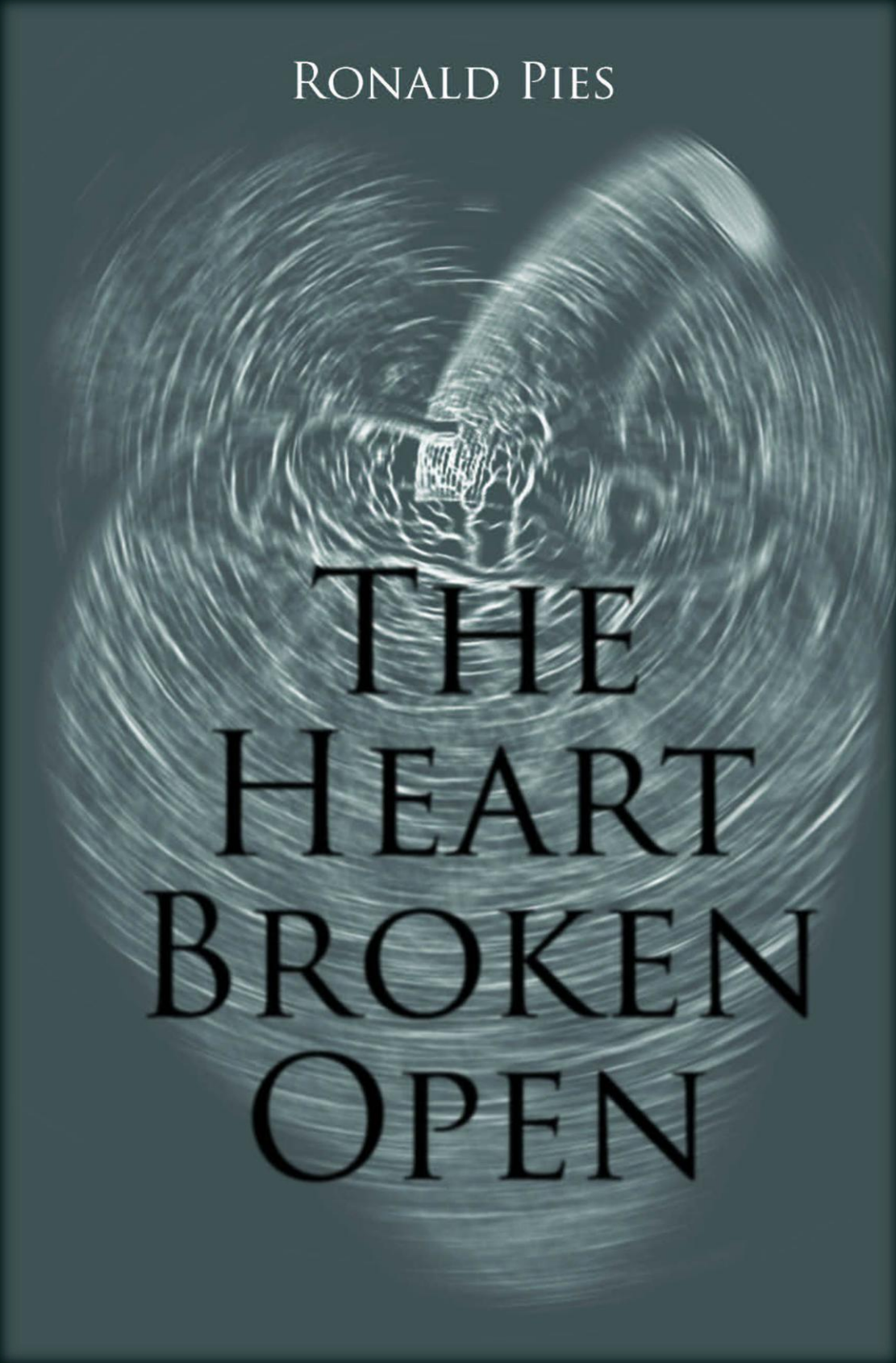


RONALD PIES



THE  
HEART  
BROKEN  
OPEN

Cover art: Catherine Duffy

# The Heart Broken Open

Ronald Pies



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ISBN: 978-1-927593-02-8

THE  
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*by* RONALD PIES

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## *Acknowledgments*

These poems have appeared previously, sometimes in slightly modified form, in the following journals or anthologies:

*The Great American Poetry Show*, edited by Larry Ziman (TGAPS); *Rough Places Plain*, edited by M. Wiznansky, (Salt Marsh Pottery Press); the *Connecticut River Review*; *Poetica*; and the *Rockhurst Review*.

Special thanks to Charlene Breedlove and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) for permission to reprint the poems indicated below:

The Heart Broken Open, JAMA, 2011; Pies 305 (7): 651

Villanelle for a Dying Smoker, JAMA. 2008; 300(22): 2585.

After Chemo, JAMA. 2007; 297(18): 1959.

Picking Flowers, JAMA. 2007; 297(2): 136.

The Golden Years, JAMA. 2005; 294(9): 1006.

Return to Brooklyn (poem) JAMA, 2004; 292(17): 2054.





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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.











