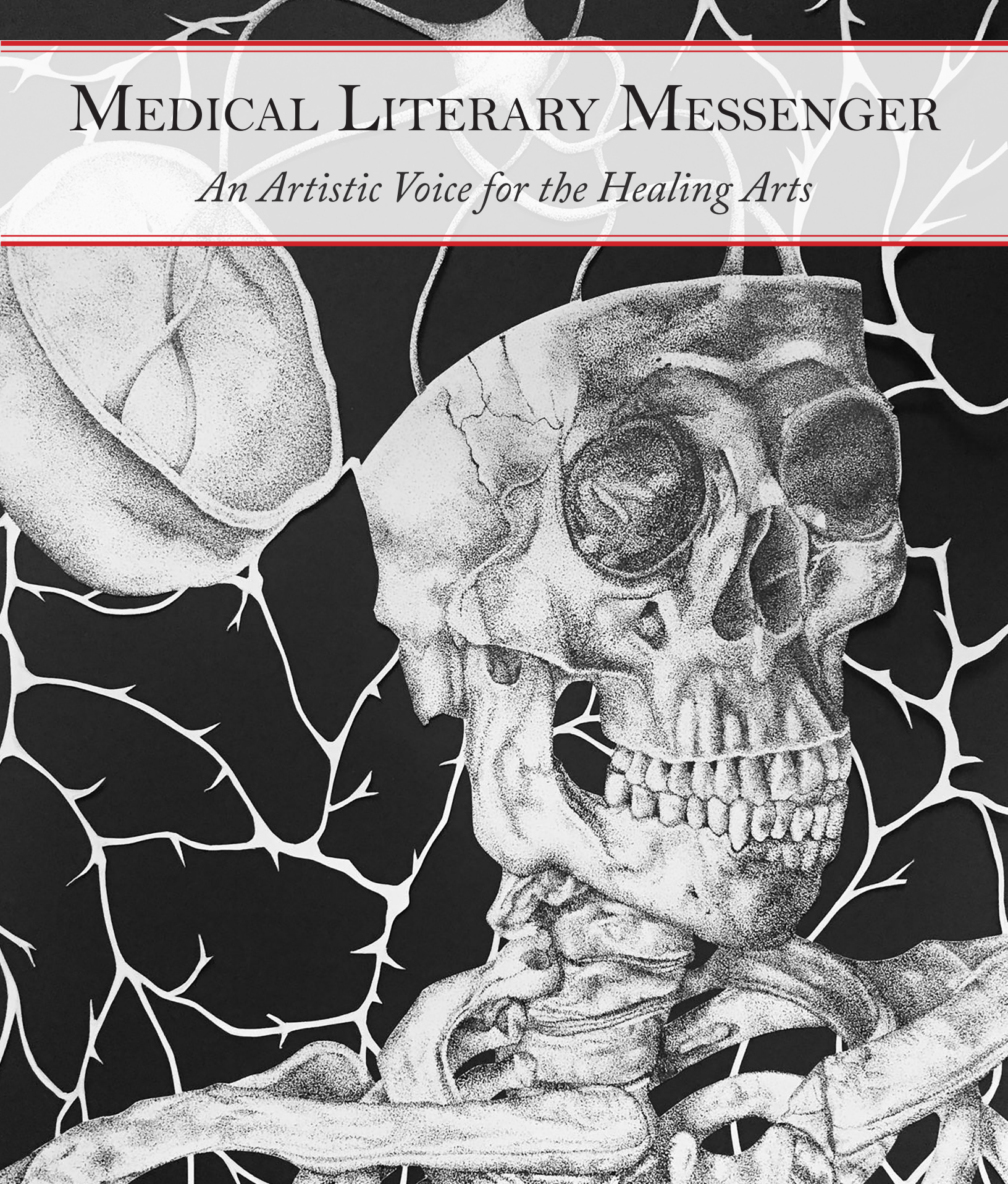


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# MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

*An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts*

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Illustration by Alana Barrett

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# MEDICAL LITERARY MESSENGER

*An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts*

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We are delighted to publish the 2016 Fall/Winter edition of the *Medical Literary Messenger*. In this edition, we explore medicine and the healing arts through heavy doses of poetry, a shift from prior publications. We hope that you find the content moving and meaningful. Thank you to our diverse contributors. And, as always, Dear Reader, thank you for making the *Medical Literary Messenger* a relevant voice in both medicine and the humanities.

Gonzalo Bearman, MD, MPH | Editor in Chief

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# Irene—*London, December 2006*

She calls her short red wig, “The Hair”  
wears a deep red shawl  
and red stones in her ears.  
She’s just as alive as we are, but not.  
Her cells are saying no,  
quietly beneath her pink skin.  
No, they’re whispering to one another,  
to her blood, to anything that will listen  
or not.  
She heats up tartlets in the oven  
makes quips, corrects her husband,  
counters his corrections.  
Her cells whisper, gossip under her skin.  
Incessant busybodies  
they don’t get tired, give in, go to sleep.  
The whispering goes on  
no matter how bright the tangerines on the table  
how soft and red the shawl, how true  
our laughter. They continue their campaign  
to make Irene not.  
Right in front of our eyes  
over French wine and fancy greens,  
tartlets, broiled chicken and friendship,  
they buzz and chatter.  
To the roses we brought  
the color of a baby’s stomach,  
the color of eyelids or pearls — no.  
To all our yeses — no, no, no.

By Katharine Harer\*

\* Author’s note, page 12

# Today

I call a taxi for the little park where years  
ago my father pushed me on the swings  
sending me soaring with strong hands.  
Today he sits back in the cab, small and thin.  
Cancer has stamped its due date on his bones.

Together we agree that words no longer serve,  
each of us learning in stages how to say goodbye.  
As we ride, the sun on the street feels kind  
like the light of a reading lamp at midnight  
softens the page and soothes the dark.

**By Antonia Lewandowski**

*Antonia teaches writing and literature at St. Petersburg College, Florida. Along with her chapbook, Out of the Woods, her work has appeared in journals, newspapers, and most recently in Helen, Meta Interdisciplinary Journal, Bluestem Magazine, and Connecticut River Review, which has nominated her for a Pushcart Prize.*



# The Bench

By Richard LeBlond

Not until Mom died did I realize the significance of the place of death. Our culture ritualizes places where lots of people have died at once, like battlefields and plane crash sites. But with few exceptions, the ritualization of the place of death for most of us is a very private matter.

One of those exceptions is the memorialization of highway fatalities by the placement of crosses or floral wreaths off the shoulder at the site of the accident. I started paying attention to these when I lived in sparsely populated Montana in the late 1960s. You could travel beautiful fifty-mile stretches of highway and see nothing of human origin beyond one cluster of knotty pine cabins and maybe three gratuitous highway fatality memorials. There were long lonely stretches where I saw more memorials than opposing vehicles. I wondered whether, over time, there might be fewer vehicles and more memorials until there was no one left to do the remembering.

Before Mom died, I didn't understand the full significance of these memorials and thought they were rather morbid. She died of ravages related to breast cancer fifteen months after the diagnosis. Like so many other emotional events in my life, I still haven't fully come to terms with it and usually cringe when I think about it.

As death approached, Mom was

*“There were long lonely stretches where I saw more memorials than opposing vehicles. I wondered whether, over time, there might be fewer vehicles and more memorials until there was no one left to do the remembering.”*

counseled on her condition by her doctor at the hospital, and she decided to spend her last few days under terminal hospice care at a nursing facility. She was given water but no food and was made to feel as comfortable as possible. It seemed almost but not quite like assisted suicide. Call it assisted natural death.

The facility that my sister and I chose was the second one we visited. The first was an older multifloored institutional-looking building with long stark hallways. The hallway we entered was filled with people in wheelchairs waiting for attention outside an office. Some looked anxious, others seemed dazed. A few looked at us—complete strangers—pleadingly. The hallway reeked of the smell of urine. And this was Portland, Oregon, 2002, a city that prides itself as one of the most humanistic in the nation.

Surely there was a better way for these people to die. A curtain had suddenly been pulled back on something carefully hidden away, of how horribly yet routinely our system, and our families, can treat us when we are no longer able to care for ourselves. Behind the cultural façade, beneath the American hubris, is a nation of smug barbarians. My sister and I left

quickly, she in tears, I rigid from horror.

The facility we chose was a modern single-floor building beautifully designed around a courtyard landscaped with trees, flowering shrubs, goldfish pools, paths, bridges, and benches. The large windows in the hospice rooms looked out onto this yard. It was still an institution, but people were being cared for in their rooms, not in a hallway, and there was no smell of urine. After mom was settled in, we talked awhile and offered to read to her (we would have predicted *Gone with the Wind*), but she gently told us to leave, more a request than an order. I think she said it to spare us the agony of waiting for her to die while in her presence and maybe sparing herself some agony as well. My sister and I came back and visited with her a few times every day during the three days before she died. But I have occasionally felt some guilt for not having stayed by her bedside, for not being there at the end. “Her family was at her bedside when she died ...” That appears in so many obituaries, but can it be so often true? Is the family sitting there day and night? No playing cards in the

Continued, next page

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cafeteria? No sitting in the kitchen waiting for the phone to ring? Death can take its time.

After one of our visits while she was still alive, I walked out into that beautiful garden in the courtyard and sat on the bench facing her room. I have been holding onto that moment ever since. It was here that all my love and guilt came together, as I looked into the room where Mom was dying. And I wondered whether I would ever have the strength to come back here and sit again.

The hospice where Mom died is not far from my sister's house in Portland and is on a major street. When I visit once or twice a year, we usually pass by it, without comment. My sister must pass by it at least weekly and I imagine she has grown used to it. But not I. Every time we pass the hospice, I am silently overwhelmed by those emotions I felt on the bench at the place of death. It is my quiet memorial. It has more meaning for me than her grave.

