Food for Thought: A Poetic Medicine Event

A list of poets and the poems they read for the November 20th event with ReImagine

Patrice Haan

A Waterfall for Elizabeth

I spent three days building a waterfall for Elizabeth
Elizabeth, grandmother, Jungian,
with her grand piano and white cats.

No matter how I tried, my efforts were fruitless.
The waterfall would not sing:
trickling water, still pond.

In desperation I took it apart,
piled the stones randomly, and then
began to reach out blindly -

this, now this -
my hands, my inner eye recognizing
partners in the dance.

And the falls
began to sing -
a watery laughter, a gurgling lilt:

"Fooled you, little architect!
Will you trust your heart?"
Instructions for Travel

Take only an old stick
one your hand knows,
one your legs trust.
Take your memories
but carry them lightly
ready to give away to the first dog you meet,
to a passing crow.
Sing your favourite song till the buttons fall off it.
Then sing it again.
Step as lightly as you can.
Watch for feathers and four-leaf clovers.
Watch for messages in the clouds.
Yes, take only an old stick
knowing, one morning
you’ll throw that away, too.

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Susan Cohen

Inspired by Between What I See and What I Say... (1976) by Octavio Paz, 1990 Nobel Laureate

What I keep silent

Melts in poetry’s warmth
My silent is an age-old iceberg

Very large below the surface

Most won’t dare to approach

For fear of freezing

But poetry floats in on its courage

Caressing the silent with warm truth

Before I know it

Silent is melting and moving

Into the next line of the poem

Poem #2

To live in this world

You need courage, curiosity, and creativity

If you want to just exist

Then such things will not be necessary

But if you want to

Love with all your heart

Explore to your last breath

Build something from all of your ideas

Then start

Using courage
There’s a thread you follow
that at times you forget is there for you
when you find the atoms of your being
disassemble, detonate, fly outside
the cracked vessel of your body
into the unknown terrors of your
worst imaginings.

When you pick up that thread again —
because it can never completely disappear
since it is the very essence of
your entanglement with every part
of the vast and mysterious web of life
you share a part it —

When you reel yourself back
with the same thread
that ancient Theseus held fast to
when he entered the dark labyrinth of his
worst imaginings,
you’ll possibly be holding a thread of spider’s silk,
something spun in darkness,
maybe your only true connection to a hidden truer light
that makes your darkness visible.

**Prompt: Mark Nepo’s “Labor Day”**

When it’s time for me to go
where you have gone before
will you be there for me
as I so attentively, so imperfectly tried to be for you?

When it’s time for me to go
will I see you standing over me
keeping ghost watch at my deathbed
or lying right there beside me
where I can again feel your soft sculpted buttock warm against my cold hand, grasping your heat until the end?

When it’s time for me to go
will I finally have realized even you can’t make my transition to the dark unknowable realms any easier than I once hoped
I was able to do for you?

When it’s time for me to go
will I at last allow myself
the certainty of knowing
that even through the lonely depths I’ll circle,
you’ll still be there as you have always been for me —
beautifully, imperfectly, always
forgiving me,
and always one or two steps ahead.

**Willemina Joseph-Loewenthal**

**Take note**

**3rd November 2020**

You must note the way the clouds gather just before it rains,
Or how, when Shadow Cat awakens, he stretches his body in little tiny stretches, from his shoulders to his tiny toes.

You must note, when in the morning, while it’s still dark, the birds refrain from song. Their little conversations saved for the rising of the sun.

You must note also, the scent of rain on the hot pavement. That spicy odour that always reminds me of Mamma’s cooking, somehow…..

You must note that I might roar like a lion and gnash my teeth, be as tempestuous as a Category 5 hurricane, but when I look at you there is love in my eyes.
Our Silent Companions

13th October 2020

We walk everywhere with our shadows.  
They are our constant companions.  
Dogging our every footstep, they wait, patiently,  
Like pet dogs, as we stop to greet life’s new heights  
Or give us comforting nudges when we descend into the depths;  
Mutely offering their silent sympathy.

Sometimes we carry them.  
Like small children who grow heavy with age,  
So do our shadows.  
Mine is quite heavy now.  
The poor thing has soaked up so much of my life  
That she is becoming quite sodden.  
She cannot wait for the day to come  
When I can wring her out.

