

The Illustrator

Sharon Eckstein (1953-2025) had a Master of Fine Art degree in painting and taught art in public schools, at Western Michigan University and at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. She was a gallery artist for many years and won numerous awards for her paintings. She had a Masters degree in Counseling Psychology and incorporates art therapy into her private practice. She studied Internal Family Systems Therapy for several years.



In Memoriam

Sharon's life was shaped and hewed by the illness she lived with all of her adult life. As her ability to paint and then to practice as a counseling psychologist were gradually taken from her, she turned her abundant talents to writing. The following pages are a small tribute to our dear and beloved Sharon.

In addition to her poetry and prose, Sharon spent over a decade recording the story of Andy Klein; the result is her novel, *Taylor House*. The story follows Andy's search to understand himself, his past, and his future. As part of his journey, Sharon writes about how Andy and his psychologist use parts work in his therapy and the result is an informative illustration of the power of parts work. The complete novel will be published in 2026 and will be available on her website: Inneractivecards.com.

Jane, Tom, and Lauri

Spring Equinox, 2023

I lie on the couch staring out
the sliding glass door. A mix of rain
and snow filters through naked trees,
everything zooming in and out of focus
in the moment's perfection.

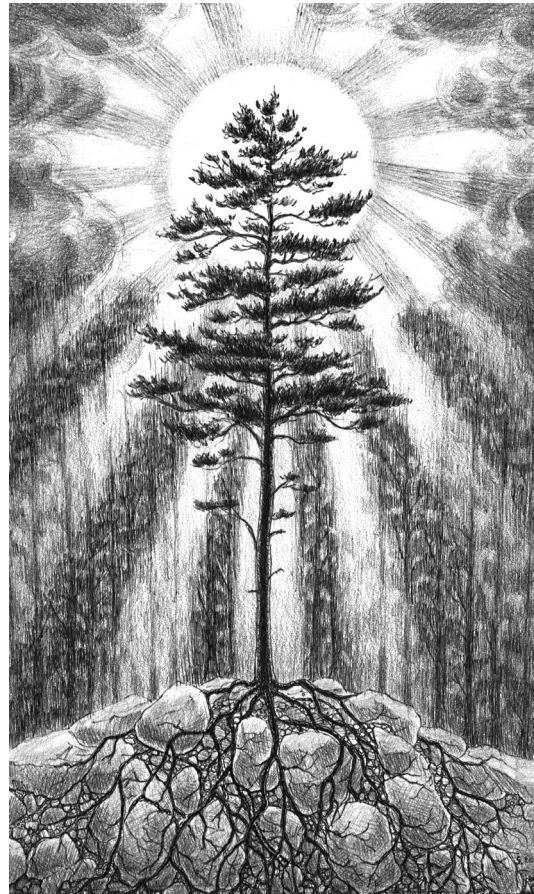
A Red Tail hawk swoops in,
fans its wings and lands
on a pine branch just off the deck.
I think about photographing the bird,
capturing its speckled breast,
its red tail and fierce eyes, but I am
too tired, my bones ache, and the task
of transferring to my wheelchair
seems insurmountable.

The raptor stays put for a long time,
preening and surveying its surroundings,
as I keep my eyes fixed on it,
until it springs from its perch and
disappears into the mist. Then I turn
my attention to my cat's fur – a nebulous
of calico splendor.

This March I will have been sick
for 51 of my 69 years, a miracle
I still have trouble believing. I have
lived 30 years longer than doctors
predicted, and I remain engaged in life,
even joyful – yet another miracle.

I have undergone over 60 reconstructive
and joint replacement surgeries,
as well as other miscellaneous surgeries
to keep me functioning
at some sub-standard level.
And, another shipment of pills
has arrived in the mail today.

How does one survive this? And why?
A deep grief smolders within me, yet pulls
me deeper into this world's beauty,
a beauty indistinguishable from love.
My life vibrates on the continuum of this love,
fanning out like hawk wings to everyone
I know, everything I see, smell, touch, hear,
earth and snow, cat fur and pine trees,
blending with the music of a hawk's screech
and frozen rain pelting the deck.



