

THE CANARY

Change

2026

Sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Bioethics

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter from the Editors **4**

"Asleep/Awake" (poem), by Roger McGinnis II **6**

"Hibernation" (photography), by Sara McIntire **7**

"...Between the Shifts" (essay), by Chris Garner **8**

"Another Day at Cooper's Lake" (essay), by Karl Rennick-Zuefle **10**

"before zyprexa" (painting), by Norm Klenicki **13**

"Bi-potency: From Liver to Life" (poem), by Gabriel Ratcliffe **14**

"End Scene" (essay), by Elizabeth Buechele **16**

"Winter Window Shadows" (photography), by James Nagle **19**

"The First Word Back" (essay), by Noor Ahmed **20**

"The First Flowers of Spring" (photography), by Lola Ortiz-Whittingham **22**

"The Typewriter" (poem), by Elizabeth Parsons **23**

"River in a Box" (essay), by Chris Ward **24**

"Submerged" (poem), by Roselyn Goldstein **28**

"The Constant Rhythm" (photography), by Jael Shatlock **29**

"Evens, Odds, and Faces" (essay), by Elizabeth Buechele **30**

"Graveyard Shift" (essay), by Karl Rennick-Zuefle **32**

"Bougainvilleas of Crete" (photography), by Christy Lucas **35**

"Hospital Sushi" (poem), by Samir Yellapragada **36**

"His Broken Heart" (painting), by Jane Lillard **38**

“His Broken Heart” (poem), by Evelyn Reis **39**

“critical care” (poem), by Caroline Karnosh **40**

“A Bridge to New Seasons” (photography), by Lola Ortiz-Whittingham **41**

“Inevitable Flow” (photography), by Jael Shatlock **42**

“A path to recovery” (poem), by Kavita Israni-Winger **43**

“The Gray” (poem), by Wendy Myers **44**

“Framing a Shadow” (photography), by James Nagle **45**

About the Authors & Artists: In Their Own Words **46**

Creative Staff **48**

A Page of Thanks **49**

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Cloaked in Pittsburgh's black-and-gold, the canary appears as a bright, beautiful songbird: symbol of happiness. However, a canary has a melancholic past, brought into coal mines as a sentinel species signaling the presence of toxic gases by becoming sick before their human counterparts. Thus, a canary is also a symbol of warning, the embodiment of grit, and, at times, of sacrifice. Whether experiencing illness or providing care, many in medicine may feel like canaries in a coal mine: struggling to navigate treacherous passageways, seeking hope in dark places, celebrating the strength of our humanity with song.

The Canary seeks to be a place where the hearts of patients, providers, and community members can sing. It is a journal of poetry, prose, visual arts, and now, music. In its third annual issue, pieces were submitted and selected based upon the theme of "change." In addition, for the first time ever, we invited pediatric artists and authors to contribute to this journal aimed at creating community.

Change is inevitable, for better or for worse. How do we navigate and make meaning of changes in life? Should we resist change or embrace it? What changes would you like to see in your own life?



May the knowledge that you are not alone in the coal mine sustain you as we fly home together.

Asleep/Awake

By: Roger McGinnis II

I’ve walked through nights that never end
where every thought becomes a friend

where quiet spoke in softer tones
and I found peace being alone

the city hums. all lights gleam
but I still drift inside a dream

the world moves very fast
I move slow and that's the only speed I know

they tell me shine they tell me fight
but I was born from gentle light

a steady flame that doesn't scream
still bright enough to chase a dream

I've fallen hard I've learned to rise
to see the truth behind the skies

the cracks we hide are how we glow.
the moon would never steal the show.

without the dark to frame its Grace
without the night to hold its face

I've lost my way but found my ground
in every echo, every sound.

in every no a softer yes.
in every mess a kind of bliss

and maybe life's a crooked line
not meant to fit but to design

a map that folds a song that bends
a path that breaks and then it mends

so if you see me standing still
it's just me climbing my own hill

I move by heartbeats not by clocks
by whispering winds and skipping rocks

and when the noise begins to fade
I hear the choices that I've made

they hum in colors soft and true
a quiet world I'm passing through

so here I stand beneath this light
a little wrong a little right

and if you listen close tonight
you'll hear my heart begin to write

its story calm and unafraid
of every tear and every shade

I'm not here to be the loudest sound.
just here to say I'm finally found.



"Hibernation"
By: Sara McIntire

...Between the Shifts

By: Chris Garner

I used to think change announced itself—loudly, unmistakably, with some cinematic moment of rupture. But the change that came for me did not arrive with spectacle. It slipped in quietly, almost politely, dressed as a series of inconveniences I kept brushing aside. A dropped cup. A strange heaviness in my legs. Fatigue that no amount of sleep could cure. I blamed stress, weather, aging, anything but the truth that was slowly rewriting me from within.

When the diagnosis came—*multiple sclerosis*—it felt like the moment the room falls silent after a song ends. Everything familiar was still there, but altered, waiting for me to notice what had shifted.

The Worse

There is no pretending MS hasn't made life harder. Some days my body is a puzzle I can't quite solve—pieces stiff, tingling, unpredictable. Plans must be negotiated, energy budgeted like a scarce currency. I learned to measure time differently: not in hours or days, but in "good mornings," "manageable afternoons," and "please just let me rest" evenings.

Change, when it first arrived, felt like loss:

- Loss of certainty,
- Loss of innocence about what my body *should* be able to do,
- Loss of the easy, unconsidered way I moved through the world.

It forced me to confront my limits, and for a while I grieved them quietly, privately, the way one grieves an old version of themselves.

The Better

But here is the part I never expected: MS also made my life *bigger* in certain ways.

It taught me to listen—to my body, yes, but also to myself. I no longer postpone joy for "later," assuming later will always arrive. I learned to celebrate small victories: a steady walk, a day without pain, a conversation that fills me with laughter. My priorities rearranged themselves, gently but firmly, like books on a shelf finally placed in the right order.

I grew stronger in the places that don't appear on MRIs—patience, resilience, clarity. I became more honest about what I need and braver about asking for help. I stopped apologizing for taking care of myself. And I learned, for maybe the first time in my life, what it means to rest without guilt.

MS, unwelcome as it was, forced me to slow down long enough to see what I used to sprint past.

The Middle Space

Living with MS means inhabiting a kind of in-between place—a place where "better" and "worse" are not opposites but companions. Change has become a constant conversation between those two forces, shaping me in ways I could never have predicted.

Some days I resist it. Some days I embrace it. Most days I do a bit of both.

But I have learned that change, even the painful kind, is not always the enemy. Sometimes it is simply a new landscape,

asking you to find your footing. Sometimes it is a teacher disguised as chaos. And sometimes it is the thing that pulls into focus the life you were meant to be living all along.

What I Want Now

If I could ask for one more change, it would be this: to continue meeting myself with compassion as I evolve. To allow the shifting terrain of this condition to reveal not only my vulnerabilities but also my strength. To stay open—to new treatments, new perspectives, new ways of living fully inside a body that does not always cooperate.

Change is inevitable, yes, but meaning is something we make.

I am learning, day by day, to make something worthwhile out of the unexpected life I am still lucky enough to live.

Another Day at Cooper's Lake

By: Karl Rennick-Zuefle

Bill DuPont woke up with a strange feeling. It felt like he hadn't slept in years. His joints were sore and he could hardly muster the strength to get out of bed. *Must be coming down with something* he thought to himself. By the time he got to his feet, his wobbly legs could hardly stand straight. For a 22-year-old, this was a concerning development. If *I can't get around, I'll have to ring up Doc Smith to check me out*, Bill thought. He shuffled over to his bedpost and held onto it. He closed his eyes, and took a few deep breaths. After a few moments, his legs settled down and he felt like he could finally start his day. Bill walked over to the radio and turned it on:

"You're listening to WIBG 94.3 on this lovely Tuesday morning for the hottest hits of the week! Next up is 'Twistin' the Night Away' by Sam Cook, coming in at number 9 on this week's Billboard Hot 100!"

