



POETRY

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Editor's Note

My dog is aging. At 10, he is losing, for the first time, some of the spry legginess of his youth, the ability to jolt up barking when a funny sounding car goes by, or to pace endlessly, as he would, the length of the house, for no purpose other than to experience the joy of being a dog. The white in his coat, previously isolated to his socks and belly and end of his tail, now covers his face. Sometimes a squirrel goes by and he gives only an interested look, a situation I thought impossible just a year ago.

I tell my wife, who dotes on him, to steel herself against the likelihood that these first ten have been the majority years, maybe the bulk. She scoffs. She insists that his hips are good, that his mutt blood has diluted whatever congenital defects surface in the breeds, and that mentioning the end of such a perfect creature is morbid, criminal, and mean.

I'm trying to be practical. Trying, as one does, to soften the inevitable loss by managing it, even if we have six or seven more years. Or ten, as she insists. But despite all this, despite whatever ammunition I can put ahead of us, I know when it finally happens I'll be a mess. I know that when I'm telling her to steel herself against the inevitable, I'm really telling myself that. And that the reason, perhaps, I'm doing it so consciously with my dog is because I can't find a way to do that so consciously with anything else. With anyone else. So much of what we do is to avoid these thoughts, yet nothing is more guaranteed, nothing the surer bet, than losing. "We are made of loss," Bill Roorbach writes, because nothing else, I'd argue, pierces our attention more, rests more weight on the soul, or gives more fuel for the urgencies that give such joyful shape to our lives.

Few vehicles exist to capture these shapes better than the essay's honest, direct attempt, its trying through discourse and story, or the poem's connections, images and meditations, its lovely engines of surprise. The selections we offer in this, our sixteenth issue, serve as a reminder of how successful these forms are in carrying those weights and urgencies, in underlining and grappling with and feeling the joy they give rise to, the pain we recognize, the loss that defines these so human problems. It's why these writers write, I think. And it's why we read. Read on, friends.

Laurie Sewall

Losing and Finding

As choirs hanging from a tree, the tree
having no name, but having different lengths

of hollowness, different lengths of cord
hanging from it, I thought of you as coming

from the woods, as from a choir in the tree.
I sought after you in the woods, in the worlds

that lie between them?between the hollowness
and the rooms into the trees, the choirs

hanging from them. I thought of you as substance?
forest rain, collected sap?and I as daylight passing

through, passing through you. Running maple sap, thick
oak root, burnished elm cast on the forest floor.

I imagined you as rain, as real, and I, too, was rain,
but believed I was not. I thought of words

as replicas of worlds, as replicas of you?the spaces
in the words, vowel sounds especially, as proof

of you, but not. Losing and finding, I find you.
Once, I longed for you as if my whole life were possible

and we?d always be apart. The bottom bough

of the sycamore is frozen and bends toward the pond?

a great sigh moves in and out of this world.

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LAURIE SEWALL received an MFA from New England College and an MA in Counseling Psychology from Lesley University. Her poems have appeared in *Folio*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Pinch*, *Poet Lore*, *Salamander*, and *Soundings East*, among other publications. On-line, recent work can be found in *Bluestem*, *Grey Sparrow*, *Wild Violet*, and others. Her poetry was selected as a finalist in the *Atlanta Review* 2011 International Poetry Contest. After living in New England for many years, she now resides in rural Iowa, where she writes and teaches poetry. Most memorable sweet: chocolate mint ice cream scooped into a sugar cone on a broiling July day--at the Jersey boardwalk, Elvis in the background.

Alyse Knorr

Welcome Poem

Listen to the reading:

Joan, the first thing you will notice is everything.
Futile to describe all the colors, the sounds, the way
air will wrench open your mouth and fill you,
bursting, till you breathe. Futile because I can't
remember the moment?none of us can?
and, even if I could, I wouldn't want to ruin it
for you. What I can say is that we are all here
waiting for you, and that everything is fine.
I can say that your newness will be a symbol,
not just for poets, but a symbol in the way that
a fresh chance, a fresh start, is always a symbol?
a symbol only for itself. I can say that you are
loved already, that you are joining a world which, yes,
is maybe not the world you deserve in some ways?
not as clean, not as green or alive as in the past,
but Joan, we're doing better now at other things
than we were before, and we do try hard, will try
even harder once you're here?a vow we make
every time a new member of the species arrives
(you'll see), so yes, Joan, you will be a symbol,
and then you will be a woman?the reverse story
of your namesake all those centuries before you,
though you will be brave like her, Joan, because
you will have to be. I once knew a man for weeks
before I noticed the word "courage" tattooed
on his calf, perhaps because, in a way, we all have

that word imprinted on our flesh, given to us
at birth, like our names, because we all need it,
and Joan, I'm not trying to give you advice,
because you have a mother for that, and because
I don't know enough yet to give any, so Joan,
the point is this?we are all here waiting for you,
and everything is fine.

