Atlantic Health System and Montclair State University’s

Healing Voices

2014

First Place
With Deepest Gratitude | Nancy Méndez-Booth | English Department, Montclair State University

Second Place (tie)
Gratitude: Pass the Torch! | Maryann Re | Chilton Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
Thankful for a New Day | Gina Carro | Morristown Medical Center, Atlantic Health System

Third Place
The Lifeline | Lorie McDonald | Overlook Medical Center, Atlantic Health System

Without You Here | Monica Alvarado | Morristown Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
Thank You | Giuliana Allega | Overlook Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
If I Had Real Money | Nicholas Samaras | English Department, Montclair State University
Hotel Bad Leo | Nicholas Samaras | English Department, Montclair State University
Maddy Prior’s Voice is a Flawless Violin | Nicholas Samaras | English Department, Montclair State University
Jubilee | Sharon Lewis | English Department, Montclair State University
Gratitude in Life | Janis Gangi | Chilton Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
Gratitude | Bette Birnbaum | Overlook Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
The Face of Gratitude | Dawn Alfieri | Chilton Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
Each New Day | Dawn Alfieri | Chilton Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
little heart, where is my gratitude? | Diane Delaney | Newton Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
The Year of Gratitude | Dayra Luz Perez | Children’s Center, Montclair State University
Ghazal of Gratitude | Paige Briglia | Student, Montclair State University
untitled | Katrina Musto | Morristown Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
untitled | Danielle Rose Pino | Student, Montclair State University
To You With Love | Alice Wright | Linguistics Department, Montclair State University
America: My Every Chance to live My Dream | Joy Calunsag | Morristown Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
Celebrating You Grandmother | Jenna Honrath | Chilton Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
They Felt Grateful | Katharine Greenfield | Morristown Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
Gratitude | Kristen Kelly | Student, Montclair State University
I am even grateful for the black snow | Geri Silk | Morristown Medical Center, Atlantic Health System
I wrote almost two hundred and thirty thank you notes between February and May 2008. These thank yous were not for any happy occasion. I wrote them after the stillbirth of our baby boy.

I had waddled into the maternity ward the night of February 7, nine months pregnant and in labor. John and I left the hospital 48 hours later with a death certificate. Our baby was stillborn. The news of his death was delivered to me before I delivered him. I labored to bring him into the world as if he was alive. My doctor insisted that I take the three-month leave provided by my employer. I didn’t have a newborn, but I needed to recover.

I rarely left my home in those initial days. The times I did go out, I became lost, forgot where I was or where I was going. At intersections, I couldn’t remember if red lights meant go or stop. I stopped going outside.

I was home alone a lot. John returned to work after his two-week leave. Family and friends visited less often. Routine and organization had always been a comfort to me. That’s when I began to write the thank yous. John and I had received extraordinary kindesses from many people. My grief was no excuse to let these gifts go unacknowledged. I sat with the box of thank you cards provided by McLoughlin’s Funeral Home and wrote every day.

Each note was as unique as the recipient and their show of love: the head nurse of the maternity ward who unwaddled our son so we could see how perfect he was; the friend who opened her restaurant on a day it’s typically closed so we could hold the repast; the friends who took time from work to be with me; the uncle who made surprise deliveries of homemade cookies; family members who did crosswords with me; my family in Puerto Rico who hosted me and John, and reminded me that the love I had in the past still existed in the present.

The notes proved that while I felt broken, I could still write a note, seal and address an envelope, affix a stamp. The walk to the post office emboldened me to leave home. My project also reintroduced me to hope. Every note reminded me that there had been beauty even during the blackest moments.

Writing the notes did not erase the anger, pain and terror. They did reveal that my life is rich and I am not alone: many people go through much worse than me with much less, or nothing at all. These lessons do not make up for my loss. I would rather have my son – but I don’t. I do have a choice as to how I will go forward. That I’m able to move on at all, however slowly, is something for which I am thankful – and for all the people who continue to make it possible.
“Thank you” – the two words my mother taught me after “Mommy” and “Daddy”. You would think that with an old-fashioned Italian-American mother, the third words I would be taught would have something to do with food, but when it came to Mom, manners, respect and gratitude trumped “pasta with gravy”!