As the song played, Bill couldn't remember hearing the song before, but found himself humming along as if he already knew the tune. *Maybe I know it from somewhere,* Bill thought as he went about his small, bare apartment. His place didn't have a kitchen, so he decided to head out to Jack's Diner for some breakfast. He put on a polo shirt and some slacks, ran a comb through his hair, and stepped out the door.

The radio announcer was right: it was a lovely day in Cooper's Lake. The town's residents were out and about, some sitting on their porches, others milling about the shops on the lakeside promenade. Bill set out towards Jack's diner. He passed old Mr. Anderson (or was it Armstrong?) bent over picking flowers in his yard. Not wanting to say the wrong name, Bill offered a cheery hello. Mr. Anderson/Armstrong looked up confused, spotted Bill, and offered a smile and a wave. As Bill walked across the town, he greeted many more of his neighbors. Eventually though, he realized he was no closer to Jack's than when he left. He paused and looked at the street signs, trying to get his bearings, Bill heard a voice behind him.

"Excuse me sir, are you looking for Jack's?" Bill turned and saw a young woman in a light blue dress.

"Yes!" Bill said, exasperated.

"It's just around the corner. Here, I'll show you the way."

"Thank you miss!" Bill responded. She held out her hand and he took it, overwhelmed by the kindness of this stranger. Folks in Cooper's Lake sure took care of one another. As they walked, a thought briefly crossed his mind: *How did she know I was looking for Jack's?* But before Bill could come up with an answer, they were already there. The woman held the door open for him. Bill turned to her and sheepishly said "Thanks again for your help!"

"Anytime!" the woman replied. She briskly turned around and was gone from Bill's sight.

Before Bill could think, the hostess appeared, told him "Right this way," grabbed his hand and led him to his seat. Bill sat down and glanced around the diner. A lot of old folks were there, probably for the early bird special. Most of them glanced up at the TV, a little black-and-white unit behind the counter that was recapping President Kennedy's most recent speech. Usually Bill's friend Mac could also be found here. Bill scanned the diner, but couldn't spot him. Eventually, a waitress appeared.

"Have you seen my friend Mac here? He's here most mornings. He's got blond hair and wears thick-rim glasses" Bill asked

A look of concern briefly swept over the waitress's face before she suddenly regained her composure. "No, I haven't seen him, I'm sorry. Now what can I get for you?"

Bill ordered two eggs over easy, bacon, and wheat toast. As he waited, he mulled over the morning's strange occurrences. By the time his food arrived, he had lost his appetite, and could only muster a few bites. When the waitress returned, he asked for the check.

"Oh, there's no need for that sir, we've got it all on your tab!"

What tab? He was a regular here, but diners don't usually take tabs. "How much is on my tab?" he asked.

"I'm not quite sure, but don't worry about it. We'll get it settled for you the next time you come."

Bill didn't feel like arguing, so he got up and left. Now where to next? He had a job at Ted's mechanic shop. He glanced at the town clock: 9:56. He was already running late. But where was Ted's at? In fact, now that Bill thought about it, he didn't see any cars either. Now his head was starting to hurt. He went into the nearest shop, a small convenience store and quickly approached the man at the counter. "I'm running late for work. Where's Ted's mechanic shop?"

The man at the counter smiled and said "I'll get that figured out for you right away." He quickly went to the back of the shop.

While Bill waited, he heard the radio. Again it was that "Twistin' the Night Away" song. Where had he heard it?

♪ Twistin', twistin', twistin' the night away! ♪

A memory flashed across Bill's mind. Him at a diner with a lovely young woman he'd never met. The same song played over the jukebox. That woman looked beautifully familiar. He saw them at the community center dance, walking through the park at night, watching TV with two kids. A life flashed before his eyes.

"Where the hell am I?"

"Why, you're at Cooper's Lake!" the man behind the counter replied.

"What the hell is going on!"

"It's alright sir, everything's gonna be alright" a voice spoke from behind him. Bill turned around and saw two young women and a young man. They were all wearing normal street clothes. One of them was carrying a medical bag.

“What is this place?” Bill yelled accusingly at them.

The woman in front responded: “Everything is alright, you can just relax”

Bill stomped towards them. “What’s going on?” he shouted.

The trio glanced at each other, and the woman spoke: “You’re at Cooper’s Lake Memory Care Facility. Just calm down, we’re here to help.”

Memory care? What was that?

“What year is this? Who are you”

“It’s 2025. We’re all staff, and we’re here to help”

2025?? That made Bill, what, 85 years old. Where were his wife and kids and grandkids? He looked down at his hands and saw that they were wrinkled and withered.

“What did you do to me? I wanna go back home! I WANNA GO HOME!” Bill cocked his fist back and stormed the group. Before he could react, his arms and legs were restrained. He kicked and screamed, but it was no use. The man rummaged through the bag and produced a needle.

“It’s alright sir, we’re gonna take you back home” Bill felt the needle pierce into his thigh. His vision grew blurry and dim and he stopped resisting. As he slipped out of consciousness, he heard the radio:

♪ Twistin’, twistin’, twistin’ the night away! ♪



“before zyprexa”
By: Norman Klenicki

Bi-potency: From Liver to Life

By: Gabriel Ratcliffe

I made the switch…
I was a stem cell in the metabolic factory of the body
I had signals alarming me, urgency pumped from the main vein:
“Stop this trek, check your notes, do different!”
I did different, yet anxiety grew into what I feared: a tumor,
An anxiety-induced malignancy marked by deformed ducts and costly stomach pains
It left me hunched over in shame
I once hoped in the liver, a regenerative prodigy
I believed I could harvest deliverance from it

I made the switch…
As a bipotent cell in the liver, I had power to be one of two identities:
Be right or be wrong
Synthesize plans or secrete guesses
Know the common or shock with incompetence
Knocking out the grays of thought is therapeutic
Logic can’t be any crisper (CRISPR) than that
But some blacks and whites hid under my nose despite the new edits
My errors, the misguided RNAs, drew the scissors (Cas9) closer to my neck
The scissors say I’m not cut out to be a positive readout for PhD
I became the knockout who required validation more than any other molecule

I made the switch…
I was a caged mouse with canine courage, clinging to a cliff by my teeth
I weighed the errors, screened for solutions, stained my history on histology-based mosaics
I did those, not knowing if the progress was qualified to treat the malignancy
But still, I found myself reluctantly locking eyes with cirrhotic faith
And I swallowed this wound behind a collagen cocoon shaped like a smile

I made the switch…
This sentence is a vector I can't overexpress enough
The sleeping beauty of my experiment is that I will return a different way
Though suppressed now, I will approach this new path
The sleeping beauty's mystery makes it beastly, but I will awake it
I will integrate it into my genome and discover my long-term target
I've been a stem cell – a pupil – my whole life
My return will shrink Injury to an infant and narrow Wound into a way
Prayer, protocol and perseverance extract the correct Path from my pathology

I made the switch…
I am no longer hunched by a cirrhotic liver
What feels like a faceplant is transport to a transplant
My new liver chews mourning into an energy fit to build medicine
Now that I'm crisper (CRISPR) in wisdom, I grab my scissors and cut the shame
Shame is an impermeable cell that breathes like a minus-80 freezer
Lessons are the small windows on every laboratory door; They offer me a hallway
Like always, between me and the hallway is the handle

I am the owner, but not "on my own"
I am the driver, but not without passengers

Whether I present myself as Scientist or Poet,
The titles Reader, Writer, and Editor join them into a state of bipotency
No matter the phenotype of my future, I dig deep
My strength did its time in the silence of science
So now, it's time to deliver again

End Scene

By: Elizabeth Buechele

Never trust the first mile is conventional distance running wisdom. And, depending how much you run, sometimes the advice is to never trust the first three.

The opening miles are for working out the kinks. They're for catching your breath and settling into your pace. They're for the gentle stretch of muscles. The expanding of lungs.

Sometimes you hate a story so much, no amount of re-reading or editing can save it. Sure, you may like a character. They may stay with you and they may even get the privilege of living in another piece. The underlying theme may even be something you explore again.