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ALYSE KNORR is the author of *Annotated Glass* (Furniture Press Books, 2013). She received her MFA in poetry from George Mason University and her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Drunken Boat*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *RHINO*, and *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, among others. She is the co-founding editor of Gazing Grain Press, a feminist chapbook publisher (gazinggrainpress.wordpress.com). Knorr teaches English at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

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[Cookie Dough Brownie Bars](#)

Kyle McKinney

Tutorial

It is easy to lean
too far into yourself
 while making the poem
the door slams shut
behind you &
you realize it's dark in there
 can't see a goddamn thing

the hardest part
 is getting out of bed
another hard thing
is pissing
in the dim bathroom

 also: hope
 others include
saying *I am happy it is just*
a thorny happiness
 to my love
while keeping a straight face
hoisting that watery smile again &
 again &
the poem
 rolls over in my guts kicks
it is
 asthma in my lungs
 a ringing phone
 also definitely a massive fish

that hates me
as I reel it in pull its cold
sleekness into the light

the spool bends my wrist too heavy by far
so I try to find an easier way
outside
as if it would come to me
in the useless gesture of an iris bending
or a child riding by on a thin blue bicycle
& all the while
my gladness is spilling out
like warmth from a cheap jacket

& that's the secret

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KYLE MCKINNEY is an accomplished wastrel who spends his days reading speculative fiction, learning the Ruby programming language, and using Photoshop to make a buck. He shares a warm house with two brilliant humans and two dumb but endearing felines. His favorite poem this week is "Welcome, Fear" by David Rivard. You should check it out.

Megan Volpert

This is my post now

Listen to the reading:

It used to be that whenever you were at a loss, you could retreat to the public park around the corner. Or later, you could step aside and light up a smoke. Those places are gone. I flick the pollen off my bike while the neighborhood stray cat eyes me with suspicion. An old woman I don't know waves at me as she jogs past. So much of living is listening quietly for signs that the guardians of decorum have fallen asleep at their posts. A kid walks by, eyes on his feet like he is doing nothing wrong. We have the same shoes on.

sweet

6.1

I have superior night vision

Four in the morning is the hour of the wolf. That's when my alarm clock goes off, just like Ben Franklin's. The stillest hour before dawn is a space for contemplation, even in my younger years when it was after closing time and late night breakfast. I have always loved campus most when it is empty. People do hideous things under the cover of daylight, but in the clear cold quiet broken only by my seventy miles per hour, any animal awake is my friend. The abyss yawns and stretches before us, intelligent and unprepared to negotiate.

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MEGAN VOLPERT is the author of five books on communication and popular culture, most notably about Andy Warhol. She has been teaching high school English in Atlanta for the better part of a decade. She will eat all the black jelly beans, and predictably, www.meganvolpert.com is her website.

Rich Ives

Was That Only Yours?

Stars speak and the cold January wind
gathers their falling words
and whitens them.

They never say the same thing twice.

Are those your habits
crossing the street against the traffic?
No wonder you say wonderful things I don't believe.

Impulsiveness gets the attention
while wisdom watches
with his clever dog that doesn't bark.

One thought later
there's paradise.

Don't put your foot through the sky.

In everything, I navigate with what humans have done.
Another life signed its mysterious name,
but don't ask me. It's big, too big
to read more than once.

Debt: Throw something away, and it's yours.
Love: Give something away, and it might be yours.
Religion: Follow something away, and it's you.
Childhood: Forget where you're going.

Wisdom: Don't forget where you haven't been.

Happiness: Forget where you wanted to go.

Success: a burning twig

Failure: two burning twigs

Life: three burning twigs

Do you still think the ashes might speak?

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sweet

6.1

What Feeds The Dawn But Darkness

I made the rain. I designed the fatter drops to flop more gently
and spread like a circus warming up. I'd play by the rules
if I knew what they were. Love's not something to sip at.

He pauses on the path and twirls his cane till it sings.
She slides each hand up the other sleeve. Death is waiting
like cold fresh well water ladled from her bucket.

All water means mischief. It moves beyond its boundaries,
and when stopped, it stagnates and breeds and vibrates between
odors and tiny wings hovering. Ravaged then this territory of sleep.

I know that before I was not empty because now I have spilled
from my creamy cathedral of butter and sin. *I must open you to
my exquisite sadness. You're too happy to believe,* said the lover.

The lake is a polished table adorned with carvings. Two loons and a scuttle of ducks and suddenly dinner is served. Don't you want to climb in the boat and row back and forth between courses?

The heart is not the enigma but everything that comes to it. I'm speaking now to only you, and it's a scattered voice like yours before I was only thinking of Russian stars on the Neva.

I hadn't known the pleasures of being tired. The weather soaks up songs, so that repeating them clears the air. How wet is the sunlight. I know only one poem, and I feed it relentlessly, its fog a dirty blonde.

I made the wind. I can see its road now only as far as the gate, closed as if it had never opened. Light approaches straight from so many rebounds it's crooked and soft, in captivity.

Don't worry. Life is easy. You don't even have to do what makes you happy. The ridiculous thing you said found a place for itself. The brilliant one remains lonely.