Always a Joy

17th November 2020

A joy appeared. A small bundle wrapped in the arms of the midwife.  
Her face crumpled up into her first yell of protest.  
Where was this place? This was not what she knew.  
The light, the unfamiliar sounds? All were hostile.  
Her pink mouth opened, and a shriek of regret left her,  
Surprising in its strength.
She screwed up her face and drew in her lungs preparing for another wail.
She stamped her infant feet in rage.
Her fists bunched – preparing for combat?
I cooed at her.
Miraculously, immediately, she beamed,
A windy beam, yes,
As she peered at me uncertainly.
What a strange little being!
A joy she was to behold.
A joy she became.
Always a joy to me.
My girl.

Nina Lewis

Prompt: Elements – Marilyn Robinson/ To know the Spirit

To Know
30th October 2020

To know the spirit
is to live with trust,
to be held, always.

To know the spirit
is to be gifted
by a strength beyond anything human.

Is to believe that all things will work out, somehow.

To feel pain and know the wounding is a darker side of light.

To know the spirit is to walk in beauty, a for every season of your soul.

To know the spirit is to witness an umbilical connection made from stars.

To know the spirit is to dance steps you’ve never been taught.

To know the spirit is to see the full moon of yourself.

Prompt: The Caged Bird – Maya Angelou/ The Free Bird/
Free Bird
20th October 2020

The free bird has the whole sky
to define as its own,
dreams exist beyond wingspan.

It carries the prayers of the unsung
between its feathers,
lets them fall where it nests.

It takes your pain
high into the trees.
Its morning song tells us of this
before we are alert enough
to really listen.

The free bird feeds truth back
into the earth
and lifts, those of us
born without wings,
so we too, can feel the air.

Prompt: Absolute – Jacqueline Woodson /Who could try to tell me...

Defining the Rules
14th August 2020
Who could try to tell me…
how to dress, what to wear
and how to do my hair?

Everyone.

Everyone did,
but I was younger,
didn't listen.

This uniformed body
was expressing,
the crazier the hairstyle
the better.
Some mad bird's nest
Easter bonnet parade
eccentric.

I'd braid and loop,
French plait and curl.

After I did,
they rewrote the rulebook.

Stated under School Uniform:
*Girls with long hair should wear plain hairstyles – plaits, buns or pigtails, hair accessories should be plain or match the school colours (red and blue).*
That weekend
I visited the Haberdashery,
mum bought ribbon
by the foot,
blue, white and red.

Chaya Gusfield

You Can’t Bring Back Dead

You can’t bring back the dead, but you can live with them inside your feet and your hands, guiding your cooking, your dreaming, your words. Singing melodies of comfort, so sweetly.

You can say their names out loud. Name your children after them, make movies about them and wear their socks or pajamas. Or a necklace made of jade, bought by them on a trip to Japan.

You can’t bring back the dead, but you can ponder your regrets, write them I’m sorry letters, pray for forgiveness, and know that you might be one of those people that waited too long. Just maybe.

You can put together intricate photo collages of them in all their ages and glory, when they were sleeping, when they were posing, hoping to smell them again, or sit in their lap.

You can see them suddenly walking down the street, same gait, same clothes, same bad haircut.

You can hear their voice calling to someone.
You can’t bring back the dead, but you can look into the eyes of your mentor and know that your dead sister is looking back you through her eyes, saying, “yes, it’s me. You get another chance. Don’t be afraid”.

You can eat that chopped liver as if mom is in the room saying, “have some more, it’s delicious”.

You can tend to your plants as if her arms are your arms and your intuition is really hers.

You can’t bring them back, but you can learn their Torah, passed down from generation to generation.

You can’t bring back the dead, but you can mourn their deaths at the hands of the State. Cry out until someone listens, or just keeping crying out.

You can write their names on your sidewalks, in the synagogue, in your poetry. Never forget those who died during the great pandemic, or at the hands of white supremacist violence.

Why has the press stopped telling stories about those who died and are still dying?

You can’t bring them back but you can remember their lives. Each individual life.

You can’t bring them back but you can know that you will join them someday and others will not be able to bring you back, no matter how much they howl, or plead, or bargain.

