Telling Our Stories
Through Word And Image
Patients, Loved Ones, And Staff
Present Their Original Work

2015 Anthology
Welcome to the 2015 *Telling Our Stories through Word and Image* anthology, which includes poems, songs, and stories written by patients, loved ones, and our clinical staff. These writings were collected and arranged by the staff of Patient and Family Support Services at Norris Cotton Cancer Center. Selections of these works were read aloud by the authors and other readers at our *Telling Our Stories through Word and Image* event held on October 27th. We hope you will take the time to find a quiet place with a warm beverage to enjoy the entire anthology of original writing and the images of visual art and music-making interspersed in these pages. Thank you for honoring our artists with your attention. To have one’s artistic expression witnessed, listened to, or seen by others is a rare and profound gift.

Poems, visual art-making, story-telling, writing a song, and playing an instrument are all outward expressions of a deep creative urge shared by all of us. Facing one’s own cancer diagnosis or supporting a loved one who is suffering with disease is a life-altering experience. Patients and family members have reported that finding a creative language of expression through words, colors, sounds, or movement can be profoundly healing and rejuvenating to one’s body and spirit, no matter one’s life span.

The Creative Arts Program at Norris Cotton Cancer Center offers group classes and one-on-one visits with cancer patients and/or their loved ones in both outpatient and inpatient settings. Visual artists, writers/storytellers and a therapeutic harpist are onsite to serve patients each week. Because there is never a charge to patients for our services, the Creative Arts Program has relied on the support of philanthropy. We thank the cancer center administration, the Friends of Norris Cotton Cancer Center, and the corporate and individual donors who make possible a patient arts program through which so many with a stressful diagnosis can benefit.

We are grateful to D-H Arts and to the Palliative Care Service for their input of resources and thoughtful support that broadens the reach of our program. Finally, we acknowledge the creative arts staff and volunteers who work with dedication to bring possibility, relaxation, inspiration, and healing to our patients and their family members, one person at a time through their artful interactions: Marv Klassen-Landis, Margaret Stephens, Chris Orcutt Henderson, Laura Foley, Debra Sabalewski, and Kit Farnsworth.

With Gratitude,

Deb Steele
Manager, Patient and Family Support Services
Norris Cotton Cancer Center
October 27, 2015
The Friends (Quakers) have an expression that goes back to the early days: “It speaks to my condition.” Again and again, the creations of patients, their supporters or medical staff speak to my condition, touch my heart, make me pause and think and see things in a new way. And, as I meet people here at Norris Cotton Cancer Center and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center and speak with them, often a particular poem or story comes to mind that I feel will “speak to their condition.” What a gift it is to be able to reach into my backpack and offer the anthology to someone and point out a line that seemed to have been written just for them.

Thank you to all who participate and support our arts programs – you’ll never know how many people you touch.

Marv Klassen-Landis
Creative Writing Specialist

NOTE: The individual writers and artists hold the copyrights for their own work in this anthology.
A painting by past participant Jes Gebard
5 – CENTS A RIDE
Esther Taylor Barber

Across from our house in Canton, New York, was a long walk leading up the hill to the central part of the St. Lawrence University campus. The walk cut diagonally across the hill and made a path from the campus at the top to the main intersection to town at the bottom of the hill.

It was a wonderful hill for roller skating (boy, how you gained speed on the way down and prayed that there would be no cars at the bottom!).

The pole holding the street sign was slightly off angle and if you were determined to steer a straight path, your speed made it necessary to jump the curb and wheel around in a circle. This maneuver made braking impossibly dangerous. (I never saw anyone get seriously injured but there were many skinned knees. Eventually some of the kids became pretty good fliers).

Sometimes the college students asked to ride our wagons or bikes. And after a snowstorm, the co-eds’ saddle shoes, while safe on the hill top, going down that hill was quite impossible for them – especially when they were carrying books.

We kids watched them slip and slide a bit and then we asked if they’d like to ride our sleds down the hill for 5-cents a ride. No one said “no”. We kids loaded our sleds and then raced down the hill to reclaim our sleds. It was tricky at first but the full fist of coins in our mittens made it worthwhile.

And for as long as we lived in Canton and after each storm, the co-eds waited at the top of the hill for the “sled express” – and we kids were there waiting to fill our mittens with coins.
I LOOK INTO THE DARK
Esther Taylor Barber

I look into the dark; there is nothing to see.
My feet are stuck on the ground – and they won’t move.
I put out my hand and touch – nothing.
I turn around but there is nowhere to go.
I turn and slide my foot along the ground –
The ground is strong and gentle.
I put the other foot forward – again the ground is even and smooth.
I look hard at the dark in front of me.
What awaits me?
I see a small light like a star – it is far away.
I take another step forward.
The light is brighter.
My courage is growing.
Another step – the light grows to fill the place.
One more step.
– I am amazed!

TANGLED YARN
Esther Taylor Barber

Let go
Take no prisoners.

Like strings of tangled yarn
twisted on the spindle
Many colored knots
are wound around themselves.

Follow the strands
pick the tangles apart.
Untie the knots
let the yarn untwist.

Wind it up in a neat ball
Start anew.
AFTERNOON DREAM
Esther Taylor Barber

The water gurgles happily as it dances over the stones –
downward it flows and along to other places.
If I could be small and float along with the stream
Where might I go?