Now I understand those roadside crosses and wreaths. If there is anything beyond this life, the places where they left us were the portals. ✧

*Richard LeBlond is a retired biologist living in North Carolina. Inspired by travel and introspection, his essays and photographs have appeared in numerous U.S. and international journals, including Montreal Review, Hippocampus, Compose, Smoky Blue, Appalachia, and Still Point Arts Quarterly.*

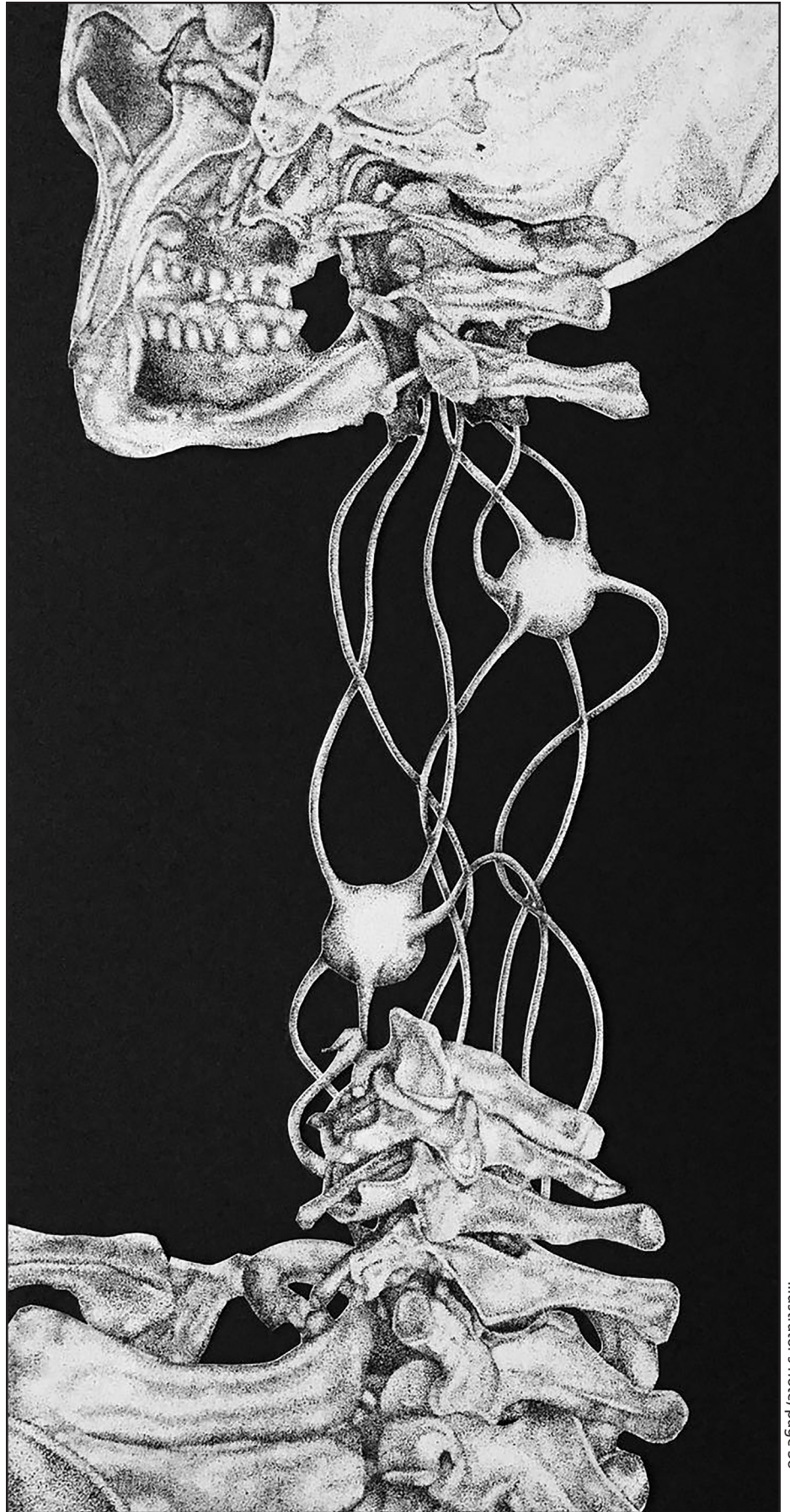


Illustration by Alana Barrett\*

This piece is part of a collection that juxtaposes anatomical forms with enlarged cell types (in this case neurons). View more at <https://alanabarrett.myportfolio.com/>.

\*Illustrator's note, page 38

# After Reading Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room"

A closed mouth. A volcano. A little girl in 1976.  
A dentist's waiting room. Screaming. Unity. Separation.  
My mother inside for what felt like a long time.  
The day spilled out rivulets of fire. I am quoting.  
Using my open jaw.  
I don't remember what I was reading. I wasn't reading Elizabeth Bishop.  
Not *National Geographic*. I was always reading.  
I learned to read before I started school.  
This visit was before I started school, understood adults,  
what it meant to enter the volcano of school,  
rivulets of learning like bright sparks.

Suddenly, my mother came back. Sat with me.  
Our backs pressed against the cushions.  
It took me completely by surprise. Her and me, together.

Later, when the ambulance came, we were falling,  
and this was happening because of a mouth,  
my mother's that wouldn't open.  
I heard her mouth open, and my name fell out of her several times.  
And the day turned volcano,  
sacrificial, Aztec vectors swirled around me,  
and my eyes hurt my mouth and there was no way  
to not fall off the world  
nothing stranger than the police and the ambulance  
going separate directions  
one with me  
one with her  
nothing stranger than a mother whose mouth won't open  
but who is screaming her daughter's name.

By Nina Bannett

*Nina Bannett's poetry has appeared in print journals such as Open Minds Quarterly, Bellevue Literary Review, CALYX, and online at Topology, the fem, Snapdragon, and Amygdala. Her chapbook Lithium Witness was published by Finishing Line Press in 2011, and her first full-length collection of poems, These Acts of Water, was published in 2015 by ELJ Publications. She is Professor of English and department chairperson at New York City College of Technology, CUNY.*



# How to Open Your Eyes

By Angus Woodward

**H**ave your wife, Jalan, awaken you at three in the morning by laying her hand on your shoulder and saying, “Pandora caught a squirrel and it’s in the living room.” Fight loose from the covers and put on your glasses.

The squirrel will be a flying squirrel, gray with eyes like coat buttons, and it will be crouching on the undercarriage of the end table by the bay window. The cat will patrol nearby, tail restless. You’ll squat down within easy reach of the little squirrel, which will blink at you. It looks so easy, but you say, “I don’t want to just grab it.” Later you and your wife will disagree on what she said next. She’ll swear that she said, “Don’t just grab it,” but you’ll be just as certain that she said “Just grab it,” and that is what you’ll do, simply reaching out and putting your fingers around the furry body. No one will dispute what comes next: the squirrel rares back, opens its mouth, and sinks its teeth into the end of your middle finger.

Let go of the squirrel and allow it to scurry around by the baseboard while you clutch your finger and your wife fends off the cat. Someone will grab a dishcloth and throw it over the squirrel, which is small enough to be totally immobilized by a few ounces of cotton. Dripping blood from your puncture, gather up the cloth, open the front door, and toss the squirrel into the yard. As soon as it disappears into the night, think: *Maybe I should have kept it and brought it to a lab.*

In the morning your finger will

hurt, but it’ll be nothing antiseptic and a little bandage can’t fix. It will make a funny story, until Jalan’s mother hears it and starts talking about rabies. But you and Jalan remain calm, going online to figure out whether flying squirrels carry rabies. It will be hard to find anything definitive, but the preponderance of evidence will say no, although a state agency website will show that a (non-flying) squirrel in the next parish was found to have rabies the year before. Eh ... nah. But then, on Monday, Jalan will call the state and the man on the phone will be reassuring until she mentions the rabid squirrel in Livingston. “He needs to get the shot,” the man will say definitively.

The next step is to call the clinic and talk to the nurse in your primary-care physician’s office. No problem. Call the switchboard to make an appointment. The nurse will call back because they do not have any rabies shots available, but they will try to get some, which might take a few more days. Postpone the appointment. The nurse will call again on Thursday to tell you that they cannot get the rabies shot, but a hospital would have a ready supply, so you should just go to the emergency room.

Go to the ER on a weekday morning, hoping that it will not be too busy. The city you live in is biggish, around 400,000 residents, nearly a million in the greater metropolitan area, and emergency rooms can get busy. But the waiting room will not be too crazy when you arrive, populated by people with no obvious injuries or illnesses. You will have to explain twice why you are there,

*“Later you and your wife will disagree on what she said next. She’ll swear that she said, ‘Don’t just grab it,’ but you’ll be just as certain that she said ‘Just grab it,’ and that is what you’ll do, simply reaching out and putting your fingers around the furry body.”*

repeating the squirrel-bite story and the no-rabies-shot-at-the-clinic story, and then you will be asked to take a seat. Study your finger, which will have a tiny red scab where the creature’s long needles plunged through your skin but looks otherwise undisturbed. Pick up a magazine about football and flip through it, cultivating patience.

Between pages, indulge in some people watching. Eye the old couple to the right, he in a wheelchair, she in a polyester pantsuit. Will you have such a deep frown when you are his age? Will you be in a wheelchair, or will Jalan? Will both of you? Which one of you will tow an oxygen tank on a little dolly? A young woman across the way will distract you from these questions. She’s kind of a badass, with sloppy bleached hair, some tattoos, and a top that sometimes rides up and shows her belly button. All of that is interesting enough, but her entourage will raise the stakes. Two young

Continued, next page

## Continued from page 8

men and a middle-aged woman sit with her, and all four seem agitated—fidgeting, making loud phone calls, laughing, arguing, never sticking to the same activity for more than a few minutes. “When are they going to see you?” one of the young men demands.

The young woman will scowl and wave one arm wildly. “They got people with gunshot wounds and whatnot back there! Just chill!”

After maybe ninety minutes, a nurse in raspberry scrubs will emerge and state your name. Stand up and follow her to a small room with two chairs and an examination table. She will invite you to take a seat on crinkly paper. Her name is Becca and she will ask some official questions as she takes your vitals. “Any fever or chills?” and such. Finally she will hoist a syringe the size of a cigar. “Okay, Mr. Angus,” she’ll say, “which finger was it?” Give her the finger and let her begin to poke holes in it. She will poke nine holes, injecting so much serum that the tip of your finger balloons up and throbs heavily, oozing clear fluid from several of the punctures. The syringe will be half empty. “Okay, so the rest goes into your thigh,” she explains, and tells you to pull your pants down. Turn your head as she pumps serum into your pale muscle. “Alright, so that’s it!” she’ll say cheerily.

Rise to your feet and fasten up your pants. “So I’m all set?”

“No, we need to keep you a while to make sure you’re not having a reaction. Follow me.”

Follow Becca down the hall to a larger room with four examination tables. “You can just sit there,” she’ll say,

pointing to a hard plastic chair. “I’ll come check on you in a while.”

