

SEEKING SOLACE: CONFESSIONAL POETRY AS THERAPY

by

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## SEEKING SOLACE: CONFESSIONAL POETRY AS THERAPY

### *How did you start writing poetry?*

I have always been drawn to the written word. Like poet Dylan Thomas I loved “the shape and shade and size and noise of the words” I read and heard (1061). Ever since I was a child my imagination has been rampant and my curiosity a constant, driving force in my life. Before I learned to read I always begged my mother and grandparents to read me stories. I took picture books with me to bed and made stories up based on the illustrations. My parents were avid readers, and I wanted to share what was so important about books. I learned to read and write very quickly. I was in advanced reading and writing groups and scored high on standardized tests. I wrote using anything I could get my hands on, including the inside of books and even the floor, much to my mother’s dismay. In grade school I started writing a play and a novel. I read constantly, even sneaking books to church, and fell asleep with a book in my hand every night. I read mostly fiction: Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary and Ann Martin were my favorites, because these authors wrote about what it was like being a kid, and by reading these books I felt surrounded by friends. Like most people, I also used reading to escape the real world. I went through two very traumatic events before the age of twelve: the break-up of my parents’ marriage when I was seven and the death of my maternal grandfather when I was almost eleven. Both of these things rocked my world, and I found that reading was a way to inhabit a world other than my own.

While reading helped me distance myself from problems, it didn’t completely help me heal. I found the therapy inherent in writing a few months after my grandfather

(I called him Boomp) died. I fiercely missed Boomp and got the idea to write him letters, probably from reading Beverly Cleary's book entitled Dear Mr. Henshaw. I pretended my grandfather was just away on one of his cruise vacations and I told him what was going on in my life and in our family. I also asked him questions in these letters and asked for him to "put a good word in" to God about things I prayed for. The beginning of my imitation of Jim Daniels' poem "Birch Bark," entitled "Yellow Letters," is in honor of my grandfather:

I was the girl who wrote my grandpa letters  
addressed to heaven  
on pieces of yellow paper  
and kept them in a shoe box under my bed,  
where I kept anything else  
I was trying to get rid of  
so people wouldn't see how messy I was  
for a thirteen -year-old...

For the first time I found writing therapeutic in a way that talking to my mom or to a counselor could not be, and continued writing to my grandfather for years.

As a child I dealt with anxiety and have had many attacks, both major and minor, throughout my life. As a child I also suffered from severe separation anxiety due to the split of my parents. My attachment to my mother was so relentless that I refused sleepovers and stays at my dad's house, and when forced to stay even a night away from my mom I went into hysterics. During those attacks I felt my life was ending; I had no control. Counseling helped, but the black dog of fear followed me, attacking at random. My poem "Tiles" explains one of these attacks:

The black dog was just a puppy  
when he'd come calling

in my 4<sup>th</sup> grade school classroom  
 in the middle of math,  
 a subject I couldn't get lost in.

He would pad in so quietly  
 the teacher didn't see him,  
 arriving in the midst of 8 x 7,  
 his thick yellow eyes looking for mine....

We learned in history class that Winston Churchill called his depression a black dog, and it was easy for me to envision my fear as the same animal. Even at a young age I knew that whatever this was that had captured my life and squeezed it into a splinter of hell was similar to what Winston Churchill had experienced. While many poets have written poems to personify their depression, Diane Seuss-Brakeman's poem "The Past is Golden" from her book It Blows You Hollow gives a vivid picture of this dog as I see him:

...He will not go away  
 no matter what I throw at him: stones,  
 flags, crabapples, small crucifixes  
 inlaid with bright yellow roses.

Lifelong grief is not enough for this dog.  
 He wants my devotion, my bed, to eat  
 off my plate. He wants marriage, he wants me  
 on a leash... (10)

When I was fourteen the black dog threatened to take charge of my life when my first serious bout with depression threw me completely off guard. After struggling for months I couldn't function, and after staying home from school for a week I felt stuck in an endless cycle of hopelessness. My mom and I were very close and she tried to help,

but it only hurt more to see her suffering, too. After days of panic attacks and body numbing depression I sat alone in my room and wrote the following words:

Life has its ups and downs.  
And that's just it.  
When we're happy it seems nothing can bring us down.  
When we're sad it seems nothing can cheer us up.  
But in the end we prove to ourselves  
we're wrong  
because.

Life has its ups and downs.

Those short, clichéd sentences drew me out of my funk. In the days that followed, I started writing more “words to live by.” I was writing “poetry” to get myself back to some kind of normalcy and found it to be very therapeutic. Several poets such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath used writing as a way to cope with their depression. Poet and critic David Wojahn writes in his essay “The State You are Entering” that writing can be used as therapy. According to Wojahn, “to write directly of depression is to forego many of the structural and thematic symmetries upon which literature thrives. And yet anyone who has suffered a major depression knows that the desire to reestablish some sense of focus and order is a depressive’s most desperate goal” (57). Not all of the poems are of quality, but they helped the poets regain their health, at least for the time being. As typical as my early writing was I realized, even as a teenager, I could beat this dog, or at least keep him at bay, by writing. I got better, for awhile, but that was really the epiphany for me. Writing saved my life and I knew it was something I would continue to do.

Because I found such support in the inspirational quips I wrote, I began to find myself drawn to poems and song lyrics to find more authentic, published “words to live by” and began looking for poetry to read. An aunt had given me some of her old school books, and in one I found a poem that spoke to me, “In the Night” by Elizabeth Jennings:

Out of my window late at night I gape  
And see the stars but do not watch them really,  
And hear the trains but do not listen clearly;  
Inside my mind I turn about to keep  
Myself awake, yet am not there entirely.  
Something of me is out in the dark landscape.

How much am I then what I think, how much what I feel?  
How much the eye that seems to keep stars straight?  
Do I control what I can contemplate  
Or is it my vision that's amenable?  
I turn in my mind, my mind is a room whose wall  
I can see the top of but never completely scale.

All that I love is, like the night, outside,  
Good to gaze at, looking as if it could  
With a simple gesture be brought inside my head  
Or in my heart. But my thoughts about it divide  
Me from my object. Now deep in my bed  
I turn and the world turns on the other side. (25-26)

The speaker's contemplation of her physical being in relation to the world really appealed to me as a young adult, and I liked how Jennings' poem was written in the first person, which seemed to place me closer to the poem and after reading it; I felt changed by reading it.

Linda Gregg talks about the reader's experience in her essay “The Art of Finding”: “What matters to me even more than the shapeliness and the dance of language is what the poem discovers deeper down than gracefulness and pleasures in figures of speech. I respond most to what is found out about the heart and spirit, what we

can hear through the language. Best of all, of course, is when the language and other means of poetry combine with the meaning to make us experience what we understand” (poets.org). Later, in reading Walt Whitman, I would find the same restorative experience.

My mom was a bookworm, and she and I went to the library every Monday night. After finding my pile of fiction books to read for the week, I’d spend a lot of time perusing the 800 section. Poetry began affecting me in a way that I couldn’t explain. Even at a young age I knew poetry was, as poet and editor Wayne Dodd states in his book Toward the End of the Century, “carnal knowledge, the body—the world’s body—actually present for a moment; on the page, in our ears, in our throats. Not the world as existent outside the poem, and to which the poem refers, but the world in the poem, the world as the poem. Language as the existent thing itself” (41). Reading poems was so exhilarating that I started “teaching” myself things about poetry, which was not a big part of my school’s curriculum. Any time we read poetry in class it felt as if the teacher was covering it due to obligation. We looked more at form and prosody than at music and meaning. Linda Gregg says that “Too often in workshops and classrooms there is a concentration on the poem's garments instead of its life's blood.” As soon as I found the “life’s blood” in the poems I read, I started to devour them. I became the “I” in Mark Strand’s poem “Eating Poetry”:

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.  
There is no happiness like mine.  
I have been eating poetry.

The librarian does not believe what she sees.  
Her eyes are sad



and she walks with her hands in her dress... (621-622).

I could not get enough poetry. Even my mother thought I was nuts. Due to my lack of exposure to poetry in school I mostly relied on anthologies. I read lots of books of “treasured American verse,” filled with poets most people liked. I particularly loved Walt Whitman, because reading him I felt he was speaking directly to me, and Robert Frost for his language and rhythm, even if I didn’t always understand his work. I also liked e.e. cummings for his unique style and his ability to tackle social issues. The first time I read “pity this busy monster manunkind, not,” I thought “Wow, someone actually thinks like me!” and at this point in my maturity I began to see people playing with the “bigness of their littleness” all the time. I was ready to join cummings in “a hell of a good universe next door” (158). I was fifteen now, a thinking and feeling human being. I was also becoming more critical of my culture and more interested in nature and the environment.

Poetry wasn’t the only thing drawing me in. I became entranced by popular music, and the first thing I did when I got a new tape or CD was to look at the liner notes and read the lyrics. Late 80s music left me groping for lyrics with meaning, so on my mother’s advice, I looked back to the 60s and 70s and fell in love with Lennon and McCartney and Pink Floyd. In the early 1990s the “big hair” bands finally started to die off and Nirvana, Alice in Chains, Pearl Jam, Radiohead, Blind Melon and took the stage. I’m not sure what critics would say about these bands’ lyrics, but I studied their songs for every ounce of meaning I could find.

During my senior year of high school I finally got to choose my English classes. My teachers had always told me that I was a good writer, and strangely enough, I enjoyed writing persuasive research papers (most due to my aforementioned curiosity). I had never had the chance to write creatively for a grade, so I eagerly signed up for Creative Writing. Entering that class as a naïve seventeen-year-old, I opened my eyes to the beauty of self-expression. My teacher was a young woman who was open and funny, like a jet ski in a sea of tug boats. Our first assignment was to keep a semester-long journal. We were instructed to write about whatever we wanted as long as the entries were a certain length. At first I thought Mrs. Figueroa was nuts until my pencil hit the paper and had a hard time stopping. Along with venting teenage frustration, I started writing what would qualify as memoir. I could easily visualize the events of my life and I enjoyed using description and figurative language to my reader, even if my readers were just a reluctant peer editor or Mrs. Figueroa, my teacher. She was constructive of course, but in a way that really made me feel like I was writing something of merit. I eagerly awaited any assignments I got back from her because I knew I could trust what she said. I am the type of teacher I am because of her, though we didn't always agree about what was important in the study of poetry.

Mrs. Figueroa taught us strict forms like sonnets, cinquains, haiku, and concrete poems from sheets she'd photocopied out of an archaic workbook. Poet and critic Anne Stevenson says, "Perhaps a serious fault of creative writing classes is that they have failed, in America, to make this distinction between art and life" (Middlebrook 364) and I doubt if Mrs. Figueroa's aim was to show us the beauty and the music of poetry; she just

gave us formats and asked us to fill them in. She seemed not to view poetry as an art, and I tried my best to pour myself into counting lines and syllables. After I wrote Mrs. Figueroa a long letter about how I felt when I got a C on the poetry unit, I happily delved into the autobiographical unit. In a piece filled with imagery and voice, I wrote about riding the school bus with a bunch of juvenile delinquents. She read it to the class and I got an A. Until that point I hadn't realized that daily experience could be the stuff of poems.

When I got to college I wrote essays to get good grades, and hated every minute of it. I didn't really have the time or the drive to write creatively; I was too busy living college life and all of the creative writing classes usually filled up before I could sign up. I did keep a lazy journal at this time, and when I was in my early twenties I began recording stories and poems about events from my childhood that could be categorized as memoir. Like David Wojahn, I "considered myself a narrative poet, little interested in the shorter lyric but much interested in poems that can perform according to the rules we would normally require of a short story—plot, character, conflict" (102).