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RICH IVES has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Artist Trust, Seattle Arts Commission and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines for his work in poetry, fiction, editing, publishing, translation and photography. His writing has appeared in *Verse*, *North American Review*, *Dublin Quarterly*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Iowa Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Fiction Daily* and many more. He is the 2009 winner of the Francis Locke Memorial Poetry Award from *Bitter Oleander*. In 2011 he received a nomination for The Best of the Web and two nominations for both the Pushcart Prize and The Best of the Net. He is the 2012 winner of the Creative Nonfiction Prize from *Thin Air* magazine. His book of days, *Tunneling to the Moon*, is currently being serialized with a work per day appearing for all of 2013 at

Ephraim Scott Sommers

To The Singer

Your tongue can't get rid of it. When you sing on flatbeds,
you sing Atascadero, on hay bales, on barbecue pits,
on cords of chunked oak, always you sing Atascadero.

All your songs about helicopters and hot air balloons

and train-tracks track back to Atascadero, but you don't hear it.

You swear you sing a thousand other cities'tent cities
and cloud cities, cities of brick chimneys, windmill cities and cities

of apple trees, blackbird cities?and you swear your voice has galloped

all the railroad bridges between them, but Atascadero sticks
like a broken toothpick between your two front teeth.

Your tongue can't get rid of it, like a mockingbird,

when you sing other cities, *windmill cities* *windmill cities*, repeating

the intervals you've heard in Atascadero's liquor stores.

You hear what you want, and you sing
a thousand other names of only one name while you pedal

your bicycle around town, one name as you pry up railroad spikes

or fingerpick for loose change. After the earthquake imploded
the brick jewelry store on El Camino, you never left Atascadero.

Your Thames is a dry creek bed off Traffic Way.

Your Empire State Building is a wooden crutch you found

behind the AM/PM. Stop pretending. Atascadero isn't England.

You're not America. You've always lived here. You'll always live here.

Here's your dollar and your brown bag of beer

and your cigarette. Now sing.

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sweet

6.1

Sister In The Family

If you are a brother or a sister
and you're reading this, then you know
about distance, you know
about lattice fences and locked doors
and fists thrown over the macaroni-
and-ham-slab dinner table.

You're old enough to know
about soap-in-the-mouth for a curse
against your father, the rumbling
of work boots down the hard-wood hallway.

If you're from a small town,
then you know about the sound
of work boots, and coffee pots, and the diesel engine
warming up outside your bedroom window.

You know the sound of your sister
leaving for Long Beach, leaving
for college without saying goodbye

(not because she doesn't love you);
Sarah of the softball scholarship, Sarah
of the Long Beach officer assaulted,
of the finger sliced on the throwing hand,
Sarah of the school expulsion, of the return
home to work with a Bud-Lite
and her uncle's lumber yard
to pay back her mother
for lawyer's fees, to marry a man
with one beard, one horse trailer,
and two DUI's, to move
to Susanville without you,
without saying goodbye
not because she doesn't love you,
and she won't come home for Christmas
enchiladas, and not because she hates
your mother's monkey bread
or tuna casserole or key lime pie,
but because she hates how you happen upon
a dead dragonfly in your driveway.
You know hate too. If you have a family, then you know
about distance between a sister
with a cigarette and a mother
with a bible, and you know the part of you
that hates them both for that distance,
that hates yourself for moving
to a parking lot named Kalamazoo for a desk and a library
and each day saying nothing
as you walk in and out of buildings
about your sister and your mother
to your sister and your mother.
But you've never stepped into
that distance not because you lack love,
not because of your new job
or the gym membership or
because of the television,
but because you know
space inside the family
never gets smaller. And who

are you to change that?

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EPHRAIM SCOTT SOMMERS was born in Atascadero, California and received an MFA from San Diego State University. A singer and guitar player, Ephraim has produced three full-length albums of music and toured both nationally with the band Siko and internationally as a solo artist. Recent poetry has appeared in *The Adirondack Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Columbia Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Harpur Palate*, *The Journal*, *New Madrid*, *RATTLE*, *RHINO Poetry*, *TriQuarterly*, *Verse Daily* and elsewhere. New work is also forthcoming in *American Poetry Journal*, *Euphony*, *Makeout Creek* and *Weave Magazine*. The managing editor of *Flashpoint: A Journal of Literature and Music*, Ephraim is currently teaching creative writing while a doctoral fellow at Western Michigan University.

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The Beginning and the End

Sandra Gail Lambert



My mother is drowning. The Hospice doctor sits on the bed with my mother, face to face, and the doctor's soft murmuring alternates with my mother's quaver of an English accent. I watch them from the side. The doctor's head is perched high on a long neck, my mother's sinks into a hunched shoulder. Only the top of an ear visible.

"What is happening to me?" My mother's question has been exhaled on breath that has become the sound of a child making bubbles in her milk with a straw.

I close my eyes. How do they answer here at Hospice when the question is asked? I hold my breath until my throat pleads, until I think maybe this is what my mother feels or would without the drugs.