It was never considered a formality for her to thank my Dad for the overtime he worked as a steelworker or even for the household chores he helped her with when he came home from work. It was second nature for her to thank the butcher, the mailman, our neighbors, and anyone else who extended themselves or lent a kindness. At the start of the day, and the end of the day, she always remembered to thank God for her blessings. She counted each and every one of those blessings out loud so many times… “be grateful you have a roof over your head”… “thank God our area wasn’t affected by that bad weather”… “we’re blessed to have our health and our senses”… “we’re so fortunate we have each other”.

Those harsh words from the doctor more than 15 years ago still ring in my head, “your mother has a vicious, incurable cancer”. But following her lead and being grateful for having her as my mother for almost 45 years has, over time, healed those wounds. And now, when I thank my 93-year old Dad for being a wonderful father, or thank my loving husband for helping me with the dishes after his 12-hour workday, or thank my co-workers for taking a phone message for me, I see how gratitude can make a difference in the lives of the giver and the receiver. Even seeing the waitress at the diner light up with a smile after I thank her for a coffee refill can cause a chain reaction in the rest of her day and my day.

Each night, when I thank the good Lord for another day, I always remember the lessons my mother taught me. Those lessons and my memories are blessings I carry with me always. The most important thing I’ve learned is that gratitude in itself is a blessing.

Thank you, Mom.
THANKFUL FOR A NEW DAY
Gina Carro
Morristown Medical Center
Second Place (Tie)

October 19, 2012. The first day I ever wished time could fly. Oh sure, there are always the “I can’t wait until the weekend” or “when will winter be over?”, but this was incredibly different.

This was the day the breast imager, a dear friend, told me “it is breast cancer.” I hurried her off the phone because I wanted to contact my breast surgeon. I knew she was on the way to her office and my time was limited to catch her before she started patient hours. That was the start of trying to rush through things to get to the next hurdle.

I was not typical. I didn’t worry about not surviving (I knew I would); I didn’t worry about who would raise my sons (I’m still trying to survive that!), I didn’t even worry when a surprise during surgery meant that I would need chemotherapy. I was only worried about getting through each day.

I knew if I got through a day, I was one day closer to being done with all of it. I was one day closer to having my life back. But one morning, my older son (when did he get so smart and mature?) said to me, “Mom, I get it that you are just trying to wish the days away, but good things can still happen if you look for them.” And you know; he was right.

From that point forward, I made sure to find something positive, dare I say happy, in each day. I came to work every morning and reveled in the seemingly countless e-mails that accumulated overnight. I took the extra minute to catch up with a co-worker about plans for the weekend, and I definitely made sure to say good morning and share a smile with Barbara and Danny in the lobby at Overlook or Jacque, Mike and Ron at Morristown. We started my older son’s college search, and oddly enough, dragging myself out of bed two weeks after chemo for a three and a half hour drive to Baltimore was somehow exhilarating. And thankfully, my younger son is a big movie fan, so watching action movies (which I normally don’t enjoy) with him turned out to be the perfect combination of diversion and rest.

Now that I am almost one year post treatment, I keep the lessons I learned close to my heart. I am no longer excited by myriad e-mails, but still make a point of greeting everyone I encounter and finding pleasure in smaller moments. I am looking at my sons’ crazy habits and passions with a lot more respect. I still care about those around me and their joys and sorrows. Overall, I roll my eyes less and I smile more.

But I am still thankful for a new day…not because it is going to get me closer to being done with an arduous burden, but because it is giving me a new opportunity to embrace life.
You never know how you will react to a situation until you are in the thick of it. Watching my Oma’s life slowly waste away was extremely painful. Tremors and Alzheimer’s disease brought forth a series of events that slowly chipped away at her dignity and diminished her quality of life. Every day I cared for her I thought, it can’t get any worse, but the next day would prove me wrong.

Word came that she was rushed to the hospital. As I whipped around the corner my sights fell on two nurses in the hall bitching about a difficult old woman who wouldn’t eat. Their contemptuous words spit fast from their frustrated lips; they didn’t know the old woman was my beloved Oma. They should have known that her disease took away her ability to swallow. Flames of anger laced my words as I reminded them and set them straight.