At this point I decided to major in drama and English education. How I became a serious poet is a long story, but my practice grew from the worst experience in my life. This time it wasn't a divorce or depression, but the slow and painful process of watching the most important person in my life die of colon cancer. My mother was diagnosed in October of 1999, a few months after I started my first teaching job. This news hit without warning and knocked my life out of kilter, as it would anyone's. As I watched the cancer slowly eat my mother, I too felt as if I was dying. My mom was a private

person and she wasn't open to letting most of her friends know she was sick, so she asked the immediate family to keep her illness private. As it was my first year teaching, I was swamped with work and had no social life. Most of my friends didn't know how to help me and left me alone, save the occasional call to see how I was doing. My true savior was paper and pen, and yet again I turned to writing as my sole form of therapy. I began writing at night when I'd get home from visiting my mother at her home. As hard as it was, I lived for those visits at the end of the day, no matter how she felt. My poem "Maintaining" captures one of those visits. I was almost ashamed to be healthy when the air around me was full of the oncoming death of someone I feared I could not live without. The following words are from the middle of the poem:

...When I tell her my student lost the research paper  
 I spent all last night editing  
 she turns to listen carefully,  
 yellow skin pulled tight as baseball leather,  
 and I stop,  
 head dropping downward,  
 eyes tracing the long creases in my palms.  
 Why can't I stop the foolishness,  
 the petty complaining?

When I got home from seeing my mother, I'd sit on the deck of my apartment and wait for my pen to start. I mostly wrote snatches of emotion, nothing I would say really constituted as anything of quality. It didn't really matter to me, as writing was merely a form of coping with my emotions. Like Sylvia Plath, who was "haunted by a fear of her own disintegration," I too "kept [my]self together by defining [my]self so that everyone could see [me] there fighting and conquering an outside world that forever threatened..." (Bernard 83). If any one would've come to my apartment those evenings, they would've

seen a really fat spiral full of emotional writing and a young woman a little less frazzled despite the horrible events taking place in her life at that time.

So, just as I did when I was a pre-teen, teenager and finally an adult I found solace in pen and paper and it is part of what kept me healthy during trying times. I was following in the footsteps of other writers, such as poet Anne Sexton, who found writing to be their rescuer. Sexton, who suffered from mental illness and severe depression, as well as alcoholism, used writing as a way to save herself from the clutches of depression. Biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook believes that writing saved Sexton from further destructive behavior: “In 1957, poetry saved her life; in 1958 it was restoring her to motherhood” (79).

In her essay “How it Was” poet Maxine Kumin, one of Sexton’s most intimate friends, said “I am convinced that poetry kept Anne alive for the eighteen years of her creative endeavors...Without this rich, rescuing obsession I feel certain she would have succeeded in committing suicide in response to one of the dozen impulses that beset her during the period between 1957 and 1974” (xxiii-xxiv). After Sexton’s first suicide attempt her long time psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne urged Anne to write poetry. “You, Dr. Martin” came directly out of that experience, as did so many of the poems in her first collection, To Bedlam and Part Way Back” (Kumin xxiii). Later on in her life she wrote the collection The Awful Rowing Toward God because a priest told her “God is in your typewriter,” the magic and simple words that kept her alive at least a year beyond her time” (Kumin xxiii).

As my mother's condition worsened, my writing intensified, but as with Sexton's experience with writing, its magical effect eventually waned. I went into survival mode. I taught kids English, I went to see my dying mother after work, and entertained my eight-year-old brother while she slept. At home I graded papers, frantically planned the next day's lesson, and went to bed trying desperately to sleep. When my mother died, it was almost a relief. While she had more quality of life than the doctors had first promised, the last month and a half of her life was excruciatingly painful for her.

The summer after my mother's death I did everything I could do to keep from falling into blackness. I took vacations; I hung out with friends who kept me active; and more importantly, I got married. Even though she wasn't there I could feel her presence and sought out to find solace in a life without her. I knew I would write again; I just had to get some distance from what I knew would be one of my main subjects.

At first I started writing memoir because it was what I knew how to do. It came naturally and without much effort. Writer Toni Morrison talks about how, when she writes of her life, it feels like water flooding back to the source. "Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valleys we ran through, what the banks were like, and the light that was there and the route back to our original place" (199). When I began again I explored my past using the tools of imagery and figurative language to recreate my experiences. Morrison describes emotional memory by saying that even "the nerves and skin remember" what the body experiences, and that "a rush of imagination is our flooding" (199). I relished the times I got caught in that "flood."

For months I stole moments out of my day to write the emotions surrounding my mother's death. It was about this time that I decided to pursue a Master's degree and I knew that it would have to include an emphasis in creative writing. My first class was Advanced Fiction Writing with Dr. Ron Rindo, and after the first night I was hooked. I ended up taking an independent study class on memoir with him, writing mostly fed by memories of my mom. I started to dabble in poetry again as well, finding free verse fit my style best. I understood what Toni Morrison meant when she said, "If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic" (192). I became more reverent in my writing as my notebooks filled.

When I took poetry workshop with Professor Pamela Gemin in the fall of 2004, it was the first time I had ever been taught how to formally write poetry, save that small unit in high school Creative Writing. I had never shared my work with anyone else, and after my first workshop, I was the kid in the candy store. Poetry was a clear way to examine and work through the conflicts and struggles that had shaped me as a child and then as a young adult. Poet Dave Smith says, "A poem, like all high art, proposes that in dramas of crisis, human the same generation after generation, we are permitted and objectivity sufficient not simply to see what happens but also to perceive much more" (277). I wanted anyone who read my work to feel what it was like to be inside my poems. It was in this first poetry class and in subsequent others that I truly found a place I belonged and felt a special camaraderie with other writers. As Anne Sexton said when

she began taking workshop classes “I found I belonged to the poets, that I was real there, ... “These are my people” (Middlebrook 50).

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***What are the personal goals of your work?***

1. *To enjoy the writer’s solitude.*

From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were—I have not seen  
As others saw—I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring.  
From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow; I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same tone;  
And all I lov’d, I lov’d alone.... (812)

When I first read Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “Alone,” in one of those books in the 800 section, I knew it had been written about kids like me. I have never taken my joys from a society’s “common spring.” I don’t have any conventional women’s hobbies and I don’t care what is happening in Hollywood. I would rather watch water heating than watch American Idol. While most of my adult contemporaries are wrapped up in what they are supposed to be doing, I’m still the girl of in my poem “Summer Saturday Nights,” who gazes at the stars in the middle of the night, looking for something. Anne Stevenson says that some “[s]ensitive students seeking a meaning in life, or a justification of their own abnormality in American society, turn to poetry as an alternative to reality—and a way of redeeming themselves, at the same time, from social insignificance” (Middlebrook 364). Poetry writing is my way to find my way.

The state of solitude is important to my work because for the first seventeen years of my life, until my extremely younger half-brother was born, I was an only child. I lived in



a neighborhood with very few kids my age, and the friends I did have were mostly boys, not because I disliked girls, but because geographically boys were my only option. Even now I find most things to do with being an adult female uninteresting. I hate dresses, rarely wear makeup, still play videogames and sports, and have a hard time relating to women my age probably because I have no desire to have children.

Because of my unique traits, I do go through my fair share of stints of boredom, but I find that I can get along rather well by myself and often prefer it that way. Solitude has influenced my writing positively because I'm fond of observing and listening to my surroundings. Many of my poems have natural settings, and I am at my best when I am surrounded by nature and away from large groups of people or big cities. As Walt Whitman said in "Song of the Open Road":

"Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons,

It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth" (188).

When I am forced out of my element, I'm not the one to start conversation, and I loathe small talk with people I don't know. One of my favorite things to do is to sit somewhere and respond in writing to what I see, on the advice of Franz Kafka: "You do not even have to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet" (Kooser 13).

Yet, while I enjoy being a poet, it breeds more solitude. When I tell people I'm earning a Master's degree they look at me with admiration. I swallow this happily

because I know that as soon as I tell them what the focus of my degree is they will look at me with the same look I give a friend of mine when she asks me to join her in the yearly “Polar Plunge.” Few of the people I know enjoy reading poetry, and hardly any of them want to gain an understanding of my favorite form of self-expression. In his essay, “Death to the Death of Poetry,” poet Donald Hall talks about how, while there are more poets in this world than ever before (probably because it’s so easy to get published in Internet magazines of questionable quality) there are still relatively few people who truly love well written poetry. Hall states, “Let us quickly and loudly proclaim that no poet sells like Stephen King, that poetry is not as popular as professional wrestling, and that fewer people attend poetry readings in the United States than in Russia” (poets.org). While Hall complains about poetry’s small audience, he ends his essay with some hope, a hope I feel as well: “While most readers and poets agree that ‘nobody reads poetry’--and we warm ourselves by the gregarious fires of our solitary art--maybe a multitude of nobodies assembles the great audience Whitman looked for” (Hall).

## 2. *To Celebrate the Beauty in the Ordinary*

While I do like to write more personal narrative or confessional poetry, I also enjoy writing lyric poetry. I like to call attention to the seemingly mundane in my poetry, and respond to Carl Sandburg’s eighth of “Nine Tentative (First Model) Definitions of Poetry”: “Poetry is the achievement of the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits” (77).

Poet Billy Collins is one writer whom I have looked to for inspiration because much of his work gives voice to common or random things. One example of such topics

is in his poem “Marginalia” from the book Picnic, Lightning. Collins writes about margin notes left in books that people sell or donate to be repurchased by someone else. He sees these small scraps of writing as people’s voices or marks. They are like small individual poems written by various voices. “We have all seized the white perimeter as our own and reached for a pen if only to show we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages...” (15). We all want to leave our mark, and despite its strangeness (i.e. “*Don’t be a ninny* alongside a paragraph of The Life of Emily Dickinson”) we prove our worth and show our voice as individual human beings (14).

One of my favorite Collins’ poems is “Night Letter to the Reader” from the book Nine Horses. As in many of his poems he writes about his immediate surroundings, and in this poem he describes walking out into the life of a summer night. “I am simply conscious, an animal in pajamas sensing only the pale humidity” (5). He goes on to describe the night, and I like how he says, “and there was something else I wanted to tell you” (6). It feels like he’s trying to keep you listening, as if you’re falling asleep. In this poem Collins’s words keep alive the beauty in a few minutes of a night and he wants to be sure we hear him. He says he’s good at showing you this and it’s all he wants to do. He makes the reader feel like it is ok to be outside by yourself listening to birds. He says maybe nature has more to offer than that flashy loud box in the living room.

Several of my poems are, like Collins’ work, a look at things that most people don’t notice. In “Elegy to my Summer Writing Spot” I write of how my cat reacts on a fall night. In “Life in a Northern Town” I write about a campfire and what cars look like

driving down a highway. I enjoy writing about things like discarded pencils, high school hallways, and sewing machines.