There's a picture of my mother right after the war, 1948 perhaps. She grew up, was a teenager, during the Blitz of London. She emerged from underground shelters to breathe air filled with ash and soot and the feathers from exploded bedding. Bombs landed on her house. In the photograph,

she stands on a rocky beach in France, shoulders back, breasts out, legs poised, and the wind blows through her mass of black hair. A hand is raised to her forehead as she looks to the horizon. Ocean waves curl at her feet. She's wearing one of the first ever bikinis.

"What do you think is happening?" the doctor says.

I open my eyes and breathe again with pursed lips to disguise my need for air. My mother's eye, lost in an exhaustion of wrinkles, slits open. Her head lifts enough to see her chin. It quivers. She stares at the doctor. No words. No words. We wait. Is she scared to die? Is she more scared that someone will say the words?

The doctor holds her hand and leans until their foreheads almost touch. My mother's billowing curtain of an eyelid drops. She sucks a breath into liquid lungs, and her body falls into itself once again.

"Let's give you something to make you more comfortable, shall we?" The doctor says this in the kindest voice I've ever heard.

And now I am choking.

And now the morphined end of things begins.

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SANDRA GAIL LAMBERT lives in Gainesville, Florida where she writes fiction and memoir. She's had work published in *New Letters*, *the North American Review*, *Arts & Letters*, and the *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and recently, she received awards from the 2013 Saints and Sinners Short Fiction Contest and Big Fiction's 2013 Knickerbocker Prize. Her novel, *The River's Memory*, will be released in the fall of 2014.

Freight

Fred Arroyo

When my son wasn't even a year old, he suffered terribly from croup, a loud bark, ear infections. What I remember the most: a wailing cry that scared me from sleep, and how I held him against my shoulder, his fists balled up against my chest, whispering, *I've got you my, son, I've got you my, son, everything's okay*. We walked in a circle, a swaying dance across the wood floor, my voice a quiet song, my son responding with a creaky cough, a wail. And when he couldn't stop crying, I stepped out onto the cold fourth floor porch, the moon overhead, the river moving silently in that blue light. A freight train chugged out of the valley, hit the bridge like thunder, its lights sprayed across the river against us as the engine turned into a row of warehouses. I still whispered softly, my son's his fists against my heart. He breathed in the cold air, and his seal-like bark quieted, no longer crying, as he slept in the moonlight alongside the rumble of freight.

There is a silver-like dish my father gave me. The lips of the dish are raised with bougainvillea vines and flowers, a vignette circling the miniature red scene in the middle: the words *Puerto Rico* writ large; an image of the island with a few major towns (*Aguadilla, Mayagüez, Ponce, Guayama, Río Piedras, San Juan, Bayamón, Arecibo*); two bold roosters facing each other before a fight; the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Caribbean Sea on the other, some tall palm and coconut trees growing from a small sandy beach, a sailboat cutting across thin waves, above billowing clouds, and a light house. In the briefest of lines the artist spun to life a delicate handwriting forever in my blood. Images and objects from the shipwreck of childhood: the baby chickens we had in Hartford, scalped by cats or city rats; the regal red rooster in our West Hartford backyard, a long blue line of twine tied around his scaly yellow ankle, a path of cracked corn and the underside of the back porch his home; the sharp click of maracas, salsa and rumba taking shape, the call and response of music and family as everyone danced between a few chairs and a coffee table in a warm, cramped apartment; the Navy Blue work uniforms with a new strange name for my father, *Chuck*, in cursive over the left side of his heart; in Connecticut, Michigan, Illinois: the migrating tableau of a blackened silver pot brimming with yellow rice and pigeon peas, a plate of glistening pastelles, and a bottle of dark rum next to a half full glass. And always the rhythm of the sea.

For some 30 years I've carried this dish around (perfect for holding loose change, propped against some books like a porthole into forever and never, an arena of paperclips and ink cartridges), and I don't remember when, where, or how it became mine. I assume my father gave it to me (as if the

silver etching might raise *Santiago* in memory, his name deeper and stronger behind *Chuck*). When I turn it over I find it was made in Japan, and I have cracked it along the left lip, a long scar around the edge of the rim. A year ago I moved to California with my eight-year-old son, Charles, Charlie, took him some 1500 miles away from his mother. We had made the mistake of believing too much in an American Dream: we bought two houses, and when the economy turned, our houses were “under water,” as they say. I went west for work and took our son so he could attend a good private school, and because when I was not teaching I could take care of him. On the edge of the Pacific he was never sick. He learned to skateboard, found he wanted to grow his hair long, grew to love things Chinese and Japanese, and found that although he was not out on the prairie any longer, there are open spaces even in most densely populated places. He started singing in Spanish (*mañana, te quiero mañana*). He discovered the private power of reading. Like a wave that adds and subtracts to a beach, he and I will ride that year towards tomorrow. I thought in California I gave him this dish. Memory was moving too fast, changing, and I needed something to contain it, even if it’s cracked, the silver beginning to turn green gray. Maybe he declined it. Maybe he said I should keep it. Maybe I don’t remember that I decided to wait, to let him grow some more, and then I could offer him this small life. Over time more stories will entwine themselves in these vines and flowers, and like that little light house on the sea, I still need to be a keeper of memory, need to throw light on the freight of yesterday.

