that stacked too high, and which stone proved too much?

Why won't you talk to me?

Why can't I let you go?

Did you let me go? Are there days where I consume your thoughts just as you devour mine, and are you sorry for the choice you made? Are you still angry? Do you regret?

It would break my heart if this were two people sitting in a darkness that day after day just grows darker. Two people afraid to reach out and ignite that old candle for fear the other will blow it right out.

Or maybe you have moved on, pushed me out of your life, and if you have, I wish you would please pull yourself properly out of mine.

## A Necessary Life Skill

Melissa Blevins Bein

That almighty lesson that he said everyone must learn.

*Learning how to say goodbye gracefully is a necessary life skill.*

Some people go their whole lives believing that goodbyes are bad and something to be avoided.

Goodbyes hurt and the first one is the hardest - no doubt about it.

You might feel like a toddler wrestling with emotions that are bigger than you.

And you are an emotional toddler.

And just like a toddler learns to walk and stumbles about in the beginning - that's how it is with goodbyes.

It's just that the stumbling looks more like crying and saying the perfectly wrong thing at the wrong time to who you want to be the right person.

And this is why it's important to learn this skill.

It's as important as learning to read, learning to sum numbers and how to change a tire because goodbyes happen.

To live life without them is to either live a very short life or one that is numbed.

Neither are what he wanted for her.

So he said he was sorry that this life lesson was coming so early for her.

He wouldn't have wished it but now that the inevitable is upon him he wanted to provide context.

She didn't understand it then because her life experience was limited to the stories she read in books and she had not yet read a book where the Daddy died and tried to cram a lifetime of parenting and presence into a one-on-one conversation with a 9 year old.

She listened.

She did not want to sit there with him and listen.

She wanted to go upstairs to her bedroom and finish her book.

He then said that *life is like a book* and that got her attention.

That she would have many chapters in her book and there would be lots of colors and changes and catalysts and heroes and a few villains in the book that would make up her life.

At the end of every chapter - there will be goodbyes.

Things to let go.

Things to release.

People to purge.

Some of these partings will be bittersweet.

Some are going to hurt like Hell.

Anticipate those goodbyes and know they are an important part of the book.  
Without pruning nothing new can grow.  
Sometimes you will have to be the one to initiate a new chapter and it's going to  
take courage.  
Living close to the fire and true to your soul will be too much for some.  
You will know them by how they recoil from your pursuit of more.  
Leave them behind and *do so unapologetically*.  
When the fire inside you - the one that burns hot with feeding your soul,  
When your fire burns them - time to let go.  
I'm giving you permission to let them go.  
You've got important work to do building your book and putting chapters to-  
gether.  
Chapters with impact.  
Don't let anyone hold you back, making your life a pamphlet.  
You go out and make chapters.  
Thick ones dripping with whole heart experiences that propel you forward.  
Gracefully.



## **Writing About Dying**

## Natural Selection

Barbara Dellamarie

I hate ants, but only selectively, because I am also fascinated by them. I did some terrible things to ants when I was a kid. The worst was when I would put one in the little hole of a Wizzer Top and then after it finished spinning I dumped the ant out to watch it stumble drunkenly around the porch steps. I followed up that atrocity (performed multiple times) by watching two ant armies, black ants and fire ants, having a war in the empty lot next to our apartment. I watched closely, rooting for the mostly harmless black ants even though they dog-piled onto the fire ants, easily subduing them. A budding sense of sympathy for the fire ants quickly wilted when they started climbing up my legs, biting as they went, standing as I was at the outskirts of the battle zone. Slapping, stomping and shrieking I ran to get the bug spray and in the ants' panic to escape the poison, even more of them crawled up my legs. Good times.