### 3. *To Promote Mental Well-Being, Self-Expression and Creativity*

Another reason I write is that, as I stated earlier, it keeps me emotionally and mentally healthy. Poet David Wojahn describes in his essay, “The State You are Entering,” how talking to a psychiatrist about his depression doesn’t really help him: “Yes, I could list for the doctor my ‘symptoms’....but to try to describe my condition in any way but the most barely verbal fashion seemed wholly beyond my resources. It was simply not a question of ‘words failing me,’ for it was not a *question* of finding the right words like everything else talking seemed irrelevant, academic for my feelings...” (52). When I have tried to unburden myself to others, I can never describe my problems accurately. But writing makes me feel significantly better. Like Sylvia Plath, who “used every emotional experience as if it were a scrap of material that could be pieced together to make a wonderful dress,” I use my emotions to fuel my writing. And like Plath, “when in control of those tumultuous feelings [I am] able to focus and direct [my] incredible poetic energy to great effect” (Hughes xx). When I’m really in the swing of things I can write pages and pages a day, but most of the time I write fragments I may form into poetry later. I’m not just trying to describe my experience, I’m trying to recreate it for other human beings, on an universal level. As poet Michael Ryan asserts, “The discipline of writing includes a special opportunity for the writer as a person to make an interpersonal object that not only expresses his feelings but also embodies them, that

makes them both accessible to him and strangely independent of him. This is writing's gift to the writer and, like all large gifts, it carries obligation" (141). When I do share my work, it's only after I've labored to make it readable and accessible.

### 3. *To Answer the Muses*

The last reason I write is, truly, because I have to. Words form in my head that I don't even have to think into being, and when they come I am compelled to write them. It's as if I am a word geyser, erupting at random. I see words within words. I dream about words. I am happiest when the words come fast and I just see them spill out on the page like someone else's hand is writing them. Many of the poems in this thesis have come from a place I can't explain. Nobel Prize winning poet Derek Walcott offers a test for poets: "If you know what you are going to write when you're writing a poem, it's going to be average" (Derek). I love it when my pen can't keep up with my brain. I wouldn't trade the whisper of my muse for anything.

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### ***Can subject matter get trivial in a confessional poem? And what about material considered taboo?***

Poetry can be a celebration of the mundane, and a savior of the trivial. As Dr. Loren Baybrook stated in an American Poetry classes I took in the summer of 2006, poetry must enact what it describes. Images must perform what they represent, and the poet must bring a reader something beautiful.

While Baybrook was concerned with the imagists, I've always found I am drawn to confessional poetry which is a "general label for intensely personal poetry about once-taboo subjects" that began with poet Robert Lowell in the late 1950s (Ramazani et. al Iii). I consider myself a confessional-or "post-confessional" poet, as most of my poems deal directly with personal experience. I like to write in the same vein as other confessional poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Maxine Kumin, and Sharon Olds who write "about key moments of revelatory pain more often than pleasure," because "they [have seen] such moments as epitomizing the general condition of their time" (Ramazani et. al Iiii). Since I do tend to write about realistic and sometimes tragic events, it is my hope that readers of my work can more clearly understand and relate to a variety of emotional situations. While I do not suffer the extreme depression that Anne Sexton did I, like her, I welcome others' reading of my work for their benefit. As Sexton's biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook said, "If suffering like [Anne's] had any use, she reasoned, it was not to the sufferer. The only way that an individual's pain gained meaning was through its communications to others" (xxiii). If my work can help others feel they are not alone, I feel I am accomplishing my goal.

But what happens when a poet finds that her subject matter has been frequently used by other poets, and that her surface experience is not unique? In her essay "The Forbidden," Louise Glück uses Sharon Olds' book The Father as an example of a book in which a poet writes too much about one subject. Olds' book is a collection of poems focused on the illness and death of her abusive, alcoholic father, and according to Glück the reading becomes "tedious" (247). She argues that "Olds uses her genius for

observation to make, repeatedly, the same points, to reach the same epiphanies; the energy and diversity of detail play out as stasis” (247). While Olds does alter the ideas and premises of her poems, Glück claims that Olds’ poems do not “move either forward or backward, backward to an earlier phase of childhood, the perspectives of which might illuminate the current confrontation, or (convincingly) forward” (248). Having read The Father myself, I have to disagree, as would other Sharon Olds devotees. Each poem in The Father deals with the experience of watching a parent die, but each is remarkably different than the last. In some poems she may get a little graphic, such as when Olds describes her father’s catheter bag, but Olds does not tend to shy away from reality, as unpleasant (or ecstatic) as it gets. In The Father readers get a true sense of what it’s like for a woman to come to terms with the death of a father she disliked. The poems are all pieces to this family’s real picture, and without one piece, the book wouldn’t be complete. I admire Sharon Olds for her no-holds-barred approach to confessional poetry. Many of my poems about my mother are in the same vein.

In contrast, in her essay, “Breaking the Code of Silence: Ideology and Women’s Confessional Poetry,” Judith Harris supports Sharon Olds’ direct, often graphic approach as well as her risky subject matter. Harris attempts to define what confessional poetry is by saying that it is “poetry of ideas, or acute political consciousness that demonstrates through testimony, an individual’s relationship to a community” (254). Harris asserts that while confessional poetry may focus on anger and blame, by “revivifying the child” a poet can rescue the adult self in order to preserve, rather than surrender voice and memories. Confessional poems can help both poets and readers release their inner beasts,

help them find themselves, and help them refuse to feel guilty about their victimization. Much of Olds' poetry about childhood involves her private suffering, but in the act of writing it, she turns it into collective experience. She shows readers how they too can survive pain and live to write about it, to bear witness for voiceless others. And since Olds writes about what some would call shocking topics—sexuality and the body, rape and incest, for example—Harris states her belief that while poets should not be purposefully grim or offensive, readers should not exclude material based on taboo topics from their reading experience. Harris finishes by answering the typical question critics of confessional poetry have, “Why should we care?” by saying we care because reading about cruelty and redemption will help us “curse, liberate, and fly” (267).

Glück and Harris both have valid points. Often in my own work I question whether or not anyone else really cares about ants, or the way that I felt my mother's presence on my wedding day. I write of these topics because I have to and all I can do is recreate my experiences in words that I hope will universally translate to others. Sometimes a poet has to write for herself and let the critics decide whether her efforts have been worthwhile. The chapter “Writing and Knowing,” from The Poet's Companion, validates this point. Authors Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux repeat the advice all writers hear when they begin: “Write what you know.” While beginning writers may think their lives dull and boring they only have to look to famous poets to see that they heeded the same advice. Whitman wrote about grass and stars, Dickinson about a buzzing fly and a snake, and Keats about a nightingale. What they did with those ideas was make their themes universally applicable to all. “Good writing works from a simple



premise: your experience is not yours alone, but in some sense a metaphor for everyone's" (21). Addonizio and Laux use a parody poem to highlight their point:

Here I stand  
looking out my window  
and I am important.

In sum, unless poets can look beyond their own lives and write poems that "(become) shared knowledge, part of who we are as individuals, a culture, a species," their poems will fail (21).

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### ***How do poets make subject matter new?***

One of the hardest things about writing poetry is making a topic that has already been written about seem new. After the World Trade Center attacks on 9/11/2001, millions of poems were written, but how many were well-made? Derek Walcott helps answer this question. In his 1992 Nobel Prize acceptance speech entitled "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," he said, "Poetry, which is perfection's sweat which must seem as fresh as the raindrops on a statue's brow, combines the natural and the marmoreal; it conjugates both tenses simultaneously: the past and the present, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past" (1122). Therefore, poetry must come alive in a way that makes readers feel as if they are experiencing events and emotions for the first time. Everyone has had relationship troubles, mourned the death of a loved one, or witnessed injustice. In my poem "Simply Human," I describe someone who feels the oppressiveness of a dark winter day:

Her world is smeared with grey today  
 as clouds slither along like the wet slide of the snail.  
 On top of her city the murky sky hangs  
 like wet wool...

This December day presses in  
 as if stuck under a fat thumb,  
 nail whitening as the blood squeezes out...

The speaker then sees a gaggle of Canadian geese that have, at random, landed in a field  
 near her workplace:

Above a field behind a high school  
 a gaggle of geese lands  
 as if giant hands had cupped these birds like pebbles  
 and in the parting of palms gently spread them on to the ground.

This event changes the subject's world as she contemplates the simple beauty of the  
 geese and their complete oblivion to anything human. The speaker feels humbled, and

... her own world brakes for a moment,  
 and she sees inside the world's head cold,

and now she can wade through the day,  
 her mind calm as mist,  
 blank as the sky.

This poem could describe how anyone feels on a drab day, but in a way, I hope, that is  
 transformative and new. That is my goal as a poet, to celebrate the ordinary and make  
 everyday experience universal but fresh.

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*Is it ethical for poets to lie?*

Furnishing a new view of old subject matter is important in any kind of poetry, but how far is a poet allowed to go to attain this new perspective? In separate essays, Ted Kooser and Billy Collins debate the ethics of a poet's lying in a poem in order to get to the emotional truth of a matter. In Billy Collins' essay, "My Grandfather's Tackle Box: The Limits of Memory Driven Poetry," he discusses the history of poetry's subject matter and how it has evolved into taking an autobiographical approach. The first point Collins makes is that poets should make sure their autobiographical work is not just "nostalgic memory dressed up in figurative language and lines," but poetry that uses memory to produce a higher meaning that will stand the test of time (84). His second point is that it is ethical to lie in apparently personal poetry, and that memory is merely a "springboard" for a theme or idea. He ends by saying that many readers disagree with him, and expect the poets they read to be telling the truth (Collins 90-91).

In Ted Kooser's essay, "Lying for the Sake of Making Poems," he vehemently expresses his opinion that poets should not lie when writing autobiographical/confessional poetry. He feels it is "despicable to exploit the trust of a reader" to garner sympathy, because if the poet were to tell the same lies in a social situation, he or she would be shunned (161).

I respect both of these points of view. While I don't think poets should lie about the occurrence of an entire event, for example writing a poem about an abusive father when a poet didn't have one, changing minor details to fit the poem's overall goal, I think, is acceptable. There have been many poems I have written in which I can't even imagine straying from the truth. Most of the poems about my childhood, such as "Fishing at the

Cory” and “Summer Saturday Nights,” included in this collection, are written exactly as happened. Because they use integral memories that make up who I am, I could never tamper with them.

But in other poems some slight alteration is necessary to keep the poem logical, for example in the following lines of my poem “St. B’s”:

Even when the black dog began tailing me,  
tripping me at the ankles,  
I learned the “Hail Mary” to please my grandmother,  
not knowing what “womb” meant  
until her cancer began to grow there.

To keep the poem logical, I had to alter the truth a bit when it came to the part about the word “womb.” While I did have a grandmother who had cancer in that area, my grandfather was the one who actually died of cancer. It was pancreatic, and he was the one who made me memorize the “Hail Mary” prayer. Because of the difference in gender between my grandfather and the Virgin Mary I chose to change his gender. I don’t feel any part of the poem was jeopardized by my not telling the total truth; the poem is simply more effective at expressing what I was feeling.

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***Can confessional/autobiographical poetry be read as egotistical and self-absorbed?***

In his essay, “Voluminous Underwear; or Why I Write Self-Portraits,” David Graham claims that all writing is a representation of a “first person” since it is the writer’s voice that shapes its ideas. The first person voice is intimate, and Graham acknowledges the writer’s duty to autobiographical poetry-- to find the proper balance between “honesty,

truth and reality” and the “best, stylized version” of the former (96). He uses Rembrandt as an example of an artist who continually searched for and portrayed different versions of himself. Graham does the same with words, as he shows us in examples of his own work. He finishes by saying that through his process of self-expression and discovery, he has found that many of his poems he wrote with one intention formed themselves into poems with completely different, unintentional meanings.

