

# TEACH. WRITE.

## A WRITING TEACHERS' LITERARY JOURNAL



FALL/WINTER 2020

EDITED BY KATIE WINKLER

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A Writing Teachers' Literary Journal

Fall/Winter 2020

Katie Winkler~Editor

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## Finding Space

The world quieted last March. We were advised to stay home and catch up on Netflix queues or perfect our sourdough starters or finish that knitting project we began seven years ago. Initially, the quiet had only minor intrusions: a droning of the dishwasher and the late winter wind in the trees.

At some point, and it's hard to put a finger on exactly when, the hum of the noisier electronics started pushing in. We did our best to limit screen time, finishing writing projects and poking around what was sure to be "the best garden yet" (it was not). But work piled up, tasks became digitized, and the world went virtual.

I've taught fully online courses before and, in grad school, worked with a tech team in a medical billing office. I'm no stranger to technology. The resources suddenly multiplied, though, and I had to learn entirely new programs that were, admittedly, well-suited for teaching online. Additionally, my peaceful home workspace became cramped as my husband's job went remote and my kids ran feral through the house. (My six-year-old even said as much when I tried to brush her hair: "I like to be feral." Guess I used that word too often.) The work hours I'd thrived with gone, I was often up late into the night grading essays and answering emails, taking advantage of that sacred midnight silence.

My phone started becoming more and more necessary, an easy device to answer messages that came in at all hours (from my students who were also revamping their work routines). Sometimes, I found myself scrolling mindlessly. I'd mean to answer an email or return a phone call from a long-distance friend and would somehow end up researching bread machines and chicken coops. I'd get lost in the wormhole of the

internet and forget, even if momentarily, the anxiety I felt about the pandemic raging across the nation.

When fall semester began, I was ready for my courses. I'd been teaching fully online in the summer and felt comfortable enough with the technology. Virtual public school, however, proved far more difficult. My new role involved monitoring emails, uploading a variety of work to a digital workspace, and general tech and emotional support to a first grader now expected in front of a computer four hours a day. Her homework baffled me, mainly because I wasn't always present when it was explained, and I was expected to help while missing key components of the instructions. I was working as an administrative assistant to the most demanding, entitled boss I'd ever had (fitting, since her last name is also Boss). My day was spent in front of screens. I noticed one evening, as I binge-watched a TV series, that I had zero interest in the plotline. I didn't care about any of the characters. The streaming service asked me if I was still watching. I was supposed to be decompressing from the day, relaxing, but my nerves were on edge. I shut the television off and went to bed.

The next day, my husband took the kids out hiking and I had the house to myself. I ran a few loads of laundry, caught up on emails, and vacuumed the house. Feeling productive, I decided to take some of this treasured "down time" and try and work on some unfinished writing projects that had been withering in a computer file. I pulled up the word processor and there it was: that smug cursor, judging me. My fingers hovered on the home keys, waiting, while my brain chattered on about ballet classes and preschool curriculum and the logistics of a road trip to Alabama. Everything but story. Anything but inspiration. I had nothing.

Frustrated, I did what any logical person would do. I went back to bed. In the comfort of my bedroom, I felt my arm reach for the familiar rectangle that connected me to the world wide web. As my hand reached the phone, though, I stopped. I got up and placed the phone across the room. Back in bed, I inspected the ceiling. I considered the pattern of the textured drywall above, watched the dust that had col-

lected flutter under the ceiling fan's breeze. I thought about the little tadpoles we'd raised with the kids over the summer and whether any had found a way to survive in my overgrown vegetable garden or, more likely, if they'd been eaten by a blackbird. I considered the age of a tortoise I'd once seen at a zoo. I thought about the time my college roommates and I had thrown our then-dead Christmas tree off our third-floor balcony to more easily dispose of it (we made sure no one was below first). I realized, too, that I was back on the trail. I had a few more things to write about.

Alice LaPlante (I'm paraphrasing) says that one of the most important jobs of a writer is to notice. In all the technological noise, I've not been noticing because I cannot hear. My brain is so overrun with instant information overload that there was no space to wander.

As I continue to limit my time outside of my home, my physical space has indeed gotten smaller. My access to the world, however, has been overrun with memes and conspiracy theories and political debate and cute cat pictures, and that accessibility is slowly siphoning away the blank space where I find good ideas come from. Every space can be filled, so it is important to be mindful of that space and weed out the noise where I can.

I worry for my students, who are expected to manage a variety of responsibilities and still come up with something original to write about as technology screams: "NOTICE ME!" While many of them are really there to finish a Gen Ed credit and move on through their program, it's a dismal thought that even less of them are even able to let their minds wander long enough, to really think about something they may have always wondered about. There's little chance to know if they would "like" writing, as many of them adamantly claim they don't, if they never have the true mental space to try it.

All this to say, I am grateful for these screens, for helping many of my household soldier on with our careers, our responsibilities, our educations. However, I'm definitely removing it from arm's length regularly now. I need the margins back so that I can continue to wonder. And I'll be advising my students to do the same.

Sara Backer

## Between Classes

I sit on a bench by the brick building  
that was a textile institute a hundred years ago  
as composition classes shuttle in and out.  
I slide sunglasses over my reading glasses  
and open a paperback of poems.  
After each, I pause to let the words settle.

Staff and students weave around each other  
on skinny sidewalks. They notice me.  
Some point. Are they surprised because  
I'm wearing double glasses? Or because  
I'm reading paper pages?

I'm struck by the opportunity to embrace  
my oldness with my oddness—to be  
without a phone  
and in no hurry.

Kenneth Chamlee

## WHAT HAPPENS HERE

*for the liberal arts college*

What happens here are the mentoring willows  
and creek's counsel, late afternoon,  
evenings themed with diligence and excess.  
Morning fingers classroom blinds,  
striping the whiteboards like chronicles of rocks.  
In another room, the crucible of politics  
and blue flame of dissent.  
Roped in inquiry, each hour  
we pitch down the cliff of a question  
to set feet on surer ground, or  
begin the climb anew.

Our common language scripts  
a legion of requirements—  
*curriculum and competencies,*  
*majors and emphases,*  
*division, department, degrees—*  
yet from that consonant troop  
we choose our idiom of endeavor—  
harmony, valence, scripture and spectrum,  
carabiner, equation, metaphor and phobia,  
musculature, brushstroke and gesture.



# READING POEMS AT THE ARTISTS' COLONY

Hello, my name is Ken. My first poem  
is 8 ½ by 11 on acid-free, twenty-pound stock,  
Brilliant White in Classic Laid finish.

I roughed the draft in pencil  
on a blue legal pad, the cool  
tones more soothing than

stark yellow, color of  
fried eggs my mother frown-fed me  
every morning till I was ten.

I tooled a transfer on a Toshiba  
laptop, 12-point New Times Roman,  
final print shot from a Canon.

The idea? Picture  
an arctic field, reams of snow  
pressing white weight, then

a lumbering thought, brute and shaggy as a mammoth,  
the roused words taunting, waving their points.

# THE FOSSIL POEM

Can any poem endure  
like an ant in amber, coincidence  
of sap and misfortune?

Can any thought insist  
the way of a leaf  
pressed to a forgotten riverbank?

Ideas are as fragile as atmospheres.  
What abides must be written  
like ferns in anthracite—

a body of carbon,  
a heart's heat.



## Redbox for Books

“Mr. Bush said reading for fun will help me be a better reader at school.”

This wasn’t the first time Kelsey had stayed after class to chat. She was a stand-out student in my remedial writing class, smart and engaged and funny as hell. And she was so excited to be in college.

“He’s right. Any reading, even for pleasure, will make you a more fluent reader. And faster too.”

I knew she was really struggling to keep up with the reading assignments in her other classes.

She raised her eyebrows, clearly assuming I was bullshitting her just to back up whatever my colleague had said.

“No, really! It will! Can I make some recommendations?”

Without waiting for a response, I started a list: *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, everything I’d read over the summer to keep up with what my students were reading (or at least watching the movie adaptations of).

I knew our tiny satellite-campus library wouldn’t have those titles, and they’d probably require a hold and a long wait at the public library. I added some older titles she might be able to get right away: *The Giver*, anything by Eloise Jarvis McGraw.

As an afterthought, I asked, “You have a library card, right?”

She didn’t.

And she never had.

She told me that she’d never set foot inside a public library in her life.

“So, it’s like Redbox for books?”

She was breaking my heart. I tried not to let it show.

I told her kind of, yeah, but it was free, completely and totally free.

I reassured her that even though she was only seventeen, she could get her very own card without her parents. Anyone could get a library card. It was easy!

And they would help her! The librarians were so nice!

I printed out Google Maps directions to the closest branch — 2.3 miles.

She took my list of recommendations and the driving directions.

I packed up my handouts and folders and dry erase markers and made my way back to my office.

I shut the door.

I keep a box of tissues in my office. Not just for the bad-grade discussions or the no-I-didn't/yes-you-did plagiarism confrontations, but for all the things my community college students live through and share with me: late rent and lost jobs and shitty daycare and too much overtime and too little sleep and the girlfriend's mom in jail again and sleeping in the car for the last few nights.

The tissues are usually for them, but there I was, crying for that smart girl. That smart, smart girl.

Because nobody ever took her to the goddamn library.

No Eric Carle or *Boxcar Children* or Madeleine L'Engle or *If You Give a Mouse A Cookie*.

If you never take a child to the library, she will probably have a hard time learning to read. And if a child has a hard time learning to read, learning in general will probably be a struggle. And if learning is a struggle from the very beginning, it will probably never be a pleasure. And when that child someday finds herself with a schedule full of remedial classes at the local community college, she probably won't even make it to midterms before she starts to worry about failing out.

Up until that moment, it somehow hadn't occurred to me that some kids never go to the library.

It's not like I thought everybody made a weekly trip or had a special library book bag with their name puffy painted in pink. It's not like I thought every kid jammed that bag so full it was hard to carry. It's not like I thought every single parent read to their kids at bedtime or that every kid was bargaining for *five more minutes five more minutes please please*.

But somehow I had never imagined no trips to the library, no bags filled with books, no minutes or hours or days spent submerged in stories.

So I sat in my office and sobbed not just for Kelsey, but for all the space between us and I hadn't even known to look for.



Alex Richardson

## Losing Power

When it flickers out, I lament  
My utter lack of foresight,  
Reminding me of all I cannot bear  
And all that I will not become.  
I rock beside a primitive fire,  
With just enough tapered candlelight  
To see the words I'm scrawling  
On a pad and feel a little less soft.  
I wonder, tomorrow, if I'll be able  
To read what I have done,  
If the antique imperfections  
Of these scratchings can replicate  
The feeling from which they came,  
Or if that feeling can be reached.

# Ode

Walk  
through the world of art, half-created,  
no governments to greet  
the minds of men, nor women neither.  
Rise from here and go now  
into canopies,  
take the dark and gloomy wood,  
relate it back to you  
and all the ways you are alive,  
Really alive, not alive  
like a poem.



# Lecture: Intro to Romanticism

Walking here, I sense a tone in the quad this  
Morning  
That is not regarded. I raise the blinds to bring in  
Sunlight,

Knuckle out fluorescence and begin modeling  
Behavior  
For rows of hooded students who scroll and swipe,  
Occasionally

Lifting their heads, as deer in a field,  
As if  
They considered being where their feet  
Are

For the improvised musings of a stock  
Character.  
Once they note this voice signifies  
A presence,

My strangeness becomes more strangely  
Human,  
And calls up something in them they cannot  
Remember.

