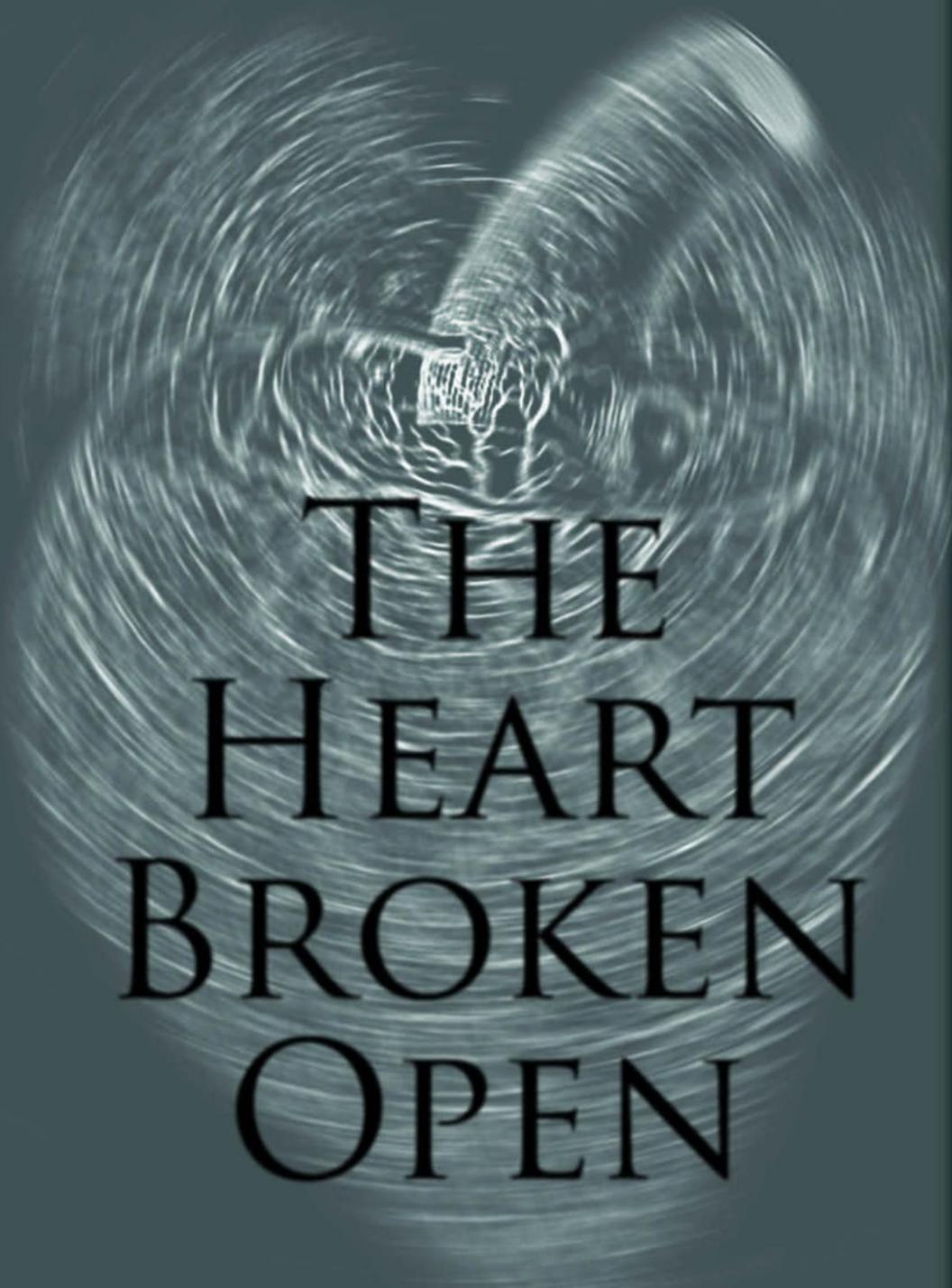


RONALD PIES



THE
HEART
BROKEN
OPEN

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The Heart Broken Open

Ronald Pies



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by RONALD PIES

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Sorrow's Body

Return to Brooklyn

Grandma, can you see
 Crosby 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 *cawfee*,"
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

Requiem for Bees

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.

Note To A Godless Jew

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
chokes 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.