My poem “Avenue to the Afterworld” started out as a poem about a blizzard, but after letting it sit for a bit I saw what the words were getting at. I know that thousands of people die all over the world, every minute, and I have always wondered what it looks like when souls ascend to the afterworld. I wrote the last stanza to explore that question:

When I let my eyes blur  
 each flake becomes a line—  
 an avenue to the afterworld,  
 white souls streaming  
 a million a second,  
 strands of life combed out before me,  
 zooming towards the light,  
 and I imagine that is what it was like for you  
 when you left this world.

In her essay, “Family Talk: Confessional Poet? Not Me,” Colette Inez says that confessional poetry shouldn’t have much to do with ego. She tells us what confessional poetry is not by saying “I don’t think of poetry as therapy, as a prescribed remedy for sorrows...Poetry is not a cure-all nor does it promise compassion or forgiveness. It’s an art with verbal music and intensities that may or may not reveal a parallel universe of insights and well-being (119). She believes that the art of poetry has more to do with

how the poet uses language to tell an “emotional truth” and to get at the facts of a good story, rather than finding a way to heal herself.

I disagree with Inez. I feel that confessional poetry *is* about a poet’s unburdening herself on paper. I wouldn’t be the person I am today without having done so. Part of being a confessional poet is to perform some of that egotistical behavior inherent in all human beings. I strive to be as humble as possible, but I find that through writing poetry I can let out a part of myself I truly can’t express by speaking to someone. As William Meredith says in his essay “Reasons for Poetry,” “Poets don’t respond as one, they respond in character, with various intuition, to...new experience. What each maker makes is poetry, but why he makes it, his reason, is his unique intuition. The reason determines the proper mode of apprehension. It is part of the purpose of every poem to surprise us with our own capacity for change, for a totally new response” (poets.org).

I am a poet living her own unique life. I will use my gift as long as my brain and the muses keep fueling my pencil. I will try to bring my experiences to life for my readers so that they too can see the world in a slightly new or different way. If this is egotism, then so be it.

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### ***What is difficult about writing poetry?***

While poetry is, at this point in my life, my favorite genre to write and read in, there are some things about this style of writing I find challenging. In her book *Hand-*

*Held Executions*, poet and editor Joan Houlihan states that some poetry readers, when reading what is considered the best contemporary work, have “reached the point where [they] are being asked to believe that a text block, chopped randomly into flat, declarative lines, is a poem. [They] are told to kneel and stare at this specimen of dead lines...and declare it alive” (70). Like those of all writers, my first drafts fall in the category of needing revision because I tend to say too much and overwrite in the early stages. In a chapter entitled “Leaving Things Out,” in his book The Resistance to Poetry, James Longenbach discusses poetry’s unique way of saying more with fewer words. This requirement of poetry leads to my downfall. What do I cut out? How much will my reader understand if I take out some of what I think are key words, phrases, or lines? In my graduate school poetry workshops I found that the best advice I got was not what to add, but what to cut. Because I come from a background of prose writing, most of what comes out of my pen is in long lines of description, and I’m constantly having to condense. “So while poems cannot help but leave things out, and while the job of interpretation is in some sense to supply what the poem has appeared to omit, we return to poems when they make our job difficult. Poems show us how it feels to like trouble” (Longenbach 94). On the positive side, as I continue to write poems, I’m finding I enjoy struggling through revision. I enjoy the “trouble.”

Another issue I run into is that finding new and refreshing things to write about is getting harder the more I write poetry. Sometimes I find that the poetic form constricts my ideas. In her book The Music of What Happens, Helen Vendler says that a good poem should be able to be described so “that it cannot be confused with any other art

work” and that we should be able to infer from its elements the aesthetic that might generate this unique configuration” (2). One poem is unique in all other poems because it enacts what it describes. As Vendler states, “the significant components are known as such by interacting with each other in a way that seems coherent, not haphazard” (3). Houlihan’s definition of a good poem is similar, as she states poetry needs “to communicate something significant, complex, or profound coupled so fiercely with the need to communicate it exactly, such that the hearer understands it even to the point of experiencing the original event or emotion him or herself (69). Therefore, a poem must be the most accurate and pure distillation of the emotions and actions of an event or idea, and must join together all elements—style, word choice, voice, and idea—to say something that poem and only that poem can. I’m always worried that what I do choose to write is betraying the craft of poetry, because I have tended recently to write narrative poems, or poems about nature. As David Wojahn states in his essay “Without a Deep Delight,” narrative poetry must introduce characters, plot and setting as a novel would, but it still must be limited by poetry’s shorter form. The result can be narrative poetry that is “funereally paced” (110). Sometimes when I am told my work isn’t saying anything new, I try to remember that a narrative poet needs to strive for a poem that is a “story of deep delight” (121). This struggle, though, is what forces my creativity.

Because I write so much about my past, I also worry that most of my writing is too sentimental. When I write I tend to get wrapped up in the emotion of the poem, and I sometimes forget there’s nothing really poetic about it. While it is fun to embrace my nostalgia, I’m constantly trying to heed Ted Kooser’s words from The Poetry Home



Repair Manual: “To write a poem that is not just a gush of sentiment but something that will engender in its readers deep, resonant feelings, you need to exercise restraint to avoid what is commonly termed sentimentality” (55).

One of my last concerns involving poetry is how to keep its beauty alive while teaching it effectively to high school students. I have been a Creative Writing teacher for almost ten years now, and I find that each year it is more of a challenge to make my material interesting and graspable to beginning writers. I get two types of students in my classes: those who have to be there and those who want to be there. Sometimes just getting the first group *to* write is a challenge. Telling them, “No one wants to read poetry. No one wants to. You have to make it impossible for them to put the poem down...word after word you have you have to keep them from closing the book” would never work (Olds 348). They would just ask me why I’d open the book in the first place. The second group wants to write because they are full of emotions. As a high school teacher I see a lot of students who are going through the same troubles I did at their age, and I have often given them the advice to write their problems out of their systems. I tell them a piece of paper always listens and never talks back. A few of my poems about teaching included in this thesis describe my teaching experience. While I know that poetry will never be every student’s favorite subject, I have helped a lot of students “vent” their emotions, as described in my poem “On Teaching Poetry”:

...More sighs, body shifting, pages flipping,  
and finally one hand sneaks up.  
‘How much do poets make, anyways?’  
My turn to sigh.  
“Writing a poem is kind of like breathing,” I answer.  
You don’t get paid for things like that.”

Twenty-eight heads jerk up from packets  
to the hard stare of my green eyes.  
One kid's left eyebrow is raised high enough to match his smile.

Billy Collins was right about teaching poetry,  
all people want to do is beat a confession  
out of poor poems tied to chairs.

For a few seconds there is silence  
and then twenty-eight sets of hands  
go back to paging through poems.  
I start digging through new lesson plans until I hear  
the girl in the corner's pen scratching  
across the blank pages of her own red notebook,  
and then I stop.

But one of my biggest fears, and in some cases failures, is being too quick to  
judge my student's work as raw emotion when looking at their creative writing. I still  
have to remember what it's like to be the 14-year-old kid trapped in her own world  
feeling as if she is the only one who knows what pain is like. I tried to capture this idea  
in my poem, "On Grading Poetry":

... But my mousy haired girls, cuts on their arms  
and black-clothed boys with painted black fingernails  
write only pain in the absence of light.  
So much they feel now,  
so much they embrace the darkness,  
the hate, the rage,  
like a new toy they can't control.  
Theirs is a life that finally bites back  
after years of snack-packs and Pokémon,  
and their words come to me  
etched hard into spirals,  
the murmurs of blackness leaking from their ink.

Where will their words be when I am through?  
I wish I didn't have to write down a score on their papers,  
letters labeling and measuring what they won't feel in a few years  
but now circles their world like buzzards.

“Teenage angst has paid off well...”  
but it means nothing if I stop those pens for good.

Despite the questions and troubles I still have about writing poetry I will continue to “let the ink run from the corners of my mouth.” I will live by Dylan Thomas’ definition of poetry: “All that matters about poetry is the enjoyment of it, however tragic it may be. All that matters is the eternal movement behind it, the vast undercurrent of human grief, folly, pretension, exaltation or ignorance, however unlofty the intention of the poem” (1066). And while I am sure I will never win a Nobel Prize for Literature, I will continue write until I don’t know how to use a pencil anymore. I will continue to find the redeeming and therapeutic factors of writing poetry. “You’re self-esteem shouldn’t depend on whether you publish, or whether some editor or writer you admire thinks you’re any good....Find that positive place inside of you that is at the heart of your desire to write” and just write (Addonizio and Laux 196-198).

Shedding: Poems of a Messy Haired Girl

“But now I am wondering if you are even listening  
and why I bother to tell you these things  
that will never make a difference,  
flecks of ash, tiny chips of ice.  
But this is all I want to do—  
tell you that up in the woods  
a few night birds were calling...”

*From “Night Letter to The Reader” by Billy Collins*

*MAINTAINING*

### Maintaining

Today her death has slowed down enough  
to let her catch up in her long winded strides.  
It is a good day,  
and when I arrive after work to talk  
she sits up on her love seat,  
opening her rusty hinges,  
lighting her face like a lamp  
in the middle of night.

On the coffee table her hand finds a can of Sprite  
between pink Kleenexes balled up like socks  
and the latest doctor's phone number  
loosely scrawled on the back of the cable bill.  
Her pills, lined up in their tall orange bottles,  
magical copper canisters filled with the latest fixes—  
Augmentin, Wellcovorin, Xeloda, Zoloft...

When I tell her my student lost the research paper  
I spent all last night editing  
she turns to listen carefully,  
yellow skin pulled tight as baseball leather,  
and I stop,  
head dropping downward,  
eyes tracing the long creases in my palms.  
Why can't I stop the foolishness,  
the petty complaining?

But when I look up  
she points at the newest coffee stain on my shirt  
and laughs through a mouth full of sores,  
so I keep talking.

### Fishing at the Cory

Shane and I fished at the “cory,”  
because we didn’t know to call it “quarry,”  
when really it was neither,  
just a shallow oval a farmer dug  
in a low end of his field.

We spent afternoons within cattails  
on the lip of a murkiness  
carpeted with army drab algae,  
our tennies soaked with the funk an old farm tire gets when full of June rain.  
All day long we caught and recaught the same pickle pail of fish—  
bull head with their halted faces and gaping mouths,  
skinny perch with pointy tiger striped bodies  
sunnies as flat as the skipping stones we threw when nothing was biting.

Shane was afraid to unhook them.  
He’d dangle the fish in my face,  
caught by their innards,  
their mouths pinching,  
trying to bite hooks in half with invisible teeth  
until I set them free.  
One day I called him chicken,  
told him boys shouldn’t be scared of things,  
and with the sun behind him blackening his silhouette,  
face red, hand clenching his pole,  
Shane slapped his fish against a limestone rock,  
faster and faster,  
until the translucent line tethered  
a bloody splatter among the grayness of bones.

From then on I took Shane’s fish off the line,  
scrubbing the smell off  
my hands with a pumice stone.

### Fire Tender

From my summer seat on her porch, I watched my grandma's  
cucumber vines climb around the wrought iron,  
their open-eyed yellow flowers,  
their white pupils looking upwards  
as they danced to the lazy syncopation  
of the rusty piped wind chime.

I drank those endless days  
in long swallows of sunshine, green grass and daisies,  
legs scratched and dented from ten-year-old games,  
my teen years something in after school specials.  
Someone told me that time  
is a bottle of wine you keep drinking  
because you like it,  
but when it's gone you can't even walk.

