

The Best of the Bellevue Literary Review: Study Guide

Written by:

Danielle Ofri ♦ Ruth Oratz ♦ Harold Horowitz
Jerome Lowenstein ♦ Suzanne McConnell ♦ Frances Richey
Kathryn Coffman ♦ Marylu Ekiert ♦ Meghan Holeman

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 heartbeat, 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? How is it used in poetry, in word play, in communication, in silence?
10. Quotes and excerpts from different authors appear throughout the story, set in different narrative frames. (An example is the story of Flush, drawn from reality, appearing in Barrett's poetry, then in Woolf's fiction, then in Althea's oral narration to her dog.) Are these narrative strands borrowed? Stolen? Recycled? How does this compare to Derrick's actions? What is the story's final assessment about plagiarism?
11. In Althea's parting injunction to Derrick, she seems to equate language and words with life. Is this really true?
12. Compare the interactions and relationships between Althea and Derrick and those between the doctor and Althea. Are there differences and/or similarities between these relationships that cast different lights on sickness and the experience of sickness from different perspectives?

Anger

Animal and Human Relationships

Definitions of Sickness and Health

Desire

Doctor-Patient Relationship

Empathy

Honesty

Loss

Mortality

Music

Poetry/Literature

Professional Behavior

Teaching/Learning

Truth

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.

Family Relationships
Memory
Music
Nostalgia

Sense of Place
Sickness Intruding on Health
Technology

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?
7. Is this a story about Gar or about Eldonna? Does anyone change or grow? Who? How so?

Animal and Human Relationships
Authority
Beauty
Containment
Definitions of Sickness and Health
Disfigurement

Dreams
Empathy
Escape
Truth
Unspoken Relationships
Youth/Age

What Were the White Things? by Amy Hempel

1. Why does the author delay going to the specialist's office?
2. Who is speaking? Elaborate on their meanings.
3. How does the author connect all of the "white things?" How are they related?
4. Questions recur throughout this piece. What kind of questions, posed by whom to whom? What kind of information is being solicited? What questions are left unanswered, and why?
5. The author juxtaposes a scene of an artist displaying slides to an audience and a scene of a doctor displaying slides (X-rays?). How do they reflect upon each other? How and why does the author position these two scenes in such a manner?
6. 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"

Absence
Diagnosis
Disclosing Information
Memory

Mystery/Clarity
Objects/Things
Questions/Questioning
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?
4. Discuss how the poet describes the changes in her body in comparison to changes in landscape. How does she map her body onto the land? How do the changes in the land reflect her physical and emotional/mental state?
5. What happens in the moment that the speaker's gaze locks with the deer's? Is there an affirmation of life and the struggle to live? Or the abandonment of this struggle?
6. What is the tone of the poem? By the end, does the speaker express acceptance? Relief? Despair? Apathy?

Anxiety
Change
Coping
Definitions of Sickness and Health

Healing
Nature
Pain
Uncertainty

Cold Kiss by John Kay

1. What is cold in this poem?
2. Do you feel hopeful at the end of the poem?
3. What does it mean to “sidestep” time?
4. How and why are italics used? What effect do they create and at which point in the poem?
5. Does the wordplay offer humor? Bitterness? Irony? Is it effective?

Cancer
Confronting Death
Containment
Denial
Diagnosis

Dissonance
Escape
Harmony/Unity
Memory
Time

Nesting in a Season of Light by Angela Wheelock

1. Did Dr. Brown or the visiting doctor treat the patient incorrectly? Was Dr. Brown honest? Was it right for him to tell the patient that he “missed the ectopic but saved her life” (45)? Did the missed ectopic pregnancy change the patient's relationship with Dr. Brown?
2. “Listening is the greatest gift we can offer to one who grieves” (47). Who was listening to the narrator? Did the narrator derive solace or succor from being listened to, from telling her story?
3. Discuss the juxtaposition of the patient's possible death and her effort to create new life.

4. Comment on this line: “[Grief] isn’t really like sadness; it is more like feeling you’re going crazy” (46).
5. Is pregnancy/infertility a state of health or sickness?
6. How do the narrator and her husband process their grief?
7. What is the relationship between the narrator and her husband? Does it change? How?
8. How are images of nature used—particularly elements of fertility and growth—in relation to the narrator’s personal situation?
9. In this story, the medical world seems to offer more ambiguity than certainty. Does nature offer something different? Are nature and medicine posed as antithetical to each other?
10. What is Dr. Brown’s role? Is he an antagonist or an ally? Is he a source of support and comfort? Does he stand for something beyond himself?
11. What does the narrator take from the image of the young moose near the end?
12. The narrator reads a number of books throughout. What kinds? What do they tell her? What do they tell us?

(Self) Alienation/Isolation	Forgiveness	Nature
(Self) Destruction	Grief	Procreation
Acceptance/Understanding	Helplessness/Powerlessness	Safety/Security
Betrayal/Trust	Home	Support
Coming to Peace	Importance of Place	Truth
Counseling	Loss	Vitality
Cycles of the Earth, People	Loss of Home/Displacement	Women’s Health
Desire	Loss of Security	

Fissure by Debra Anne Davis

1. The narrator provides various definitions of “fissure.” How does the narrator’s experience of “fissure” compare with or reflect upon the medical and dictionary definitions?
2. Describe the style of the piece, the way in which it “converts” a horrific episode of rape into “ordinary” prose.
3. How does the rape affect the narrator’s view of and experience of her own body?
4. Is there any parallel between the rape, the examination, and the enemas? Do you think that even patients who have not been victims of assault might find these procedures to be violating?
5. What are the “ironies” of the doctor’s visit?
6. Is the hope of healing a possibility by the end of the piece? If not, does the narrator find an insight that enables her to live with her wound?

(Self) Alienation	Empathy	Pain
Anger	Exposure/Vulnerability	Pity
Choices/No Choices	Humiliation	Power
Destruction	Invasion	Sadness
Dislocation	Numbness	Victim/Victimization

DOCTORS

She Makes the First Cut by Linda Tomol Pennisi

1. What does the mother try to communicate to her daughter? How does she communicate with her, considering the distance of “one hundred miles” that is between them?
2. What is the nature of the distance between mother and daughter? Might it be temporal as well as spatial? (Things to consider: the distance between childhood and adulthood, the developing, changing relationship between daughter and mother.)
3. How does this poem explore the daughter/mother relationship? What types of language and images are used?
4. Discuss medicine as art.
5. How does the poet use the imagery of the hands?
6. Comment on the structure and the flow of the poem.
7. Discuss the musical instruments and the meaning of music in this poem.
8. What is the connection between medicine and music? How does music function in the poem? What effect does it have on the mother and how is the performance of music analogous or linguistically/imagistically linked to cutting open a cadaver? Is such a connection unexpected or jarring, especially when stripped of the poetic apparatus? How and why? How does the poem make such a connection work?
9. What insight does the poem provide into the character or feelings of the daughter? What might serve as an indication of the nature of the other side of this mother/daughter relationship?