*You can’t bring me back when I am called to the other side, but maybe someone will write a poem in my memory.*

**Daniel Raskin**

**Do I Have the Right**
Do I have the right? What kind of right?
It's not in the Constitution.
How about a new amendment?
The right to mourn what's inevitable,
The right to complain, a little or a lot
About the losses of aging.
You say no. It's inevitable.

A new procedure, a new pill.
I'll take my blood pressure at home.
Surely it will be lower than this
White coat, in-office reading.

What are the side effects,
What's the trade-off?
I could once walk 15,18 miles in a day.
No pill will give me back that.
Please sedate me well when
You put the probe down my gullet.

November 10, 2020

Lynn Bravewomon
What May You Be

October 13, 2020

Dearest Annie, what may you be thinking as you lay dying?

Behind your angry reprimanding words
   Of “not one more morning!”
Behind your demanding anxiety ridden words
   Of “don’t let go of my hand!”
Behind your involuntarily obsessive words
   Of “move that to the left- No- not that far!”
Behind your fearful words,
   Of “no, no, no...”
As you straddle two worlds the pulse words of your heart chime,
   marking your truth and your vanishing time.
   I honor your knowing Leo spirit.

Behind your angry words, I know the pulse words of your heart, I hear...
   “I wish I had more healthy in-my-stride-time”
       (I whispered, be free, we will live on.)
Behind your anxious words, I know the pulse words of your heart, I hear...
   “I love you Lynn, Sam, and Josh”
       (I whispered, be free, we will love you forever)
Behind your obsessive words, I know the pulse words of your heart, I hear...
   “It is hard to let this solid world go.”
       (I whispered, be free, go on your way with peace in your heart)
Behind what you have been meaning as you lay dying,
   I know the pulse words of your heart,
I whisper, “I see you, I hear you, I feel you, I release you.”

On loss, the place I wrote my first grief
August 2020

The place I wrote my first grief poem spoke to me.
... dark, silent and loud.

She came to me after a keening and laid open the pathway of poetry- the first night after Annie died.
The new moon called through to me,
A molten swirling down through crystal still airspace
Shining just a whisper of courage into the terrain of my retching soul.

She then, with a hint of a hummingbird’s heart,
offered the tenderest of possibility-
       a barely flickering potential .... yet there, undeniably.
Anchored to earth and suspended by the strength of moon’s magnetized hold,
My throaty words, hearty words, poured forth,
       more torrentially, furiously, and demandingly, than tender.

In the place where I wrote my first poem of loss,
When the new moon called out
Unknown words told a timeless story of loss in their rhythmic and steadying pulse.

Outward and upward through star strewn spaciousness,
the pure new moon drank in these words, illuminated them,
and shined them out to the universe.
... and then returned them to this, my solo soul.
Ohhhh... I beseeched you, universe, for just one moment of peace.
and new moon heeded this call.
Ah Grief

September-October 2020

Ah grief... you've lived so long perched on my shoulder,
whisper-screaming into my ears.
   For decades, I have cut my teeth on rejection of you.
   I have pushed you down the stairs and fought you to the ground.
   I have on you a mask of traitor... of batterer.
Grief, I made you enemy and I misunderstood- so I surrender.

Ah grief... your staying power sits you now as my consort,
   As familiar and estranged as mother earth and universe to humanity.
   I edge towards and in to you.
   You are tormentingly attractive, seductively sacred, salty,
   and, it seems,... a gift with an expiration date,
   (though many argue with me, it’s not so).

Ah grief... not friend,
   a demanding guide for a solo tour, others try but cannot join.
This time I breathe in my heartbeat and your lifeline,
I invite you down from your perch,
   side by side,
   eye to eye,
   I take you on,
   I take you in,
You own my heart now for a while,
    I choose, diving into this dark beauty of mourning.
    I trust, waiting the delivery of ripe memories you promise in the rightness of your time.

Candace Coston

Against Winter
    I remember myself in the spring
        Of my youth.
        Curious and determined.
        You hand clasped in mine.
        The world new in my eyes.
        The world black and white
        With muted sound to you.

    I remember myself in the summer
        Of my adolescence.
        Defiant and liberated.
        Convinced I could make nature bow to me.

        And you—
        Your hair white and shorter.
        Furrowed brow now wrinkled
        Green veins like ivy under thin skin.

