

## Bubbles and Poppies

By Sonya Huber

I lie on the sloped narrow side yard in electric-green grass, where watermelon vines have slyly threaded through the slats of the wooden fence, studding the neighbor's driveway with striped globes.

The sun warms the thud of my heart and the lace of my lungs. The earth warms my skin and bones from below, a solid embrace. I churn out Vitamin D, wanting heat to chase the daily chills of COVID-19, to smell again the heady mix of dirt and rot and lilac.

The tiny sticky globes got in by accident in March, before we knew, and grew me into another machine, making me for months a question mark. I was so much of the virus that I felt silver, the wheeze in my throat like voicemail. I was rooted in place like the humidifier, the coffee machine. I dozed and remembered fields far away, remembered stride, hip-flick, back-arch laughter.

We watched the red circles bloom on a field of gray, the poppies of spreading ailment on the map, the soap bubbles proliferating until the numbers shrouded us under those flashing sunsets, each life a fireball at dusk.

Summer is for soap bubbles, and we blow delicately against the wand so as to not shatter the membrane of rainbow. Sometimes the orbs come out joined in clumps, askew, and they yaw in the air like stumbling drunks of light.

Inside me are bubbles, some made according to plan and others pushed slightly awry. My red heart is strong like a Superball you can buy for a quarter near the grocery store sliding doors. I remember the round seamed press of rubber in my hot palm, the urge to fling it against the tarry blacktop and watch it fly in the blue sky, then squint in the sun to find the dot as it descends.

The sticky burrs of viral proliferation clogged my pipes somehow. And then my heart, always a thrummer, a wild bass drummer, pounded hard enough to pummel a little side-wall bubble.

Aorta, aorta: I learn the word for what the virus broke, and I like the "o" in the middle, the a's at the end, like a portal, a porthole. My heart was strong enough to break itself, and I pointed in the ER at the stabbing pain: *here*. Everyone who tried to help was kind, and we were held together by what we didn't know. I have to be careful or it might get thin and explode. But we won't let it, because there are ways to sew soap bubbles now.

I bought a plastic red model heart on eBay to make friends with the shiny blue-red-purple problem, to trace the aorta and hold it in my hand. My outside heart has a lift-off lid like a racy convertible. It sits on its metal post, tilted like a rocket in flight and elevated like a thought, like a story problem, perfect and still.

And I am no soap bubble. I am tough and pink and mauve and purple inside, though the lace of my lungs is edged with a ground-glass filigree on the magnetic scans, a bit nipped around the edges. I am burnt like a cookie. I have breathed hard into cylinders in my eight months of mystery, never knowing if my strength would return. I have bled hard maroon into surging tubes and slid into metallic tunnels. I have watched numbers of the magic in my blood, and I have waited for the spark in my marrow to restart, the little pilot light of the body.

In the patch beside the watermelons are accidental hybrids, compost combinations that birthed a tiny cantaloupe with delicate orange, icy flesh and several odd ducks, green spherical cucumber-melons that taste like potato and grass.

When you don't know whether you'll live, you sometimes begin to say goodbye, so in that frostbite I detached from my husband like senescence, and he let go of me in fear. We are singed from it still, and I emerged this fall with burls and bitten edges, bonsai-stunted. But some deep root stored enough for me to grow again. There is no sense in it, and in the mornings there's a fog and dew of guilt that so many others were pruned before their time, and yet here I am, a shoot allowed again to push toward the sun.

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**Sonya Huber is the author of six books, including the award-winning essay collection on chronic pain, *Pain Woman Takes Your Keys and Other Essays from a Nervous System* and the forthcoming *Supremely Tiny Acts: A Memoir in a Day*. Her other books include *Opa Nobody*, *Cover Me: A Health Insurance Memoir* and *The Backwards Research Guide for Writers*. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Brevity*, *Creative Nonfiction*, and other outlets. She teaches at Fairfield University and in the Fairfield low-residency MFA program.**

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