Special Supplement: “Creative/Artistic Narratives of Illness”

INTRODUCTION

Richard Arnold

First and foremost, I thank Cheryl Krasnick Warsh for the opportunity to contribute to CBMH as the guest editor for this special “creative” supplement. The idea first arose out of some informal chats between Cheryl and myself over the past few months; I shared some of my poetry, and she suggested that I solicit submissions from the field, and serve as guest editor for the special issue. Although poetry, short fiction, and personal essays are a somewhat radical departure from CBMH’s norm, the idea of a special issue is not—for example 19, 1 (2002) was a Special Issue on Children.

This, our first venture into the field, is a modest one; however, as word spreads, we expect to offer more in a future issue, and in fact have already a stockpile of material set aside for a special issue on “Cancer.” We are open to further submissions of creative material on that topic. And, as in all new enterprises, we go into this with a bit of uncertainty—but also with confidence that readers of CBMH will not only find the high standards of the journal upheld, but will be entertained by the deeply personal characters in each of these pieces.

EXTENDED CARE

by Winona Baker

Her arms empty now
no impatient child
no greedy lover
covets unclaimed breasts

She sleeps alone
kisses endearments stillborn
behind parted lips

Her floaty eyes
have life still
something’s sheared off
In the sun room
eyes skate off her
Her body embarrasses
coughing fits rumblings
wind
Wets herself
lifts shaky legs into dry pants
shamed as a new-trained toddler
Forgets room number

Sometimes merry
tells retells stories
those she knew when young

Quotes poets
who wrote verse in rhyme

I REMEMBER SHE LOVED FLOWERS

by Kate Braid

Lost in halls painted pink and crowded
with people leaning on canes and their waning
wits, I clutch orange roses.

The sign on her door says Ellen,
not Auntie Kelly as I always called her.
As if she has already left, as if she is already
someone I never knew.

She sits in a wheelchair, elegant, her hands folded,
eyes absent, as if she has lost something.
The high gloss of her forehead
shines, her pale, pale skin glows marble, a fading moon
already half in shadow.

This dearly remembered face that sillied and loved me
lights in a moment of recognition.
Her only words are soft birdie kisses to my cheek.
She hasn’t forgotten love.

When I give her the flowers, she gasps.
Her rolling speech struggles, then fits: Beauty, she says clearly.
There’s peace in it, as her face blooms
ever the exact beauty of an orange rose.

All morning we giggle: her meaningless words,
my own. At lunch she clings to my hand and prays—
May the Kingdom come and the perfect our coming to a holy too
and forever, Amen, squeezes, says
We can eat now and does, with vigour, as if each bite
of soft meatloaf and milky mashed potato
were the manna of Heaven come down to feed us,
here, now.

After, we sit in the front hall, holding hands, oblivious of others.
When I say good-bye, her eyes fill.
She leans her forehead against mine and we cry
a small wet blessing on each other.
I am yearning for what is lost, forgetting
what is found.

And how does it matter?
All my life I have been seduced by the economics of memory—
hoarding the once upon a times, saving up the remember whens?,
forgetting exactly what I have: the scent of a rose, taste of a potato,
Auntie’s birdie kisses on my cheek.

Maybe now is the time to catch up, to be present
in the present of this life—
every single minute of it, vast.

MY GRANDMOTHER DIES

by Allan Brown

She could not grow thin.
The waggling goose’s flesh
of her grey neck swelled
and collapsed and swelled again
as she sucked the loose air
that our vague talk supplied her with,
metabolizing our platitudes,
still growing, still heavy
with misplaced memories
and confused recognitions:
I became my father
returning from a golf game,
and where was the dog, until
a bubble of some other desperate
question exploded into grateful silence.

Eventually we left
the constipated room
and, dry ghosts, walked away.
WHEN HIS BODY BECAME THE POEM
I ALWAYS WANTED TO WRITE

by Leanne McIntosh

When his body became the poem
I always wanted to write
I didn’t move his shoes from the front door and I left
his extra pair of glasses on the table by the couch
where every noon he ate tomato soup and toast.
The bills stayed in a folder on his desk
but I took out the garbage and fed the birds
as I always did after breakfast
when his body became the poem I always wanted to write.

When his body became the poem
I always wanted to write
with my tongue on the hollow of his back—
the place that gives him the most pain as though
sorrow had to show, eventually, on the outside
the tears he didn’t cry when he was five for the father
who left him—I stood aside for his children
to hold him and change him and sing him to sleep
when his body became the poem I always wanted to write.

When his body became the poem
I always wanted to write
detailing the joy of a man who loved babies
and washed diapers before it was a thing fathers did
I looked through a box of treasures he kept
on the shelf of his closet: the letters and cards from daughters,
a copy of his son’s diploma and our marriage license
kept handy so we could get a cheap room rate at the Empress
when his body became the poem I always wanted to write.

When his body became the poem
I always wanted to write
I put down my pen because words were stalled
in cartoon balloons and listened to my daughter’s husband
remember his mother and how little time there was
to say good-bye, so little that now he can’t leave the bedside
and the touching—my husband’s face a blank page
for old grief where it was written I am still in love
when his body became the poem I always wanted to write.
AND THIS IS THE WAY

by Joan van der Goes

And this is the way you love
a husband of forty years

And this is the way his mind fades
before your eyes and heart

And this is the way you listen
to his long silences
or indistinct chatter

And this is the way you
direct him
dress him
lead him
feed him
and then clean up

And this is the way
you jump to see what he is doing
soap powder for sugar
on his cereal
a little dog food
for the chickens

And this is the way
you hold him
and hug him
and ache to share your pain
as you always have before

And this is the way
you stroke his dear
mute sweet head
tenderly

And this is the way
you pour into your journal
what you can’t say
the way you spill heartache
on those white pages

And this is the way
you lock your words away
where they can’t hurt him.
MENINGITIS
(for Emma)

by Mildred Tremblay

That morning, death showed up
in the yard, dazzling the boy
who ran in to his mother, crying:
The snow hurts my eyes.

And she at the stove
contentedly stirring
his favorite soup for lunch,
blind to the feast
that was well underway
in his small tender spine,
frowned, put down her spoon,
laid her hand on the forehead
ablaze with a fire
her fierce love
would be
unable to quench.

DEPRESSION PIECE, WITH SWANS

by Richard Arnold

Never saw them—
March midnight, they were flying high.
But heard their ancient traveling song

Above the frozen earth
And tortured clouds,
Their rusty trumpets blowing.

Like migrated long-gone good thoughts
Returning through rifts
In my wintry skull.

I almost grinned.
Guess I'll get well
After all.
Winona Baker has published internationally, has won major haiku awards, and is the author of five books of poetry.

Kate Braid worked for 15 years as a carpenter. She now teaches Creative Writing at Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo.

Allan Brown’s poems have been published in many Canadian venues since 1962. He is the author of 15 books and chapbooks from various presses.

Leanne McIntosh is a member of the Vancouver Island Women Poets, and has appeared in numerous Canadian journals and anthologies.

Mildred Tremblay is a widely published Nanaimo poet. Her latest book is Old Woman Comes Out of Her Cave (Oolichan, 2001).

Joan van der Goes was a faithful companion and nurse to her husband as he suffered through Parkinson’s Disease. She is also a member of the Island Women Poets.

Richard Arnold survived major depression in 1997, and has since published essays and poetry about the experience.