

# **5<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM POETRY OF HOPE AND HEALING**

**February 24, 2022**

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**Organized by:**

**Frank Meyskens, MD, FACP;**

**Johanna Shapiro, PhD; Thelma Reyna, PhD**

**5<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM**  
**POETRY OF HOPE AND HEALING**  
February 24, 2022 | 6 – 8 pm (Zoom Webinar)

6:00 – 6:05 pm	<b>Welcome &amp; Opening Poems</b> “Connections”	Frank Meyskens
6:05 – 6:08 pm	<b>Present Anthology</b>	Thelma Reina
6:08 – 6:10 pm	<b>Introduction of Keynote Speaker</b>	Johanna Shapiro
6:10 – 6:40 pm	<b>Keynote Presentation and Poems</b> “5920 Days Pre-Pandemic” “Mask” “Apex, Pandemic Part I (Five Days Out)” “When They Ask How He Died I Tell Them” “Elegy for Jerry (275 Days Out)” “Relic” “The Elysian Fields (52 Days Out)” “If it Helps You (560 Days Out)” “Lie (575 Days Out)” “In my Dream” “Vespers” “Whispered in the Ambulance Bay at 5 am (197 Days Out)” “Carillon” “Sharon” “Incarnadine” “Speak”	Stacy Nigliazzo
6:40 – 6:50 pm	<b>Responses</b>	Jayne Lewis
6:50 – 7:05 pm	<b>Group 1 Readers</b> “Supposed To” “Heart as an Esker” “Isolation”	Thelma Reyna Kathleen Powers Chloie Flores
7:05 – 7:15 pm	<b>Responses</b>	Jayne Lewis

7:15 – 7:25 pm	<b>Group 2 Readers</b> “Outside Therapy” “The Territory”	Lisa Krueger Gabriella Miotto
7:25 – 7:30 pm	<b>Responses</b>	Jayne Lewis
7:30 – 7:45 pm	<b>Group 3 Readers</b> “A Letter to My Future Self” “Sunset at Top of the World” “Happy Birthday”	Michael Eselun Jane Hilary Jamielle Rankine
7:45 – 7:55 pm	<b>Responses</b>	Jayne Lewis
7:55 – 8:00 pm	<b>Closing Remarks</b> “Dear Future”	Johanna Shapiro

## Connections

Hugging, a universal gesture.  
When done well  
like holding hands with your whole body.  
When done with malintent  
like a punch to the gut.

There is an infinite variety of hugs:

There is the business hug,  
brief arm contact around one shoulder  
a greeting familiar to all saying  
    "I'm here."  
    but nothing more.

There is the faithful colleague hug.  
Arms encircling each other,  
bodies facing and apart  
accompanied by a smile,  
and a brief meeting of the eyes.

And then, the good friend hug.  
A brief contact of bodies  
with a felt response,  
A peck on the cheek,  
a slow parting of the flesh.

And unexpectedly, moments that we all remember.  
Two bodies  
    entangled from head to toe,  
leaving nothing  
    to the imagination.

And hands.  
Two people gently holding hands while walking down the street.  
The Caregiver, softly touching the hand  
    of a patient or a loved one,  
    signaling kindness and love,

    Building empathy and trust.

Hugging and holding hands.  
Two ancient forms of communication.  
Transmitting compassion and understanding.  
Keeping the peace, leading to healing and hope.

Nurturing, fostering, connecting....  
the chance for another day.

- Frank Meyskens

## 5920 Days Pre-Pandemic

My mother has cancer. I pray

for a cure,

then

for her to die

mercifully.

I never knew—

could not have

known

before.

*I want to be a nurse—*

- Stacy Nigliazzo

## Mask

My borrowed face,

incorporeal,

blue—

I give you            only

my eyes.

- Stacy Nigliazzo

**Apex, Pandemic Part I (Five Days Out)**

He arrives choke-winded,    vespid breath

like pollen on a windshield.

I am the first one—

I steady my gloved hand across his chest,

his heart, an angry fist.