Linda Scheller

# Begin

A young woman  
masquerades as the sun.

Children appear, sitting lightly.

Cornered, they search her face,  
seeking knowledge  
and hoping she is kind.

# Look Back in Wonder

It was the best thing I could've done.  
For 36 years their lives subsumed mine,  
their future my cause, their hunger  
folded around metal desks salted  
with pencils and visited by cockroaches  
while outside the windows, almonds bloomed.

It was the look in their eyes, listening  
or challenging, open or hurt, the room  
filled with tipped-up faces of various  
shapes and hues. I knew their walk  
from 50 feet, their unique penmanship,  
their voices even with my back turned.

It was all I could do to stop myself  
from thinking about them long after  
the last stories were corrected,  
essays graded, language test created,  
and outline for their research report typed  
in preparation for the ditto machine at dawn.

It was my art and atonement, my debt  
to the world repaid in service and hope.  
For every note placed on my desk,  
for every poem shared, for every smile  
of comprehension, I was doubly blessed,  
for I was their teacher and this, my joy.

## Thirteen Drabbles

### **A Hundred Words**

(first published by Friday Flash Fiction, 2018)

"Good work!" I enthused. "Here's a star to make you Star Writer of the Week."

Jemma beamed with pride. She had worked hard for nearly twenty minutes—rubbing her head to start the ideas flowing... drawing a lively picture of squarish shapes and round smiling faces... and laboriously forming words: "I wet too The parc aN I plad on The swigs." She had even done a full stop at the end.

"You've really made progress with your writing," I added.

Jemma took a deep breath. "One day," she promised—"one day, I gonna write a story a HUNDRED WORDS LONG."

### **A See Storey**

(first published by Friday Flash Fiction, 2018)

"Dawn on the see sure," Katelin laboriously typed, "their livid a mer made. She swum round with her fiend's, they had a ventures, ones they got lost in see we'd an ones they fond a dessert I lend. An other daze their was doll fins an a good see which how helped them git purls."

"It's a wonderful imaginative story," I told her. "And what a long piece of typing! Let's see if we can correct some of the spellings."

Katelin stared at me in righteous indignation. "I already done that," she protested. "I done Spell Check on the pewter!"

## **Thesaurus**

“...So sometimes,” I told my class, “you can look up alternative words to make your stories more interesting. For instance, ‘walked’, ‘travelled’, or ‘wandered’, instead of always writing ‘went’.”

“The diminutive girl strode melancholy down the route desiring she could purchase a new reboundy sphere,” Nadine’s next story went. “Unexpected she spied on the land a wallet replete of cash!!! So now she purchased the reboundy sphere and she sensed joyful.”

“You’ve used some very unusual words,” I said doubtfully.

“Well, when you said to write more interesting,” Nadine explained, “I used that dinosaur book to swap out the words.”

## **Ideas**

Maggie had writer’s block.

“Well, if you’re short of ideas,” her friends said, “why not write a time-travel story? They’re always good.”

“Oh, please, not time travel,” Maggie groaned.

“But it’s full of possibilities. You could have a guy who goes back and changes history, like kills Hitler or something. And he can meet an alien robot on the same mission. Everyone loves alien stories.”

“No, thanks.”

“And romance, people love romance. Maybe the alien robot falls in love with the guy and gives him magic powers.”

“I think I’ll write a story about you,” said Maggie, and she did.

## **Horror Writer**

(first published by Friday Flash Fiction, 2020)

Shelley is a horror writer.

It’s not what she aimed to be. She always dreamed of writing poetry. She has notebooks scribbled full of pretty little fragments on blossom and summertime, songbirds and butterflies, and the visions of

warmth and light that kept her alive during long dark years, promising her she could one day break free.

Shelley is safe now, life is gentler, and she feels ready at last to follow her dreams and to write. She opens her notebooks, picks up her pen, channels soul and memory through its thin black trail of ink.

Shelley writes horror stories.

### **The Perfect Story**

It was dark and stormy one night. Nothing happened; nobody did anything, for they were tired of this story. It was readable: it scored As on all the automated tests of “quality writing”. But it bored everyone and had bored them for a hundred years.

All the characters in the story had lost the will to live. One by one they died, then the readers began to die of boredom too. The story kept going--creeping through nations like a virus. Everyone who read to the end died.

Only the robots all agreed: this was the best story ever written.

### **Whatever the Weather**

(first published by The Drabble, 2020)

It never was a dark and stormy night—not quite. But whatever the weather, Corey’s stories always began with it. A grey and misty morning, or a hot and cloudless noon? You knew straight away which led to ghostly visitation or a gunfight.

For two of Corey’s novels, set in Scotland, the night had not only been braw, but also bricht and moonlicht; and once he had even begun a story at brillig, but without the slithy toves.

But then, one black and tempestuous evening, Corey’s stories ended with the weather too. Lightning struck his computer, and they perished forever.

## **The Perilous Pens of Doom**

On dark and stormy nights, the Cliche Club take out their pens, and everything of magic runs away to hide.

Witches and wizards vanish, werewolves and warlocks disappear. They have heard dread whispers of that terrible sentence—Death by Stereotype—and they fear for their souls. Heroes huddle in corners, pirates plead for mercy, and even dragon-riders take refuge deep underground.

The night grows darker, stormier still. No-one remains now but Friendly Monsters and Time-Travelling Scientists and Little Girls on Sparkly Unicorns. All else have fled in terror or breathed their last, destroyed forever by the Perilous Pens of Doom.

### **Powerful Prose**

The editor's jaw dropped.

"Beautiful," he said. "Beautiful. Finest work I've ever seen in this genre. We MUST acquire it."

Kelvin, the new intern, shrugged. "Shall I get to work on the typos?"

"No, no, leave them in! They're the best part."

Kelvin pulled up the Acceptance form-letter. He hated the piece. It began, "Dear Stupid Philistine Who Don't Get Grate Litreture" and roared on for six angry pages.

Why? Was it the sheer incandescent emotion of the rejected poet? The visceral imagery in his cursing? Some literary device Kelvin had yet to comprehend?

He shrugged, again, and clicked "Send".

### **Writing Group**

"So, did you read my story?" asked Tyler Wright at the WriteRight group. "Did you? Anyone? What did you think?"

“Well,” said Enid.... “It’s great, but just a bit short on originality. We always have so many stories about writers writing.”

“But—but mine’s completely different!” said Tyler. “This story’s not just about writers writing. I’ve taken it to a whole new level. I’ve written about a writer who writes a novel about two writers who write sound-bites on other writers’ writings!”

“Oh. Right,” said Enid, then wished she hadn’t, for somehow it felt like the wrong thing to say.

### **Passive Aggression**

A writing club was formed one day by a perspiring group of aspiring writers. As poems and stories were written, the latest work was shared, and helpful comments were offered. Improvements would be made, and success would surely be achieved if only this process could be kept up long enough.

As each week’s meeting was held and turns were taken, it was noticed that anything written by Mona was written in passive voice. Eyebrows were raised. Heads were shaken. Advice was given.

But Mona was only annoyed by the comments made by her fellow writers. What’s wrong with passive voice?

### **Romance Writer**

When writing romantic novels, Gavin uses the pen-name Gloria Horace and the brilliant new Romantisaurus app. Guaranteed to raise the temperature of your prose by 50°C.

You simply write a bland narrative of liaison, and run it through the app. Romantisaurus injects adjectives to knock off not only your readers’ socks but anything else they may be wearing.

For his latest novel, Gavin runs the author bio through too. It reads, “Gloria Horace, a well-known pulsating author of gyrating romantica, wields her throbbing pen from her swooning villa in the heaving hills of New Breathless Hampshire.”



This one's gonna sell.

### **Sid Said Said**

(first published by The Drabble, 2020)

"Sid always says said," said Sarah with a sigh. Sarah's stories never said said. Sarah wrote untagged dialogue and hoped for the best.

Vera nodded vehemently. She valiantly avoided the verb. Vera always veered violently off into various virtuous alternatives. Her characters stated, confirmed, surmised, breathed, chanted, barked, requested, blurted, and—weirdly—smiled or frowned their lines of dialogue instead of saying them. Reading Vera's dialogue resembled riding a bucking thesaurus through a heaving labyrinth.

But Sid almost always said said; and, strange to say, no reader who wasn't a writer had ever complained that Sid said too many saids.



David Radavich

## IN THIS ROOM

is where alchemy  
happens.

Where air crystalizes  
into words,

language materializes  
into mind, leaves  
black tracks

on paper printed  
with a buzz and shove

out into the world  
of things.

Now it is born  
and makes its uncertain  
a way among the suffering.

Among many books  
that also live  
in a magic space,

sometimes recovering eyes  
that see into darkness

and bring sun  
over shivering trees.

# RE-READING MY EARLIER BOOK

I have forgotten myself  
like a ghost.

A rogue inquisitor.

Weed spreading  
into the brave flowers  
of the past.

What is it I have been  
and danced away?

How could that  
tornado be forgotten?

This other person too  
writes words

that become  
centipedes, oratorios,  
burnt-red sunsets.

I should like to meet you  
someday over beer.

Artisanal craft, perhaps.

Long conversation  
of lost equals.

# LITERACY

Reading is the mainstay  
of children and the minded.

And people who love words  
as flowers and games.

his weird class  
for whom books spellbind  
and shelving is critical,  
not merely for show.

Such people still exist.  
Not many, but they strive.

I don't know  
if words will save us.

But maybe they can survive  
his change of climate

that will make language  
crawl and fight

and sing late songs  
into the burning night.

## Rebecca's Watch

I came home on a Tuesday. John said he kept the lawn mowed while I was gone, but it was waist-high, and I could barely see the purple coneflowers I planted by the porch last spring. The white siding was gray, I guessed from all the rain we had, and the eaves troughs were full again. There were random weeds growing out of the muck in them. John needed to clean them out. It's the least he could've done.

Sarah was supposed to visit me. She didn't tell me when, just that she would. Maybe I'd get the house cleaned up before then, so she'd see I was fine here by myself. She doesn't need to worry about me. I'm the mother, after all.

On Sarah's first day of kindergarten, I fretted about taking her. What if she was lonely? What if there weren't enough teachers? What if she missed me? I walked her in and showed her the classroom, which smelled vaguely of crayons and Elmer's glue. She sat at one of the miniature tables and kicked her feet. She wore her prettiest white shoes that had the heart-shaped buckle.

From her desk, she smiled sweetly up at me and said, "It's okay, Mommy. You can go now."

I cried the whole way home.

That was twenty years ago, though. She had her own child now, Millie, and she said they would visit as soon as they could, as soon as the baby's schedule became a little more consistent. As soon as her husband's job became a little less hectic. As soon as they got settled in that new home they bought.

I walked up the worn path to my house and the yellow front door. I painted it that color before I left, hoping it would make it seem more cheerful when I came back. The porch had two boards busted in since I left and one of the neighbor kids carved something vulgar on the

banister railing. I pressed a finger into the lettering. It was probably Danny and Jenny's kids. They were always running loose, unsupervised. Free-range parenting, my ass.

