

## That's All She Wrote

By Katha Pollitt

Although I did not choose this issue's poetry with a theme in mind, I find there is one—or two or three—in these seven poems: memory, loss, death, and different kinds of triumph over them.

I never get tired of learning about women who achieved great things despite obstacles. There are so many of them—and so many of them did not get their due. Jessy Randall offers three scientists, and in short, terse lines conveys their excitement and delight in their respective fields of zoology, geology and medicine. Inevitably, their stories, however triumphant, evoke the shadows of other women who were not so fortunate. Of Rebecca Lee Crumpler, the first African American woman to graduate from medical school (in 1864!) she writes, "They say, *first, first, first*, / as though everyone before me / lost."

Deborah Hauser's "Please Tell Me How" is a beautiful, hilarious poem about ... breast cancer. It is also tragic and manic, full of anxiety but also a fervor of language and imagination. I love the way Hauser rings changes on pearl/nodule imagery ("do oysters miss their pearls grieve for their lost jewels") and also the way she twines together themes of womanhood, mortality, and art: "how does a woman write about such a small thing in an epic way?"

Andrea Fry's "Leaving the Bitter" gives us resignation and determination pared down to its essentials. Bitterness is hard to leave—some people never manage it— but if you can do it, Fry seems to be saying, there's a reward: life restored, in all its beauty and clarity: "the red cardinal's/ black mask/ against the snow." An indelible image of finding joy in what is.

Who says puns are the lowest form of wit? I love Karen McPherson's clever wordplay: notice how in the opening line "long" goes from adjective (as in someone isn't long for this world) to (implied) verb: yes, we must long for this world! I love, too, the strange, rather ominous ending, that spool of thread writing an illegible signature as it rolls across the floor, as if to say, *That's all she wrote*.

Were it not for archeology, almost everything we know about Ancient Rome would come from the perspective of the wealthy, literate upper classes. In "Poor Bones," Lisa Mullenieux gives us the grave of the child Linus, a poor child, probably enslaved, who was nonetheless buried in a richly decorated hooded cape and laid to rest with an amphora for a pillow. Against a background of harsh poverty and short lives, one thing stands out across the centuries: Linus was a loved child.

With this issue, it's time for me to say goodbye to the *Women's Review of Books*. I'm grateful to Jennifer Baumgardner for giving me this opportunity to read and select poems, and to Charis Caputo and Noelle McManus for their good and steady hand on the production process. It's been a lot of fun working with both of them, and I feel privileged to have been able to place before our readers some wonderful poems by poets young and old, some famous, others perhaps to be famous someday. I hope you've enjoyed them! Happy reading to all.

With love, Katha

## Please Tell Me How

I too have a little hard nodule in my right breast not a little seed of fear but a solid mass 6 millimeters across (I never learned the metric system so it must be explained to me that it is the size of a pearl

{A 16 inch string of pearls is called a choker mine has already been restrung even though I rarely wear it perhaps I should wear it like a talisman or amulet do oysters miss their pearls grieve for their lost jewels do clams envy oysters their inedible beauty as I envy indelible ink its permanence}

and it takes some time for me to work through these measurements from inches to centimeters to millimeters) which are more valuable: the larger or the smaller pearls? this too I was never taught (or rather I failed to learn or have already forgotten though I am not old enough to start forgetting such things and am still too young for this diagnosis) so please tell me how does a woman write about such a small thing in an epic way is it permissible to string (on double-knotted silk thread) pearl-sized nodules for public display I have already sacrificed one healthy but enlarged left lymph node for no good cause it turns out that the cancer was lurking underground in the trusted right breast or is it now the wrong breast or a breast wronged it is certainly a breast wrung compressed digitized prepared for blockbuster 3D imaging and staging every (once) living thing can be staged or graded like a slab of meat (this much I have learned: choose stage door number 1) you who have put your ars poetica on the line and made the reader squirm through the afterbirth please tell me how to be: woman wife poet mother and yes I want to keep my breast too though it's merely decorative like the choker I rarely wear how do I find the core meaning and revise it in grand (but not pretentious) near epic form epic in that I perform (heroic) action rather than being acted upon how can any one ever write anything that is not merely self-(indulgent) elegy

—Deborah Hauser

## Leaving the Bitter

Now.

With the simplest  
gesture, rise  
from your chair.