As soon as Becca walks out, the badass from the waiting room will walk in and plop into a chair on the other side of the room. She’ll shrug her lips, scowl at her nails, and then glance your way. “What are you here for?” she’ll ask, as if you were bunkmates at the city jail.

Go ahead and tell your little story, the one about the flying squirrel and the phone calls and rabies shots. Tell it wryly, in a tone of voice that suggests you realize it is not much of an emergency. When you are finished, return the courtesy by saying, “What about you?”

“I’m here to get pain meds for my cancer,” she’ll say. “Yeah. I’ve got this ovarian cancer, and it hurts pretty bad sometimes, and the only way I can get the meds I need is to come to the E.R. for them. I usually have to wait longer, but they’re not too busy right now. Sometimes I come in here and there’s people bleeding in the waiting room, or an ambulance’ll pull up and they’ll roll in someone with a gunshot or dying from an accident or whatever. It gets pretty bad.”

Now you are ready. The muscles of your face know what to do. Simply raise your upper eyelids. Your lower lids will drop slightly, and you will see clearly at last. At the same time, nausea will well up out of your legs, into your gut, chest, and head, doubling you over. Groan deeply, cursing your squirrel, your doctors, and yourself. ✧

*Angus Woodward is the author of a short story collection, *Down at the End of the River* (Margaret Media, 2008), and a novel, *Americanisation* (Livingston Press, 2011). He is working on a memoir entitled *How to Write a Memoir in Just Seven Wrenching Steps*. Angus teaches writing at *Our Lady of the Lake College in Baton Rouge*.*

# Stage 3

Her hair undressed  
itself from her head  
like dandelion  
florets in the wind —  
collected themselves  
like balled up fuzz  
everywhere —  
pillow cases,  
shower drains.  
Under fluorescent lights  
she grips  
toilet handlebars  
for breath  
as she cries. She  
is a wilting stalk  
with bones  
no bigger than her hands.  
She pours over the edge  
into a pile  
of flowers.

By Amanda Gomez

*Amanda Gomez is an MFA candidate in poetry at Old Dominion University. Some of her works have been published in the following publications: Eunoia Review, Ekphrastic Review, Manchester Review, Expound Magazine, San Pedro River Review, and Avalon Literary Review.*





Illustration by Alana Barrett\*

View more at <https://alanabarrett.myportfolio.com/>.

\* Illustrator's note, page 38



# It

Just runs on blood, not a metaphor  
just hurts like a mutha and  
tells lies beneath its indecencies,  
pounds you in the eye til your head splits  
turns your focus into hurtgrit  
stops your breathing til you forget that you can  
just wears you to a filthy nub,  
dissolves your resolve til you're empty,  
bursts like a cold pipe on a moonless night,  
beats waves of adrenaline into poison and  
nobody's on the phone or coming,  
bouldered bleakness til you're deaf and stupid  
sick with nothing as something collapses  
invisibly a sharp wind breaks open  
and you pick up your head from the bottom of your heart  
and a sweet smell rises as your legs reach for ground  
and everything that was before is simply forever  
just that  
because you just keep riding the insides of yourself and plummeting  
out like raring electricity  
you can't believe  
you're still here  
right with yourself in a future of none other  
spinning in the horrific beauty of each and every first moment of  
oncoming, oncoming, oncoming  
like a metaphor without its substance yet  
breathing when you get there, and you get there, and you're here.

By Grace Fryberger\*

\* Author's note, page 38

# The Mammogram, Part II

The woman who instructs me  
is big and blond and Germanic.  
She gives me a paper gown to wear  
white and sharp-cornered.  
I feel like an angel in a Christmas Pageant.

She leads me to a room  
with nothing but a cold floor and a huge machine.  
She steers me here, then there, lifts  
my right breast, and lays it deftly onto the metal plate.  
The machine squeezes it tight.  
We compress because we care —  
says a sign on the wall.  
“Is it alright?” she murmurs  
and compresses me a little harder.

A mirror on this machine  
lets me watch my breast getting flatter and flatter.  
A moody little lamp casts a rosy glow.  
I peer at my flattened breast  
and its round twin in the mirror.

I am sent back to my dressing room  
in my angel suit.  
I let down the paper and slip a peek  
at my just-photographed breasts.  
The area above them is red and raw  
but they still look perky and inviting.

Beautiful liars.

By Katharine Harer

*Katharine has published six collections of her poetry and her work appears in literary journals, newspapers, and online poetry sites. She teaches at Skyline Community College in San Bruno, California, and works as an organizer for the teachers' union. Katharine received her MA from San Francisco State University and lives in San Rafael with Bob and Shaggy.*

*Old and New*

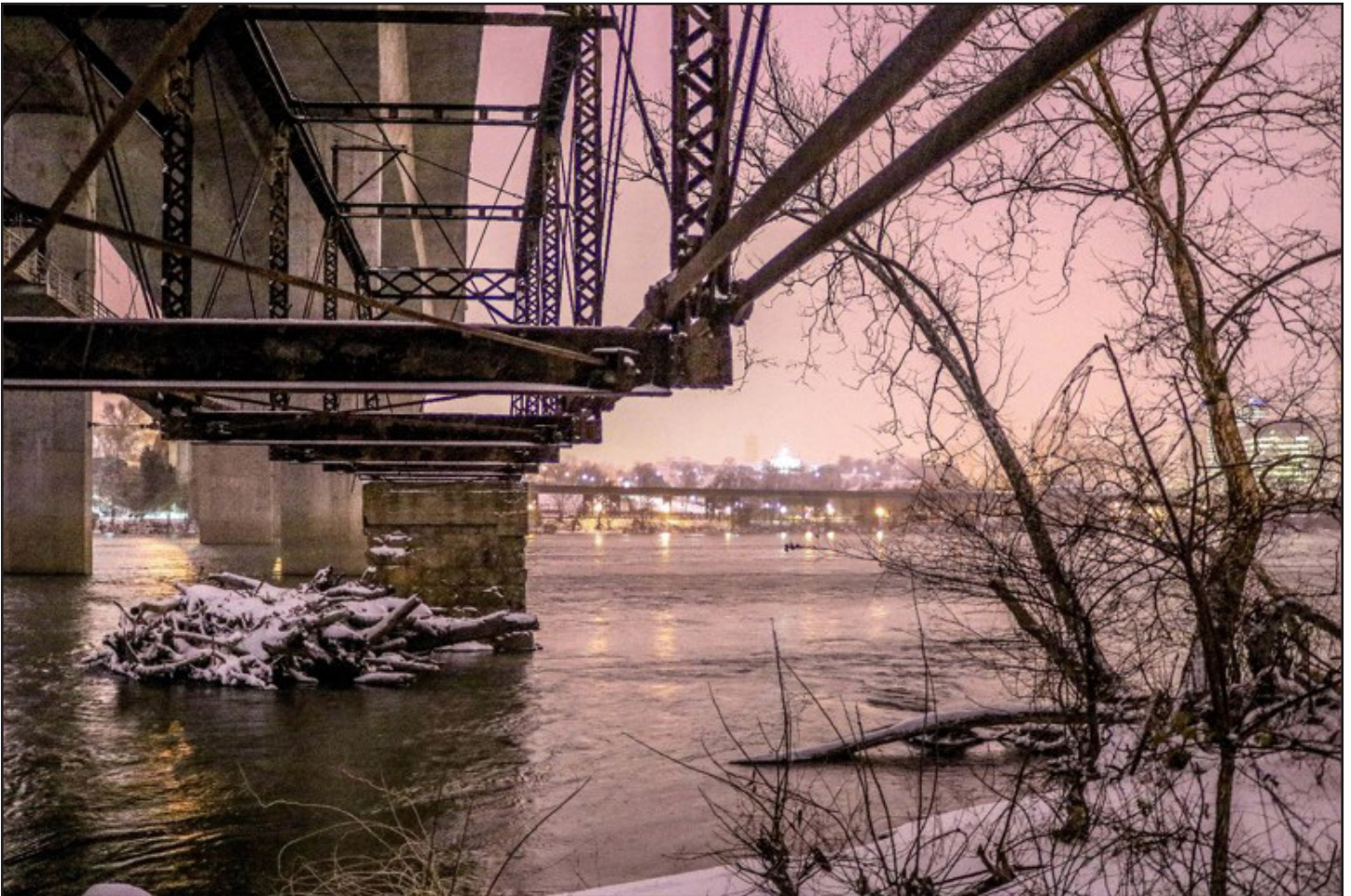


Photo by Derick Nelson Jenkins, MD

*Derick N. Jenkins is serving as a Chief Medical Resident at VCU Health System from July 2016 until June 2017.*



# The Innoculation

By Simon Friedman, PhD

“I’m going to lower the upper hemisphere slowly onto your scrotum.”

“Thank you.”

I try to express gratitude at every juncture, in part as a reflex based on the training I received as the child of an English mother, in part as actual gratitude, and in part as a sacrament—as an attempt to protect myself against the various and unknown injuries that can be meted out at the hands of those whose care you are under, not with malice, but in error, as one might inadvertently slam one’s small toe into the leg of a table. No one *wants* to mangle one’s toe, but somehow on a fairly regular basis, the toe *does get mangled*. As I ponder my fairly mangled small toes, toes that I *myself* have mangled on my own foot, I ponder the nurse now holding the not-light lead hemisphere and slowly lowering it onto my waiting scrotum.

I will have twenty-five radiation treatments to my rectum, and so there will be twenty-five opportunities for the nurse to let the lead hemisphere slip prior to all the loose bits being poked and prodded into the shielded pocket inside of the hemisphere. As I assist in the poking and prodding process I say, “I’ve given up on modesty at this point,” which lightens the mood in the room somewhat and is a completely sincere statement. The purpose of the hemisphere is to protect the sensitive center of the scrotum from inadvertent X-rays, to ward off sterility in part, although I’m really pondering

*“Confronted by it, the Simon of two months ago would have gnashed his teeth, wept, and cursed to the heavens, at least in his mind; but the Simon of the present was being remarkably zen ...”*

at age forty-eight the absolute necessity of passing my particular genetic gifts on to a next generation. On one hand, there is my remarkable skill at whack-a-mole, and on the other hand there is this small but poorly behaved tumor that I am sure I had something to do with. But, I was the one who brought sterility up to the radiation oncologist, and she was the one who suggested the “clam shell,” and so it is I who now am gingerly poking the odd bits that are poking out of the not-large slot in the clam shell back inside their shell where they will be safer.

