

The Best of the Bellevue Literary Review: Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION:

The experience of illness is both universal and specific. Each of us will at some time become a patient—experience an illness or disability that may be acute or chronic, mild or life-threatening. All of us will experience sickness and death of a loved one. Some of us—doctors, nurses and other medical professionals—interact with illness from “both sides of the stethoscope.” The impact of illness on us as individuals, in our relationships to one another and in the broader socio-political context cannot be underestimated.

Illness narratives, stories and poems that bring these issues to light provide a useful teaching tool. This study guide is based on *The Best of the Bellevue Literary Review*, published by the Bellevue Literary Press. These readings provide a framework for considering the illness experience from a variety of perspectives. This study guide will be useful for teachers of literature, ethics, medical/nursing students, social workers, as well as for health care professionals, adult continuing education courses, and general reading groups. The study guide is free, and is available online at www.BLReview.org.

We welcome your questions and comments. Please contact us at info@BLReview.org

PART I: INITIATION

PATIENTS

The Plagiarist by Hollis Seamon

1. Why doesn't the teacher notify the Dean's office of Derrick's plagiarism?
2. What does the teacher learn about herself? What does the student teach?
3. Is Althea sick? What makes us healthy and what makes us ill?
4. Althea loses her beloved dog, the love and friendship of a colleague – what does she gain?
5. How does she use poetry to understand her situation?
6. Note the importance of rhythm in this piece – the heart beat, the meter of poetry.
7. Discuss metaphors for the rhythm of the heart.
8. Contrast the cardiologist's explanations of Althea's medical condition with her own experience of it.
9. What is the power of language in this story?
 - poetry
 - word play
 - “loss of facility with words the minute she was faced with anyone in a white coat”
 - “the perfect world”
 - the words Althea speaks to her dying dog
 - Derrick's not speaking in class

Empathy

Teaching/Learning

Doctor-Pt relationship

Professional Behavior

Truth

Honesty

Mortality

Loss

Definitions of Sickness & Health

Music

Having an MRI/Waiting for the Laundry by Jan Bottiglieri

1. How do we learn about this woman's life?
2. How does she reveal to us who she is, where she comes from, where she is now?
3. Are there different types of memory? What is the nature of this memory?
4. Discuss the sounds in this poem.

Memory
Nostalgia
Sickness intruding on Health
Technology
Sense of Place
Family relationships
Music

The Road to Carville by Pat Tompkins

1. Why is Gar conflicted about driving Eldonna to Carville?
2. What defines a patient? Is Eldonna sick?
3. How is Gar's ambivalence displayed by the author?
4. How has Gar's war experience influenced his feelings about Eldonna and the other patients he drives to Carville?
5. How are animals used in this story?
6. What do you think about the ethics of Gar's decision?

Empathy
Unspoken relationships
Definitions of Sickness & Health
Truth
Dreams
Authority

What Were the White Things? By Amy Hempel

1. Why does the author delay going to the specialist's office?
2. Comment on these lines:
 - "finding the mystery in the clarity"
 - "the mind wants to make sense of a thing, the mind wants to know what something stands for."
3. Who is speaking? Elaborate on their meanings.
4. How does the author connect all of the "white things?" How are they related?

Memory
Uncertainty
Disclosing Information
Diagnosing

Cold Kiss by John Kay

1. Is the word play humorous in this poem?
2. What is cold in this poem?

3. Do you feel hopeful at the end of the poem?

Memory
Denial
Diagnosing
Confronting Death
Cancer

Nesting in a Season of Light by Angela Wheelock

1. Did Dr. Brown or the visiting doctor treat the patient incorrectly?
2. Was Dr. Brown honest? Was it right for him to tell the patient that he “missed the ectopic but saved her life?”
3. Did the missed ectopic pregnancy change the patient’s relationship with Dr. Brown?
4. “Listening is the greatest gift we can offer to one who grieves” Who was listening to the narrator?
5. Discuss the juxtaposition of the patient’s possible death – and her effort to create new life.
6. Discuss the images of the seasons; the light, birds, nesting, cycles
7. How does the author use garden imagery in the poem?
8. Comment on the line: “grief isn’t sadness it’s more life feeling you’re going crazy.”
9. Is pregnancy/infertility a state of health or sickness?
10. How does the narrator and her husband process their grief?
11. Did the telling of this story help the narrator?

Procreation
Coming to understand
The importance of place
Coming to peace
The cycles of the earth and people
Women’s health
Loss
Grief
Betrayal/Trust
Truth
Support

Fissure by Deborah Davis

1. Does empathy come from wisdom?
2. Did the doctor or the nurse exhibit empathy?
3. Should the physician have addressed the “long deep fissure” that had not and would not heal with medicine?
4. What do doctors treat?
5. Note the three parallel descriptions of the rape, the examination, the enemas.

Pain (physical and emotional)
Humiliation
Empathy

DOCTORS

She Makes the First Cut by Linda Tomol Pennisi

1. Discuss the connection between this poem and “I Want to Tell My Daughter....”
2. Is the mother speaking directly to her daughter?
3. Discuss medicine as art
4. How does the poet use the imagery of the hands?
5. Comment on the structure and the flow of the poem
6. Discuss the musical instruments and the meaning of music in this poem
7. Connections between medicine and music

Memory
Doctors in Training
Family Relationships
Music
The Art of Medicine

I Want to Tell My Daughter Not to Name the Cadaver by Linda Tomol Pennisi

1. Why doesn't the mother want her daughter to name the cadaver?
2. What connects the mother and daughter?
3. What does the mother understand about the experience of dissecting a cadaver – that perhaps her daughter/student doesn't know?
4. Is the mother a doctor? A musician?
5. Discuss the blurring of boundaries between the mother, daughter, and cadaver.
6. Note the symmetry of the poem's structure.

Professional Detachment
Coping
Doctors in training
Family Relationships
Empathy
Music

MUD by Thomas McCall

1. How does “medspeak”, acronyms, medicalization of language help health care providers cope with stressful situations?

2. How does the nurse Darlene help the student and help Leslie?
3. Compare & contrast the student's image of his wife and Leslie.
4. How does Leslie respond to the student? What do we understand about her character?
5. What does the author mean by "Apathy or anarchy had formed one unit to its neighbor"?
6. How does the student's feelings about this baby change from "already a goner" to "incandescent, Heaven's light."?

Professional Detachment
 Doctors in training
 Doctor-Nurse Relationship
 Support
 Nurses

The Initiation by Alicia Ostriker

1. Was the head surgeon helpful to the intern?
2. Is the poet a man or a woman? Would the gender of the author make a difference in the response to the last line of the poem: "Boy, he said...?"
3. Discuss the use of family relationships as a literary device.