We place a breathing tube.

I step back and hold my breath.

His lungs                      bloom,

hands                      open

like sunflowers.



**When they ask how he died I tell them**

he found the gate unlatched,

crossed the downy path

into the volant field,

pressed his palm against a river birch carved with his name,

his breath, a brace of stars—

and never looked back.

- Stacy Nigliazzo

**Elegy for Jerry (275 Days Out)**

We painted your colors on the ceiling of the ambulance bay,

lit flameless candles,

read your name.

When Christmas cases bloomed

and the snow came,

we doubled our ranks to process the living—

and the dead—

lost power as the generator sang to shouts of

*vents!*

*bi-paps!*

*oxygen tanks!*

## Relic

Quietly, they concede,  
leaving pennies

at your feet.  
Clove oil at your bedside.

A constellation of symbols  
etched

across the grease board  
like cave scrawl.

In your palm, a withered  
blade

of split stone. Fluted reeds  
like hollow wings in flight.

Eyes closed, lips  
unparted,

I collect you like clover  
in the green fleck of my eye—

like bone chips at the altar.

- Stacy Nigliazzo

## The Elysian Fields (52 Days Out)

“...no snow is there, nor heavy storm, nor ever rain...”  
(*The Odyssey*)

When the last bed is taken,

and patients are already booked two in each room,

where shall he go?

When the last hallway spot is filled,

and the aisle by the ambulance bay formerly used for broken IV poles,

and the recliner that sits next to the supply cart but still in the eye-line

of the charge nurse,

and the black chair in the blind corner,

and the corridor along the admit desk that can hold six stretchers but only has outlets

for three cardiac monitors and two oxygen concentrators,

and the alcove saved for CPR calls because it has a curtain and wall-mounted

oxygen

and buys us time to pull someone else out of a room

and into the hallway on a stretcher,

and where will *that* stretcher go—

and who shall care for him

when the nurses are pressed and the doctors can't

keep up, and three of our staff are among those

admitted and waiting for beds in the lobby,

and the travel nurses are overrun

after only two days of clinical orientation,

and how shall we shield his cough that sounds like the bark  
of my dog, Homer, from when I was seven  
and he was fifteen and suddenly left to live  
on a farm  
where he could run with other dogs in rolling fields, and drink  
milk just expressed from a Holstein cow  
whose udder never waivers, and sleep  
in a hay-filled stall curled beside a Shetland pony,  
where ventilators are planted in groves  
like pomegranates,  
and oxygen tubing and stylets are sown into the green hair of the earth,  
and waterfalls spill over  
with convalescent plasma,  
and streams swell with Remdesivir,  
and bottles of corticosteroids are plucked like apples from the trees  
each morning, and bushels of N95 masks  
are packed in pallets in a red barn flanked with pearl-lined gates,  
and evening meals are blessed with songs from a golden lyre  
as we dine with friends, family, and colleagues we've lost  
at tables ripe with summer-sweet fruit  
that never sours  
and wine that never turns.

- Stacy Nigliazzo

## **If It Helps You (560 Days Out)**

A refrigerated truck arrives in the bay.

*For centuries, in the northern states,*

*the winter dead have waited            for spring burial,*

*because it's too            hard            to break*

*the frozen ground—they were saved*

*in barns and caves called “dead houses—”*

*in 2005 alone, roughly 1000 burials were delayed in the state of New York—*

- Stacy Nigliazzo

**Lie (575 Days Out)**

I tell you

*it's okay.*

You fall asleep on a bench seat.

I replace your keening oxygen tank

hourly

in the lobby.

Someone else calls your wife with an update.

I have worn this mask for six days.

These are not my hands.

This is not my face.

- Stacy Nigliazzo

**In my dream**

my mother

is alive,      still

ripe with cancer.

Her eyes are the color of rain.

I take her to my hospital      where there is a line spilling into the street—

and watch her die on the sidewalk.

- Stacy Nigliazzo



## Vespers

We stand together                    on the bank,

slip into the laden arms of the dark water.