I dragged my suitcase inside. The place needed a good cleaning, some dusting and vacuuming, but I decided that could wait. I needed to get out, take a walk.

The leaves were all just beginning to change, rouges and rust-oranges and golds, and someone was burning a brush pile in the distance. My nose stung with the woody scent, strange after the bleach and ammonia and iron-smell of the hospital. Lucy was outside, weeding her flower beds. At least someone was trying to keep up the look of the neighborhood. She seemed pretty absorbed in it, so I didn't stop to talk. I told the Home Owner's Association how devoted I was to the beautification of the neighborhood last spring, but of course they couldn't expect me to do much while I was gone. The Hernandezes let their vegetable garden go, and there was crabgrass and morning glories taking over where they pulled the radishes last spring. I made a mental note to offer to help them clean it up.

When I got to the end of Oak Knoll Road, I saw that the red house on the corner next to Mary and Joe's house finally sold. The realtor's sign had been replaced with a hand-painted one. "Pópo's Art Studio," it read in swirling lines of blue and purple. An arbor was built at the end of a walkway up to the front door, painted a gaudy teal that clashed with the brick red of the house. A rainbow windsock flapped from the flag pole and a series of no less than seven wind chimes jangled near the front door, which was now covered in a mural of floral with the scripted words "Notre Chateau."

A little woman in a cotton dress stood further back in the yard, a bucket in front of her that she scooped a muddy clay from and packed onto a wire sculpture in front of her. She was short, Asian maybe, and her tanned arms were gray to her elbows with clay. She turned as I passed the house.



"Hello!" she said. I pretended not to hear her. I kept my gaze on the road in front of me, quickening my step.

"Hello, there," she said, waving one hand in the air and grabbing a ratty towel with the other. She made her way across the yard, wiping her hands. "I'm Madeleine."

"Nice to meet you." I tried to continue my walk, but she went on.

"Oh, nice to meet you," she said. "Mary here on the corner told me you live in the house up the street with the yellow door. She said you'd been in the hospital for some time. My sister had bouts of depression, too."

"Depression? No depression. I just needed a bit of a checkup. It was nothing really."

"Of course, of course. Well, my husband and I moved in a few months back, such a beautiful neighborhood. Please, though, let us know if you need anything at all. So happy to finally meet you."

"That sign," I said, pointing to *Pópo's Art Studio*. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Excuse me?"

"Pópo?"

"Ah yes, it is Chinese. For grandmother. I have four grandchildren. I am also an artist," she said, displaying her dirty hands.

"Well, I'm surprised the HOA approved the sign."

"Oh," she said. "I was under the impression we didn't have an HOA out here."

"Oh, we have one all right."

"Right," she said. "Well, I must get back before that clay dries. It was great to meet you."

I raised a hand in acknowledgement, not looking back as I continued my walk. The nerve of some people, coming in and disregarding the HOA's high standards for the neighborhood. This wasn't just some place where "artists" and "musicians" hung out to be hip. I was here when this neighborhood was built in the 80s, when each street of ranch-style homes went in, perfectly parallel to one another.

When I got home, I called John.

"Hello?"

"John, it's me."

"Yes?"

"What happened to the lawn?"

"I haven't exactly had time for that, Rebecca. We talked about that in the hospital last week."

"We most certainly did not. It's part of the agreement; it's the least you can do."

"The least I can do for what? You took an axe to the hood of my car, Rebecca. I'm not coming by anymore."

"I told you, there was a raccoon that's been getting into my garbage. Besides, it's in the divorce paperwork."

"Yardwork is not in our divorce papers," he said. "I have to go now, Rebecca. I don't have time for this."

"It's a stain on the neighborhood, the weeds up to my waist like this. I bet there's already letters from the HOA."

"There hasn't been a HOA there in fifteen years, Rebecca. I have to go. The girls are here for dinner." And then he hung up, just like that.

I couldn't sleep that night. There was too much noise, too much to be done. Near 4am, I finally got up and decided to take another walk. As I passed the brick red house again, I decided to go ahead and do something. Grabbing a branch off the ground, I stomped up to the flagpole and swatted down the rainbow windsock and stopped its flapping. I stuffed it down my shirt, just in case anyone saw me on the way home. I slept better after that.

The next night I got the wreath off of the door at Mae and Suzie's. It had pastel florals and a miniature wrought iron bicycle on it. It was a springtime wreath; this was autumn. Their old dog, Scout, must have gone deaf because he didn't even bark when I opened the screen door.

The night after that I just walked. Mary and Joe had a lovely garden. Joe put in river rock by hand to border it, and there are coneflow-ers and hostas and azalea bushes. They have a little ceramic birdbath painted coral that sits in the middle. Since I'd been gone, Mary added a shepherd's hook to the garden and hung a pretty little birdfeeder. When I touched the finish of the birdfeeder's wood, it was soft and cool, damp from the dew and still dusty from someone sanding it smooth. A storm door slammed behind me and when I looked out the corner of my eye, Mary was standing on the concrete stoop in front of her house, her dark hair still in a bandana.

"Rebecca, what are you doing?"

I decided not to acknowledge her.

"That don't belong to you; now put it back."

I held the birdfeeder higher in one hand and sent it spinning fast with the other. It was perfectly level, and as I'd decided it was up to standard, I replaced it on the shepherd's hook hanging over the garden.

"Put it back, please," Mary said. "It's too early in the morning for this, dear. Thank you, Rebecca."

Halloween arrived and the neighbor's yards were decorated with hay bales and fake spider webs and demons in the bushes. The kids paraded down the streets in their costumes. I kept my porch light off.

A group of boys, thirteen or fourteen years old maybe, came tromping through the yard. They were dressed in pitiful costumes. One had a rubber mask perched back on his head, leaving his face exposed. One wore oversized army fatigues and had slapdash bits of green and black face paint. The last had a few lengths of toilet paper taped to his arms and legs and a strand wrapped around his forehead, I assume a sad attempt at a mummy.

"She lives there all alone?" I heard Rubber Mask say.

"My dad said she was in a mental institution," said Quasi-Mummy. "I saw her one day after the school bus dropped me off. She

was standing right in the road, on that corner by Kroger, talking to her shoulder.”

“I’ve never seen her,” said RM.

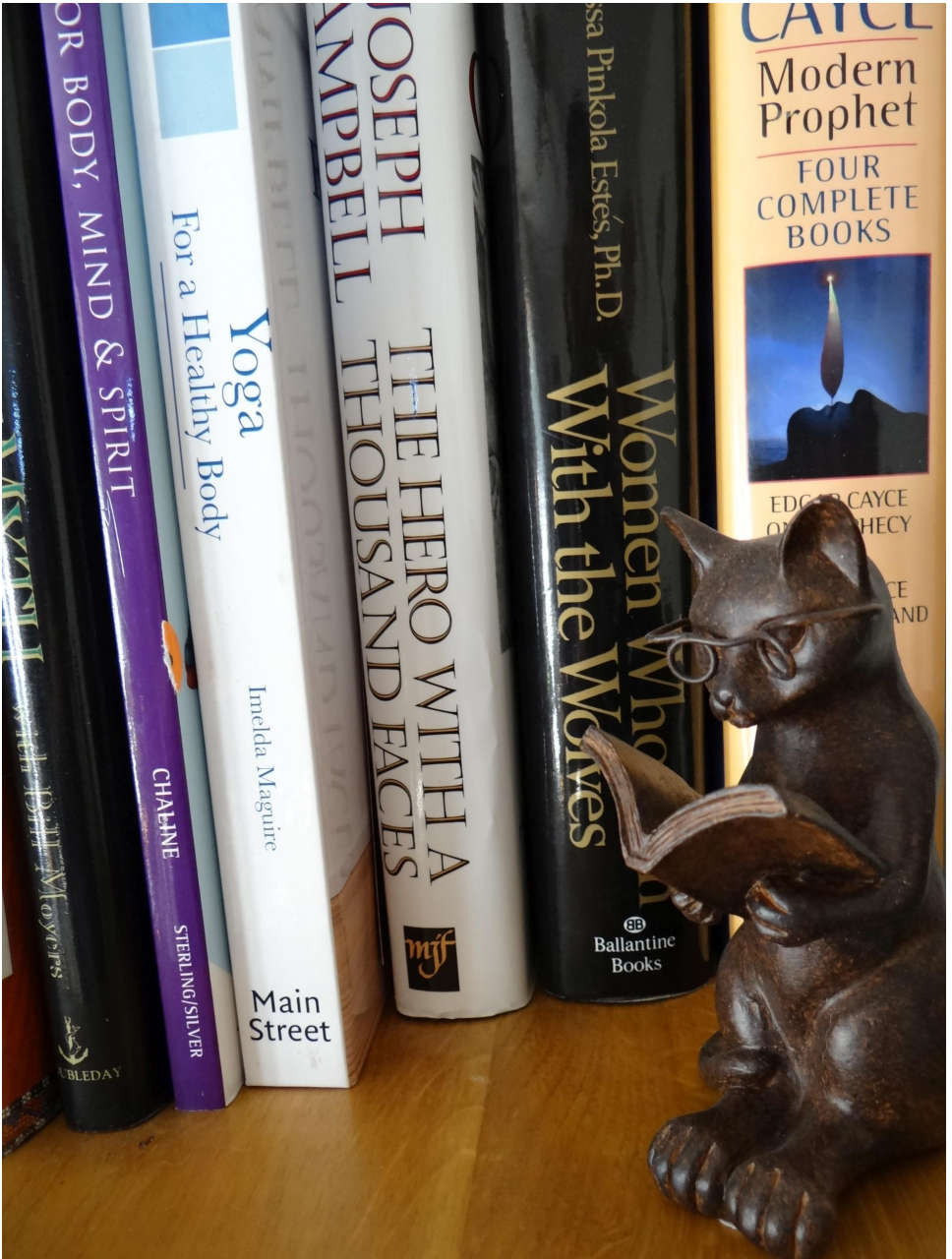
“She’s real skinny,” said the mummy. “And her hair is really big – like she stuck her finger in an electrical socket.”

“Come on,” said Slapdash. “Are we going or what?”

I decided that was my moment.

“No treats here, boys,” I said, stepping onto the front porch. “Only tricks.” I threw a bucket of water over the porch onto the hedge they were hiding behind.

The boys ran away, leaving a pack of firecrackers and some cans of spray paint behind. I considered following them, finding out if their parents know they are raising a pack of graffiti artists and delinquents. But then I decided otherwise. That night might’ve been the night Sarah comes by, with Millie all dressed up in costume. That night might’ve been the night I met my granddaughter.



# Rick McElhaney

Author's Note: In an online poetry group, one of the members proposed a 10 word challenge, picking words from Robert Frost's "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations" – floats, tingling, fire, watcher, heaven, calm, planets, happens, changes, sight. I chose to also attempt the use of the form of his poem, and I referenced memories of when I was first inspired by poetry. Though I don't recall, it is likely that Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" was the piece of his we read at that time. Just for fun, I prefaced my piece with a Dave Barry quote.