Social Organization of Medicine
 Professional Detachment
 Empathy
 Teacher-Student Relationship
 Doctor-Patient Relationship
 Family relationships

Field Trip, Ypsi State by Roy Jacobstein

1. Whose voice is dominant in this poem?
2. What does the student learn in his interaction with the patient?
3. What do you think he expected from Psych 402? How is this experience different from his expectation?

Dr-Pt Relationship
 Organization of medicine
 Doctors in Training
 Detachment
 Humor

Ask Him if He Knows Jesus by C.E. Smith

1. What does the author mean by "contradictions precluded infallibility"?

2. Is there a role for religion in medicine?
3. Is it appropriate for Dr. Mitchell to ask David to pray?
4. Why is David relieved to see that Camilo is still paralyzed after they pray over his legs?
5. Is the miracle real or not?
6. Discuss the role of translators

Professional detachment

Authority

Religion & Science

Doubt

Translators

Shobo by Dannie Abse

1. Who are the characters in this poem? Where are they from? Where is the action taking place?
2. What is the patient's concept of health, sickness, and the cause of his illness? What is the doctor's concept of these?
3. What does the poet mean by "malignant eidolon"?
4. Describe the structure & rhythm of the poem

Cultural Divide b/w Doctor & Patient

Religion & Science

Translators

Diagnosing

Prisoner by John Stone

1. What is the prison? Who is the prisoner?
2. Does the poet feel that this research is morally correct?
3. What metaphors does the poet use for the illness?
4. How does the opening quotation from Auden relate to the rest of the poem?
5. Discuss the historical references

Research

Vulnerable Populations

Doctor-Patient Relationship

Humor

Veterans

COMING OF AGE

First Born by John Grey

1. Is someone who is in the hospital, but not sick, really a patient?
2. What defines a patient? (is it the condition they have or the care they receive?)
3. Do we do patients a disservice when we don't differentiate the healthy from the sick?
4. Why is the husband defensive about his wife "illness?" Does he feel threatened or powerless in the face of the changes occurring to her?
5. Is the husband embarrassed by her good health, and that they will all leave the hospital happy and healthy? (Was obstetrics always this way?)
6. What brings these individuals together in the hospital experience?
7. What is each one waiting for ?
8. Discuss the image "two steps behind her smile"
9. What image in the poem stands out most for you?
10. What do you make of the final image?

The hospital experience
Definitions of sickness & health
Miracles in medicine

Breathe by Caroline Leavitt

1. Why is the woman angry in the beginning of the story?
2. What were you were expecting to happen when his mother knelt down before Sammy as he was leaving for school.
3. "There was only one thing that could hurt him and that was his asthma" – discuss the impact of illness on the boy.
4. The breath - discuss "Don't hold your breath" – both the doctor and Sammy's mother use this phrase – what are the different implications?
5. Discuss the power of the inhaler
6. "As he loses his breath, she deflates" – analyze the use of breath and air in the writing
7. How do you feel about a mother abandoning a sick child because " I deserve a life too" ?
8. Can you empathize with the mother?

Independence
Humiliation
Family relationships
Empathy
Coming of Age
Impact of illness on growing up
Illness & Family Dynamics
Caretakers

If Brains Was Gas by Abraham Verghese

1. What does the title of the story mean?
2. What is the relationship between JR and the girl?
3. Discuss the line “A little girl inside me began to weep, even though I knew I should be relieved.”
4. Contrast the image of JR’s dentures in the beginning of the story with the image at the end of the story.
5. Who grows up in this story?
6. The author is a man and he is writing in the voice of a teenage girl – is this credible/authentic?

Coming of Age
Family Relationships
Independence

See Photo Below by Rick Moody

1. The poet provides a clue as to the meaning of his poem in the footnote – how does this relate to the text?
2. What is prohibited and what is allowed?
3. Note the rhyme scheme: reprobation, veneration, liberation, information, termination...comment on other structural and rhythmic aspects of the poem.
4. The last verse “feels” different than the rest of the poem – why?
5. “Driven by passion, he and his sweetheart drive to a neighboring state whereupon they lie down gently.” What image does this provoke for you?

Independence
Coming of Age
Social Mores

PART II: CONFLICT: GRAPPLING WITH ILLNESS

UNCERTAINTY

Angina by Alicia Ostriker

1. What is the poet anxious about?
2. How does the poet use images from nature to describe her chest pain?
3. What does the deer stand for?

Uncertainty

Anxiety

Definitions of sickness & health

What We Don't Know by Gail R. Henningsen

1. How important is it to have a diagnosis?
2. Does the diagnosis matter?
3. Should doctors remain silent when they are uncertain?
4. List the examples of anger expressed by the patient.
5. What is the diagnosis? Is the author sick?
6. How does the author cope with her symptoms?
7. Various doctors have diagnosed different causes of the patient's sickness – what is the real reason for her illness?
8. Who makes the diagnosis? Does the patient choose her own diagnosis?
9. What does the author mean by “you are sickened by being yourself, so have become someone else”?
10. What do doctors treat? How do we get well?

The importance of place

Uncertainty

Qualities of Life

Definition of Sickness & Health

Dr-Pt Relationships

Uncertainty

Different POV of Drs and Pts

Diagnosing

The Bald and the Beautiful by William Bradley

1. Is this coping or denial?

2. Why are patients hesitant to be optimistic?
3. The patient believes in the “transformative power of art”. Why is he drawn to soap opera?
4. Are physicians hesitant to use humor?

Coping

Denial

The value of humor

Sharing a life

So Much in the World is Waiting to be Found Out by Sariah Dorbin

1. What does the title of the piece mean to you?
2. Does the author have any hope at the end of the story?
3. Characterize the way the medical team interacts with the patient and the daughter – are there differences between the doctors and nurses?
4. How is the world of advertising similar to, or different from, the world of medicine?

Family relationships

Loss

Doctor-Patient relationships

Doctor – Family relationships

Loneliness

Hope

DISABILITY

The Facts by Mark Rigney

1. What are the unspoken meanings of the line “ I’m a big boy now...”?
2. What does the “walk” around the lake mean for each of the characters?
3. Were Maurice and/or Kaylie responsible for Lewis’ death?
4. Did Lewis commit suicide?
5. Discuss the author’s comments about the “newspaper reporting” point of view about Lewis, Maurice, Kaylie.
6. How does the author reveal information about the characters and events?
7. Is there foreshadowing in this story?