Marigold,     milkweed,

all that is left of the light.

The cellar of the lake.

- Stacy Nigliazzo

**Whispered in the Ambulance Bay at 5am (197 Days Out)**

*Be a light, a living*

*prayer, always*

*your child;*

*courage,*

*composure,*

*kindness.*

*Let no one die in the hallway today,*

*please.*

*Slow down,*

*slow*

*down,*

*slow*

*down...*

- Stacy Nigliazzo

## Carillon

I call to tell him she is *here,*

and *not here;*

that her heart stopped,

then started again,

and we are seeking her in every lampblack corridor.

And when I hold the phone to her ear

so he can read to her,

her

eyes

ring—

**Sharon**

Blackfoot daisies are your favorite flower.

His first gift,

a mood ring that still blooms green.

And last night,

here, in room 203,

I counted the steps of his galloping heart with my fingertip.

He called me by your name.

- Stacy Nigliazzo

## **Incarnadine**

The cardinal at my window

sings            year-round,

does not migrate

or shed his colors, builds an open cup from parched grass and the hair he plucks

from the dog's bristled ear,

cannot bear the sight of his own face reflected in the pane—

is a red river, a cleric's crown, an artery.

- Stacy Nigliazzo

## **Speak**

No one saw or heard.

Don't tell anyone—

tell everyone.

- Stacy Nigliazzo

## Supposed To

You were supposed to get my pearls when I died, and ruby-studded bracelets nestled in the cherry armoire lined with silk, the one I'd brought from Rome to someday will to you.

You were supposed to get my golden watch, mother's wedding ring she left for me, and Mama Fina's velvet box of antique photos we adored— treasures small and big, things speaking to your soul.

You were supposed to read my decorated card, me not propped in bed with limping breath, but gifting in advance, sitting at your side, dear sister, basking in the radiance of your eyes.

But gods weave plots without consent, marking spit and blood on unsuspecting hearts, sending unseen ghouls with microscopic crowns to blindside us at rest, at play, entwined in arms, tending others.

Gods twist calendars and clocks to block the maps of best-laid plans, sledgehammer us to dust, stifling breath, shredding lungs, pilfering loved ones with carte blanche.

You were supposed to outlive me, my angel girl, to hold my hand in my last breaths, not fight for yours in ICU alone, not slip away so soon like wisps of cloud, frayed apart, piece by piece, like threads.

## Heart as an esker

I.

There was once a river  
Where fingers now are

A whole flood  
And now we're in it.

II.

The strange thing about thinking is that  
It possesses no force.

As he held the heart in his hands  
The edges kept caving in

I kept putting them back  
Putting  
Them  
Back  
As if to preserve their form would mean something.

III.

Meaning in an ancient riverbed arrives as the water and  
seafoamed life you'd imagined there  
dissipate

And you're on the banks as you always were  
Marooned  
(An observer's status is always a marooned one)  
Not realizing you're in it.

That's you, dear.  
The khaki-ed paleontologist of the anatomy lab.  
Enclosed in sedimentary fascia  
Looking at something else  
the earth has poured itself over.

IV.

You are both on and beside the table.  
The carapace is formaldehyde.  
You plug a valve with your thumb.



V.

The day you zoomed about necrosis  
You saw a wall of cinderblocks  
as a dike freshly lain  
across what used to be the library

You ask the foreman:  
“What...”  
He replies:  
“Labs.”

Knowledge and life are at odds with each other.  
but you knew that before  
seeing forms in the basalt and limestone.

You shrug. Aristotle said ‘like attracts like.’  
And you went out looking for fossils.

- Kathleen Powers

## ISOLATION

1.

The brilliant light of a newborn day  
crawled into the convalescent room  
where the mother, despite her pain, stood up to say  
“Please open the windows wide.”

With latex hands, I revealed the outside  
where soft cotton sailed through the blue.  
To my delight, she waved to a child passing by  
whose father waved back too.

She’s watching the world from behind a glass,  
quarantined by a merciless sickness Sometimes  
the best I can do listen,  
To comfort, to soothe, to understand.