Tonight I sit,  
with my tan legs propped up on glass top table  
staring at the sky as it swallows  
the last pink haze of sun.  
The backyard prairie sprawled before me  
dances to the Phish songs melting out stereo speakers,  
as I sip red wine from round glass,  
letting each swallow of warmth light  
my mind's kindling.

For now I can still recall the faces I love, the names, the dates,  
when I put the glass down.



## Riding With Boys

I swing on a park bench,  
the Fox river slowly sighing by,  
2 o'clock sun finally weaving its way through the haze,  
and watch two kids, their feet perched on rocks  
catch cast after cast of weed bass.

I remember those afternoons  
our feet sank into the  
muddy lip of the shoreline,  
awaiting the murky tug of a bullhead  
or the frightened flash of a sunny.

The sun on the backs of our necks,  
we talked about how Yoda's body disappeared when he died,  
whether your dad would notice the burnout marks in the drive,  
the *Terminator* movie we snuck on your mom's VCR.  
We debated the toughness of the General Lee versus the Knight Rider,  
argued about who would beat 74,550 on Pole Position II first,  
and guessed at how many more 2x4s we could dig out of the construction dumpsters  
to build a bigger bike ramp.

Those summer days  
before puberty knocked all our toys from the shelves,  
all we thought of was fishing,  
and if one of us was strong enough to pull start  
the three wheeler to get back,  
I could wrap my arms around your waist  
and your body was only something to hold on to.

St. B's

I went because I had to,  
spent Sundays in monotone mouthing.  
Around me people stared into nothing  
as we went through the motions:  
Stand, sit, kneel.  
Stand, sit, kneel.  
Between the turning of hymnal pages,  
I swear I could hear God snoring  
along with the old man,  
back bent into the letter C,  
who sat next to me.

I'd peer up at Jesus hanging above the pipe organ,  
his arms spread wide,  
face full of longing, eyes looking into mine, as if  
leaning from his cross to ask for a hug.  
I loved him even when the Father told me  
he died for my sins.  
I wanted the neighbor boy's matchbox cars  
and didn't listen when Dad yelled "Front and Center!"  
His eyes burned into my bent head  
as I chewed communion.

Even when the black dog began tailing me,  
tripping me at the ankles,  
I learned the "Hail Mary" to please my grandmother,  
not knowing what "womb" meant  
until her cancer began to grow there.

After I gave my mother's eulogy  
under the same spread arms of my savior,  
I noticed the sway of green grass,  
the blur of butterfly wings,  
the reach of day lily stems and red fall of maple.

## Tiles

The black dog was just a puppy  
when he'd come calling  
in my 4<sup>th</sup> grade school classroom  
in the middle of math,  
a subject I couldn't get lost in.

He would pad in so quietly  
the teacher didn't see him,  
arriving in the midst of 8 x 7,  
his thick yellow eyes looking for mine.

Taking the pink pastel pass  
dangling from the tag board,  
I'd blink those eyes away  
and flee down the hall,  
my heart pounding,  
sweat coming like a convulsion.  
All while the black dog kept up.

Alone in the bathroom,  
past porcelain sinks  
and mirrors I feared looking into,  
I'd close myself behind a stall door  
and dangle my legs off the toilet seat  
as I counted the tiny squares of institutional tile,  
geometric perfections  
in drab greens, dirty browns, speckled whites,  
until the black dog finally got bored  
and his legs padded away back to where he waited.  
I'd hiss out my breath  
until my chest caved,  
and go back to learning,

always those two yellow eyes  
blinking close behind me.

My dad, the sports fan

wakes before the sun does,  
mind like a full rain gauge,  
and reaches for his glasses while the rest of Wisconsin,  
eyes zigzagging on the backs of eyelids,  
readjust themselves in bed.

He hobbles down the hall, feet shuffling,  
pupils adjusting to the lasting remnants of night,  
his thoughts are the breezes weaving through a wind chime.  
His hand parts the blinds a crack to see the sparrows preparing,  
with chirp and chatter, in the gathering glow of morning.

He settles into his TV seat, eager to hit the go button,  
the sun now a blister of light on the horizon.  
A stack of newspapers, and a bottle of Diet Coke at hand,  
he looks to see what the Bull and the Bear are up to.

He watches the money channel as if it's a Packer game,  
the rise and fall of T-bonds and tech stocks  
like Favre's pass rating. Mr. Dow, Mr. Jones'  
ticker tape lines run continual fifty yard dashes  
across the bottom of this screen.  
My dad called Coach Greenspan an idiot,  
said Bernanke's not much better.  
What was he thinking, lowering the interest rate  
in the red zone?  
My dad knows KO means Coca-Cola,  
knows the price of oil barrel to barrel  
knows Al Michiels play by play  
from the New York Stock Exchange floor.  
He watches the tape tick wondering  
when he should punt, when he should go for it  
on 4<sup>th</sup> and goal.

## Keeper

The river went calm  
on the day of my wedding,  
and the sun, a hot white dot,  
punched through the sky  
for a better view,  
sending angled rays between passing clouds  
as I walked down the grassy aisle.

On a table next to a vase of snapdragons and daisies,  
my mother's eyes,  
glinting in the same kind of light,  
stared from within a picture frame,  
flat as this sheet of paper.  
She sat with me  
on a bench in Disneyworld  
hands in her lap.

When I lose my mind,  
I hope it's not the way Nana did.  
Eyes flat and dead as rocks  
staring up from a pile of melting snow,  
body slumped in a blue velour chair we pointed toward a window,  
her left hand holding right to keep from spinning.

Her mouth was an unbolted door,  
stuck open in winter,  
exhaling her first kiss,  
her baby daughter's face, full of strained carrots,  
the smell of the Atlantic.  
All those things floating away  
in wispy scarves of thought  
and all she could do was watch,  
as I do now recalling my wedding day,  
my mother's picture.

### Summer Saturday Nights

Belly full of brats, hobo-pack potatoes  
and purple Kool-Aid I'd sit watching,  
while humid air clung to my skin  
like a Shopko perfume knock-off,  
and the mosquitoes outnumbered the corn stalks,  
in the farmer's back field.

My parents partied,  
hands holding bottles of sweating Leinie's,  
as neighbors' bodies bounced on the deck to  
the pulse of Otis and the Alligators.

A lightning bug paparazzi,  
flashbulbed butts, popped pictures of the revelers.  
But out back crickets, in full July swing,  
beckoned me with their cheep-cheep beat.  
My step-dad, too busy trying to stay young,  
never noticed me slipping away,  
like a forgotten conversation.

I'd hoist myself up the side of the dog kennel,  
dirty bare feet buried in holes of lattice,  
and swing a leg over the ease trough  
to slither up the rough shingles of my garage  
past my mom's rectangle of window light.  
I'd look for the darkest part of night,  
far away from the corner street light and  
rest my head on roof peak to breathe the warm thick air.

Those nights the wind was merely the smooth, light exhale of sleep,  
rippling the oak leaf canopy bed I sometimes dreamed under.  
The clouds were silver flat flames consuming sky,  
pulled along with tired hands groping for love.  
On the moon, planted high in the sky,  
was the toothy pin-up grin  
of a cheesey cat wandering the night.

I liked to play connect the dots with the stars,  
miniscule white eyes of life looking down  
on me, as if I mattered.

I might stare at one so long my eyes blurred,  
wishing that I was looking into the eyes  
of another blonde haired girl  
snuck out atop a roof somewhere.

### There's More Than One Way to Sing

After everything was finally decided and divided, her Singer was the one thing I wanted.  
It lived in its own desk, hiding inside like the dollar  
you forgot was in the pocket of your jeans until you slip them on again.

We pulled Grandma's memories from the house. That weekend my aunt stole off,  
arms full of brown photos, bent paged bibles, and recipe boxes brimming with cards.  
She left the Singer with either me or Goodwill.

I remember on Sundays my father brought her clothes to mend with their mixture of afflictions.  
Khaki pants with holes in the seat, bent toothed zippers, cords with pulled out pockets.  
Hemming, letting out, fixing, fitting--she gathered them all like scraped kneed kids.

She sewed something for everyone with her Singer.  
Dinner aprons for Grandpa made from K-mart clearance fabric  
to shield his ties from a spaghetti sauce baptism.

My Christmas pajamas always a size too big, molded and v-stitched from flannel,  
mismatched quilt squares sewn straighter than a draftsman's blueprint lines,  
and we can't forget her own polyester pants suits after the 70s disco ball had broken.

I slide open the top drawer to find her tools--  
black and white-headed pins sprouting from a red felt cushion,  
notes in the owner's manual scrawled in her rickety right slant cursive.

And a clear plastic mouth guard box from Dad's football days,  
filled with silver bobbins laced with strings of pink, yellow, green,  
colors she used like Monet.

Now I try to sew a patch on my jeans, my stitches more like stutters  
and keep breaking my thread.  
Her Singer won't wind bobbins for me. I think it misses her.

But it makes for this nice table  
I write my poems on.



### Tending Roses

My grandpa tends his roses Saturday mornings,  
picking lime green aphids from the undersides of leaves,  
smearing them between thumb and forefinger.

His back sweats through the thin sheer fabric  
of a button up K-mart shirt,  
sleeves cut and hemmed a little too high  
so the white line of his arm bobs in and out with the  
bulge of his bicep.

His long fingers rake through the dirt  
collecting rose petals of red, peach, yellow, white.  
His feet tip-toe through those arms of thorns  
in a slow-motion waltz and he points and smiles  
at a bumblebee the size of his thumb  
singing its mellow buzz-saw song  
as it climbs inside pursed lips of pink.  
He swings his leg over the chicken wire fence,  
hands full of petals.

Under my chin he wiggles a yellow one  
until he gets the giggles he wants to hear.  
The petal as soft as a rabbit's ear,  
smooth like water under the long arm of the sun.  
We gather these slivers, one petal at a time,  
their light laughter smell gathering inside us.

After the slap of the screen door we sit on the porch,  
putting our petals in brown paper sacks to dry,  
watching morning's business open for the day.  
We drink glasses of cold water,  
our thoughts floating like the ice cubes.

My world those Saturdays was the calluses on his hands,  
thick layers of motion where skin met trowel,  
traveling through dirt,  
as we tended roses.

# Yellow Letters

--an imitation of "Birch Bark" by Jim Daniels

I was the girl who wrote my grandpa letters  
addressed to heaven  
on pieces of yellow paper  
and kept them in a shoe box under my bed  
where I kept anything else  
I was trying to get rid of  
so people wouldn't see how messy I was  
for a thirteen-year-old.

I would like those years back—  
a rare weekend when my mom went away  
even if I cried for hours seeing her  
back out of my grandpa's driveway.  
I wouldn't let him close to me this time  
just to see him wither away two years later—  
the yellow face, the sunken eyes,  
remembering the sleepy mornings  
of creamy coffee and rose bush pruning.  
Lung fulls of his comfort smell,  
Kentucky mints and pipe tobacco.  
His smile a star I could get lost in.

The oxymoron, I was  
at his funeral laughing and joking  
until the tears ran down my face  
while the others cried their own kind of tears.  
From around the corner I glimpsed my uncle  
opening the lid on a coffin that should've remained closed.  
A flash bulb popped and I saw that shell of a body,  
His smile finally emancipated.  
My star now something I had to see  
planted in the night sky.

\*\*\*\*\*

Those days after the divorce,  
My grandpa took me in, tried to teach me how to play again,  
to smile again, became my new dad  
while I sat, frantic face buried in the crook of  
his couch, knowing my mom was leaving me too  
when in a million years I knew she never would.

