



Kaleidoscope Art & Excerpts Issue 60 - Journeys—Inside and Out

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Featured Essay

Beyond the Barrier

John Nizalowski

In a corner of the garage—past scattered bicycles, stacked boxes, and a dismantled refrigerator—a young girl stands crying in the dark. My friend Barbara is trying to calm her. “It’s all right Ursula; just tell me what’s wrong,” Barbara says over and over in a soothing contralto, a mantra to ease the panic. But Ursula isn’t responding, and I can feel my nerves fraying.

“Barbara, I’ll take over.”

“No,” she answers. “I’m making a connection. Let me keep trying.”

“I’ll take over,” I say again, in a sharper tone. I feel badly about breaking in, for despite not being Ursula’s mother, Barbara is doing a good job, but years of experiences like these have worn me out, and I just want to calm Ursula and get her out of the shadow-ridden garage as quickly as possible.

“Ursula,” I call quietly. “Come here.”

She steps forward, her head down, her blond hair catching the dim dusk light sliding past the open door. I hug her, and feel her body trembling against mine.

“Now take a deep breath.”

She hesitates, then obeys.

“Another.”

Her breathing deepens, becomes slower. Her crying stops. Gently I guide her through the door that leads to the yard. Above, the sky is gray and cloudy. The yard light is on, and Ursula turns from it, keeping her head buried in my side. Stroking her hair, I start my own mantra, “Everything’s fine; you’ll be fine.”

Thus ends another difficult episode with my high-functioning autistic daughter.

When she was five, these “blow-outs,” as we call them, occurred two or three times a day. Now that she is eleven, these moments of turmoil seize her less often, maybe once every few months. I wish I understood what triggers them, and could fully comprehend her experience of emotional unraveling. Then, perhaps, I could stop the blow-outs from happening. Still, over the long, difficult years, Ursula has learned through maturity and force of will that she can, to an extent, control these outbursts. She does this by metaphorically stepping outside of her experiences, thereby gaining a degree of objectification that helps her keep the chaos at bay. She has attained self-knowledge, an understanding and even appreciation of her own autistic nature. It has been a remarkable achievement.

And yet, like the goddess Persephone, Ursula must occasionally return to her Hades. The seeds of autism, like the seeds of a pomegranate, remain in her. Tonight, confusion over the rules to a game of pretend with her sister sent her crying into the cave-like garage. Her keen sensitivity to the universe rises and falls—a strange, interior tidal rhythm, independent of moon or sun. The autistic tide has risen again, nearly drowning her soul. As I usher her out of the yard’s darkness into the kitchen’s warm light, I realize that it is time to once more enter the desert, seek out its healing powers, and restore Ursula to Demeter and the good, solid earth.

We are standing at the edge of a vast, sinuous landscape, a realm of deep canyons carved from white Navajo sandstone formed 180 million years ago in the late Triassic Age. Ursula and I are at the trailhead to eastern Utah's Barrier Canyon and Great Gallery—a panel of shamanic pictographs painted when Egyptian pyramids were not yet conceived. Reaching the Great Gallery involves a six-hour hike that includes an 800-foot descent and return climb from the canyon floor.

The drive out has already revealed numerous wonders. Dust devils followed us as we passed through the red shale fantasies near Goblin Valley, their weird, fluted shapes inspiring Ursula to go into an extended monologue about the Jim Henson fantasy movie, *Dark Crystal*. In classic autistic fashion, she recited the entire plot in minute detail, even though we have watched it together at least a dozen times. When her recitation arrived at the scene when the Mystics begin their long trek to the Dark Lord's castle, we passed a small ranch consisting of a silver trailer and a cluster of livestock chutes forming a mysterious wooden maze on the desert sand.

"How would you like to live here?" I asked.

"Sure," she answered, nodding. "I know it would be hot, but there's lots of great stuff to explore." She said nothing about the ranch's lonely isolation, possibly because she might find its remoteness comforting.

After the ranch, we began riding the road's roller-coaster plunge through sand hills reminiscent of barrier dunes near an ocean. But here, the sea is a thousand miles away, or 66 million years in the past. Remote, by either perspective. Climbing the sandstone bench, our car tumbled its way over the final, very rough stretch of road, a real challenge for the Honda Civic. We parked, checked our packs and canteens, and stepped over to the rim to look across the vast, canyon carved plateau.

Now it is time to descend.

Ursula leads. Her footing is sure, steady. Beneath a bright sun, we wind our way past white stone minarets, mineral domes, and an old stock tank with a pipe that runs along the raw earth before dropping down into the canyon's depths. The trail passes through a horse gate and out onto a ledge descending a sandstone wall. Below us stretches Barrier Canyon, with its gothic, red mudstone cliffs to the north, and its sandy wash stretching out of sight to the south, where the pictographs await us.

Reaching the canyon floor, Ursula tests the acoustics by shouting, "Ho!" An echo comes back, not crisp and clear, but strong enough to evoke a smile. "I love this hike!" she announces with delight.

Moving upstream along the dry wash, we enter a grove of big, powerful cottonwoods. They are still green under the blue early autumn sky, their leaves rattling in the wind, making the sound of gently running water. Looking up, Ursula spies a pair of ravens playing beyond a tree's crown. They whirl and loop, their pinions cutting the air with a sound like ocean waves. Their wild dives inspire Ursula to laugh, and I laugh with her. Out here, the signs of her autism have vanished like mist in a dawning sun. She is alive, whole, thrilled to be in the wilderness. Here she feels connected—the cottonwoods, the ravens, and the carved sandstone monoliths are the friends she lacks in the tangled, demanding world of human society

Within the cottonwood grove we find the first pictograph panel. Called the High Gallery, it is a clustering of twenty or so figures in red pigment made from turkey blood and mineral compounds. They are ghost shapes, shaman forms with elongated bodies that seem Egyptian in their stylized and haunting beauty. A bird man draws Ursula's attention, and she begins to climb the sandstone rubble to get a closer look. I stay at the base of the canyon wall, near the trail. Next to me stands a huge cottonwood, with twin trunks that support a maze of branches and a veritable forest of leaves. Each trunk would make a respectable tree in its own right, and I am grateful for their shade in the growing heat.

While I watch Ursula scramble across the narrow ledge just beneath the pictographs, I hear a rustling to my left, down-canyon. Turning, I spot a family of mule deer—a doe, a buck, and two fawns—as they slip into a tangle of trees and vanish.

