

## Breaking Free

*Stuart Kestenbaum*

I am pledging allegiance to the flag  
in the basement classroom when  
my crewcut friend appears at the door  
with a message. He whispers to the teacher

who motions to me and I learn that  
my dog has followed me to school.  
What an occasion, that above all the other  
scents in the world, all the other

high-topped sneakers, he has found me out  
I learn that he has already made it through  
the first grade, where he has  
muddied a teacher's dress with his dark paws.

I imagine his journey as he runs down  
the long corridors that smell of chalk dust  
and institutional cleanser, cantering  
past the principal's office, the holy of holies,

where the records are kept. I see him sniffing  
at the blunt toed shoes of the army  
of teachers who find him.  
He wags his tail when he sees me, but I am

overcome with my notoriety. Why did you  
follow me, why single me out? I get the dog  
and put him out the front entrance.  
Go home, I tell him, go on home, ignoring

his optimistic eyes, shutting  
the great wooden doors  
on that part of me that is  
without a collar and wild.

## Sick

*Shel Silverstein - 1930-1999*

"I cannot go to school today,"  
Said little Peggy Ann McKay.  
"I have the measles and the mumps,  
A gash, a rash and purple bumps.  
My mouth is wet, my throat is dry,  
I'm going blind in my right eye.  
My tonsils are as big as rocks,  
I've counted sixteen chicken pox  
And there's one more—that's seventeen,  
And don't you think my face looks green?  
My leg is cut—my eyes are blue—  
It might be instamatic flu.  
I cough and sneeze and gasp and choke,  
I'm sure that my left leg is broke—  
My hip hurts when I move my chin,  
My belly button's caving in,  
My back is wrenched, my ankle's sprained,  
My 'pendix pains each time it rains.  
My nose is cold, my toes are numb.  
I have a sliver in my thumb.  
My neck is stiff, my voice is weak,  
I hardly whisper when I speak.  
My tongue is filling up my mouth,  
I think my hair is falling out.  
My elbow's bent, my spine ain't straight,  
My temperature is one-o-eight.  
My brain is shrunk, I cannot hear,  
There is a hole inside my ear.  
I have a hangnail, and my heart is—what?  
What's that? What's that you say?  
You say today is. . .Saturday?  
G'bye, I'm going out to play!"

## Give Yourself Some Flowers

*Marcus Amaker*

And in the beginning,  
God gave your body  
a checklist:

Keep your heart  
on beat  
and your lungs  
dancing with oxygen,  
not passive to air.

Make sure  
the path of your blood  
slows down  
for checkpoints  
and avoids  
bumps  
in the road.

Train your nerves  
to keep a balanced pace  
and stay within  
the lines  
of steady flow.

Push forward  
without putting  
too much  
pressure  
on movement.

Remember  
to return to water  
when your spirit  
and its frame  
are in drought.

Treat your body  
like a well-rounded planet  
built for all seasons,

or pretend you are  
an adaptable star:

Float in the black  
and stay there  
if you need to,

save some light  
for yourself.

In other words,  
rest like the sun does:

Schedule some time  
to stay out of sight  
when too many people  
praise warm energy.

Keep in mind  
all of these things

when depression  
tells you  
nothing is working.

Keep in mind  
all of these things

when it tells you  
there is no  
invisible force  
connecting us,

when your veins  
are stopped by blood clots,

when your bones are dry,  
and the water  
is too quick to boil.

Keep in mind  
all of these things  
when it tells you  
that the soul is like the body:

Made to be broken,  
open to deterioration  
and doubt. Yes,

keep in mind  
all of these things  
and remember:

Even when it  
seems like  
the clock isn't ticking,

you were made perfectly  
for this moment  
in time.