"It is a well-documented fact that guys will not ask for directions. This is a biological thing. This is why it takes several million sperm cells... to locate a female egg, despite the fact that the egg is, relative to them, the size of Wisconsin." Dave Barry

## Finding My Way

or

On Remembering My First Robert Frost Read

I was a watcher of your singular lines  
Each one a star with its own position, not seen  
As part of constellation, with relative place  
To planets in one heaven; not set in time  
Nor marked by sight, with changes yet to be.  
Nothing was known of how form and space  
Could speak of fire, could speak of calm,  
Yet we were asked to compare and contrast  
Yours with cummings', both with the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm.  
And all of it was so strange - so very, very new -  
The thought or notion that words could be imbued  
With much, much more than what the first or last  
Meaning in a dictionary conveys to those  
Who later read what words a writer chose -  
Who then might understand what happens when  
A tingling forms and floats toward galaxies again.

# Poets All

(for fellow creative writing students)

You claim to lack a poet's skills;  
you set yourself apart.  
Yet, not all poets work with words,  
though all must work with heart.

Look deep inside to find the muse;  
that's where true poems breathe.  
The words, at best, are mere attempts  
to set the poems free.

So, bring to me some heartfelt words;  
think not of which are worthy.  
Most anyone can learn the craft,  
But none can fain the beauty.

# Poet's Narcissus

In fragrant dreams, you come to me  
my heart feels what my nose has seen  
imprinted there within your being.  
You are a pheasant's eye.

As morning twilight turns to day...  
as I set out to make my way  
you are a jonquil-sweet bouquet  
set in my mind's lanai.

As every workday hour is spent  
you are a pinkster lily scent  
assuring me of moments when  
you'll be again close by.

You are –  
my evening's findern flower,  
as day draws to its final hour...  
as sunlight lessens its sure power -  
my well illumined sky.

And as the night grows dreaming still  
You are my poet's daffodil.  
Poet's Narcissus





Roger Collins

# WHY I WRITE: A TRUE CONFESSION

## A ten-minute play

Characters:

The Poet: Young Adult Male

Classmate #1: Young Adult Male

Classmate #2: Young Adult Female

Their Instructor/Sarah: Middle-age (or older) Adult Female

**Synopsis:** The Poet composes a videotaped confession of the crime he committed against several classmates and their instructor in his creative writing class. During his confession he visualizes his victims who have no relationship outside their classroom. A trace of sexual tension between the Poet and a Female Classmate surfaces while a Male Classmate does his best to camouflage his fear of the Poet. Sarah, their instructor, harbors regret over her inability to help the Poet tap his constructive creative potential. Or so the Poet imagines.

**Setting:** A room with a card table and four folding chairs

**Time:** The present

## At Rise

In the darkened theater, the light from a laptop screen switches on and illuminates the POET, seated at a card table surrounded by several folding chairs. He taps on the keyboard and a slow, instrumental rendition of “Amazing Grace” begins to play softly.<sup>1</sup> The POET, dressed in shirt and tie, gym shorts/boxers and slippers, switches on two table lamps trained on him (lights up on stage). The laptop is perched on several books to align its webcam with the POET’s face. The POET views his image on the laptop screen and primps. He gets up, puts on the sport coat draped over his chair, sits again, faces the monitor, adjusts his tie, and tugs his lapels. He clears his throat and prepares to speak. He taps keys of the laptop, and the music fades away.

### POET

Well, here I am. In the flesh. So to speak. In the pixels, anyway. (Beat.) You folks been looking for me for what – a couple weeks now? Exhausting, no? For all of us. That’s why I’m confessing. Taping it. Putting everything in context. Explaining. Then I’ll upload the video. Send you the link. I’m ready to give myself up...but only after you’ve viewed my confession. You’ll send me an email. I’ll give you my email address at the end.

First the formalities. This recording is my true confession. Without threats or promises. (POET glances around the room.)

You can see I’m alone. No need to advise me of my right to remain silent. I’ve waived my right to an attorney. I waive all those rights and freely make the following statement.

(POET takes a deep breath)

Well, the trouble started when she asked the class: why do you write?

### MALE CLASSMATE

(Entering cautiously, hesitantly)

A, uh – a normal question, I thought. I mean normal for a creative writing class.

POET

(Mildly surprised by his visitor)

Two months into the class? Two whole months?

MALE CLASSMATE

I don't see why that should matter. Two months, two weeks, two days into class. Today. Two years from today. Why you write could change, you know. Or not.

POET

Apparently you and I don't hear with the same ears. I heard her inflection. Why do you write? As in: why do you bother to write?

FEMALE CLASSMATE

(Enters haughtily)

That's because you're paranoid.

POET

(Stands, defiant)

I pay attention. I'm not paranoid! I'm aware! Woke, as they say!

FEMALE CLASSMATE

Delusional!

(Sotto voce)

Among other things.

INSTRUCTOR

(Peeks into the room, then enters tentatively.)

I ask that of all my students. Why do you write? There's no right or wrong answer, of course.

MALE CLASSMATE

Perhaps there should be! Wrong answers, I mean.

(The characters circle the table in fits and starts,

eyeing one another.)

FEMALE CLASSMATE

Personally, I like the question. Why do I write? I value reflection. I value discovery. Self-discovery.

(To POET)

We didn't have to answer. No gun to head. And as I recall, you didn't answer.

POET

No point wasting time on a topic everyone would find...unpleasant.

FEMALE CLASSMATE

Which was fine with me. Sarah, too – right Sarah?

SARAH/INSTRUCTOR

Of course. And the timing? I figured you all needed a few weeks ... Was it really two months? Anyway, I figured you'd need a decent amount of time engaged in creative writing to answer the question. To answer it truthfully.

POET

Truthfully? Ha! You people only want lyrical truth. Blissful truth.

MALE CLASSMATE

My concern had nothing to do with whether you answered her question or not. That's your business. My concern was your poem. The one Sarah passed out to us. Not whether it was good or bad. Or how it might be improved. My concern was whether a poem like yours should even be allowed.

POET

There you have it: censorship! The reflex responsive of tiny minds

SARAH

Well...targeting classmates was not acceptable. I made that clear during our review.

FEMALE CLASSMATE

(Reciting)

I roam wet asphalt,  
Shimmering in the moonlight.  
My classmates my quarry, unseeing the stars,  
Unseeing their own dead selves.

(Pause, back to normal speech))

I didn't feel threatened. Not personally.

(To POET)

You don't scare me.

MALE CLASSMATE

(To FEMALE CLASSMATE)

That's not the point – whether you felt threatened or not. I felt threatened. I have a right to feel safe.

POET

And freedom of speech?

SARAH

Well, even putting the targeting aside for the moment...

MALE CLASSMATE

(Interrupting)

I don't want to put targeting aside!

SARAH

For the moment. Putting that aside.

(To POET)

There wasn't any distance. There wasn't any emotional distance between you, the author, and the rage.

POET

I don't want emotional distance! I want the opposite. That's what's

wrong with you people. Too much damn distance.

SARAH

But if you're open to –

MALE CLASSMATE

(To SARAH, Sotto voce)

Don't argue with him.

SARAH

(To POET)

If you're open to change for artistic purposes...

POET

Whose artistic purposes? I'm open to change for my artistic purposes.

SARAH

But the violence...

MALE CLASSMATE

(To SARAH, Sotto voce)

Do not challenge him.

SARAH

(To POET)

Your violence seems more expressive of your own rage rather than offering any literary aesthetic. Or thematic purpose.

POET

Hmmm – thematic purpose. A killer's thematic purpose.

SARAH

(Moving closer to POET)

No, no, no.

MALE CLASSMATE

(Moving closer to SARAH, Sotto voce)

Do not get too close!

SARAH

Your thematic purpose. Your poem's.

POET

Like good triumphs over evil? Or maybe live and let live?

(Inspired)

How about: the truth shall set you free?

MALE CLASSMATE

(Laughs)

The truth! Please. She asked us to write what we know – not some horror show fantasy!

POET

Easy enough when what you know is herb gardening or the Zen of kite flying.

FEMALE CLASSMATE

Actually, I didn't think his poem was half-bad.

(To POET)

But next time, please...no more than one dead body per stanza.

MALE CLASSMATE

Stop! I'm trying to get those images out of my head. Surely there need to be limits. Yes, I'm sorry: right and wrong! Limits! Wrong is not a dirty word!

FEMALE CLASSMATE

Maybe it should be. At least in creative writing class.

POET

How do you write about life today without writing about violence? I mean, cops killing kids, kids killing cops, random people slaughtering random people. I've looked the world over. Where is life sacred? And what about the onlookers? The so-called innocent bystanders?



FEMALE CLASSMATE

They're busy surviving.

POET

Busy closing their eyes.

MALE CLASSMATE

But you don't have to contribute to it. To the violence, I mean.

POET

Who's contributing? I'm writing about it, not causing it!

MALE CLASSMATE

Except when you're threatening to kill us all!

(Pause)

POET

Well... yes. That. That's what this is all about.

SARAH

This what?

POET

My confession. This.

(Sits, facing the laptop/webcam)

Okay, I admit sending that threatening email. But I had no intention of actually –

MALE CLASSMATE

Oh, no, no, no. It's not that easy. Not after all the suffering you caused! You simply own up to it? Like, oops, my bad. I apologize.

POET

(Scanning them all)

No, no, no! No apology from me. You people needed a wakeup call – a jangling out of your complacency. The surprise that you – you, herb gardener, you, Zen master of kite flying – that you could end up dead

center in somebody's bullseye!

MALE CLASSMATE

(Backing away)

You need to be removed from normal people. You're a menace. Not a potential menace. A real menace. You've been menacing us for months!

(He continues walking backward in the direction  
he'd entered, facing POET, gesturing for  
FEMALE CLASSMATE to follow.)

And we don't have to take it.

(MALE CLASSMATE exits and FEMALE CLASSMATE  
walks backward in the direction she'd entered and exits.

POET

(To SARAH)

You wanna know why I write? First of all, I don't just write. I write poetry. And I write poetry because I believed it was the purest way to express the truth. An honest feeling. A pure thought. I believed poetry could express me like nothing else could. Not talk. Not tweet. Not song. Only poetry could reveal. But now I realize it reveals too much. I think of my poetry as some kinda brain scan, a dissection of my mind, spilled onto a page.

SARAH

I invited you to meet with me. After I read your journal entry. I thought it would be a good idea to talk. Just you and me.

(Pause)

You never came.

POET

For you to pick and poke at my feelings? No thank you.

SARAH

(Reciting)

It takes a lifetime  
To create savagery.  
A child's lifetime.  
We kill because we can.

POET

And what if nothing of those feelings is worth sharing? Not a speck of originality? Not one iota of art? Behind the babble about murder and mayhem. The moaning about loss – lost friends, lost strangers...

(He looks where his FEMALE CLASSMATE had exited.)

Lost love?

SARAH

In your poem. That horrifying poem. You did write what you knew. I'm so sorry.

(SARAH exits, walking backward, facing POET.)

POET

(Toward the absent SARAH)

A boy drags darkness over his head and takes shallow breaths beneath his blanket. Knees locked to his elbows. A clock ticks. Nothing else.

(Long pause.)

(Faces the laptop/webcam)

So...there you have it. My motive, I guess you'd say. What provoked me to send that email. Do I really need to reiterate?

(Summarizing)

No one answered the question! Of whether my poem should have been allowed. Allowed! You might as well ask if I should be allowed. And, and, and...if they can threaten my existence, why shouldn't I threaten theirs, huh?