“It’s strange that they’re this far down-canyon this late in the day,” a voice says beside me. Startled, I turn to find a short, dark-featured woman in a ranger’s uniform mere feet from me.

“Is that so?” I ask, wondering from where she had suddenly appeared.

“Yes. They don’t like being near people, so usually by mid-morning they stay higher up-canyon, past the Great Gallery.” She pauses and frowns at me. From her round, Eastern European face, curly black hair, and urban accent, I guess that she is from somewhere near New York City. I wait with her, and wonder what’s on her mind.

“Is that your daughter?” she asks at last.

“Yes.”

“Well, she shouldn’t be up there. It’s rather dangerous. It’s also too close to the artifacts.”

“All right,” I assent, though not without some irritation, for I know that Ursula would not harm the pictographs. Still, I realize the ranger doesn’t know this, and she’s just doing her job. I turn to tell Ursula to come down, and my voice dies in my throat. There, a mere six feet from her, stands the doe. The deer family had slipped past the ranger and I, and the buck and fawns are now poised up-canyon, tense and waiting. But the doe doesn’t move. She and Ursula stare at each other in silent attention, communicating a wisdom that dwells beyond the mere flow of language.

Poem

The Journey Home

Diane N. Klammer

I am called Dorothy.
I was shaken up
inside my own home,
taken into a spiraling vortex
of drugs and spells.
I confronted witches without
my little dog Toto.

I am called Scarecrow.
I falter on uncertain footing.
Windblown, alone,
fragile in unknown journeying
I contemplate,
within strawhaze memories,
unverifiable explanations.

I am called Tin Man.
I follow my malleable heart
bent and scraped by metal.
I foolishly love
those who break me.
I am called Lion.
Soft to the touch,
I hide behind
ferocious roars of thunder.
I hold my panic
beneath a coat of anger.

I am called Emerald.
Polished and presented,
I am pushed over the edge.
I shatter
into sharp gleaming shards
glued back together
by bleeding hands
of desperation.

I am called Puzzles.
I am mixed up within
old dusty boxes
hidden torn and held
together by worn
rubber bands.
I cannot be found.
I cannot be solved.

I am called Chosen.
I meander within
strange mazes of mystery.
I forge on

The yellow brick
road of shiny pennies
reflecting ahead.

Where is Oz?
Who are the Wizards?
When will I be Home?

Fiction

Promise to Remember This

Karen Pfeil

My daughter shows up to my deathbed with a dog—barely a dog, an old grandfather of a brown poodle that growls at me when I try to pet it hello. It's half-dead and smells funny and has dandruff. Sheryl calls him Ben and says he's a rescue. It's just like Sheryl, Sheryl and her animals. I have to sit here and cough and watch my daughter watch a dog while I die. My husband, George, who Sheryl calls just plain Number Three, is not home and I'm going to tell Sheryl that's because he's working overtime, but I'm not sure it's the truth. I wish I could say I don't care if it's the truth—that would be what makes sense after all, me not caring at this point, but I care more than ever. I care that George would be here to greet my daughter who hasn't been to this apartment once in the three years we've lived here and who, knowing her, is going to turn up her nose at him anyway. And I wish George would be here to roll his eyes about the stupid dog. Maybe he could mix Sheryl up something to drink, if she wants something.

"Why aren't you having chemo?" my daughter asks me—I think she's repeated herself. Lately, since I got told I'm dying, I sometimes feel like I'm drifting out over a great big ocean, taking in everything with just my eyes and not my body and certainly not my ears, and when I feel this way, I don't seem to hear. Anyway, hearing has been a downside to my life—hearing my husbands yell and my children cuss me out, hearing the doctor say, "two weeks, maybe four or five if you're lucky," hearing a voice in my own head that always seems to tell me to do something stupid.

"Because they say I'm too bad off already, and they asked me if I want to get chemo and, with everything else, go bald."

"Hair grows back."

I look at my daughter who's sitting on a La-Z-Boy George and I bought off the people who lived here before. It's leather and somewhere on the back of it, their cat scratched it up, so we just pushed it back against a wall and lived with it. My daughter has beautiful hair—it's red and long and she's got the complexion to match, brown-pink freckles on pale white skin (it's like my own hair, my own complexion, but I've got less freckles)—and my daughter has a tiny body, just over five feet and skinny but with enough chest. I know she thinks she's ugly—I know from when she was a teenager and dyed her gorgeous hair gold and then black and then some God-awful blonde-orange color, and I know from when we were friends and she told me. "Mom," she said one day, "if I were as pretty as this dog, life would be so much easier." She was talking about Gretel, a mean, old, shiny black Doberman Sheryl adopted from God-knows-where that always used to growl at Doug (who Sheryl called just plain Number Two). Gretel didn't seem any kind of beautiful to me, but Sheryl loved her like crazy, and that's why we were friends for a while, because I let her keep the dog.

"You know I'll never risk my hair, Sheryl."

"Don't be silly."

"Oh, Sheryl, it's a lot more than hair. The cancer's too far along. The chemo won't work and it'll just ruin the time I've got left."

"Why hadn't you been to a doctor?" she says, tossing her own pretty hair over her shoulder, scowling.

“Do you go to doctors?” I have her there because she never goes. Sheryl is the type that’ll take a loan from a bank to have some animal operated on, but if she herself was half-dead, not go to the hospital even then.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I tell her and I mean it, too. But I wish she hadn’t brought the damn poodle. It must be the crazy woman she lives with who made her do it—Lexy takes the word dog-lover to a whole new level. The two of them have a house full of dogs and cats and there’s a donkey out back. All of them “rescues”, as Lexy says it. Lexy’s fat and nearly as old as me and walks around with donkey slobber and cat hair on her clothes, and I don’t know what makes my daughter want her for a roommate. I sure felt unwelcome as a bladder infection when I went to visit, and I haven’t been back since, not even to see Gretel, even though I kind of got to like that dog when I let Sheryl keep her.

“Where’s Number Three?” Sheryl asks now.

“His name’s George,” I say.

“Well, where is he?”

“He’s working, honey. Overtime.”

“Oh, yeah, he’s a big security guard at the public library.” She’s quiet for a minute, and I know she’s angry about something but I don’t know what. It’s not like she wants him here. But then she says, “So what do you wanna do, Mom. Can you go someplace or you’re not up for that?”

I don’t want to tell her about yesterday when I tried to go downstairs to get the mail and passed out. George was home and he put an oxygen mask over my face and saved what’s left of my life. “I need to stay close,” I say. I don’t want to tell her getting up for the bathroom makes my lungs feel like they’re filling with sand.