Independence

Disability

Uncertainty

Caretakers

Nurses

Professional Behavior

Forgettery by Rachel Hadas

1. What happened to the poet? To her voice – spoken, written?
2. The language “lands on its feet” – did the poet?
3. Has her quality of life been diminished, enhanced or left unchanged?
4. Comment on the last line “I could have been in search of nothing and found just what I was looking for”.
5. Discuss these words: “forgettery” and “obliviousness”

Loss

Language

Memory

Disabilities

Coping

Qualities of Life

The Absolute Worst Thing by Seth Carey

1. “Laughter and denial are the tools that make living with this nightmare possible.” Is laughter denial?
2. Is denial a bad thing?
3. What is your absolute worst thing?
4. What tone does the author adopt in telling his story? Does this make you empathize more or less with him?
5. Discuss these 3 things: cats, mosquitoes, hugging your wife
6. What is the lesson of this story? Do you agree with author’s point of view? Would you have the same reaction to *The Absolute Worst Thing* you could think of?
7. Has the writer come to peace with his situation?

Disability

Coping

Qualities of Life

Uncertainty

Coming to Peace

Sharing a life with illness

Denial

Laughter

Sentence by Barbara Lefkowitz

1. Discuss the meaning of the title “Sentence”
2. What is the “round black lacuna that will replace forever the middle of this page” – do you know the poet’s diagnosis?
3. Is there really certainty about prognosis?

4. Has the poet come to peace with her situation?
5. How do we prepare for future disability?

Disability
 Nature
 Loss
 Coming to Peace

Pain by Stephen Dixon

1. Who is disabled?
2. Who is sick and who is well?
3. What happens when the caretaker becomes ill?
4. Does it make a difference if your caretaker is a family member or a health care professional?
5. Did you think the wife was sick at the beginning of the story ? the middle? the end? – how did her illness change in relation to her husband’s health/illness?
6. How did you feel at the end of the story?

Humiliation
 Intimacy
 Family Relationships
 Caretakers
 Sharing a Life

COPING

Revelations by David Shine

1. When a person becomes a patient, describe some of the levels of fear that he/she may experience.
2. How do health care givers’ fears affect their relationship and communication with patients?
3. In your experience, are fears regarding medicines and surgery adequately handled by the health care system?
4. Describe how the “resolve of the device” contrasts with our more human foibles and how this may affect a person psychologically.

Coping
 Fear of Dying
 Empathy

The Little Things by Joan Malerba-Foran

1. Does the protagonist sound her stated age? Why or why not and are you surprised?
2. Do you feel that the “counselors, therapists, and psychologists” have missed the protagonist’s underlying problem with alcohol while focusing on more ancillary ones?
3. Do you believe that the protagonist has a handle on her problem or, is she in a state of denial?
4. Does the author sympathize with the protagonist? Students? Who do you sympathize with, and why?
5. What does the author mean when she writes, “Tonight I’m going to do a planned drunk, the second hardest thing any professional drinker can attempt.” What is the hardest thing?

Coming of Age

Emotional Pain

Importance of Economic Birthright

Writing Poems on Antidepressants by Nikki Moustaki

1. Do you believe that “love is a type of madness.”
2. How does the author view the creative process and how is it impacted by the therapy for depression? Do you think that the author believes that the trade-off is worth the treatment?
3. How does an individual try to determine which treatments should be considered in the face of adverse reactions due to treatment, the severity of illness, the chance of cure?
4. Describe the major elements of irony in this poem.

Loss

Pain

Adverse Reactions to Medication

Irony

In the Hospital by David Lehman

1. What type of hospital is the author referring to? Is it relevant to this poem?
2. What does the author mean when he writes “Denmark wasn’t a prison or brothel, it was a hospital”?
3. How is the perception of time changed when a person is hospitalized?
4. What is the reference to Freud about in this poem?

Coping

Hospitalization

How Suffering Goes by Melisa Chanmann

1. What is the title of the poem referring to?
2. How do you think the girl perceives her mother? What does she feel about her and how does she cope with the problem?
3. Do you feel that the monkey metaphor is a successful device in this poem?
4. Is the mother's sickness real or imagined?

Coping

Parent-Child relationships

Chronic illness

Postoperative Care by Arlene Eager

1. Transformation through illness is a common theme in literature. Describe the ways in which this poem explores transformation.
2. Does detachment serve a positive role in dealing with illness for the patient?

Coping

Detachment

Midnight in the Alzheimer's Suite by Floyd Skloot

1. How does the poem illustrate the difficulty of converting intention into action?
2. Are there positive aspects to dementia?
3. Is the "struggle to maintain her poise" a metaphor?
4. Do we infantilize older, demented patients?
5. What is the most powerful image in the poem?
6. Is there any part that makes you "choke up"? Why?
7. The poet uses very simple language. There are no fancy or flowery phrases, no impressive structure. Why is the poem so powerful?

MADNESS

The City of Lights by Sandy Suminski

1. The author writes, "It is the most real I have ever felt. Only in this intense light can I truly now live. Yet I realize the price of this...a certain isolation from the merely earthbound." Does this justify rejection of medical treatment by some writers and artists? (previously written and adapted)
2. Was Ann negligent in leaving the protagonist alone?
3. How does mental illness affect relationships of friends and family members?

4. Do you feel that the protagonist was taken advantage of by Nikolai? Is this in your opinion a prevalent problem in the lives of the mentally ill?
5. Why do you think that delusions and hallucinations related to religion are so prevalent among the mentally ill?
6. Is bipolar behavior a disease?
7. Does a physician need to “understand” in order to treat?

Mental illness

Physical and emotional abuse

Delusions

Religion

Madness seen from the “inside” or “the other side”

Bellevue by Julia Alvarez

1. Is the threat of “I’m going to Bellevue” an empty one?
2. Is the mother really ill or simply looking to control her children and perhaps express her desire for a break?
3. How do the threats of abandonment affect the lives of children?
4. Does our society provide enough support for single parents with little money?

Stress

Abandonment

Economics

Emotional illness

Shaking the Dead Geranium by Harriet Rzetelny

1. What are some of the “survival” mechanisms that the family of mentally ill employ that are noted in this story?
2. Describe the role of guilt in this story (mother’s and daughter’s) and how the feeling of guilt plays out in the families of the mentally ill.
3. What does the author mean on page 3 when she writes, “His mind is like an old suit of once-excellent quality, that has been patched and re-patched with odd pieces of material that don’t quite go together, kind of like a crazy quilt.”?
4. What does the protagonist feel when she states that “My love is inadequate to protect him.”? Do you believe that this is a common theme for family and friends of the mentally ill? What about for family and friends of people with other illnesses?
5. Does the protagonist make the right choice at the end? Will this lead to a change in lifestyle?

