

A Place to Breathe
Chapbook

Creative Writing at Colorado Resiliency Arts Lab

Dedicated to all healthcare providers

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Falling Down

By Tara Neubrand

Two hours before I met her, she was flying. As her legs pumped back and forth on the hot, rubber swings, her blood pumped, fervent and full of oxygen, cycling through the body like the seasons. It flowed emphatically, soaking tissues and capillary beds, violaceous and sustaining while she climbed up a slide, slipping down the hard plastic in bare feet, and smiling. Before we met.

Thirty minutes ago, she stopped flying, not landing, but crashing. When blood stops flowing, it becomes bruised, sticky. It does not puddle or pool when it leaves the body. It sculpts itself into a new form. Solid and three dimensional, it is scooped, not mopped into cardinal colored biohazard bags and later incinerated, flames consuming plastic the color of life.

One hour after I met her, her mother collapsed, fell to the floor of the trauma bay while surrounded by 18 strangers in full PPE. In N95's, thick yellow gowns, blue rubber gloves, and full face shields, her mother could not see the eyes of the people who told her they had been unable to re-start her child's heart. Maybe the shields are a good thing, protecting both of us. No one wants to remember the eye color of the person who breaks the world. When the mother fell down, the team walked carefully around her. They tucked warm blankets around the girl's cold fingers and still, small toes. The tubes and lines had to stay though. The coroner said so. The detective sat outside of the room and prevented the mother from touching her daughter while she lay, prone and silent, on the hard floor at her child's feet.

Two hours after I met her, the emergency department was full of new patients, and the ambulances kept coming. Her last day was our Tuesday, and there was work to do. "Jack of all trades, master of none" goes the description of our specialty. True, unless you're talking about squeezing blood from stone, finding resources and resilience where there is none. Of that, we are masters. We squeeze until the rock shatters and the shards slice into our hands, and we all start to bleed.

I'm Ready

Three Pieces by Alisa Gray

I'm Ready

I entered her room, her regular room. It overlooked the hospital helicopter pad and had a spectacular view of the Chugach Range. She smiled as wide as her frail face would allow. Her teeth stained from orange soda, a necessity during all her hospitalizations. A Hallmark movie competed with me as I worked to catch up on the latest changes in her health and offer support as she coped with the final stages of a disease that has stolen so much from her. Her thin arms wrestled a faded crochet blanket on her lap, the only item that humanized the sterile room. I could see her discomfort as she struggled to adjust her body.

“What would make you more comfortable?” I asked. With a defeated look she responded, “I’m not sure.”

After some help from the nurse and a few extra pillows she mustered up some energy and said, “I’m ready.” Tears streamed down her young but tired face. A look of panic entered her eyes as she shared an immediate need to call her brother, who she hadn’t talked to in months and her mother, who promised to come be with her girls as they mourned her. I helped her dial and held her hand as she said her goodbyes.

Fear

I had overheard them talking about their plans to stay in a cabin outside of Homer for a long weekend. We were colleagues but not quite friends, only spending a few hours together at any given time. I ask enough question and seem excited, so they invited me to join.

Amy called to ensure I knew the plan and to gauge my comfort with being dropped off at a cabin with no road access. “We’ve reserved a water taxi that will take us, the kayaks and the rest of our gear. It will drop us off Thursday and pick us up Monday. Scotty has an In-reach, so if there are issues we can call for help.”

Being the daughter of a hunter, I wasn't uncomfortable with the lack of service or being in the wilderness for days. It was the remote location and trusting that the taxi would eventually return for us. But, I couldn't pass up this opportunity.

It was a four-hour drive to Homer from Anchorage. I'd been there a few times before and anxiously awaited my favorite views where the ocean meets mountains. When we arrived at the "End of the road," as they call it we found the store front for the water taxi. We loaded our gear onto the boat and traveled another hour by water. Guided by the mountains that surround the bay, we passed sea otters, jellyfish, and puffins. Inching further and further away from civilization.

When we arrived, we unpacked the boat onto a small dock and waved the taxi goodbye. As the boat disappeared in the distance the fear and excitement sank in. We hauled our things to a cabin several yards away. It sat on a rock ledge that overlooked the bay, it was all ours. Only the sights and sounds of the bay to keep us company.