The following week we celebrated her birthday. I brought her balloons, held her hand and I swear I felt her finger stir and a faint smile crept across her lips when I sang to her in German. Her first language – she still remembered that; but her eyes never opened.

Two days later the call came, “you should come to the hospital right away.” The sight of her small frame took me by surprise, and as I stepped closer I felt the blood run from my body. I was stone. I crawled into bed next to her and held her. I stroked her hair and sang to her in German. I squeezed my eyes shut to press out the vision of her contorted face as her life slowly slipped away.

Hours passed and I refused to leave – her greatest fear in life was to be alone. She passed at 4:00 am.

The hospice nurse came in. I looked up at her, and my eyes searched hers for direction – pools of sorrow awash with a painful mixture of relief, fear, grief, and anger; they begged her to tell me what to do. She reached out to me and her arms drew me in. I was lost at sea and she was my lifeline pulling me back to shore. She held me the way a grandmother does, soft and firm with a sweet smell of perfume that reminds you that you are safe, that she is here. And I cried. She held me; just held me. And I cried.

No words, just raw emotion that poured from me like cool water rushing out of pitcher, and when I was done I felt empty and hollow, but relieved.

I don’t remember her name, and at that moment my gratitude seemed small compared to my sorrow. But as time has passed I have realized in that moment her simple expression of sympathy: the act of listening wholly and providing me with a safe way to grieve was the most gracious thing a person has ever done for me, and I am eternally grateful.
Without You Here
Monica Alvarado
Morristown Medical Center

You’re the heart that keeps on beating, through this winter’s night,
You’re the love that keeps on spreading far or near,
You’re the joy that brings smiles, and the hugs oh so tight,
I don’t know what I’d do without you here.

You’re the call wondering if I’m gonna be okay,
I can tell you thanks for saying your prayers for me,
Because we’re all gonna make it out one day,
But without you here I don’t know where I’d be.

Without you here, my stars wouldn’t shine as bright,
Without you here, my days would never turn into night,
Because I am so grateful and so thankful for your love,
The love that I am not deserving of.

How did God give me such a great life?
That my good health and my family come for free,
Some may say that I deal with too much strife,
But without you here there’s nowhere else I’d be.

Without you here, my stars wouldn’t shine as bright,
Without you here, my days would never turn to night,
Because I am so grateful and so thankful for your love,
The love that I am not deserving of.

Let me tell you why I take nothing for granted.
Nothing comes for free, but good things disappear,
Be thankful of what you have, we’re not underhanded,
So thanks for guiding me and standing by me here.

Without you here, I may have survived,
But your push and shove helps me to revive,
Without you here I may have lived on,
But I won’t let go even after you’re gone.
The day I admitted you I thought you
Would be the patient with the least
Involved care. You were in great shape
(or so you make me think).
Then your Results came back.
I was tired that day.
Broken down by life.
I saw you in the morning.
And then at night.
Not prepared.
Miscommunication.
Heartache.
Sleepless night.
It passed – because you are much
stronger, older and wiser than me.
Day by day together.
Learning from each other
You were my teacher with each
tiny step.
Thank you.
If I had real money, I would be a photographer.
If I had real money, I’d return to the darkroom I quit
because I just couldn’t afford it—the paper, the swirl
of the tray and the liquid that coloured the paper, the equipment
to shape light and the passion of light.

If I had real money, I wouldn’t buy a big house.
But I would rent a small studio I could walk to each morning—
two miles away for serious exercise—where there’d be
no telephone, no mirror, no boss saying,
“Type this before 5 p.m.”
If I had real money, I would work on nothing irrelevant.

I would consult a doctor to help me find my wazoo
so I could have money coming out of it.
But if I somehow got real money, I would not become an ego-tripper.
I would not drive a long car.
I would keep my putt-putt ride till it fell apart.
I would stay humble. I would become more humble.