Art/Music
Change
Childhood
Distance
Doctors in Training
Family Relationships
Fear

Growing Up
Love
Memory
Mother/Daughter Relationships
Parent/Child Relationships
The Art of Medicine
Time

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

1. Discuss the connection between this poem and “She Makes the First Cut.”
2. Why doesn’t the mother want her daughter to name the cadaver? What would it mean for the daughter if she named the cadaver?
3. What connects the mother and daughter, particularly in light of the last line, the “delicate synapses?”
4. What does the mother understand about the experience of dissecting a cadaver – that perhaps her daughter/student doesn’t know?
5. Is the mother a doctor? A musician?
6. Discuss the blurring of boundaries between the mother, daughter, and cadaver.
7. The poem seems to start in the middle of an idea, with the word “but.” Does the “but” follow from the title’s statement? Or from something else?

8. The narrator hopes that her daughter will not name the cadaver, yet the narrator refrains from sharing this with her daughter. Instead, she only asks “Who?” Why? What does this kind of silencing on the narrator’s part reveal (about herself, her daughter, their relationship, the narrator’s own experience, the medical profession)? What kind of struggle or conflict, in light of her silence, is operating within the narrator? Does her daughter experience the same conflict? Or is there no way to tell what the daughter is thinking and feeling?
9. What does it mean to “remove the person from the body”? Is this at all commensurate with the notion of “the body’s sacredness”? How does the poem negotiate or reconcile these two seemingly disparate views on humanity, life, and medicine?

Age/Youth

Connection

Coping

Death

Doctors in Training

Empathy

Experience/Inexperience

Family Relationships

Life

Music

Parent/Child Relationships

Professional Detachment

Silence

MUD by Thomas McCall

1. How does “medspeak” help health care providers cope with stressful situations? Can acronyms euphemize?
2. How does Darlene help the student? How does she help Leslie?
3. Compare and contrast the student’s image of his wife with his image of 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 joined one unit to its neighbor” (57)?
6. How do the student’s feelings about this baby change from “already a goner” (56) to “...incandescent. Heaven’s light” (59)?

Doctor/Nurse Relationship

Doctors in Training

Nurses

Professional Detachment

Support

The Initiation by Alicia Ostriker

1. Was the head surgeon helpful to the intern?
2. Does the fact that the poet is a woman 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.
4. What is the poem saying about the effect of life as a doctor on one’s humanity? How does this conflict with the attitude with which the speaker arrives at the hospital?

5. How does the head surgeon view death and the medical profession? How does death affect him?
6. How does the speaker view death, and how does it affect him?
7. The speaker is never given a chance in the poem to respond to the head surgeon's instructions/advice. The head surgeon literally has the last word. What effect does this create? Does it seem like the speaker has learned something from the head surgeon? If so, what?
8. What is the relationship between the head surgeon and the speaker with regards to power imbalances?

Death
 Doctor/Patient Relationship
 Empathy
 Experience
 Family Relationships
 Ignorance

Inexperience
 Professional Detachment
 Social Organization of Medicine
 Teacher/Student Relationship
 Youth

Love Is Just a Four-Letter Word by David Watts

1. Does “unflinching frankness” bring a new perspective?
2. Did the student overstep the acceptable limits of professional behavior?
3. According to the narrator, everyone recognizes the patient at the ward as “different.” What makes her so different or special? Is this a projection of the doctors, specifically the narrator, onto the patient, making her out to be something more than she is, or a symbol of what they want her to represent? How does her appearance figure into their construction or evaluation of her as different?
4. What would he have said to an older unattractive woman?
5. Is the narrator different from the other doctors at the ward, specifically in his reaction to and treatment of the patient? Does he view himself as separate from them? In what ways?
6. Consider the doctors’ treatment of the patient, their diagnosis and the way they talk about her. Is this professionalism or rude callousness? Compare this to the narrator’s romantic, chivalrous response to her, his imaginative construction of her as a “woman who ‘needed protection.’” What do the two different approaches to doctor-patient relations say about the possibility or impossibility of a connection or understanding, let alone love, between doctor and patient?
7. What divides the narrator from the patient?
8. Consider the title. What does it mean that “love is just a four-letter word.” Does the narrator view it this way? Does the patient?
9. Are we ever provided access to the patient’s perspective? How does she view her situation, her illness, the doctors, and love? And does this affect or change the way the doctor views himself and love?
10. How did the bedside conversation affect the patient?

Beauty
Boundaries/Division
Disconnection
Empathy
Invasion
Limits of Compassion

Love
No Communication
Privacy
Professionalism
Vulnerability

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?
4. What is the setting of this poem? What kind of atmosphere does that create?
5. What effect does the use of italics create? Locate the lines where italics are used and think about why the poet italicizes what he italicizes?
6. The sentences are fragmented as they run from line to line and stanza to stanza. What effect does this create? How does it contribute to the message of the poem?
7. Who is the woman in conversation with the speaker? How does the speaker view her?
8. Who is the “dolt” of the third to last line?
9. Why did Madge come to New Orleans?

Doctor/Patient Relationship
Organization of Medicine
Doctors in Training
Detachment

Humor
Dislocation/Loss of Home
Travel

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

1. What does the author mean by “contradictions precluded infallibility?”
2. What is the relationship between medicine and religion here? Do they follow similar paths, or are the two mutually exclusive and competing, representing opposite means of healing? Along similar lines, does this story erect a divide between body and soul, or are the two spheres brought together and conceived as inextricably interwoven?
3. What is David’s view of religion? Does he place his faith in religion or in medicine (or both or neither)?
4. Many other issues are raised in this story: the politics of religion, religion’s place in the medical world, medicine’s place in religion, different forms of religion, conversion, the people to be converted, the efficacy of religion, the sincerity or lack thereof of its believers and preachers. Does David change his views on any of these issues?
5. What is the role of witchcraft in this piece? How is it positioned in relation to religion?
6. Why does David decide to volunteer to go to the medical clinic in Venezuela?

7. The medical clinic in Venezuela, with its missionary nature, attempts to make a connection between international health and international religion. Is this connection born out in the piece? Does David agree with this stance and the methods employed to establish such internationalism?
8. Throughout the piece, David seems to view the world through the lens of a doctor, never deviating from medical paths of thought, utilizing scientific metaphors to translate the world into manageable, comprehensible terms. What effect does this have on his interactions with his surroundings, with other people, with his patients? Is it a sign of healthy emotional compensation, or psychological fragmentation?
9. How does this piece view diagnosis and healing? Who diagnoses whom? Is anyone truly healed?
10. During the visit to Camilo, David expresses discomfort and embarrassment. At what moments and why?
11. How does David view Dr. Mitchell? Does this change over the course of the story? Does David learn anything from him?
12. Explain Dr. Mitchell's change of mind when he first says he won't visit Camilo, then pays the house call.
13. Is it appropriate for Dr. Mitchell to ask David to pray?
14. Why is David relieved to see that Camilo is still paralyzed after they pray over his legs?
15. What kind of faith is represented in the character of Todd? How does it reflect on what kind of doctor he is? Describe his reaction to the miracle. Is he rejoicing for Camilo and his recovery, or is Todd's focus more self-centered?
16. Camilo's recovery—the "miracle"—is staged as a kind of spectacle. How does this reflect on the authenticity or lack thereof of the miracle? What does the spectacle-like nature of the miracle mean for David?
17. Consider this idea of "translation as connection" with relation to a connection between humanity and God, particularly the last line of the piece and the notion of God "mocking us." Does it suggest connection and understanding as deliberately thwarted or impossible? What does the last line mean?