I immediately noticed an otter riding the tide. He was alone but content. An eagle dove down towards the water and effortlessly grabbed a fish. I sat outside the cabin taking it all in.

We spent the weekend breathing the salty air, watching wildlife, and rummaging through the treasures the low tide left behind. Before we knew it, it was Monday and we were loading our gear back onto the water taxi. The cabin grew smaller and smaller in the distance as we drove away. The only fear now was that I may never return.

Small Delights

It's my day off but I still wake up before seven. I start the coffee, slide open the back door, and open the windows of the sunroom. It had rained most of the night and the air is fresh and crisp. The morning light shines through the branches of the cottonwood whose leaves are dancing from a small breeze. Jasper knows the drill, he circles his sheep skin rug until he finds the perfect temporary spot. He'll move to snuggle as soon as I sit down. I pour my coffee into the mug my sister made me. The glaze is my favorite shades of blue and green. And it holds just the right amount of coffee. I sit, Jasper moves, and the sun beats in on us.

Unfamiliar

By Brit Weiss

I slowly shuffle my way forward through the narrow boundary created by the black straps and stanchions neatly arranged into a labyrinth around me. This carefully assembled maze feels like the only order in my current situation. I wiggle my fingers, one hand at a time, in an unsuccessful attempt to return blood to my whitened knuckles that have been preoccupied guarding my entire life's belongings. I stand facing the check-in podium with an oversized bag in each hand wondering how much extra I'll be charged because, certainly, neither one of these weighs less than fifty pounds. I think I've planned out the details of this move, but some of the money I've budgeted may have to be diverted to paying a bag fee that I've always avoided by traveling light. How is it that these absurd fees can somehow exceed the cost of the flight itself? Although not even close to my biggest problem, I perseverate on my frustration over baggage fees. It's almost as though all of my anxieties around this huge life decision have manifested as annoyance about these absurd rates.

The intercom blares, directing me to report any lost or unclaimed baggage and I refocus my attention towards check-in. I drag the luggage over the freshly waxed tile floors that inhibit friction just enough to allow me to continue to move forward a few inches each time the next airline passenger reaches the desk. The length of the neatly-formed line never seems to fluctuate; the only variation is the individuals who comprise it. Each passenger before me makes his or way to speak with one the representatives who will give a perfunctory smile, ask for ID, weigh their baggage and print their boarding pass. Looking around me, I'm acutely aware that I blend into the sea of faces from all over the entire globe. Although I feel I'm about to dive into an uncontrolled freefall, I know there is nothing spectacular about my situation from the outside. Maybe that's the beauty of it.

I begin to play a familiar game that I've played ever since I can remember. I pick my first people-watching subject and begin to fabricate their backstory in my head. I distract myself just enough to feel comfortable. Being a Canadian born to American parents living abroad, flying was the norm for me from a young age. Although I've flown since I was a small baby, somehow today seems different. Despite the familiarity of the airport, today feels new. This time, there's no one to help me navigate the dream I am chasing on the other side of this flight. I stand alone with the same nervous excitement I feel looking over the

cornice of one of my bucket list ski runs. I want to do this, I *need* to do this, and once I take the leap there's no looking back.

I've totally lost track of how much time I've been standing here, but it's finally my turn. I step up and lean against the metal base of the podium that feels like it's towering above me. Every ounce of warmth has been sapped from my body. I am unsure if this is an effect of the cold metal, or my nerves kicking in. Yet, somehow, I don't freeze. I wrestle the large orange suitcase that was once a prime hiding spot during many bouts of childhood hide-and-seek up onto the scale. Where a weight reading should appear, I see two horizontal neon red dashes like a scoreboard before a game actually begins. I give the uniformed worker a puzzled look and he says "the scale is broken today. Just throw your bags up here and I'll print your ticket." The warmth returns to my body and I realize things might be okay after all. I hand over my life's belongings to a stranger and let the freefall begin.

Mrs. Blunt

By Rossi Javernick

“It was so nice to hear young voices again” my octogenarian, white haired, widowed next door neighbor confessed the day after I had my 13th birthday party. It had been a late summer, early evening backyard party with approximately fifteen 12–13-year-olds who were incapable of regulating their noise or even being able to comprehend how their socialization may affect others around them. “What a weird thing to say!” thought my egocentric, adolescent brain. While I certainly didn’t comprehend her statement, something about this admission resonated with me, permanently etching itself into my memory until a future moment when I would be able to grasp all of its complexity.