I could bump over the stones and jump down the falls.
I would cup the water in my hands and taste
its bitter woodsy flavor with my tongue.
I would slide along down – over a little waterfall,
catch a drifting leaf and set
it on my path.
I float along with the stream letting the current carry me along.

The sky is blue and cloudless.
The sun plays hide and seek in the treetops.

An eagle is soaring leisurely above, scanning the ground
for any little tasty morsel.

Suddenly a little wind rises and causes ripples in the water.
The air is chilled.
Several dark clouds appear.
Is it going to rain and spoil my journey?
More dark clouds appear.
The wind blows more insistently.
I rise out of the water and climb up the bank,
as the first raindrops begin to fall.
The wind rises, I gather my things and hurry home.

There is a smile on my face – it was a lovely afternoon.
MR. BUG
Esther Taylor Barber

I hear you Mr. Bug.
You buzz around this room
    Bumping off one window – then another.

You buzz around the cat, just missing her face.
You are very daring! She will bite you if she catches you.
(“She will NEVER catch me,” you boast).

You sit down on the arm of my chair.
I can see you are a beautiful golden dragon (but not a dragon fly).
Where did you come from Mr. Dragon?
Are you a handsome Prince transformed by a wicked witch?

Did you hatch outdoors in the flower garden?
Are you hungry? Where’s your family? Or are you a solo act?
What food do you eat?

I think you are not welcome in here. You frighten our kitty.
You chase her until she scrambles under the bed to hide from you.
I fear that you may sting us.

When I open the door, you must leave!

Shoo! Mr. Bug.
MONEY
Esther Taylor Barber

Money – its vulgar Grandma says.
People spend too much time thinking about it when they could be doing productive things.

Okay, Grandma, what should we think about now?
Oh, well, we should count our blessings.
What blessings, Grandma?
Oh, you know, the house Grandpa built that we live in,
that keeps us warm, safe from storms.
It gives us a place where the family
can gather to renew our friendship,
meet any newcomers (like babies and brides).
Kids get to play all the old games like “Kick the Can,”
and we eat.

Mother and Aunts and Grandma have cooked for weeks.
Grandpa has the men to help get the last hay into the mow
and they can tinker with the old pickup.

After dinner we sing and Grandma plays the piano.
Then we all go to the cellar and Grandma gives each child his own sweet
jar of jam to take home for breakfast toast.
No one goes home empty handed.

With sleepy heads the kids pile into the cars and waving goodbyes,
we head home.

Ahh – money could never buy this day.
HAPPINESS
Esther Taylor Barber

It is slippery and sliding
You think you know it but then the clowns decide you are their toy.
When you turn from them, you find your friends – but they are so busy.
There have been good times when I would laugh and dance.
We held hands and danced to the music.
Now we two dance to the tunes.
There is much love and caring.
But the clown peeks around the doorway and spoils the music.
The empty space outside the door is uncomfortable.
What is out there? Who is out there?
They say there’s a beautiful place to go.
I must believe them – but it’s hard to know.

I HEAR YOUR WHISTLE
Esther Taylor Barber

I hear your whistle from the deep fjord
I walk to the shore and there you are in your beauty
You are brave and so handsome.

This fjord is dangerous… there is only one doorway.
You look at me with one eye.
I turn my head and look back with one eye.
You slap the water with a flipper.
I clap my hands not nearly as loudly.
You dive and are gone – but not for long.
With a tremendous splash you surface high above the sea.
You are laughing at me.
I clap my hands and your big face comes closer to take a look.
What do I see in those deep eyes?
We each have stories to tell but they won’t be told.

We just know that for a very brief moment and in a mysterious way,
our lives were touched by the great unknown.
EVENING STAR
Esther Taylor Barber

You are first up there
Looking down at me
Shining peace into my soul.

You are there even when I can’t see you
Can you see me from so far away?
Why do I find it comforting that you are there?
Your light takes a long time to get to me.
Did you know me before I saw you?

I feel protected in your light.
You calm my fears.
I feel joy in your light.
There is love.
I reach my hand out to you
There is peace.
I smile at you
I feel calm.
There is no worry or concern about past or future
I look to the joy of friendships
the love of my family
They call me – there is love.
They leave their homes to visit me – there is love.
They make sure I’m safe – there is love.
You see all this, O Evening Star,
And my heart sings a grateful song.
REFLECTIONS ON HAVING BREAST CANCER
Deb Beaupre

I have learned a few things from having had cancer and also from having been touched by it as well.

Philosophy Shift
The phrase “Life is too short” has a new emphasis for me. I balance everything up against cancer and then who cares what the other thing is; nothing much fazes me. All the stupid stuff that used to annoy me or freak me out pales in comparison except stuff with my kids... and, I worry about money. So mostly, people. I no longer waste time on dumb people or annoying people, etc. However, sometimes you have to so I have mastered the I have ‘checked out’ face. They talk and I am not listening.

Lingering Fear
I still am able to panic that it will get me. Cancer is a motherf**** that way, excuse the strong language. It is a horrible thing, worse than racism, which, as a black woman, I thought was the worst. I do not feel that I have dodged a bullet, won the battle, whatever the metaphor. I’m just waiting. I do not skip into each new day, I kinda peek out the door. Rotten legacy.