(Self) Alienation

Authority

Desire

Diagnosing Memory

Doctor/Patient Relationship

Doubt

Faith

Healing

Mystery/Clarity

Numbness

Professional Detachment

Religion and Science

Translators/Translation

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 and rhythm of the poem

5. Where and how does the poem work with notions of foreignness and the familiar? Things to consider could be the duality of title, the juxtaposition of medical language with references to the patient's culture and religion, and the apparent opposition between reason/science/medicine with irrationality/fear/religion/superstition. Is this truly the way the divide falls with respect to the oppositions in the poem? Is religion equated with superstition, fear, irrationality? Does science and medicine provide clarity and knowledge?
6. How does the speaker view his patient and his patient's culture and religion? Does he take a critical stance, denigrating the patient as superstitious and irrational? Notice the shift in the third stanza. (Consider the doctor's question of reason and his own rationality.) What form does this shift take and what is its effect? How does this shift effect of the preconceptions the doctor brings to his encounter with his patient, as well as those the reader might bring to this poem?
7. How does the doctor view himself through an imaginative projection into his patient's perspective? Does this reflection on himself change him?
8. What is the relationship between the doctor and patient? Are the two at an impasse?
9. Is the doctor able to understand and communicate with his patient? Consider the role of translation in this poem. If translation and communication are frustrated, how does that make the speaker feel with regard to himself, his profession, his patient?

(Self) Alienation
 Communication/Connection
 Cultural Divide b/w Doctor and Patient
 Diagnosing
 Disconnection
 Doctor/Patient Relationship

Isolation
 Mystery/Clarity
 Powerlessness
 Religion and Science
 Translators/Translation

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? What or whom does this poem praise?
5. Discuss the historical references, such as allusions to the Vietnam War.
6. How does the speaker define heroism in the poem? What are the examples of heroism he provides? How do they relate to and reflect upon each other?
7. How is malaria represented in the poem? What kinds of metaphors does the speaker use to describe it?
8. Geographical locations mentioned in the poem include Atlanta, Africa, and Vietnam. How are these locations positioned in relation to one another? Does the poem indicate a sense of a global community, or a global threat?

Anger
Containment/Escape
Doctor/Patient Relationship
Guilt
Humor
Research

Resentment
Sacrifice
Sickness
Veterans
Vulnerable Populations
War

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" (78).
9. What image in the poem stands out most for you?
10. What do you make of the final image?

Hospital Experience
Definitions of Sickness and 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" (81). Discuss the impact of illness on the boy.
4. Both the doctor and Sammy's mother use the phrase "don't hold your breath" (83). What are the different implications?
5. Discuss the power of the inhaler.
6. "As he loses his breath, she deflates" (86). 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?

Caretakers
 Coming of Age
 Empathy
 Family Relationships

Humiliation
 Illness and Family Dynamics
 Impact of Illness on Growing Up
 Independence

If Brains Was Gas by Abraham Verghese

1. The narrator begins by telling us that she had just turned thirteen at the time of the story. What events or shifts in perspective mark her initiation into adolescence?
2. What are some clues that indicate the narrator’s style of living? What is her family situation?
3. What is the relationship between the narrator and Mamaw, her grandmother? What is the grandmother’s role in the family? How does she treat the granddaughter, particularly in terms of monitoring her social life, and why?
4. J.R. is a vital presence in the narrator’s life. Pick out some of her descriptions of him. What do you make of the narrator’s adoration of her uncle, an infatuation that seems to be confused with or at least complicates her sexual feelings for Elmo?
5. J.R. takes the narrator along with him to smoke marijuana in the Kmart parking lot. How does the narrator feel in this scene? How does this scene reflect on J.R.? Does it point the way to a different perspective on J.R., one that departs from the extreme adulation the narrator has felt for him?
6. In this story, J.R.’s dentures are almost characters in their own right. What do they signify about J.R.’s history and his relationship with his mother? What do they symbolize between J.R. and the narrator? How do they indicate the changes that the relationship undergoes by the end of the story?
7. The title of the story refers to a saying the narrator and J.R. share. How/why do they use this saying? What does it mean when the narrator uses this saying against her uncle?
8. When Abraham Verghese submitted this story to the Bellevue Literary Review, he told the editors that they could edit anything in the story except the title. He said, “Please don’t change it to ‘If Brains Were Gas.’” (subjunctive vs. indicative). Which is grammatically correct? What is the significance of “was” vs. “were” for this particular story?
9. How does the narrator view J.R.’s infidelity? How does it shape her thoughts about love, family, and sexuality—feelings that throughout most of the story are unformed and developing? How does it change her view of her uncle?
10. Consider the final scene of the story. What does it mean for the narrator to chew the condom and be calmed by this action?

Abandonment
Anger
Blame
Coming of Age/Adolescence
Disillusionment

Drug Use
Escape
Family Relationships
Home
Independence

Loss
Love
Marital Relationships
Sexuality

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?

Chaos
Coming of Age
Containment
Freedom

Independence
Order/Laws
Social Mores

PART II: CONFLICT: GRAPPLING WITH ILLNESS

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.
6. How does the author reveal information about characters and events?
7. Is there foreshadowing in this story?

Caretakers
Disability
Independence

Nurses
Professional Behavior
Uncertainty

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.”
6. How might language live on after it has been uttered or once the speaker has been “silenced?”
7. The poem deals in numerous paradoxes. What are the kinds of paradoxes that comprise the narrator’s journey? How do they shape her journey? How might they inform the symbolism of the narrator’s train ride?

Coping
Qualities of Life
Disabilities
Language
Loss

Memory
Silence
Time
Travel

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 three 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?

Coming to Peace
 Coping
 Denial
 Disability

Laughter
 Qualities of Life
 Sharing a Life with Illness
 Uncertainty

Sentence by Barbara Lefkowitz

1. Discuss the meaning of the title “Sentence,” particularly in relation to the poem’s structure, its lack of punctuation, as well as the last two lines of the poem.
2. What is the “round black lacuna that will replace forever the middle of this page?” Does it provide the reader with a clue to the speaker’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?
6. How does the poem manipulate/maneuver notions/images of space, of absence and presence, wholeness and emptiness, darkness and light?
7. How does the speaker use images of nature (the moon) to reflect upon her own situation?
8. How does the sentence “they robbed them blind” relate to the speaker’s situation?

Abnormality/Inversion
 Acceptance
 Coming to Peace
 Coping
 Disability
 Growth/Depletion

Invasion
 Loss
 Nature
 Nature/Natural
 Resistance
 Weakness/Vulnerability

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. The wife’s condition isn’t disclosed until midway through the piece. Are there any indications of her condition before it is explicitly revealed? How did her illness change in relation to her husband’s health/illness?

6. How did you feel at the end of the story?
7. Why is the husband so resistant to the idea of going to the doctor when he first experiences his pain?
8. What are the various forms of pain in this piece? Who feels it? What causes it?
9. Discuss the form of the poem, the single, continuous, hypotactic sentence. What effect does it create to the tone and mood? Does it make the poem, the events and thoughts it conveys, seem rushed or somehow overwhelming? Or maybe the repetition of “and” creates the opposite effect? What kind of emotion does the form convey? How does it make the reader feel? How does it affect the reader’s reception of the poem?
10. What does the husband’s routine reveal about him, about his life, his values, his marital and familial relationships, his role and place in his family, and how he views himself?
11. Another aspect of this routine to consider is its specificity. Food, time, dialogue, and actions are related precisely. What large picture can the reader construct/infer from these minute details?
12. What is the relationship between the husband and wife? What is the basis of their relationship? How does his caring for her inform or determine their relationship? With this in mind, how does his own illness affect their relationship?
13. Is the reader ever provided insight into the wife’s perspective, how she feels about her husband’s illness and how it changes or affects her life?