(Sotto voce)

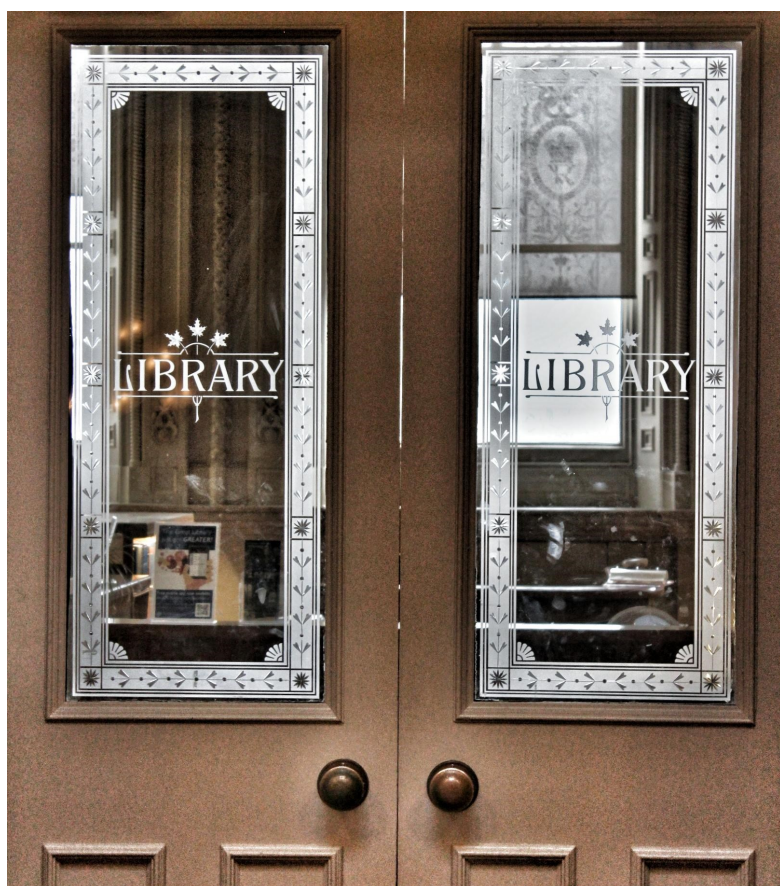
Well, other than it's, you know, illegal.

(Pauses)

Okay, then. I'll upload this video to the Internet and send you the link. You send me an email after you've watched it. The entire recording. No cheating. I might give a quiz. (Laughs) Just kidding. (Pauses.) After I get your email, I'll come down to the precinct. Give myself up. Surrender. My email address is... [bury-the-beast-inside@gmail.com](mailto:bury-the-beast-inside@gmail.com).

(The POET taps a few keys on his laptop and "Amazing Grace" plays: a loud, frenzied bagpipe version Please Note: the opening and closing renditions of "Amazing Grace" played on the laptop theatrically, are intended to be played on the theater's sound system.)<sup>i</sup>

**End of Play**



Youssef Elhararak

## O Oxygen !

*To G. F.*

Someone had a dream that one day  
We can breathe the same colorless fresh air;  
O old chap I see you cannot know how  
The Ozone hole has been recovering in the human skulls  
Enough that black and white Men can now  
Take the bus to the space without having time  
To look at the faces of one another...  
Now, they have much time for more important stuff  
In the attic of the Universe,

O dear Martin,  
You thought we could write in black ink  
Only if pages were white like cotton plantations,  
You said borders would fade away  
And your golden generation shall write their names  
On the white borders with no fear  
Without having to prove their human veins...

Well, dear Martin, I know that colors do not matter  
There in heaven  
Where you are teaching rainbows to butterflies...

Please don't forget to tell Mr. Floyd we miss him  
And that his life matters  
For every flower of cotton  
For every tear  
For every colorless handkerchief  
For every spoken word  
For every breath about to get up  
In the early morning  
When no one asks the Sun what color is She  
Nor from where She is coming

We can see, dear George,  
Your whisper flourish across every inch  
On the Continent  
As white as your smile  
When your teeth teach us pride and love

Don't worry!  
Black and white palms are weaving rays  
To draw your name on the page  
Of the American shy dream

**RIP** for your breath is not in vain  
It is here to stay  
To efface the human sin  
Like iron is still facing stain...

Hunter Wrenn

# Hidden Agendas

Silver-tongued devils would have you believe they speak in gold.  
They use honey to hide the poison; they want you to behold!--  
“I’ll make you listen, then you’ll believe in every word I say!”  
Telling the lie more often, their self-belief grows by the day.

Making you feel inferior is how they live their life  
Plots and schemes they hatch between drowning you in strife.  
Lay out the bait and set the snare- wolves turn on unsuspecting sheep.  
Recurring victims, worrying; hardly getting any sleep.

The truth they have disguised and tucked away discreet.  
Tell a lie enough, they think, and it becomes belief.  
Falsehoods and dishonesties are what they trade and barter  
Spindly, treacherous fingertips reaching ever farther

Breaking bones and families, tearing lives apart.  
Hope smoke stays long enough that you won’t see the farce.  
Caring only for themselves; warping, twisting truth  
Accusations made with broken promises of proof.

You can kill the soul and spirit; leave behind the living flesh  
Take away the will to live- that's what they do best.  
Empty and drifting aimlessly, no purpose to detect  
Just enough to seem alive, but mostly void and dead.



# Warmth in Cold Places

Suffer in silence,

hide your pain.

It's not contagious,

but it may spread,

so keep it far away.

Just smile and nod-

everything is fine.

No one wants

to hear your troubles

Or listen to you whine.

Misfortune has befallen you-

it is yours and yours alone.

How dare you try

to make me care

or ask a bone be thrown.

The world doesn't care

about what's going on.

You reap the sinful

seeds you've sown

And never see the dawn.



Akinlabi Ololade

## Aminu Bello Writes Letter Home

(after Salawu Olajide)

you think about me  
lying on the couch and sipping coffee,  
throwing the memory of sea off me  
and making blissful evening beside the pool.

you think of me  
sitting on the bench at a vineyard  
and watching my dreams grow  
like sprouted tree with different boughs  
spreading across the elbow of the city.

you think of me that now, I am in European City  
sitting at the balcony listening to Nani  
and cruising my evening with cold beer.  
But you never think I am in Angeles  
weeding different paths to find my route.

## Teach Me to Make Smoke Rings

From the kitchen window, 12-year-old Varna watched her older brother Haney and his best friend Cal slip off into the woods behind the shed. She knew where they were going. They were off to the clearing just beyond the woods. Cal usually came equipped with cigarettes and liquor. Varna knew all of this because she often followed them to spy. Hiding in the bushes wasn't so simple for Varna, already 5'9 and as heavy and as strong as Haney, who was fifteen. But Varna knew quiet. She knew how to move without making a sound. With furtive maneuvers, Varna wended through the trees and brush to find her familiar piece of ample shrubbery. Once shrouded, she would peel apart the heavy branches and watch Cal and Haney— a nickname modified from his real name, Henry— smoke Lucky Strikes and pass a bottle of whiskey back and forth.

She did not particularly care what Haney was doing; she saw Haney every day. She only went to see Cal. Blond, thin, and handsome, with strong arms and wide shoulders. She often found herself lost in the shimmer of the blond fuzz on his forearms. And when the sun hit his green eyes, yellow melted from the irises like sap dripping down sturdy maple trees.

Varna would withstand the cramps and the pains of sitting motionless, silent, just to look at Cal as he lighted Lucky Strikes. He would stretch out across the grass, sometimes taking his shirt off and rubbing a hand across his chest, feeling the heat of a cloudless, bright summer afternoon. She would withstand her popping knees and the limp she would have all the way back to the house just to see him. It wasn't necessarily love, but Varna didn't know much about lust at twelve. She knew about like and love and crushes and how that Patsy Cline song made her think of Cal lounging lazily in the grass. She knew he would

never love her, his best friend's big little sister. She knew that Cal thought she was ugly. He never said it, but he didn't have to. Varna knew it. Too big, too heavy, too tall. Her skin too pale. Her freckles too many. Her hair was thick and course, like bunches of yellow sun-spoiled hay. But Cal? Well, he was perfect. Beautiful. And Varna would sit for hours in the woods to gaze upon him in the same way distant, smaller stars must stare at our sun.

After her spying missions, on the way back to the house, her calves tingling with pins and needles, Varna would sing either a Patsy song or Kitty Wells, imagining she was heading home to cook dinner for Cal or to make up their bed with sheets pulled fresh from the line. She would pretend that he would be waiting for her, arms open, smiling, waiting to kiss her full, bright, pink lips.

But now she stood at the kitchen window watching them slip into the woods. Once into the trees, it was difficult to see them, which was why, she knew, they took that route rather than follow the path from the yard. She, too, always took the more treacherous route, thorny bushes scratching against her legs, leaving small trickles of blood and red lines on the surface of her pale skin.

After she could no longer see them, she stepped quickly to the living room and told her mother she was going to meet Judy, her only true friend.

"Be back soon, Varna," Mrs. Moses told her daughter. Varna looked at her mother, knitting in her chair, legs swollen with pain, her knees swallowed by puffy flesh. Gladdie Moses usually only moved from the bed to the living room and back again. She had suffered from arthritis her entire life, but now, after her three children, her joints had given out.

"I will, Mom."

"I mean it," she said.

"I know."

Varna stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, but her attention was still at the window, her body leaning toward the back door.

"Remember, chicken tonight for dinner, sweetheart."

"I remember."

"It's on the plate in the fridge," her mom said.

"I said I know," Varna answered, as she waved at her mother, stepping backward toward the door.

Varna slipped out the back, careful not to make a sound at all. Slowly and quietly, she stole behind the shed and made her way through the oaks and maples and birches until she was at the first clearing. Then, she stealthily made her way through the thorny shrubs, not caring about new scratches over the last, barely three days old. She found her spot. Varna crouched. She separated the green arms of the brushwood and peered forward.

There was Cal. The sun was shining down on him, splashing off his blond hair and melting his eyes. And there was Haney. Physically, he and Varna were very much alike, but the features and the size were more pleasing on a boy, or at least more acceptable. She watched Cal light two cigarettes at once, both stuck between his lips. He plucked one from his mouth and handed it to Haney, who, Varna noticed, smoked expertly, but hardly as sophisticatedly as Cal. She lowered herself further down, resting her thighs on her calves, her shoes twisting a secure place in the dirt; she watched them and listened to them talk. The words were unimportant. She had already supplanted Haney with herself. *She* was sitting next to Cal; he was passing *her* the bottle of whiskey while blowing smoke rings up into the air.

*"Teach me how to do that," Varna said, as she watched Cal puff out circle after circle.*

*"It's easy," he said. He handed her the cigarette and she inhaled. Then, he placed his long fingers against her mouth, forming the OH-*

*shape that she needed. "Now, just puff the smoke out in little exhales. She blew it all out in one fast exhale, and they both giggled.*

*"Like this," Cal said, keeping his fingers on her lips. Instead of inhaling again, Varna pursed her lips together and kissed the tips of Cal's fingers. He brushed a strand of hair off her forehead and tucked it behind her ear. Cal leaned in and kissed her mouth.*

Then, Cal leaned close to Haney, his face against his ear, whispering something. Varna was snapped back to reality. Had he seen her? What would he have to whisper in a secluded, empty clearing in the woods? What was so personal that it couldn't be said aloud, even here?