In the moment I shouldn’t necessarily have been surprised by her confession as this was the neighbor who allowed us to use her property as our own personal playground. She didn’t mind that our bike rides around the block included the “short cut” which essentially was deviating off the sidewalk to follow the concrete that edged around her stone house; the “short cut” which in reality was taking the long way round. This was the neighbor whose wrap-around front porch had a banister to slide down and was also the perfect place for “playing house.” The neighbor whose converted barn/garage’s back wall made for an excellent tennis backboard and also stored a tetherball pole which could be rolled into position in the middle of that large concrete slab whenever the need arose. The neighbor who gave us countless tours of her house whenever we came knocking with another friend who was curious to see what it looked like on the inside. The neighbor who religiously pruned her rose bushes and brought over the trimmed blooms for my mom to place in bud vases throughout our house. The neighbor who gifted us a National Geographics subscription every year for Christmas and who routinely sent us postcards from all her travels.

It is common in movies and TV shows for an elderly neighbor to be depicted as grumpy and mean; the “get off my lawn” stereotype. And while I knew all of the previous examples of her generous behaviors towards me and my family to be true, I was still initially confused that an older, next door neighbor would actually enjoy the noise and raucous caused by a group of adolescents. What I wasn’t capable of realizing that day as a 13-year-

old was that my elderly neighbor was introducing me to the concept of vicarious joy. She had taken a situation where a neighbor might complain about noise levels and instead turned it into a joyful experience for herself, even though she wasn't directly involved in the revelry. She helped to create a safe space for a group of kids to unabashedly enjoy themselves without having to worry about the world around them. And all the while holding this safe space, she was able to delight in it herself.

January

Three Pieces by Traci Nivens

January

It was a crisp fall day, one that reminds you of apple cider and pumpkins, of crimson leaves and chunky sweaters. I was post call, in my third year of residency, and in that zombie fog of awareness. It was an easy Sunday, a simple distraction from a night of “keeping everyone alive” as we’d like to say, watching a casual game of football with my husband’s buddies.

I stayed in the car since it was a little too chilly to be outside, especially in Dallas where we were used to hot sticky summers and warm winters. As I sat listening to the radio, a warm cup of coffee in my hand, I began to search around for anything interesting to occupy my time. Out of pure boredom, I opened up the middle console, expecting to find a set of gloves I had forgotten about or maybe a pack of gum to help keep me awake. Instead, my hand felt a crisp sheet of paper, neatly folded in half, only partially trying to conceal its secret.

I can't wait until we can be together again. I love you.

My heart dropped to the floor, then leapt up and started racing out of my chest. We had been married seven years, high school sweethearts, relocated college towns and law schools to be together, traveled miles and miles to make our relationship work. How could this be happening? Who? When? Why? My mind was a frantic and jumbled mess. After such intricate planning of my whole life, I had no plan for this.

I hurriedly walked-ran out to the football field, to my smiling carefree husband in the middle of his guy time on a perfect Sunday afternoon. He was initially excited to see me, naively assuming that I had come to cheer him on, to be the Stepford wife he always wanted, standing there watching his game. Then suddenly he knew. He quickly realized it was time to start protecting his reputation.

“What’s this?” I screamed, grasping the paper, now wrinkled from my furious and sweaty hands. “Is this true? How could you do this?”

“Let’s go,” he said authoritatively, and I was carefully escorted back to the car, a child that would have to have such complexities explained to them away from others.

The car ride was the longest ten minutes of my life.

“How long?” “Since July.”

July - What did I remember about July, besides taking on the role as chief resident, the culmination of 4 years of training, the weight of the world on my shoulders as I cared for my patients. Our amazing vacation in Bellingham, where everything seemed perfect, not a care in the world for one glorious week, except for his unexpected work obligations. I would eventually learn that all of those pesky work calls required by the new firm were, in fact, not work at all.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?” I shouted.

Later, he would explain to me that the whole affair was my fault, not taking care of his needs with all of those silly residency hours getting in the way of my cooking dinner and managing my other domestic duties, and not making him feel like a man. What was not to blame was him.

We drove into the driveway of our 1930’s Tudor home in silence. I slammed the door of his car and raced into the house. As quickly as I could, I wrestled down two large suitcases from the closet and started piling in as many clothes as I could manage. Tears, apologies, excuses, all too late.