I’d get non-deceptive medical insurance that actually covers things.
If I had real money, maybe I’d pay off the credit card, the bills,
and have enough left over to take my family to a restaurant.
I would walk my two miles to my studio each morning
and work ten straight hours a day on writing and sending out work.
If I had real money, I think I’d live
off the interest and give fellowships for writers.
I’d want to share. I’d offer
the time and space to others that I never had.
As it is, I have the heart of a philanthropist, without
the pockets or the funding.
I call myself an “impoverished philanthropist.”

If I had real money, I would begin each new day, grateful to God.

If I had real money, it would be a gift of time
in which I could produce again what really matters—
and I would show my gratitude.
Every day would be a liturgy.
I’d rise from bed each early sun-filled morning
and I would work my ass off.
The curving earth travelled
under us as we rolled
over the body of long fields.

And who put the iron border there?
All we could see was the sameness of landscape,
the trees of the Bohemian forest, its shadows

spread greenly, equally dark—
one corner in Austria, one
convergence in the Czech Republic.

How simple it becomes, when all you think of
are sleep and water, a thicket to pull around us,
a barn in the hive of the forest, the hills stepping

off into grey mist. Until we found the Hotel Bad Leo,
dropping our luggage into the sleep of a room.
The relief of conversation drifting into dream,

waking in the thinning hours to bleating
sheep outside.
This is how gratitude goes:

the weariness and excitement of miles,
joy of animal-sounds and new sunlight,
the transient world that finds you everywhere.
I
A cathedral of night rippled in silver moonlight. A Cassiopeian sky.
Outside, the deep field river-bathed in iridescence.

II
This scene will always have music, intricate and beautifully sad.
How does this sorrow become the most heartfelt, loved thing?

III
A slender woman with long plaited hair and the brocade of an ancient gown
will stand in an English meadow, and lift her voice to the shilling moon.

IV
Entranced. You are entranced. You finally know an energy of God
and will give everything to embrace the silken timbre of her voice.

V
Her song is the sweetest pain you could ever hope to contain.
A concert of one. Haunting disappearance in harmony.

VI
Somewhere, a waterfall is cascading the whitest crystal water.

VII
You return to earth. You have been celestial for the length of the song.

VIII
A woman. A gown of velvet birds. Tremolo within you.

A narrative to break your heart, and leave you changed, grateful,
your soul visited purely.

A woman. A rosined voice. A flawless violin that leaves
part of you in that place forever.
JUBILEE
for Lucille Clifton
Sharon Lewis
Montclair State University

A choir of voices – family, friends, my medical team, including pharmacy, and support group – accompany me through two chronic diseases – relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis and complex-partial seizures. Twelve years ago, my first neurologist hummed, “You have M.S. You’ll live.” She prescribed subcutaneous self-injections and, to combat my visible terror of needles, told me of her five-year old patient who gave himself a shot before boarding the school bus. Then, dumbstruck, in denial and depressed, I haven’t derailed. Research, fundraising, donors, and the FDA provided a pill last year (youth, decline pursuit of celebrity occupations and seek, instead, cures for the diseases threatening your people).

Six months post-M.S. diagnosis, Brian, my spouse, watched me fall, convulsing, out of my home office chair and Bob, my colleague, whom I talked on the phone, planning our next co-taught course, heard my body thump. My neurosurgeon keeps me seizure-free with Depakote scripts but disallows unattended swimming and long-distanced driving.

Brian and Bob synchronize my here/there care duet. Here home. There work. Together, they safeguard against stress and anxiety (acutely detrimental to those of us suffering these chronic diseases). From transporting me to a host of doctors’ and MRI/cat scan appointments, to escorting me to and from campus, Brian and Bob, respectively, harmonize quietude and rest.

Debbie orchestrates my Zumba classes, Stephanie conducts yoga, and Mr. Harden plays tennis with me, weekly, all insisting I realize and obey personal limits. Dr. Ruby Jones is my jazz-blues melody defying imminent disease-related despair. I derive comfort and learning from my local M.S. support group. We meet first Thursdays. Potluck, we share food and stories about our experiences with M.S. We recruit members and give notice of upcoming drug company free meals-with-lectures at nearby restaurants.