Haney laughed, reached across the small space between them and placed his hand upon Cal's leg. Varna watched as Haney's hand began to move slowly, up and down Cal's thigh, stopping just above his knee. And, as a smoke ring broke apart in the air around Cal's head, he turned to face Haney, and Cal placed his hand atop his.

Varna backed away, letting the bush close in on itself and she stepped back, still in her crouched position, and when she was far enough way, she stood, turned, and ran back to the house.

This time, she let the door slam.

"Varna, that you?"

"Me, mom."

"I dropped my knitting needle.

Varna slowly made her way to the living room, letting her mother wait a minute or two. She stopped at the kitchen window and looked out into the trees behind the shed. Just beyond, she knew Cal was whispering secrets to her brother. Why had they touched that way? Why was Haney's hand on his leg? Why did Cal touch Haney's hand? What did Cal whisper?

*"You are so beautiful. I love you."* She heard the soft breeze of Cal's voice drift through her head. But there was a sting to it this time that she hadn't felt before. They were Cal's words in Cal's voice, but

who was he saying was beautiful? Who did he love? That sting hit the corners of Varna's eyes.

"Varna. My needle. Varna. Varna?"

She remained at the window, hoping to see them come from the woods.

"Varna do you hear me?"

She picked up the knitting needle. Her mother was told it was good therapy for arthritic fingers. There were blankets and sweaters and booties all over the house.

"Why don't you start dinner, Varna, honey? Your father should be home soon. And where are your brothers? Where's Philip?"

"Philip's in town with Joey."

"And where's Haney? Where's that Haney always running off to?"

"Dunno, Mom."

"He's funny, that Haney," her mother added.

Mrs. Moses looked at her daughter, sat up in her chair a bit, the pain in her legs and hips obvious in the movement.

"Where were you you got so dirty? Dirt on your legs, Varna? Where were you at just now?"

"Just out."

"Wash up and then start dinner, honey. Chicken's in the fridge, Varna."

"I know. You already told me. On the plate in the fridge."

"Don't be fresh," Mrs. Moses snapped, pointing at her with her needles.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Go on," and Gladdie Moses waved her daughter off with her hands like a queen sentencing a subject to exile, but with a smile.

Washed up and back in the kitchen, Varna began to clean the chicken parts over the sink. Her hands knew what to do; she kept her eyes on the edge of the shed, waiting for the two fifteen-year-old ciga-



rette and whiskey smelling boys to totter into the yard. Finally, they emerged from the side of the small white building as if it had borne them into the world.

*Dinner's almost ready, Cal*, she thought, as she watched Cal disappear around the corner of their house. Haney stood in the yard beside the clothesline. His arms hung at his side, his body loose, shoulders slumped. He wore what Varna called his Secret Smile— when you asked Haney something, anything, he put on that smile, whether he knew the answer to the question, or he didn't. The smile was the same because Haney didn't want to tell you either way.

Haney did not pull his attention away until Cal was gone. Varna watched him turn toward the house. He looked up and saw her face framed in the kitchen window. The Secret Smile was still there, but this time, Varna thought of it as his Stupid Smile. This time, it looked mean.

The door slammed when Haney came in, his eyes glassy and his breath thick.

Two desperate emotions rose in Varna. First, she desperately wanted to know what Cal had whispered to him. But, more importantly, and more shockingly to Varna, she also desperately wanted to hit her brother. She wanted to take the plate from the chicken and smash it over his head. She had never felt such an urgent desire to hurt someone.

"Hey, Varn," Haney said, as he walked through the kitchen and toward the bedroom he shared with his brother, Philip.

Varna did not answer him, but instead, craned her head toward the window hoping she could see Cal through the walls, maybe see the melting yellow streak of his eyes behind him in the air as he headed toward the road. But all she could see was his hand on Haney's hand. His face close to Haney's face. Haney's hand on Cal's leg. And it was all she would ever see again.



Gichimu Njeri

## SHE GREW WINGS

She grew wings after our first meeting,  
She flew never to come back,  
She left me, her online lover...

She grew wings never to come back,  
I can't tell what went wrong,  
Like a mystery she left me in confusion...

I can't tell what went wrong,  
But our first date was perfect,  
We had fun and took hundreds of photos...

But our first date was perfect,  
Like the videos we had online,  
We enjoyed ourselves like ducks in a pond...  
Like the videos we had online,  
Our relationship suffered poor network,  
And I was left wishing...

Our relationship suffered poor network,  
She dropped me like a vermin,  
And how I had my hopes high...

She dropped me like a vermin,  
And never said what went wrong,  
She left me like a mystery...

And never said what went wrong,  
So I just had to learn and admit,  
Online relationships are shortlived!

## CONCEPTION

I love my husband. I do. But I can't give him what he wants.

I lie in bed, listening to his raspy, off-key voice echoing in the bathroom as he sings one of Aaron Lewis's melodramatic songs. I've never understood Russ's fascination with that kind of music—the whiny, oh-woe-is-me crap. He feeds on it, worships it even. It's a part of him, a part I don't like. A part that's inaccessible to me.

When the water turns off, he lowers his voice to a hum. He's still humming when he walks back into the bedroom with a towel around his waist. He sees me watching him and he stops humming.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he says. “Sleep OK?”

Apparently he's going to be nice this morning, so I nod even though it's not true.

“I have an early meeting today,” he says as he pulls his clothes on. “One of our potential clients is calling in, and Jack wants us all there early to go over what we've got.”

He rambles on about the pitch they're going to make, and I fade in and out as he talks. It's just filler. He doesn't want to continue the fight from last night until after he gets home from work. Soon enough, though, it'll be the pitter-patter of little feet and tick-tock, tick-tock.

When he finishes getting ready, he gives me a quick peck good-bye. “Wish me luck,” he says, but he's out the door before I even manage a reply. His cologne lingers. The towel sits in a crumpled heap next to the open closet. I lie on my side of the otherwise empty bed and stare at my wedding ring. The diamonds glitter in the morning light like stars and wishes in the night sky.

I wonder what happened to the man that gave me this ring.

He listens to the radio as he takes I-279 toward Pittsburgh. There's talk of a hurricane, and the thought gives him pause. The tropical storm is supposed to make landfall this afternoon on the other side of the state. Since when is Pennsylvania in the tropics? Since when do these things happen this far north? He thinks of his wife of eight years and he purses his lips. Since when does anything make sense anymore?

Not for the first time, he wonders if he's demanding too much from her. He used to be satisfied with the way things were, but now, he's pushing forty. Now, he has a house and a career, and he can't help but feel that something is missing, that there's more to being an adult than just thinking about yourself all the time.

Rachel, of course, disagrees.

She loves her freedom and her space—her “me” time, as she calls it. She's happy. Despite all the fighting lately, he's proud of that, in a strange way. Proud, perhaps, that he had something to do with keeping her happy for the last eight years. Maybe it's partially his fault that things have gotten so out of control. Maybe it's all his fault.

Rain pelts his windshield as he changes lanes to exit off the highway. The buildings of downtown Pittsburgh loom overhead as though scrutinizing him. He almost feels like he should ask them if he's wrong, as if their metal beams and reflective windows could give him an answer.

The hurricane may not be arriving in full force until later, but as he's driving across the 31<sup>st</sup> street bridge, he can't help but notice the angry, churning waters of the Allegheny underneath him. Rain has been falling for two days, and if the newscasters are right, they'll be getting a lot more.

He parks his Accord in the garage and gets in the elevator. As it ascends half a dozen floors, he pushes all thoughts of the hurricanes—the one over the Atlantic and the one waiting for him at home—from his mind.

He'll brood later. Right now, he has a client to persuade.

I don't hate my job, but I do lately. I worked my ass off to get this job. Nursing school, ten years of being an ER nurse at Presby, four years working as a phone nurse (“health care professional” is the official term), for various health insurance companies, and finally, I have what I've always wanted: I work from home.

Russ has made me hate that aspect of my career.

I won't have to give anything up, he says. I can take a few months off, and then when everything is on a regular schedule, I can call my patients as though nothing is different. He sees my work-at-home career as a sign that it was meant to be. I see it as a sign that I finally have what I've worked for my whole adult life.

I don't *want* things to change. I took care of people for ten years, and the one thing that kept me sane was the fact that I could come home and just

relax. Nobody was hemorrhaging or hyperventilating or hallucinating. Nobody needed fed or bathed or wiped.

He wants to take that from me, and I know he doesn't see it that way. But I do.

Somehow I'm even more annoyed that I can't work today. The phone lines are down because of the storm. I've been sitting at my desk for hours, hoping I can call my patients, but I'm starting to think that might not happen.

Hurricane.

The word blazes through my mind. That's what we're supposed to get, and I still can't wrap my head around it. I don't live near an ocean. We don't get hurricanes here.

Curious, I get up and go look out the window. The sight of water and leaves hurling through the air makes my jaw drop. Trees bend under the gusts as though they're made of rubber, and water rushes along the streets in deep streams.

The hurricane isn't even here yet; it's not supposed to hit until later in the afternoon. This is the prelude, and it's worse than I thought it would be.

I wrench my eyes away from the chaos outside and focus on my hand as it holds back the curtains.

My eyes narrow when I notice the missing stone on the side of my ring. I let the curtains fall back and look closely. It's just one of the little ones, a chip that adorns the band, not one of the three big diamonds in the center.

I don't know why this upsets me as much as it does.

Russ has a lifetime warranty on this ring. Lost side stones are covered. I can take it in and have it fixed and it'll be like it never happened. Really, this is nothing. A minor inconvenience.

I feel like crying.

His windshield wipers are on their highest setting, the rubber blades making a thumping noise as they change directions, but he can barely see through the water that attacks his windshield. No clients called in today. The meeting was canceled. The firm closed early, and as he glances at the speedometer hovering at 40 mph in a 70 zone, he understands why. In front of him, a little two-door something-or-other fishtails a little bit before the driver gets it back under control.

*This is bad*, he thinks to himself. He thinks it more than once.

As if on cue, the wind buffets his Accord and he feels the car edge to the left. He turns the wheel into the wind and his rear end swerves a few times until he takes his foot off the accelerator to stop it.

*Tires*, he thinks. They're brand new. He remembers that they spell it differently in England—tyres or something—and it takes him a minute to realize why such a seemingly random thought popped into his head.

He and Rachel honeymooned in London. She'd loved it. She drank in the atmosphere—the accents, the expressions (she'd called him a git for weeks afterward), eating fish and chips, and watching football in a real English pub while drinking honest-to-goodness English beer.

He tries not to remember the looks he earned for using the word “soccer,” but he finds that he's smiling anyways—not because he particularly enjoyed the trip, but because she had.

For him, it was the little things that ruined it. They made the whole experience seem off-kilter. Plug outlets, light switches, windows, and doors. They all worked the same way as they did back home, but they were different enough to give him pause.

Somehow, it's always the little things that he can't stomach. Big things are just an obstacle, something to overcome, but the little things are like needles jabbing him in the eye.

An unexpected pregnancy would be a big thing. A discussion about trying to conceive is a little thing. Minute, really. Immaterial.

He can't let it go.

I'm sitting in a dark house, candles flickering on the dining room table, while the wind howls and the rain pelts the windows. I'm wondering how much water is in my basement and I'm worried about Russ. He should've been home by now.