I think about the giant ancient tortoise Owen, who made friends with the orphaned hippo baby, Mzee, in Africa, much to the delight of anthropomorphizing humans everywhere, and I think, *why can’t this shell be a bit larger, or the slot a bit more forgiving ... and why does it look like it was surplused off of a late 1950s Soviet submarine?* With all the high-tech wizbangery that surrounds and fascinates me in this room, this hollow lead ball with the not-large rectangular slot looks unchanged from the age of Madame Curie.

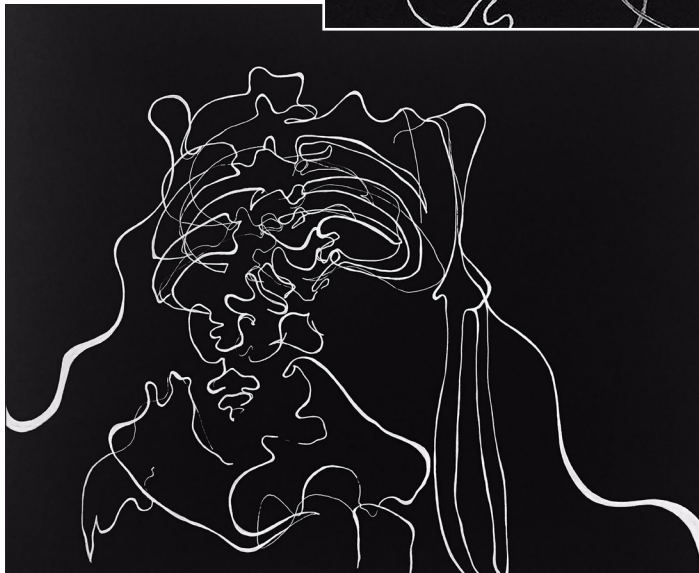
Confronted by it, the Simon of two months ago would have gnashed his teeth, wept, and cursed to the heavens, at least in his mind; but the Simon of the present was being remarkably zen, taking in the moment with a kind of separation,

as part of the ongoing brain restructuring process, where the mind over time realizes it can no longer react to every possible threat that looms in the distance and so draws in to only that which is nearby, and even those things are not viewed with panic but with some kind of cool James Bond-ian detachment. Or, at least, this is what I hope. The reality is that there is still some 2:00 a.m. ceiling-staring whimpering going on, but significantly less than before. Could this be my prize at the end of this year of radiation, surgery, and chemo (in various combinations and orderings)? An inoculation against neurosis? An abandonment of the approach of anticipating all possible threats, assigning a probability to them, and then preparing for each and a switch to the approach of dealing with what actually is, right now. ✧

*Simon H. Friedman is a scientist-educator, writer, film maker, and musician. His scientific work lies at the interface of chemistry and biology: described in the pages of the Economist and the New York Times and cited more than 1,000 times. His art lies at the interface of meaning and absurdity: Winner of Science Magazine's "Visions of the Future" essay contest, featured writer for Nature Chemistry's "In Your Element" series, multiple featured films in the New York City Food Film Festival and others. His collection The Complete Short Works of Young Simon Friedman: Philosophical Ponderings and Flights of Whimsy for a Benighted World, Volume 1 is available on Amazon.*



Illustrations by Alana Barrett\*



These pieces were drawn "blind," meaning I did not look at the paper as I was drawing; I only looked at the spine/skull I was trying to draw. Afterwards, I went back into the top piece to accentuate lines and add in design elements such as the small neurons coming out of the bottom of the spine. As I was drawing this, I was thinking about the fluidity and interconnectedness of neurons. View more of my work at <https://alanabarrett.myportfolio.com/>.

\* Illustrator's note, page 38

# Shocking

She sits in the back.  
I ride up front. At 14, I am the parent now.  
They take Mother from the house by force,  
after she confesses hearing voices  
coming from the old Frigidaire,  
black bears stalking the back door,  
single-engine planes from Tech Airport  
circling, watching, waiting.

Adults explain shock treatments to me:  
*“Otherwise, they might have to operate,  
cut out part of her brain.”*

In the treatment room  
a starched-stiff nurse injects sedative  
into one of the arms that held me as a baby.  
Next, a bat of cotton, thick as a Kotex,  
is placed on the side table.  
*“She might swallow her tongue.”*  
Wires from electrodes stuck to her scalp  
conjoin at the central wall socket.  
*“Honey, it’s time now.”*

I wait in the hallway  
while they crank the juice —  
enlightenment, just shy of electrocution.  
When she wakes  
her face is tender as a child’s.

We walk out in the April day  
to beds of bright tulips,  
the chalice of their blossoms  
too heavy  
for their tender stems.

**By Phyllis Price**

*Phyllis Price, native of Blacksburg, VA, is the author of the books Quarry Song, a poetry chapbook by Finishing Line Press, and Holy Fire, a spiritual memoir by Paulist Press. Her work is also widely published in literary journals. Price's writing focuses on the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world and mind/body concepts. Price currently resides in the New River Valley of southwest Virginia.*



# Boutique Hotel

She was new there, another addition  
to the Elmwood sanitarium flow  
as the gentry irons out the wrinkles,  
this one old enough to remember  
the chains, dank tunnels, fat needles  
where now the corporation  
gilds the outcast so tourists  
can turn terror into fantasy,  
laying steep dollars down  
for days in a haunted castle.

Bewildered she wanders,  
fuzzy slippers, hospital gown, quilted robe.  
Offering factory-made tea and pastry  
I cross over to her  
but she has already disappeared,  
ghost of my long ago

yet that chill remains  
not just the damp that is Buffalo  
this strange El Niño winter  
but the memory, naked, shivering  
awoken by a nightmare  
in that solitary room.

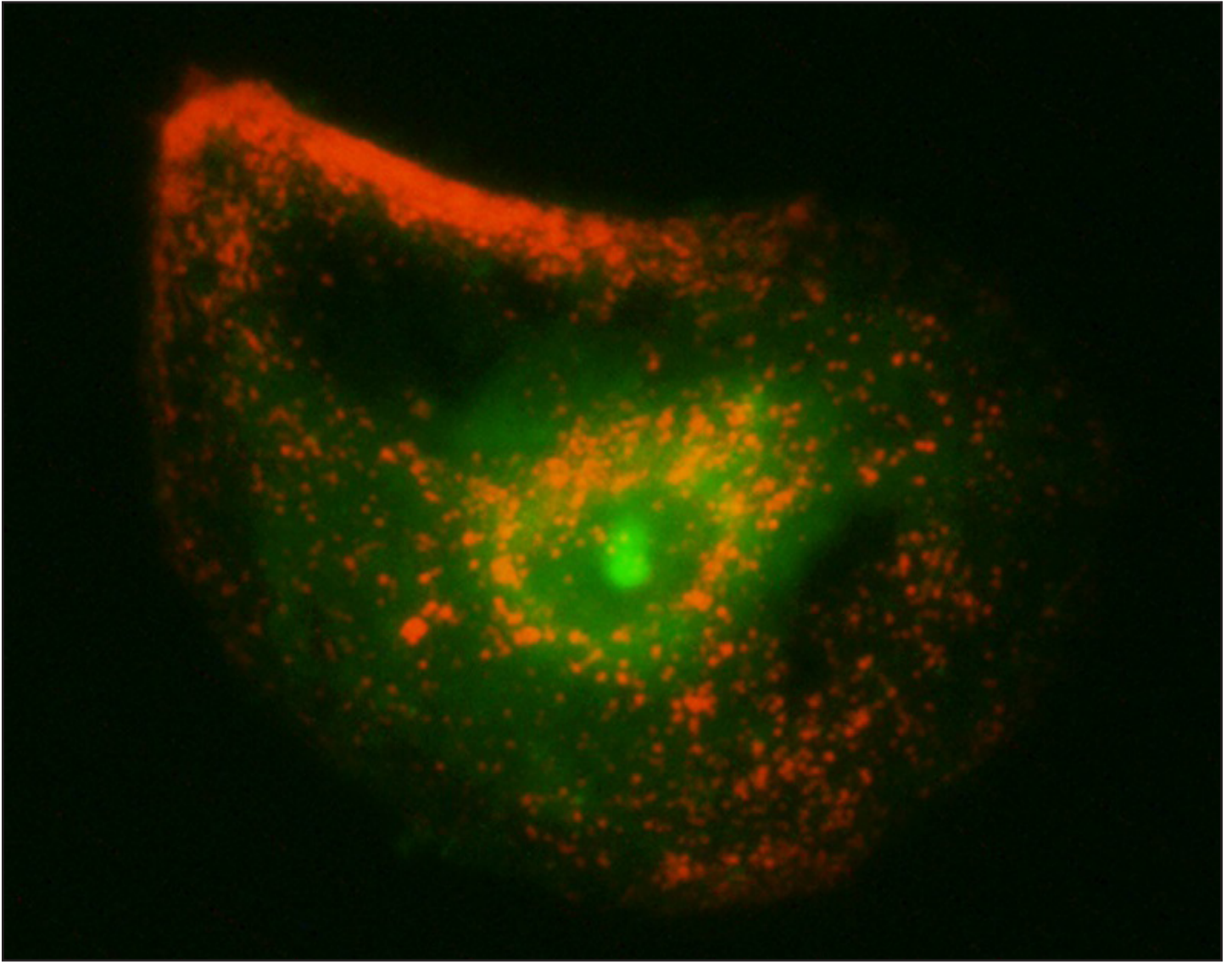
She takes the haunted part of me  
who knows where, returning at sunset  
when I urge her to seek shelter, point  
and ask, *Do you live there?*

*I don't want to talk*, she says,  
so I walk away,  
my feet retreading steps  
in the newly poured cement.

By Lynn Ciesielski

*Lynn Ciesielski is a former teacher who worked with children and adults with disabilities for over twenty years. After she retired she became very involved in reading, writing, and studying poetry. She has been published in over one hundred periodicals and has a chapbook and a full-length collection.*

## *A Sleeping Cancer Cell*



**Photo by Theresa Thekkudan**

This is the microscopic image of a cancer cell that was treated with chemotherapy and radiation. This cell went into a state of sleep or dormancy. Such dormant cells could stay in the body for a long time before re-activation. This phenomenon is an important cause for recurrence of cancer after standard therapy.