“You wanna play cards?” she asks me, snapping her fingers at the dog. She says softly, “Come ‘ere, Ben-Ben.”

“Sheryl, you and me never played cards in our lives.”

“Lexy taught me some card games—there’s one called Bullshit, but we need three people. There’s one called War—you must know how to play War.”

“I don’t think I do.”

“Well, then what do you want to do?”

“Your brother isn’t coming, you know that.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“He said he can’t come down here. It’s not work, it’s because of the baby. He has to watch the baby while she’s working.” She is the eighteen-year-old girlfriend of my twenty-six-year-old son. She works at a donut shop and has a baby that I can tell by looking does not belong to him. “He’s got the baby.” Now I think I’m repeating myself. I forgot if I said it already because in my mind I’m out over my ocean again, looking out over ocean spray and watching leaping dolphins like the ones George and me saw at Sea World on our honeymoon. They had a dolphin show and a tour guide with dark skin and some kind of accent who said wherever he’s from dolphins were called angels of the sea. He said dolphins were powerful, could heal you if you’re sick and could bring you good luck if you touched one. Then he asked if anyone wanted to touch one, and the whole place went wild raising their hands—he picked a dark haired girl in a wheelchair who seemed retarded to me. I

remember how bad I wanted to reach out and touch a dolphin, reach for something to make me lucky. Instead, I was too afraid even to raise my hand. I don't know why I keep thinking about it lately, but maybe it has something to do with all the damn pain medications. I keep picturing the man's face and the retarded girl clapping and the leaping dolphins. When I see them in my head, it feels like I'm above them, and I find myself wondering if I could reach down and touch a dolphin for luck. Good luck for the dying mother of two. The dying wife of three. The dying woman who smoked herself to an early grave wants to touch a dream dolphin for luck. I say, "Can't even come to see his damn mother when she's dying."

I hold my hand up to my daughter. "I want you to come over here for a minute and give your mom a hug." I can see Sheryl doesn't want to. She's afraid of me or something now that I'm dying, but she does come and I hold onto her for a minute. "You smell like a poodle," I tell her and it's true. She smells like a wet dog let in after a storm.

"You smell like old smoke," Sheryl says, and I remember how she's never been kind.

"I know now what I want to do," I say, biting back from saying 'how dare you' or 'ungrateful brat.'

"Yeah?"

"I want to have a margarita, a frozen one. You mix it up in the kitchen and put it in the blender with a lot of ice. And then you can teach me to play cards."

"Yeah, okay," Sheryl says, and she goes in the kitchen. Ben doesn't follow her so I guess he's tired out. He looks sicker than I am. He probably has some disease or at least fleas. Damn dog. He's sniffing around the bottom of the La-Z-Boy.

"Your dog is gonna lift its leg and pee on my chair."

"He is not," Sheryl says, and I hear the blender click on like it's angry and chop ice.

She comes back with the blender pitcher and two plastic cups. From somewhere Sheryl's got a deck of cards. She pulls the coffee table over so it's in between us and shuffles the deck and then deals us each half the cards. "I'm not good at this kind of shit," I tell her.

"It's easy." And when she shows me the rules I see it is. We just both pick a card at the same time and throw them in the middle, and whoever's got the best card gets to keep both.

"Why do they call this War?" I ask her.

"Don't know."

"Did Lexy teach you to play this?"

"Yes, she did," Sheryl says, "Lexy's taught me all kinds of card games."

"Lexy's a good friend," I say, trying to be nice.

"Lexy saved my ass. Lexy saved Gretel's ass." Sheryl's talking about the way I moved in with George suddenly and left her without a place to keep Gretel. She freaked out about it back then, saying I sentenced the animal to death and I was a murderer.

"Oh, now honey, you saved Gretel," I say. "You're the one who gave her a second chance." I throw down a king but Sheryl has an ace. It's okay because my pile's bigger than hers. All of a sudden, I feel like I want to win real bad. I feel like I want to be able to shrug my shoulders at the end of this game and say that thing winners say, "beginner's luck," with a nice little smile. Because the fact is, I

could use some luck. Not to save my life, it's too late for that, but maybe just enough luck to make the time left worth something. I'll ask Sheryl to shuffle, to deal, to play this easy game called War again and again. I'll ask her next time to bet me a dollar—hell, twenty dollars or even a hundred. I feel all of a sudden like I want her to remember me as someone who won something.

Poem

Life Back to Living *To Kenya, my service dog*

D.E. Brown

Tiny whorl within
The essence of a bond
Along silent streets
By my side
Strong at steps she prances,
One foot up. . .
Pauses for my lean to seek
The bones of her shoulders roll
I gently rest (rely) my hand
We climb
Black in a starless night.

Poem

Straw Into Gold

Antoinette Constable

In the warehouse district of Berkeley,
with bars and bums and a gas station across the street,
there used to be a yarn shop whose name,
in capital letters, once painted bright-yellow
over the door, spelled "Straw Into Gold."

Inside wide-open doors, on either side of a central passage,
raised baskets full of assorted skeins overflowed with temptation.

To the right, like candles, cones of yarn
for weaving in the workshop full of looms.
To the left, plain or flecked or fluffy wool, silk,
cotton from Australia, Switzerland, France, or Iceland
sat in pristine cubbyholes like luminous saints inside
their niches. By the side aisle windows, patterns for
sweaters, hats, gloves, baby blankets, and lace slept
in the timeless limbo of clear plastic covers. A few faithful
women sat in deep contemplation, looking for old prayers
in these newfound missals. A woman, suddenly called

by the spirit, would rise, a rosary of yarn around her fingers,
making her way to the back of the store where a cash register
sat on a glass counter over intriguing buttons in glowing boxes.
She might buy a pattern and be gone. If not, from the dark
confessional area, a priestess listened to her recitation of venial
sins: impatience, negligent omissions, dropping stitches, failure
to diminish The priestess often imposed an Act of Contrition
before granting absolution and blessing the sinner, who,
supplied with new sacred images, could now
return in peace to our world of tangles.

Fiction

So Gifted, So Young

Tally Brennan

The antique freight elevator groaned to a stop. Bronwyn reached for the brass handpull. Out there, beyond the accordion safety gate, the long hallway stretched, empty. Rotted floorboards disappeared into pools of darkness between wire-caged ceiling lights, to emerge, at the far end, at Thea's studio door.