        My hand tightly holding yours.
        I hold you to me against winter
But my hold too weak—
My rage not enough
To fight against death.
My only battle
And I crumble in defeat.

I Belong There

In the darkened corner
Behind the dusty bookcase
Filled with books of Homer, Socrates, and Plato.
Away from the pathos and ethos
They espoused.
Far from the bright, shining world—
With its clear definitions of wrong and right.
I belong there
In the recesses.
The crevices.
Caverns.
The unseen thing drying up.
Unfed.
Undernourished.
Life in death.
Death in life.
I belong there.
Because I am the terrible thing—
Known as truth.

**Jasmin Walter**

**Based on: Courage by Jan Zwicky from The Long Walk**

What will you do?

What will you do?
Now, that you have tasted the scent of salt in the wind?
It has brought to you –
Memories that make you belly soften and your pen fly over white paper.
This is where you are meant to be.
You can see the hills rolling behind your closed eyes.
All that ever touched your heart comes by for a visit.
Minutes, when you feel the sun turn golden and your skin soften as clouds.
You want much but so little makes you happy.
Go for the closed eyes, the smile to the morning sun and the jolly talks with the trees.

**Based on: The Way it Is by William Stafford**

As people keep asking
Keep smiling.
Don’t give in to that sinking feeling,
as they haven’t sent a danger,
they have only asked a question.
They just wonder –
And even though you wonder too,
you leave room for not knowing.
They want to make sense of your life –
And so do you.
They want to find you sitting in that room at that time and know you’re there.
It’s just not that easy.
Instead, you are floating in the dreamy morning sky, high above their heads.
And you keep smiling.
And they keep asking.

**Based on: The Way it Is by William Stafford**

**Your thread**
Do you want to pretend it is not there? Like a far-away island?
Pretend you do not know exactly how the waves talk, as they roll in and out in the morning?
And the way they curl up like little animals on their way to the shore?
Pretend you have never tasted the sweet fruit, that fall in front of your feet, wrapped as gifts from nature.
Well, you know what I mean,
You know your paradise and don’t pretend, that you have lost the map to find it.
It is written all over your face and engrained in your smile.
Pack your bag, take a step and a breath and the wind will take you there.

**Eric Milliren**

**Prompt: Seed of re-beginning**

In our decades of struggle to maintain your health
we established a pattern of cherishing each moment,
each day that came along.
In the end we had trunks full of cherished moments,
untold riches few could see.
In that living in the moment we set the stage for
our seed of re-beginning.
We are different now,
you are energy floating in the cosmos
and I am here
stuck in the soil of my remaking.

**Prompt: Free bird**

The bird set free and off to flight
in the middle of the night.
Your destination unknown to us
is scheduled on your magic bus.
Tripping across the universe
going forward not in reverse.
Travel that’s unstoppable
seems strange to us, not even probable.
A perfect trip completed so
as all of us must someday go.

**Prompt: Now you are a part of me**

Now you are a part of me.
Your funny mannerisms, your obsessive compulsive inclination,
your silliness, your big heart
your compassion, your dedication to community.
All of it, all of you has filled out
the change of address card for the move
to the not quite tangible space of now.
In a world without you.
how can I forward your mail?
You must cease to be afraid
or your life will stay small and trembling
and what you have to give
will shrivel and finally be
as if it never was.
To truly live,
to live your part that the mystery needs
to grow, change, heal our world,
you must allow your heart to expand
to its own definition of courage.
You must hold hands with your trembling child
and walk together with every hand
every size and shape and color
every hand of our one human race
walk together with
every living thing that reaches out to be held
walk together
towards the fresh high place
walk together to
where we all belong
and where the light there
makes us all see
and all be bravely known.