Caretakers
Denial
Dependency
Family Relationships
Fear
Humiliation
Intimacy

Marital Relationships
Medication
Responsibility
Sharing a Life
Strength
Trust
Weakness/Powerlessness

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.

5. How is medical technology positioned in relation to the human body, a person's humanity? What affect does the artificial heart have on the patient, his sense of self, his connection with other people?
6. Who is the man speaking to before he dies? Is there anyone to hear him or listen to him?
7. What kind of values or associations are attached to the heart in this poem? By extension, what does it mean that the living heart is replaced with a machine, an alien piece of technology?
8. What is the meaning of the tile? Who experiences a revelation in the poem? Who doesn't? What is revealed to whom?

(Self) Alienation
 Abnormal
 Coping
 Death
 Empathy
 Fear

Fear of Dying
 Isolation
 Life
 Love
 Nature/Natural
 Technology and Medicine

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” (124)? What is the hardest thing?

Coming of Age
 Economic Birthright
 Emotional Pain

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.

5. What is the relation between madness and sanity in this poem? Are they clearly divided or more complicatedly interwoven? What kind of images are used to illustrate sanity and madness?
6. How does medicine/medication/science figure into or impede the speaker's efforts to create art/poetry?
7. What does it mean to be "cured" in this poem? How does the speaker treat or represent the notion of being "cured"?
8. Consider the self-conscious nature of the poem, its premise of being a poem about writing poetry. Does this intense self-reflexivity relate to the role of madness in the poem? What might it be saying about identity and subjectivity, and medicine's or depression's affect on or distortion and undermining of identity and subjectivity?
9. What is the interplay between reality and dreams, or sanity and madness? How does this relate to images of the fantastic and the mundane in the poem and how are such images related to poetry and the creation of poetry? (Consider the poem's last line).

Adverse Reactions to Medication
 Depression
 Irony
 Loss
 Love

Madness
 Pain
 Sanity
 Self

The Bald and the Beautiful by William Bradley

1. Why does the narrator like soap operas?
2. How does the narrator present his views of soap operas, to his fiancé and to the reader? Are the methods humorous? Serious? Critical?
3. Is the narrator's emotional investment in soap operas a form of escapism? Denial? Does this investment ultimately help him or harm him?
4. What differentiates "highbrow" and "lowbrow" art? How do the merits or flaws each relate to life in general and to the narrator's situation in particular?
5. What is the relationship between the narrator and his fiancé? Do they deal with it differently?
6. How does the narrator's fiancé view soap operas?
7. What is the author saying about the line between fiction and reality, between art and life?
8. Are patients hesitant to be optimistic? Are physicians hesitant to use humor?

Coping
 Denial
 Humor
 Marriage

In the Hospital by David Lehman

1. What type of hospital does the author refer 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 does the perception of time change when a person is hospitalized?
4. Explain the poem’s reference to Freud.
5. How is the form of the poem (the lack of punctuation) incorporated into its meaning? What sense of time does it create? How does it figure into the stream of connecting ideas extending from the hospital to Freud to Hamlet?
6. What is the relation between Hamlet, Freud, and the speaker in the hospital?
7. What is the role of madness in the poem? Do the speaker’s reflections on Freud and Hamlet’s madness provide any indication that the speaker is going mad? Or maybe he fears going mad? Why would this be a possibility for the speaker? What is his situation, where is he, and why might his situation drive him mad?

Art/Drama
Coping
Hospitalization

Madness
Psychoanalysis
Time

How Suffering Goes by Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor

1. What is the significance of the title? Consider it in relation to the attempts at healing figured in the poem, and the abortive attempts at healing.
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. How do the images of the monkeys figure in the poem? Are they literal, imaginative, signs of madness, projections of feelings of the speaker, or manifestations of others’ feelings? How does the speaker view them and respond to them?
4. Is the mother’s sickness real or imagined?
5. Some key words in the poem are italicized: “stomach,” “neck,” “sick,” “pain,” “aversion,” and “suffering.” Consider where they appear in the poem and in what context. Why are these words italicized? Why are some of them repeated? What effect does this create?
6. Different kinds of feelings and different ways of expressing and coping with those feelings are presented in the poem. Compare the meditation leader, the mother, and the speaker with regards to their feelings and how they deal with them. How does the speaker view the meditation leader? What light does the meditation leader’s instruction cast on the relationship between the mother and the speaker?
7. How is healing and the healing process (physical, emotional, mental) represented? How do different people in the poem (the mother, the meditation leader, the speaker) try to find a path to healing? How are their efforts frustrated?
8. How does the speaker represent her childhood and how does it figure into the healing process or the failure of the healing process?

Childhood
Chronic illness
Coping
Disconnect
Emotion

Healing
Isolation
Madness
Pain
Parent/Child Relationships

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?
3. Discuss the metaphor in the poem. How does it reflect the speaker's feelings about herself, her body, her treatment, and those who "cared" for and operated on her?
4. Describe the tone and meaning of the first line: "glad to be alive."
5. What is the interplay between the speaker's physical confrontation with herself in the mirror and the way in which she regards herself psychologically/emotionally? Is there a disjunction of sorts? How so?

(Self) Alienation
(Self) Disgust
Control/Loss of
Coping
Detachment

Disfigurement
Madness
Numbness
Vulnerability

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. Why is the poem so powerful?
8. What is the relation between past and present in the poem? How does the poet represent the slippage between the two, the confusion of past and present?
9. How are images of theatricality presented and how does theatricality figure into the conflation of reality and illusion?

Age
Change
Confusion
Delusion
Humiliation
Loss

Mind
Nostalgia
Parent/Child Relationships
Powerlessness
Time

Flu Shot by David Watts

1. How is the appointment for the flu shot positioned in relation to the other, larger issues of cancer and death? What kind of meaning is attached to the actual flu shot?
2. How does the doctor change after the encounter with the wife? How does it affect the way the doctor views himself, his profession, the purpose of helping and saving lives, the possibilities and impossibilities inherent in his role and the human interactions it entails?
3. The doctor admits to feeling “shame” and “humiliation,” but on what grounds? Are these feelings purely on a professional level? Does he feel the shame of failing at his job? Or does his articulation of his feelings imply remorse or guilt and therefore a more human connection with his patients as people to whom he is accountable?
4. In relation to the notion of shame or guilt, it’s important to note that the doctor never offers an explicit apology to the wife. Why do you think this is?
9. Was closure attained by either husband or wife?
10. Discuss the irony of the title and the medical lapse described in the essay.
11. Why doesn’t the wife sue the doctor?
12. How does forgiveness operate in this piece? Under what circumstances, what kind of a meeting and exchange, is forgiveness brought about, developed, or resisted? Does the wife forgive the physician? Does the physician forgive himself?

Cancer

Coping

Death

Doctor/Patient Relationships

Failure

Forgiveness

Grief

Limitations

Loss

Marital Relationships

Medical Error

Responsibility

Unspoken Relationships

MADNESS

The City of Light 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...” (137). Does this justify rejection of medical treatment by some writers and artists?
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? In your opinion, is this 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. Does a physician need to “understand” in order to treat?