I also have fun memories of playing with ants and I hope they share my feeling. Sometimes on a rainy day, or maybe when the creepy neighbor with that pale kid who never came outside watered his lawn, I made boats for the ants. The water-filled gutter was the raging rapids. A curved leaf made a great boat and if another flatter leaf was pierced with a small twig just so, a sail was fashioned. The twig with the sail could (and still can) be poked carefully into the boat to make a fine looking sailboat. I could usually find an ant easily, bailing from their elaborate tunnels trying to save their monarchy as they often did when water invaded. I'd carefully pluck an already panicked ant and drop it gently into the boat, quickly putting the boat and passenger into the rapids. Engineering was not a priority as the boat immediately tipped over, leaving the ant to frantically struggle against the pull of the water, clinging to the boat. The ant inevitably lost its grip, casting it helpless into the water until I came to the rescue with a stick or leaf for it to scramble aboard. If I missed one it was so sad. Sad.

The ants that invaded the bathroom last week have been a challenge. During the night they had formed up and the line of them stretched from under the sink, up to the top of the sink, across the edge of it, up the wall and across the ceiling. It disappeared into some unseen abyss on the other side behind the towel shelf. No food was being eaten or carried. Colleen and I don't like to use pesticides if we can avoid it. We'd been told that vinegar is a good deterrent, disruptive to their pheromones or whatever sciency thing it is that keeps them marching in line. I went to get it and thought not much about the plight of the ants as I wiped them up with a piece of toilet paper soaked in vinegar and deposited it in the trash. As the lid dropped, I could see them writhing on the crumpled toilet paper and had a flash of regret. Meanwhile Colleen poured small amounts of vinegar onto spots along the wall by the sink that looked like probable entry points. A piece of

cotton drenched in vinegar was left behind on the edge of a cabinet as a deterrent and warning.

I washed my hands about an hour later and saw the rattled survivors' attempts at reorganization. I slapped at them idly and with some annoyance and washed their crumpled bodies off my hands and they are sucked down the drain. I looked to the right and saw an ant being swept over the side of the sink by what must have seemed a tsunami. A split second of empathy for the ant overboard as I continued smashing wandering survivors. Where were they coming from, dammit!? More appeared as I called Colleen and we set about with 409 and paper towels, standing on a step stool to wipe the audacious ants off the ceiling and higher reaches of the walls. As some unreachable ones simply appeared to be drowning in the 409 while remaining on the ceiling and walls, we left them, packed up our tools of death and left the bathroom, slapping at imaginary ants on our arms.

Preparation for bedtime. We turn on the bathroom light. Dazed survivors wander the walls. We slap at them in annoyance. "Are there more, or are they just the ones left behind?" I said I thought they were just the unfortunates, left to wander until they dropped onto the floor intermittently as they starved to death. Poor things. We decided to crush those that came into our field of vision and ignore the rest. I brushed my teeth and flicked a few. I watched their futile wanderings. I was reminded of the time I had an Uncle Milton's Ant Farm. I was an adult at the time and still am. I waited anxiously for my ants to arrive in the mail. When they did I read the cartoon illustrated manual which instructed me to put a drop of water into the ant travel tube first thing. They were thirsty after their claustrophobic journey in the small container. They would be thrilled with their new home. I enjoyed several days of delight and fascination as I watched them dig tunnels, cover them over as they decided on a new course, and then they began to dig chambers for their dead. I began to feel so sad for them. What a pointless existence! They could be contributing to the ecosystem from whence they came, were it not for the two sisters who vacuumed them up for packaging and shipping to people like me. The saddest time was when only one ant remained. He listlessly moved his dead comrades from chamber to chamber, piling them up, then digging a new chamber to transport them to. Until he too died and there was no ant to carry him to a chamber.