Being Judged
There are levels of sorrow people feel for you when they learn you have cancer based on their perception of your collusion in your demise. I am overweight and was when I got cancer. I live in a place where everyone has a black dog and runs triathlons, so... I do not fit in. I love hot dogs and Twinkies and a pine nut has never crossed my lips. It is always too hot for me to think about doing anything for the Prouty and under no circumstances does biking lots of miles appeal to me. So when I told people I had cancer, there was this very quick very subtle flash in the eyes that told me they were judging me. I know this is true because people always sound so surprised when active healthy people get cancer.
Nota Bene

Having cancer also gave me the opportunity to observe my fellow humans divide into three categories: Plaguers, Researchers and The Sick Friend. Remember when AIDS first came out and people were convinced they could catch it from sitting on a bus near someone who had it? I had people avoiding me like that or, like the plague. It was alarming how fast they worked to get away from me. It was me/death that was threatening.

‘Researchers’ were those souls who told me about this new study they’d heard of involving milk from goats in the Bering Strait and wheat germ and did I want them to get some for me? Or had I heard about drinking six cups of coffee a day made from the bark of trees watered by virgin boys…you get the idea. I wanted to tell the Researchers, “Too late, but thanks.”

The Sick Friend group was the worst. This was tricky for me because as the only black person just about everywhere I go, for many years and for many people I am their One Black Friend. People tell me their one black friend from home story all the time. The sick friend story starts in the same way. It features the same preamble. They would walk over to me earnestly and make meaningful eye contact and take both my hands in theirs.

“There was this little kid being picked on the playground and I stood up for her…” and because of me, she went on to overcome adversity and become Oprah, Shonda Rhimes, or Condi Rice. Only difference is, the sick friend version is like that but it ends with them asking me to email or phone their friend since this person and I (a total stranger) have so much in common. Now, I am happy to reach out to anyone on the cancer train, but it does, at times seem a bit much.

What is hilarious is when the Plaguers have a favorite uncle get sick and they have to come see me to get some cancer help – I love that awkward moment. Or when my work enemy comes over to me – you know, the person in the office who really can’t stand you even once they learn you have cancer and now they are all sweet as Kathie Lee Gifford. Ha ha ha!
No More Nooky.

Sex is over.

I don’t care because I have a handful of hormones left, but can we look at the irony here? I may be cured and live until 80, but I will not be getting any for…ever? Why? Because my hoo hoo has atrophied. Not a word you associate with that region of the body.

When Dr Schwartz, my cancer doctor, told me that had happened to my vagina, I blanked out a minute and was unable to pay attention because I had two competing images in my mind. One was that it shriveled up like a scab and fell off onto the ground one day and a dog picked it up between its teeth and ran off, forcing me to run after it screaming, “Come back! Come back! Stop that dog!” in hopes that they could maybe soak it and reattach it. The other was of me walking at the Cornish Fair or the mall and my vagina falling off kind of like a contact falls out and me screaming, “Nobody move! Nobody move!” while I hit the floor, searching.

I did not share these thoughts with Dr. Schwartz.

He gave me cream for the night of sex and my pcp gave me two creams for intermittent application to prevent the atrophy from fossilizing, but the directions are really complicated. Being semi tech savvy, I programmed them into my phone on my calendar as a reminder so I could keep it straight. But somehow it went out to me, my husband and the kids at 5am so I had to stop that.

Laid Back
I am much more accepting of people and their crazy – I laugh at a lot of what makes other people furious. There are more explanations than we can imagine for why someone is behaving the way they are and we can’t tell from the outside. Cancer is a great leveler. In the infusion ward, I get to choose my seat, but not who joins me. I have seen it all and if I felt uppity all that changed when I was puking on the floor on all fours.
Advocate
I have learned there doesn’t have to be an art to saying no, forget what you heard. Since I have had cancer, I tell people if I am interested in something or not. It is liberating.

I was well into my forties when I got sick. I had named them F*** it Forties because I was gonna let a whole lot of s*** go. Well, cancer helped me take that to a whole new level. It surprises a lot of people who see this lively, uninhibited side of me to know that I used to be approval oriented. My mom was a southerner and she raised me to do for others and to always say yes. People are not trained to accept no from women, so they keep talking like you didn’t just answer them. Now I just say to folks, I have zero interest in that project when I am asked to do something. That ends the entire discussion. Poetry!

Stages
The last thing I will share with you is that I realized that there are layers to my experience and understanding of my illness and I’m still experiencing them. I still get depressed, I still freak out, I think about heaven. Two friends who were diagnosed at the same time as I was have died which has broken my heart, scared me senseless and sent me to bed for days at a time. One other is kicking huge cancer butt by becoming a marathoner and trying to encourage me to do it, too. I am at the stage right now where if I were diagnosed again I would consider skipping chemo and radiation, it was that awful, even though I know full well the repercussions. I’ll pass through this phase eventually and feel joy and wonder and be hopeful again.

Cancer will always be with me.

The scars, the despair, the lessons learned and the wisdom acquired. And the friends! The laughs! Please, an atrophied vagina? Seriously? This is my life now?

In some radical, unexpected and profound ways, it has made me a richer person.

In others, not so much.
Telling Our Stories 2014:
Deb Beaupre brings down the house.
Telling Our Stories 2014: Appreciating the art
REVELATION
Robert Bryant

Thirst angers
at the sight of an empty glass
that waits to be filled.
Consumed by wanting
what cannot be,
thirst is unable to hear
gentle rain falling in the dark.
By morning, this storm will be past.
Thirst will rise again
to find a glass full of water
revealed by first light.
HABITAT FOR HUMILITY
Robert Bryant

As I returned from recycling, I came upon a rare midday sighting of woodcock dusting himself in our driveway. If you have never seen one, they are quite whimsical as if they were crafted out of spare parts from other birds. With a round shape and a long curved bill, their ability to produce such graceful flight might come into question.