Delusions
Madness
Mental Illness

Physical/Emotional Abuse
Religion

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?
5. How is life in the “old country” contrasted with life in New York, in the “new world? How does the change affect the mother? How does it affect the daughters?
6. What is the interplay between images of containment and freedom? Who is free and who isn’t in this poem? How does the poem redefine the notion of freedom? Does the mother’s threat of going to Bellevue express an escape? From what does she want to escape? What traps her? Where does the irony lie in the idea that going to Bellevue would signify an escape for the mother?
7. What is the relation between the “cloistered carmelites” and Bellevue?
8. What is the relationship between the mother and her daughters? How do tensions of rebellion and obedience play into the relationship and how are they expressed?

Abandonment	Escape	Religion
Change	Freedom	Sanity
Childhood	Love	Strength
Containment/Imprisonment	Madness	Stress
Desire	Obedience	Time
Displacement	Parent/Child Relationship	Weakness
Economics	Powerlessness	
Emotional Illness	Rebellion	

Shaking the Dead Geranium by Harriet Rzetelny

1. What are some of the “survival” mechanisms noted in this story that families of mentally ill employ?
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. Concealment seems to be a theme in this piece. Who conceals what and how does that affect their interactions with others? When what a person conceals is exposed, how does she (and how do others) react and why? How does this relate to silence in the story? Think of the narrator's "vow of silence" and the silence of other characters, like Marushka.
6. How does isolation operate in this story? Who is isolated and how?
7. What is the narrator's relationship to her brother? What is the basis of their bond, their love? (One of the things to consider might be her fascination of him.)
8. The narrator is able to find humor in the tragedy of her brother's illness. Does this help her cope?
9. What kind of perspective does a relationship with someone who's mentally ill provide for the narrator? How does it affect her view on delusion and reality, the normal and the abnormal? Do the divisions between these different poles become blurred somehow?
10. What is the relationship between Ben and Marushka?
11. What was the relationship between the narrator and her brother when they were children? How does this relationship change with the onset of Ben's illness?
12. What is the nature of Ben's mental illness? What affect does it have on his sense of self?
13. One of Molly's primary concerns/motives is a desire to protect her brother. How does this inform her decisions in the story, her interactions with her brother, her feelings regarding committing him to the private hospital?
14. In the final moments of the piece, Molly has a kind of revelation. What does she realize? How does she view her life? How does she view the choices she's made? Is there any indication of changes she might make in her life after this episode?

(Self) Destruction	Guilt	Powerlessness
Anger	Humor	Responsibility
Betrayal	Impact of Illness on Family	Sanity
Delusion	Insanity	Silence
Desire	Isolation	Therapy
Deterioration	Loss	Trust
Disorientation	Medication	Violence
Family	Mental Illness	
Fear	Poetry	

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"?
4. This poem is replete with images of restraint and imprisonment. Locate them and consider how they reflect upon the theme of madness. Who is contained/imprisoned and by what, in the poem?

5. How does madness affect the family dynamics? How does it affect and shape the relationship between the brothers?
6. The violence of the brother's madness remains on the periphery of the poem and is only alluded to obliquely through what did not happen. What effect does it create? On what, instead, does the focus of the poem shift?
7. How are feelings of guilt and betrayal represented in the poem?
8. How is medication represented? What are the complications of taking medication? Why does the brother refuse to take medication?
9. Consider the last image of the poem, that of the bread crumbs. Does this offer hope of healing and reconnection between the brother and the family? Or is such a possibility relegated to the realm of a fairy tale fantasy?

(Self) Alienation	Helplessness/Powerlessness
Betrayal	Isolation
Containment	Loss
Disorientation	Love
Vulnerability	Medication
Displacement/Loss of Home	Mental Illness
Effects of Mental Illness on Families	Non-Adherence with Medications
Family	Responsibility
Forgiveness	Trust
Guilt	Violence

Overblown by Hal Sirowitz

1. Who is speaking in this poem and to whom? What kind of tone is used?
2. What message does the therapist impart to the patient?
3. What message does the representation of the therapist's voice impart to the reader of the poem? Is there a critique involved? What is being criticized and how?
4. Is there an implicit message directed at the therapist?
5. How does the patient feel about the therapist? How does the therapist make the patient feel?
6. What effect does the monological nature of the therapist's speech produce?
7. In reference to the title, what is meant by "Overblown"? What is overblown and by whom?

Anger	Healing/No Healing
Anxiety	Helplessness/Powerlessness
Disconnection	Isolation
Doctor/Patient Relationship	Medical Condescension
Frustration	Therapy

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 “they may be mentally ill but they’re not crazy,” (158)?
3. What can be learned from the narratives of men like Leif and Richie?
4. The author speculates that Leif’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. Leif says, “I gotta keep moving. Death is being static,” (161). Why is “traveling” such an ingrained reflex? Is it a metaphor for anything?
6. Comment on the contrast of Richie’s attitude and the author’s “official duties.”
7. Why does the author describe his work as “strangely and cruelly exhilarating,” (165)?

Counseling

Dislocation

Disorientation

Emotional Illness

Honesty

Hope

Madness

Medicine, Social Organization of

Mental Illness

Psychiatry

Psychology

Reflection

Sense of Place

Separation/Connection

Vulnerable Populations

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?
6. Why does the speaker seek to bury or put to rest the culmination of his life’s work? How does he seek to do this? Is there any symbolism to be found in the way in which his life’s work is destroyed?
7. What role does the prayer play in the poem? What is the speaker praying for? What kind of a prayer is it? How does it affect him?
8. Consider the images of birth, death, and resurrection in the poem.
9. How does the speaker view his life, his role as a psychotherapist? Does he find, at the end of so many years in the profession, that he is confronted with as much mystery with regards to the human condition, as when he first started? What has he learned from his life’s work? Does he achieve a measure of clarity or find answers to his questions? Or is he not even looking for answers? What then, might he be looking for?

Aging
Birth/Rebirth
Coping
Death
Destruction
Letting Go

Mystery/Clarity
Peace
Prayer/Religion
Psychoanalysis
Science
Time

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. Why is Lawr attracted to Nora? Is he in love with her or in love with the idea of her?
4. In his conversation with Jack, Lawr defends the romantic ideals of love against Jack's material cynicism. Is he able to sustain this commitment to love? Are his feelings for his wife and Nora love, or different kinds of love, or is it a question of love vs. desire?
5. Is it commonplace for physicians to feel love for their patients? If so, how might this play out on the doctor-patient relationship?
6. 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?
7. Lawr wonders what is happening to him. Does he answer this question himself? What *is* happening to him?
8. Lawr seems to reach a crisis in his personal and professional life, calling himself a "faker." What causes this crisis, his feeling of duplicity and emptiness?
9. Why does Lawr start thinking of traveling? What do the Caves of Lascaux represent for him?
10. How does Lawr's inability to make the hosta grow reflect on his relations with Nora?
11. Does Lawr achieve any resolution by the end of the story? If not, on what kind of note does the story end?