I flinched and wailed  
while he sat waiting, joke in tow  
until my sniffles turned to giggles  
and he pulled me into the yard for a game of catch,  
our love the slap of a ball in a glove.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the shoe box under her bed  
those yellow letters saved  
by the girl buried in the couch—  
a love she could catch like a baseball,  
and write in penciled cursive like a cluttered girl  
to relive a smile from her grandfather,  
for her alone.

7 years ago  
--for you

Death came quietly  
as a blackbird,  
its claws clicking softly against the sterile tiles,  
a faint sound that April day,  
drowned out by sleet pelting the hospice window.

In that room  
your thin body slowly sank  
under the weight of a white sheet,  
your shrinking eyelids beginning their blank eclipse.

I know you tried to escape it,  
like the dead doe I passed in a ditch this spring,  
pale brown face knotted within a wire fence,  
her eyes picked clean by blackbirds,  
hollow sockets coated with black saliva.  
I doubled back to see her back leg broken,  
backward and bent,  
from pushing hard against the thawing ground  
trying to break free.

How long until those frantic eyes flickered out?

Around you that day  
the black wings rustled,  
flitting feathers in the dim room,  
within the quiet whirl of recycled air.

I know you wished them gone,  
but blackbirds are best at waiting;  
they have nothing else to do.

*DAY TO DAY OPERATIONS*

### Sanctity of Five Minutes

saved at the end of my prep  
and I pad down to the lounge  
to sit in a plaid chair  
that hasn't moved since 1975.  
The arms are worn smooth of stain  
from the many before me,  
who pushed themselves up  
when the bell rings that splits our days  
into eight periods.

My ideas for a poem  
are like shirt sleeves trying to break free  
from brambles.  
My eyes wander my place—  
The lounge is the old library,  
slapped upon it like a crooked bumper sticker.  
Old walls clad in oak inlay paneling,  
routered and stained by craftsmans' hands.  
The ceiling is a geometric puzzle  
of squares and hexagons  
except where a few fell out.  
Above my head two tiles next to one another are missing.  
I wonder if they leapt together or if they hit anyone?  
Can write a poem about it?

I'm still searching for the go button,  
the fuel for my pencil,  
as the second hand sweeps another circle  
closer to my next batch of sophomores,  
so I look out the window and begin—

“Sunlight laughs today,  
whizzing in through the panes of dirty glass  
glancing off my green cotton knee,  
and bounding up my arm to curl up like a cat  
on my chest.  
How I love the feel of it,  
like warm water flooding through fingers...  
or the way the denim of creased jeans feel  
right out of the dryer...  
I want to jump into these pools of light permanently  
this safety light that never turns off...”  
And then the bell rings,  
and my thoughts are broken in half like a pencil.

Calgon, Take Me Away:  
 --High School Hall Duty Part 1

When a short woman erupts through the door,  
 ratty hair blown out by too many  
 helmetless Harley rides,  
 jeans painted on her legs with  
 a black Crayola from the 80s,  
 I say hello and get a grunt.  
 She whisks her whisky smell by,  
 and heads for the office.  
 Between nicotine stained teeth  
 she clenches her angry mission  
 like a denim swatch  
 ripped from the seat  
 of a cheating husband's jeans.

Swallowing assumptions away with my coffee,  
 I flip my pencil,  
 and watch Wisconsin high school students shuffle by  
 wearing t-shirts announcing  
 "Weenie Roasts at Joe's Surf Shop"  
 and "AF Beach Party, since 1972,"  
 and I'm rolling my eyes at "Let's pitch a tent"  
 when she comes out,  
 feet stomping invisible ants coming out of the cracks in the floor tile,  
 eyes glaring at her suspended son strutting down the hall,  
 his book crammed with papers under one lean arm.

It's him—  
 The kid who throws pennies,  
 plastic caps, and broken pencils  
 down my hall each day when I kick him out of class.

The kid who makes fart noises during vocabulary tests  
 while other students grit their teeth.  
 The kid who laughs during an Anne Frank video,  
 who jams pens in the bubbler spigot,  
 clogs paper in the urinal drain,  
 draws penises on the blackboard—  
 a sliver under the school's fingernail.



While his mom swears  
about her tax dollars,  
the lazy teachers,  
authoritative assholes,  
and how she'll home-school him,  
I laugh the kind of laugh  
that escapes sometimes during  
the nightly news,  
because she's swearing at us,  
the ones forced to baby-sit her teenaged child  
the government has ordered us not to leave behind.

What are you going to do  
-an imitation of Jim Daniels' "What I Did"

What are you going to do  
when a student you've had for years,  
a good kid,  
a kid who is all giggles and smiles,  
comes to you after school  
head down,  
face buried within brown bangs and a messy ponytail.

What are you going to do  
when she asks you what happens  
when an adult has to report  
something bad about a student.  
A vague something—  
and she lifts her head  
brown eyes searching yours.

What are you going to do  
when she looks back down,  
and chews her thumbnail.  
Who do they tell?  
Will they tell my parents?  
The vague something still  
floats in the air like a cloud  
of black dust.

What are you going to do  
when she tells you she has been  
looking at a bottle of pills  
and wondering if two is enough  
or if maybe the whole bottle will do the trick.  
Her mom thinks she's kidding  
and her dad just yells.

What are you going to do  
when you don't want to hear her.  
She's smart, she's got friends,  
she's got everything going for her.  
She's barely pushed the play  
button for the story of her life.

What are you going to do  
when you see yourself,  
another scared little girl  
who was falling too,  
until she started to write poetry  
locked in her room.

What are you going to do  
to help this girl who is  
being introduced to the black dog  
following her everywhere now,  
leaving his tracks, his hair,  
his yellow eye light  
in every room  
in every breath.

What are you going to do  
but offer her a shoulder  
and tell her you'll take her  
to the counselor tomorrow.  
You'll give her a ride home and  
tell her to keep her chin up  
as the brace that holds your own up  
bends a little more.

Welcome to MHS...please don't shoot  
 --High School Hall Duty Part 2

Outside it's carbon paper grey.  
 The trees halt on their pop-go-the-leaves  
 attempt toward spring.  
 One large oak moves as if an invisible  
 child is climbing up the middle,  
 thighs gripping bark, hands rocking branches.

Students file slowly by scuffing their shoes,  
 as if they might fall off the earth,  
 bodies, tiles, feet, sandals sucked up in a tornadic swirl.  
 Boys wear pink shirts this year,  
 Abercrombie's new color,  
 to match the pink tanning bed bellies  
 peeking from the girls' no-man's land--  
 the area where pants and shirts must touch or girls are sent home.

Outside the tree still shakes,  
 now along with the flutter of my eyelids  
 when a Latina mother comes in carrying a pair of jeans,  
 her face lost among the old tiles and doorway.  
 I blow the dust off my Spanish-  
*Oficina es en...no...el.....umm..*  
 She just smiles,  
 so I point and show, as is my duty,

and sit back down looking like a sigh,  
 body bent like those branches.  
 Forty-six minutes to go.  
 My grading pile beckons with inky blue eyes.  
 At least I have a window.

### Reminder: A Sestina

An unexpected announcement came over the intercom today,  
interrupting the end of my English class with its electronic nasal voice:  
“All teachers meet in the auditorium at the beginning of the lunch hour.”  
My sophomores barely noticed and packed up their things, ready to leave.  
But I knew something was wrong, a red flag meeting like this.  
The possibilities began to play through my mind.

My curiosity rose with every thud in my chest. I didn't mind  
missing part of my lunch, I knew this news was going to change my day.  
The blue chaired auditorium was a somber scene, each teacher's face frozen, this  
day about to be broken. Our principal peered out at us, his steady voice  
spoke. Nena...exchange student...dead...apparent natural causes. We took our leave  
and got the same news on a sheet I put in my pocket to read to my students in an hour.

As I walked, I saw the host family picking up the phone during that 8 o'clock hour.  
A ringing in Denmark. The news must have caused Nena's father to lose his mind.  
He left his daughter in the care of the USA only to hear she'd taken her final leave.  
Did he imagine something so awful would greet him when he woke up today?  
I could see him drop the phone and remembered having to be that kind of voice  
delivering death news. The caller, the father, the daughter, me. No one deserved this.

All during lunch, that paper dug into my leg, trying to eat through my pocket—this  
bombshell of info the students didn't know, until I would drop it during sixth hour.  
In Creative Writing they sat. Quieting them down, I told them in a trembling voice  
that a student they knew was dead. Mouths agape, they let it settle into their minds.  
Some knew her from a class. Some had even wondered where she was today.  
The school had set up a grieving room and one of my sniffling students decided to leave.

I was told to keep things normal. We practiced writing settings until it was time to leave  
As the kids trickled out of my room, I tried not to think about this--  
Her young face, innocent, a life uncompleted--all this invading my day.  
I had already had my share of these times, these events, these hours.  
All of this coming back now, fresh and staining my mind.  
I remembered making my phone call, and hearing my dad's silent voice,

surprised on the other end of the line while my blathering unfocused voice explained the findings and the verdict. I'd had to leave him with the same feeling. Such an unjust seed I'd had to plant in his mind, festering and sweltering like the father in Denmark during this time, this unimaginable, unbelievable, unnecessary, terrible hour that felt just like what I'd had to deal with, painted fresh for today.

Today a principal's voice brought to life  
this hour once again a reality of life that continues to leave  
this mind full of grief.

## On Teaching Poetry

When I hand out photocopied packets of poetry  
to my high school students,  
I am blasted with sighs  
that could put out forest fires,  
cause tides to shift,  
and part the seas with windy grief.

I toss them bits of Plath,  
Merriam, and Sandburg,  
whole pieces of Frost,  
splashes of cummings,  
the same poets who  
whispered in my ears,  
gently tugged at my pant leg,  
guided me by my fingertips when I was young  
and weeding through the empty aisle of the 800 section.  
Within yellowed pages and musty smells  
I read between those faded black lines  
and found the poems that spoke my name.

At fourteen I began to write my own,  
with perfect cursive in a lockable red notebook  
because my English teacher told us  
a blank paper always listened and a pen was like a shovel  
that could help clear our cluttered minds.  
I ran out of ink days later.

Now I peer out from behind my podium and see them  
studying poems read  
at presidential inaugurations and  
commencement ceremonies,  
words that have won the Pulitzer.

“Why does Plath compare...”  
“What does ‘pity this busy monster, manunkind’...”  
“What about the title ‘Size and Sheer Will’...”  
I poke at their minds a bit to help them find  
the heartbeat of each piece,  
praying for discussion.

More sighs, body shifting, pages flipping,  
and finally one hand sneaks up.  
“How much do poets make anyways?”  
My turn to sigh.  
“Writing a poem is kind of like breathing,” I answer.  
You don’t get paid for things like that.”  
Twenty-eight heads jerk up from packets  
to the hard stare of my green eyes,  
This kid’s left eye brow is raised high enough to match his smile.

Billy Collins was right about teaching poetry,  
all people want to do is beat a confession  
out of poor poems tied to chairs.

For a few seconds there is silence  
and then twenty-eight sets of hands  
go back to paging through poems.  
I start digging through new lesson plans until I hear  
the girl in the corner’s pen scratching  
across the blank pages of her own red notebook,  
and then I stop.



### An Ode to Anticipating Autobiographical Incident Essays

It's Friday morning  
and twenty-five futures type  
in neat rows atop a scuffed hardwood floor  
that's seen 2000 times as many futures pass  
in and out of its paneled doors.