Bronwyn's nails cut into her palm. She relaxed her grip and turned to face Thea, huddled in her winter coat, slumped on the seat of her wheeled walker. Thea, with her lungs shot, too weak to stand, to walk, to climb the stairs, still found a way to get here, where she suddenly, urgently needed to be.

"Why me, Thea?" Bronwyn demanded. "After three years of total silence, why is it me you call? At two in the morning."

No answer. No sound but the indrawn hiss-click of the portable oxygen apparatus monitoring every breath that Thea took.

Bronwyn could wait. Thea wasn't about to skip out on her. Not this time. No longer the easy mark, the abandoned lover, tonight Bronwyn was in control. She slammed the gate open, left it hooked, ready for a quick exit.

The building was the same fire trap she remembered, a nineteenth century loft with exposed joists, knob and tube wiring, plywood partitions and hollow-core doors. From where she stood, Bronwyn spotted half a dozen code violations, including the elevator inspection certificate, eleven years expired.

"Come on, Bronny." Thea, still sitting, maneuvered the walker backward out of the elevator with her feet. She won't consider a wheelchair, they say. In spite of the warning stamped into the plastic seat, Thea expected Bronwyn to push the walker with her on it.

Undersized wheels skittered under Thea's weight as Bronwyn shoved her down the slanting corridor, past studio doors definitively shut. Once there had been manufacturing here, the hum of machinery, voices. Now emptiness, silence. The building, left isolated, listed like an ancient tombstone in its graveyard of industrial waste, of broken glass, blackened brick, coiled razor wire, graffiti cancerous with rust.

"I love being here," Thea said. She twisted around eagerly as they approached each door, then sagged in disappointment, seeing the red 'OUT' signs. "Nathan. Color-field," she panted. "Hillary. Neo-realist." These artists Thea claimed as her own, her kind, the superior species she now belonged to, having outgrown her old friends, the dull, ordinary people who, in spite of everything, had taken her back, were keeping her alive.

For Thea, friends were disposable, fellow travelers waved to in passing. Only Bronwyn endured. For six years, Bronwyn provided house room, cash, consolation, risked her own security to save Thea from herself. And failed.

Bronwyn turned her key, still on her key ring, and the studio door swung open. Thea reached up to flick on the lights. Smells of turpentine and paint accosted them, unventilated fumes, pent up for months, still potent, and, after all this time, to Bronwyn, still seductive. On the threshold, she hesitated. It could be here, in this building, in this room, the unknown poison that Thea had inhaled,

that left her helpless and gasping, the pink sponge of her lungs thickly scarred, inelastic. Idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. *Idio*, idea. *Pathos*, suffering. Meaning doctors haven't a clue.

"Take this," Thea instructed, her rings ring-ringing as she patted the cast iron oxygen tank she wasn't strong enough to lift. She inched to the edge of the seat, her left hand balancing the control box trailing plastic tubes, her right struggling to shrug off the sleeve of her coat. Bronwyn failed to register the significance of the alarm when it began to beep. Hugging the green tank, she watched Thea paw frantically through the coat's loose folds, find the tube and, finally, jerk it free. Thea hooked the narrower loop back behind her ears. Her hands were shaking as they clipped the life-sustaining plastic pincer to her nose. The control box recovered its regular pneumatic pulse.

Bronwyn struggled to shift her onto the daybed while Thea, unhelpful as an infant, gazed past her, eyes roaming the room to reclaim tables strewn with tubes, jars of paint, pots of brushes. Sketches and photographs pinned up. Finished canvases stacked against the walls. Satisfied, Thea collapsed against the Persian-carpeted pillows. Odalisque in sweat pants, surrounded by half-burned candles, half-emptied bottles of wine. At her feet, the walker with the oxygen tank stood waiting like some unconsidered beast of burden. Bronwyn examined the corduroy bed cover for new spots and stains, oily, salty, milky spoor of who knows how many bodies. "Okay. You're here. What more do you require?"

Thea, with her attention focused on the easel and the canvas standing there, was immune to sarcasm. She pointed, fingers wagging, commanding the painting to come.

Bronwyn fetched the picture, set it up against Thea's raised knees.

The image, a female nude, reclining, legs spread on ruffled sheets, dared the viewer with its display of pink and private flesh, dared the viewer to look and not to look. Thea traced the figure's outlines, her tapered fingers clean and manicured. No paint rimmed the cuticles. No paint filled the cracks of her knuckles. "I love this pale yellow," Thea said. "Naples yellow. Against the madder. Isn't that great? Don't you like it?" Her framing hands embraced a bright patch. "Grace loved this splash of sunlight. She said I have a fantastic color. Sense."

"Who is Grace?"

"The model. Art history professor. NYU. Reviewed my last show." Thea let the canvas slide. With a negligent hand she propped it against the bed. "I thought we had a lot in common. But she never understood." Thea shrugged. "It didn't work. Out."

Clever Grace, resisting the temptation to remain the focus of Thea's attention. To be seen. Realized.

"Still. The sunlight on the sheets is really good." Thea looked up for confirmation, as if her own satisfaction were not sufficient. Bronwyn refused to be distracted. Rigid with anticipation, she waited for Thea to acknowledge the finality of her diagnosis, her impending death. Three years, at most. At thirty-four? Incredible, but true, a reality even Thea's thoughtless, careless insouciance couldn't shrug off.

Thea dragged herself upright. Her copper-colored curls shone electric-bright against the dark wall. Her glittering, ale-brown eyes sought Bronwyn's. "I'm okay," Thea said, "I can do it." She reached a trembling hand to push the ring-marked coffee table out of her way. It refused to budge. She raised her foot, her invalid's foot with its white, unused sneaker sole, and kicked. The table lurched. A wine glass toppled, shattered. Thea fell back against the pillows, her chin puckered, mouth trembling in rage. Steroid-induced psychosis, they say, but this fury wasn't drugs. It was Thea being Thea. Finding her again, Bronwyn was scalded by joy. She turned and walked away.

Bronwyn toured the studio, her arms wrapped around her ribs, hugging herself as she encountered work she hadn't seen in progress. Three huge portraits of Isabelle, oils, glowed high up under the trussed roof. Isabelle in torn red sweatshirt. Isabelle with boobs bare beneath unbuttoned military jacket, cool and sexually challenging. Blonde, blue-eyed Isabelle against a bright green background, wearing the embroidered blouse from Guadalajara, Thea's gift to Bronwyn. A blouse so beautiful Thea considered it fair exchange for Bronwyn's minivan, borrowed for an afternoon to move paintings, abandoned four weeks later at the Mexico City airport. Now the blouse was costume. Isabelle was the one left standing when the music stopped. Isabelle, with the hospital bed and commode in her living room, the bell to summon her, Isabelle would deal with the consequences of this escapade. "Are you ready to go back?" Bronwyn asked, to be scrupulously fair. Generous, even. "Isabelle will be pissed to come home and find you gone. To hear you've fired another home health aide. Suppose you're dropped by Medicaid. What will you do then?"