Betrayal
Concealment
Desire
Disorientation
Doctor Transference

Doctor/Family Relationships
Doctor/Patient Relationships
Escape
Honesty
Powerlessness

Surgeon by Sharon Pretti

1. How does the speaker represent the surgery? Does it seem like something invasive or something healing? What language, what tone and metaphors would support your interpretation?

2. The narrator projects into the mind of the surgeon near the end of the poem. What kinds of sentiments are revealed (with respect to the surgery itself, the patient, the patient's family)?
3. How does the speaker feel towards the surgeon and the surgeon's skill/methods/role? How does she react to the surgery? Does she react at all, or is she only observing?
4. How has the surgery affected the narrator's father and the way she feels about him? (Think specifically of the language of exchange in the line "After she returns him.")
5. The poem is silent about the outcome of the surgery, emphasizing instead the surgeon (note the title), as well as the process of the surgery itself. Why do you think the poet made this choice in terms of content? What kind of message does it send? What kind of atmosphere does it create?
6. The poem is framed or presented in terms of a journey, particularly in the last lines. Whose journey? What kind of journey? Where has s/he gone (metaphorically speaking)?
7. What are the power relationships in the poem? Do the power distributions shift? What does it mean to represent a surgery in terms of a play of power?

Doctor/Family Relationships
 Doctor/Patient Relationships
 Escape
 Helplessness/Powerlessness
 Invasion

Journey
 Medical Hubris
 Nature
 Power

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?
5. This piece has the feel of a science-fiction story. What does this genre bring to medicine and nursing care?
6. How is humor deployed in the piece?
7. What are the advantages of the Levitron? How did it change the lives of the patients, the families, the nurses?
8. What kinds of flaws in legal and health systems does the malfunction of the Levitron reveal?
9. What does the malfunction of the Levitron reveal about patient-family relationships?
10. Is this piece a polemic against technology as progress, or is it a polemic against the status quo? Does the story retreat from this challenge by the last paragraph? What opinion does the speaker ultimately voice about ideas of change?

Aging/Deterioration
Change
Containment/Escape
Coping
Denial

Family/Health Care System Relationships
Family/Patient Relationships
Nurse/Patient Relationships
Sympathy/Empathy
Technology in Medicine

Miss Erma, Private Duty by Madeleine Mysko

1. What is the relationship between the nurse and her patient? Does she care for her?
2. What is the interplay between sight and blindness? How are they conveyed (beyond merely physical blindness)? What does the speaker see and what does she not see? Do we ever get a glimpse inside the mind of Mrs. Carlisle? If so, then how? If not, then why?
3. Discuss the metaphor describing trashcans in the rain.
4. What is the effect of time and setting in this poem?

Aging
Containment
Coping
Empathy
Escape

Imagination
Nurse/Patient Relationships
Sight/Blindness
Sympathy

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?
7. What is Dr. Nygaard's position in the hospital? How do the other doctors view him? How do his patients view him? How does Sylvia view him and his work? Does her opinion change? How and why?
8. Why does Sylvia go to see Dr. Nygaard?
9. What does Sylvia learn from Dr. Nygaard's treatment? How does it affect her or change her?
10. In her meeting with Dr. Nygaard, how does Sylvia undergo the transition from doctor to patient?

11. Dr. Nygaard is described variously throughout the piece as Dr. Frankenstein (186), “something out of Alfred Hitchcock,” (191) and a witch doctor. What does this say about Dr. Nygaard and the medicine he practices? How is it positioned in relation to medicine that is more conventional? What kind of judgments are made about Dr. Nygaard’s medicine, particularly in relation to his association with Hollywood fabrications, horror scenarios, and superstition? Are these judgments challenged or reversed by the end of the piece? How?
12. How does Dr. Nygaard participate in or disassociate himself from others’ imaginative construction of himself? He certainly seems aware of how others view him. How does this relate to Sylvia’s husband’s British affectations?
13. How does Sylvia feel about her divorce? How does this change throughout the piece and how does Dr. Nygaard and his treatment contribute to this transformation?
14. What is meant by the “nothing” at the end of the piece?

Alternative Medicine

Anxiety

Distrust

Divorce

Doctor as Patient

Doctor/Patient Relationships

Exclusion

Family

Healing

Honesty

Trust

FAMILY

Peeled Grapes by Sharon Olds

1. At the beginning of the poem, Olds lists those things for which she feels grateful to her mother. How do these “gifts” differ in nature from the peeled grapes her mother hopes she hasn’t forgotten?
2. What kind of person emerges in the few lines Olds uses to depict her mother? Draw or describe her.
3. Write an imaginary conversation Olds’ mother might have with a close woman friend, revealing the mother’s personality as gleaned from the poem.
4. Would you like her as your mother? Explain in a paragraph or two, including the pros and cons.
5. Evaluate how you would feel if she were your own mother, including the pros and cons.
6. Olds uses the terms “said” and “mean” at the end of the poem. How has she transposed their usual arrangement? What does this convey to you?
7. Why does Olds conclude that her mother urges her to “Be yourself?” Can you draw the same conclusion from the evidence she provides in this poem?

Caretakers
Child/Parent Relationships
Coming of Age
Dependency

Independence
Steering Your Own Course in Life
Support

Lily of The Valley by Emma Wunsch

1. Henry takes care of his wife when she becomes ill, and after she dies, he must raise his daughter alone. Considering how Henry handles this responsibility, what do we learn about him?
2. Locate instances in which Henry tries, unsuccessfully, to talk with Lily about her eating habits.
3. There are several threads that weave throughout the story: the boy with the hole in his cheek, the father's work on a 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 her 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. The title and use of Lily's name refers to "the valley" in Los Angeles. Now 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. When Lily was young, Henry showed her how perception can change by closing one eye and then the other. Lily does this as she talks with her father over dinner. How does this small detail foreshadow Henry's epiphany? Can you find other such details?

(Self) Destruction
Child/Parent Relationships
Control/Loss of
Death of Parents
Denial

Disconnection
Disfigurement
Effects of Mental Illness on Families
Frustration
Perfection/Ideal

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?

Childhood

Death

Family

Loss

Religion

The Liver Nephew by Susan Ito

1. Trace the conflicting pulls vying for Parker’s choice to donate, or not to donate, his liver.
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?

Anxiety

Betrayal/Trust

Choices/No Choices

Difference

Disclosing Information

Family Relationships

Guilt

Honesty

Illness and Family Dynamics

Isolation

Loneliness

Pity

Truth

Vulnerability

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.

Age	Death	Isolation
Birth	Deterioration	Love
Change	Escape	Parent/Child Relationships
Containment	Freedom	Responsibility

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

1. Discuss the interplay between the narrator's career life and her personal life. How does each change as the story progresses? How does the narrator feel about these changes?
2. The mother never speaks in this piece. Her personality, remains on the periphery, in the realm of the narrator's memory. How does this form of presenting character affect the reader's vision of the mother? What does it tell us about the mother and the narrator, and their relationship?
3. Locate the moments when black humor appears in the story. Why is it used and to what effect?
4. The moments when the narrator must choose between saying "yes" or "no" reveal an interior dialogue that highlights a disconnect between what is being said and what is truly meant. How does this echo the mother's condition? What does the narrator say "yes" to, and what does she say "no" to? What effect does it have on the narrator and her mother?
5. Silence is just as powerful as speech in this piece. Who is silenced and how?
6. How does the narrator wrestle with issues of blame and responsibility?
7. How is the world of advertising similar to, or different from, the world of medicine?