He stood there watching me, his sweet moppet suddenly making her own choices, her own decisions, just like she was taught in residency. I shoved my suitcases into my blue Honda Accord, grabbed my two cats and placed them in the front seat, and drove off. It was the last time I would see this house as a married woman, the last time I would see many photos and memories of my life up until this point, and the last time I would ever be called Anderson. It was also the best thing that could’ve ever happened to me, the first time I would truly stand on my own.

G8P0070

“Hi, this lady is a 29 year old G8P0070, AMA, IVF, PIGT and cell free negative declined amnio, with mo/di twins and sIUGR of twn A. She’s gonna need a C section at 37 weeks, 34 if Dopplers or fluid go south.”

“OK” I say, and I walk over to meet this couple for the first time to give them a date for the surgery that I likely won’t even be performing. This is one of the downsides of hospitalist work, the lack of continuity. After having spent a decade trying to juggle my own family commitments with private practice expectations, it is a downside I am willing to take.

I am one out of five or six specialists this patient will meet with today, overwhelming her and her husband with dates, instructions, expectations, outcomes, risks, benefits and alternatives. Are there any alternatives? Of course, there is always the option of walking away, of ignoring all of the medical advice, but with so much invested and with two unborn lives at stake, it doesn’t ever feel like there are any real alternatives.

What do I know about this mother, really? Or her husband? We glance over her history because it is too painful - mostly for her, but for me too. How much has she lived through with 7 miscarriages? I feel guilt for my own luck in this whole game of fertility roulette. My G3P3003 numbers would be enviable and possibly infuriating to her. How dare I walk through this journey unscathed, my three term pregnancies to show for it, not a loss in sight, while she by no fault of her own has had seven walks through hell. Each pregnancy with the excitement and joy and nervousness and hope, then the finding out - not again - not another loss. Having to mentally process the grief, then physically, then mentally again, and to eventually find the courage to try one more time.

I hope everything goes well for them. I am now meeting them much farther in their pregnancy than they have ever gone. This is both exciting and terrifying. Twins are innately a risky pregnancy, with the death of one or both twins a real possibility. A loss at this point would be devastating. More devastating?

I also find that this “story” as we call it, her history, contrasted by my own inadvertent luck, distances me a bit. Am I worried that her bad luck will rub off on me, or that my good luck will wear off?

I give her her planned C section date, go over the details, answer any questions, then send her off to the next specialist meeting for the day. If I am lucky I may be able to perform her C section, to be a familiar face to help calm her nerves. Or maybe I am there in the days

following, just a quick exam and visit postpartum, when she is on the other side of things, worried about the next hurdles to jump through in the neonatal ICU but also relieved to be able to have those worries. The truth is that there is a good chance I will never see this mother again after today. Have I done enough? Have I made her journey, her process, any easier? I can only hope that I did, and hope that I can do even more for the next patient I meet.

Well Tempered

Frayed edges, torn pieces of washi tape, borrowed from a child's craft drawer.

Feathered corners, confessions of the many days stuffed in a work bag, hoping to be snuck out for a little reprieve from the daily grind.

Green and white paper encompassing perennial desires, quatrefoil pattern revealing the simultaneous order and complexity of the contents inside.

Collegiate blue peeking out of the corners, stating "don't be fooled, this is a serious endeavor."

A standard copy, sitting in an enormous warehouse, stuffed between unfamiliar and unrelated objects, robotically shoved into a plastic bag and unceremoniously dumped in a dirty brown truck.

Eventually the address is found, and the cardboard box housing the purchase is thrown uncaringly onto a concrete porch, another task fulfilled by the Amazonian giant.

But once you were mine, oh how I loved and cherished you!
And despised you, with all of your complex and confusing ideas.
Who is speaking here, anyway?

Slowly, I begin to understand this new and exciting language, but just enough to feel like a tourist with a phrase book, still unable to even ask for directions clearly.
As you teach me, I begin to stand, then walk. Running still seems like an impossible task.

You have been a constant theme in my life, a melody that centers me and simultaneously challenges me to do better, to work harder, to not give up.

You have taught me resilience, hard work, success, failure and grace.

I may never master you, but the lessons I have learned from you have forever changed me for the better.