In the bathroom, third or fourth day. The ants remaining are sluggish. But that doesn't keep them from panicking when the ants around them are flicked or crushed. There was a seemingly endless supply but no point of entry. A small volume but always there, never completely going away. I became more convinced than ever that our bathroom was a huge Ant Farm. No way out for them so they just use what skills, strengths and intuition they have to keep moving, keep moving. This intuition included the compulsion to carry around the dead ones. So sad. The most horrific moment came as I was sitting on the toilet

watching increasingly sluggish ants and thinking, “just disappear already! Die!” But they weren’t hurting anyone, were they? I tapped my finger against one on the wall as Colleen called out to me from the kitchen. I don’t remember what she said. It wasn’t ant-related. Out of the corner of my eye I saw it. An ant struggling, cemented to the wall by its own...its own, I don’t know, thorax! Or whatever that butt end of an ant is called. Stuck to the wall by its own body! Its still-functioning four front legs flailed in desperation as a compatriot wandered past. That one too became agitated, running back and forth to the fatally injured ant to just a few inches away, unsure what to do. They caressed each other’s feelers. The ambulatory ant began to move away but came back one last time. Realizing the hopelessness of the situation, he continued on. Perhaps he was on his way to inform the family of this ghastly end. I poked the broken ant, putting it out of its misery. The helper got a poke too. Making sure he was truly dead, I knew I had spared him the heartbreak of informing the wife and kids.

Fucking ants. So sad.