Beauty	Doctor/Family Relationship	Recovery
Blame	Doctor/Patient Relationship	Responsibility
Containment	Family Relationships	Survival
Control/Loss of	Hope	Youth/Age
Death	Loneliness	
Disfigurement	Loss	

Socks and ***Stubborn*** by Meg Kearney

1. In “Stubborn,” how does humor serve the father and daughter? Does it ease their mutual self-consciousness?
2. The relationship between parent and child is reversed in these poems. How does the labor and intimacy of caring for the father in a physical way serve as a rite of passage?
3. The poet uses two comparisons in each poem. Find them, and then read the poems again without these. How do the 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 to participate in a patient’s hospital stay (supplying blankets and food, being present in the examination room, etc.). Please comment.

Caretakers
Cooperation/Unity
Dependency
Detachment
Deterioration

Family
Helplessness/Powerlessness
Humor
Love
Mortality

Parent/Child Relationship
Strength
Vulnerability
Weakness

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 from the husband’s point of view.
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 by 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?

Age

Body vs. Spirit

Choice/No Choices

Death

Intoxication

Marital Relationships

Medical Community

Philosophy/Metaphysics

Powerlessness

Suicide

Time

Studies in the Subjunctive by Ruthann Robson

1. What is the relation between the narrator and Anne Sexton? Does the narrator identify with her? Or does she reflect upon Anne Sexton in relation to other people in her life?
2. How does time, the narrator’s memories, her projections into past, present and future, operate in this piece, especially in relation to the theme of grammar?
3. What is the role of grammar in this piece? Does it stand for anything beyond itself? Is it a marker for a discussion of something else? If so, what?
4. The narrator refers to the dictionary throughout the piece. What role does the dictionary play?
5. There are various instances throughout of different people in different situations confronting suicide. How do they relate to each other? What do they mean for the narrator? How are they positioned in relation to other forms of death or ways of meeting death?
6. Is this piece meant to take the form of a letter? To whom is it addressed?
7. What role did the World Trade Center attack play in her thinking?
8. Is this “overintellectualized?”

Cancer
Choices/No Choices
Coping
Depression
Life/Reality

Literature/Poetry
Perfection/Ideal
Psychiatry
Suicide
Therapy

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. In what ways does this visual lay-out contribute to its effect? Try rearranging it.
4. 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.
5. Respond in writing, as if you were the child contemplating suicide, to the poet's appeal.
6. How are images of absence and presence, permanence and transience, represented in the poem and juxtaposed against each other? What kind of message does it impart to the addressee of the poem?
7. What connection does the poem make between hardware tools and a human body, a human life?
8. Consider the image of "Ghosts" in the poem. What does it suggest about death and the effect of a death on the living?

Absence
Displacement
Ghosts
Loss

Love
Permanence
Presence
Suicide

Art by Eric Nelson

1. What is 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.
3. Adults tend to think they should shield children from unpleasant truths. Comment on this.
4. Based on what the poem evokes, describe a time when you were a child. Also describe an incident in which you were an adult interacting with a child.

5. 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 these factors contribute to the impact of the poem?
6. What line in this poem is the most moving to you? Why?
7. Colors are particularly vivid in this poem. What are the various colors used and what kind of feelings do they each impart?
8. Discuss the italicized lines of the poem, the dialogue between mother and child.

Birth	Loss
Child Illness	Love
Death	Parent/Child Relationship
Grief	

A Roomful of Christmas by Scott Temple

1. How does the "room full of Christmas" help Bobbie?
2. Was the psychologist encouraging denial?
3. Does Bobbie help the narrator? How?
4. What role do the hospital politics and struggles play in the story, in Bobbie's life and death? How do they affect the narrator and his view of the situation?

Absence	Empathy
Containment	Escape
Coping	Imagination
Depression	Psychology
Doctor/Patient Relationship	Therapy

"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?
2. Investigate the word "count," including its variations. 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?

Control/Loss of	Grief
Coping	Helplessness/Powerlessness
Death	Loss
Family	Medication
Fear	Protest
Friends	Silence

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”? Is there another way?
3. Are there ways in which you have shared this “shedding”?
4. Unpack the meaning(s) of the extended metaphor of the raft. What does it mean to be pushed off the raft? What does it mean to stay on? What does it mean to have the raft collapse beneath you?
5. How is “being adrift” reflected in the content and the setting of the conceit? Is it successful or not?
6. What philosophical life questions does this narration set out to answer? What do we know about the narrator’s actual state of “being”?
7. What effect does the writer’s use of the second person have on the reader’s conception of the subject matter?
8. What are the successive stages of this trip on the raft? What are the criteria by which people are pushed off?
9. What perspective does this trip on the raft grant to aspects of life that are traditionally considered normal and absolute, such as hierarchy, responsibility, (“carrying” and “being carried,”) love, and pain?
10. In the course of this journey on the raft, do “you” change? How?
11. How does time operate in this piece? How is it represented?

(Self) Determination
Aging
Childhood
Control/Loss of
Daily Life

Family Relationships
Friendship
Isolation
Learning
Loss

Love
Relationships
Time

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?
5. What are the different meanings of “survive” presented in the poem?
6. The word “survive” is almost lent physical form in the poem, the “v”s becoming knives. What other archetype of death might such an image of a “shiv” allude to? Is there violence inherent in this image? Or a dispassionate destruction?

Age
Change
Coping
Death
Family

Fear
Isolation
Loss
Survival
Time

Morning at Fifty by Alan L. Steinberg

1. The opening paragraphs outline the stages Ebstein goes through when he drives to visit his father. Less clearly delineated, there are also three stages he goes through whenever he first sees his father. What do these stages have in common?
2. 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" (251). 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?

Aging
Consciousness of Death, Time
Dementia
Disorientation
Facing Mortality
Fading Memory

Nostalgia
Numbness
Parent/Child Relationships
Questions/Questioning
Sadness
Waiting

DEATH

His Own Time by John Thompson

1. The narrator "does his time" by reading, others by walking. How does Lenny 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" (253) What does the narrator mean by this? What does this have to do with his feelings and the others' towards Lenny's act?

4. What common attitudes among medical personnel prevail in regard to patient behavior? How might one community of medical personnel approve or disapprove of the behavior of another such community (nurses, aides, doctors)?
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 halts because of a suicide attempt and wishes the person “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 Lenny’s death?
8. If you were Morgan, how would you respond? If you were the narrator, what would you say? And if you were Lenny, how would you answer? Using first person, (“I”), write responses in each one’s voice.
9. How would the story be altered if the “bookend” scenes (which take place in the present) were removed?
10. Could this have occurred outside a prison setting? How does the fact that this incident occurs in a prison setting affect what happens?

(Self) Destruction
 Anger
 Anxiety
 Authority
 Detachment
 Escape

Frustration
 Guilt
 Numbness
 Social Mores
 Suicide
 Waiting

The Accident by Gray Jacobik

1. How does the author use images of light and dark to advance her investigation of the active process of dying?
2. What effect does the bride coming down the aisle preceded by her flower girls have on you near the end of the poem? Describe how it enhances and deepens 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 she 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 poem’s 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?

Anxiety
 Confronting Death
 Consciousness of Death/Time
 Facing Mortality

Mortality
 Mystery/Clarity
 Uncertainty
 Waiting

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?