On Repentance and the Ross Bargain Bin Gay Vegan Jesus Wallet

By Tyler Fair

The queerest damn Jesus
I've ever seen.
Well, four Jesuses, I suppose
with four different
Easter-themed hair colors,
pastel shirt shades, and
disco-ed auras.

Beating
his heart naked, bare,
flaming
for all to see,
bound by a black barbed
wire crown

His hands
wounded yet un hiding.
Right pointer and middle
fingers slightly lifted
as if to say,
slow down
look again
see.

His eyes seem to stare
directly into me and yet
somehow also

away

Ashamed?

His mouth neither smile
nor frown just...

An ache?

A flimsy tag inside once reading
“Made in India”
He unfolds into pockets
of plastic and paper,
caricatures of capital and credit.

A threaded seam
seemingly unwinding
un-becoming
being
undone
already

Already?

He smells of hungry skin-y sweat
I'd think it were
someone's punctured
hide
if I didn't know better.

Resting in him
lies
my dated photo
under Spanish red
and beside turquoise Rockies
cowlicked, puffy eyed
beardless, grinned. Hair shorter than
these days. Less curly too.

Sticking my knuckle in
his slot, sliding
along Washington's face
I clink three quarters.

Belief?

Beneath his gay gaze I
feel a play-ful dare of
generosity—
his gently closed lips
silently
shouting: Enough!
"Give to God what is
God's"
yes, all of it
yes, all of you

Words of wisdom
from uneaten
fortune cookies and receipts of old remind me
—in diverse states of discoloration and sun staining—
to be
brave and to snort laugh
and to supermarket-aisle jig.

To return to this
Ross Bargain Bin
Gay Vegan Jesus Wallet

And reply with a
wink.

Hope-fully, once again,
baptized in the cosmic
punchlines of Grace
and Love and
Plant-Based Fleshy Resurrections.

Shadow Dancing

By James Thomas

Mac adopted me a long time ago. He just showed up one day, with a ball. I was pretty busy that day. He wouldn't take no for an answer. He just kept placing the ball at my feet in hope that I would throw the ball. The first time I fell for it and threw the ball. He just came back. Finally, I was done loading wood into the truck, so I took the ball and threw it as far as I could. I got in the truck and took off for home. As I was driving home, my rear view mirror was blocked by the wood. I couldn't tell if I had lost him or not. When I arrived home, Mac was in the driveway waiting for me. He still had his ball.

Not long after the day Mac adopted me, I was out in the front yard throwing the ball to him. When I threw the ball, Mac would launch himself into the air, spinning around in a circle, and catching the ball. There was no such thing as just playing catch. It was late in the afternoon, the sun must have gotten into his eyes. The ball went up, Mac's mouth snapped shut. The ball shot out of his mouth and flew out into the street. As he ran for the ball, his eyes caught site of another dog also running toward the ball. It all happened so fast. Tires screeching, Mac yelped and I ran. By the time I got to Mac, the other dog was at Mac's side. She offered him the ball, Mac took it, then rolled it to my feet. I looked down at the ball and Mac was standing on 3 feet. His front right paw had blood dripping from it. I put Mac in the back of the truck, the other dog jumped up in the back of the truck as well. Mac, although injured, welcomed the new dog into his heart. I knew right away that Martha, the name on her dog tag, would be staying awhile. With Mac in his usual spot, on the right side of the truck bed, Martha took what would be her spot on the left. I drove Mac to the Vet to have his foot stitched up. Later that day, Mac and Martha came home with me. Martha spent the rest of the night doting over Mac. Just in case you're wondering, you know the dogs names, my name is Mike. Mac, Martha and I would do just about everything together.

Best friends, Mac, 1 year older had taught Martha everything a dog needed to know. They would play, never too rough, the moment one or the other would yip in pain the play would stop. Mac won't eat unless Martha is there to eat with him. When going for a ride in the truck, it was always the same, Mac on the right side, Martha on the left. That was about 10 years ago.

Every now and then, Martha would catch a scent. A scent of something familiar, something tantalizing, a memory of a not-so-distant past. The scent turned to an emotion that would bring her to a run and she would not be at my side anymore. The closer she got, the more excited, gleeful she'd become. I would follow her to see where it would take us. Today, it was the back of the pickup truck. She got to the truck with the smells and memories fully embraced, standing proudly, having found Mac again, as if they had been playing hide and seek together.