Mental illness

Guilt

Impact of illness on family

Thanksgiving: Visiting My Brother on the Ward by Peter Schmitt

1. Discuss the theme of betrayal the patients with psychiatric illness often feel as noted in this poem and in the story “Shaking the Dead Geranium”? How does this play out on the family?
2. Describe the “relationship” that patients with mental illness have with their medications. Are the medications perceived as friend or foe and why?
3. What is meant in the poem by “Have you gotten what you came for?”?

Mental illness

Guilt

Non-adherence with medications

Effects of mental illness on families

Overblown by Hal Sirowitz

1. Is this poem written from the doctor’s or patient’s perspective?
2. Do patients frequently feel condescended to by physicians as this patient seems to?
3. Is the shift from the patient’s to doctor’s voice effective in this poem?

Anxiety

Doctor-Patient relationships

Medical condescension

CONNECTIONS

Songs from the Black Chair by Charles Barber

1. Have you had the experience of being given “official terminology” for patients which don’t fit?
2. What do you think of the line (bottom of 2nd page) “they may be mentally ill but they’re not crazy”?
3. What can be learned from the narratives of men like Leif and Richie?
4. At top of 5th page, author speculates that Lief’s wildness might have served him well a few thousand years ago. Are there aspects of mental illness that are only “illnesses” in particular contexts?
5. Why is “traveling” such an ingrained reflex? Is it a metaphor for anything?
6. Leif says—on 6th pg—”I gotta keep moving. Death is being static.”
7. Comment on the contrast of Richie’s attitude and the author’s “official duties.” (pg 7)
8. Pg 8 “It was an expression of shy longing, a wish to be part of something that was unavailable to them. America, it seemed, was a party they could observe but not attend.”

9. Why does the author describe his work as “strangely and cruelly exhilarating”?

Psychotherapist at the Landfill by Lou Lipsitz

1. What does the author mean by “detective of dreams”?
2. Does the author reach closure at the end of the poem?
3. Can one read this as a coming of age poem? If so, how and in which lines is this theme prominent?
4. What is the “long initiation through the comradely, lonely stinging sweat lodge of the years” referring to?
5. Overall, would you say that the author is contented with his life?

Aging
Coping

The Caves of Lascaux by Miriam Karmel

1. Is it ethical to leave patients in the dark as is written in the first paragraph?
2. Does the portrayal of the doctor’s anxieties regarding telling Nora the news of her breast cancer paint him in a favorable light? Do you think that such anxieties are commonplace for physicians or are most doctors too detached for such emotional attachment?
3. Is Lawr really in love with Nora or in love with the idea of her? Is it commonplace for physicians to feel love for their patients? If so, how might this play out on the doctor-patient relationship?
4. Do you think that it is possible for physicians to keep their work in the workplace? What effects does the introduction of their work life into the home have on the family life of physicians?

Doctor-patient relationship
Doctor-family relationship
Doctor transference

Surgeon by Sharon Pretti

1. What does the author mean by “as if to say where she’s been..”? Is this a common sentiment that doctors wear when approaching the families of patients? Is it pretentious?
2. Do the illusions to nature work for you in this poem?

Doctor- patient family relationship
Medical hubris

The Levitron by Robert Oldshue

1. Do you feel that the description of the nurses' job at the nursing home is an honest and real one? Do you feel more sympathy for them having read this?
2. This story is packed with satire. Name several of the aspects of the health care system that are satirized. Is the use of satire successful here?
3. Do you believe that the author is misguided in his lack of conviction that technology is the way out of some of our most difficult medical-social problems?
4. What do you think is the major point of this story?

Coping

Family-health care system relationships

Technology in medicine

Miss Erma, Private Duty by Madeleine Mysko

1. Is the nurse sympathetic to the plight of Mrs. Carlisle?
2. Does the author sympathize with the nurse's position?
3. Discuss how the use of images of sight and light contrast the lives of the nurse and patient. Do you feel that this is effective?

Nurse-patient relationships

Aging

Coping

Biofeedback by David Milofsky

1. What do you feel is the theme of this story?
2. Is the protagonist Sylvia a likeable character? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think that Sylvia connects with Dr. Nygaard?
4. How does a patient's preconceptions of what a physician is supposed to be color their view in any particular patient-doctor relationship? Does "Biofeedback" make any judgments regarding this? If so, explain.
5. What does the divorce theme and Sylvia's realization that she needs to be away from her husband add to the story?
6. Do you think that the author is asking the reader to generalize the beneficial effects of alternative therapy other than biofeedback?

Doctor-patient relationships

Doctor as the patient

Alternative medicine

Family (Suzanne)

FAMILY

Lily of The Valley by Emma Wunsch

1. The father, Henry, took care of his wife when she became ill, and after his wife died, had to learn how to cook for himself and his daughter, and raise her alone. What do you learn about the father, from how he's handled these?
2. Locate the several instances in which the father tries to bring up his concern to his daughter about her lack of eating, but fails to do so.
3. There are several minor threads that weave through the story: the boy with the hole in his cheek, the father's work on the physics textbook, the unusual Seattle heat. How do these resonate and add girth to the central story?
4. This story appears at first to be about Lily's possible anorexia. But the turning point is not in solving that problem. It is an internal realization that occurs in the father. Henry travels common emotional responses to a problem: denial, recognition, struggle, breakthrough. This journey is similar to the plot outline of a story: exposition, *intensifying* conflict, crisis or *turning point*, resolution. What epiphany does the father have? Were you surprised at this ending?
5. Although the title and use of Lily's name is about "the valley" as in Los Angeles, consider her name and the story in light of the following Biblical verses (Matthew 6:29-34): "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself."
6. On p. 6, in the midst of their exchange, there are lines about perception: when Lily was little, her father showed her how perception can change by closing one eye, then the other, and she is doing it as they speak. This is a detail, and may be overlooked. But it is in the planting of such details that the writer's work accumulates to work its magic on the reader. How does this foreshadow Henry's epiphany? Can you find other such details?

Above the Angels by Phillip Levine

1. "It's their life." What kind of life is the poet describing?
2. There is a description of a painting of the angel Gabriel, in the poem. What are the differences between that represented angel and the child who is described as an angel?
3. "In this world the actual occurs." What is 'actual' here? List words that leap out as showing what's actual. What does the 'actual' exclude?
4. The poet asks:
"...how can the life of an angel abide
a Ford plant where the treasures
of the earth are blasted and beaten into items?"
Levine is alluding to these New Testament verses (Matthew 6:19-20):

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where rust and dust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.”