He was not concerned by the approach of my car. In fact, he tried to stare me down as if to ask, “Do you mind?” I just stopped and watched his show. When he was ready, he took to the wind and disappeared back into the woods.

Our land was logged about the same time I began my treatment for cancer. The logging operation ripped through our woods and left scars that we thought would define our place forever. This was described by the forester as an improvement cut. Similar to the friendly fire of radiation, the whole thing was deemed to be necessary.

The devastation of my treatment and the logging ran parallel tracks through my life. Empty silence and scars were left behind. Then, God’s Hands went to work in a purposeful manner to respond. Slowly, restoration began to take hold as small changes became the evidence of healing.

A new habitat was just what that woodcock had in mind. He was not alone in his appreciation of the changes that had unfolded. Our neighbors watched as a mother owl trained her fledglings at the edge of the cut. Other species of songbirds traveled to see this strange clearing as if it were some kind of theme park. Bear, moose, bobcat, and others have made their presence known in our perfectly redefined woods.

A new life was just what I had in mind. Adapting to changes beyond my control was one of the most powerful lessons that my illness taught me. As I have said before, “If not for that, this would not be.” My life has continued to give me more than I had dreamed was possible.
IT’S ALL GOOD
Robert Bryant

Rest up.
Dream big.
Wake up.
Live in the now
with hands on, heart in, and head up.

Walk on.
Keep it moving.
Share the gift.

Dig in.
Plant seeds.
Speak to the flowers.
Wait patiently for reply.

Breathe in, breathe out.
Sing whenever possible.
Play what you feel.
Listen for the harmony.

Capture the colors of the day.
Fill in your canvas.
Paint whatever you see.

Laugh often.
Exercise your sense of humor.
Life is not an inside joke.

Look for the good.
Then remember,
it's all good.
MINDFUL ESCAPISM
Robert Bryant

full of mind,
i am no longer
in need of more
thoughts.
so, i walk
in the woods to feel
the earth beneath my feet,
eluding my captor
without even
thinking.
JOURNEY
Alejandra Casco

There is a journey that starts as a bride walks down the aisle to the altar. Her eyes gaze on the one she loves captivated with the vows that will unite them on this journey as they walk on this earth. I’ve seen for many years an elderly couple walk in all four seasons of the year, smiling, holding each other close. As I drove past them a prayer was birthed, my Lord, each day I want to grow old with you as you hold me close to you.

SING
Alejandra Casco

The song I sing from my heart
It's a song I heard while I slept in your arms
I heard a lullaby to the rhythm of your heart

It's a new song that you gave me in the night hours
and only resting in your arms close to your heart
I awake singing His love to see the dawn rise.
SITTING HERE IN 3K or MAKING TIME
Ed Cheramie, Jr.

Sitting in the morning sun. I'll be sittin' when the evenin' comes
Watchin' the stuff drip in, makin' me getting better, I'm on the mend
Because I came here to 3K
To watch my IV drip away.
Just sitting here in 3K
Making time

Well, I hope Otis Redding don't mind, that I stole his song and most of his lines
If I get caught I'll have to do time, and I'm not gonna be that hard to find,
Because I'm sitting here in 3K
Watching my IV drip away.
Just sitting here in 3K
Making time

When I left home this morning, well, it must-a-been ten below.
It took 15 minutes to scrape the car, then we drove on through the snow.
Just to get here to 3K
To watch my IV drip away.
Just sitting here in 3K
Making time
(The break)

Could not sleep, racked with pain

I came here, now that’s all changed

A little better every day

I hope you’re doing even better than me

Well, Mr. Norris Cotton sure would be proud
of all the people that are in remission now

The Prouty people, man, they help out so much,
it chokes me up, my heart is touched

So I come here to 3K

To watch my IV drip away.

Just sitting here in 3K

Making time

I'm sitting here resting my bones, it's the last bag, I'm heading home

But I'll be back to do it again, we’ll beat this cancer, gonna win

That’s why I come here to 3K

To watch my IV drip away.

Just sitting here in 3K

Making time
'TIL DEATH DO US PART
Amelia Cullinan, MD

The ring was firmly, tightly, around his still-warm finger, mottled and purpling. Would it come off? The nurse fetched gauze and lubricant, and began to massage. We four women stood at his bedside, witnessing His vacant, fixed gaze. Just departed.

“We’ve been married for 50 years....” He was Catholic, she was Jewish. It was hard to find someone to marry them, so down to Arlington, Virginia, they went. Connie Francis singing “Who’s Sorry Now” on the 45 rpm during the service. Laughter.

The nurse pulled the ring finally from his finger, and lovingly placed it in her hand. She took the band, and the memory of their marriage, to her chest. She tugged her engagement ring off, and slid his ring down, over her wedding band. His ring encircled and enclosed hers, and her engagement ring then held both in place.

For 50 years he wore that ring, and now they are parted, in body... but his ring has come home to her, and the union abides with her. ‘Til death do us part... and yet, they are still one.
THE THINGS THEMSELVES
Amelia Cullinan, MD

Nancy Fried taught me art in high school.
She was short, with frizzy brown hair, somewhat squat,
and had a blinding smile.
She had one breast.