There are no cures for M.S. and seizures (yet), only ways to control and impede debilitation. In addition to the medications, exercise and healthy eating are equally effective insurgents against both disorders. For me, though, the most meaningful combatant against the diseases is a regular review of my “Gratitude” and “Blessings” lists (an idea given to me by an former beloved friend who, therefore, continues to contribute to saving my life), reflective and rich reminders of the truth of community as protectors and saviors. Let me share one item on the second list: my university students. I’m thinking that they, collectively, are quite unaware of the ways in which their dynamic desire for learning, giddy hope, their knowledge of consumerist material and harried distractions sustain me.

If I were Whitney Houston, I would sing a hymn to all, near and far, known and unknown who pray for and ensure my well-being, those who have faith (my sister) that I will prevail. Could I recognize a musical note, I would play the piano, a song of my own composition, praising and thanking those who usher me through this providential life my Mother and Father gave me.
GRATITUDE IN LIFE
Janis Gangi
Chilton Medical Center

What does one say when things are going your way?
When wonderful things are happening throughout your day.
   A word come to mind and it is GRATITUDE,
   For all the things in my life that shape my attitude.

   I give thanks to my family for just being there.
   For all their support and love they have to share.

   My friends are true blue in good times and bad.
   No matter if my gratitude for them slips a tad.

   My job is a blessing I enjoy very much.
From patients to coworkers whose hearts I hope to touch.
   They teach me to see the good in all walks of life,
   And with gratitude I can lessen my daily strife.

   I hope this little poem makes you think once or twice
About all the things you have to be grateful for in life.
Placid.
The swimming pool before I slip into it.
The sheet of paper before I collage upon it.
First, the shivery anticipation,
of smoothly slicing through the water,
of silently arranging the bits.
Next, the ritual collection,
lining up kick board, fins, and hand paddles on the deck,
placing magazines, glue stick, and scissors on the table.
Then, I begin.
Hands slap slap.
Scissors snip snip. I
am weightless.
I am gluey.
The aromas of chlorine
and construction paper
give me pleasure.
The black-tile lane line
and shiny tip of the shears
point me to the end,
where I turn and start again.
I feel so happy to be present
in the unfolding
that when I emerge dripping wet,
or gaze at my artwork,
I utter thanks.
THE FACE OF GRATITUDE
Dawn Alfieri
Chilton Medical Center

Our lady Gratitude has many a face
Maybe a loving smile or a warm embrace
From grateful eyes and a hand to shake
Or tasty treats, kindly baked
May it be words spoken, or letters to write
Any small token can make a day light
To be avowed for good deeds being done
Leaves a warm feeling second to none
So when next a good soul makes easier your way
Remember sweet lady gratitude can brighten a day

EACH NEW DAY
Dawn Alfieri
Chilton Medical Center

Many a grateful day, I do awake
To see bright sunshine at day's break
But even on days when it is grey
I have good memories to light my way
For we are blessed with life, a chance to live
With hopes and dreams and joys to give
Although bad hours do darken the heart
They are followed by hopes for a fresh new start
For every new day may bring a new chance
For kinships and friendships or even romance
So to anyone who hears me, I am grateful to say
Look forward toward tomorrow, to a brand new day
little heart, where is my gratitude?
Diane Delaney
Newton Medical Center

i begged my heart for gratitude
for all i felt was sorrow
i begged my heart to show me joy
for all i had
were tears

i begged my heart to heal all wounds
instead it brought me here

it held my hand and walked me, through its chambers
small and deep
chambers round and beating soft
full of painful love i’ve lost
and full of other hearts
i’ve
hurt
in
heaps

where is this joy i’m told is here? i begged my heart to show
grateful is as grateful has
is there more to know?

my heart reached out
and drew me close
whispered in my ear:
gratitude is for life’s promise,
that joy will follow loss and fear
that peace will follow every hardship
and laughter follows
every tear
Gratitude is one of the most wonderful emotions that a person not only feels but also shows.