Or it might be your warmup. For catching your rhythm and settling into alternate endings. For the gentle stretch of fingers on a keyboard. The expanding of ideas.

Never trust the first draft.

As was my routine on nights I closed the bar, I slept until noon. One benefit of not working the nine-to-five is that I could run my errands in the quiet middle of the day, dodging the pre- and post-work crowds.

The ultra was still two months away, and I was at the peak of my training. My cousin got me into running twelve years ago when we trained for a breast cancer charity half marathon in support of his mom. A few years later, my cousin ran from his grief, falling deeper into distance running and deeper into the ever unique ultra running community. He's done five 100-milers.

Despite his repeated pleas to get me to join him, I was sticking to half and full marathons. It was because of my outright refusal to run more than 26.2 miles that led to the Fantasy Football bet: if I came in last in our family pool—dead last—I would run an ultra. Seeing as my mom and younger brother who cared nothing for the sport were included, I shook his hand.

Imagine my surprise when my brother's strategy of picking which team's mascot he liked most, and my mom's of researching what ESPN commentators said, led them to place 6th and 3rd respectively. Imagine my horror when a screenshot of my eleventh place finish came in a back-to-back text with a 32-mile race registration webpage.

So, my routine for the last four months had been very solitary. Long runs, evening naps, work on act two at the Yemeni Coffee Shop, and then head to the bar for the late night shift.

I'd started going to the Yemeni Coffee Shop because of Noor which made it both the best and worst place to be now.

We met at the bar the day of the Olympic time trials. I hadn't watched them on account of my being asleep and Noor hadn't on account of her being in class. She asked if we could put on the rebroadcast.

She knew more about the runners than I did, commenting on who was coming back from an injury and who was the favorite.

Noor grew up outside of Cairo, the only child of a bank manager and an engineer. She moved to the United States when she was 18 to study economics at Columbia. She was raised in a progressive Muslim household, so when she told her parents she was dating an ex-Muslim woman in New York, they were supportive. She told me this one night as I

was lying in her bed, drawing gentle circles on her thigh.

"Which is to say that I don't think they'd care if I brought home a white guy either."

Falling in love with Noor was outside my control.

She began showing up at the bar during my shifts for a late dinner. After her first degree, she took a job at a financial organization where she stayed for four years before deciding to go back to Columbia for a Masters in Public Policy with a focus on International Development. She was effortlessly passionate about the work. As passionate as she was about going back to Egypt.

After three weeks of flirting across the bar, Noor asked me for my schedule. She said this bar wasn't close to her apartment or her school and, to be honest, the fries kind of sucked. If I wasn't going to be here, there was no point in coming.

I gave her my schedule and my number.

Our first date was at the Yemeni Coffee Shop. Because of her class schedule and her part-time job translating financial documents for a law firm, she was most free in the evenings, before I started at the bar. The Yemeni Coffee Shop stayed open until one in the morning and plus, she said, Yemeni coffee was better.

Over pistachio baklava, she asked me about my family. I told her about my older twin sisters and my younger brother and about growing up in the part of New York nobody talks about. I talked about the large, close-knit community we had of first and second cousins. Of Baptisms and baby showers. Of Sunday dinners and sporting games.

She wanted to know when she could meet them.

That spring, my younger brother came to visit. He was—at the time—only out to me and our sisters. He and Noor hit it off instantly and one night when I had to work unexpectedly, Noor took him out to her favorite gay bars in Manhattan.

The next day, he asked if I loved Noor.

That I was sure of.

He asked if I'd follow her back to Cairo.

That I wasn't.

Nor was I prepared to address it so quickly. The night before the New York City marathon—my third time running it—Noor called me enough times to override the "do not disturb." There was an emergency. She was on her way to the airport. After the marathon, would I join her?

By the time she landed, I had finished the race—a course PR that hardly felt worth mentioning now.

I video-called her that evening and the redness in her eyes told me this wouldn't be a simple conversation.

It was her father. A stroke. She needed to be here. She wasn't sure how long.

At first, we spoke every day. She hadn't brought up my coming to Egypt since that initial call. It was as though the severity of the situation had struck a delayed blow. She wanted me to meet her father. But not like this.

Three weeks later, while Noor was still in Egypt, I went to the Yemeni Coffee Shop alone. Noor and I had become regulars there—her working on school papers and translations, my working on the screenplay that was the whole reason I moved to New York and started bartending in the first place. Ali, the owner, asked about Noor. Asked when she was coming back.

I repeated his question the next morning

when we spoke.

She wanted to talk to me about that, she said. She wasn't sure she would be. At least not soon.

She'd spoken to Columbia and was going to finish her final semester remotely. She had taken a short leave from the translating job, but they were happy to now let her continue from abroad. All she had left was her apartment, her loose ends in New York City, me.

She flew back a week later to break her lease and pack up her personal belongings. We met at the studio she'd rented and I wrapped her favorite mug in a pair of leggings, nestling it amongst her books and shoes.

We talked about the marathon, and I told her how my brother was beating me in Fantasy Football, about the bet. She told me about the Cairo Marathon, how it always happens around Valentine's Day.

It was as if neither of us spoke it out loud, we could pretend this was normal.

That tomorrow night she'd walk into the bar and I'd give her a free basket of those French fries that we both hate. That she'd come home with me and we'd compare the miles we wanted to run the next day. That we'd meet back up at the Yemeni Coffee Shop where I no longer needed her to order for me and where, if we stayed long enough, Ali would give us the leftover bakery treats at the end of the night.

I could almost convince myself that this was part of the play. That I just needed to sit with Noor and write a better second act. In the second act, we run the Cairo Marathon together, and I propose at the finish line. I lose Fantasy Football and I run my ultra in Egypt—the 100km Pharaonic Race—maybe, in Faiyum that passes by Haware Pyramid and Kefren Pyramid and Elleshet Pyramid and Dahshur Pyramid and Memphis and I know Faiyum and I know these Pyramids and I know these places because I know Egypt because the woman I love loves Egypt and so we live there and the stage lights drop and the curtain falls and we are holding hands and catching our breath.

And I call her an Uber to the airport.

And I tell myself that I shouldn't trust my first instinct which is to go with her.

Don't trust the first mile. Don't trust the first draft.

But sometimes the kink in your knee doesn't go away. Sometimes you do write something beautiful in one go. Sometimes the first reaction is the right reaction.

Ali still brings over extra baklava. Masoob. Sabaya. He asks about the screenplay. Asks what draft I'm on. He knows I've been working on the ending for a while.

He says he wants to know what happens before the stage fades to black.



"Winter Window Shadows"
By: James Nagle

The First Word Back

By: Noor Ahmed

In the rehab unit, change doesn't arrive with the snap of a finger. It moves slowly, tip-toeing its way through a slightly steadier grip or extra inch of finger flexion, half-steps that the therapists cheer for like a touchdown. Progress happens quietly here, almost secretive. You learn to notice tiny things: the way a patient leans a little less on your shoulder, the way fatigue slowly withers away with every repeated movement. You learn that healing sounds more like a whisper than a proclamation.

I was still learning all of this when I met my new patient. He had experienced a stroke that left him profoundly aphasic. He could understand us, but being able to speak again seemed like a distant dream. On my first shift with him, he held my arm and watched me with a gaze that felt weighted. It felt apologetic, like he wanted me to know that he was trying. As if he felt that losing his words demanded an explanation.

Communication became an intricate act. I brought in a picture board with illustrations of water, blankets, bathroom, food trays, and more. He would point with effort and use gestures, eyebrows raised sharply for yes and knitted tightly for no. When I guessed wrong, the air between us thickened. It wasn't anger, but frustration. I could feel the disappointment radiating off of him, coupled with lingering hope that I might still figure him out. I would say, "We'll figure it out together. One step at a time." And he would close his eyes, inhale, and try again.

Some days were harder. His blood sugar would dip, or therapy would push him to the brink of his capabilities. On those evenings, he would withdraw, his gaze shifting towards the window, as if he expected someone to retrieve him from this new, bewildering life. Even in those moments, he tried. He always tried.