There she danced, shadow boxing with Mac. The two of them chasing in circles.

That's when the full memory, the finality of the memory would hit her. The truck was the hardest on her. That was the last place she was with Mac. It was their last truck ride together. When I put Mac in the truck, I remember, he raised his head as if to try and take his proper place in the truck. He just stayed where I put him, too weak to stand. Martha beside him, not even the slightest bit interested in taking her place on the left side of the truck. By the time I had gotten Mac to the vet's office, Martha was saying goodbye.

For the rest of the day, Martha won't eat. I'll be bringing her water to the truck, as she won't leave it until tonight.

She

Three Pieces by Lisa Schneider

She

She has a face classic of her syndrome. Flattened brow, well defined, thick, dark eyebrows, her eyes don't convey feeling the way I've come to expect. Her voice is deep for one so small and lacks inflection. Still, everything she says is said with an urgency, a level of "this must happen right now". Those of us that care for her know this to be true; at least to some extent. This, whatever this is, really does need to happen right now. Otherwise, there will be upset and escalation.

She's small for seventeen, petite. Probably only about 4'10" and surely only seventy or eighty pounds. Her hair is brown and fans out just below her shoulders. I've never seen her syndromy face smile or reflect an emotion that I'd be able to define. I'm not sure if that speaks of my short comings, my lack of understanding or something intrinsic to her. Her face is a bit disconcerting when first beheld. It was a relief to me when I researched the syndrome and found out her appearance is textbook for the condition. Somehow being able to explain the close-set eyes and the definition in her brow was a relief. What the text doesn't speak to is her voice. The pitch, the lack of inflection, is this also part of the syndrome or something specific to her?

She's demanding. Her story is very specific. For those of us in the know just a few words tell the tale of who the patient is without so much as a glance at the board listing the patients in the department. I only needed small details during change of shift report to know who was here. They said changing her out of her soiled PJs into a clean onesie, zipper to the back, was going to be a challenge and I understood she was back in the department. I also knew that she'd be in the department for far too long. Also, no matter what we did there would be complication and her mother wouldn't be satisfied with her care. Our compassion would never be enough for Mom; we wouldn't be capable of completing tasks quickly enough and no one would be able to care for her well enough and still she'd wind up abandoned in the ER for days without end.

She seems to like being naked and, of course, this cannot be allowed. Although small in stature, she nonetheless has the development appropriate for her age. She has hair in the places a post pubescent female has hair, her breasts are developed. In many ways it is this development that makes care that much more difficult. She appears grown in so many ways but still needs to be changed out of her diaper and onesie like a baby. In many ways she is similar to a spirited toddler. She fights and exerts her independence. Unlike a toddler she isn't small and requires multiple adults to get basic cares done.

There is violence in these cares. Kicking, hitting, biting and hair pulling. She attacks like an animal in a cage as we try to remove the malodorous and soiled clothing to replace them with clean clothing that may last for the day or may only last for a moment. She throws herself to the ground and we move her from a prone position to all fours so that we may remove dirty underwear and replace them with something clean. While this act has cleanliness in mind it feels dirty. We become soiled by our actions as we hold her extremities and keep her in position. The taint of what we need to do to clean her stains all of us.

The fact is that the new onesie, opening to the back to prevent removal and the zipper reinforced with a hair tie to inhibit it being pulled down, will wind up on the floor, removed moments later. At some point we'll all have to revisit the trauma of putting it on all over again. For now, we can keep the suite door closed and place paper on the windows to maintain her dignity. Perhaps she deserves the autonomy of her choice of attire. Certainly, it keeps us from an immediate revisit to the abuse that dressing her felt like mere moments ago.

We bring in meals and meds. Some moments she has a clear motivator. Perhaps today is the day where Sprite or some other food or beverage is desirable and as long as it's available meds will be consumed without issue. Perhaps she'll decide that Sprite is no longer appealing and our bargaining chip will be lost. I'll get to test my ability to dodge the offered food and beverages. The adventure of when the tides will turn and what objects we will need to elude is ever-present. The need for hypervigilance is exhausting. Twelve-hour shifts don't seem designed for this; ER nurses certainly aren't. We thrive on the unexpected. While she is this, the expectedly unexpected in not where we thrive.