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FRED ARROYO Arroyo is the author of *Western Avenue and Other Fictions* (University of Arizona Press, 2012), as well as the novel *The Region of Lost Names* (U of Arizona P, 2008). Named one of the Top Ten New Latino Authors to Watch (and Read) in 2009 by LatinoStories.com, Fred is a recipient of an Individual Artist Grant from the Indiana Arts Commission. He has published fiction, poetry, and essays various literary journals, and the anthologies *The Colors of Nature* (Milkweed 2011) and *Camino del Sol: Fifteen Years of Latina and Latino Writing* (University of Arizona 2010). Currently, he is completing a book of essays in which he lyrically meditates on work, reading and writing, migration and place—sources of creativity arising from his life and work in the Midwest, growing up bilingual on the east coast, and then being caught between urban and rural worlds. Fred lives in Vermillion, South Dakota, where he teaches in the MA/PhD Program in Creative Writing, as well in the undergraduate program, at the University

of South Dakota.

Desserts are one of the wonderful pleasures of life, and Fred's favorites move around from tiramisu, gelato, cheesecake, and flan.

Buddhism 101

Heather Kirn Lanier

The morning before my stepfather's surgery, I found him pacing the kitchen. I pulled a gallon of milk from the fridge, watched white liquid dip into my black mug of coffee and then swirl up to the surface like clouds.

"*Clouds in my coffee,*" I sang. "*Clouds in my coff-ee and...*" I looked at my stepfather. His shoulders were up around his ears. His brow was furrowed. "What are you nervous about?" I said. "It's only cancer."

That was my joke. He didn't chuckle. But this was my thinking—put the word *only* before anything, and watch the stakes fall. Only life. Only death. No attachments. These things are like clay balls to hold and mold gently, to merge with other clay balls, to lose. In just a few more weeks, I'd take my first Buddhism 101 class with the leading scholar of eastern religion at my university. I was preparing. No pain. No suffering.

But when the surgeon, Dr. Moses, split my stepfather open that afternoon, the doctor gasped. The fist of cancer was gripping a million little nerves. Holding tight. *Can't take it out. Not without destroying his arm. The man's a chiropractor,* the surgeon thought. *He'd never work again.*

My stepfather came home shirtless with a tube attached to his body where the blood drained into a plastic, translucent container. He sat in his chair at the kitchen table and smoked Salems with his other hand. I watched him ash his cigarette into the old, rusting, silver tray that he'd brought into this house years ago.

"Oh, Heath," he said, and then we sat in silence.

*

The next month, he hauled all my books and clothes and shoes and even a mini-fridge into my new dorm room, and he did it with almost his usual gusto. But in three weeks, when I returned home to visit, he could barely lift my pillow-sized bag of laundry. The house had become a cancer battleground.

School was a welcome reprieve. I took dutiful notes on the Buddhist concepts of samsara, karma, and bodhisattvas.

On the day of the no-self lesson, I raised my hand warily. “So... the Buddhists believe that there’s nothing inherently *me* about me?” This sounded terrifying. “There’s no essence to my nature?”

Up until this point, I’d “gotten” Buddhism. Or at least the Mahayana version my professor was teaching. See that mountain up there, the Buddhists said. That’s a mountain.

Okay, got it.

Now see that same mountain? That’s not really a mountain. That’s only a mountain because you perceive it to be a mountain. Just as the chair you’re sitting on is only a chair because you’re using it for its chairness. Pick it up and hurl it at something, and now you’re working with a weapon, not a chair. The chair loses its chairness and takes on weaponness.

So the “suchness,” as my professor said, of an object is dependent on conditions and perceptions, which means there is no essential, permanent chairness of a chair. And there is no essential, permanent mountainness of the mountain. So there is a mountain, but there’s also *not* a mountain. Got that?

Yes, I’d gotten that too. The point: nothing is fixed. Nothing is permanent.

The philosophy had the bonus of extending to other nouns in my life. Cancer, for instance. There’s cancer. But then there’s also not cancer. I liked that.

But with the self, shit just got personal. There’s no essential me? No little glowing diamond bit inside my chest? The bit I’d thought maybe glimmered long before my first post-birth scream? And the one that I thought would survive long after I’d taken my last breath?

Which means there’s no essential stepfather? Because everything is just water (and *not* water) and running right through my fingers?

“That’s right,” the professor said, in response to my first question. “In Buddhist philosophy, there’s nothing essentially *you* about you.”

I gulped, tried to imagine this “no-selfness.” What was it? A void? A nothingness? A black hole in my chest where once I’d thought that little light beamed?

A small part of me wanted to say, “No, of course there’s something inherently me about me! Isn’t there? Something vital and permanent!” But I didn’t because in Buddhism 101, you didn’t argue the principles, not unless you were one of those fundamentalist Christians hell-bent on proving your Sunday school lessons because if you didn’t, it would mean your worldview would crash down

around your Jesus-T-Shirt-wearing shoulders.