I spend the hours performing little tasks  
that ease my patient’s loneliness.  
I swaddle their worry, nurse them with care,  
become their loving confidante.

While I cannot heal disease, I help them feel  
they matter in this world.  
I can’t be their baby, their daughter, Their  
sister or wedded partner,  
But I feed them, bath them, and honor them In  
the time we share, each day, each shift.

2.

When the hours matured to somber twilight, I  
wend my way back home.  
My service isn’t finished yet:  
I take care of my sick grandmother.

While it was hard to see her suffer, and  
hear our conversations run short, every  
battle had made her tougher, and she’d  
humbly praise my support.

Her daughters and sons were unable to come,  
from lands beyond the deserts and seas.  
How ignorant the world has become  
with bans and border policies.

She misses her family every day, and  
tells me what I do is enough,  
That my presence makes her feel safe, and  
through my patience she has felt love. For  
indeed, the bonds of family transcend miles,  
laws, and walls.

- Chloe Flores

## Outside Therapy

Sitting across from someone closing  
their eyes, I can't do this.

A canopy of oaks ribbons skin;  
somewhere leaf-blowers drone.

Leaning toward one who weeps,  
a lizard by their shoe.

Feathers from a hawk-ravaged nest  
make a mandala on grass.

90 degrees. A woman says, I left, then  
panicked, went back.

95 degrees. A man shouts,  
I don't know who they want me to be!

Out in the open, gestures look theatrical,  
on stage; a squirrel pauses.

Late afternoon, someone whispers,  
I am always afraid.

Acorns, feathers, strips of shed skin,  
bone bits and seed stipple: what was alive,

what wants to live. All day with trees,  
grove of the unbroken.

- Lisa Krueger

## The Territory

I've been wandering the grounds of this homestead  
looking for the animal that keeps scratching at my windows and doors.

Some days it seems beaked, others, clawed.  
Perhaps an injured bird, feathers askew in the aftermath of feline jaws?

*I want to warm you gently in my palms, reset your wings.*

Or perhaps a wolf, bloodied paws still harnessed to the steel trap?

*I want to bandage your wounds, offer your limbs deliverance.*

What?

You say those sounds of screeching tapping whimpering scratching  
are coming from me?

Well then.

Will you help me  
tend to my song and my flight  
to my howl and my hunt?

And I will, yours.

- Gabriella Miotto

## **A Letter to My Future Self**

*by Michael Eselun*

Dear Michael,

Oh, how I long for answers from you! Do we make it? You and I? What losses have you endured? I want to steal the teacher's copy of the textbook from behind her desk to see the answers in the back.

But what do I even mean when I ask, "Did we make it?" As if there is a finish line? A point when it's over—this chapter? When it all goes back to the way it was before? As if this is as finite, as discrete as the last agonizing semester of eighth grade? I suppose I see it that way from here, though I know it's not. In a way, just as I never quite "got over" the trauma of eighth grade, perhaps this trauma too will never leave me.

Maybe it shouldn't. I hope it doesn't. May I be shaped by it. But just tell me—"Will it be OK?"

Of course it will. It is now. I know that too. And I want you to know when you remember me, when you conjure up these times in your memory, that a part of me knew that too.

Michael

## Sunset at Top of the World

For Anne Grete

From high we look down  
to the quiet water  
    stretching  
        east - west  
    grey as a dove's wing  
- we know a body can fly like a bird -  
    away  
to the low, dark island  
    back-lit in pink  
    pale as a shell

Now you speak  
of the death of your son

    - suicide  
- a body can fly like a bird -

So many came  
    you were amazed -  
So gentle a soul  
    *God is good*  
    you say

Driving down the mountain  
all hell breaks loose -  
Turquoise, like sea-glass  
    bursts through the windshield  
    and clouds  
    scarlet as flame  
    flock toward heaven  
    beating in chorus  
        their glorious wings

- Jane Hilary

## **“Happy Birthday”**

It is my birthday today.