To keep from wringing my hands, I stare at the varnished wood, the red and gold place mats, and I twist my wedding ring around my finger. I should take it off, wait to wear it again until after I've had it repaired, but I can't. It seems important now to wear the ring, even if it is broken.

The dining room smells like pork chops, mushrooms, and rice. We have a gas stove, so at least I could still cook. I can't keep it warm, but it doesn't matter because I'm not hungry. I won't be hungry until I hear him pull into the garage. I'm not above opening the Merlot, however.

In fact, I do just that, and while I'm in the kitchen retrieving the wine, I bring two glasses, hoping both of them will need washed by the end of the night.

I fill one glass and gulp it down, not bothering to savor the coolness on my tongue or enjoy the black cherry and caramel flavor. I don't smack my lips the way Russ would, saying that the air enhances the flavor. He's the wine connoisseur, not me. I would've been proud to hear him say that the Merlot was a good compliment to the pork and leave it at that.

I'm dreading the conversation that I know is going to happen when he gets home. I know it because I'm going to start it.

He asked me to think about it. "The kid thing," as he called it. I've thought. I've thought long and hard as I paced through my empty house today, unable to find anything to distract me. If I say yes to his question, if I give in to what he wants, it'll be fine. But if I say no . . .

I know what will happen if I say no.

*He really should've been home by now,* I think to myself again.

I think it after I finish each glass of wine until I'm left with in an empty bottle in an even emptier room.

The drive has been horrible, but he's home. What usually takes only forty-five minutes has taken over three hours. It's dark, it's still raining, and the streetlights are all out.

He wonders what Rachel is doing.

He gets out of the car, grabs his briefcase, and uses the flashlight app on his iPhone to navigate through the breezeway and into the house. Tea lights burn softly on the counter tops and the island in the kitchen. He smells food—chicken or pork, perhaps—and he sees an empty wine bottle by the sink. The living room is dark, but there's light coming from the dining room.

After tossing his briefcase on a stool, he crosses the rest of the kitchen and steps through the doorway. Rachel is seated at the table, her face shrouded in candlelight, a second bottle of wine in front of her.

"I'm home," he says.

She takes a sip of wine and then stares at the glass cradled in her lap. "I'm glad."

He nods, mostly to himself, and pulls out a chair. As soon as he sits down, Rachel gets up and goes into the kitchen. He hears cupboards opening



and closing, followed by the clanking of dishes and silverware. A few minutes later, she comes back carrying two plates.

As they eat the cold food, the only sounds are the scraping of knives on plates and the rain pounding against the roof. The silence between them is palpable. It's not the comfortable silence they've been able to enjoy together—it's the dead space between the lightning and thunder of a storm that's fast approaching.

When the last grains of rice are gone from his plate, he refills his wine and holds the glass with both hands. She pushes her plate aside but doesn't get up to take the plates into the kitchen.

That's when he knows something is very wrong.

"I want to talk," she says.

He doesn't answer her. Instead, he looks into her eyes and waits. The wind howls outside, shrieking through the trees and making the siding creak.

"I don't want to have kids," she says finally. "I've never wanted kids. I told you that before we got married and you were fine with it."

"You said 'maybe'," he interjects.

For a moment, he sees the tell-tale lines between her eyebrows, but she smooths her features quickly. She's trying to stay calm.

"I said maybe because I was open to the possibility that I might change my mind once we were settled, but my point is, I never once told you I wanted to."

"So what are you telling me now?" he asks.

She takes a deep breath. "I'm telling you I don't want to have kids," she says. "Ever."

He shrugs. "Well I do."

"I realize that," she says. "But I've made my decision."

He drains his cup and sets it on the table. For a moment, he considers refilling it, but just as he's decided against it, Rachel fills it for him. He picks up the glass again, stares at it for a moment, and then takes another long drink.

"What do you want from me?" he asks.

This time she shrugs. "It's your turn to make a decision."

He glares at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know perfectly well what that means."

She's not looking at him anymore. She's slouched in the chair, resting the wine glass on her thigh, and staring straight ahead. Her eyes are fixed on a point just beyond her nose—so close and so far away. He loosens his tie.

"What do you want me to do, Rachel? Fall to my knees and kiss your feet? Beg you to reconsider?"

"No," she says. "Neither of those. I want you to make a decision and live with it."

"Just like that, huh?"

Her eyes focus. She glances at him and nods.

More than once, he opens his mouth to speak, and then closes it again. When he can't stand it anymore, he gets up and goes to the window. Irritated, he bats the curtains aside and looks out into the storm. It's so dark he can't even see their mailbox thirty feet away, but he can still see vague shapes in the darkness.

He remembers how incredulous he was when he heard they might get hit by a hurricane. He laughed it off, swore it would never happen. He thinks of other things he's sworn over the years.

*I, Russel, take thee, Rachel . . .*

He remembers that day well. It rained then, too—another one of the little things that he couldn't see past. Rachel loved it. After the ceremony, she made him stand in the rain with her to have some pictures taken. He'd thought it ridiculous, but by the end of it, she had him laughing too. Her dress was ruined, her hair and makeup smudged and streaming, but she'd been so *happy*.

She hasn't been so happy lately.

Truth be told, neither has he. He wants something so badly it keeps him awake at night, and she won't give it to him. He can't just accept her answer; he can't just let it go.

Part of him—a very large part—wishes he could.

He swallows hard and lets the curtain fall back into place. For a moment, he stands there, staring at nothing before finally turning around. Rachel is still slouching in the chair. All he can see is her silhouette outlined by the candles on the table in front of her. He stares at the curves of her shoulders, memorizing the outline of her body. She has her head tilted slightly to the right, exposing the delicate line of her neck, her cheekbone, the round nub of her chin.

"I love you," he says.

She stirs, her head lifting. "I love you too," she whispers.

He nods, even though she can't see him. "I know you do," he says and sighs. "I just wish it was enough."

He stands there longer than he wants to, trying to control his breathing and the trembling in his arms. Finally, he forces himself to turn away from the shadow of his wife in front of him. He goes upstairs—not to the bedroom, but to the guest room instead.

If he'd known this morning how this day was going to end, he'd have lingered in bed awhile longer, savoring the moment, the warmth. He'd have snuggled closer to his wife, breathed in the smell of her skin, and memorized every line on her sleeping face.

He wonders if she's even crying.

He is.

Outside, the storm rages on, heedless of its own destruction. Branches creak and sway as the wind rips through the trees. The whole neighborhood is dark—shadows and puddles and people huddling in their homes. The man in the guest room of his house sits on the edge of the bed, hunched over, cradling his head in his hands as silent sobs wrack his body. Downstairs, the woman sits at the empty kitchen staring straight ahead. Her eyes are dry, her body numb. Half-burned candles and empty plates sit on the table like forgotten remnants of a romantic dinner that went so well neither party wanted to interrupt it long enough to wash up.

A ring sits on the place mat in front of her. The diamonds reflect the candlelight in multifaceted prisms. Except in one spot—a tarnished chasm on the otherwise white gold band. Nothing is reflected by the empty space.

Nothing at all.



## The Bee Is Free

It has always been a matter of time galloping like a jaded horse by my window every night before I regain my speechless bed and colorful pillow. Midnight seems to have changed its address to somewhere else I cannot decipher yet .Tonight can never be a normal night, at least for me.

Now that everyone has left after a noisy party, my *100th birthday party*, including my sons and grandsons who have managed to live away from me. It is hard to be alone, and lonely, in a house gradually getting rid of the warmth of words and gifts. Here I stand by the open window to feel the fresh breeze on the wrinkles of time in my face. The wind has the smell of the nocturnal water playing the song of rain on the piano of darkness. My cup of coffee on the desk has stopped breathing for it is cold now.

what should I, the old widower, utter to myself one hundred years after my first cry in the local hospital where my mother had given birth to a new leaf in the tree of life \_ Me ?

On page 99 of my diary, a pen is trying to fill in the white paper with the hesitating ink of memory. My pen is just like me now. It can feel the huge difference between being a professional writer and living the real meaning of words between the lines of life.

***\_ O you old man! Do you still believe in words?***

*\_ Sure I do, for words are the only bridges I have to repair the gaps in my body and soul ...*

*Dear Me,*

First, I should\_ or must\_ say sorry for having prostituted your name on the pages of newspapers and magazines. I thought that you

enjoyed being popular enough that everybody would stop you in the supermarket for autographs. Even those who never read a word you wrote. I know very much, at last, that you have always cherished privacy and seclusion.

I still remember when you once murmured to me your contagious pain. It was the middle of a Saturday night while we, you and I, were driving home away from the cemetery. " Can you still write without her eyes watching your trembling fingers? "

You said that *Ernest Hemingway* had no other option after he had burnt all his words in the hearths of his books .Sure, he had more to say, but the waves of the sea were stronger than *the wise bearded man* he used to be.

Dear me,

I know what you are thinking about right now. The ending of a last story is within the reach. The window is not a bad excuse for the wingless that is about to fly away. Everybody will get the morning paper to see my face as a last poem. " Poor thing, he was just trying on the garment of life out of the cage of language " .

Dear me,

Regret is not only a piece of vocabulary imprisoned somewhere in a dark corner in the dictionary. It is deeply rooted in the details of my life story.

You see, CANCER was making no noise in the kitchen while my wife would put the familiar piece of sugar in my coffee on the desk by the window. They both, cancer and my wife, knew that inspiration needed secrecy.

" Your poems will put you in the line for a Nobel Prize "

She would say with a sublime smile. She would read my poem in the morning paper along with the pride in my face on the top of the

page. Cancer was doing its job in her noble body as if it were in a hurry. She wanted to say something that night before she went to bed. She knew I always had some extraordinary mission to fulfill before I would share the same pillow \_ but never the same dreams.

Now that she has passed away, I regret not having kissed every single inch in her sacred body \_ the best human text that I could never write between the lines.

Dear me,

I know you wish I were a peasant praising the harvests of land rather than picking the forbidden fruits of imagination. " Did you forget the bitter apple in your neck? "

I know you say if only he had had the chance to be a soldier in the battle field rather than a passenger in the trains seeking the meaning stations.

But, you know, war is none of my religions. Poets, unlike priests, are the inventors of all the names and attributes including crops, roses and mines.

You were there in the funeral. You saw people in black who were watching my silence. They thought poetry would cover all the losses. You were the only creature in the graveyard who really believed I killed my wife.

I killed my wife for I made her believe in poetry more than believe in a man that I was supposed to be. How couldn't I notice the medical reports in the dustbin? I was just obsessed by my sheets.

*Why has God made the giraffe so long-necked?*

She once found a torn paper on the desk. The same question needed an explanation in the daily newspaper. When she saw my article the day after, she laughed and said:

*" The giraffe does not see the lower truths; it always seeks the highest fruits! "*

That was only one among other lessons I did not have time to take from her.

Dear me,

Now that time has denoted all the secrets of body and soul, I should tell you something. Midnight is only minutes away from your window. So, let me be honest with you for, maybe, the last time.

One of us, either you or I, has to go away. Forgive me for the words, but there has always been a mysterious mistake in the chemical composition of our being.

I had always lived in peace before I saw your face in the mirror that night in the spring of my years. You thought you were growing in me like a bird. I was your prison not the tree. I could not see your broken wings in me like I could scarcely notice the flourishing grey in my beard and hair. Since then we have been two galloping horses in the race of age.