Meister Eckhart wrote:

***If the only prayer you say in your entire life
is thank you, it will be enough.***

February Poem 2021

The woods is pretty much sleeping,
the raccoons and opossums anyway.
Although fox squirrels still frequent
the birdfeeders instead of hibernating;
an unnatural food source
they've come to depend on.
And they're gormandizing beyond fat;
making a good meal for that coyote,
who makes a night-time appearance
on our video-cam once in a while.

We still see plenty of white tail deer.
Mom and her fawns
paw through the crusty snow
for a meal of dormant Virginia Creeper.
A big buck, whose sprouting buds
for another boney candelabrum
between his ears to attract her,
and fight off competitors,
follows her scent.

I feel sorry for mom and her kids,
thinking I should supplement their diet
with a bucket of corn.

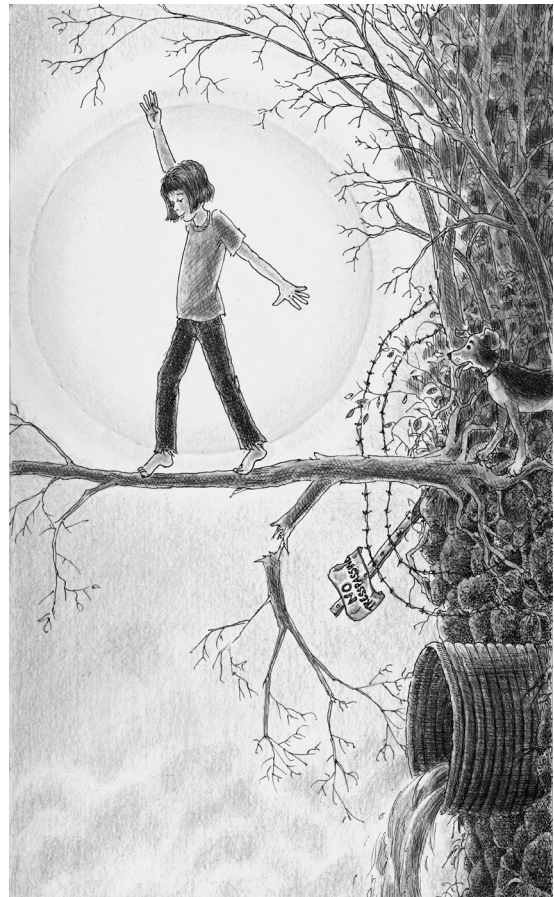
But then I read on the DNR web site
that a deer's stomach produces
different enzymes in the winter
and corn is not easily digested,
even harmful.

So here is my opportunity to trust
the old aphorism: Nature knows best.

I also read that in today's turbulent milieu:
the corona virus, job loss, climate change,
social unrest and the death of loved ones,
people can suffer from PTSD:
Post-traumatic stress disorder.

And also **PTSG:**

Post-traumatic ***Spiritual Growth***,
which has surprised ministers,
psychologists and counselors.
Not everyone succumbs to despair.



In these stressful days,
when a person is forced to let go of
the dictates of an entrenched ego,
they can discover
the spiritual enzymes deep within:
the opportunities to transform
into a better person, to discover
a more authentic way of being,
with the insight to love
thy neighbor as thyself.



Paradelle to the Moon

The wind shifts, then
the wind shifts, then
the moon fills out. And
the moon fills out and
fills out the wind. And
then the wind shifts the moon.

I walk in clear air, then
I walk in clear air, then
breathe this space and
breathe this space and
then I walk this clear space,
breathe in clear air. This

my hands reach into.
My hands reach into
nothing.
Nothing.
My hands reach
nothing into nothing.

I breathe and walk this,
clear space, clear air.
I reach into nothing, then
the wind shifts
and the moon fills out
in my hands.