# After Years

By Sophie Shaw

In the cold morning light of the upstairs bathroom I watched my sister Emilia bend over to pull off her pajama pants, and I saw the ridges of her ribs rise down her back—soft and at the same time sharp. Her spine curved and each vertebra pointed up. Her ribs were like furrows in a ploughed field. How long had she been like that? I hadn't seen her undressed in a while.

Years later, I would watch my other sister Bridget walk across our kitchen, the rich summer sun coming in the many windows and melting lavishly on the warm pine floors. I would watch her walk hunched like an old woman, leaning on the island in the center of the kitchen for support. Her spine curved under the weight of pain. She walked exactly like my Nana did.

Emilia was eight when she was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, and at that time not many people had heard of it. The symptoms of the illness vary, but not so much so that my mom couldn't recognize them in Bridget a few years later.

I didn't believe her at first. I thought she was overly sensitive because of Emilia. Bridget had always been quiet—never particularly energetic and never a big eater. Eventually my mom took Bridget to be tested, which led to months of further tests. By then I knew something was wrong. I wanted to pray that the diagnosis would come back negative, but then I knew if it wasn't Crohn's it must be something else. So I

wasn't sure what to pray for.

I was much younger when Emilia was being diagnosed with Crohn's and knew nothing about the disease. Emilia's main symptoms were the fevers: every night at first and then earlier and earlier in the afternoons. She was so exhausted that even though my mom let her sleep late

she could hardly stay awake through the afternoon. Bridget and I were too young to be left alone and came to all her doctors appointments. We spent hours sitting in hospital waiting rooms watching the horrible children's shows on the too-quiet TVs and smelling the sick clean smell of the hospital. Emilia was eight years old. She was scared and angry and confused.

Bridget was different. She was a little older, eleven, and Emilia and I and our youngest sister, Daisy, were old enough to stay home from her appointments. If I ever saw Bridget cry it was silent and dispassionate. There was nothing to be confused about—she knew precisely what was coming. She was alarmingly resigned.

When Emilia and I were in middle school we played lacrosse at a private school in Durham on the club team. By this time Emilia was somewhere in the process of trying various treatments to find one that would work. Her fevers were better, but she had been hospitalized in January and that spring she

was still in a lot of pain. She wore a pair of baggy navy blue sweatpants to practice—especially baggy on her because she was so thin. They were the same sweatpants she had worn during those eight days in the hospital; I think they were her only pair. As we ran through drills, wearing our mouth guards and goggles

and yelling "Got ball!" Emilia was always behind. I could see her pump her arms harder than necessary to try to make herself move faster, but she had no energy and also she was in pain. Her goggles, the mouth guard, the pink lacrosse stick and the baggy pants looked like they were dragging her down. Her hair was cut short, just below her chin, but even so it looked too thick, something else to encumber her motion. Emilia never wanted anyone to know about her Crohn's. There were still many people who did not know, and we had not told the coach or anyone on the team because every time my parents brought it up Emilia fought them vehemently. Our coach was always positive and encouraging, but she could not understand why Emilia did not try harder, did not hustle more.

Toward the end of the season, my parents finally convinced Emilia to let them just mention the Crohn's to the

*"I wanted to pray that the diagnosis would come back negative, but then I knew if it wasn't Crohn's it must be something else."*

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coach. She was very understanding and stopped pushing Emilia so much in practice. Soon the season ended and the team was invited to an end-of-year party at the coach's house. After the meal, our coach gathered us in her living room to give us each a gift and talk about the season. I was sitting on the floor with my back against the sofa, and a friend on the sofa behind me was playing with one of my braids. I do not remember where Emilia sat. Suddenly my coach said, "There is someone I'd like to tell you about." I sat absolutely still and listened as my coach began to talk about Emilia, about her Crohn's disease, about how coming to practice every day was a challenge for her. My coach started crying as she spoke, and the room was completely silent. I did not look at Emilia. I did not take my eyes off the coach. The girl behind me continued to play nervously with my braid the whole time. I glanced to the side without turning my head and saw the girls from the team looking down, mostly, not wanting to see their coach crying. You don't know, I thought, you don't know what you're saying, you're just saying things my parents told you. I know that coach meant well, but she could not have done anything more completely opposite of what Emilia wanted.

There is a summer camp in Randleman, North Carolina, for kids with chronic illnesses. It is a remarkably joyful place, and each summer they also set aside a week for the siblings of campers. Bridget and I had been to the sibling week once before, and the summer before Bridget had been diagnosed we

*"I was so afraid she would pass out from not eating enough and no one would know why, except for me. And would they tell me, if she got sent home? Would they let me see her?"*

were set to go again. It hurt so much for her to eat anything that she was eating almost nothing at all. There was no official reason to keep her from going to sibling week. No medical diagnosis had yet confirmed that there was something wrong with her. And she wanted so badly to go.

Because she is four years younger than me, we were in different cabins and did different activities. The only time we saw each other was at meal-times, when the whole camp gathered together. I watched her, then, and sometimes walked over to her table. She sat with the other girls, long thin body bent, long thick beautiful hair plaited down her back. Neither of us had to say much, we both knew why I came and she always told me she was okay. Her counselors, loud, smiling, perpetually covered in sunscreen, face paint, and friendship bracelets, made a big deal when I came over. "Is this your sister, Bridget?" they would ask. "She looks just like you!" I wondered how they could look at Bridget and not know something was wrong. I was so afraid she would pass out from not eating enough and no one would know why, except for me. And would they tell me, if she got sent home? Would they let me see her? But she made it through

alright.

Emilia is tall now, taller even than my mom, her eyes made up of so many shades of blue. Crohn's often makes people short because their bodies are deprived of getting enough nutrients for so long that it stunts their growth. For most of my childhood we were the same height, and people often asked us if we were twins. Once Emilia finally found a treatment that worked, it was like her body was making up for lost time, and she quickly passed me in height. When she was little, she used to bounce almost all the time. She would bounce in place rather than standing still. Now when she walks she bounces up a little with each step. But in that bounce there is also an echo of the way she pumped her arms when we played lacrosse.

Emilia was always so shy as a child. When she and Bridget were little I answered for the three of us. She isn't exactly shy anymore. She knows more about a wider variety of topics than any person I know. She tells me that in her classes everyone always knows more than she does, that she always feels like she is behind the rest of the group, but somehow she manages to get almost perfect grades. She can be so critical of other people, but she is never more critical of anyone than she is of herself. I have never heard a person successfully give Emilia a compliment. She either finds a way to explain why it is not true, or she finds a way that the compliment is not actually a good thing. She assumes that, given the choice, people would rather not spend time with her. Now I wonder how much of this is just

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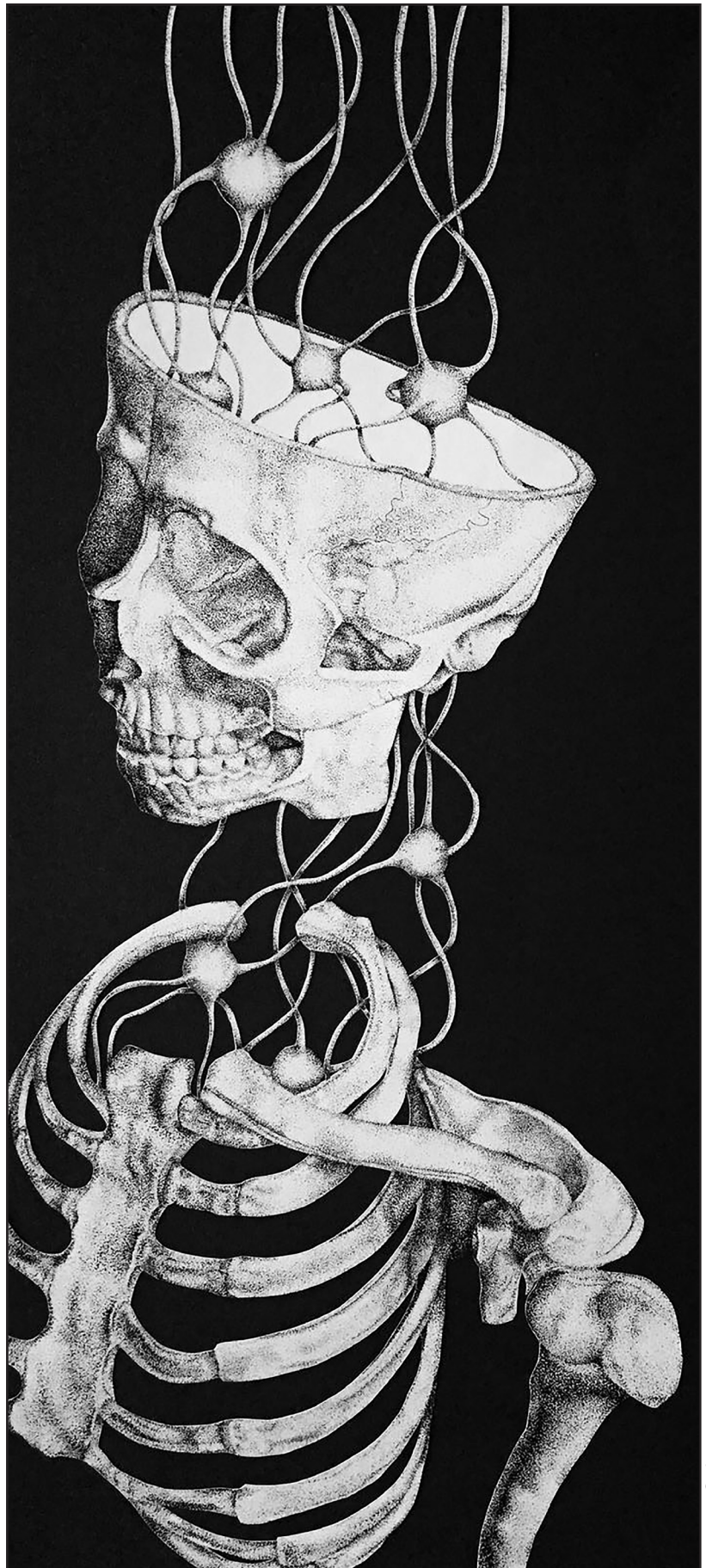
her or if somehow her illness is to blame.

More recently we took our old home videos and had them converted from VHS to DVD so that we could watch them. I watch Bridget as a toddler dart across our backyard in her overalls and red turtleneck, her long hair flying out behind. She laughs and dances around sometimes, and smiles. Not the way she smiles now. She smiles now, but it is a slower smile. Almost careful. Like there is a secret behind it. And she hardly ever laughs.