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

How would you answer Levine’s question?

The Liver Nephew by Susan Ito

In fiction, as in life, character and action intersect. That is, a person of a certain character may be inclined to act a certain way. On the other hand, choosing one action rather than another helps to form a person’s character. Like a game, in a story competing possibilities increase as the plot moves along, until some decision is made or insight occurs. In the most compelling suspenseful games, the stakes are high, and the teams close.

1. Trace the conflicting pulls vying for Parker’s choice to donate, or not to donate, his liver. You might think of this as keeping score.
2. Consider Parker’s character. What kind of a person does he seem to be? Aside from his circumstances, is he convincing as someone who would consider organ donation? What kind of person would do such a thing, and what kind would not?
3. What has become more solid in his character by the end of the story? What has come undone?
4. “Blood is thicker than water.” Consider the validity of this folk saying from the point of view of Parker, his uncle, and his cousin George.
5. What motivates George to tell his cousin the truth? How might that be more believable?
6. Write about a time in your life when you felt especially vulnerable. What decisions have you made out of that sense of desperation?
7. What are the risks of donating a liver? In this story, the doctors offer limited counsel to the nephew. Should the medical team take more responsibility for who donates an organ?

The Golden Hour by Sue Ellen Thompson

1. What is similar in the poet’s caretaking of her dying parents and her memory of caretaking her infant daughter?
2. What advice does this poem offer caretakers about their own self-care? What advice do you have, or wish you had gotten?
3. Notice images of space and freedom. Notice images of enclosure, confinement. What does the poem say about the terrible pull of love, its obligation and snare? Does it conjure up any such pull for you? Write about such an instance in your life.
4. Find rhymes, slant-rhymes (words ending in the same consonants), and alliteration. Then locate words and line ends that are declarative, abrupt. How do these two kinds of sounds conspire to assist the poems’ themes?
5. Locate – or imagine – a golden hour in your own life. Describe it in a paragraph.

“Socks” and **“Stubborn”** by Meg Kearney

1. In “Stubborn,” how does humor serve the father and daughter? ease their mutual self-consciousness?
2. The relationship of parent to child is reversed, in these poems. The daughter ministers to the father. How does the labor and intimacy of caring for the father in a physical way serve as a rite of passage? (Note: I originally wrote “...serve as a ritual of love as well as preparation for mourning”)
3. The poet uses two comparisons in each poem. Find each. Read each poem again without these. How do these similes and metaphors contribute to the impact of the poems? To their vividness?
4. The daughter says she later steals the Gold Toe socks. Why would she steal them? Why would the poet use “steal” rather than “take”? Have you ever stolen anything for similar reasons?
5. In many countries families are encouraged or must participate in a patient’s hospital stay, supplying blankets, food, being present in the examination room. Please comment.

PART III: DENOUEMENT

MORTALITY

Living Will by Holly Posner

1. Does the “doctor” conversation differ from conversations about very old age and death that any serious older adults might have?
2. “‘First do no harm’ circles its wagons.” Who is threatened? What is the threat? Who is on the inside and who on the outside, of this circle, at this dinner table?
3. If you were the poet’s husband, would you help load her pockets, when it’s time? Write your own response. Write the response from the point of view of the husband in the poem.
4. The title of the poem is “Living Will.” What is a living will? Is the phrase an oxymoron? Do you or any of your loved ones have a living will? What is the difference between a living will and the assistance in dying that the poet refers to in alluding to Virginia Woolf, who famously loaded her pockets with stones in order to drown?
5. This is a narrative poem. It tells a story. There’s a conflict, a turning point, a resolution. What does the narrator do that is unusual for her, in this circle?

Studies in the Subjunctive by Ruthann Robson

1. What is the connection between the author’s illness (cancer) and Anne Sexton’s suicide?
2. Does the writer seem depressed?
3. What role did the World Trade Center attack play in her thinking?
4. Is this “overintellectualized”?

Cancer narrative
Coping with illness

To a Child Contemplating Suicide by Helen Klein Ross

1. What purposes does the comparison to the grandfather’s outlined tools serve in the poem?
2. This poem is spare. How does that contribute to the poem’s impact? To your sense of the poet?
3. The poem consists of two sentences, arranged on the page in couplets.
4. In what ways does this visual lay-out contribute to its effect? Try rearranging it.
5. What phrases or words leap out at you? Choose one, and write for ten-twenty minutes without thinking or stopping, letting your pen take you where it goes.
6. Respond in writing, as if you were the child contemplating suicide, to the poet’s appeal.

Art by Eric Nelson

1. What are the difference between the mother's drawing and the son's? What do they reveal about the attitudes of each toward the son's terminal illness?
2. Using crayons, draw this boy and this mother. Illustrate any part of the poem you choose, or illustrate the "story" of the poem, the changes that occur from beginning to end, using a comic-book or film-making storyboard technique of consecutive frames. the narrative arc of the poem,
3. There's a tendency of adults to think they should shield children from unpleasant truths. Comment on this. Recall a time when you were a child that this poem conjures up. Recall an incident as an adult interacting with a child that this brings to mind.
4. Nowhere in this poem is the child's diagnosis revealed. It is in present tense. And time is referred to without using the word "time." How do each of these factors contribute to the impact of the poem?
5. What line in this poem is the most moving to you? Why?

A Room Full of Christmas by Scott Temple

1. Comment on the psychiatrist's observation that he wanted to learn coping from his patient.
2. Is this empathy?
3. Was the psychiatrist encouraging denial?
4. Is the "room full of Christmas" magical thinking?

MD and Patient

Coping

Empathy

"Silence = Death" by Rafael Campo

1. Do you remember seeing this slogan, Silence=Death? What did it mean? Why was this slogan used? Is it relevant now?(maybe the last question is asking this)
2. Investigate the word "count," including its variations, in this poem. List the number of times it is used. Take a look at who counts.
3. Similarly, check out the usage of words about speaking and language, and also words about silence.
4. "...one left me this stupid T-shirt when he died," the patient says. The poet himself wonders, at the poem's beginning, why the t-shirt still threatens him. Why does it?

The Raft by Toni Mirosevich

1. Do you believe that aging is characterized by progressive jettisoning of friends and family from "the raft"?

2. Are we all ultimately alone on “the raft”?
3. Is there another way?
4. Are there ways in which you have shared this “shedding”?

