



Readers' Guide

Looking for ideas on how to use *The Healing Muse* as a text in a classroom or as a selection for a book club? Here is an excerpt for this issue. You can access the entire guide at thehealingmuse.org

The Banality of the Everyday

Poetry is commonly viewed as transcendent and profound, a vehicle that leads to higher levels of understanding. Poems eclipse the monotony of the daily grind. Poetry brings an expectation: it transports us to deeper meanings.

What happens if we flip the script, *dive into* the ordinary? The following writers focus on “the everyday”—preparing dinner, getting dressed, shopping for groceries. Where do these poems take us?

- Claire Scott ~ *It Shouldn't Be So Hard to Be a Person*
- Mary Gardner ~ *Now That You Mention It*
- Luke Park ~ *Bubble Wrap*
- Kasia Clarke ~ *To My Husband and Fellow Medical Student*

The Meaning of Meaning

Many people see poets as makers of meaning; others see them as astute observers. Grade school students learning poetry are trained to look for meaning. This quest continues in adulthood. An absence of meaning is unsettling and so we wrestle with the poem, creating a dynamic tension.

In the following poems, how does each speaker approach the tension found in the poem? Do they share common identities?

- Robert W. Daly ~ *What Does it Matter That*
- Mary Gardner ~ *Now That You Mention It*
- Charlene Langfur ~ *The Conditions of Happiness*
- Kaye C. Newbury ~ *And That's That*

Cosmic Humility: The Smallness of Man

Carl Sagan is well-known for his description of the planet we inhabit as a mere “speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark.” Sagan diagnoses the collective “delusion that we [as humans] have some privileged position in the Universe.” He offers the unsettling prospect of our *own* existential smallness, our insignificance in the vast majesty of the cosmos.

How do the following writers envision man’s position in relation to the Universe? Do they evoke a sense of fear, acceptance, wonder, or awe?

- Jerome Gagnon ~ *Invisible Ocean*
- Joan Cofrancesco ~ *The Poem That I Will Be Remembered For*
- Rich H. Kenney, Jr. ~ *Closer Looks*

Mending of the Self

The self can be splintered in several ways, physically, mentally, even spiritually, and the aftershock induced by this subjective fracturing is persistent and pernicious. Trauma reaches beyond space and time; the stability and certainty may vanish in its wake. Recovery from trauma entails reintegration: the shattered shards of the self must be rearranged and bonded together again.

Examine how these writers narrate the experience of trauma. Discuss any methods for repair, recovery, and a return to wholeness the poems bring to mind.

- N. LaBril ~ *PTSD is*
- Ellen Schmidt ~ *The Knitters*
- Donna L. Emerson ~ *In the Retelling*
- Gloria Heffernan ~ *Fused*
- Sarah Kuhlman ~ *Rage*

Objects and Memories

Objects hold stories, and these stories remain alive inside and often thanks to the concrete permanence of objects. Memories *can* die; but they can also be recalled or resurrected through objects: the black safety shoes that carried your father across the dance floor at your wedding (Friebele); the kitchen table you sat at as a child (Spaulding); the brush that still holds strands of your father’s hair (Newbury). Objects hold memories; objects keep memories of loved ones alive.

Discuss the psychological power of objects in these poems. Identify the object at the center of each poem. What emotions rise to the surface for the

narrators as they interact with these objects? How do the writers articulate the characters' respective emotional states?

- Elaine Friebele ~ *Safety*
- Kaye C. Newbury ~ *Opening in the Attic*
- Corrinne Spaulding ~ *The Things We Lose*

Recipe for Grief

The 5 Stages of Grief model is widely known in popular culture, and also respected as a powerful tool for making peace with loss. The model has nonetheless been criticized for its reductive and depersonalized conception of grief. The move up the rungs—from denial to anger, bargaining, depression, and ultimately, to acceptance—and the rungs themselves, fail to capture the concrete experience of grief. With its linear stages, exactitude, and universality, the 5 Stages of Grief model might be compared to a *recipe*— a recipe that the baker must follow to a T, one which leaves no room for creativity, and singular understanding of what the final bake ought to look and taste like.

Read *Recipe for Lemon Cupcakes* by Laura Carroll with the 5 Stages of Grief in mind. Does the criticism of the model apply to writer's recipe for grief? What messages about death, dying, and grief come through the poem? If it is not a recipe for grief, might it be a recipe for something else?

- Laura Carroll ~ *Recipe for Lemon Cupcakes*