They type their lives in clicks and taps,  
the sound of percolating thoughts  
steady and constant like the in/out breath  
of someone sleeping a dream.  
Their ideas tick along as the second hand sweeps its  
sixty second circle behind me on the wall.

On white rectangular screens,  
one black Times New Roman letter at a time,  
words appear faster than raindrops on dry pavement.  
Their ideas flow like the colors in woven rag rugs,  
and branch out like the streets they traveled to get here.

I say, "Record a memory with a lesson learned,"  
and walk around to see screens filled with first boyfriends,  
prank stalker calls,  
stolen garden gnomes.  
One vandalized picnic tables with swear words,  
another placed 100 orange caution flags in a friend's front yard.  
They show me the hiding spots parents never catch,  
where only silent voices play tag  
and this time I get to be "it"  
and chase them all down.

Janny Brandes-Brilleslijper  
-a holocaust survivor

I tell my students  
we will watch a movie about Anne  
and after I shut off the lights,  
some of my sophomores go to sleep,  
their heads disappearing  
like candle flames blown out  
one at a time.

In snippets Janny tells her story.  
and she looks like my great-grandmother  
speaking from watery old eyes,  
her pupils like stones imbedded  
in the bottom of a river,  
her wrinkles the sways of sand  
deep within the stream bed.

Janny's slow voice,  
rough like the grooves on a rasp,  
speaks in a thick language  
I only understand by her inflection,  
her pauses.

Subtitles below her face,  
glow white against the darkness—  
Finally caught by Gestapo,  
the Franks awaited their fate.  
Anne and the others welcomed fresh air,  
until the camps gave them all scabies  
and lice, beatings.

Janny spoke and I listened,  
looking up over more sleeping sophomores.  
And like a spool of kite string  
her story unravels slowly.  
Dead bodies in piles—  
she tried to shut the eyes,  
stomach searing with hunger,  
flesh to trade...  
and she stops,  
says “no—  
no more.”

But her words can't keep  
alive the story of millions  
when it falls silent,  
silent as ashes,  
around the bodies of our sleeping children.

### Wannabee Gangsta

Some of the boys  
wear baggy jeans at half mast,  
crotch parallel with knees,  
red print boxers flaring  
like flags. They walk with a strut,  
their left hands acting as belts.  
They point their pelvises forward,  
as if their privates are divining rods  
sniffing out sustenance.

Shady, Biggie, Tupac  
Cash Money, Scarface,  
Lil this or that.  
XXXL t-shirts on 14 years olds  
trying to drown themselves  
in instant adulthood.

Some of the girls flock to them,  
arms locked around the waists of these boys  
who flaunt them like stolen Ipods.  
They linger in the hall after passing time,  
bodies leaning together against lockers.  
The hickies branded into their necks have barely faded  
when these girls are dropped like candy wrappers  
as these boys reach for their next sweet.

They don't want to learn  
what we have to offer.  
They keep the halls for hoods up,  
handshakes, and hustling Adderall,  
The street corner for smoking  
during double lunch, cops slowly patrolling by.  
Desktops are for shutting bleary eyes,  
as shaved heads sleep on sweatshirts smelling  
of burnt rope.

For awhile they will make more money than I do  
until, like the crushed embers of a their cigarettes  
they burn away.

### Day to Day Operations

Today in a windowless study hall classroom,  
a student asked me  
if the equator went  
all the way  
around the earth.  
When I told her it was a dotted line,  
she believed me.

Yesterday, a boy ducked his head in my room  
during seven minute passing  
to ask if he had a uterus.  
I said I really hoped not.

Last week the “Phantom Pooper”  
squeezed his butt  
between the second floor railings,  
pants dropped,  
and shot a perfect brown bomb  
two stories down to splat  
like putrid pudding  
on the institutional tile below.

A girl asked me why we have books.  
One boy asked who wrote *The Diary of Anne Frank*.  
Another asked if the hard cyst-like lump jutting from his forearm  
was from jacking off too much.

On 4/20 some of my students wore green shirts,  
green shorts and green socks  
to show their support of pot.  
And I had to laugh like you do sometimes during church,  
at these green beacons of pro-bud,  
because at least for once they cared about something.

The terror alert has been stuck on orange  
longer than the air conditioning has been broken in this school.  
A crazy kid killed 32 people in Virginia,  
the planet's warming faster than a boy groping cleavage  
but a girl tells me she'd vote for Bush  
because he looks like her grandpa.

### An Elegy to Saint Kim

You told me you signed *Kimberly* on your papers,  
because you were worth all the syllables,  
and you were the first student  
who could finish my sentences about similes  
eagerly sought the stress marks in words and  
and couldn't wait to try a sonnet.  
And the words you wrote  
in that rounded print  
really were worth every syllable  
that tumbled out the end of your pen  
to prance around the page  
and settle all in the right order  
that I got to just read,  
instead of halting for the stop start of pen.  
Your twin brother was a burnout,  
but you boasted that he was the artist,  
and you were the writer,  
two perfect halves of the your gypsy heritage.  
You worked on your indie  
during that exchange year in Mexico,  
emailing poems about saints,  
crucifixes, the Virgin Mother  
until your computer broke.

My Creative Writing II class  
was an hour you told me you lived for,  
as you praised the title of our school publication,  
*The Basket-Case of Serendipity*,  
saying writers go a little crazy sometimes  
and find a way to cope in strange places.  
But I didn't recognize the growls of the black dog  
you left outside in the hall to wait for you every day  
until you came to class full of bruises  
that seemed to spread each day  
like water from a spigot you didn't want to shut off  
even when the puddles were up to your ankles.  
I asked you what was wrong,  
sent notes to Guidance you laughed off,  
talked with your friends.

When they sent you away for a week  
I hoped for the best,  
and a month later  
you stood proudly on a stage  
wearing a white gown and smiling  
as the audience listened to the graduation speech you wrote.

The last time I saw you,  
you came back to visit after school one day,  
you were wearing trip pants and thick eyeliner,  
a Manson shirt with fishnet sleeves.  
All black.  
You danced through the halls with a Goth boy,  
and told me you were taking a semester off  
when they agreed to hold your scholarship spot.  
I told you, "Don't forget to write..."  
and you smiled.

A month later, when they told me you killed yourself  
I heard every syllable in slow motion.  
And when I left your funeral today  
to rusty clouds and a pink sky goodbye,  
I wondered how you would have written this scene.



## On Grading Poetry

For years now I've been throwing myself  
into the scribbles of sixteen-somethings—

the Hallmark light verse of “when I see you, my heart soars...”  
Contrived rhyme like “down to the bone I feel so alone, I want to throw a stone.”  
Stupid similes: “happiness is like the grass stain on your favorite white t-shirt,”  
and clichéd metaphors like “my love is a flower, the scent my desire.”

I just see between those lines  
where I want to write my own words.  
or just erase theirs  
but instead I leave comments  
and write a score on a paper  
that a first glance of grade  
will get thrown away anyway.

But my mousy haired girls, cuts on their arms  
and black-clothed boys with painted black fingernails  
write only pain in the absence of light.  
So much they feel now,  
so much they embrace the darkness,  
the hate, the rage,  
like a new toy they can't control.  
Theirs is a life that finally bites back  
after years of snack-packs and Pokémon,  
and their words come to me  
etched hard into spirals,  
the murmurs of blackness leaking from their ink.

Where will their words be when I am through?  
I wish I didn't have to write down a score on their papers,  
letters labeling and measuring what they won't feel in a few years  
but now circles their world like buzzards.

“Teenage angst has paid off well...”  
but it means nothing if I stop those pens for good.

## Ode to my Pencil

One #2 pencil  
made in China for School Select,  
I imagine packaged in a box of 12,  
purchased hastily and thrown into a blue plastic cart.  
In the check out aisle a mom yells at her cluster of kids  
as they reach wanting fingers toward chocolate,  
but she's already spent the rumpled dollars  
left in her pocket from yesterday's last call at JJ's.

Her son wrote nothing with it really—  
His name on blank assignments he'd leave on the floor,  
and "Turn to page 69" on the insides of books.  
In study hall he picked off the eraser as if it was a zit,  
flicking the pink rubber pellet across the room.  
Later he smashed its silver top against a table leg  
making it sharp enough to etch the word *drugs*.  
He finished his work by rubbing its sides against a desk,  
and the paint, yellow like the school bus he rode on,  
flecked off like snow.  
When the bell rang he let it fall  
like a cigarette butt on smoker's corner.

Every day at 3PM  
an immigrant lady begins to mop for minimum wage,  
building her new life one sweep at a time.  
Her dust piles fill with candy wrappers,  
balls of lint, pens and papers--  
from too many students in one small space.

When I walk out of my school at six, feet shuffling,  
she's sweeping the steps, making another pile.  
I smile, say excuse me, weave through,  
but stop when I see this pencil.  
It needs to be sharpened, but has the six angled sides I love.  
My hand reaches down, saving it from the dirt,  
and I slip it into the silver spirals of my notebook.

And now it finally gets to write, this.

*13 WAYS TO LOOK AT THE SUN*

### Simply Human

Her world is smeared with grey today  
as clouds slither along like the wet slide of the snail.  
On top of her city the murky sky hangs  
like wet wool.  
She drives to work,  
the two tail lights ahead are like dying embers.  
The sky drizzles sweat,  
preparing to slide, breathless,  
into the deadness of winter freeze.  
Trees unfrocked,  
her mind is locked  
on brown grass, broken and bent,  
stop lights bleeding into wet pavement.

This December day presses in  
as if stuck under a fat thumb,  
nail whitening as the blood squeezes out.

Above a field behind a high school  
a gaggle of geese lands  
as if giant hands had cupped these birds like pebbles  
and in the parting of palms gently spread them on to the ground.

She watches as more come,  
gradually descending,  
wings curved like umbrella tops,  
lower and lower,  
gliding like pieces of paper falling slowly from a desk top.  
Is this what the Wright brothers studied,  
pencils poised in hands?

A flock of planes with  
landing gear legs,  
these geese are pros,  
“Blue Angels,”  
aware of each other’s place  
as their webbed footed brakes  
try to slow down the world.

They waddle on the wet grass,  
bills nudging the earth.  
Why did they choose this place to rest,  
the middle of a city?  
She does not know,  
but her own world brakes for a moment,  
and she sees inside the world's head cold,  
And now she can wade through the day,  
her mind calm as mist,  
blank as the sky.

## 13 Ways to Look at the Sun

### I

The sun has died for today.  
Her blood seeps into a horizon of ocean blue,  
tainting the edges of the sky a watery crimson.

### II

Today I thought the sun would not come up,  
but when she did, she grabbed the night,  
crunched it into a little ball,  
and threw it into a corner.

### III

Summer's last sun and autumn's incoming coolness  
are swirled together by wind's stir stick.  
She nervously plays with my hair, the chime above, and the pages of this book...

### IV

You don't notice how fast she glides across the sky.  
In the expanse of time it took me to write this, she is gone,  
changing into polka-dot pajamas behind her hazy purple screen,  
a neon splotch.  
And now she pokes through to see if anyone's looking.

### V

She is the end of my father's cigarette,  
a red eye winking,  
watching the damage done.  
As he breathes in and out,  
her red eye stares.

### VI

Her fiery arms push through the branches of my tree,  
here on the outskirts of the backfield the farmer is selling off.  
What kind of price do you put on a view?

### VII

Smokey sun savior.  
A stabbing on the horizon.  
Golden glint of steel,  
I watch her being slowly devoured by pink-lipped clouds

**VIII**

Out my plane window the sun splashes  
off the chrome wing,  
making a mini ball of eye piercing, retina slapping, star shine.