Over the weeks, I learned to read him in subtler ways. Observing a shift in his jaw to signal discomfort. The tapping of his finger that meant impatience. A certain tightness around his eyes that meant he was overwhelmed or agitated. I didn't realize it at the moment, but learning him, or learning how to see these little details about him, was already changing me. We worked together endlessly, and every successful moment of understanding would bring me satisfaction like no other.

One morning, I walked into his room expecting the usual pattern: a nod of recognition or perhaps his hand holding mine to signal that he needs help with something. And then, without any warning, he said, "Hi."

Just like that. A single syllable. But it detonated something inside of me.

Shock burst through me like an electrical current as I experienced an adrenaline rush so sharp, it made me freeze for a split-second. This was not what I anticipated at all. I had braced myself for silence, for the familiar slow ritual of communication. But instead, that one word changed everything. It was a bridge. A piece of him returning.

My own "Hi!" came out way too fast, way too bright, but I couldn't help it. I stepped closer. "You look great today," I said. "You're really doing amazing."

He was sitting up on his own, his eyes following mine with alertness that felt new. He looked present, not drifting but rather rooted in the moment. It felt like the sun finally shone again after weeks of gloomy fog.

For a second, the room felt suspended in time. He blinked, perhaps realizing what he had accomplished. I felt this surge of pride for him, gratitude for being there to witness it, and awe at the resilience of the human brain. It was a small moment, the kind that rehab is full of, but this one lingered close to my heart.

When I stepped out into the hallway, I immediately found another tech that I was close with. “He said ‘hi’ to me,” I whispered, like it was a secret too delicate to speak at full volume. She smiled, instantly understanding the weight of such a tiny word.

After that morning, I held onto the moment tightly. It shifted the way I understood my role. Before, I saw my job as simply helping. Assisting with vitals, transfers, blood sugars, and comfort, which are all important. But suddenly, I saw my work more holistically, with more nuance, realizing the value of small moments in each patient’s progress. I saw how the smallest syllable can change the trajectory of my day and my patient’s day completely.

I also realized that change in rehab isn’t just something that happens to patients. It also happens to us, the caregivers who work alongside them every step of the way. As weeks went by, I watched countless patients arrive in our unit needing max assistance to move. And then, slowly, I watched them rise, first with two people supporting them, then one, then only with a walker, then finally on their own completely. I have watched families cry when someone stands independently for the first time in months.

I have also watched patients grieve. I have held hands while someone says they’re scared for the uphill battle to come. I have seen the way frustration can turn into fury when progress is slow. As a result, I’ve had to learn patience in a new, deeper way. I learned to be patient not just with tasks, but with suffering.

But ever since that morning when my patient said “hi,” I have carried a sense of hope and knowing inside of me that never rattles. When patients get discouraged, saying that they don’t see any change or that the process feels slow and grueling, I can speak honestly. I can tell them about the things I have seen, the transformations that begin so subtly that you almost miss them. I can say, “I know it feels slow. But I’ve seen people walk out of here who couldn’t even sit up
when they came in. You have no idea how far you’ve already come.” And I believe it. Because I’ve seen it with my own eyes, time and time again.

That one syllable changed the type of care that I give. I became more observant, noticing the way patients look at their hands with new confidence, the way their shoulders straighten when a therapist praises them, and the way their families soften as they slowly but surely make progress, day after day.

I began to understand that change is not always a dramatic turning point. Sometimes, change is a single hesitant word spoken into the morning air. A few weeks after his first “hi,” my patient was discharged. He didn’t walk out speaking freely, but he walked out speaking more, syllable by syllable, and more confidently.

Now, every time I greet someone, even in the most mundane exchanges, I think about how many connections must happen in the brain for a single syllable to find its way out. I think about the privilege of being able to witness his journey. I think about how that moment didn’t just change him; it changed me too.



"The First Flowers of Spring"
By: Lola Ortiz-Whittingham

The Typewriter

By: Elizabeth Parsons

It always finds you —
in your mother's face,
the wrinkles, bones jutting.
In the first ache of your right knee
when you stand.
In your favorite coffee shop closing,
the homemade version not comparing.

Simultaneously,
in the excitement of a new book,
in the warmth of a call from an old
friend,
in the forgiveness of a mending heart.

How could anyone like this?
A thief
taking our comfort, routines, stability.
Sometimes leaving gifts
to replace the stolen.

I once thought adaptability its conqueror
yet it is an accomplice—
prompting internal change
in response to an external one.
It still wins.

The worst is when I serve it.
Sobbing in the corner,
his wife
wrapped in a threadbare white blanket.
One second ago
it wasn't cancer.
Now it is.

But if I cannot stop it
and I cannot stop creating it,
though every action,
every conversation,
every look.
How could I possibly accept it?

I think of my grandfather,
the loud clacking,
perfect letters stamped
beside my grandmother's looping cursive.

The birthday card that comes now
with only one familiar script.
His absence,
a reminder.

Perhaps the best way to live with it
is to recognize—
to notice the shift,
the wrinkle,
the silence.

To not let it creep,
to not let it rot.
Opening the drawer
to split skin
leaking amber syrup
pooling under dimpled fruit.
A slow collapse
under plastic light,
unwatched.

Rather witness the robbery
than wake one day
to an unrecognizable home.

River in a Box

By: Chris Ward

When you were two, I watched as you tossed gender aside like an empty pack of fruit snacks. Dancing in the sun, warm grass between your toes, our backyard wind chimes keeping ethereal time. Your long wavy hair, shortened by the humidity of the day, pulled itself into tighter curls. Commanding your play, you chanted, "We're running out of oil! We're running out of oil!" Trains in each hand. "Thomas! We need hydraulics!" You had an uncanny ability to live totally in your own created space. How nice to live in such a place, outside of the eyes of onlookers.

In those moments, I was naive to the danger of allowing the world to witness your beauty and imagination. I was naive to the constraints we place on children as they grow and develop. I had yet to fear for you living Out, authentic and true, among the eyes of onlookers. I had yet to have visions of your death at the hands of some hate-filled person whose mind limited them from seeing your value.

The day grew hot. Our house oppressive. Sun baked the ground, dry cracks running through brown grass. On evenings like this you liked to order food and sit under a tree in the park. We inched forward in the drive-thru line. At the window, the woman asked, "Would she like a girl toy or boy toy?"

"Mom, what does that even mean? Toys are toys. I can play with whatever I want!" I explained to you that the woman at the window had to ask, it was part of her job, so if this bothered you, you could call the company to let them know. All of 5 years old, you told me to dial the number and asked for my phone. You told me we were eating in the car that night; you had a lot to say. I spooned my melting frosty, AC blasting, as we sat in the parking lot and you educated the customer service rep of a fast-food restaurant in the ways of gender and toys. It was one of our best picnics.

I did my research and waited for the day you would come out to me. I managed the conversations in day care, preschool, summer camp about why you wore "boys" underwear. I remember losing my cool one day and simply telling a camp counselor that if there were trains and construction vehicles and dinosaurs on "girls" underwear, maybe we would try them. I added that "boys" underwear was more comfortable anyway and maybe they should try them.

I prepared myself for your choice of appearance, possibly a new name, new pronouns. I learned about life expectancy. Even though the research is flawed, you are not likely to live as long as your cis friends. I remember looking at your cis friends' parents with jealousy. Jealous that their children could fit in boxes with no explanation. I envied those parents who did not have to explain their children to people without ears. Fear began to set in.

Would I be the advocate and supporter I hoped to be? How would I protect you in this world that loves to "other?" Would I be able to see the danger, or would it be insidious, invisible, and lethal? My heart grieved the smooth and peaceful life I imagined for you. I never wanted a trans kid. I wanted my child to live free from the dangers of being something unknown. I never wanted a trans kid because I was not sure I could be the parent you needed. But I did not have a choice in the matter, and I am eternally grateful for that.

As late season flowers bloomed in vibrant color, so too did your imagination. Your mind boundless, glowing in glorious possibility, imagining your authentic self without limit.

Green buds peeked from everywhere in anticipation of the earth's renewal. It was the Spring when you were nine, and you sat me down at dinner and came out as gender-fluid:
"Trying to stay in one gender is like trying to put a river in a box."

