The Heart Broken Open

Ronald Pies
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by Ronald Pies
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Table of Contents

Sorrow’s Body

Return to Brooklyn … 3
Villanelle for a Dying Smoker … 5
The Heart Broken Open … 6
Picking Flowers … 8
The Golden Years … 10
After Chemo … 12

Resurgence

Requiem for Bees … 17
Note to a Godless Jew … 18
The Lilac Borer … 19
Summer’s Lease … 20
Winter Moths … 21
Utah Juniper … 23
Sorrow’s Body
Grandma, can you see
     Cropsy Avenue
from Miami General’s ICU?
     Or smell the sear
of Nathan’s hots, back
     when Coney Island
was safe,
     and your accent thick
as hot pastrami?

Those years at Wellesley,
     those Kennebunk summers—
they honed your tongue
     to a blue-blood blade.
But storms of emboli came
     and every squall
blanched the marrow
     of your brain.
The more we lost
     of you,
the more your speech
     reclaimed
those Brooklyn vowels.
    “I want some *caw*fee,”
you whisper.
I hold your hand
and hear
the rattled heave
of your lungs.
Grandma, can you smell
the sear
of Nathan’s hots
as you weave your way
back to Brooklyn?
Villanelle for a Dying Smoker

Your neck pulsed, your nostrils flared, you couldn’t catch your breath; every muscle fought for air.

Who wouldn’t be scared with lungs so full of death? Your neck pulsed, your nostrils flared.

The sound was deadened everywhere I listened to your chest: every muscle fought for air.

Your mouth formed some kind of prayer: Dear Lord, forgive the cigs and crystal meth. Your neck pulsed, your nostrils flared.

Why should I or anyone care for a life so willfully bereft? Every muscle fought for air.

Your eyes had no more light to spare. My right hand took your left. Your neck pulsed, your nostrils flared. Every muscle fought for air.
The Heart Broken Open

Doppler Echocardiogram, Male veteran, Age 67, results:

It’s not the image of your heart  
you’ve had since boyhood,  
when you climbed heaven-high  
in those golden aspens—  
just cold echoes  
of your mortal core.

You lie shivering in a fetal curl  
while a chirpy technician  
your granddaughter’s age  
slides a cold wand across your chest.  
She says, “You’ll hear a whoosh  
with every heartbeat.”

You want to tell her of Khe Sanh  
and what the heart’s really made of.  
You want to tell her  
that in each rush of blood,  
you hear the sound of a wounded fox  
in famished winter.
You want to tell her of all that is to come, but her eyes—
her eyes are so painfully blue, and so young.
Picking Flowers

Your refrigerator door
    is a crazy quilt
of death and life:
    a yellowed form
from the state
    reads, “Do Not Resuscitate”;
dog-eared photos
    show you beaming
as mother and wife.
    Those instructions
I sent you
    for stopping nosebleeds—
sit up, lean forward,
compress—
sit right beside
your grandson’s
    crayon sketch:
dressed
    in your Julia Child apron,
Mother,
    you are ever
the reigning spirit
    of this house.
Today, you wheel yourself
into the kitchen,
pause before the fridge
and sigh.
You nudge
that Monet magnet
to the right.
  The “DNR”
disappears
  beneath a blue sky
and a field
  of wild poppies.
The Golden Years

We are in Sy Rothman’s
“Golden Years” shop
in Boca Raton,
buying a transfer handle
for your father’s bed.
A cardboard cut-out
of a smiling old gent—
Rothman himself, perhaps?—
beckons us
to endless rows
of incontinence pads
and compression hose;
to easy-rise toilet seats,
comfort cushions,
and toe-spreaders
for bunioned feet.
At the lift-chair display,
someone’s Uncle Gus
glides up and down,
up and down.

One glimpse of the abyss
is enough for us.
We hustle back
to your father’s flat
and unpack
    the clunky box.
Your father smiles
    from the good side
of his mouth,
    and says,
“Just like Christmas.”
After Chemo

Come you home now, love:
   Come you home
to bless our bed.
   Grace me
with the scent
   of your jasmined hair
and leave behind
   the bare stench
of chemistry.
   Come you home,
and let me
   pamper you
with strawberries.
   Leave behind
harsh latex
   and burning needles:
sweeten your tongue
   with coriander.
Come you home,
   and be lovely
in your battered bones,
   and let the doctors
not singe again
   your sullen marrow.
Come now, love,
and warm our bed,
and be
  the living border
against
  the quickening dead.
Come home now
  and let me rub you
with oil
  of sandalwood.
Resurgence
I am sorry, Lord, for killing the bees: six plump and buzzing drones, trapped against the pane of our guest-room window.

What choice did I have? It was the bees or me.

Opening the window would have let compatriots in, lofted from the nest in our rotted eaves—or left me bitten, at best.

I am sorry, Lord, for slaying creatures who wanted only to make honey.
In your email
you call yourself
“a godless Jew”—
casually,
like brushing off a hair.

I reply
that if they come for us again,
they will march us all side by side
to the Zyklon-B:
the rabbi whose eyes dance with the Almighty;
me, with my dim and flickering prayers;
and you—
the godless Jew.
The Lilac Borer

The lilac borer
does its work
in the lush growth
of our fifty-year-old
bush:
  efficient underminer
of petal, branch
  and flesh.
The lilac borer
plies
its tunneling death
  as just
another way
  of life—
as if to say
to April
and us
  that worms
and blossoms
  come and go,
as all things must.
Summer’s Lease

On a jewel-bright day
in deep July,
we sit, father and daughter,
by Fisher’s Pond,
your laughter meeting
the immaculate sun.
Suddenly,
I see the fins
of a gutted perch
near your feet,
wrapped in a whorl
of last spring’s catkins.
Child: I want to keep you
from fetid flesh,
warn you
of winter’s winding sheet
and dappled summer’s lies.
But as I start to speak,
you stop my mouth
with eyes
of wild azure.
Winter Moths

In late November,
we are wrapping
our Norway maple
in clear plastic.
The winter moths
have just begun
to climb the trunk,
mating in a flutter
of pheromones.
In Spring, their eggs
will hatch,
and famished larvae
will devour
the maple’s leaves.

We have slathered
a lethal honey
called “Tanglefoot”
all around the trunk,
to mire the moths
before they maim
the tree.
Then suddenly,
we see
a flightless female
struggling
in her tangled doom.
We turn away,
unwilling to watch
how death
makes room
for the life
of our tree.
Utah Juniper

We hiked today
through Utah’s canyons,
deaf to all
but scurrying squirrels
and the crunch
of desert soil.
Startled
by the tortured trunk
of a Utah Juniper,
we stopped to touch
the stiff, grey fibers—
splayed, as if
by some blast
within.

Yet out
of the dun wood
sprang green leaf
and stone-hard berry,
where death
and life
in the brooding tree
had married.
We learned
   how the juniper
choke off water
   to its own branches,
and so survives
   the desert drought.
The tree’s core thrives;
   The inessential limbs
die out.

And you and I
   these thirty years
might have nourished
   a hundred loves,
a hundred lives—
   who knows
what stony fruit
   would have flourished?
Instead,
   we took our chances
with water
   spread
to love’s essential
   branches.
Biography

Ronald Pies MD is a physician and writer on the faculty of SUNY Upstate Medical University and Tufts University School of Medicine. He is the author of a collection of poems (Creeping Thyme/Brandylane), a short story collection (Ziprin’s Ghost/Harvard Book Store), and Becoming a Mensch (Hamilton Books), among other works of poetry, fiction, and philosophy.