The Summer
August 2020

Even now
after so many circles around the sun
this summer feels like
my very first.
The greens never greener
and so many shades.
Un-nameable, uncountable.
My legs taking me
high into the Alpine forest
life growing out of hard solid granite millions of years old
the impossibly blue sky
the exquisite and delicate wild and fleeting offerings
of equally impossible purples, pinks, sun yellows
the poignantly short-lived brilliantly
petaled painted flowers
and this fresh new feeling in my heart
crystal clear
and empty
of all
but this

Redwing Keyssar

In the Beginning
I love poetry

I love the way words
filter through thin white curtains
that are not hung
to hide the light
but allow shadows
or silhouettes
to be seen

I love the way words
flow like a choppy river
not that water itself is choppy
except in certain circumstances
like when it encounters serpentine rocks
set in its way
for centuries
or massive oak trees
who spent their lives attached
to a slowly eroding
steep hillside
and then fell silently
in a winter storm
and rested
lying across the waters
with dark green moss
cressing the bruised bark
of their strong trunks

I love the way words
open my heart
bypassing my mind
like a road on a dark windy night
allows you to take a wrong turn
and for a moment
you feel you are lost
but then
you hear
the hooting of an owl
and look up
and catch a glimpse
of moonlight
wafting her message
through the patchwork
of black leaves
illumined
just for a moment.

Let me use my love
my words
my moments of open heart,
mind, soul
to serve
this sad world

where so many tongues
do not utter truth
where love
of words
of rivers
of trees
of fire, in its gift
of heat and light
even
love
of human beings
does not seem
to be enough.

How do we move mountains
and re-direct
the River of Time?

Or are we to drink deeply
of this great intoxicating Sadness
and become delirious
so that we may glimpse
a new
wider, wilder
darker, deeper
bolder, brighter
universe
that will begin again

with a word?
Coke Tani

Bereavement
(ed. 11.10.20)

In my mom’s mourning, her mending is neuromuscular.
It is light of mind over tug of bone,
the braiding of remnant over ribbon.

Her bereavement is born
in his last exhalation.
It is in her adrenal No—her ribcage through her mouth,
an unbounded hole in the night.

It is in her deep cells joining figure with shadow,
the drift of her shoulders to the door at suppertime
heart rallying
lips parting to ask
how was your day?
It is instead seeing my then-husband walk in,
a close-enough place to land.

It is her right wrist flipping pearls of gohan
rice cooker to porcelain chawan
her grasp on the ivory shamoji a comfort—
scoop, flip
scoop, flip.
It is her legs carrying her trunk and dreaming branches
serving the *chawan* to the candlelit portrait
placing his favorite *o-hashī* across the thin rim of the unheld bowl,
napkin to the left
teacup to the right.

It is her five-foot body on the ride side of their bed
rolling left nightly at 3am
right hand skating between sheets
to massage malignant metastases.
It is discovering none there.

It is rising with a persistent twinge
that wants to make its home in her body.
It is the drawing back of tissue memory
the teething insistence of the new.

**Counted**

Do not be afraid.
Someone said that this is stated
365 times in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scriptures, combined.

First, I want to know about the person who counted these.
Second, it can’t escape me
how much Fear must have been the pervading state,
and 365 times that must surely equal trauma.

Someone else said that trauma happens
when something occurs that is
too fast
too much
or too soon.

This seems to account for natural disasters.

But what about the unnatural ones?
8 minutes and 46 seconds?
Say. Their. Names.

While there is still an illusion of time
enter it
your cells into its fibers
your heart’s hand discovering willingness in another’s,
undoing the fear-filled threads of lies
one filament at a time.

**Corona Crown Down**

I didn’t realize I’d been under a lead blanket until the votes were counted, and counted.
I peeled back the heavy corner and this is what I found—
A throbbing, as if the earth herself had a heart into which all the deceased had fallen
at the speed beyond names, though to Her none were nameless.
It was as if I knew each person, and each of their survivors too;
as if the lead blanket gathered all of us beneath its weight
little planets quaking in the dark
an intimacy quickening between us,
murmurs of the unexpected,
our own throbblings too.
And so.
And so I count my hopes.

Ah Grief II

*inspired by Denise Levertov’s “Talking to Grief”*

Ah, grief.
You’ve been living under my porch.
Waiting so patiently in the open shade
amongst the pots and soil and mulch.

I am sorry to be so seedless.
I am sorry to be so breathless.

Life has been falling through my fingertips
when all I want to do is
twirl and raise my hands,
open my mouth to the sky.

Speak to me in the space between porch and pillow
in the spaces around the night stars
in You, the ground beneath my feet
that I have yet to bless.

**Poems Read by Redwing**
These Days
By Charles Olson

whatever you have to say, leave
the roots on, let them
dangle

And the dirt

Just to make clear
where they come from

Late Fragment
By Raymond Carver

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.