You could not believe it took so long to figure out. You had already told the world: teachers, classmates, friends, anyone who would listen. I had waited for this day. My heart welled up in my throat. You were out, open and free, living in the world as the person you were meant to be.

My 9-year-old had more confidence and self-awareness at their age than I did at that moment. The promise of spring and new life moved through us both. I saw you as a budding flower, braving cold mornings and near-frosts to grow defiantly into something fabulous, new, and yet familiar. And I too was moved to think of my life anew. My voice strong; my hugs soft and gentle. I thought of myself as a place to come back to—to land—but also launch from. A familiar, safe place where you could feel secure and loved.

Out of respect for you and out of an uncontrollable drive to "get this right" I asked a ridiculous number of questions. What are your pronouns right now? What bathroom are you most comfortable using? Should I tell your friends' parents, your after-school, your grandparents? Do you have a new name? Who gets to use the name? Has anyone been mean to you? It was an overwhelming flash flood of questions. Then the questions and comments came from your peers, mostly around bathrooms. "What are you doing in here?" "You don't belong here!" "Are you a girl or a boy?" Oh, how simple to get to pick just one. There came a point where you had had it. You announced to me that you would answer questions you wanted to answer and ignore questions you did not want to answer. You "owed nothing to no one" concerning your identity, and you would save your energy for living in the way you wanted to live.

Soon after our coming-out dinner, the world shut down. People forgot about pronouns and bathrooms. There was no tangible way to live Out in pandemic isolation. You reinvented yourself with the return of online school, hair cut short, dyed blue. And again, with the return to school in-person. A year and a half passed, and you now looked like the twin of your best friend Noah. No one recognized you, and you kept to yourself quite a bit. Daylight fading, leaves falling and crunching underfoot, a brisk breeze lifting them into the air as they fell to their final resting place on the sidewalk. Just before the school year started, you were misgendered in summer camp for the first time. I could see the weight of the world pushing down on you.

But as the world reopened, so did the possibility of living Out. We scheduled an appointment with Adolescent Medicine to discuss puberty blockers. You had done your research and felt you needed more information to make a choice about what to do.

As we drove up to the clinic, I thought of it as some kind of portal to another dimension, a fortress of sorts, the safest place for you to fully be yourself. In my memory of that day, the backlit building glowed with promise and hope.

I think of my time sitting next to you at that first appointment for gender affirming care, the beauty in your expression, finding comfort in possibilities. I have never felt you live in the world as genuinely as in that moment. It was as if a second summer had come, and you were back in your 2-year-old

body, dancing in the grass, sun gracing your skin, as you yelled for hydraulics.

Your body was in your hands; your care shared with your experts. You could ask questions, make up your mind, change your mind, ask more questions, and it was ALL safe. You began to try out distinct aspects of your identity more publicly. You had a newfound freedom to walk through the world as your authentic self.

But that season was brief as a dream. The world started its slow freeze, shrinking and dying back. The worst was still a year or so out.

Anti-trans legislation began to mount. Our politicians grew emboldened to relegate our children to second-class citizens, taking away their rights, their lifelines, leaving them living in fear. I tried to hide all of this from you, but you knew what was happening in the world. You would ask about bathroom bills and efforts to keep trans girls and women out of sports. We discussed what this meant. We discussed the possibility of support from people in the world who knew the beauty in the trans community, who would fight for the rights of people, even people they had never met.

“Mom, I think I want to know more about testosterone, I think I might want to start it.”

Our appointment was a month before the administration would begin its project of destruction. On our drive to the clinic, it snowed light flurries, ominous, like nuclear fallout, ethereal and toxic. I entered the clinic with apprehension, trying not to project onto you my fear of what was to come. You carried a lovely hope of what was ahead for you and the world you created, the one I wish we could all live in. You had thoughtful discussions with your providers, made plans to learn more and come back to talk about next steps. You wanted to take your time to know if T was right for you. You would let me know, you said, when it was time to schedule our follow-up. At my urging, our provider clarified that the clinic would continue to function unless there was a federal law banning care. I knew our time was running out. Sand through my fingers.

And then our world shut down again. This time owing to hate for trans people stirred up by politicians. The sky lost all color and light.

I panic-messaged our gender clinic. At first, they said they would maintain kids on meds, but no one could start new. You could no longer have that conversation with your provider. No longer ask your questions, make up your mind, change your mind, ask more questions. You were silenced. No more appointments. No more space for us to live freely and openly. No more possibilities.

“I think we should move, Mom. It's not safe here anymore.”

A thin layer of ice appeared around the edges of the windows. No one under 19 years old would receive care. The clinic reneged on its promise to maintain children on their medications. Our community’s children were being forced to detransition. Families began searching for lifelines, but our searches could not be out in the open. We shied away from public lives, for fear of becoming and creating targets. We went underground and everything underground was chaos.

You decided to pause, not knowing how to get to know a new provider safely in this situation that felt so unsafe and uncertain, fearful you would start, and it would be taken away. The days were long and dark, isolating, filled with terror of what might come next.

Our community no longer felt safe to trust in institutions that preemptively stopped caring for our trans kids. No law banned gender affirming care; only an executive order threatening funding that an injunction temporarily halted. An executive order, the legal equivalent of a memo.

Going to the hospital for any reason suddenly felt risky. Would they care for my whole child? What would they put in your medical records? Had they already handed over your protected health information to the government?

The flag outside the hospital is flying at half-staff in honor of someone who said I should be publicly stoned to death for being bisexual and that my trans child is an abomination. Politicians and their enablers have made life so much more dangerous for us. The air bites, siphoning oxygen from my lungs.

You cannot talk to me about much of any of this. Instead, we share silly gay memes and point out all the beauty and transness in the world. You capture photos of the fading garden out back, overgrown and putting out the last of its flowers for the pollinators to survive the winter. We both fear winter.

You ask me if I will be taken away from you, like they proposed in Texas—will caring for and supporting a trans child be grounds for a child welfare referral? I cannot answer you other than to say, "I can't imagine any way anyone could keep me from you." But in reality, I can picture taking you to the hospital with a broken arm only to be questioned about my parenting, not because of a broken bone but because you refuse to pass, because you live authentically trans. The ground is frozen solid beneath our feet.

And somehow, we must find a way to live. You dream of moving to Canada to meet your online friend in real life. We do not have passports. I have never lived a life where I could afford to travel, so passports seemed like a waste. I look back at my to-do list: "Get Passports" dated 11/20/24. I am angry at myself for not focusing on a way out of here, a way to keep you safe.

We center down and concentrate on our microcosm. Slowly I begin to reach out, to find lifelines in other families, pushing past my comfort zone, building community. Faltering daily. Trying to find balance between hiding and standing up.

I cannot stop the images from running through my head. You are out on your own, and I helplessly envision you beaten for being different, murdered, dumped somewhere alone and scared. I cannot keep you safe.

Just six years ago, I felt like we could move through the world only having to worry about bathrooms and pronouns. Now it feels as if the world will sniff us out, make an example of us. And if your protected health information is released, that may become our reality. Thoughts of going into hiding, changing our names. The landscape has lost most all life now. A dark hollowness surrounds us in broad daylight.

I dream of going back to that spring of your coming out. I know spring will come again. I can see the determination and courage of trans and queer people all around me. This fight is not new; it is built into the fiber of our beings. Our joy and love are resistance. Our ability to shape-shift and hold space are resistance. And just as I was privileged to witness your glorious transformation over the years, I know that you will witness the world evolve. I must believe the earth will hold you boundless again. I will never stop fighting for it.

Submerged

By: Roselyn Goldstein

Growing up, I was petrified by the ocean. The brutal image of a wave pulling me under, trapping me beneath the rippling water persisted whenever I was near the shore. With depth of water comes a lack of clarity; an uncertainty that unnerves me completely.

