

Event Title:**Postcards from My Bed: How Autoimmunity Shapes Form, Practice, and Career**

Event Description: This panel features writers whose experiences with autoimmunity have informed their writing practices. Panelists who write, edit, and teach in multiple genres discuss writing before and after autoimmune issues entered their lives. How have their perspectives shifted in relation to character and agency, plot and time, and structure or poetic form? How do they navigate these topics with editors, interviewers, and readers? How does moving between illness and wellness affect the ways they move between private and public spaces, creative and professional work, and poetry and prose?

Event Category: Multiple Literary Genres: Craft & Criticism

Alexa Weinstein: Opening Remarks & Housekeeping:

Welcome to Postcards from my Bed: How Autoimmunity Shapes Form, Practice, and Career. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel (identify moderator) know and a printed copy of the presentation will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing perfume.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.
- We realize the lines for the bathrooms may be long, but please refrain from using an accessible stall unless you require such accommodation. Please also be aware family restrooms located on level 2 are reserved for those with disabilities or those wishing to use a single-stall restroom.
- If you have any questions or concerns regarding conference accessibility, please call or text the Accessibility Hotline (503) 455-4127 or email events@awpwriter.org.

Alexa Weinstein: Introduction of Panelists in the order they are sitting, beginning with herself**Alexa Weinstein, Moderator**

Alexa Weinstein holds an MFA from Mills College. Her written work has appeared on Essay Daily and the Brevity blog, and she regularly performs her live work. She is currently finishing her first book: a collection of essays about finding a place in language where you can speak from all your parts.

Katie Willingham, Event Organizer and Panelist

Katie Willingham is the author of *Unlikely Designs*. She is the poetry editor for *Michigan Quarterly Review* and has taught writing at the University of Michigan. Her poems have appeared in *Bennington Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Poem-A-Day*, *Colorado Review*, and others. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Judy Halebsky, Panelist

Judy Halebsky is the author of the poetry collections, *Tree Line*, *Sky=Empty* and the chapbook, *Space/Gap/Interval/Distance*. Her honors include fellowships from the MacDowell Colony and the Millay Colony. She directs the low residency MFA program at Dominican University of California.

Jennifer Militello, Panelist

Jennifer Militello is the author of the nonfiction book *Knock Wood* as well as four collections of poetry: *A Camouflage of Specimens and Garments*; *Body Thesaurus*; *Flinch of Song*; and *Anchor Chain, Open Sail*. She teaches in the MFA program at New England College.

giovanni singleton, Panelist

giovanni singleton is a poet, professor, yoga teacher, and founding editor of *nocturnes (re)view of the literary arts*, a journal of the African Diaspora and other contested spaces. She is author of *Ascension*, winner of the California Book Award Gold Medal, and *AMERICAN LETTERS: works on paper*.

Participant Opening Remarks: (6-7 minutes each)**Jennifer Militello:**

- medical gaslighting and the impact it can have on one's sense of self, and trust in one's judgment
- writing practice: how the body may not be pushed to work in the same ways it once was (including the use of caffeine, alcohol, sleeplessness)
- the struggle with how much health-related information to give to others, and when and why to provide that information
- invisibility and fear: the invisibility of the symptoms and challenges of many autoimmune illnesses, and how the lack of predictability or stable physical reality can create a fearful situation

Katie Willingham:

- Processing the transition to a writing life with autoimmunity
- Self advocacy in health and writing contexts
- Shifting approaches to writing in relation to autoimmunity and about autoimmunity, including a newfound focus on fragmentation, disjointedness, simultaneity and conflicting aspects that are all still self
- Leaving academia as result of autoimmunity

Texts:

Two Kinds of Decay, Sarah Manguso

Body Horror: Capitalism, Fear, Misogyny, Jokes, Anne Elizabeth Moore

Judy Halebsky:

I'll talk about living a writer's life with an autoimmune issue somewhere within a constellation of allergies and eczema. While this illness is minor in comparison to many other autoimmune conditions, it has had a drastic effect on my daily choices and my work as a writer. My symptoms were particularly bad in my 30s and limited where I could go, what I could eat, and how much work I could do in a day. As a poet, I've tried to align the demands of this illness with my life as a writer so that they could run in parallel rather than in conflict. There were times when I just couldn't go out. I tried to use the solitude for journaling and daydreaming. Of course, being sick is in conflict with the energy of producing work. But, it can lead to cultivating a reflective mindset that is not wholly separate from a poetic sensibility.

Illness has brought to my writing a focus on the body, temporality and frailty. I'll read and discuss my poem *Thinned by Storm* that I wrote when I was trying to come to terms with this illness.

giovanni singleton:

I plan to talk about how my aesthetic/poetics is connected to physicality and the experience of exhaustion and to not knowing one's limitations as a result. Another point of discussion will be the nebulous nature of auto-immune and correlation to a spare, open ended approach to creating poems.

Alexa Weinstein:

In my talk, I'll discuss the confusion between self and other that occurs in the physical body in autoimmune disease. I'll connect this with the self/other confusion caused by childhood abuse from a caregiver. (For those who may be triggered by discussions of childhood sexual abuse and related trauma: I'll be speaking about this connection using general terms like those used here and will not relate details or stories of specific abuse experiences.) Finally, I'll explore how the struggle to create a clear boundary between self and other plays out in my relationships to writing practice, genre, and language itself.

My greatest challenge as a writer is to isolate a piece from the other pieces it's deeply related to and cut away the connecting threads so it can stand on its own. I have come to see that this challenge is bound up with unclear boundaries between self and other as they echo through embodiment, experience, form, and concept. I'll share how performing my work for a live audience, working in other forms that introduce constraint, and using aliveness as a guiding principle have helped me grow as a writer.

Texts:

Lynda Barry, *What It Is*

Renee Gladman, *Calamities*

Eileen Myles, *Inferno*

Moderator Questions: (15 minutes)

- As a result of living with autoimmune illness, what possibilities have closed down for you as a writer? What new possibilities have opened up?
- What has your experience been with the visibility or invisibility of your autoimmune illness? What decisions have you made around making your illness visible to others in your personal and professional life or in your writing?
- Do you claim autoimmunity or illness as one of your identities? Why or why not? Can you talk about how you relate to this aspect of your experience, in relation to your other identities?

Audience Questions: (15 minutes)

There will be time at the end of this event for questions from the audience.