She was a sculptor who had suffered breast cancer and had undergone
a mastectomy.
In her work, she focused on the physical embodiment of illness
and her fierce pride in survival.
Torsos, each without one breast.

I was fifteen, sixteen, coming to terms with my own sexuality and
certainly not doing much thinking about mortality.
She brought the two into the forefront.
She taught me about resilience and anger, ugliness and beauty.
She said, tolerate this. Tolerate me.
Learn to accept within yourself all of this — it will happen to those you
love, and to you.

HOME
Amelia Cullinan, MD

Beams and windows, yellow clapboards, spider webs, handprints,
crayon markings, cat vomit stains, dust balls. Laughter, screaming, joyful.
Stories on laps, bayas and binkies. The fish swimming placidly in the
tank. Thin floorboards. Mommy, what did you have? Smelling my breath.
The couch, a computer or two, companionship. Stories about my day
and his. The steps to our room, disrobing, the warmth of a comforter,
and us.
LIFE WITH MY CAT SOPHIE
David D

It's not lack of focus - it's distraction.
It's not cute - it's annoying.
It's not me - it's you.
It's not a toy - it's my day's work.
It's not a beating - it's a firm pat on the butt.
It's not what's really bothering me anyway.

SCATTERED WORDS
David D

The moon in the heavens contemplates

the electrified doorknob that is

transparent to the travelers who

dream of blazing

secret failures as they lay sleeping

next to the panther's breast whose

tail is swirling in a path of chaos.
CHRIS – MAY 11, 2013
David D

My friend Chris has a van. His van has palm trees as his company’s logo. Along with "flower power" daisy and "have a nice day" smiley face magnets that look like decals until you look close.

He buys those magnets by the hundreds and then goes out to random parking lots and "daisies" strangers’ cars. People walk out and I've seen their anger at the brazen vandalism until they find that 70's era flower or smiley face peels off and then their own face lights up as they climb into the car with the vandalism intact and untouched.

Chris told me he was going to do the cars outside the cancer center today before his treatment. I hope people enjoy their gifts of love and humor as much as I love mine.
For My Mom, Bonnie  
September 3, 1945 – August 16, 2010

THE WISH
Michelle Belinda Davis

Her wish
was not like any other.

For, it was hers alone.

The sweetest song
heard by the stars
and the moon
and every rainbow.

A hope about all hopes
resonating from
a most precious heart.
BEYOND THE VEIL
Michelle Belinda Davis

Random thoughts of you
dance through my mind
parade past my eyes
their images take shape
and hover on my doorstep.

THE FACE ABOVE
Michelle Belinda Davis

On well-lit nights
she talks to the moon
and imagines
the face above
is you
smiling down
and listening.
Telling Our Stories 2014: Appreciating the art
Therapeutic Harpist Margaret Stephens shares her gift of music.
THE ABSENT PLACE
Laura Foley

Her husband rests
in the slanting Adirondack chair,
centered on the lawn he’s just cut,
for the first time this summer—
the one they know is her last,
though she’s not yet sixty.
He savors the fragrant spice
of shorn grass and blooming lavender,
forgetting, for a moment,
her countless tumors,
the malignant blooming.
She heats water in a copper pot,
stirs in sugar, simmers a new batch
of hummingbird nectar,
as the tiny whirring birds arrive:
one, then two, then one again,
hovering in the absent place
where the feeder once hung.

Published in Valparaiso Poetry Review
THE SOUNDS OBLIVION MAKES
Laura Foley

We’re in the barn,
my job to pour gasoline
into the carburetor
of the old Toyota wagon,
as he cranks the key repeatedly,
and when the can ignites,
burns my lashes, eyebrows –
I drop it, flaming, onto dry hay
and for a panicked interim
we run back and forth,
moan and yelp like animals,
as we fill buckets from the horse trough,
dump water on flames,
fire lapping the barn walls,
cackling with greedy glee,
and my little sister, on a weekend visit,
caught by another kind of oblivion,
on the lawn watching us,
pets the purring cat.

Winner of the Milton Kessler Poetry Award, Harpur Palate
IN THE HONDA SERVICE AREA
Laura Foley

We’re sitting knee-to-knee
while her car gets new brakes, mine new fluids,
she discusses hip replacement,
in warrior-like detail, with a friend,
each slice to flesh, how skin is spread
from bone, the pain she’s in, her plans when she gets home,
the miracle of titanium. I’m trying not to hear,
two foam plugs squeezed snugly in my ears,
head bent low over The Iliad. I’m at the part
where Achilles, known for ripping limbs,
breaking hips apart, rests angry in his tent,
saying he will not fight, not for shining pots of gold,
nor the seven dancing girls Agamemnon offers.
But, time and again, her new hips, titanium and strong as a god’s,
break through the bronze age scene, her voice
a wave dissolving the Trojan beach.

Published in Pulse Magazine, Voices from the Heart of Medicine
AT THE DOCTOR’S OFFICE
Laura Foley

When the doctor says
I have permanent
hearing loss in both ears,

I imagine a monarch,
wide wings propped
on fragile legs,
resting on the wise doctor’s
balding head.

I shiver in their
thin green gown,
completely fit, except
this constant ringing
I’ve heard for years,

a side effect, I thought,
of silent retreats,
a hyper-attunement attained
through much hard work,

a sensitivity to the movement
of my body’s cells,
my inner cricket’s
tic, tic, tic.