"There's a prepared canvas. Over there. Put it on. The easel."

She makes these recoveries, they say. After siren-blaring ambulance rides, night-long crises in the emergency room, tears in rehabilitation hospitals, Thea wants to party. They say.

Thea stirred the puddle of unboxed CDs on the coffee table, held one out for Bronwyn to load. "New favorite. Schubert. Eighth."

"Music to create by?"

"Screw by," Thea said in her new telegraphic style. "Unusual tastes."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Thea's laughter burst out. She tried to suck it back. Coughing raggedly, she held herself stiffly upright. Bronwyn stopped breathing to watch as Thea, with her eyes closed, hands pressed to her mid-section, tried to lift her rib cage up, as if the weight of her own bones was crushing. Thea's face was hidden, then revealed, eclipsed by the transit of shadows from the hanging mobile. Bronwyn grabbed in her panic and set wildly swinging. The arms of the contraption dipped and rose. Bronwyn tried to still their jerky motion, but the suspended metal disks continued to spin, shade-shapes waxing and waning in their progress across two walls, eliding the corner, drifting over Thea's form as if she wasn't there.

Captive planets circle, inclining to the flame. The line from an aborted poem of Bronwyn's came limping back along with the image that inspired it, a grade school classroom model of the solar system, planets and their satellites gear-driven, ratios calibrated to the cranking motion of a single hand. *Spindled moons revolve.*

The world does not revolve around you, Bronwyn told Thea silently. Passion is no excuse. Artistic license earns you no exemption. First, you pay your dues.

"You forgot to hit 'play,' Bronny," Thea said. "We need. Music."

While Bronwyn strained to catch the opening bars, Thea held out both hands to be helped to her feet. "Schubert. So gifted. To have died. So young." She looped the tubing over the walker's handle bar and moved tentatively forward, stiff-armed, slow-stepping, until she reached the easel and collapsed onto the seat, her back supported by the green tank in the basket behind her. Her outstretched hand hovered above the thicket of brushes sprouting from cans, jars, vases, and plucked one. "Get those paints for me. On the table there. Ultramarine. Flake white. Cadmium red. That big tube of ivory black. Squeeze some on. The palette. And lower the easel tray. So I can reach. Sitting down."

Bronwyn squeezed dabs from stained and twisted tubes, black, blue, white, red. Thea seized the palette with both hands. She turned to the full-length, mahogany-framed mirror on her right. "You're welcome," Bronwyn coached, but Thea didn't answer.

She had ceased to exist for Thea; Bronwyn understood that. Thea was where she wanted to be, alone except for Schubert. Bronwyn pursued her through the music, the strings making their case against the orchestra, the longing of the woodwinds; she searched for the note that could arrest Thea's flight. Whatever it was that Thea found sexy musically, Bronwyn knew it wasn't longing. Thea didn't want. She took. Then threw it all away.

Poem

Will You Assist?

Constance Gutowsky

Hello, death. You think I don't see
you hovering in a corner behind
his doctor? Surgery on Wednesday.

Will you assist? He and I will shower,
slather each other's shoulders with lavender
soap, kiss. He'll be admitted at six.

His hair will be mussed. The mass
will come out. Of course he'll come home
unless you insist on a funeral Mass.

Death, we'll drive you back, send you
off with ranch eggs for breakfast, yams
for lunch. We could even pull marrow
in a stream from *Ossobucco*, his recipe.
Hold off on the guy. I'd feel as grateful
as when we first met, arms full of books

in front of the library, this boy
from Chicago who still brings me
farmer's market flowers.

Poem

Immune Defense

Arden Eli Hill

I want to feed you dirt
because I love you.
How else will the earth
know what you are
unless you swallow
worm dust and diamonds?

Instead I wash every hour
palms making prayers
of liquid soap. Red fingers
rubbing, baptized in warm water.
A white towel hangs
next to the mirror.

Even without water,
I cannot touch you till I am sterile,
ninety nine point nine percent
of everything gone,
only the lemon burning left.

till skin is barely more
human than latex. My finger
prints disappear drop by drop,

gone before you
grow up and choke
on a single bacterium.

Personal Essay

Learning Vision

Joan Kresich

One way I know about the mysterious bond between pain and pleasure is through my son's vision. Not at first though. At first, in the face of the doctor mouthing words as though his soul had departed, and us on the other side of the abyss, trying to understand a retina that degenerates, there was a physical pain, square in the chest. That pain took up residence, and stayed. I curled in bed at night and imagined laying healing hands on his eyes. But that brought me back to the bloody thorn, because there was no cure, no specialist in Boston performing miraculous surgery. In my journal I wrote:

I see an old man, struggling with his red tipped cane, perhaps newly blind. I pivot quickly and sweep into another direction. I don't want to watch him. A pain crosses me like a shadow over a still landscape. Your eyes, child. Your eyes. I cannot reach into the infinitesimal place inside your eyes to touch the rods and cones devastated by some genetic hurricane, cannot put them back in order. All those hundreds of hours of protection . . . I caught you just before the sweet rounded flesh on your knee was scraped off. I held you when the lightning flashed. But tucked away from my hands, your eyes journey alone.

The library created a pain break, because I could reach ahead into the next abstract, the next article, and pull myself along as though I was operating my own rope pulley, with me in the basket. I read with an appetite, shoveling in trails of multisyllabic words. I never stopped to be baffled. I read and read until the strange language modified its atonal barks and came to its own melody. I called the scientists themselves, and we actually conversed in that language. They gave me their time, took me seriously.

I tried to imagine what Luke was seeing. I tried to imagine the future. What would he do for a living? I saw the vibrant young woman who would decide living next to his disability was too big a sacrifice. I saw another young woman's pragmatic parents who tried to dissuade her from the total acceptance of love's primary colors. As though the challenges of the present were inadequate, I made them spill over into the future.