## Heirlooms

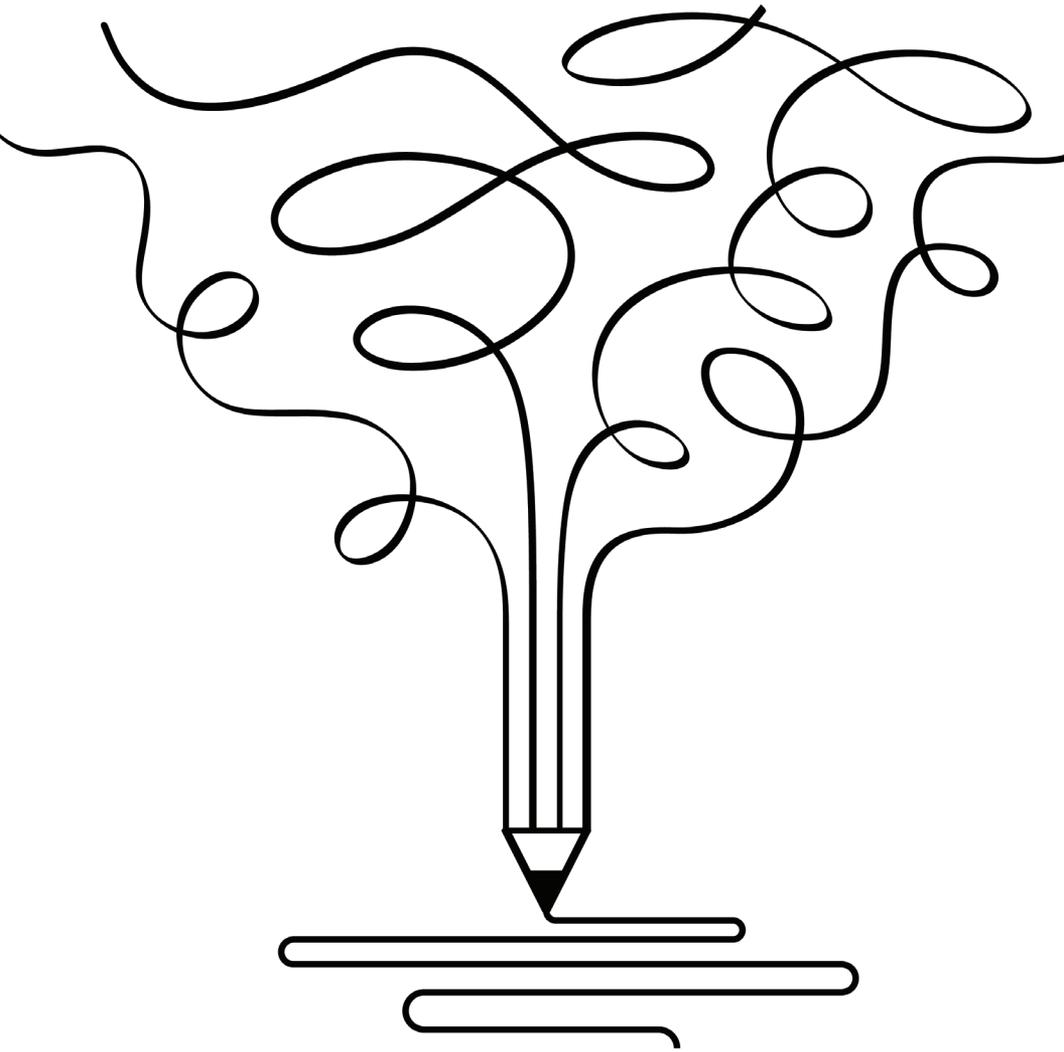
MacKay O'Keefe

When asked, I pick the turquoise drawer. Graham opens them all for me first: black, white, orange, green, red, silver, pearls, opals, wood, blue, purple. The gold and diamonds are locked away, in the safe.

I carry the drawer downstairs to go and sit beside her on the couch where she spends all her time when she's not in the hospital bed, three feet away. She's reclined, wrapped in a blanket despite the sunny fall weather, her feet propped up to ease the fullness of her swollen legs. I recline too, so we're even. She sees the color of items in the drawer - the turquoise, aquas, blue-greens - and sighs quietly. Her breathing isn't labored today but her voice is soft; she lacks sufficient breath support to project. Everyone else leaves, knowing I will have her occupied for at least the next hour. I'll be there, which means Graham can leave. He can enjoy some time in the park with his son and grandson, three generations playing on a typical fall afternoon. It's quiet when everyone else is gone. There's no one else to detract, nowhere else for the attention to drift, space for us and our task.

Lilah is sitting in her favorite spot and Ellen asks her to get down, kindly at first. Generally, Lilah listens, but today she wants to stay close. She won't move for me, a non-resident in her house, trespassing upon her loved one's seat. Ellen repeats, "Lilah, get down," five times in rapid succession. She gets progressively more annoyed, the edge in her voice calcifying. She has no strength to push her, too weak to even move her arm an inch and give a nudge. I won't do it because she's not my dog and Ellen could easily become irritated that I tried. So I stand, awkwardly waiting for the dog to move, holding all of Ellen's turquoise jewelry which may soon be mine.

Ellen picks up each piece carefully, admiring with her whole hand, her eyes, her memories. Along with her jewelry she wants to give these stories: the history of the pieces and the effort she put in to find them or make them. She wants to share her limited time looking at beautiful things, appreciating the loops encircling, combining colors and shapes in unexpected ways, recalling the places and spaces of her lifetime. Now we let those stories fill the space around us, anchored by fragile connections of rock and metal.



## **Writing Life Stories and Memoir**

## Broccoli or Blue Eyes

Dick Maw

Charlie was a confirmed bachelor. He was also the poster child for the “I Don’t Eat Broccoli Foundation”. He really hated broccoli and vowed that green, bunchy stuff would never cross his lips. He was a happy, contented person and was quite clear on his likes and dislikes. One day, Charlie was grocery shopping and literally bumped into Jenny at the Safeway in the produce department. Their shopping carts slammed together as they rounded the corner of a green produce shelf. Charlie’s immediate reaction was to say “I am so sorry! I wasn’t paying attention as I should have been. I hope I didn’t hurt you!” This brought a big smile from Jenny. As Charlie looked at the blond hair and blue eyes which accompanied that smile, he was captivated. They exchanged some “Do you shop here often?” and “Yes, I like this store – it’s close to my apartment” chit chat but Charlie couldn’t help staring at those blue eyes next to the long blond hair. In order to not let their impromptu visiting about vegetables come to end, Charlie made a classic mistake by asking Jenny a question when he had no idea of what her answer might be. He asked, “What is your favorite vegetable?” Jenny’s reply caused Charlie to freeze in his tracks when she said, “Oh, my very favorite is broccoli. It’s so yummy!” It was a moment of truth for Charlie. It was surprisingly easy in that moment for him to utter to this completely captivating person staring over her grocery cart at him with those blue eyes, “Oh that’s amazing, it is my favorite too!” Guess it’s not surprising that blue eyes will always triumph over broccoli, especially when they are accompanied with long blond curls and a bright smile.