And no, I do not mean this was the day my mother first met me in a hospital room.

Today is the day my mind removed the chains of racial ridicule. The stifling choke hold in which  
“I... can't... breathe!”.

Nightmares of a bullet entering my unarmed body, then hearing... “FREEZE”!

My skin is not a symbol for danger. Or why I've been a resident in my community for  
years, yet still looked at as a stranger... That's where I live.

At work, nepotism against my over qualified resume. Seems the ladder is always in favor.

In a room and seated at a table where my chocolate skin is the only flavor.

In my mind I was bound.

Said to be free, but these chains in my head I could not find the key.

So, I struggled to find my worth in a place that tells me my creativity and culture is worth  
stealing, but everything else about me needed some healing?

I told myself, “No more!”.

My silence was more deafening than the hungry and unjust cries of the underserved.

Freedom and opportunity are gifts that we as God's people all deserve.

So, I declare... Today is my birthday!

For I am birthed from the hope and strength that my ancestors had. A  
black woman whose voice can be heard; for this I am glad.



My black is not a crime, or a reason I should spend time behind  
bars. Or be shot while my hands are on the steering wheel of my car.

Rather, this black should be celebrated, because it rose in the night and lit candles in dark  
places. Despite being hated and told degrading words to our faces.

This black, God himself painted. I like to think it is renowned.

And on this birthday of mine, I will proudly wear this crown. You should wear one too,  
and celebrate this birthday with me.

For nothing can be accomplished unless there is unity. No more will we bring a knife to a gun  
fight. Instead, we will use our voices and insight.

Create a world of opportunity and healing for all, in plain sight.

This story today, we will  
rewrite. Happy Birthday!

- Jamielle Rankine-Kirlew

**Dear Future (if you are still there),**

2020 was quite a year  
Pandemic, quarantines  
lockdowns  
a crazy President  
telling us not to worry  
There was no pandemic  
Inject bleach  
Demonstrations against masks  
“They stifle my freedom!”  
(to be an idiot)  
Doctors, nurses risking their lives  
and their families’ lives  
fighting daily with few weapons  
just their oath to heal  
at least to care always  
Hundreds of thousands of deaths  
disproportionately among  
people of color  
a tsunami of suffering

Yes, 2020 was quite a year  
(Yet another) awakening  
to the endemic racism  
of our country  
Black Lives Matter  
demonstrations in the streets  
Finally, people of all colors  
no longer afraid to recognize  
Black and Brown injustice  
countered by white supremacists  
and neo-Nazis  
no longer afraid to  
show their ugly khakis and  
Tiki torches  
unafraid to shout their  
ugly ideology

And of course there was still  
climate change  
continuing to smack us in the face  
while we pretended  
mother Earth was not sick  
- and sick of us

Fires, floods, hurricanes

heat waves, downpours  
melting polar icecaps  
rising sea levels  
while governments dithered  
and asserted something  
must be done

2021 was supposed to be  
better  
We had vaccines  
We had masks  
We had a new President  
whose trademark was empathy  
We had learned some things about  
crowds  
unventilated spaces  
testing  
Or had we?  
We rushed to reclaim our old lives  
heedless of warnings of new variants  
heedless of the hordes who  
refused vaccination, refused masks,  
preferred risking illness and  
death  
for themselves and  
everyone around them  
Delta struck  
and now it was not just  
(at times seemingly expendable)  
old people and sick people  
but younger folk  
even kids in ICUs  
Still we partied on  
It was summer after all

Dear Future,  
please write back and  
tell me what happens  
are we caught in an endless loop of  
more variants, more deaths,  
more vaccines that people won't take  
more denial, more politics?  
Will we ever learn to do  
the right thing?  
Will we ever learn that  
the virus doesn't care

ff we are white, Black, Brown  
what our politics are  
Will we ever learn that this is an  
existential struggle  
If we don't come together  
we will die separately  
alone in overcrowded hospitals  
and when they are too full  
in parking lot tents  
Did we ever figure this out,  
dear Future?

- Johanna Shapiro