Anxiety
Control/Loss of
Destruction
Fear
Loss of Security

Scars of War and Illness
Terror
Tragedy
Trauma

Breathing by Cortney Davis

1. Exposition in fiction is defined as the presentation of information essential to the dramatic situation that will unfold. At one point in the story, it says “incongruities floated into his mind when he was tired...” (259). In what ways does the author use exposition to prepare the reader as well as to 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. 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. 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, as well as 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? Think of it in relation to the following quote from Sharon Olds' poem, "The Last Day": "I laid my head on the bed in the path of his breath and breathed it." (From *The Father*, Knopf, 1992)
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?" (267)
 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.

(Social) Organization of Medicine
 Confronting Death
 Doctor / Nurse Relationship
 Doctor / Patient Relationship
 Doctors in Training
 Empathy

Fear
 Fear of Dying
 Learning
 Nurse/Patient Relationship
 Uncertainty
 Waiting

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 "life" to the dead? Which of these images stand out for you?
4. Do you think it is positive or a negative to miss the things of this life when 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?

Consciousness of Death, Time
 Coping
 Desire
 Grief
 Loss

Memory
 Mourning
 Nostalgia
 Uncertainty

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?

Coming to Terms with/Humanizing the “Other”

Communicating with the Dead

Death

Imagination

Mortality

Separation/Connection

Spirits

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?

Absence
 Confronting Death
 Coping
 Death of Parents
 Facing Mortality

Family Relationships
 Grief
 Mourning
 Saying Goodbye

...*Divorced, Beheaded, Survived* by Robin Black

1. The narrator talks about “ways we protect our children” (275). What are some ways we do this? Are these ways helpful or harmful?
2. “As soon as we learned Terry was sick, my house stopped being the daily gathering place” (276). Why do people shun the sick? Why do doctors and nurses pay fewer visits to the rooms of dying patients?
3. The 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. The 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” (277). 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?

Dealing With Memories of Death
 Death of a Child
 Denial

Facing Mortality
 Siblings

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 words call to each other through the poem? Example: “more light,” “beam,” “luminarias,” 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?

Coping

Dealing with Memories of Death

Depression

Friendship

Intimacy

Memory

Nostalgia

Relationships

Sharing a Life

Suicide

Apartment 1-A by Amy Mehringer

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. The narrator wonders why the tenant, who didn’t know the narrator or his 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. 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” (283)?
6. Why does this piece feel more clearly like fiction, whereas “...Divorced, Beheaded, Survived” feels a bit like nonfiction?

Dealing with Memories of Death

Facing Mortality

Marriage

Spouses

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-à-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?

Communicating with the Dead
 Mourning
 Spirits

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 aide 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
 Generation Gap
 Objects in our Lives

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? What does the word "frail" indirectly refer to?
3. Which images and sounds give this poem its haunting quality?

4. Certain words and images are repeated throughout 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.

Aging
 Child/Parent relationship
 Death of Parents
 Generations

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 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?”

Aging
 Fading Memory
 Saying Goodbye

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 effect on you? If so, what aspects of the poem cause that visceral effect?
8. The title, “First Steps,” has multiple meanings. How would you describe those different layers of meaning?

Changing Life Philosophies

Hope

Rehabilitation

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?

Coming to Terms with/Humanizing the “Other”

Coping

Difference

Physical Disabilities

Struggle of Life

Sleeping on the Perimeter by Gaynell Gavin

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. How is the Vietnam War used in the writer’s method of character development?
3. In what ways does the piece’s structure reflect the main themes of the story?
4. What are the various forms of conflict represented throughout this piece? Who do they involve? What are their causes?
5. What types of connections are forged through war and how? What types of connections are ruptured and how?
6. How does war affect the combatants? How are they transformed (psychologically, physically, etc.)? What does war do to their humanity and that of the “enemy”?
7. Numerous scars and wounds are described in this piece. Who is scarred and how? How do those affected deal with the scars and wounds (their own and others)?
8. What role does the excerpt from Tobias Wolff’s memoir play in this piece? What does he say about “jumping”?

(Self) Alienation/Isolation

Anger

Coming to Terms with/Humanizing
the “Other”

Communication/Silence

Coping

Dependency

Dislocation

Dreams

Fear

Grief

Insomnia

Isolation

Loss

Memory of Tragedy

Numbness

Scars of War and Illness

Separation/Connection

Victim/Victimization

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?

Containment
Daily Life
Escape
Nature

Survival
Uncertainty
Vitality
Vulnerability

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?

Death of a Child
Doctor/Patient Relationship
Hospital Experience
Loss

Parent/Child Relationship
Professional Detachment
Saying Goodbye

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” (301). Does this relate to the responses many of us feel when we experience sudden personal loss or devastating illness?
2. Does the mind’s repetition of trauma serve a useful purpose?
3. How does the narrator struggle to express something indescribable? What kinds of words or means of expression does she eschew? Why?
4. How does the narrator view metaphor and simile? Why might these modes of description become ineffectual or defunct through the experience of 9/11?
5. What effect does location (proximity and distance from the event both physically and temporally) create? Between whom does it create a disconnect?
6. How does the narrator represent the disruption between sense perception and knowledge/understanding caused by the sights, sounds, and smells of 9/11?
7. Why is “desire” a “troublesome word” (301) in the context of 9/11?
8. How is the narrator disconnected from her own body?
9. What does the sentiment “I ache for something greater for my senses” (301) express?
10. What does “the eminence of place” (301) mean for the narrator?
11. The narrator juxtaposes 9/11 with scenes of foreign and distant destruction and war mediated through artistic representation? How do they reflect upon each other?
12. What are the different forms of seeing in this piece? Who is looking at what and how is the viewer affected?

13. How does the art of Kenro Izu affect the narrator? Does the art of Bruegel the Elder affect the narrator differently? Why?
14. What are the various psychological terms that appear in this piece? What reflections do they inspire? To what are they applied?
15. How does the narrator find the path to recovery? What role does art play in this discovery and what is the nature of the healing process?
16. To what does the “it” of the last “Have you seen it?” refer?

(Self) Alienation/Isolation	Dislocation	Numbness
Absence	Disorientation	Objects/Things
Annihilation	Exposure/Vulnerability	Pain
Beauty	Healing	Reciprocity
Chaos	Helplessness/Powerlessness	Recovery
Control/Loss of	Imagination	Survival
Coping	Invasion	Terror
Desire	Looking at Art	Trauma
Destruction	Memory	Victim/Victimization
Disconnect	Mind Processes	Waiting

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” mean 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?

Fate
 Struggle of Life
 Survival

Bereavement and Beyond by Joan Kip

1. Does the author’s “professional” knowledge help her to deal with her own grief?
2. Would reading Joan Kip’s story help others who are grieving?
3. What traditional tenets of mourning does the narrator debunk? What rules/facts of mourning does she offer in their stead?
4. What kind of community does shared mourning create?
5. How has the narrator been transformed by the loss of her husband?
6. At what point does the author arrive at her epiphany?
7. What is the relationship between time and memory? In what ways does Kip express this relationship?

Aging
Bereavement
Death
Empathy
Grieving

Isolation
Loss
Love
Marital Relationships
Memory

Objects/Things
Passage of Time
Presence/Absence
Separation/Connection

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?

Consciousness of Death, Time
Death
Human Condition
Passage of Time