Loss

Isolation

A Widow at 93 by Andrew Merton

1. A shiv, according to the dictionary, is “a knife or razor, especially used as a weapon.” Pronounce the word “survive” with a soft ‘v’ sound; now pronounce it like a shiv.
2. What is a transitive verb?
3. Imagine this poet is at the dinner table along with the doctor’s wife in the poem “Living Will.” Imagine what he might contribute to the conversation. Write pieces of his dialogue to fit into that poem.
4. The widow has lost more than her husband. At 93, she has also lost a brother, and a son. Anyone living into very old age will suffer such losses. “What is the toll of such loss? Are there other ways to survive that toll besides “dying slowly? Does this differ from people surviving loss of loved ones in war or catastrophe?”

Morning at Fifty by Alan L. Steinberg

1. The opening paragraphs outline the stages Ebstein goes through, each time he drives to visit his father. Less clearly delineated, on pp. 50-51 there are also three stages he goes through whenever he first sees his father. What do these stages have in common?
2. On pp. 49-50, Ebstein describes several residents who live in the nursing home. What do his descriptions have in common?
3. At those times when Ebstein’s father doesn’t recognize him, Ebstein feels “insubstantial, as if he were without weight and substance.” Recall a time when someone you care about acted as if you weren’t there, didn’t acknowledge your existence. How did you feel?
4. Imagine Ebstein’s father could speak. What might he say to Ebstein’s desire for him to be the father he once knew?
5. Sam’s sentences repeat like a refrain. Ebstein calls them “nonsensical” but although inarticulate and in the background, they clearly make sense. Write them as one continuing sentence. Examine the author’s pacing of them.
6. How does the title resonate to you?

DEATH

His Own Time by John Thompson

1. The narrator “does his time” by reading, others by walking. How does Larry do his time?
2. Institutions have their own habits and mores. A prison is an institution. A hospital is an institution. Are there any similarities?
3. “It ought to be a private thing, at the very least done at night time.” What does the narrator mean by this? What does this have to do with his feelings and the others’ towards Larry’s act?
4. What common attitudes among medical personnel prevail in regard to patient behavior? Are there ways to behave as a patient that are disapproved? Consider how one community of medical personnel might approve and disapprove the behavior of another such community. (nurses, aides, doctors) This may be too complicated.
5. Describe an instance in your own experience when you might have stopped another person from speaking or acting self-destructively.
6. In an article about suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge, an impatient driver halted because of a suicide attempt, wishes the suicide “would just go ahead and do it.” Recall an instance when you felt impatient towards someone in a similar way, whether anonymously as in the instance cited here, or more personally, as in the story.
7. Who do you think is responsible for Larry’s death?
8. If you were Morgan, how would you respond? If you were the narrator, what would you say? And if you were Larry, how would you answer? Using first person, (“I”), write responses in each one’s voice.
9. This story could have been written without the book-ended opening and conclusion. What do those, set in the present, reveal about the effect of this incident and prison on the narrator? That question may be too revealing, perhaps it would be better to ask What would be gained or lost?
10. Could this have occurred outside a prison setting? How does the fact that this incident occurs in a prison setting affect what happens?

The Accident by Gray Jacobik

1. How does the author use images of light and dark to advance his investigation of the active process of dying?
2. What effect does the bird coming down the aisle preceded by her flower girls have on you near the end of the poem? How does it enhance and deepen the meaning of the line before it: “The unexpected comes preceded by its irreversibility...”
3. What does the poet mean in the last line when he calls death “an absolute union”? What images come to your mind when you think of death? How many different ways does the poet refer to death in the poem?
4. Notice what words are repeated throughout the poem. How does the repetition of a word enhance the poems meaning and rhythm?

5. What do you believe happens as a person is dying? Do you believe there is light at the end of a tunnel or that you will be escorted “home”?
6. Have you been with someone at the time of their death? Does this poem make it easier or harder for you to think about death?

Helicopters by Elinor Benedict

1. Compare and contrast phrases like “pay dearly,” “blasting rattle,” and “red gape of wounds,” with “the land rolls out its green carpet,” “Bees hum in white tamuka blooms,” and “honey so fine that hospitals swear by its healing.” What feeling do these images juxtaposed evoke? How do they contribute to the layering and complexity of the poem?
2. What does the poet mean by the words, “Life wasting?” How many layers of meaning can you think of for these words?
3. Find other examples where the poem juxtaposes a peaceful image with a violent or opposite image.
4. In your own life, think of a moment when you felt opposing feelings at the same time. What were the circumstances? What images would you use to describe that moment? What was it like?
5. What images evoke sound in the poem? How many different sounds do you find in the poem? How are they related to each other? How do they build on each other?
6. How does the speaker struggle with the noise of the helicopter and her thoughts?
7. What is your favorite line in the poem?

Breathing by Courtney Davis

1. Exposition in fiction is defined as the presentation of information essential to the dramatic situation that will unfold. On p. 182 at the bottom, it says “incongruities floated into his mind when he was tired...” and the technological information “overwhelming.” How does the exposition in this story set up Peter as being open to what Irene will teach him? In what ways does the author prepare the reader as well as show Peter’s readiness to learn what Irene has to teach him?
2. Have you ever seen anyone in a coma? Did it seem to you that they were dead or alive? What were your feelings? What did you notice about how others regarded that person?
3. Throughout this story, the author describes Peter’s physical sensations. Note each of these instances. Note changes in his physical state. How does the author use these to show Peter’s emotional discomfort as well as engagement?
4. Irene is matter of fact and seasoned. She knows the stages of dying and its physical symptoms. She’s also kind and tired. What kinds of things does she teach Peter, unobtrusively? How does she go about involving Peter?
5. On page 187, Peter wonders why Irene bothers to care for Mr. Harris, why she doesn’t just sit and knit instead, like many nurses he sees. She supplies a brief answer. Write a paragraph or two in her voice, giving a full response. Write another paragraph or two in the voice of a nurse who does just sit and knit.

6. On p. 188, Irene observes that most nurses and aides have witnessed the exact moment of someone's death. Many doctors, she says, have not. What is she implying about the medical hierarchy and patient-doctor intimacy? What might she be suggesting to Peter?
7. Breathing is the first and last act in life. It's the title of this story. Write about Peter's joining in the breathing at the end of the story. How is it an act of initiation, of birth? "I laid my head on the bed in the path of his breath and breathed it" from "The Last Day" a poem by Sharon Olds in *The Father*.
8. In fiction, the idea is to show, rather than tell directly. At the very end of the story, when Mr. Harris is in the final effort of dying, there is the following dialogue:
 "Are you okay?" Peter asked.
 "Not really," Irene said. "Are you?"
 What comment is the author making about being "seasoned" regarding death?
9. Write a letter as Peter might write to his mother or closest friend about what happened to him that night.