I am grateful for a wonderful woman in my life who is also my role model. She is someone who possesses the best qualities in the world; she is kind, lovely, quiet, honest, patient, smart, understanding, friendly – but most of all, she is a great, encouraging person. She was always there during my early childhood – helping me open all those heavy doors that were such obstacles in my life and always instilling in me that I had to learn to do everything on my own without taking advantage of others. She gave me strong wings to fly that demonstrated to me that not only airplanes could fly far, far away – but we, as human beings, can also fly as far and as high as we want if we possess the desire, dreams and discipline to help us move by our convictions. Thanks to God and to my mom I moved on with my life. I had Polio when I was eight months old and my mom took me everywhere to get the necessary therapies I needed. She never gave up and I always felt that she did everything for me from the bottom of her heart. She always treated me the same way she treated my other two siblings. I applaud my mom’s efforts in seeking the best way to help me move forward during all my difficult times. She offered me a vision of hope and progress beyond my difficulties and set the stage for not only my social and emotional growth, but also for my intellectual growth during my childhood. She always encouraged me to do my very best and to never give up whenever I wanted to reach my goals.

Thanks to my mom, today I am a very persistent and self-sufficient individual. There are no limitations for me; instead, only accommodations that are there to assist me and other individuals to help us accomplish tasks that are doable…even if there are done in a different way. As an example, I can still drive a car but I need to do it in a different way. As my legs are weak, the car is adapted to help me drive using hand’s control. And thanks to my mom, I have become a good mom to my two sons – doing everything for them as she did for me. My mom has inspired me throughout my childhood; I learned to believe in myself and have a vision for all my goals. My mom never let me just sit in that wheelchair where the doctor had condemned me to live.

What else could I possibly ask for? I have a great mom who has always followed God’s messages and has helped me grow to be the woman I am today. I am grateful for the woman who has taught me to be strong and to overcome any difficulties in my life.
GHAZAL OF GRATITUDE
Paige Briglia
Montclair State University

You've etched a name on my heart
three letters, U-N-I, on my heart.

And as I stand by the train tracks when we part
I can see your scarlet stilettos heels impale my heart.

If I'd tucked your blond hair behind your ear from the start
would you have then ripped out the tendrils my heart?

If I'd showered you in sugared words, if I was smart
could I have saved my mangled, bleeding heart?

Oh, but you've somehow made a work of art
scratching your blood red nails down my heart.

You've painted a pretty sigil that tore us a part,
spilling the wine in the chalice of my heart.

Playing with matches, igniting the spark,
Please, won't someone stomp out the fire of my heart!

You've buried the remains, I'm mapping a chart
so from the phoenix ashes grows, my stronger heart.

I'm anew from the pain and torment from the start
And gracious for the scars you've marred upon my heart.
“What does this look like to you?” I asked my mother the day before my 20th birthday as I stood in the bathroom. “Maybe a new freckle?” she suggested, while I studied my face from different angles in the mirror. I did have freckles on my nose in middle school but they faded away. But this new, dark, mark was troubling me and all I could think about. Call me paranoid if you will (as my friend already did) or extremely health-conscious.

I dialed the number for my dermatologist’s office and scheduled an appointment. I arrived and was sweating as I waited for my name to be called. The nurse let me into the room, announcing the doctor would be in shortly. I stared at horrible pictures of what melanoma looked like. They showed black marks, and some had pus oozing out of them. I thought of my best friend who had numerous moles removed due to over-using tanning beds, and felt my heart race.

My dermatologist examined me and said it was a freckle. A light-brown freckle that I most likely got from the hours I spent out playing tennis on my university’s team. Although I was the only one to apply sunscreen before a match, these things still popped up, she assured me. It is instances like this where I realize how lucky I am to be healthy.

My father and grandfather were outside my house every weekend, either to fix a roof, build a tree house, or put mulch down throughout our property to keep the grass looking lush. I would see them with their tools sprawled out across our wooden picnic table, as they discussed what project to tackle next. You could imagine our shock when my dad found a mysterious bump on his neck. After traveling to various doctors, the verdict was out. He had skin cancer. My dad fought the battle but succumbed to the disease after a year and a half, at age 54. My grandfather started to feel ill the following year. He was diagnosed with leukemia the day of my college graduation and passed away two months later.