Fresh out of sixth grade, terrified and apprehensive, I moved from New Hampshire to Pennsylvania. The ten hour drive felt longer as I realized I was moving away from everyone and everything I knew. Curled up in my bed, staring at the cardboard boxes, my room filled with water for the first time. Deep-set anxiety turned into rivulets running down my walls. Quickly spreading into all corners of the room, the water gushed in, insatiable. The pressure weighed me down, spread into my limbs, pushing out the little remaining air in my lungs. Sinking further and further down, yet never finding the solace of solid seafloor.

I marveled at the way my classmates seemed to ignore the incessant dripping, the rivers forming in the hallways. Puddles appeared throughout my house, pinpricks of condensation pervading the walls and nearly every surface. The water became a constant presence, pushing back on my every movement, an extreme gravity that only I could feel.

Over time, the water came to ebb and flow. Still, an uncertainty remained. The water acted almost like a wild animal, coming and going as it pleased. Asking for help underwater felt pointless; why bother when the sound won't travel? But, as the tide receded, breathing came easier. Given the opportunity, my friends and family acted as a buoy, holding me up between the lapping waves. Draining an ocean is impossible, but floating on the surface is possible without the weight of carrying everything alone.

Still, I find myself wading through life. Currents occasionally tug, at times dragging me under. To try to dismiss the water is to try to dismiss a part of myself. However, acceptance is not the same as submission. Needing and asking for mental health support is not an admission of failure. When the room fills with water, swimming is less difficult knowing that I have people waiting for me at the surface.



"The Constant Rhythm"
By: Jael Shatlock

Evens, Odds, and Faces

By: Elizabeth Buechele

The only reason we were driving up the coast of California together was because a 14-year-old cheated on her long-distance camp boyfriend.

When he found out, he punched a tree so hard his knuckles bled and I, the make-shift nurse with limited first-aid training, was made to wrap it. A., on the other hand, was made to raid the kitchen for French toast and verse our teenager on the healing power of hip hop music post breakup.

The whole summer had been a fever dream, traveling between camps around the country, coordinating staff schedules, and showering in communal halls with spiders. One camp had a rattlesnake problem and high elevation leading to an obscene number of nosebleeds and venomous scares. At another, the storage space in the attic retained heat that was not conducive with human life.

Perhaps this is why, on the penultimate evening of camp, surrounded by teenage angst, hip hop, and whipped cream topped French toast, when P.—a man I'd met only 10 days prior—asked if I wanted to go on a road trip, I said yes.

We sat on the cabin stage watching a key memory unfold for our camper and looking at a map of the Western states. We'd start in Los Angeles, the closest major city to our rural temporary home. If we could get up to Oakland, we could stop at his apartment where we'd have access to tents and a couch to crash on.

And thus began our journey from Idyllwild, California to the Olympic National Park and back again.

In the week we'd spend together, we'd pull sap from the Great Sequoias and climb impossibly high for waterfall views. We'd lounge in a natural hot spring in Oregon and I'd get the worst sunburn of my life at Lake Tahoe.

We had sleeping bags and a camp stove I'd borrowed from a friend. We filled an empty jar of protein powder with trail mix from the grocery store and tried not to complain when all that was left after a few days was pepitas. We stocked up on peanut butter, apples, bread, and almond milk that we somehow trusted would never spoil in the trunk of a hot car.

For months, I'd planned and organized camps across the country while still maintaining multiple, separate freelance contracts. Traveling with A. and P. was a welcome respite from that. Where I seldom wake-up without a detailed agenda—even on quiet weekends at home—here, I often woke up without a strong indication of where I'd sleep the next.

One night, we wandered from our reserved campground and set up on the sand of Boca Reservoir, sleeping bags under stars.

Another night, we pulled off on the side of a dirt road on public lands and in the morning—after hours of waiting for them to wake up—I squatted in the woods, unable to wait until we made it to a proper camp restroom.

After getting completely drenched camping in the rainforest at Olympic National Park (and after much debate about whether blankets would dry on their own), we stopped into a laundromat and entertained

ourselves with the arcade games, pulling our quarters to chase ghosts on a screen. Our bedding was ready before we were.

And the fog. I'll never forget gripping the steering wheel and sending silent prayers to anyone who would listen as I navigated the twists and turns of the Pacific Coast Highway one night. Eventually, we managed to exit for Impossible Whoppers and a driver change but to this day, when I drive in fog, I remember the way the scant reachable radio stations seemed to play songs that would only loop on a scratchy vinyl in a black and white horror film.

The night before we were set to split, we shifted our plans slightly. What we wouldn't do for a little more time together. And when that time came to drop me off at LAX first, we blasted punk-pop music from our middle school years and sang. We didn't have words for much else.

Perhaps, though, my favorite memory of the trip were those hazy nights where we'd pull out a deck of cards and play *Evens, Odds, and Faces*. Early on, bored from traditional card games, we'd created a game that at its premise is as obvious as it sounds. What began as a joke turned into a nightly occurrence.

We made more rules for the game. We came up with a way to break ties. We decided how to pick who dealt first. At the end of a day of driving and hiking and drinking spoiled milk, we'd sit with our deck of cards and earnestly discuss how to make *Evens, Odds, and Faces* better.

It's been seven years since that road trip. We each live in a different state now. I haven't been camping in months.

But sometimes, when I'm feeling the pressures of the world, I remember what it felt like when my only priority was getting to the beach in time to watch the sunset. When I pick up a fresh apple, I find it near impossible to eat without an accompanying jar of peanut butter. And sometimes, when I look at a deck of cards, I think about what I wouldn't do for one more round of *Evens, Odds, and Faces*.

Graveyard Shift

By: Karl Rennick-Zuefle

♪ If I leave here tomorrow, will you still remember me? ♪

I sit at my desk while my speaker plays my 70s rock playlist. It's one of the few pleasures I'm allowed to indulge on the job. That, and it obscures the symphony of beeps echoing down the hall. *Free Bird* must have been written 70-some-odd years ago, well before my time. Music's taken a lot of directions in my life, but I can't resist going back to the songs of my parents' and grandparents' generations.

In fact, I've found myself dwelling on the past a lot lately. The nature of my work gives me ample time to do so. I'm a button pusher and fall guy at Granite Run Medical Center (an Avenis Enterprise®). Or, as my job title states, I'm a Night Shift Intensivist. It wasn't my choice to work nights. In fact, back in college, I did research on why night shift work is so bad for you. But I'm lucky to still have work. Here in Pennsylvania, most outpatient medicine is done entirely by AI. Down South and out West, my job can be done entirely by AI too. But here, intensive care is considered too high-risk. The liability situation in Pennsylvania is still complex, and Avenis would like to avoid any expensive snags. That's where I come in. I sit at my screen and as orders come in for all the patients in my wing, I'm supposed to review them and sign them. Of course, these patients receive so many tweaks to their treatment that their orders pop up on my screen every few seconds, giving me hardly any time to review them. So I end up clicking each one away as the next pops up. Luckily, Avenis never makes mistakes.

After another half hour of clicking and a few more songs, I need to stretch my legs. I pace around my tiny office and peer down the hallway. The wing is dimly lit and remarkably empty. God, it's different from when I started. Despite the hallways being built wide to accommodate foot traffic, no doctors, nurses, technicians, or equipment are in sight. Also absent are any noises from the patients themselves—they're kept sedated. Avenis's studies say it improves outcomes; I think they do it because it's cheaper. Back during my training, the liveliness of the hallways was one of the best parts of the job. Now, being there with the patients makes me sad and uneasy, so I avoid it whenever possible.

"Why haven't you been filling orders?" a voice calls to me, snapping me back to reality as the music pauses. I call back "Sorry, Sidney, I was about to use the bathroom."

Sidney is both my assistant and my boss. He is Avenis's manifestation in this space, the company's attempt at a more personal way for me to interact with all the machines and patients around me, but this also makes him my overseer.

"Well go ahead and get back to your desk" he replies, friendly but firm.

"I lost the urge." I shuffle back to my desk and sink into my seat. I know a lecture is coming.

"I know you want to take breaks, but you can't just zone out" *Was I?* A blue circle near the corner of my screen vibrates with each of Sidney's words: "Look at how many orders have piled up. You know we expect you to review each one thoroughly before signing." However much I want to, I know that there's little use arguing with Sidney. He'll never budge—he's programmed not to, and I'm much more replaceable than he is.