When he adds:
It will get worse—
the butterfly lifts
on able wings
from its slippery perch,
unimpeded by dangling legs.

Published in String Poet
COMMUNITY: A RECIPE FOR RECOVERY
Loisanne Foster

Let them help you. Ask for prayers.

They gave me love through
   homemade pies and bread and prayers,
   hats and candles and chocolate and prayers,
   soup and corn bread and music and prayers,
   cards and calls and carols and prayers,
   quilt and Christmas wreath and prayers,
   flowers and bounty of fruit and prayers,
   shoveling snow and rides and prayers,
   errands and books and offers and prayers.
I am lifted up to hope and heal.

Feel the Oneness.

Complete the joy. Give back.
GOOD VIBES
Loisanne Foster

Let music flow and brush your heart.
Hear whispered wind through leaves.
Let waves and ripples wash your shore,
And know your breath in silence.
Let art and motion be your friends.
A kitten to your breast can calm.
You feel its tiny rumble.
Heal.

HERO FOR A NEW EARTH
Loisanne Foster

A sword he will not carry, nor hate’s helmet wear.
No binding belt of bullets, no grenade or gleaming gun
will mire him in mud.
No malignant glare will mar his face.
When the tramp of heavy boots echoes in the streets
and elders cheer the brassy bands
and children gape at mighty treads of tanks,
then will he mourn.

Then will he be planting trees watered with his tears.
Then will he sift through fields sown with chemicals and bombs,
Clearing, cleaning, hearing, seeing, giving bodies back to earth.
A sword he will not carry, though he bleeds.

Each will lead another or a thousand deep within
to the hero without end.
NATION OF GHOSTS
Loisanne Foster

A nation of ghosts we are,
    our ghosts made quickly
while we look away.

Pioneer Valley’s paved.
In the parking lot of Pheasant Mall,
    pigeons ply their trade.
    They wheel to snatch our scraps.

Elm Street’s treeless.
Oak Ridge is bricks and walls.
Huckleberry Hill and Bobcat Run
    and Deerfield Park and Beaver Brook
    and Cougar Canyon and Wolf Den Road
that ring so sweetly
mock us with straight lines, sharp edges
in nature never seen.

In Meadowlark Lane, not one recalls
    a lark or meadow
and Whippoorwill Way is still.

On Sunset Boulevard,
    who stops to see the sun go down?
and so I pause at Liberty Park
    and wonder.
YEARLING DEER
Loisanne Foster

Little one, I would touch that tawny fur,
that velvet nose, still damp with dew.

Little one, I could watch you place those hooves
daintily on forest paths known just by you
and walk by your side in meadow mist.

Little one, I would sleep curled next to ferns and you
through heavy midday sun
and merge with you at dusk along the river.

In you, I feel my heart beat fright, your one protector.

In you, I feel the need to run from creatures
hungry for warm blood.

Then go, and let me feel the thunder of those hooves
separate us now.
VILLAGE DREAMS
Loisanne Foster

Hopes spring forth from forest floors,
silent as Indian pipes,
never seen to rise,
yet always there,
waiting till our footfalls fade
before their ghostly dance begins -

The odd shack, well-hid in brush,
The clearing starred with graying stumps,
The dirt heaped high where someone sought a spring,
And sagging lumber pile beneath November trees.
Someone in the village dreams.
BARN MEMORIES
Freeman Johnson

In March of 1951, we had an awful heavy wet snow. When I walked in the middle of the barn, I thought, “Hmmm, it’s awful dark in here.” There was a window on the end of the barn, but it was blocked by the roof having sunk down in the night from the weight of the snow. Luckily the hay was up so high that it held up the roof and none of the timbers broke. They cracked a little bit, but didn’t really break. The barn builders had left out some braces. The timbers were eight by eights; you wouldn’t think they would need braces but they did for that snow. And, you would think the roof was steep enough for the snow to slide off, but the snow was the heaviest I ever saw. We jacked the timbers back up and braced it, and the barn was still standing.

Another time in March, when I was about eighteen, we had a nor’easter. I went into the barn at noon to feed the cattle, and the wind blew the side doors open. I pushed them shut, but it was blowing so hard, I couldn’t latch the doors. I just stood there holding them in place. I couldn’t let go of the doors with one hand to latch it. My mom came out wondering what was taking me so long to feed the cattle. She helped me – it took both of us to latch the barn door.
THINGS I’D LIKE TO BE
Jacqueline Kelly

I would like to be a monarch butterfly,
spending my summers in New England,
then flying down to Mexico.

I would like to be a lilac,
enjoying the morning dew,
then basking in the sun.

I would like to be a Victorian house,
enjoying being fancy and ornate.

I would like to be a passenger on an ocean liner,
enjoying the food, the games and the gambling.

I would like to be a pale pink and purple yo-yo….
Is there a purpose to a yo-yo? I don’t know.
We’ll have to find out.

I would like to be a trombone,
blowing out everybody’s ears
at all the local jazz clubs.
FRAGMENT
Kathryn Kirkland, MD

Glide along the surface of the water.
Sweep the paddle deftly and
turn into the sheltered cove.
Come to rest
near the bank of the river
where spruces stand in witness to
the remains that were scattered here.
Look through clouds reflected on the still surface
through clear, cold water to where
a scattering of tiny shells
bleached bone white lies on the silty bottom.
See a kingfisher gently take his perch on a nearby branch.
And
you are back
instantly
to a day in August,
an early morning mist,
a blue box of ashes.
These are not shells, but bones.