Cemetery Plums by Jim Tolan

1. Do you agree with the speaker's assumption that the dead miss life more than we miss them? Do you believe the dead miss life at all? Do you believe in an afterlife?
2. How would you describe your concept or belief about existence or absence of existence of the dead?
3. How does the poem use images to bring a "life" to the dead? Which of these images stand out for you?
4. Do you think it is a positive or a negative to miss the things of this life after you are dead?
5. Aside from your beliefs about death, what do you hope death is like?
6. Imagine what circumstances might cause someone to write this poem. Do you think this kind of writing can be healing to the writer?

The Long Journey Home by James Tate

1. How does the speaker draw you into this poem right away?
2. This is a prose poem. How does it differ from straight prose? How does it differ from a poem that is not a prose poem?
3. Why do you think Jeannie "freezes" when the deceased customer touches her hand? How do you feel about touching a corpse?
4. Why does Jeannie prefer the company of the dead man?
5. How do the apologies near the end of the poem work to advance its meaning? Count the moments in the poem that show awkwardness. Notice the moments that make you smile. How do awkwardness and humor help to make the poem work? What feelings do they evoke when used together?
6. How do reality and un-reality or surrealism work in the poem? Find moments of irony in the poem.
7. How does the speaker make this improbable story seem real? What feelings do the last two lines evoke?

8. Do you know people in your own life who could be described as ‘the walking dead?’ Do you ever feel that way?
9. This poem might be considered surreal. Can you think of conversations and encounters in your life that seemed surreal? How did you react to those situations?

LOSS

The Weight of Absence by Judy Katz

1. How does the speaker use weight and lightness to give the reader her experience of her mother’s death? Which images give a sense of heaviness? Weightlessness?
2. Which images call to family and relationships? Which objects that once belonged to the mother are identified in the poem? How do those objects call up the lost one’s absence and presence? Which one touches you the most?
3. What do you think the speaker means when she uses the words “sank” and “sinking?” What else in the poem is sinking besides the house?
4. Morphine allows the mother to travel through different times/memories in her life. Have you ever had medication that caused that reaction? What was that experience like for you?
5. The mother is relieved of physical pain by the morphine. The speaker, in contrast, experiences pain in witnessing her mother dying. What techniques does the poem use to make the reader recognize, and possibly feel that irony?
6. How does the author use spacing, line breaks and sounds of certain words to express her grief, and allow the reader to feel it as well?
7. The speaker addresses her dead mother directly. How would the poem be different if she had told the story without addressing the mother directly? How would the effect of the poem be different if it were written in the third person? Do you ever speak to loved ones who have died?

...Divorced, Beheaded, Survived by Robin Black

1. On pg 3, the narrator talks about “ways we protect our children.” What are some ways we do this? Are these ways helpful or harmful?
2. On pg 4, the narrator says, “As soon as we learned Terry was sick, my house stopped being the daily gathering place.” Why do people shun the sick? Why do doctors and nurses pay fewer visits to the rooms of dying patients?
3. Bottom of pg 4, narrator speculates about how their friends lives might, or might not, have been influenced by her brother’s death. What is the significance, if any, to such speculation? Is it self-centered?
4. Pg 5, narrator talks about no longer thinking about her brother’s death. “It isn’t only the discomfort of disloyalty I feel; it’s the fact of utter disappearance after death. The idea that as loved as we may be, we may also be forgotten.” Is this a true statement? Is the narrator a nihilist? Does this belief impact how we live our lives? How we deliver medical care?

5. Is the section on Anne Boleyn used strictly as a memory of the brother, or might it be a metaphor? Does the title have significance?
6. Does this piece feel like fiction or nonfiction? Why?

Siblings

Death of a child

Dealing with memories of death

Facing mortality

Denial

In Suicide's Tracks by Lisa Rosen

1. Why does this poem start with the reference to solstice?
2. How many different phrases and images in the poem indicate or evoke depression without actually using the word depression?
3. How would you describe the mood of the speaker?
4. What are your personal beliefs about suicide? How would you respond to a suicidal loved one or patient? What questions would you ask? What actions would you take?
5. What feelings did this poem evoke in you?
6. If the title had not included the word "Suicide", would you have known the poem was about a suicide?
7. What word call to each other through the poem? Example: "more light," "beam," "Luminaries," etc.
8. What does the line "with a weight of mothers behind us," evoke for you?
9. What line or image stands out the most for you?
10. What would you guess the relationship to be between the speaker and the one who has committed suicide?
11. How do the sounds in the poem give it mood and rhythm?

Apartment 1-A by Amy Mehringer, Spring 2006

1. How do you feel about the experience of "voyeurism" that the narrator conveys in the story? Is there any parallel here with a doctor interviewing or examining a patient?
2. In both "Apartment 1-A" and "Her Last Week in Their Paradise" there is the experience of going through another's possessions. In what ways are these experiences similar or different?
3. Pg 3. Narrator wonders why the tenant, who didn't know narrator or wife, came to the funeral and squeezed his hand. Why do people attend funerals of people they don't know well? Is it selfless? Self-serving?
4. Pg 4. The narrator talks about the scent of his wife and of his tenant, and of the feel of a woman's clothes. Why are the senses of smell and touch so powerful?
5. Last line. Why does the winter seem "as if it will last forever?"
6. Why does this piece feel more clearly like fiction, whereas Divorce, Beheaded, Survived feels a bit like nonfiction?

Spouses/marriage
Dealing with memories of death
Facing mortality

First Anniversary by Joan Michelson

1. What do you think the speaker means by the line: “I have to fight your death...”?
2. How does the speaker use time to heighten the feeling in the poem and the effect of this death on the speaker?
3. What battle is the speaker losing?
4. Which three words in this poem stand out for you as key words vis-a-vis the poem’s meaning?
5. As you read the poem, what did you guess the relationship to be between the speaker and the deceased?
6. Identify all the different parts of the body referred to in the poem. Which stand out for you? Why?
7. If you read just the last word in each line in order, how much of the story told in the poem would you be able to discern?
8. What is the mood of the speaker?
9. Think about the references to winning and losing. Why do you think the speaker uses these words? What do they tell you about how the speaker is handling the death of this person?

Her Last Week in Their Paradise by Elaine Schear

1. Is the cleaning out of a dead person’s house a metaphor for “dealing with” that person’s death?
2. Are there moral differences between throwing out, selling, and donating a dead person’s items?
3. There is a slight tinge of embarrassment on the part of the narrator, upon the “exposure” of her parents’ possessions? Why is this? What do you think about it?
4. Many of the material possessions that people work so hard to acquire turn out to be a burden to their children. Is this a paradox?
5. In both “Apartment 1-A” and “Her Last Week in Their Paradise” there is the experience of going through another’s possessions. In what ways are these experiences similar or different?
6. Is there sometimes guilt on the part of the family member, when realizing that the nurse aid has had more direct and intimate contact with the patient than he or she has had?
7. Does this piece feel like fiction or nonfiction? Why?