**IX**

Not a hopeful blemish in the sky deters this  
ash grey day.  
The sun is dead.

**X**

Winter's morning sun springs from a snowy horizon and  
a million flash bulbs pop in a wave,  
exploding across this perfect sand-like carpet of white.

**XI**

The sunrays play hopscotch off the tops of parked cars.  
Each roof gathers the rays into one concentrated, blinding glint of whiteness.  
Mini suns, these balls of light stretch as far as my eyes can see.

**XII**

A frosty white film on all horizons.  
My car enveloped in foam a top a bridge one morning,  
when the heavens opened up to her light—mesmerizing angelic—  
she captured and coddled us travelers  
in brilliant all-wellness.

**XIII**

She's the twinkle in the eye of life,  
this golden girl in golden garments  
waltzing over the world.

### Elegy to My Summer Writing Spot

It's nights like these like friends forever leaving  
that are so hard to say goodbye to, let go of.  
So many things I've written  
from this stoop of cool cement,  
rough as a craftsman's hands.  
My light bulb toes curl upon it for the last  
night write of fall.  
The words come like raindrops in spring,  
quickly covering this page and the next  
until my body feels clean.

Even the cat stays out tonight.  
Body a rectangle of charcoal fleece,  
green eyes on the dying spirea,  
his pupils the size of dimes,  
his tail curled into a J  
until his cheek finds my outstretched hand  
and the rectangle becomes an ellipse  
poised for a rubdown.  
His hind leg sticks out,  
white paw pointing like a compass needle,  
to where in the distance, a motorcycle revs its engine.  
The wind swings on the chimes' pendulum,  
whooshing through an evening I'd like to keep  
in a jar on the counter,  
a clear glass delight  
to open some clotted January night  
when it hurts to keep my eyes open.



## Crumbs

On a cool marble slab under the sunshine of an Indiana day  
 a family parks a few steps down, ready for the parade,  
 carrying their lives in blue Wal-Mart bags.  
 Two women, stomachs ringed with baby fat,  
 hair the color of tobacco juice,  
 pull the dirty elbowed arm  
 of a boy wearing only a diaper,  
 the yellowing center drooping between his knees like a soggy tennis ball.  
 They line up in front of us,  
 a bin of laundry out to dry.

Their kids crawl around on old sheets,  
 crusts of snot under their noses,  
 nappy hair, mismatched shoes.  
 One's grubby hand grabs at gum  
 wedged under a soldier statue.  
 Another throws rocks at perched pigeons.  
 Laughing and pushing, these siblings swirl like  
 the swear words seeping from between the gritted teeth  
 of their young mothers, who make lunch for their  
 children on pieces of dented white bread ripped in two,  
 spreading the peanut butter with dirty-nailed fingers,  
 switching only to drag on a cigarette they pass.

We listen and we watch.  
 These women's voices are pitchers of vinegar.  
 Before long the smallest kid gets a slap for smiling at me  
 as the others drop crusts, candy wrappers, and butts.  
 These kids are like the crumbs  
 left behind for the pigeons.

An Ode to a Summer Night (a.k.a. Happiness)

Summer's eve cuddles the night's cooler air,  
lulling the day to sleep, dropping its heat lazily.  
The crickets chirp in a symphony of metronomic rhythm,  
and one splits off into a short-lived sporadic solo.  
Un-named insects happily glide  
on a collision course with my porch light named destiny.

I sit on the cement step of the front porch,  
my writing spot,  
the best seat out of the house.  
A lone mosquito investigates my leg  
until my pen makes a swoop for it.  
Next to me, my pepper plants  
proudly offer their tiny unready fruits.  
Green and curvy, the chilies grow.  
Clusters of yellow daylilies trumpet their mouths toward the drowsy sun,  
all tucked in to her bed of pink cotton clouds.  
Below me the tiny garden gnome is entrapped in a spider's spindles--

And I, barefoot and mellow,  
see the tan, perfectly round moon  
smoldering above the rooftops,  
rising slowly, preparing for its night watch.  
My uplifted eyes devour another example  
of nature's eye candy.  
With crystalline eyes, a few sleepy stars peak down  
and rub the galaxies from their eyes.

When my own eyes shut,  
I let the words dance together in my head,  
mixing and matching  
until they explode out the end of my pen,  
all in the right order.  
and only the constant intrusive humbuzz of the highway  
bellowing in the distance  
reminds me I'm not in heaven.

## Hope

Outside, the fog sprawls out like a seal,  
and there's a cold in my bones,  
like the remnants of a nightmare  
I can't seem to shake off.  
This day has nothing special to offer  
and I can sense the darkness waiting to seep in.

Paper mill smoke stacks  
exhale their breath from round mouths,  
feeding the fog  
our second hand smoke,  
white like milk.  
The remnants of river ice I see floating below,  
broken and jagged-  
are giant puzzle pieces shrinking  
in this early January thaw.

Yet above this smoky darkness,  
concealed by a crust of clouds,  
is a sky of the bluest eye kind,  
and a sun that shines an inextinguishable light.

Life in a Northern Town  
--Camping at Rib Mountain State Park

The city below  
spots and speckles the dark landscape  
in foggy white diamonds.

I watch the fire lick and tickle  
the underbelly of moldy mis-cut hardwood  
scrap from someone's kitchen floor.

Rusty round ring circles the tongues of orange,  
breathes it back, red and blue colliding  
like a melting wax waterfall.

Out on the highway, an invisible hand  
pulls the cars along  
in a string of dirty pearls.

All this while the wind whispers through the pines.  
Wish they'd let me in on my secret.  
Let the door to the rabbit cage of my heart be opened.

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--For a book in the travel section

On one page, the men in green, arm and arm,  
lean faces, black beards, scraggly hair,  
like their counterparts who stayed safe  
during a time that pulled out  
of a socket, an electrical cord,  
tangled and frayed,  
the knot in the middle,  
only tightening as each side pulled.

On another page, thousands of names,  
block letters branded into granite,  
black as bamboo smoke.

In a library corner chair,  
my hands shake as I turn the pages,  
reading their letters in handwritten blue ink.  
Smelling the roses left by high school sweethearts,  
now married with other men's kids.  
A Purple Heart, a stuffed bear,  
so many young faces,  
crew cuts and caps  
in black and white.  
A blonde boy in shorts kissing a name  
and I am sorry.

## Why I'm Probably Going to Hell

Boxy car sprouting Jehovah's Witnesses  
 parks near my drive one June day.  
 Tag teaming for God,  
 two come out to talk,  
 bibles in hand.  
 to spread the word,  
 smooth as creamy peanut butter  
 across bumpy bread.

A psalm she reads to me and after—  
 "Why is there wickedness in the world?"  
 "Hasn't there always been?" I say.  
 "Yes, but it's getting worse."  
 and at home I bet she posts a chart  
 on minorities, divorce, gay sex.

She leans in close  
 so I can see the pockets in her acne scarred face,  
 pages to her place,  
 and reads something that's kept groups fighting  
 for all these years.  
 Her words as thin as the bible pages  
 she clutches so desperately between her fingers  
 while the winds try so hard to flip them.

I take her *Watchtower*, her *Awake*.  
 She tells me her name is Diane  
 and she'll be back sometime  
 to see what I thought of them.

I thank her and smile,  
 (at least they are the polite kind),  
 and go off on my run;  
 I almost ask her to come  
 to see my god floating  
 in the air I kick up  
 when my soul hits the pavement.

### Missing You, Again

Next to a river I watch seagulls circle down,  
lower and lower,  
like pennies in a funnel bank  
only to soar up before they hit the water  
rippling alive in blacks and whites.  
Yellow fire glints  
when lamp post light  
goes for a swim.  
A duck rudders through,  
dragging a bill  
across this dark mattress  
I just want to curl up on  
and sleep.

Above a dam  
the rising moon,  
a dissolving aspirin  
plugged into the hole in the sky  
keeps the blue from leaking away.

A white cement bridge  
bends to match the curve of the earth.  
It carries cars over the gush of water,  
flowing as fast as children  
running through metal doors after school.

The water wavers in the shadow of a telephone pole  
a line of noisy static pushing toward me,  
a life line I'm too far away to grasp.

A seagull lands atop a factory's roof  
tucking in its white wings,  
filing feathers within folds  
of grey side pockets.

Sadness,  
thick like my dead mother's sweater,  
layers of woven yarn linked together  
forever folded in the bottom of a cardboard box  
on a basement shelf.

I can't set myself to throw it out.



### Why History Repeats Itself

Tall spears of grass,  
pointy greens,  
call to my cat  
in little earthy voices,  
and he presses his grey striped self  
against my screen door.  
And when he stands up like a prairie dog,  
flashing an underbelly of white,  
I harness him into the earliness of  
April's spring and tie him to the porch post.  
So eager to get into the lawn,  
he runs through the brown tinder of a spirea  
sleeping in until May  
and I extract his tangle and toss him  
into the lush spoils of Winter's death,  
his face burying in the moist stalks  
that he devours like a hairy little vacuum.  
Crab grass, Kentucky Blue—they are all the same  
eaten whole and swallowed.  
He rips out grass like kids do  
sheets of notebook paper on the last day of school.

When his stomach makes popping sounds,  
a hiccupping Vesuvius,  
he continues his search for green  
and only my scold of no saves a budding tulip.  
He turns and pads around the cement sidewalk,  
his body lurching with the unseen force wanting out,  
until he stops to let it come  
a geyser of green—  
I should've named him "Old Faithful."  
The grass is still intact,  
barely bitten,  
and I wish there were a way to put it back.  
That doesn't seem to be how it works.  
My cat now empty, steps over his mess,  
spying another perfect stem  
and he stretches his leash towards it,  
his voice mewing for more.

## Failure

The wind finally took a day off  
and the river in front, a plate glass,  
only breaks for a second to receive the expanding rings  
of a carp's surfacing flop and the rapid ruddering of a green headed duck.

Behind me the lazy June air,  
sopping with humidity,  
is occasionally punctuated  
with the fwip whap slap of shoe rubber on pavement.  
Below my feet, speckled with mother's first flower,  
is grass gone to seed.  
Across the water trees hug the shoreline,  
a jagged line of leaves drawn in solid green across my horizon.  
Seagulls float in the distance like tiny toy boats.

And finally, off to my right,  
a silver cannon, flecked with rust.  
I watch kids climbing on it to pose for a picture  
and I have to look away.

### Avenue to the Afterworld

The snow falls,  
illuminated by yellow yard light.  
Frantic flakes zig and zag,  
jockeying for position  
on a Wisconsin night.

Some are slow, like dust settling in an empty room;  
some fast, speeding down as if thrown from the sky,  
weaving between the slowpokes.  
Some swirl up and down  
to match the agitation in my cat's tail  
as he sits next to me.  
I know some melt before they hit the ground.

Suddenly, one clings to my window,  
a white asterisk,  
a tiny dusty thumbprint,  
a crystalline window cling  
peering into this room  
with an icy eye.

And then  
before we can shake hands properly  
it is whisked away by wind's hand,  
a teacher tugging a child,  
and it joins the others  
in the fast paced dance  
I wish I knew the name of.

When I sit back and let my eyes blur,  
each flake becomes a line—  
an avenue to the afterworld,  
white souls streaming  
a million a second,  
strands of life combed out before me,  
zooming towards the light,  
and I imagine that is what it was like for you  
when you left this world.

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