I had forgotten.

I had forgotten she was ever like that. And of course she has gotten older. She has matured since then. But I can't help but wonder what was lost in those years of suffering. If she would have been different now. Maybe she wouldn't have seemed so very much older than everyone else her age. Maybe she would not be so concerned with regularity, with consistency, with keeping to the schedule she makes for herself. She drinks tea and talks with our family dog and reads and studies and plays the piano. She wears her thick long hair in a massive braided bun and stands straight like Audrey Hepburn—straighter, even. After years of being hunched with pain, she has trained herself to have perfect posture. ✧

*Sophie is a student majoring in English, naturally. Her favorite book is Betty Smith's A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, though she loves many books. This is why she is majoring in English—so she can spend hours each day talking about books and getting credit for it.*



\*Illustrator's note, page 38

Illustration by Alana Barrett\*

View more at <https://alanabarrett.myportfolio.com/>.

# Taking Note

Suitably professional,  
the doctor informed us  
that the increased pain  
was due to “spinal crumbling.”  
Later, a sympathetic nurse  
told us the hallucinations  
were part of a state  
known as “morphine shadow.”

Even while immersed in the horror,  
if one is truly a language person,  
part of one’s brain will register  
such phrases, and one will know  
that a time is coming when one  
will put them down on paper.

**By Iain Macdonald**

*Born and raised in Glasgow, Scotland, Iain Macdonald currently lives in Arcata, California. He has earned his bread and beer in various ways, from flower picker to factory hand, merchant marine officer to high school teacher. His first two chapbooks, *Plotting the Course* and *Transit Report*, were published by March Street Press, while a third, *The Wrecker's Yard*, was released in 2015 by Kattywompus Press.*



# The View from the Hospital

There was snow  
in the mountains!  
Cold, white reflection  
of these halls I walk.

California droughts suck  
fingers dry, chap and split  
them open like tomato  
skins under a sharp knife.

I hold my scalpel steady  
on first incision; my grip  
firm and forceful against  
scarred fascia.

In our hospital, my patients  
worry less about drought  
than about bus fare, elevated  
sugars, preeclampsia.

Today, between contractions,  
one mother told me a story  
she read on her phone:

C-section preemie  
born three months  
early—en-caul!

Rare, she gushed,  
as snow in SoCal  
mountains in May.

**By Li Yun Alvarado**

*Li Yun Alvarado is the author of the chapbooks Words or Water and Nuyorico, CA. A poet and scholar, her work has appeared in Wise Latinas, Writers on Higher Education, The Acentos Review, and Centro: Letras, among others. Her poetry collection received an honorable mention for The Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize in 2012. She has served as the Senior Poetry Editor for Kweli Journal and is an alumna of VONA/Voices Writing Workshop and AROHO. Li Yun is a native New Yorker living in Long Beach, California, who takes frequent trips to Salinas, Puerto Rico, to visit la familia. [www.liyunalvarado.com](http://www.liyunalvarado.com).*

*Comfort*



Photo by Wei-Li Suen

*Wei-Li Suen is a first-year medical student at VCU School of Medicine.*

# Taking My Father Hostage

By Kathryn Trueblood

“Dad, we’re worried. Marshall says you’re going through a lot of money.” I am able to say this in the restaurant because Marie Callendar’s has cavernous booths; we can steer the conversation in a perilous direction knowing we will both be saved by generous helpings of pie.

“I’ve got enough money to keep me watered.”

“It’s not just about money, Dad. We want things to be easier for you.”

“Easier,” my father says, as though the word were soaked in vinegar.

He clears his throat. “Your grandfather lost both his legs below the knee in a minefield. At Fourth of July picnics, he’d drink his fill of liquor and stagger into the trees where he fell off his legs, and your grandmother and her quilting group would search the woods.”

“I know, Dad.” My father looks right over the top of my head and continues.

“They could hear him singing, roaring like a gelded bull, and eventually they would find one leg, and then the other.” My father’s spoon makes a purposeful ching-ching-ching sound as he stirs his already cool coffee. “I don’t think his life ever got easier.”

I do the only thing I can do when my dad has decided to go hard-ass on me; I hit him up with love. “Dad, would you consider coming to live with me? When you’re ready.” It helps that the waitress shows up with our pie, banana cream for me, chocolate velvet for him.

*“My father forgets to pay his mortgage, forgets to pay his taxes, forgets to look at his bank balance before ordering thousands upon thousands of dollars worth of telescopes and lenses, knives and panini grills, computers and distorted nudes in heavy gold frames—whatever seems to be the obsession du jour.”*

“If it comes to that,” he says, nodding, his demeanor softening appreciably. He adds another sugar to his coffee before looking up. His left hand shakes as he tries to tear the packet.

“When I get to Saint Peter’s Gate,” he says ruefully, “I’m going to have to ask, ‘Where the hell am I?’”

Since his head injury six years ago, my father’s “executive function” seems to be impaired, that’s the part of the brain that governs planning, initiative, and impulse suppression. It means he doesn’t follow through on things anymore, like paying the bills. His short-term memory is also impaired—and not in a small way. My father forgets to pay his mortgage, forgets to pay his taxes, forgets to look at his bank balance before ordering thousands upon thousands of dollars worth of telescopes and lenses, knives and panini grills, computers and distorted nudes in heavy gold frames—whatever seems to be the obsession du jour. We try to make his general physician understand that these are not just senior moments. The G.P. responds that perhaps one of my father’s medications might be impairing his memory; he’ll look into

it. His neurologist reports that he has passed the exams that would indicate dementia with flying colors. Of course my father has. He can summon all his own ex-army doc authority and scare the bejesus out of anyone. After that, he’s super charming.

When I came down to visit for New Year’s, I made him promise to take a tour of assisted living facilities with me and that’s what we’re doing today after we finish our pie. I live eight hundred miles north of my father in Seattle, my sister lives fifty miles south in Santa Cruz, and my brother lives sixty miles east in Livermore. But Dad criticizes my sister, and Pamela turns to mush and flees. One visit with him equals a major fall off the wagon. Although our father sees Pamela’s alcoholism as a weakness of character, I am in the camp that sees it as a chronic disease. Pamela runs a daycare and holds up fine as long as she stays mostly away from our father. Our brother was the one who bore the brunt of our father’s absence as a child while Mom sought her own happiness in a succession of husbands. Marshall would still be Dad’s whipping

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post if he hadn't out-earned and out-smarted our father on every front as a nuclear engineer, for which he does receive begrudging admiration now and then from Dad. I am the coddler and the cajoler, the flirt and the slap, the one who became a court-ordered mediator so I could write to him on the Dispute Resolution Center's letterhead though I never dare sign it anything but "Love, Maeve.

"Feelings," my father says, almost with repugnance, "are difficult." This, from a highly trained, top-flight surgeon.

I have had to explain to my father why it hurts when he disappears to Mexico at Christmastime and forgets to tell my siblings or me. When I called his cell that year, I heard his latest girlfriend, Rayona, informing me that I could leave a message. I'd never even met the woman. *Hello, would you get the hell off my father's phone, you harridan.* I had to explain why it was hurtful for his grandchildren not to receive any gifts that Christmas.

"Oh," he said, abashedly, and I pictured him closing his eyes like one caught in a shameful act, "I'm sorry."

"Listen," I told him. "I didn't call you up so I could make you feel bad and hurt my own feelings. How about next year I buy gifts for the children and send you the receipts?"

"Yes," he said, "That would help me. I've never been good at this sort of thing."

When I explained the new gift system to my brother, he was furious. "That's sickening. Why should we help Dad be more self-centered than he al-

ready is?"

"Uh...so our children's feelings won't get hurt?"

"And he gets to be Mr. Good Guy? Forget it. They may as well know who he really is."

Now there was a question with some resonance. My father has the kind of encyclopedic mind that can drive a person barking mad. He can recite the Declaration of Independence backwards, and he once found his way around Greece by using the letters he'd learned as a college fraternity member. He named his son after George Marshall, former Secretary of State who conceived of the Marshall Plan and enabled post-World War II Europe to recover with American aid. He likes to quote George Marshall's famous 1947 speech at Harvard: "Our policy is not directed against any country, but against hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos." When I was sixteen, I was able to report in a snarky tone that George Marshall didn't write the speech. My father glared at me as though I were an imbecile.

"The man brought the world back from the brink of darkness. He resisted the urge to punish."

I see now that what mattered was the exemplary nobility my father believed in. When he was chief of staff at Rialto Hospital, he published the C-section rates of all the MD's in obstetrics. It didn't make him popular, but the C-section rates fell. His own crusade for the proper practice of medicine.

After lunch, my father, Wendell, and I sit together at Chateau San Jose on a pink couch filling out forms. Whoever thought of pink and brown as a color scheme for the elderly must have raked in the dough because it seems to be the ubiquitous palette for sopping up tea and coffee. I write his name repeatedly: *Dr. Wendell Stanton* The care manager, Maryanne, shuts us in her mocha mauve office and proceeds to say exactly what the video testimonials told me on the website. Fortunately, for my father this is not round two.

"I know this is not an easy decision, but so many of our residents who were unsure now wonder why they didn't do it sooner." Maryanne actually claps her hands as she says this and I can imagine her turning the light switch on and off to capture the attention of her "learners." She is trying so hard, yet her class is failing. My father wears a scowl that grows grimmer and grimmer until the creases in his forehead bulge and buckle, forcing his eyebrows down. His lower lip sticks out like pastrami squished on rye. I smile on doggedly.

"Perhaps you have seen our activity calendar," the woman says, pushing the piece of paper toward me. "We have movie nights and bridge nights and a barber shop quartet that comes." While she is going on about the special features of Old Folksville, my father

*"I have had to explain to my father why it hurts when he disappears to Mexico at Christmastime and forgets to tell my siblings or me."*

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is staring fixedly into space. There's a line of silver that outlines his irises and a second of hazel that seems to have come with age; these rings give his otherwise blue-grey eyes a planetary quality. Once, when I was ten, he strapped a telescope on the back of his motorcycle and showed me the summer sky in the Santa Cruz mountains, Mars and Saturn big in the southwest, meteorite showers at midnight.

"We have a bus that goes into town twice weekly," Maryanne says. "There are two shopping centers nearby."