The retina is a hidden part of the eye, out of view, the recesses of vision. We see the pupil, the window which allows light in, watch in others as it flexes and relaxes to adjust the bundles of light. Light entering the eye traverses the vitreous body, a jelly-like substance, and reaches the shores of the retina. The surface of the retina is a patina, just one cell layer thick, of rods and cones. The macula, a very small dot on the retina, has cones and a few rods packed like sardines, very intimately. This tiny spot on the retina, the macula, brings us the expression of puzzlement floating across the face of a friend; the words in a favorite book, read and reread; the black hands of a clock, to the minute; the pattern of pine needles dotted with dusty cones. All the details of sight originate when light meets the macula, awakening those crowded cones and rods, and beginning the relay to the optic nerve, and finally, to the visual cortex at the back of the head.

Light hits other areas of the retina, but not with the same intensity. Our eye has a preference, a proclivity, for detail, and much of the eye's light is concentrated on the macula. The rest of the retina has its job too, though: peripheral vision. Peripheral vision is called on for motion detection, night vision, simple form and shape. Rods and cones there are too loosely arranged to perceive the life line on a palm. They do the blunt work, the sod carrying job. In Luke's eyes, the macula is dying, and with it the vision for details.

My friend said as we tramped along on our monthly hike: "It seems to me life is really about loss." For the losses in our lives, we have the stages of grief. We recognize anger (the most I could muster was "why me?"—embarrassing to admit since it *wasn't* me), but bargaining, now *that* held

possibilities. I found I could make bargains with vitamins (not yet proven, but in trials), and future cures. Denial was a long distance horse; I'd hop on and ride for several weeks. But dismounting was invariably bruising, landing on hard packed ground.

Luke lived the vision loss. In kindergarten he endured a year without learning to read, his dearest expectation. When first grade showed no signs of remedying this, his confidence flagged. His reading teacher forbade him to put his face close to the book, his only chance of deciphering the small black squiggles. He began to describe himself as stupid. The real explanation that finally came the day of the diagnosis only added pain. It was a large loss for a small boy. To recognize that he wasn't culpable for his inability to read was more grist than his seven-year-old workings could handle. He continued to measure himself by the rod of reading, and ranked himself low.

It was difficult to judge how vehemently to force the physical act of reading on a young boy whose eyes made it sweaty work. He could struggle with enlarged print, but never quite perform the trick of photographer's paper in developer, that brassy moment the image rectifies itself. There was no scanning, no gliding across mossy words. It was the sort of work both children and adults shun. If there was reading at home, it took my backbone to make it happen. Each night, for years, I tried to detect the silken thread that marked the boundary between his immediate discomfort and my hand-on-the-brow view of the horizon. What was best for him? I never knew precisely.

Fiction

Grandma Versus the Buddha

Nicholas Poluhoff

Grandma was my guru. When I was a girl, I'd sit at her feet while she sewed and she'd teach me about life.

"When you grow up try to be either beautiful, rich, or stupid," I remember her saying. "Otherwise you'll only suffer."

Grandma's pronouncements were followed by blasts of cigarette smoke. Her voice was sandpapery, a cat's tongue. To be in her presence required great strength of character. Most of my friends ran crying.

"Never let a man see you naked. I was married to two men for fifty years and never once did they catch me in the flesh. Try to retain a little mystery."

Then, to demonstrate the beauty of service and sacrifice, she'd have me clip and file her jagged, yellow toenails.

In college, I studied religion. I think growing up with Grandma had trained me to see behind and beyond things, to prefer the unseen to the seen. By this time, Grandma had moved into an apartment building and was taken care of by a West Indian nurse named Bertha. Except on the coldest of days, Grandma was always on the same bench in front of her building. She dozed in the sun like a sleepy crocodile, lips curled in a leathery sneer. Cigarettes and lighter had become wheelchair and oxygen tank. Only the flaming-orange bouffant hinted at her former strength.

Something about the image of the Buddha reminded me of Grandma. Not the chins or the sagging ear lobes signifying the weight of wisdom. Maybe it was the eternal smirk or the eyes that, even when closed, saw everything at once. I went to see her, to talk about what I'd been learning.

"Sara, my angel, my dearest," Grandma purred. "Whatta ya doin' here in this graveyard?"

When Grandma said *graveyard* she motioned toward the other benches where more grandmas and grandpas sat, lined up like birds on a branch. Even under the blazing sun, they were always encased in sweaters and coats. The other old folks liked to congregate to complain but Grandma never mixed. Their persistence in existing was an unforgivable offense. If one got too close, she'd scowl as if her dentures had been soaked in vinegar.

"How are you feeling today?" I asked.

"I'm half blind, half deaf, I got one lung, and my legs are so swollen I can barely walk. I shit or pee myself almost every day. How do you think I'm feeling?"

"Oh, you lie," said Bertha. Bertha had a lilting voice that sprinkled chuckles between her sentences. She was heavy and sluggish but burned with higher purpose when Grandma was nearby.

"Grandma, I'm reading a book in school about the Buddha. Have you heard of him?"

"Fat Chinese man."

"Buddha said that life was suffering. He also said that since we all suffer it should teach us compassion for all living things."

"Life is suffering," Grandma repeated, letting the ancient wisdom seep in. "You're tellin' me! But suffering throws compassion right out the window. When you're sick, your heart dries up worse than your privates."

"Let me read you something," I said, opening my book to a passage I had marked. "We are what we think. With our thoughts we make the world."

"Spoken like a man in good health," Grandma scoffed. She was a scoffer. "Give him this body for a day and we'll see what Mr. Boody has to say."

Art

Hidden Talent

Sandy Palmer

"Every image I draw is a learning experience about the animal and how to bring it to life."

- Doug Landis

Facing his opponent on the wrestling mat, high school sophomore Doug Landis wanted to rush in, tackle him, and take him down. The night before, while practicing for the meet, a fellow teammate with a few more years of experience told Landis he was doing the take down move incorrectly. He told him not to do it again, warning, "You could get hurt." The possibility of an injury doesn't matter much to a testosterone-fueled teenage male who thinks he's infallible and wants nothing more than to tackle somebody. Disregarding the earlier warning, he followed his impulse to plow right into him. In a split-second his opponent grabbed his head, dislocated his neck, and Landis was lying on the mat, unable to move. That was January, 1975.