## Passion for Ice Cream

Dick Maw

I have a passion for homemade ice cream. I remember making ice cream as far back as age 5 or 6. It all started with Dad grabbing the burlap bag and getting out the old, wooden ice cream freezer with its rusted hand crank assembly from the cabinet in the laundry room just off the back patio. We'd head for the ice house on Grand Boulevard in Dad's old, red Studebaker pick up. We'd ride in the bed of that truck while Dad did the driving – something that in today's seat belt days would not be allowed. Once we arrived at the ice house, a quarter was dropped in the coin slot followed by a rumble of the block of ice sliding down a ramp into a basket and then into Dad's burlap bag. As we headed home, visions of what was soon to come danced in our heads. With a few whacks with the blunt end of Dad's axe, the ice was ready. All the time the ice project was happening, Mom was doing her magic in the kitchen. She combined milk, half and half, whipping crème, eggs and sugar, and finally her magic ingredient – a bit of sour cream. The mixture was then poured into the shiny, silver container and the metal and wooden dasher was inserted in the mixture before the lid was put over the dasher axel in readiness for the freezer crew and Dad. Once the container was placed in the freezer, layers of ice and Leslie rock salt were added to fill the freezer, and the cranking began. Slowly the crank handle was harder and harder to crank. The decision of when the ice cream was frozen was left to Dad, who gave the crank some test turns and soon declared the ice cream was ready. The first taste of the ice cream was reserved for those who had taken a turn on the crank. The lid removal celebration resulted in some ice cream sticking to the lid and this provided the first taste. The dasher was slowly removed with the ice cream being scraped off as it came out of the rich, creamy ice cream. I always recall that often a piece of rock salt found its way into the ice cream for tasting. This provided a savory contrast to the rich, sweet taste of the ice cream. I have reflected on that over the years and have decided that that salt is a lot like life. Things happen in your life that are not what you want but they provide a contrast which enables us to better appreciate all the good in our lives when compared to those unwanted experiences. It seems the ice cream nourished us at the time and our memories nourish us once again.

## Color Change

Melissa Blevins Bein

You were that strong kind of silent. Focused. Stern but fair.  
A condensed human package with an intensity to which others naturally yielded.  
I witnessed the magic of color change in your blue eyes.  
That turned bluer when you were happy or playful or emotional.  
Stormy slate gray when you were mad.  
Your brain an industrious sponge absorbing information of all shapes and flavors.  
Sopping up morsels of data from the annual almanac at dinner.  
A little disheveled on those occasions when you would let your funny out.  
How we delighted in your humor and the comic strips you drew of Mom and of us.  
And your smile.  
The proud victory march around the house when you won at Old Maid.  
The extended arm and pure sparkle of mischief in your eyes  
When asking - *do you want to touch a champion?*  
So much person wrapped up in mortal skin.  
You wore red and blue plaid flannel shirts and whatever else didn't match.

I wish I had asked more questions.  
I wondered why you woke us up at 6AM on Saturdays.  
*What are you going to do - sleep all day? Cows to milk.*  
We did not own cows.

The originator of The Comma Nap,  
That 20-30 minute eye-closing that separated work from home time.  
The smell of Minwax stain and sawed wood shavings  
The backdrop of our youth in the wood shop at the back of our lot.  
Your sanctuary where you threatened to - and later did - paint the windows black  
So the neighbors would not interpret lights on as an invitation.

Raw unflinching honesty was your loving carving knife  
Slicing away our illusions to ensure a clear-eyed view of life as it is.  
Not as we wanted it to be.  
Your legacy.  
Your gift.