My father could be thinking about anything—the launch of Sputnik in 1957 that led scientists to realize satellites could be used as artificial guide-stars for global positioning. Because of Einstein, engineers knew to program the time-altering effects of relativity into these satellites. My father likes to say, "Einstein had a thought and a hundred years later it proved useful." Then he smiles, fast and bright. His whole life, his teeth have stayed white and his incisors pointy, even now when his head seems to bulge like a baby's and the circular bald spot on the back looks like crib wear.

I chose Chateau San Jose because it's built Mediterranean-style around a garden courtyard, and they offer a top tier option called independent living. My father wants desperately to maintain his relationship with Jing Fei, the home health care worker he fell in love with after his head injury and the departure of Rayona. Jing Fei survived Communist China and a husband who batted her around by fleeing to the States with

her son, arriving with no English and no skills. Wendell helped her file her divorce papers and the two fell in love, though there are twenty years between them. My father wants to marry Jing Fei, but she refuses to give up her Section Eight housing for a man who keeps ordering flat screen TVs and forgets to pay the electric bill, though I am sure he is putting her son through college, but I don't care. Jing Fei is no American Princess, and she is loyal, coming each week to take my father marketing.

They fight, as lovers will: "He all the time want buy expensive things," Jing Fei yells into the telephone. "I tell him you already have dark glasses. Whole box full. What you need more for?"

My father grimly complains over the phone to me, "You know that old Chinese saying? 'Work hard. Die rich?' She won't even let me buy chocolate unless it's on sale." Once, Jing Fei enlisted her sister in coming over to help her break up with my father. It was as formal as a tea ceremony, but they couldn't give each other up. The next week Jing Fei was back with a bag of cherries, his favorite fruit. I make a point of telling my father now, "Dad, if you get the financial thing under control, maybe Jing Fei will agree to marry you." He nods and glances out the window toward the tiered fountain. "If there's one thing I'd like to do, it's put a roof over that woman's head."

Once my father sees the magnolia trees and the hibiscus with its red-trumpets, his face relaxes. We follow Maryanne, who is prattling on about floor plans. My father nods towards her backside and stops to take a few chocolates from the bowl on the piano. He thanks the Dapper Dan

who allows us access to his apartment, which is filled with models of wooden boats and nautical drawings, rather nice, and some respite from the pink and brown. We decline the showing of a second apartment, giving each other the nod, and escape the ongoing nattering of Maryanne.

In the car, my father growls as I start the engine. "There's one problem here."

"What's that? Dad." I see numerous problems, trying to gain control of his credit cards before he has spent his entire pension is only one of them.

"You don't take into account how I feel."

I hit the A/C button hard and ask, "How do you feel?"

"Like that was a bone yard." He shouts the last two words, drawing long on the *o* and the *a*. "A bo-o-one ya-ard."

"Dad, we agreed on this together. I can only go by what I see on the website."

"Will you get the directions out of the glove box for the next appointment?"

"There isn't going to be a next appointment."

"I put a lot of work into this, Dad, and the next one is the one I feel best about."

There's no bingo. They go to the symphony."

My father is jerking on his seat belt and swearing. I don't remember him swearing, ever. A wise and kindly bedside manner is his specialty with his patients. Pure grit stonewalling is how he withstood his teenaged kids and ex-wives. If you'd shot him with a BB gun, he would scarcely have flinched. "Goddamn son of

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a bitch,” he gives the belt a sharp yank.

“Let go of it for a sec, Dad. Let it go.” Once he is settled, I pull back out onto the expressway.

“Get into the right-hand lane,” he commands, pointing his arm straight out like a drill sergeant.

“Turn right,” he shouts.

I am merging with traffic and giving myself bonus kudos for remaining calm. I have never seen him so upset.

“No,” he thunders, “Right! Back there.”

I pull an emergency U-turn across two lanes of expressway traffic. This must be how people respond in the military when they’ve developed muscle memory after being shouted at in close quarters. I think we’re back on track. Good. Good. Then suddenly everything about the neighborhood is too familiar. There’s the Lucky Supermarket and the Peet’s Coffee. My father has directed me back to his condo, the sly codger.

“No way, Dad,” I yell, flying past the driveway that leads into his complex.

“You said you would do this with me and we’re doing it.” We ride along the expressway in a pit of silence.

Jing Fei is not with us today because she is at work. Not only does she work in home health care, she also works at her brother’s restaurant in the evenings. She spends her one day and

one evening off with my father, and for this she has earned my forever gratitude.

Until Jing Fei, my history with my father’s women was an HBO series in female alienation, a constant mop-up operation of leftover women who wanted me to like them so much it was painful, or who called when it was over to see if I had a clue about my father’s emotional life and was there another

woman? There was always another woman; he just hadn’t met her yet. But I genuinely liked Jing Fei, who refused to marry my father, and I suspect as a result she has lasted longer than any of his wives. Despite my siblings’ cynicism, I think he may have found true love late in life, now that memory loss has made him

a financial liability. Jing Fei is no gold digger, not like Rayona, the married woman he was with in Hawaii when he hit his head six years ago. Rayona was American, born Chinese, but she refused to speak Mandarin with Jing Fei, which made Jing Fei livid.

“She big moon face no talka Mandarin with me. Why she like this? You tell me. She shut door to you faddah’s room when she come. He sick! She no good woman. Why he no learn? God hit him in the head.”

I had to agree about Rayona. The ambition of most of the women my father took up with was to get him to forget about his previous children and adopt theirs. He moved easily into new

families. Each time it was his chance to be reborn as the perfect father. New families were good for that, for fashioning himself as an ideal. My sister-in-law used to exclaim, “He’s like the father I never had.” I wanted to answer, “He’s like the father I never had either,” but I couldn’t work up the nerve.

Right now, Jing Fei is not speaking to him because he bought a \$1,000 telescope the same day the electricity was disconnected. She paid to restore the lights, but he refused to return the telescope. “Dad,” I said to him before we left the condo—“Why did you buy a \$1,000 telescope when you had no money?” We were sitting side by side in front of his computer screen staring at his overdrawn bank accounts and unpaid mortgage.

“I don’t know,” he said, and his eyes welled up. My father, who believed in the value of observable fact, would not embellish even when it came to his own irrationality.

I took his hand in mine and we sat there, stunned in our shared not-knowing. Then I called my brother, asking him to transfer funds one more time from our father’s rapidly dwindling pension. “Maybe Dad should take up smoking again,” Marshall said.

Somewhere near Los Altos my father shouts, “Where are you going?”

“I have no idea,” I answer evenly, “just not back to your place.” I realize my colleagues would recommend calling Adult Protective Services on someone like me. Go ahead, I say to them in my head. I am taking my father hostage.

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Our next engagement is a newly built, ultra-modern form of independent living situated next to the Jewish Center of San Mateo on a campus that includes a fitness center, a day care, and a performing arts center. It also houses a community medical library. Our guide is a young Indian woman in a maroon and gold sari with lips the color of black grapes. This cheers my dad up immeasurably. I am grateful when she asks him formally if he prefers to be called Doctor Stanton or by his first name. "Wendell, please," my father says with a sheepish little nod of his head.

*Oy fucking vey*, I think.

We walk on a multicolored earth-toned carpet past sculptures of slabbed glass. The framed art is anodized aluminum that shimmers, or huge photo close-ups of plants. The apartments are glass-cornered and spacious; they look out upon treetops, the Santa Cruz mountains, clouds. The dining room wall is entirely glass, and I am starting to feel how soothing it is to live inside a sea-green bottle. A tall slope of blonde wood delineates the wine bar, and the dining room tables are covered in linen, each glass holding a napkin fan. I am learning: giving dignity to age is all in the details, and making sure there is still a bar is one of them. I, myself, am ready to move in.

Shaila's office has the same architectural features as the apartments we've just seen—glassed in corners—and the effect is freeing. How can you feel cornered when the corners let out upon clouds? Pretty soon, Shaila has got all the facts out of him—the worth of his condo, his dented pension, and his social security. She works it out so that he

can qualify for one of the below-market-value units that are co-subsidized by the city of San Mateo. To think that moments ago he was yelling at his daughter on the freeway. I don't know yet about the second mortgage he took out on the condo last year, or the other house he bought in Hawaii, or his final punishment to Pamela in his will. Shaila sketches out several different financial models.

"With this one, 90 percent of your investment comes back to yourself or your heirs. "With this one, 50 percent comes back to yourself or your heirs." But then she seems to remember his dented pension and has to look up some figures.

"The option that would qualify you for the subsidy requires amortization after five years." She taps her maroon nail on a column of numbers. "This is essentially a reverse mortgage." My father looks nonplussed and she continues. "Of course, if your concern is to leave something for your heirs, that might not be a good option."

My father looks at me and smiles serenely. "All of my children are successful," he tells her. In the moment, it feels like a triumph to hear him say this. Later it will feel like something else entirely, like his final desertion justified. ✧

*Kathryn Trueblood was awarded the 2013 Goldenberg Prize for Fiction and the 2011 Red Hen Press Short Story Award. Her novella, Diary of a Slut, was published in 2014 by SheBooks. Trueblood's novel, The Baby Lottery, was a Book Sense Pick in 2007, and her story collection, The Sperm Donor's Daughter, received a Special Mention for the Pushcart Prize in 2000. Trueblood's stories and articles have been published in Poets & Writers Magazine, the Bellevue Literary Review, The Los Angeles Review, Glimmer Train, The Seattle Review, Zyzzyva, and others. She is a professor of English at Western Washington University.*

# Going Blind in One Eye

fibrous claws  
gouge sighted flesh  
as scabrous tissue born to  
heal rends the healing ground,  
rips the macular fissure round,  
cleaves a channel down which  
sight, warped and curved as  
space-time balanced on a  
black hole's lips,  
streams out.

By Craig W. Steele

*When not writing poetry, Craig W. Steele is a professor of biology and health services at Edinboro University in northwestern Pennsylvania. In his quest to become a widely-published unknown poet, his poems have appeared in numerous anthologies, literary journals, and magazines. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in The Lyric, Word Fountain: The Literary Magazine of the Osterhout Free Library, The Penwood Review, Mused: the BellaOnline Literary Review, Muddy River Poetry Review, and elsewhere. He continues to write poetry as "The Writer's Poet" for Extra Innings online.*

*Hollywood Cemetery*



Photo by Michael P. Stevens, MD, MPH

# Scald

The skin looks just the same. A trifle red.  
You look at it and wonder why it smarts.  
A moment's carelessness. One nerve's gone dead,  
the rest are clamorous, off clinic charts.  
Some itch, some burn, some ache, some throb, some sting.  
It stretches tight, that patch of palm and wrist,  
as taut and wide as lunar sea. They bring  
some gauze and ask if you can make a fist.  
The pain seems useless after first sharp pang;  
what point is there to rubbing in the shame?  
Your nervous system thrilled when kettle sang.  
That it still echoes from the steam feels lame.  
Duration is the ailment. What's the cure?  
To wormwood add a dash of moonshine. Stir.