You think you're solid, the Buddhists said. But your self is just an illusion made up of things like your physical body. Your thoughts. Your feelings. Tomorrow you wake up with another layer of skin cells sloughed off, a different attitude about your boyfriend, a slightly different chemical make-up given your hormonal fluctuations, and on and on. There's no solid you. I took rapid notes and reveled in the wonder.

Wasn't it death and loss that made cancer so terrible? The notion that this fixed person would be gone? Once solid, then vanished? What if I could see the whole universe as fluid? As liquid? Maybe death wouldn't hurt so much.

Looking back fourteen years later, I wish I could tell my knuckle-head self: Heather, you can't *will* your way into that mind frame.

But I believed that if I could just let go of my insistence on the solidness of myself, if I could just see each thing as fluid and interconnected, if I could tap into the eternal clarity of this, in the gleaming northern star above the Bodhi tree, in the stillness between my stream of inhalations and exhalations, I could know bliss. I could never know pain.

*

On the weekends, I drove an hour north up I-95, past leaves the colors of saffron and rust, to hang around my stepfather's bed. To stare at a face that was once round and jolly and caught poolside sun but was now pale and gaunt. To watch him sleep. The notion of life's impermanence never felt more palpable. The need to end all suffering never felt more urgent. My stepfather was dying.

Sometimes when I came home, I found him staring at a blank spot on the wall, or staring up at the ceiling. The television was mute. This troubled me. I wanted him to be watching television. I wanted him to be amused while he was dying. I wanted him to escape the pain.

*

Buddhism 101—or my crude misunderstanding of it—offered a blueprint for escaping my own pain. I just had to accept that the contract with this life was simple: all things go. I just had to loosen the white knuckles around my love and everything else, and release.

Just let go, Heather. Just let it go.

This was, I now realize, an oversimplification of real Buddhism. Desire is human. In the Buddhism I've continued to study, desire isn't something to annihilate but to work with. Destroying it would be like blowing out the flame that could start a fire that can cook your food. Of course, it can also burn your whole house down.

*

I hugged him on a Monday, went back to school, went to classes, got drunk alone on a Wednesday, got the call on Thursday.

I arrived home just as orderlies were wheeling an empty hospital bed out of the living room.

*

In any given class, I could weep without meaning to. Without the usual wind-up of sorrow, without the contorted oh-don't-cry-now face. Water would just leak out of my eyes. I gave myself two weeks off from school, and it had been enough time, but in a certain way, no time would be enough. Grief was a roommate in my solar plexus. It was a gaping hole. It ached.

In October, the world had been lush orange and red and still golden with sun. Now it was November. The trees were black brush strokes. The sky was stone. The world was gray and freezing over. In October he lived and in November he did not live, and all of this, this life, this world, these maples losing their leaves and this ground of grass and this sun and this body and this mother and this sister and anyone else I'd ever love. All of it was temporary. All of it would vanish.

It seemed a cruel contract we made with the world. The most beautiful thing would always be pregnant with the most pain. Unless you could keep yourself from clinging. Unless you could let it all go.

*

If my grief hole was heart-sized and hung out in my solar plexus, my mother's was house-sized and swallowed her whole.

Now, I have more compassion for my newly widowed mother. She lost her husband, her best friend, and her coworker all in one sweep. The arrows of her life all pointed to him, and now they pointed nowhere but inward, to the sorrow, to the heavy gravity of nothing, and so she stayed home.

And back then, I was compassionate, but I was also frustrated. She had to get over this. She had to move on. To let go. She couldn't throw in the towel of life.

If I stopped and felt enough what lay beneath my urgency, if I really practiced Buddhism, if I'd found, for instance, Pema Chodron's books like *When Things Fall Apart*, I would have encouraged myself to feel my own grief. I would have seen my desire to push both hers and mine away.

Instead, all the photos and the full closet of his clothes and that full ashtray and even the saved bottles of painkillers from his cancer, they were infringing on my Buddhist practice of not suffering.

Besides, there was no self. There was no stepfather and there was no mother and there was no me. It was all an illusion, and maybe if my mother saw that, she'd wipe her tears and go outside to smell the fallen leaves.

I tried to counsel her. She had to let go.

She couldn't. She cried and said she just couldn't.

She couldn't stay attached, I told her. It was attachment that was causing her pain. She had to get over this.

"What's there to mourn anyway," I told her. "There is no self. There is nothing essentially him about him. He's gone. It's over."

To this, she burst into tears. Did I really believe there was nothing essentially him about him? The question was asked in panic, as though I were a renowned scientist telling her that odds were good a meteor headed straight for her house this minute.

"Yes," I told her. "That's what the Buddhists believe."

She sobbed. She couldn't believe that.

Her face was gaunt. Her collarbones visible. It was like, in her grief, she was shrinking into less and less.

She had to believe there was something left of him, she said. She had to believe she'd see him again. In heaven. She cried and cried and said no, she couldn't accept that there was no self.