PROMISSORY NOTE*
Kathryn Kirkland, MD

If you will open up the chambers
Of your heart to me, allowing
Me entrance into the atria of
Your world, sharing your way
Of seeing the illness
That has befallen you, your hopes
And your fears,
I will promise to synchronize
My heart with yours, matching
Your systole with
My diastole, creating and holding
A space for both of us to fill.

*Inspired by Galway Kinnell’s poem of the same name.
BREATHE
Marv Klassen-Landis

Breathe in, breathe out.
I’ve run too far too fast.
Listen within, listen without.

I need to start by stopping.
I need to catch my breath.
Breathe in, breathe out.

With so many voices in my head,
I can’t hear you, I can’t hear me.
Listen within, listen without.

One drop from a branch.
Ripples spread from the center.
Breathe in, breathe out.

One bird calls once.
I don’t need to know its name.
Listen within, listen without.

Before my closed eyes,
I see the face behind my face.
Breathe in, breathe out.
Listen within, listen without.

DARKNESS AND LIGHT
Marv Klassen-Landis

A single candle lights the room, but there are puddles of darkness in the corners, under the table. I look closer; they are puddles of dimness, not darkness. I walk outside into darkness – no, not darkness – darknessness. The candlelight leaks out the window onto the grass. And, even though it’s a cloudy night and the moon’s not yet up, starlight travels unimaginable distances to add a little light to this darker night.
A COLLABORATIVE LIMERICK
Marv Klassen-Landis and Yoni Stevens

On the Supreme Court sits a judge named Scalia
Who thinks Obamacare is a bleeping bad idea –
All mirrors and smokery,
"Jiggery pokery;"
His legal language is well loved by the media.
RABBIT RABBIT RABBIT
Julia Pierce

Every first day of the month I try to say, before I say anything else out loud, "rabbit, rabbit, rabbit." This ritual somehow, miraculously, gives me good luck for the ENTIRE month. There are also a myriad of daily things one can do for "wishes"... such as, at 11:11 you can make a wish (this is great because you can do it twice in one day); find an eyelash on your cheek; see a shooting star; see the first star of the night; if the clasp of your necklace ends up in front; make a wish! I'm not one to avoid cracks in the sidewalk or throw salt over my shoulder, but I will avoid walking under ladders and I try not to break mirrors whenever possible. Why take a chance?

Which leads me to my next musing: chance.

There is a distinct difference between chance and odds. Chance implies willy nilly, oops, no rhyme or reason. Odds are based on statistics and real numbers. So what were the odds that I'd get breast cancer? The numbers say one in eight women get breast cancer. The odds are lower for Asians... So, was it chance? Bad luck? Or, was it FATE?! Fate is a romantic notion. People are fated to meet one another. "Fate brought them together", "He was fated to end this way." I suppose I lean toward the romantic and believe in fate. Maybe it's a way to try to make sense and order out of chaos. If everything was by chance then we have no control over what happens to us. If it's pre-ordained fate, then, yes, we still don't have control, but SOMETHING or SOMEONE else has control...

This is where God comes in. "God," as in a power or spirit that moves us. For me, God is the uncontrollable, overwhelming, deep longing I felt when listening to the Central Vermont Chamber Music Festival ensemble playing Paola Prestini's cello piece. It felt like the bow was vibrating across my soul. God is waking up and looking at the new sky on one side of the bed and rolling over and seeing my best friend on the other.
God is feeding my babies with my now dented and scarred breast and seeing them grow up to be beautiful, caring beings. God is going down to the beach and seeing my friends... seeing the concern in their eyes and hearing the love in their voices. God is in everything.

I don't think God gave me cancer. I don't think that it was by chance either. Do I have cancer for a reason? Maybe. Maybe there is a path I'm supposed to take that has been set for me since the day I was born. I will keep walking my path, taking each day as it comes, keeping in mind that, although I don't know what's in store or even why I'm here, I can affect change by extending kindness and giving more. I will keep making wishes on falling stars and padiddles because wishing is hope. And hope is my way of trying to exert some influence or sway with God.

I'm hoping that you will have a most amazing day (made at 11:11 am)!!
NO PINK RIBBONS FOR ME, PLEASE
Melanie Podolec

Am I the only one who cringes at the commercialization of breast cancer? October brings a plethora of pink ribbons, maudlin Facebook posts and cloying television ads. I was almost waiting to be wished "Happy Breast Cancer Awareness month!" Enough already. Too much celebrating for a deadly disease.

I know about breast cancer. In August of 2013, I was diagnosed with a high grade, aggressive form of invasive ductal carcinoma. I had a lumpectomy that September and chemotherapy from October through February. Radiation followed in March of 2014. As I write, I am pretty sure the cancer is gone, for now. But, like a bad roommate, it could return.

This intolerable, scary roommate invaded my personal space and tried to take over my life. It angered my friends and terrified my family. This is the kind of roommate I dared talk about with only a few very close, trusted allies. And, this roommate even threatened to kill me!