**By Dan Champion**

*A contributor to previous issues of Medical Literary Messenger, Dan Champion is the author of Peter De Vries and Surrealism, coeditor of Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song, and contributor of poetry to many magazines, including Able Muse, Light, Measure, The Midwest Quarterly, The North American Review, Poetry, Rolling Stone, and Shenandoah. A native of Chicago with degrees from the University of Chicago (AB), the University of Illinois at Chicago (MA), and the University of Iowa (PhD), he works as a writer and editor in Iowa City, Iowa.*



# Brain Injury

Exquisite plates of perplexing Davinci intrigue  
mathematically curved and knitted together  
by feathered fronds of growing bone.

On their underside, arches, pits and canals deepen to channel  
visions the Aztecs could barely conceive of  
and there, rivers of blood are born streaming  
in a terrible majesty that floats the maze of birth and ruin  
into this bone house with  
all its windows naked to the worlds.

A single crack, bang, pop or thud  
would jostle unrestrained  
the flesh that bounced against this frame.

Some recover, others limp forever, their burdens  
shouldered on the banks of those deep rivers  
where hope is sometimes beached but  
never asleep.

And every now or then, even after years of toil,  
like forgiving slaves of rare and unseen pyramids,  
a resonant hum may echo within and wind its way out,

Chanting aloud, the doves are rising,  
the doves are rising, like lanterns in the dark,  
to fly home again into the wide buoyant air.

**By Grace Fryberger**

*Grace Fryberger is a choreographer and writer. Her work has appeared in the Bumbershoot Northwest Festival; Performance Support Services, Seattle; On The Boards, Seattle; American Dance Festival, Salt Lake City; sheworXX Theater, Tucson; and other venues. The place where your heart breaks is the place we're all the same. Grace Fryberger may be reached at [grace.fryberger@gmail.com](mailto:grace.fryberger@gmail.com).*

## *Blind Skulls*



Illustration by Alana Barrett\*

This piece was drawn "blind," which means I drew it without looking at the paper/what I was drawing. I kept my eyes focused on the skull I was trying to draw and repeated that process several times. Afterward, I went back into the piece to accentuate certain lines and add in the white color blocks. While doing this, I was thinking about the fluidity and interconnectedness of neurons. View more of my work at <https://alanabarrett.myportfolio.com/>.

\* Illustrator's note, page 38

# Stitches

She's scared.  
Hands clutch at the gown  
she's wearing—no jewelry, no panties,  
no nothing to feel like comfort.  
I lie beside her, my own gown  
pale against my scared skin.

Today they will slice  
us open, sisters  
will become conjoined,  
a part of me inside  
her till the end.

We will wear matching  
scars, skin puckered along  
our bellies, no baby pulled  
from us but my blood-thick  
kidney plucked from me,  
served on a platter of ice.  
No bow around this gift  
but enough veins to sew  
my body into hers.

The stitches hold us  
together, we heal  
as one.

**By Courtney LeBlanc**

*Courtney LeBlanc is the author of chapbooks *Siamese Sisters* and *All in the Family* (Bottlecap Press). Her poetry is published or forthcoming in Public Pool, Rising Phoenix Review, The Legendary, Germ Magazine, Quail Bell Magazine, Brain Mill Press, and others. She loves nail polish, wine, and tattoos. Read her blog at [www.wordperv.com](http://www.wordperv.com), follow her on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/wordperv](http://www.twitter.com/wordperv), or find her on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/poetry.CourtneyLeBlanc](http://www.facebook.com/poetry.CourtneyLeBlanc).*



# Cardioplegia

At the last moment,  
your body jerks to a stop  
at the street corner.  
The car passes by,  
harmless.  
The operating room is a white and  
susurrous fall of snow:  
blue gowns and paper shoes,  
breaths sifted through blue masks.  
To open your chest, they crack the ribs,  
branches fall under the weight of ice,  
exposing your still heart, still  
cut into red,  
a cardinal braving the winter  
in the small wooden house,  
waiting for crumbs  
and a hint of spring.

**By Ina Roy-Faderman**

*Ina Roy-Faderman's work has appeared or is forthcoming in Right Hand Pointing, Surreal Poetics, Pif, the Tupelo 30/30 Project, and elsewhere. California Poet Laureate Dana Gioia named her "Elegy for Water" the winning poem of the Richmond Anthology of Poetry. A native Nebraskan of Bengali heritage, she received her formal creative writing training while completing an MD-PhD at Stanford and UC Berkeley (philosophy). Currently, she teaches bioethics for Oregon State University, is the librarian at a school for gifted children, and edits fiction for Rivet Journal. More information is available at [www.inafelltoearth.com](http://www.inafelltoearth.com).*

*Riding the Rails*



Photo by Derick Nelson Jenkins, MD

*Derick N. Jenkins is serving as a Chief Medical Resident at VCU Health System from July 2016 to June 2017.*

# Rebecca at the End

I drove home  
    while your body waited  
tethered by a pump  
    to oxygen you would not breathe,  
a tube into the nose  
    for food you would not eat.  
I planned to visit again,  
    to hold your hand,  
speak into your ear,  
    hum a lullaby . . .

Driving home,  
    traffic was sticky and slow,  
Friday afternoon rush  
    to get out,  
out of the office, the city,  
    cars backed up  
for a block before the turn  
    onto the highway,  
thoughtful drivers sometimes slowing  
    to let another into the creeping line . . .

Sometimes you just have to  
    inch out,  
hope someone  
    will see,  
stop the whole works  
    and let you go.

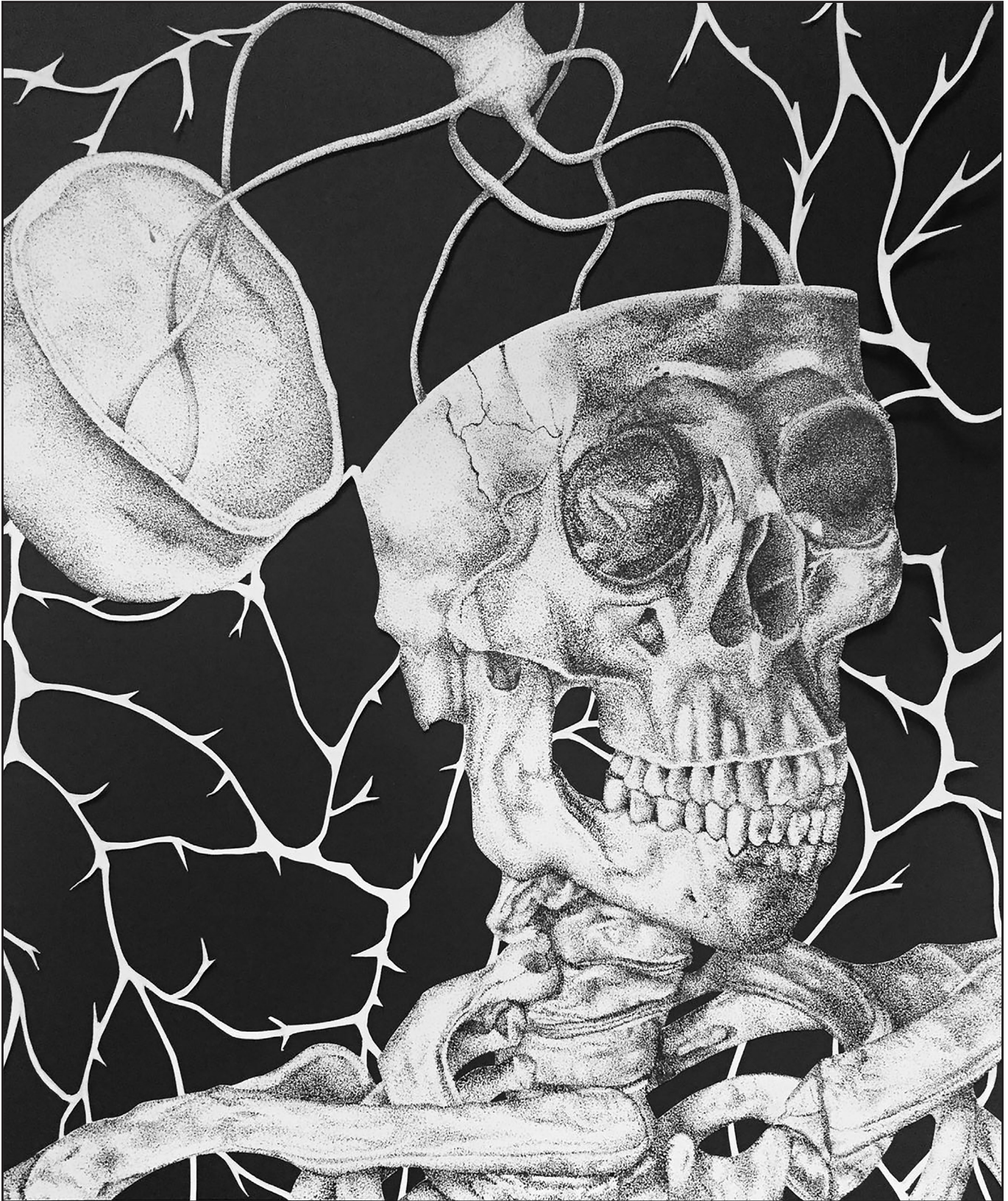
By Sheryl Slocum

*Sheryl Slocum lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she teaches English as a second language and ESL teaching methods. Her poems have appeared in magazines and journals, including Blueline, The Anglican Theological Review, and The Wisconsin Poets' Calendar. Her poetry also appears in the Hartford Avenue Poets' anthology, Masquerades & Misdemeanors, published by Pebblebrook Press in 2013. Sheryl is a member of the Hartford Avenue Poets and the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets.*



## ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

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**Illustration by Alana Barrett**

This piece is part of a collection that juxtaposes anatomical structures with enlarged cell types (in this case neurons). View more of my work at <https://alanacbarrett.myportfolio.com/>.

*Alana Barrett is a Miami- and Los Angeles-based artist. Her artwork primarily focuses on biological forms and processes.*