I looked away. I, who had cried maybe daily since he'd died, who'd cried without wind-up or warning, who'd cried in class and in the shower and repeatedly in my sleep, I just sat at the kitchen table numb. Believing with all my might that I could push the grief away like some unwanted, feral cat. That it would be as illusory as the chair my grieving ass sat on, the chair I could turn into a weapon by hurling it across the room. I would watch it smash into splintered pieces against the wall, hoping that maybe, just maybe such a gesture would bring him, the illusory him, the ethereal, fluid, no-self him, back to me.

HEATHER KIRN LANIER is the author of the nonfiction book, *Teaching in the Terrordome: Two Years in West Baltimore with Teach For America*, and the poetry collection, *The Story You Tell Yourself*. Her work has been published in dozens of places, including *Utne Reader Online*, *The Sun*, and *Salon*. You can also find her at starinhereye.wordpress.com, where she blogs about mothering a child with disabilities. "Buddhism 101" is from her book-in-progress, *Monk's Girlfriend: A Memoir of Love, Agnosticism, and Faith*. She could talk for hours about Swedish Fish, Circus Peanuts, Big League Chew, and all things sweet, but sadly she had to give up sugar years ago.

36A

Wendy Rawlings

Probably if I asked you to conjure an image of breasts you would picture two basically spherical body parts perched side by side on the chest so as to create an appealing and erotically suggestive crevice between them. From the time I was a young teenager, I anticipated the time during which my breast "buds," as my mother called them, would blossom into twin and abutting body parts. Yet when I left for college at eighteen, my buds had progressed only so far as to be properly described as two conical and independent flesh disturbances.

I've never been that interested in my breasts, even though they're the part of a woman's body with the most public clout. But I had a dream recently in which I was lounging in a shallow pool at a resort, the area well populated by sunbathers. I wore a black and white bikini bottom but nothing on top, and yet I was lying on my back, propped up on my elbows, so that anyone could see my bare chest. I was neither ashamed nor particularly aware of any impropriety until people with children arrived and I came to understand that my bare breasts, unimpressive though they might be, were causing the parents consternation, at which point I hurried into a locker room and to recover the black-and-white racer back bikini top I'd left on a bench there.

*

Buds or a giant bosom, at forty, one must submit to a mammogram. I stand on tiptoe while the white-coated technician takes hold of my breast and urges it flat on a clear plastic platform. It is a singularly humiliating experience – worse, for me, than a pap smear -- to endure a stranger in rubber gloves forcing one's breast flat, after which she flips a switch that lowers an identical sheet of plastic onto the breast, thus mashing it between two sheets of plastic the way Dagwood Bumstead mashes the top slice of bread on his epic sandwich so he can fit it into his mouth. There's a comic book cover that shows Dagwood with his radiantly vacant smile, holding his Herculean sandwich between the parallel jaws of a vise. My breasts are no Herculean sandwich innards. Thus, the technician finds herself prodding at the meager meal each breast offers. Once she has positioned the breast in a way that causes me maximum discomfort, she flips the switch on and off several times in quick succession, so that the jaws of the vise jerk a millimeter closer to each other with each switch flip. As the vise jaws are made of clear plastic, I'm afforded an unobstructed view of my breast. A blue vein that runs along the border of the aureole appears to pulse. I notice a dark hair flattened by the

top jaw and, though the room is darkened and certainly the technician has seen many a hair growing from a breast in her life, I'm mortified.

My bra size is 36A. As a teenager I found a copy of Playboy magazine in my father's dresser drawer. There was a long feature on Linda Lovelace in progressively skimpy patriotic lingerie to commemorate the Bicentennial. This was when I learned that women have measurements. Hips, waist, breasts. From the pages of the magazine I inferred that 36-26-36 was both a desirable and common measurement. When, years later, at Victoria's Secret, a store employee measured my bra size with a pink tape measure, I was at first proud to learn that my measurement was 36 and then reduced to feeling the great inadequacy of my attempt at womanhood when the saleswoman brought me several bras in my size, all of which contained considerable amounts of padding. My inquiries about the possibility of trying on a bra without padding were met with puzzled stares. One of the bras I was convinced to purchase, said to possess miraculous qualities, was a demi-cup style bra with no padding at the top of the cup but with a large padded area at the base of the cup. Curiously, the pad is divided by diagonal stitching into three sections that resemble the downward-rushing streams of a waterfall. The cups are larger than those on any other bra I own. I cannot discern this bra producing even the slightest hint of décolletage, despite the outsized claims on the label. I note that the bra was made in Thailand, where workers must look upon the size of the bras they're making and imagine the garments' future owners to be Amazons.

I googled "bras for small chested women." I googled "bras for small breasts." From the sites that came up in the search I learned that I could purchase a "Delirious Triangle Bralette" for \$36 dollars, that a company called "The Little Bra Company" makes bras for women whose cup sizes are A, AA, and AAA, and that even when the very small garment is comprised of elastic and a handful of lace, the purveyor of such an item is likely to ask upwards of forty bucks for it. Apparently a bralette is a sort of daughter of a bra, made of gauze and lace but without any of the pneumatic properties of the miracle bra or any of the support mechanisms of the bras worn by real, adult women, who require industrial materials to hold up their plenitude.