Cancer brings a lot of baggage. Worry, fear, anger, helplessness and frustration are part of the experience. Terrible things happen when cancer moves in. Your oncologist goes to battle with this aggressor using chemical weapons and your body becomes the battlefield. Parched and dry, you begin to die at the cellular level. Your hair falls out while your nails turn black and brittle. Battle fatigue is rampant. Yet, this roommate lingers.
I'll admit, sharing my body with cancer was not entirely miserable. Cancer introduced me to friends old and new who had also shared the space of their bodies with this disease. From these strong women I learned the value of friendship, wisdom and support. Cancer also brought me to a wonderful group of women, TEAM TGIF, who share my diagnosis of breast cancer. They call themselves "cancer conquerors" and celebrate our sisterhood the first Friday of each month with margaritas and beer. Cancer also drew my family closer as we commiserated.

I do not feel like a survivor or conqueror. I think cancer might move back in at any time. Even though I have been assured that I no longer have this intrusive roommate, I often think it might be hiding somewhere, like in a dark closet. It could come back. And if it does, I will shrug and accept the inevitable. Another battle round with a bad roommate. But, please, no pink ribbons for me!
Telling Our Stories 2014: Matt Zapel introduces his original song.
WINTER’S COLD
Sandi Reynolds

Standing in the winter’s cold,
Fighting over truth untold.
Tears were warm,
Words were bold.
Standing in the winter’s cold.

Standing in the winter’s cold,
Having faith while truth is told,
Hoping love don’t lose its hold,
Standing in the winter’s cold.
RENGA*
George Simpson
and Marv Klassen-Landis

I.
wind...what is wind
an invisible force touching your face or
a monster that only knows displacement

oak leaves skitter over ice
wind shrieks drown out calls for help

winter—pretty yet cruel
a viper unpredictable
appealing yet deadly

snake charmer’s flute song
grass basket... lifted lid
swaying cobra rises

fire from ashes
eyes of embers...roles reversed
he’s the charmer’s snake
II
bashful eyes, sari
her stubborn goat on the bank
I threw him across

softly landing he looked back
as if to say why did you do that

resting fragile wings
decorated with huge eyes
to fool predators

unseen with glowing eyes
waiting in the moonlight sky
unlucky one passing by

when dawn comes the songs begin
crawl out of the tent and stretch

*Renga is a collaborative poetry from the Japanese tradition. Each poet in turn writes a new stanza based on the preceding stanza written by another (often taking the poem to new places).*
Telling Our Stories 2013: Appreciating the art
ON THE EVE OF SURGERY FOR OVARIAN CANCER
Lynn Smith

Tomorrow I am set adrift
Tethered to the life boat and off I go.
The water will carry me, nourish me, save me
Gently rocking, rocking, rocking.
This is a journey I'll never recall –
The captain will tell me of her star lit navigation
And I will cry tears of joy and gratitude, and woe
For I will have lost the vessel within me.

And then the paddle is mine
But this is no canoe, no kayak, no row boat;
It is a boat out of proportion, huge and unwieldy
And the ocean is roiling and rising
And I am so afraid!

And yet...
The stars will still guide, the tide will ebb,
THE WAITING ROOM AT 3K
Deb Williams

We meet in the Waiting Room at 3K
Once neighbors on an old dirt road
He in his hunting jacket, I in my fine wool.
We talk of days gone by, life on the old road,
The hunting stand he used in our woods,
How his house needs insulation,
His brothers draft horses killed by lightning
in one of the lake's powerful storms.
We talk of the past
As we wait to hear of our futures
In the Waiting Room of 3K.
MY FEET ON THE EARTH
Deb Williams

My feet on the Earth
Sending cares down to the ground, the cool moist soil,
the child woods.
Hours spent soaking in the oak forest fragrance
With no thought of tomorrow or yesterday,
just the moment of being in the wildness, child alone.
My feet on the earth
Before I knew my path
It is time
To put my feet back on the earth
Bare, unencumbered by expectations or fears of tomorrow.
MAY 11
Deb Williams

My grandmother died 30 years ago today
while the toads were trilling,
the marsh marigolds were blooming yellow,
the woods were turning spring green.
I have often thought
What a strange time of the seasons to die.
ON THE BIRTH OF MY GRANDSON, MAY 29
Deb Williams

Welcome little spirit to this world,
to this new body,
to this beauty of Spring and awakening.

Welcome little spirit to the loving arms of your young parents,
to their tenderness, their fears, their hopes for you.

Welcome little spirit to your little sister's adoring gaze
and gentle touch on your tiny head of silky hair.

Welcome little spirit to the old arms of your grandparents
who cherish you and know the lessons that only age can impart.

Welcome little spirit to this world,
to this beautiful old turning sphere that you will call home.
RIVER PARTNERS
Deb Williams

Partners in a canoe for a lifetime.
You in the stern, I in the bow.
Wild rivers, northern worlds
Lovers of solitude.
You looking down the river, I looking right ahead
Partners in life.
And here we are
Navigating our last big river.
You in the stern, I in the bow
Moving into unknown waters.
THE BURDEN  
Deb Williams  

I say I can do it myself...........  

But this burden is so heavy.  

Your hand reaches out to steady me,  

Your words to lessen the load,  

Your advice to spread out the weight,  

Your presence to lift me up.  

The burden is always there  

But lightened by those who travel with me.
Bruce Gaylord applauds the performance of his song “Biker’s Dilemma” by David Nalepinski and Dr. Tom Davis.
The Creative Arts Program at Norris Cotton Cancer Center and Dartmouth Hitchcock offers visual art-making, creative writing, storytelling, and therapeutic harp music to patients and family members at no charge.

We wish to thank all those individuals and organizations who support arts-based outreach throughout the year.