The injury to the C3 and C4 vertebrae in his neck resulted in quadriplegia. While in the hospital he was encouraged by staff members to try and paint by holding a brush in his mouth. At the time, he readily admits, "I was kind of a punk and I didn't want anything to do with it." Since his parents made sure he had tutors while he was in the hospital and throughout rehabilitation, he was able to finish high school and graduate with his classmates. One year out of rehab, seeing that he was despondent and spending more and more time in front of the television, his brother Monte challenged him to a drawing duel. With a bit of surprise in his voice even now, he quips, "My drawing was better than his." That rudimentary sketch was the catalyst that opened his eyes to what might be possible, lifting the veil of depression. He found several drawing books that his mother had around the house and started studying them. Whenever he would get bored he'd start sketching, trying to replicate the images he saw in the books—faces of apostles, houses, etc. He initially copied the styles he saw in the books and eventually his own style emerged. It wasn't long before he was making and selling note cards with sketched images of houses on them at local arts and crafts shows.



Doug Landis, *Tiger Eyes*, 2007 acrylics, 8"x6"



Doug Landis, *Patience*, pencil, 2002, 21" x 28"



Doug Landis, *Lavender Iris #1*, 2009, acrylics, 9"x12"



Doug Landis painting *Lavender Iris #1*

Fiction

Vera's Cure

Kathryn Henion

A raspy voice on the phone: "What's your name?"

A simple question. Vera stumbles for the answer. *Should've written it down.* Like the rest of the things she needs to remember today: pills at eight, shots at noon, call her daughter Traci at three, write letters at seven, bed at nine. Vera only wants a pizza. Been craving a deep dish pepperoni slice ever since she saw that Dominoes commercial on the lounge TV. Scribbled down the number and taken the long white hallway past reception, to her room with the thought of melted cheese on her mind. Never thought to scribble down her name.

She scans the pad of lined paper in front of her. In writing that echoes the shake of her hands she sees her address, phone number. No name. *Don't panic. Makes it harder to remember.* She sweats, but her skin pimples. The questions pop into her head: *Where am I? What am I doing? What's happening to me?*

Jez's voice barges in:

Forgot to write your name down, Vera. Never needed to before. It's catching up to you . . .

Vera's longtime friend Jez, a presence since Vera began to forget. Not long after Jez died, two years ago now. Shortly before Traci moved Vera into Lakeside.

It's too late, Vera.

I'm not ready.

Can't even remember your own name.

Vera takes a sip of water from the paper cup next to her ibuprofen and looks into the white paint on the wall. "Hello?" Jez's voice brings Vera back to the phone.

"What?"

"I need your name to place the order ma'am." She remembers what she needs to do.

"Can you wait one moment, sir?" she stalls, "I have to get something."

"I guess . . ."

Vera pulls a wad of tissues from a box on the dresser and muffles the receiver.

He knows.

Vera tries to focus.

It's in your voice, Vera. It's burning through you.

Be quiet Jez.

Vera sifts through her memory drawer for the envelope; keepsakes pass through her fingers as quickly as her ninety-three years. A photograph of Missy, her childhood cat. Wooden paintbrushes

smell of turpentine and caked yellow paint. Charcoal sketches of her childhood farm. Photographs of signs she painted on doorways, trucks, and road signs. A yellowed cotton handkerchief with scalloped edges and her husband's initials, WC, embroidered in a corner. Her mother's cameo pendant. *Ah, here.* She unfolds the letter beneath the warmth of the glass lamp, tilts the paper between her knobby fingers, and smooths the stationery's vanilla surface with her fingertips to find the embossed initials.VC.

"Hello, sir? Are you still there?"

"Yes Ma'am. I'm *still* here."

"Sorry about that. Just wanted to make sure I had all the information in order."

"So what's your name then Ma'am?"

"Vera, sir. Ms. Vera Cartwright."

"Address?"

"Lakeside. 93 Gladiola Avenue. Shelburne."

"We'll have that out to you in about a half hour."

"Thanks." Vera puts the receiver down and runs her index finger over the initials. So permanent, she thinks, imprinted there in the paper. She doesn't feel so hungry anymore.

You can't stop it.

Shut up Jez.

Remember me, Vera.

At first Jez forgot little things like keys, birthdays, the name of her dentist. Then she started finding her keys in the freezer. *Why had she put them there?* Then things got worse. Jez had trouble sitting still, would get lost in her own house. Sometimes she'd put her underwear on over her clothes. When Jez started having trouble recognizing her family and friends, her daughter Liza decided to do something about it.

But Vera kept visiting her longtime friend even after Jez's family moved her into a Home "for her own safety." Livingston Manor was not a place for the living. It was built in a dense wooded forest and every time Vera visited, she thought how much more like a prison it was than a home, with its fencing and electric entrance gate and security guard.

As Jez got worse, her family visited less and less until Vera was her only guest. Even after the Jez Vera knew disappeared, Vera remained patient in the starch-white room with its cold metal and flashing buttons on beeping machines. Vera was the only one to see her childhood friend reduced to diapers and incoherent babbling. While Jez mixed and painted her food trays with the colors of her pureed dinner, Vera tried to remember brighter times.

"Want to play hide and seek?" she asked, hoping to pull Jez back from the place that ate her memories. "Remember the orchard, and the geese, and the cigarettes?" Vera thought back herself, to a time when the memory was just being constructed, when the two girls began their own histories. Vera remembered playing hide-and-seek amongst the flickering shadows of her grandfather's apple orchard, just north of Rochester on the sandy earth of the old lake bottom. Of

chasing pet geese, skinned knees in the driveway, finger pricks bonding blood-sisterhood. She stroked Jez's slender hand then, its loose skin hanging off bone like clothes on a line, as she remembered. Those same fingers, seventy years younger she remembered, were firm and bronzed, cut off at jagged, bitten down nails, drawing a first cigarette to full lips. A cigarette scandalously puffed within the prickly protection of the raspberry bushes behind Vera's parents' barn. Coughing in-between laughs as their lungs swelled with smoke. The glamorous feeling as the disintegrating white shaft passed between fingers to lips, through lungs and into blue sky. Those summers they lived in-between days, Vera thought, in-between girlhood and womanhood, ignorance and knowledge, bliss and fear. Then there was the Jez lying in her stale nursing home room seventy years later. All Vera saw then was her friend struggling in-between hell and peace in an immaculate room that mocked reality. Everything clean and tidy, except Jez.

At first Vera had thought she saw a flicker of recognition, of memory, in Jez's eyes. She stopped mashing her food with a spoon and looked out the hospice room window to the trees. Vera put a hand lightly on Jez's shoulder. "Do you remember, Jez?"

Jez gripped the spoon in her hand and threw it at the window, bits of squashed peas smeared and dribbled down the pane.