Death of parents
“objects” in our lives
Generation gap

How Snow Arrives by Michael Collier

1. How many different generations are included in this poem? What event connects them?
2. What does the image of snow evoke? In the line “How frail the weather...” what else does the word frail refer to indirectly in the poem?
3. Which images and sounds give this poem its haunting quality?
4. Certain words and images are repeated through the poem. Identify them. What effect do these repetitions have on the poem? How do they deepen its meaning?
5. Have you had a similar experience, or witnessed something similar in your family?
6. Why does the speaker keep coming back to “singing”? Read the poem out loud and then to yourself. Does it have a different effect on you when you read it out loud versus reading it to yourself?
7. What colors come to your mind as you read the poem? What additional pictures come into your mind as you read the poem? Notice what your imagination adds to the poem; what you project onto it. Explore how the poet, in a few words, is able to create worlds.

Medicine Chest by Amanda Auchter

1. What event does this poem allude to?
2. What is the mood of this poem?
3. The title is “Medicine Chest.” How is the word chest repeated in the poem? What different meanings does it have? How do the different images for chest relate to each other?
4. How does the image of the mirror work in the poem? What images “mirror” each other?
5. Which image or line stands out for you? Why?
6. In a poem, every word counts. Which words in this poem build on the feeling of absence and loss without actually saying the words “absence” and “Loss”?

AFTERMATH

First Steps by Floyd Skloot

1. How does the shape of this poem reflect the story the poem tells? How would you describe the shape of this poem?
2. What is your impression of the speaker in this poem? What is his relationship with his illness? How would you describe him as a person based on what he reveals about himself in the poem?
3. When you see the word “Frankenstein”, what happens to your visual image of the speaker walking? The speaker says he does not walk like Frankenstein or a tottering child. Does that stop you from seeing him walk in those ways?

4. There are many clichés in this poem. Normally, writers try to avoid clichés. Why does the poet use them here? How do they work for the poem? How many can you identify?
5. What has the speaker learned from his illness? What is his attitude?
6. What feelings does this poem evoke in you?
7. What makes the speaker dizzy? Notice how you feel in your body as you read the poem. Does the poem have a visceral affect on you? If so, what aspects of the poem cause that visceral affect?
8. The title, “First Steps” has multiple meanings. How would you describe those different layers of meaning?

Another Life by Susan Varon

1. What is this speaker’s relationship with her physical condition?
2. What comes to your mind when you notice someone walking with a cane or a limp? Do you think people have preconceived ideas about people who have physical disabilities?
3. How does the description of the canes “lying forgotten” apply to the speaker and her friend?
4. What is the mood of the speaker?
5. How does the speaker perceive the people “above her head”? How does she describe them?
6. What does the title, ANOTHER LIFE refer to in the poem? How many layers of meaning can you identify?
7. Where are there “connections” in the poem? Where are moments of separation?
8. Which line or lines stand out for you?
9. What sounds does the speaker refer to in the poem? What do those sounds add to the poem?
10. Do you feel distance from the speaker? Do you feel connection with the speaker? Is it possible to feel both at the same time?

Sleeping on the Perimeter by Gaynell Gavin (S02 127)

1. Is there a connection between veterans “securing the perimeter” and the difficulty experienced by survivors of life-threatening illnesses in acknowledging their survival?
2. Is PTSD more pervasive than we think?
3. Is it important to recognize the origins of stress disorders in order to effectively treat?

Coping

Isolation

The scars of war and illness

Survivor by Eamon Grennan

1. Who is the survivor in this poem?
2. What happens with your breath as you read the poem? How does the architecture of the poem work to affect your breath? Your heart rate?
3. Imagine what the bee might be feeling when it is captured...as it is held...when it is freed.
4. What do you think the speaker feels as he captures, then holds, then releases the bee?
5. What purpose does it serve to have no breaks in the poem so that it seems to rush forward?
6. How do the sounds in the poem heighten its meaning? Which words call to each other?
7. What does the speaker mean by “of this world, and yet beyond it..”?
8. How many different references to pulse can you find in the poem? Why is the pulse and heartbeat so important in this poem?
9. What images would you describe as soft in this poem?
10. How would you describe the “puzzle of the world,” as it relates to the speaker and his encounter with the bee? Have you ever captured an insect and held it captive? Set it free? Do you remember how it felt to capture and then free it?

Whatever is Left by Cortney Davis

1. Why do you think the mother wants whatever is left of her fetus?
2. Why do you think the mother gives the “blood and small bones” a name?
3. How does the image of the plastic cup work for the poem? What does it tell you about the difference in how the institution of the hospital perceives “what is left” versus how the mother sees it?
4. How would you characterize the speaker’s attitude toward the mother? What actions show she is caring? What actions show she is part of the hospital culture?
5. How does the shape of the poem affect its subject matter?
6. Why do you think the poet repeats the word cup through the poem?

Visual Anguish and Looking at Art by Carol Zoref

1. “The brain, having been asked to understand faster than it can absorb, replays the unprocessed stimuli again and again”. Does this relate to the responses many of us feel when we experience sudden personal loss or devastating illness?
2. Is this what, in other settings, we might call “flashbacks”?
3. Does the mind’s repetition of trauma serve a useful purpose?
4. Does this essay speak to the treatment of acute traumatic stress?

Coping

Recovery

How the mind processes

Strategy by Samuel Menashe

1. How does brevity serve this poem? How does it embody the speaker's strategy for life and survival?
2. What do you think the lines "We are given/What we did not ask" means in this poem?
3. Why do you think the poet chose not to use punctuation? How does that choice serve the poem. What do you think about the two dashes after the word "task"?
4. What is the poem's intent? How does the rhyme scheme contribute to the poem's intent?
5. What is the mood of the speaker?

Bereavement and Beyond by Joan Kip

1. Doctors and patients experience loss together _ what of bereavement?
2. Does the author's "professional" knowledge help her to deal with her own grief?
3. Would reading Joan Kip's story help others who are grieving?

Isolation

Loss

Grieving

Bereavement

In the End by Robert Nazarene

1. What do you think "the end" means to the speaker? How would you describe "the end"?
2. How does the repetition of "the end" work for this poem?
3. How would you describe the shape of this poem? What feeling does it evoke for you?
4. What unspoken images come to your mind as you read this poem?