And as you rise, let  
the raft of wrongs  
lose its mooring,  
let your tally  
of others' ecstasies  
and fortune dangle.

Now let them fall.

Enter into winter's  
frigid air, its stillness.  
There is no justice.  
There is no rancor.

Just the icicle  
that gives itself up  
in painless drops,

sky that's never  
been so blue,

and the red cardinal's  
black mask  
against the snow.

—Andrea L. Fry

## Poor Bones

At Ostia they died young,  
but not so young as Linus, laid  
to rest at eight years in his hooded cape  
with his seashell necklace and beads  
of carved bone and imported amber,  
enough to feed his family for half a year.

Harvesting the coastal salt beds  
in AD 1 or off-loading grain, iron, lead,  
marble, timber, bricks, and oil at the port,  
their bodies bent, then broke.  
Slave labor when pack animals were scarce.

For them, death was deliverance,  
exhaustion wrapped in a soft shroud,  
perhaps a coin in the mouth to ease  
the journey to the next world, their crypts  
topped by simple planks of wood.

Except for tiny Linus, curled on his side,  
an amphora for pillow, holding  
his delicate dowry, halfway between  
the pain of living and eternal light.

—Lisa Mullenieux

## Marie Tharp (1920-2006)

The map of my university education  
shows a double major  
and a quadruple minor.  
Towers and tentacles.  
A sonata built on a three-dimensional  
seven-line staff.

The ocean floor is even more complex.  
We listened to it, aboard ship.  
We literally burnt our map,  
ping by ping by ping.

Little school children learn about Pangaea now.  
That was us. That was ours.  
That was mine: the whole world.

\*

## Libbie Henrietta Hyman (1888-1969)

I don't like vertebrates.  
I don't like bones.  
So dull, so everyday.  
It's laughable.

Give me a worm,  
an urchin, a jelly.  
I'll measure the  
electricity they make.

I'll prove they do.  
They generate  
their own energy,  
boneless, like a heart.

\*

## Rebecca Lee Crumpler (1831-1895)

They call me the first African-American woman  
to earn a medical degree.

I call myself *doctress*.  
I call myself *businesswoman*.  
I call myself *being*.

They say *first, first, first*,  
as though everyone before me  
lost.

—Jessy Randall

## Long for this world

as when we are not, we must

for the comfort of the names  
of our childhood  
places: *Pretty Marsh, Dark  
Entry*;

the surprise of the semicolon,  
the nested clause, predictable  
pleasure of a rhyme;

even just one familiar figure  
against a familiar ground, aging  
in place

and time. The illegible inevitable:  
a spool dropped, rolling across  
the wooden floor, its thready tail  
a signature.

—Karen McPherson

**Deborah Hauser** is the author of *Ennui: From the Diagnostic and Statistical Field Guide of Feminine Disorders*. Her poems and book reviews have appeared in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She leads a double life on Long Island, where she works in the insurance industry.

As a practicing oncology nurse, **Andrea Fry** looks at life without sentimentality, but with intense compassion. She has published two collections of poetry, *The Bottle Diggers*, (2017, Turning Point Press) and *Poisons & Antidotes* (2021, Deerbrook Editions). Her poems have appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *Barrow Street*, *Cimarron Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Writer's Resist*, and many others.

**Lisa Mullenieux** is a writer and translator whose work has appeared in *The New England Review*, *The Tampa Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and other journals. Among modern Italian poets, she has translated Maria Attanasio, Anna Maria Carpi, Alfonso Gatto, and Amelia Rosselli. She lives in Manhattan and teaches writing for the University of Maryland GC.

**Jessy Randall** is the author of the poetry collections *Mathematics for Ladies: Poems on Women in Science* (Gold SF, 2022), *How to Tell If You Are Human: Diagram Poems* (Pleiades Press, 2018), and *Suicide Hotline Hold Music* (Red Hen Press, 2016). Her writing has appeared in *Poetry*, *McSweeney's*, *Nature*, and *Scientific American*. She is curator of special collections at Colorado College.

**Karen McPherson** is an Oregon poet and literary translator whose publications include *Skein of Light* (Airlie Press, 2014) and a 2012 chapbook, *Sketching Elise*. Her work has appeared in literary journals including *Descant*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Cirque*, *Cider Press Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Zoland*, *Potomac Review*, and *Chicago Quarterly Review*. She is also the author of a book-length translation of poetic essays by Quebec poet Louise Warren.