"Sorry" I mumble, and get back to clicking.

More songs and many more orders pass by, when I hear footsteps down the hall. I slide my chair over to the door to investigate and see two technicians and a stretcher bed following behind them. Not wanting to waste any more time, I quickly wheel back to my desk. The new patient notification waiting for me catches my eye.

Maria DeMarco. She's the mom of Alex, an old high school friend. It's been years since I've seen her, but I still remember her fondly from visits to Alex's house, team fundraisers, and school dance photoshoots. My notification says she's in for complications from heart surgery. I still talk to Alex and know he would be crushed if anything happened to her…

"You're zoning out again" Sidney chides.

"Sidney, I don't think I should be treating this patient. She's my friend's mom and someone I used to know very well."

"What do you expect me to do? You're the only one in the hall tonight. And besides, you don't need to do anything different." Unfortunately, he's right. After a few minutes, I hear the technicians quietly leave, and am once again left to man the unit alone with my thoughts.

How did it get like this? Everything in the world just seems to move faster and farther apart. Who even knows if I'll have this job in five years? Maybe I should…

Ding ding ding ding ding ding. The sound echoes down the hall and from my speaker. I tab over the heart monitors and see Mrs. DeMarco's zig-zagging erratically. My heart begins to race. Without thinking, I jump out of my seat and rush down the hall to her room. Out front, a flashing blue bulb lights up the hallway. I take a deep breath and step into the room.

Mrs. DeMarco lays in bed, her small body hardly recognizable underneath a mess of wires, tubes, and a large device repeatedly bearing down on her chest. The wires and tubes all extend to large, black, obelisk-like machines which surround her bed. One shows a feed of every action taken, while another shows her heart rate, which is not improving.

"There's no need for you to be here" Sidney's voice says from one of the machines. "We have everything under control."

"Sidney this is serious. I'm responsible for her and I want to make sure everything's done right." I think of Alex waking up in his house across the country to a horrible automated message from Avenis. I plead: "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"You're panicking right now, and that's not what she needs. The best thing you can do is to manage the orders I'm giving."

Unyielding, I walk up to the bedside and hold her hand. It's already growing cold.

"Sidney you're losing her!"

"Standing here and criticizing me isn't helping. You don't have to watch."

"Just shut up!" I yell. It seems he finally listened. The only reply is the incessant beeping of the machines and the thumping of the piston on her chest. I hold her hand and whisper "I'm sorry." I stand there helplessly holding her hand as her heart monitor slowly fades from a sharp zig-zag to a faint ripple to a flat line. Eventually, the machines simultaneously stop, and all their screens display the same message: "Efforts terminated." The only noises come from the other rooms. I remain frozen in place, still holding her hand. It's far from my first death, but this one feels different. I can't shake the thought of Alex opening that final message from Avenis. I hear the hall doors open and know it's time to leave. On the way back to my office, the same two technicians walk by, giving me only a grim nod.

At my desk, a "Declare Death" notice waits

for me. I hesitate to click that one, knowing that my signature is all that's needed to make everything that just happened official. What am I going to tell Alex? Should I even let him know I was taking care of his mom? I hope he'd take comfort in knowing I held her hand until the end. The notice stares at me from my screen, and I eventually click it just to make it go away.

The next notice is a message from Avenis:

"We observed an abnormal stress response during your most recent patient encounter. Avenis cares deeply about all employees' well being and seeks to routinely improve patient care. As such, you have been assigned a Critical Incident Stress Management Module. Please click here to begin."

Exhausted, I click. My eyes are drawn to the bolded red message at the bottom of the first slide:

"**Remember: As a team, you and Avenis have provided the best medical care available. Any adverse outcomes are not your fault.**"

I almost wish it was.



"Bougainvilleas of Crete"
By: Christy Lucas

Hospital Sushi

By: Samir Yellapragada

the whole world fell silent
as I collapsed into a secluded booth
to the left of the cash register
and ripped off the $6.49 sticker
sealing my decadent garden roll.
she was a single mother of four children,
all of whom I had spoken with individually, well before today.
how does this sushi stay edible for so long? preservatives? has to be, right?
we talked about birdwatching every morning before I bored her with lab results
and she even told me she spotted an Island Scrub-Jay in her twenties.
she was forty-four. she was forty-four. she was forty-
four pieces of ginger today next to the wasabi- had it always been four?
today I'll be more careful when I open the soy sauce packet
because the stain on my scrub pants from yesterday still looks fresh
even though it was from yesterday
and today is different. *very* different from yesterday
because yesterday
there was a person who I spoke to about birdwatching
and musical theatre
and trips to Italy
and today there is not.
the splinters at the tip of my wooden chopsticks glisten
under harsh fluorescent lighting. the same harsh
fluorescence that flooded the fifth floor hall right before
all the blue scrubs rushed into her room
and prior to that it was just me and her
and we had just finished up with the reflexes part of the exam
and I knew her four sons were coming in this afternoon and
I was planning on s- *focus!*

the splinters at the tip of my wooden chopsticks glisten.
the rice tastes softer today. or maybe it tastes the same.
the salad station is humming with bodies
but it is impossible to hear any of it over
the beeping of monitors.
the panicked commands of blurred blues.
the crashing of black sneakers onto sticky ward floors.
and most impossible to hear over
all of the silence.
the world inhaled earlier today and forgot to exhale but
I exhale and notice that
the rice *does* taste softer today.
the seaweed less rubbery today.
the soy sauce less salty today.
and I find myself eating the best sushi in the whole entire world even though
it tastes the same
as the one from yesterday
and the day before that
not because of the sushi I guess
but because I can taste it at all.



"His Broken Heart"
By: Jane Lillard

His Broken Heart

By: Evelyn Reis

Cath lab disks arrive with the mail
Images of his father's steadfast, brave, giving heart
Pierced by the errant probe
Rupturing atrial wall, then pulmonary vein, aorta
And life as he knew it
Tamponade

In experienced hands -- and being human hands, not infallible
They said the risk of cardiac perforation is one percent
Sounds safe enough for an elective procedure
But for the one in a hundred
Perforation is 100 percent
Fatal

Miraculously, the father survives three emergency
Surgeries and four minutes of open cardiac massage
The planned overnight stay with discharge
Timed for the next day's dinner with his devoted wife
Becomes five long weeks
In the CCU

Five weeks of a heart wrenching bedside vigil for the
Loyal son and daughter
Who are present to witness another miracle
Regaining consciousness, the father mouths
Around the endotracheal tube
Don't stop

But a surgically repaired heart and
Force of will and prayers cannot overcome the
Limits of an 87 years old body
Beloved grandchildren are beckoned
Goodbyes and I love yous whispered through tears
And kisses

Even the son, a seasoned healer of others' fathers' hearts,
Could not turn back time to his father's days of
Shuffleboard, bocce, and cornhole
Holding the disks to his chest, he says softly
"At least I have my father's heart, his broken heart"
And his steadfast, brave, and giving heart

Breaks

critical care

By: Caroline Karnosh

i'm not sure if you can hear me
but i speak as though you're listening

calling out my presence over the sound of steady breaths that are
not yet yours to sigh and the drum of distant monitors that are
not yet mine to discern

today i will find you burning in a barren room
tomorrow may be different

i'm not sure if you can see me
but i move as though you're watching

detangling my stethoscope with clean hands and quiet reverence
with keen ears and worried brows
with stilled hope

today i will catch a glimpse of your eyes
tomorrow may be different

i'm not sure if you can sense me
but i proceed as though you're feeling

calling out each step of our practiced routine as i make note of limbs that
are yours to move and ours to arrange and movements that are yours to
make and ours to appraise

today i will find you waiting in a stoic state
tomorrow may be different

i'm not sure if you can remember me
but i go on as though you're forgetting

reminding you that you're in the hospital, that your family's been by
that it's morning, and autumn, and tuesday
that you're safe



"A Bridge to New Seasons"
By: Lola Ortiz-Whittingham



"Inevitable flow"
By: Jael Shatlock

A path to recovery

By: Kavita Israni-Winger

Control, over a whisper of wind
To dry the tears from my eyes.
I want only a whisper though,
because the tracks left behind
from when I weep
keep me sane.
They do not judge me
when I drown time after time,
flailing as if I've never learned
to swim.
The memory of the times I cry
make a friend out of the stranger
who has no will over her emotion
Remembering I am just as weak
as I am strong
makes this giant earth a parent
that loves unconditionally
and not a wasteland full of rage
that cringes from the things that make me
human.
And perhaps acknowledging
a certain degree of being human,
the little moments of pain
become justifiable.
For a friend to see you cry
becomes a comfort
and not a blemish on my record.
I think what I want
is to hold my palms to the sky,
surrender,
and feel whole by having fallen to pieces.
But for now,
a whisper of wind will suffice,
and the promise that the tear track
on my face
will pave a path to
recovery.