It is reasons like this where I see how important it is to be healthy and maintain a lifestyle that reflects good eating and squeezing in exercise. At the end of the day, being healthy takes hard work. I take pride in scheduling my yearly skin checks with my dermatologist, a yearly physical with my general practitioner, and dental appointments, and so forth. I am thankful when I complete a kickboxing class without feeling fatigued. I am thankful when I go clothes shopping and can fit into the size I want. I am thankful when my doctor tells me my cholesterol is “exactly where it should be” and I am a “model patient.” Having a healthy body is worth all the time and effort it takes to maintain it, and makes me feel blessed and thankful.
March 3, 2006, was like any other day, but by nightfall my life, as I knew it, would change forever. At the time, I was a freshman in high school. I spent this Friday like many others. My Mom dropped me off at my friend's house where a few of us would hang out regularly. His parents were down the street at a neighbor's house for dinner. Rich asked me to make mac & cheese; this was his favorite. I took a moment to sit down as I waited for the water to boil. Rich and I were in the kitchen while Nicole and Tyler watched TV. In the next few moments everything would change. I had this over whelming feeling come over me. Like nothing I've ever experienced before. I look over to the TV room, and Max, Rich's dog, was staring at me with these eyes that will remain such a vivid memory in my mind. The next thing I knew Max was charging towards me in a devilish way. Within seconds Max was attaching me violently. Everything happened so fast that it became a blur. I recall Rich hitting the dog, and doing everything in his power to try to stop this horrible act. Finally, Rich was able to pry open Max's mouth after he toyed with my leg as if it was a chew toy. Nicole and Taylor then grabbed me to help me to the next room as Rich locked the dog in the garage. All of our parents come over immediately. I was rushed to the hospital. The surgeon was looking at my injuries and asked my parents to come step outside with him. I was able to hear what he was saying. He told them the surgery was risky because of the location of the bit, but if I didn't get the surgery I was at a high risk of getting an infection that could travel to my heart, which could ultimately lead to death. Also, he told my parents he wasn't sure how well I was going to recover. Walking could possibly be something I could never do again. I was a cheerleader and dancer if I couldn't walk how could I do what I love so passionately. All of these thoughts were racing through my head. How could I live if I can't walk? I'll never be able to walk down the aisle on my wedding day. Then they walked back into the room, I had to be strong, that is who I am, so I pretended not to hear their conversation. I told the doctor I wanted to go through with the procedure. I was in surgery from about 10pm to 1am. For the next five days I called Morristown Memorial Hospital my temporary home. In two days it will be eight years since that horrifying day. I try to find the positive within everything. I learned a lot from this experience. The number one lesson for me is to be thankful for the most minute of things. Before this I took walking for granted since then I never have. I am grateful to say that I had a full recovery. I thank god for the strength he gave me to endure this terrible event in my life.
There are those who smirk
At holidays, at greeting cards, at gushing gratitude.
Somehow, this is dumb.
Somehow, this is trite.
Somehow, this is prescribed.

Well, I'm not one of these.
I think the gulf between smart and open-hearted does not have to be that broad.
I think full-blown displays of love and appreciation can be grand.

And I know, on my birthday, you all touched me deeply
With your love, humor and sweet wishes.
May you know how beloved you are.
I have a lot to say “thanks” for, living my American dream,  
I can’t ask for more,  
Staying healthy, nourished with food so bounty,  
This one is for the mind, the heart and the soul, oh so worthy!

Started as a worker, a nurse, I do wonder,  
Now a citizen, I ponder,  
Can I contribute to the world, I further contemplate,  
Oh yes, vast opportunities, when tender loving care is great!

Came to the land of milk and honey, big belly from being preggy,  
I think about tomorrow truly,  
Will my kids be grand, in compassion and in grace,  
Here, education system is superb, technology we embrace!

I think of blessings by the way, as a mere reminder of God,  
That is present, amidst strong snowy day,  
Going to work, to contribute to the population, our time we share,  
Making every life we touch, every moment may be rare!

America, the land of the free, I bare to see each person glee,  
Exhibit talents genuinely bree,  
American Idol and Jeopardy, household game shows, on teevee,  
Why not be addicted, watching what maybe a reflection of me.