## Handbells

Melissa Blevins Bein

*To make injustice the only measure  
Of our attention is to praise the Devil  
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down  
We should give thanks that the end has magnitude.*  
- Jack Gilbert, 10 Poems for Difficult Times

The ringing of handbells on Monday nights at 7.  
And occasionally on Sundays for special performances.  
At least that's the story our parents heard.  
There may be a special place in Hell for those of us who  
Claimed we were going to church but  
Instead drove by the church and took the backroads to the next town over.  
In the K-car. The mint green K-car.  
The girls to the Dairy Freeze parking lot.  
We were a group of 2 octaves.  
Seven girls and the occasional preacher's son when we were made to include  
him.  
Eight was the right number but seven girls had it covered.  
Our Southern Baptist mothers would not approve.  
There would be consequences but not until later. Later is not now.  
Handbells and playing handbells and handbell practice equaled mischief.

If the locomotive of the *LAWD* was going to run anyone down, it was going to  
be us.  
The bait and switch of our overly clever youth growing up in a railroad town.  
Where words *locomotive* and *LAWD* were spoken as frequently as *hello* and  
*prayer chain*.  
Even then the biggest fear was living a life without magnitude.  
Three towns and one army base produced 150 high school graduates every year.  
The visceral fear of never making it beyond the walls of the county.  
They exist - those walls. They keep people trapped inside and  
Pump magic pixie dust for the inhabitants to inhale that creates  
blind acceptance of barely status quo.  
Some are born with antibodies to pixie dust.  
Antibodies that cause clear-eyed views and open-minded thinking.  
An inner knowing that there is a great big world out there beyond the walls of  
the county.  
The science of immunology applied to small town life.

## Striped Pajamas

Pat Murphy

If you don't take chances, said the man in the striped pajamas, you might as well not be alive. Well, he was very much alive and, because of the chances he'd taken, would be wearing those pajamas for 25 to life. But what kind of a miserable life it was!

She smiled and nodded and said, "Yes, Grandpa," now and then, holding her head high, listening to every tick of the clock on the wall until it would be 3 o'clock, and visiting hours would be over and her mom would take her home for another month to pretend she was a normal 14-year-old girl, with a normal family, without a grandfather in prison doing 25 to life for murdering a convenience store clerk he was trying to rob.

## Dear Dad

Seanain Snow

By now, Dad,  
your lungs  
have crumbled  
to ash.  
Your skin may have  
floated a bit  
before disintegrating  
into the  
hot air,  
and your bones,  
what was left  
after the myeloma,  
turned to powder.  
These remnants  
of the crematory  
will give us  
something  
to sprinkle,  
when we head  
to Natural Bridges,  
where you and mom  
used to take us  
camping.  
And when  
we wade out,  
into the water,

of the great Pacific Ocean,  
cuffs rolled high,  
and break the law  
for something  
we believe in,  
just like you taught me,  
let it harm none,  
we will send  
you back  
to the holiest place,  
the earth,  
the ocean,  
the current of life.  
No matter  
that your current  
has ebbed.  
I can still feel  
your warmth,  
in my hands,  
in my heart, Dad.  
And your ashes  
will find  
their way back  
to life.  
Amazing life.  
Blessed be.

## The Best Part

Terri Pauser Wolf

The best part of my job as an oncology nurse is when it is quiet enough that I can look into a face and note the color of his eyes or see the rouge she dabbed on her cheeks to look as healthy as possible.

I want to notice a patient's brow--are they knitted or relaxed? To see her day--what's going on in her life? To know the story of what this means to her—who's cooking, who's caring, who's concerned?

Nursing is an opportunity to see hope on two feet coming in day in and day out, 35 daily radiation treatments and a 50-minute drive to the cancer center. It's seeing courage in overalls and a hearty laugh, always a new joke to keep the days interesting. It's seeing Jay come up to the nurses' station and hand us a poem about beauty and caring that he had just penned. It's the tears that fill our eyes.