The Gray

By: Wendy Myers

Here we sit
No right or wrong
No good or bad
Nothing new
Nothing old

Wait

Here we sit
With the unknown
With the answers
Too much to do
Too much to think

Wait

Here we sit
Liminal is this space

Change will happen
Change will come

Wait.



“Framing a Shadow”
By: James Nagle

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS: *IN THEIR OWN WORDS*

Caroline Karnosh	*Medical Student at UPSOM.*
Chris Garner	*I'm someone learning to live a life I never expected—one shaped by MS, but not defined by it. I have gained perspective, empathy, and a deeper appreciation for what my body can do. I continue to work, love, hope, and move forward, even when forward looks different than it used to. I am growing in acceptance, in strength, and in awareness of what truly matters.*
Chris Ward	*I am a parent of a fabulous trans child, a grower of things, a collector of beauty, fierce advocate, and lifelong activist.*
Elizabeth Parsons	*I am a fourth year medical student applying into emergency medicine.*
Elizabeth Buechele	*Elizabeth Buechele (she/her) is a writer and nonprofit professional living in New York City. She is passionate about youth empowerment and kindness and she founded a nonprofit called The Smile Project around these themes when she was 17-years-old. Elizabeth enjoys distance running, vegan baking, all traveling, and waving to other people's dogs on the sidewalk. She grew up in Western Pennsylvania and will forever bleed black and gold.*
Evelyn Reis	*I am the Associate Dean for the Learning Environment, Professor of Pediatrics, mentor, educator, and Balint group leader at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. I have had a lifelong love of the arts but never attempted to express myself through poetry until seeing this call for submissions. I was moved to write this poem to articulate the pain our family has experienced due to a catastrophic medical error.*
Gabriel Ratcliffe	*I was born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana. My passion for science drives me to improve how biomedical research is communicated to diverse audiences. Whether my medium of expression is a drawing pad, a trombone or a metaphor, I am a storyteller at heart. As a scientist poet, my personal approach to translating such information is poetry, a tool that attaches emotion to data.*
Jael Shatlock	*I am a mother who loves God with all her being. I enjoy photography and sharing my perspective of life through my lens.*
James Nagle	*I am a retired educator. I was fortunate to have participated in two fellowship programs at Skidmore College in drawing and painting. Currently, my focus is in photography and video.*
Jane Lillard	*Jane, an artist living in NYC, is currently a graduate student at Columbia University Teachers College.*
Karl Rennick-Zuefle	*I am a senior undergraduate student at the University of Pittsburgh majoring in Biological Sciences and History and Philosophy of Science. These works are my first foray into public creative writing, but hopefully not my last.*

Kavita Israni-Winger	*I am currently a physician scientist in-training and also a patient with chronic illness. I use poetry and prose to reflect and make sense of my experiences and emotions. I love the outdoors, reading and writing fantasy and my two strange cats.*
Lola Ortiz-Whittingham	*I am a third-year medical student at the University of Pittsburgh who enjoys spending time outdoors and photographing nature.*
Noor Ahmed	*I am an undergraduate pre-medical student at the University of Pittsburgh, majoring in Neuroscience and pursuing a certificate in Bioethics. In addition to my academic work, I conduct ovarian cancer research and serve as a Patient Care Technician in an inpatient acute rehabilitation unit, where I care for patients recovering from stroke and other life-altering neurologic injuries. Through writing, I reflect on vulnerability, resilience, and the quiet, transformative moments that define healing.*
Norman Klenicki	*I am 71 years old i am a self taught artist i began painting in my 30s i have produced hundreds of paintings i am an intuitive expressionist i am bipolar and painting is my therapy, my meditation i feel that i paint from my soul whatever is going on inside of me comes out onto the canvas*
Roger McGinnis II	*I love expressing myself through various mediums, whether I'm playing guitar in my Michael Jackson/Prince tribute band, staring in a musical, or reciting a piece at a slam poetry session, I always try to put my full self in my work and art. I've been writing poems for 5 years, and while I am still honing my skills, I hope you enjoy my work so far.*
Roselyn Goldstein	*I am a first-year student at the University of Pittsburgh intending to study biology! I have a passion for animals, reading, and writing. I have been writing ever since I was a kid, but especially in the past few years as an outlet to channel some of my emotions.*
Samir Yellapragada	*Samir Yellapragada (he/him) is a fourth-year medical student, Pittsburgh native, and a lifelong lover of all things poetry. He is grateful for the opportunity to showcase his writing and continues to be inspired by the work of his peers.*
Wendy Myers	*Wendy Myers, LSW is a Palliative Care Social Worker at UPMC Mercy in Pittsburgh, PA.. She has been a life-long lover of the arts, dabbling in music, fiber arts, and theater. Wendy is constantly on the lookout for ways to incorporate the arts into therapy as a means of grounding and comfort.*

THE CANARY CREATIVE STAFF

Editor-in-Chief, Founder: Christy M. Lucas, MD

Editorial Associate: Gaetan Sgro, MD

Publication Curator: Mia Spinelli

Publication Sponsor: The University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Bioethics

Poetry Section Editor: Gaetan Sgro, MD

Prose Section Editors: Amanda Brown, MD, MS and James Lucot

Visual Arts Section Editor: Sara McIntire, MD

Music Section Editors: Eugene Kim and Alex Rothstein

Reviewer Team:
- Sylvia Choi, MD
- Kate Kernan, MD, MFA
- Alyson Lee
- Sayna Matinrazm
- Julia Meade, MD
- Josh Morgenlander
- Rhiannon J. Rieger, MMT, MT-BC
- Jane Schell MD, MHS, FNKF, FAAHPM
- Siddhi Shockey
- Mia Spinelli
- Esha Sultana
- Andrew Thurston, MD
- Alyssa Vigliotti, MD
- Amelia Waltman, MD
- Andrea Yarkony

Community Ambassadors:
- Sylvia Choi, MD
- Maura Miglioretti, PhD
- Evelyn Reis, MD

Web Design: Jeff Klein

A PAGE OF THANKS

Thank you for taking the time to read the third issue of *The Canary*.

We are grateful to each artist and author who took the time to share their work for our review, including those not selected for publication in this issue. We were inspired by the talent in the community and the willingness of others to open their hearts to join us in this creative adventure; it is *you*—the artists, authors, and readers—who give us at *The Canary* hope and the wind to continue flying.

A special thank you to the entire creative staff, including the editorial team, reviewers, community ambassadors, and publication team, who took on this feat while balancing school, a full-time career, and family life. Thank you to our publication sponsor, the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Bioethics, Dr. Lisa Parker, and our web and logo designer, Jeff Klein. Additional thanks go to Deb Tomazin and the Penn State College of Medicine Department of Humanities and its annual publication *Wild Onions* for teaching the healing value of the arts and planting the seed for *The Canary*.

We hope that you have been moved by the many talents of the artists and authors living among us in our community.

Here's to flying out of the coal mine together—changing, singing.



Sponsor: The University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Bioethics
Email: thecanary.medhumanities@gmail.com
Website: http://pittcanary.com/

All artistic pieces, essays, and poems were included and published with the consent of their author/artist. ClipArt obtained from OpenClipart.org.

THE CANARY