My Name

My name is Lisa. I think it's Hebrew in origin although I don't know what it means and my family is not Jewish. The origin isn't significant to it being given to me. My mom wanted to name me Melissa but thought that my name would then have too many Ss; phonetically I'm pretty sure that it ends up the same and that has always bothered me. When I was younger Lisa was always a really common name. Now there seem to be way less Lisas and I sometimes wonder where they all went. How impactful is geography on the popularity of a name; are all the Lisas back east? I can remember as a kid there were hotel soaps with my name on them. Eventually I learned they actually said USA and it just looked like they said Lisa. It was a bit disappointing when I realized this. I sometimes wonder if having the name Lisa ages me. Would another name make it harder to identify what generation I was born into? Would another name be more timeless? As a kid it always made me happy that there were personalized items at the store with my name on it, my brother wasn't as lucky. Nonetheless, I rarely wanted tchotchkes such as these but derived comfort in knowing they were available.

When I consider my name now, I'm ambivalent. I had always wanted a more unique name. I envied the kids, when called, knew for sure the caller was referring to them and not another person of the same name. I figured I would choose something creative if I ever had a female child. Now I wonder if my semi generic name allowed me to choose my path in a way that a cleverer name wouldn't have. If you have a more interesting name does that somehow dictate your path for you? Are doors closed or opened and do people decide things about you just based on your name? It's interesting to consider that I will only ever understand the journey of someone named Lisa; I'll never know what it's like to be named Star or Agnes or some other name I can't even imagine. Is Star automatically a hippie and does Agnes have to be older or an old soul? Lisa is a child of the 80s and she grew up in the 90s and 2000s. She remembers the first home computers and a time before cell phones. She started school at a time where putting pen to page was more the norm than using a computer. I'd imagine that has changed. Also, Lisa will almost always, much as I do, have Marie as a middle name. A little nod to Elvis, I suppose, and the choice he made in naming his daughter Lisa Marie. Did that name make my grandmother, a big Elvis fan, happy?

With a start like this, the year has to be great!

The concert last night was amazing; it was everything I had hoped it would be. My favorite band playing the iconic Madison Square Garden on New Year's Eve. This closed out 2019 with thousands of my closest friends and started off the new year in a really incredible way. The next day I went to meet my family for a New Year's Day celebration and I realized I had time to spare. Since the weather, while cool, was still quite pleasant for January in New Jersey I decided a walk in the park would be just the thing. I stopped at Verona Park and parked in my usual lot. Having grown up in the area this park and I had history and I was happy to pay it a visit as we hadn't spent time together in quite a while. As expected, there weren't many cars in the lot and I knew I would have the park and its trails to myself for much of my time there. I also knew that I had time enough to do the big loop around the lake and so I set off.

The cool January air felt good on my skin as I walked with last night's concert, a rebroadcast on satellite radio, playing in my ear buds. I could still feel the joy of the show, the enjoyment of the band as they played, and the excitement of the fans as they celebrated the potential of the new year ahead and bid farewell to the year we were leaving behind. The party atmosphere remained with me some twelve hours later.

I briskly walked around the lake and noticed the scampering of the squirrels. Each one seemed a reflection of the delight I was feeling as if they too were listening to the concert and excited for all the auspicious potential of the year ahead. The day was grey, the sky filled with those giant wintry east coast clouds that might mean snow later or might mean no more than winter in the northeast.

The boathouse beside the lake stood abandoned and forlorn waiting for the warmer weather when families would rent paddle boats and the restaurant would be filled with customers enjoying food from the grill and ice cream. The bridge over a narrow portion of the lake, the site of so many spring and summertime engagement and wedding photos, also stood vacant and waiting.

But oh! Those squirrels, how they scurry. No waiting for them. They, like me, were embracing the day and enjoying the slightly warmer weather and the potential of all to come.

I enjoyed the freedom of this sparsely populated park. As I walked, I encountered a few other people. I smiled at them in greeting until I remembered where I was and that strangers in NJ don't generally smile at one another. Surely people were thinking I was about to ask them for money. Then I saw the older man fishing. The lake is stocked each spring and it is

common to see people fish in spring and summer; winter fishing is far rarer. He was fully set up to catch fish but his bucket was empty.

Nonetheless, he was fishing and he seemed happy to return my smile when it was offered. In that moment all was good in the world. There were smiles, good music, and happy squirrels. Surely 2020 was going to be a great year.