It's knowing faith when the news isn't good and the willingness to try one more thing. It's witnessing love—an exam room full of family, each wanting the details of mom's sickness, siblings flying in from all over the country to be here.

It's persistence on the phone, asking more information, a wife apologizing for caring about her husband and not wanting to be a bother. These people take "job" out of it and make nursing an experience.

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Melissa Blevins Bein	p. 72, 84, 85
B. Bella	p. 9, 20, 35
Brad Buchanan	p. 21, 38, 55
Rebecca Cahill	p. 25, 26, 27
Claudette Cervinka	p. 42, 43, 62
Barbara Dellamarie	p. 16, 19, 76
Aimee Harper	p. 31, 33
S.J. Koller	p. 11, 45, 47
G.B. Lindsey	p. 58, 70, 71
Elizabeth Maw	p. 10, 37, 54
Dick Maw	p. 57, 82, 83
Pat Murphy	p. 44, 86
MacKay O'Keefe	p. 59, 79
Cheryl Paletz	p. 22, 23, 24
Aida Saldivar	p. 8, 30
Seanain Snow	p. 50, 63, 87
Cathy Tkach	p. 69
Terri Wolf	p. 51, 65, 88

## Supportive Oncology and Survivorship

Dealing with cancer is more than treating a tumor or malignancy. Cancer and its treatment can impact people diagnosed with cancer and their loved ones in many areas of life, such as, emotional, mental, social relationships, financial, and spiritual.

At the UC Davis Comprehensive Cancer Center, we have a Supportive Oncology and Survivorship service, which offer a range of supportive care programs from a team of experts to help you and your loved ones achieve the best quality of life through the cancer experience. We focus on the things that matter most to you to help you figure out how to adjust, cope, and hopefully thrive through the process of diagnosis, treatment, and beyond. Please visit the Supportive Oncology and Survivorship webpage at [health.ucdavis.edu/cancer](http://health.ucdavis.edu/cancer) for more information.

Our team provides:

- Counseling
- Care navigation
- Nutritional assessments
- Psychiatric care
- Advance care planning
- Symptom management
- Education and resources
- Spiritual support

Our team of experts include:

- Oncology social workers
- Oncology nurse case managers and nurse navigators
- Registered dietitians
- Psychiatrist
- Supportive oncology medical doctors
- Resources and education specialist
- Chaplain

## UC Davis Comprehensive Cancer Center

The UC Davis Comprehensive Cancer Center provides the most advanced methods for the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of all types of adult cancers and blood disorders. Our patients have access to leading-edge medicines and treatments, including early-phase clinical trials of new therapies and treatment approaches. Our collaborative approach to cancer care starts with teams of doctors who work together to develop the ideal treatment or combination of treatments for each patient.

Your cancer care team also includes highly trained nurses, nurse practitioners, pharmacists, radiation therapists, clinical research coordinators, genetic counselors, and many other health-care professionals. The expertise and experience of these teams make us one of the nation's top cancer centers.

Our pediatric oncology providers diagnose and treat a wide range of pediatric cancer and blood disorders for children, teens and young adults. Pediatric patients coming to UC Davis for cancer treatment also have access to a full complement of supportive programs while in treatment and the region's only clinic for managing the long-term effects of treatment on survivors of childhood cancers.

UC Davis is designated as a Comprehensive Cancer Center by the National Cancer Institute, the nation's top cancer organization. Only 50 other cancer centers have successfully earned this designation, a mark of the highest standards and achievements in cancer research, outreach and education, all of which are reflected in our excellence in patient care.

“Comprehensive” designation means patients get access to leading-edge treatments, including development of personalized therapies based on the unique molecular characteristics of individual patients' tumors, and access to clinical trials in early phases of drug development. It also means that the physicians who see patients in clinic are collaborating with researchers to develop new approaches to detecting, preventing and beating cancer for all populations.

To learn more about the UC Davis Comprehensive Cancer Center visit [health.ucdavis.edu/cancer](http://health.ucdavis.edu/cancer)

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