Dear me,

Let me be!

I have no time to waste. Let me go away or I shall wait in here by the window watching you spread your dreams in the cloudy sky. Midnight is no bad news at last.

Dear me,

Let us have a deal before you, or I, ride the window leading to the morning. Let us keep the secrets of our soul and body. Fire is always the way out when it comes to paper, but how can we handle the birth defects of the self?

Let nobody know about me and you though we are really two parts in the same exhausted body. I chose to dwell in the mind while



you opted for taking over the heart. You know my friend, I think we have been wrong waging the everlasting war against ourselves. However, nobody has ever managed to see us as scattered as the faces of metaphor in our (con)text.

Let me be!

Let me write my last poem for when we die the echo of one question will be heard: "*what were you doing up there on Earth?*"

Windows are (open) verses (of poetry)  
On the lines of dawn  
When it pours in the cups of the sky  
Windows are widows of unbegotten books  
Windows are transparent fruits of a hidden tree  
Between the wrinkles of the closed doors  
They can see the galloping hills  
The smile  
The cry  
They know well the meaning of goodbye  
They wave, wave back  
But they never go away  
Nor do they take any way  
They have learnt all the chants of the sky  
Including rain and snow  
The old man in the window was not me  
But, rather, the widower on the shelf of morning

Here we are once again somewhere between the past and the future. This time on the last page of our collection of poems\_ maybe the last day in (our) life. I cannot find you in me nor do I feel your shade in my mirror. You said you will leave me alone as ever by the window you opened once upon a dream. All I can hear, now, are flaps of a familiar wing. Could we fly with one wing?

At least one dream has come true. You are at last FREE of me!

O my dear me,

*The alphabet of freedom written on the page of the sky, I m free*

*The cage is a tree*

*The bird means I m free*

*The bird in me has become a bee*

O dear me,

*Dave Dobbyn's slice of heaven is as fresh as ever in my ears like the sound of an army of bees performing their best musical. The sky is within the reach of my eager wings while a word is driving my craze away to the seventh floor of imagination.*

*The designer was smart enough to slice the blue dream of heaven to little glassy windows. Maybe he believes, like I do, that both bees and writers do need hives to dwell their secrets in. There exists only a pretty slight difference between literature, beekeeping and agriculture, because the vocabulary of nectar is everywhere under the blue ceiling of heaven.*

*The second letter of the alphabet is opening a door through my cloudy text. The sun is too shy to show its face to the quiet boats resting on speechless waves just to relate their liquid victories over seduction. Now, I know well why the majestic "B" is omnipresent in so many BASIC details of our existence. Be. Bee... Butterfly. Bow. Boat...Bird. Baron. Bau-delaire. Borges...*

*The first letter in the word poet seems to have shifted its name from P to B. let me be a Boet for the last time before I shall leave the roofless dream. The dog-eared building can now contain me and a bee between the lines of its book though I do not care about the cheerful insect nor does it know the path to my veins.*

*No one seems to have invited that bee to the threshold of inspiration. Bees cannot see colors, but they do decipher the marrow of shapes. Honey and metaphor might be synonyms of some secret desire uniting me and the little being. Words sound like echoes of some deep voices inside me and the insect.*

*It is the first time, and maybe the last, I can share the same table with such a minute creature. The bee is harvesting the orange ink in the cup of juice on the colorful table by the leather-covered sofa. A cup of coffee is breathing for it is still hot despite the cool breeze in here.*

*The bee and I, the boet, have been painting a unique mirror on the shelves of the blue tempting horizons. A poem is waving to us (me and the bee) with its two white wings because it is learning the real meaning of goodbye. It is also imitating all the chants of Butterflies including beauty and rainbow.*

*The "B" is growing here like a baby that is riding the galloping cradle on the slippery wooden floors of the meaning stations.*

*The bee is murmuring its homely made words to the keypad on my lap. The virtual ink is creeping, at last, on the lines of the screen following the steps of a B. It seems to me that both the B and the bee have been waiting for the right time to speak up:*

*"Let me B"*



Xander Wrenn

## The castaway

The weekend will be here and gone  
effacing the weekdays mutually;  
reciprocally  
filled with resentment and emptiness  
the mundanity of office serves a reprieve  
when at week's end, the I is shown:  
the runaway, castaway, the scourge; the  
being-vowel

to whom is made further alone, sulking, in  
observation  
waiting and watching for the niche of  
acceptance  
it is less a grammatical theorem than an  
accumulation of consonants  
it is the dreamless dreamer  
rustier than cottonweeds  
and more whimsical than tumbles  
it's to melt a semiology  
of its own covalence  
in a fruitless cycle  
unto its demise

## Testimony Akinkunmi

# Shepherds

Alas, Shepherds  
You have been feeding the cows of Bashan

Shepherds,  
You have been feeding the godfathers  
Should not Shepherds feed the sheep?  
You eat the of the economy  
You clothe yourselves with the best wool of falsehood  
You live under mansions made by the sweat of unpaid labour  
But,  
You do not feed the sheep.

Oh ye Shepherds!  
You say Raca to those who oppose your selfish selves.  
You do not strengthen the weak.  
There is no place for the healer's touch for the sick  
Who have not been healed,  
The crippled who have been injured on the galloping road  
Have not been bound up.  
Those who have eloped with their love; brain drain  
To other countries have not and cannot be called back  
With the hardest force and harshness you have ruled them.  
The nation is all better off without your shepherds.

"Come Up!"  
A voice cries out in baritone soprano.  
"To the green pastures, by the fountains"  
It shouts out in counterpoint upsurge.  
"It is green enough here, no need to go over to the other side."  
The shepherds say Raca to the voice.

But,  
Not only have the shepherds done wrongs.  
The sheep, as if the good pasture are not enough,  
They tread down with their feet they destroy.  
Can two wrongs make a right?  
Even among the sheep  
You push yourselves with side and shoulder  
For the crumbs, the shepherds have left you.  
Death is the shepherd of all mankind.

However,  
I know the hireling would soon be sacked,  
The real shepherds would soon arise  
Not from space or overseas but from our midst  
Shepherds who would make sheep sleep  
In the woods.  
The sheep would no longer be slaves or prey  
To nations.  
They will be provided with prosperous plantations.

Assured of all these  
The sheep and the shepherds will move hand-in-hand to the pasture.





# Contributors

**Testimony Akinkumi** is an avid learner of the English language. His English teacher, Miss Ugah was one of the inspirations for his poem. She told her students, the future generation, to make sure they made a difference, one of the ways was by being fluent in English and using it to WRITE.

**Joseph Austin** is a middle school English and creative writing teacher in Forest Hills, New York. He is the advisor to the school literary magazine, *The Roost*, as well as the teacher for the online Summer Writing Workshop for 7th graders. After earning his BA in Communications and Creative Writing, Joseph went on to earn his MA in English and Creative Writing from Queens College. His students understand how seriously he takes the craft of writing and are eager to develop their own.

**Sara Backer** has taught composition as a T.A. at the University of California at Davis, as a visiting professor at Shizuoka University in Japan, and as an adjunct instructor for UMass Lowell for a total of 23 years. It is her life.

**Erin Weber Boss** is often inspired by her military brat upbringing, the effects surfacing both in her writing and her teaching style. Her work has appeared in such places as *The Great Smokies Review* and *Progenitor Art & Literary Journal*. She teaches at Blue Ridge Community College in Flat Rock, North Carolina.

**Kenneth Chamlee** credits his English professors at Mars Hill College with redirecting his life, leading him to a forty-year career teaching composition, literature, and creative writing at Brevard College. His poems have appeared in *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Ekphrasis*, in two prize-winning chapbooks, and in many other places. Learn more at [www.kennethchamlee.com](http://www.kennethchamlee.com).

**Roger Collins** is Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Cincinnati where he received that university's Cohen Award for Excellence in Teaching. Although trained as a clinical psychologist, he has

developed skills in creative writing to express his thoughts and feelings about the human condition.

**Youssef Elharrak** is a Moroccan poet, writer and translator who has three collections of poems, a collection of short stories (in Arabic) and a nonfiction book. He has been teaching writing for many years hand in hand with teaching poetry and prose. He believes teaching writing can be a good way to inspiration and imagination through the interaction with young minds eager to ask and react.

**Fiona M Jones** is a part-time primary teacher, a parent and a spare-time writer living in Scotland. Her published work is visible through @FiiJ20 on Facebook, Twitter and Thinkerbeat.

**Stephanie Kraner** says of her best writing teacher ever: “

I’ll never forget the way Ms. K’s face lit up when I said I wanted to be a writer. She asked to read something I’d written and I shared one story, one time. She ripped it to shreds. I was devastated, but it remains the best writing lesson I’ve ever had

**Rick McIlhaney** took three semesters of an interesting creative writing class in the ‘90’s. Each semester, the “workshopped” page count requirement increased. Students were encouraged to write essays, stories, and poems. All benefited from the blend of students, with one always experiencing the relative freshness and experience of fellow classmates.

**Jenna B. Morgan’s** prose is forthcoming or has appeared in *Menacing Hedge*, *Barren Magazine*, *HeartWood Lit Mag*, and elsewhere. She teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at Motlow State Community College near Nashville, Tennessee. Find her on Twitter and Instagram @byjennabmorgan.

**Gichimu Njeri** is a Kenyan bilingual writer and a passionate high school teacher of English and Literature. He has a children’s book *Jomo and the Wild Cats*, a poetry collection, *Whitened Black and Other Poems* and a novella *Ari ya Pasha* (in Swahili). He holds a BA in linguistics, media and communication, currently pursuing a degree in English and Literature. A prolific writer, his works are available on his blog, [www.nomyswords.wordpress.com](http://www.nomyswords.wordpress.com).

**Akinlabi Ololade** is a young Nigeria poet and winner of the Ken Egba Poetry Prize. He was inspired to write by a writing instructor: Dr Olayinka who taught him the rudiment of writing in a one day, one-on-one interaction with her.

**David Radavich** taught writing at the university level for over thirty-five years. He is currently retired but continues to lead workshops on aspects of writing poetry and drama, particularly in connection to the other arts and to current events. He remains fascinated by the complex interaction among the personal experience of the writer, the printed marks on the page, the evocative resonance in the reading mind, and the larger echoes out into a troubled world.

**Alex Richardson** has taught writing at different levels for 30 years, the past 20 at Limestone University. In all his attempts to teach, he aims to meet students where they are and to help them move forward; as writers, as thinkers, as citizens.

**Linda Scheller** taught writing for 36 years to 5th and 6th graders. Her first book was written in response to her students' assertion, "Only men can be president. Girls can't do anything important." *Fierce Light* (FutureCycle Press, 2017) consists of persona poems voiced by great women from the past. Now retired, Ms. Scheller teaches poetry writing workshops and tutors adults in English literacy.

**Hunter Wrenn** is husband to an amazing wife, daddy to three wonderful children, and an aspiring engineering student. He is a former student of the editor who encouraged him to write the poetry included in this edition.

**Xander Wrenn** studied English and philosophy at Duquesne University in Pittsburg, PA. His classes in poetry and global literature in particular were life changing for him. Today Wrenn has mixed feelings to higher education: education is something he cares a lot about but he is experiencing student debt (he does not care about that).

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