2/6/2023

A Christmas Pantoum

Sunlight slants in through the window
Dog hair glows on the hard wood floor
Jane and Angie erect the Christmas tree
We listen to Christmas music by the fire

Dog hair glows on the hardwood floor
Days are short and cold
We listen to Christmas music by the fire
I'm not afraid of the dark anymore

Days are short and cold
Winter has its beauty
And I'm not afraid of the dark anymore
We need darkness to balance things out

Winter has its beauty
Pine boughs laden in snow
We need darkness to balance things out
There are two sides to every coin

Pine boughs laden in snow
The Cold Moon rising in the black sky
There are two sides to every coin
A blizzard and slanted sunlight

The Cold Moon rising in the black sky
I open my heart to all of it
A blizzard and slanted sunlight
A trillion billion stars shout **Hallelujah**

We listen to Christmas music by the fire.

2022

Silver Linings

1. Moonlight shines through
my bedroom window, and
from my wheelchair I look out
a silvery landscape.

If my body was able and strong,
I would put on my winter coat
and venture out there
to the vineyard, where the vines
line-dance with arms extended
and narrow hips sway
to the cadence
of the Earth's pulse.

Do you hear it?

You must be still.

Quell the rattle in your mind.
Feel the Earth beat under your feet,
up your legs, hips, into your chest
and lips. Feel the Vine-dancers
lock you in their chorus line,
and the spill of silvery moon beams
christen your head.

2. Through the woods, foxes dart
from shadow to shadow,
owls ride their silent wings
between the trees.

If my body was strong and able,
I would tread the trails
that thread the silver woods.

I would move lithely, reverently,
the Moon calling me her child,
painting me silver, her beloved.

In my wheelchair I can feel
the Earth pulse her beat
up into my feet, uniting me in line
with all the dancers: stars, moons,
and vineyards on distant planets.

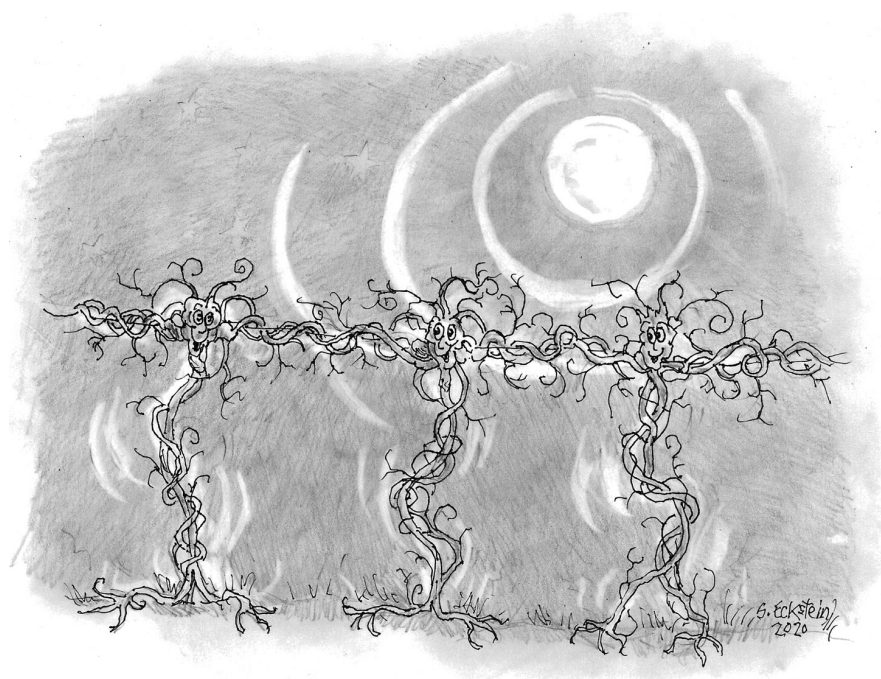
I am called to remember,
Life leaves cracks in things
where silver linings leak
into our surprised eyes,
even as my wave crest
slopes back into the ocean trough,
and the waddle
on my throat casts long shadows
on my hardwood floor
and Vine-dancers
etch lines on my face.

I am growing old.

The Moon trades her silver beams
for a shaded sky, where chaos,
hatred, wars, and lies, spawn ghosts
which haunt and deceive us.

So quiet the rattle in your mind.
Awaken your brave eyes.