True to what I hear in the news, of innovations, inventions for cure,  
Only strengthen my personal views,  
In this diverse-cultured nation, that respects elderly and youths,  
Nothing can compare, the huge chance you can get “kudos”!
Into life you poured your heart and soul
You ever so preciously made me whole

Your meaning to me let me count the ways
Impossible, I’d be here for hours…even days

From pigtails to princess you watched me grow
More and more strongly your love would show

I have memories of you spoiling me with gifts
Even when mom said “enough of this”

You sent me off with bunches of kisses
You sealed them up with lots of well wishes

Now heaven has called you to its gates
For you a new life awaits

What you taught is that family means the most
To that, everyday, we toast

A tear dropped for each year you are not near
But if I close my eyes I can still feel you here

The biggest definition of me is you my grandmother
You truly are like no other

Remember, your job now is greater than ever
To remain my guardian for now and forever

If one thing continues to be true
Grammy, I love…adore…and am grateful for you
“I know what it feels like to be loved, and this ain’t it,” he stated somberly.

She stared straight ahead; afraid to move; afraid of the impending tears. Theirs was a conversation years in the making. It should have been done when the children were younger; it should have taken place on that summer-get-away a few years back; it should have happened eons before today—yet here they sat.

A pain overtook her; a pain which seized her heart as in a thousand vices. She hid her face slightly, not wanting him to see her this way. He stared directly at her, forceful and resolute.

“I don’t know what to do. I’ve given up.” He said. “This is no way to live.”

At this, she hid her face completely; the tears could not be stopped. “I can’t do this”, she said.

“It’s just too painful.”

“That’s what got us here.” He said. “Keeping things bottled up.”

“I tried….” She said softly. “Back when the kids were little -- I tried, but you wouldn’t listen. You thought everything was fine.”

“It took me a long time to grow up.” He stated. “I know I’m not perfect, and my mistakes are coming back to haunt me now.”

“I don’t know where to go from here.” She said quietly. “I just don’t know what to do.”

They both stared straight ahead.

“Something keeps us together.” She said finally. “And it’s not just the kids; we’ve made it through things which would have made other couples crumble.”

“Yeah”, he agreed, nodding.

They didn’t know what more to say, and the day was growing late.

“Well, I’ve gotta get ready for work,” he said, standing up. “And the kids will be home soon. Are you okay?”

“I think so.” She said, wiping her eyes. “Come here.” He said gently.

And as they embraced, they felt grateful; grateful that their love lived on and grateful that their marriage endured.
For many years, I have always been thankful for all the “things” I have in life; my excellent health, my family, my friends, etc. As I have moved forward in life, things have not always turned out for the best. I often wondered why certain events in my life never panned out the way I wanted them to or why I lost things and/or people I thought deserved. It occurred to me that the events that didn’t go according to my plan or the things and/or people that I lost have helped me become a better, stronger person and have paved the way for bigger and better things. So every day when I think about how grateful I am for all the blessings that I don’t have, I am also grateful I am for the “things” I do not have.
The winter of 2014, the great white snow united us

Many days inside looking out

Like so many neighbors

Seeing big fat fluffy flakes drift by our window sills

In-home prisoners of Mother Nature’s rapturous folly

First, the grace of the glistening downy feathers pile up and up and up

Making walking, driving, seeing impossible

Then, as neighbors creep out to gather supplies—milk, eggs, butter, videos, we meet in supermarket aisles to compare notes—

How high, how wide, how dangerous, how curious

Long hazardous icicles hang over our heads like Damocles sword poised for danger

But at night, asleep in our beds, cozy under a snow while blanket of repose, we dream of sleigh rides;

   the charming miniaturization of a snow globe, white clouds of freedom and world peace.

We are grateful for the delicate snowflakes dancing and swirling in the enchanted universe

Now, all that remains are small choppy islands of unmeltable ice in the most inconvenient places

The black snow remains the prisoner of memory, held together by invisible subatomic particles of ice

Oh, I am grateful for the snow that united us all under the cozy feathery down comforter

   I am grateful we had this time together to be apart from our everyday race

When I think of that common bond, I am even grateful for the black snow