Jez's body followed shortly after her mind left. She became a mental vegetable in a body abandoned by spirit. Her sallow skin hung from the withered architecture of her face, her colorless eyes stared intently at Vera with earnestness, less recognition for her friend of decades. Her curly gray hair, crow's feet, and laugh lines mapped happier days. And when Jez died one day, her spindly fingers grasping Vera's hand more in instinct than response, Vera wondered: *Is Jez's fate to be my own?*

After Jez died, she crept somehow into Vera's head. She'd been there before, but the previous voice Vera had concocted to cope with watching Jez wither in the hospital. When Jez wouldn't answer Vera's questions, or would answer with incoherent mumbling, Vera would imagine, instead, what the young and strong Jez might say. This was how Vera kept Jez, their lifetime together, with her.

"Remember the falls at night, Jez?" Vera asked Jez in the Home one day. "The falls where you kissed Richard?"

When Jez replied, "Did Richy take my purse? Did YOU take it?" Vera heard: *I remember it was spring. The falls roared against the gorge walls in the darkness, the creek about to burst into flood. We stood on the wooden bridge. It was dangerous, but we were young. I kissed Richy because I wasn't supposed to. And you kissed William. Open-mouthed, faces damp with mist, we were the heroines in our favorite romance novels. We ran from the park police that night, up the hill through thick forest and wet with leaf litter, to home. I twisted my ankle in that woodchuck hole, and Richy carried me in his arms to your house.*

But the voice in Vera's head after Jez died wasn't the same Jez from her girlhood memories or her imagination. This Jez was not under Vera's control, but an alternate version of herself. An outside presence that interjected when it wanted, told her things she didn't want to hear. The new Jez was always with her, right from the beginning of Vera's own forgetting.

Poem

Waking Dad

Nancy Scott

On bad days, I badgered, shook shoulders.
On Mondays, I threw pillows.
Once, just once, I used a cold
washcloth. My kiss never did it.

"I'm awake."
"Are you sure?"
Blind kids are never sure.
"I'm AWAKE."

I'd leave him, believe him,
not knowing he was dreaming
of a world without nine-year-old
daughter's six a.m. sureness.

He woke early one
November Saturday for wet
revenge, but I heard
his six-foot-two tiptoes.

"Don't you dare."
"How did you know?"
Sighted parents are never sure.
"I was awake."

Personal Essay

The White World

Annette Gendler

Time drowns in the measureless monotony of space; where uniformity rules, and where motion is no more motion, time is no longer time.

Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*

The first thing that comes to my mind when I think about my visits to Tante Herta in her nursing home in Wiesbaden, Germany, is the color white. A crisp, clear, clean white. The white of bleached and starched cotton shirts. The white of milk glass.

I see the view down the long hallway on the first floor, with its gleaming white linoleum floor and its high white walls. A handrail runs along both sides of the hallway for wheelchair riders to pull themselves along. Light streams in from a high window at the end of the hallway and paints a luminous rectangle on the floor. Had I been closer, I would have been able to make out the speckles of dust floating in the tilted pyramid of light that rose from the rectangle.

And later in the visit, the bleached uniforms of the nurses, which were indeed made of thick starched cotton. The white speckled Formica tables in the dining room, and the white plastic trays the food was served on. It would not have surprised me if beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows of the dining room there had loomed, as outside the sanatorium in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, "the reeking void, the world enwrapped in grey-white cotton-wool, packed to the window-panes in snow and mist." Instead I looked out on the gray blue waters of an inlet harbor off the Rhine, and a yellow ferry docked among the sailboats to carry passengers across the river.

"There you are!" Herta's voice sounded from the end of the hallway on my first visit. Against the pyramid of light I made out the contour of a figure in a wheelchair. She glided towards me. We met in the middle of the white hallway.

"Nice of you to come," she said as I plopped a kiss on her forehead. "There's not much left of me now, is there?" she chuckled, referring to her weight loss and amputated leg. It warmed me to hear her chuckle even though it lacked the rumble it used to have when she weighed a hundred pounds more.

I was thankful that my sister, who had visited her before me, warned me not to be too shocked by Herta's appearance. Herta is almost a skeleton, she had said. Indeed, I could not help but study her sunken wrinkled cheeks that I remembered as rosy and so plump they used to squish her eyes. She still wore her small golden Star of David pendant, but now it rested against a bony chest, on the triangle of pale skin showing through her collar. She used to wear a wig because of her extremely thin hair. On occasion, I had seen her without the wig - on hot days, or when we had shared a bedroom on our trip to Vienna all those years ago. Now the bald circle on top of her head and the wisps of short white hair surrounding it were her permanent look. I could tell she was barely able to see me because her watery blue eyes followed whatever sound I made rather than my movements.

For the past few years, Herta and I had kept in touch via the occasional phone call or letter. I had moved to the States in my mid-twenties, and had seen Herta on my yearly visits to Wiesbaden to see my grandmother. After Oma passed away, after I left student life behind me, and started a job with ten vacation days a year, I traveled to Germany less frequently. When I did come, I visited my mother, siblings and in-laws in the Munich area, four hours away by train from Wiesbaden. I called Herta for her birthday and for New Year's, and she sent birthday cards with unflinching

punctuality not only for my birthday, but also for those of my husband and children. She remembered my sister, my brother and my mother the same way. As her eyesight continued to fail, her cards became unreadable scribbles. And then last fall, and most tellingly, for the holidays, no mail arrived from Herta.

Something was wrong. Through persistent phone calls to Herta's daughter Britta, my mother and sister finally found out that Herta had fallen in her apartment and had been discovered unconscious hours later. Based on that, so it seemed, Britta had decided that her mother should not be living by herself anymore and searched for a nursing home while Herta was in the hospital. Herta never returned to her apartment. While her home was being dismantled, Herta was stuck in the hospital, her left leg getting worse. It had always troubled her with oozing wounds. She had inherited, as Oma used to say, weak tissue, a propensity towards varicose veins, and latent diabetes. I remembered how during the summer she used to hate to wear stockings, opting for comfort instead, exposing her legs, wide and wobbly, the thick blue veins knotted in tight spirals up the back of her knees, her ankles a bluish red. Nevertheless, she had been *gut zu Fuss* – a good walker. Herta and Oma used to go for long walks every Sunday afternoon.

After Herta's fall and during the months in the hospital, her left leg refused to heal, the tissue slowly disintegrating. First the doctors snipped off two toes. Her diabetes must have been raging at the time and they ended up amputating her leg above the knee.