See how these ghosts dissolve
into illuminous dimensions,
wondrous interplays that unfold
here and now.



This calls me to remember,
when one signs on to live,
one signs on to die.

3. Beware! The fox and owl council me.
Your wheelchair casts its shadow
there,
merging with sorrow and despair.
Fear infects the World,
latching on a virus
that stealthily slaughters, leading
desperate minds away from that
which really matters.

Tap your feet in the rhythm
of the universe and open
to the shadows splayed out
on your hardwood floor.

Everywhere

Vine-dancers quake the Earth,
cracking gray rocks, dying ash trees,
rotting logs and storm clouds,
spilling their silver linings
on Everything.

2020

My Beautiful Death

On Wednesday, January 12th, at 2:00 AM, I'm awakened by a roaring in my head, a rapid heartbeat, and a heaviness in my chest. I dismiss it, attributing it to indigestion, and decide to wheel into the kitchen where a bottle of TUMS is stored in a cabinet. I also use the bathroom, and note how dizzy and weak I am when I transfer from wheelchair to commode. Still I dismiss the symptoms of "whatever" believing they will pass.

But the symptoms don't pass, and roaring in my head increases. "I'm having a heart attack," I say. Because of Covid, I cannot dial 911 like I did when I had a heart attack five years ago; the hospitals are full and short staffed. And why would I choose to die in a hospital hallway while waiting for a bed, and catch Covid in the process. I consider my options.

I wheel into our living room where Gus and Fiona, our dog and cat, are sleeping by the warmth of the fireplace. The roaring in my head and the pressure in my chest is growing worse. "This is it," I say. "I'm going to die." And as soon as I said that, I felt a sublime peace, a total absence of any fear. I knew I would suffer physically until death took me, but I was resigned to this as well. Death promised to liberate me and I was willing to go. I was not afraid, even though my body felt like it was going to explode.

Then I realized that I was not having a heart attack; I was having a panic attack. And as I sat in the living room by the fire, it gradually subsided – the roar quieted and my body calmed – and I became acutely aware of a benevolent presence. I have experienced this presence before, especially the day I fell off the elementary school playground crossbars when I was eighteen (long story). I had fallen six or seven feet, landed on my face, and was knocked unconscious for several hours, during which time I found myself in a peaceful glowing mist that was so beautiful and loving, I wanted to stay there forever. But this presence told me it was not my time, and I had to go back. And I was sent back to "normal reality." The departure was excruciating. But I didn't fear Death after that.

So, why a panic attack? One explanation is that I have been stressing myself under my self-imposed deadline to finish my book before 2022 – a fictional novel I began over ten years ago. I was in better physical shape then, and now, not only do I have severe coronary artery disease, I have a disabled body that's wracked in chronic pain from a collapsed spine that's left me unable to sit or walk. I write reclined on our couch, with my laptop on a tray over my lap, using my knuckle to type, because my hands are so crippled. I'm very slow. Believing my body won't make it through another winter, I've put myself in constant duress; my obdurate ego in competition with Death. "I must finish this book before I die!"

Yet when faced with Death, I was neither defensive, nor fearful; I readily let go of my book. I let go of everything. I clearly saw that none of my personal goals mattered, and I saw Death as the portal to eternal peace and my true home.

Life on earth requires a physical body, either in excellent form, one riddled in disease or injury, or in one on the spectrum somewhere in between. Whatever life puts before us is our opportunity to delve deeply into this ephemeral earthly experience and grow spiritually in the way in which we are called. So I will continue to write my book, because I'm compelled to do so, and I enjoy writing and how it mines the unconscious for our innate wisdom. And if I finish it, so be it. And if I don't, so be it.

I will continue to enjoy the beauty of our woods, and marvel at the love I share with my husband, who has become my devoted care-taker. I will continue to cherish my friends, and be awed by the human capacity for ingenuity, courage and compassion, as well as acknowledge my frustration by its ignorance, greed, and cowardice. Moonbeams streaming through my bedroom window remind me of the wonders of our universe and the vastness of its mystery. And when Death comes to call me home, I will welcome It, fearlessly.