*

Because I went to an elementary school for fourth through sixth grade, much was made of sixth grade graduation, after which we would move on to the combined junior/senior high school in the next town over. The tradition for girls was to procure autograph books and to ask each classmate to sign a page. My little book was about the size of an index card, red with a white paisley pattern and the word Autographs in gold cursive on the front. Inside, the pages were alternately pale pink, pale green and yellow. As a child I was a loving keeper of scrapbooks, notebooks, journals and diaries. The idea of collecting notes from my classmates with their variant handwriting -- the heavy press on the page of Richie Sabatino's block letters, the nimble illegible cursive of my teacher, Mr. Smith; Amy Buynak's tender and careful lower-case sentences, each designed to end at precisely the same spot near the right margin. At the end of the day, when my autograph book was nearly full, I sat in my room and read the good wishes from former teachers and the popular "Roses are red" poems from fellow students. For a while I puzzled over one that read:

Roses are red
and so is wine
I'd like your PJ next to mine.
Now don't get excited, don't turn red
I mean on the clothesline
not in bed.

At twelve, the youngest in my class at school and the oldest child in my family, I eventually came around to the possible implications of turning red and ending up in bed, but I had first to ponder well beyond my usual frame of reference. I knew almost nothing about sex; three years later, when, while kissing my first boyfriend on my canopy bed one afternoon when my parents were out food shopping, I would pause in utter confusion when he asked me to take him in my mouth. Take what in my mouth?

But here, with my sixth grade autograph book in my lap, I turned the page and found, in shaky block letters,

ASHES TO ASHES
DUST TO DUST
WHO LIKES A GIRL
WITHOUT A BUST?
MIKE CARRUZZI

Mike was in my sixth grade class, but I didn't know him well. I was a serious girl who still wore bangs and long yellow ponytails and gold aviator glasses. I had no sense of irony, worked ardently at my desk without supervision, and hated gym class. He was part of a group of boys -- all with Italian surnames, I realize now -- who wore tee shirts with brand names on them and tight jeans; he kept a plastic comb in his back pocket that several times a day he whipped out and pulled through his thick, dark hair. Mike Carruzzi, Richie Sabatino, Nicky Liantonio. This was the era of The Fonz on TV. It was the Fonz they were imitating, consciously or not, with their combs and defiance. They had female counterparts in the girls I thought of as "Charlie's Angels": Leslie Greca, Gina Burgie, Carolyn Boisits. In fifth grade, Gina had left a trail of pennies from the cafeteria out the school's front door and around to the side of the building. I'd seen a penny and then another one, intrigued, picking up one and jingling it against the others in my cupped hands. Later I looked up and saw Gina and her friends standing against the brick wall near the fire escape. "She's the Jew," I heard. There were two churches in my Long Island town, Saint Gertrude's Catholic on a hill in the center of town and a much smaller Methodist church on a side street. No temple, no church for Unitarians or Mormons. My mother was Jewish, but I didn't see how Gina Burgie would know that, or how my picking up pennies would lead her to that conclusion.

Why did not having a bust make me unlikeable? Why did picking up pennies make me Jewish? The arbitrariness of the world's rules stunned me into inaction. Our school had four cheerleading squads: Army (black), Navy (blue), Air Force (red), Marines (green). More than anything I wanted to be on one of these squads. But -- another lapse in my logic, another thing for me not to understand -- I

couldn't be a cheerleader: I had no bust; I was a Jew.

The ironies are thick here (I understand irony now): my mother, at sixteen, had been a large-breasted cheerleader and a known Jew at her high school, in a part of Long Island where more Jews lived. Dark haired, dark eyed, she'd gotten her period in fourth grade and been an early bloomer. Her breasts were a burden to her. When she found out she was pregnant with me, she wished for a blonde, flat-chested daughter. The goy she would never be.

*

If you type "Queen's Bra Shop London" into Google, the first hit will be Rigby & Peller, the lingerie retailer that has been fitting the royal breasts with undergarments since 1960. It's said that an employee can determine your bra size just by looking at you, in about thirty seconds, without using a tape measure. I learned about this from my friend Francesca, who wears a GG cup, stands five feet tall, and won't buy her bras anywhere else. As I'm tall and flat chested and she's short and busty, we make a funny pair when we go clothes shopping. Once, at Ann Taylor, I tried on a navy blue sheath with white polka dots. The dress made me look like an Emery board, Frankie said. It flattered none of my best points. On her, though, the dress took on shape; the Emery board became an hourglass. She bought the dress. I had never met anyone with such large breasts who wasn't burdened by them. But Frankie looked down at hers with a fond, appreciative expression, even after they popped a button on her shirt.

She visited me in Florence when I taught there one summer and we each bought a Pashmina scarf at a street market. In the sunny early May evening, we sat in my apartment with the windows thrown open and drank wine and ate olives, tomatoes, bread and cheese. After a glass of wine or two, we took off our shirts and wrapped the Pashminas around our bare torsos. I didn't know why we did this but I liked the feeling in the room. We'd been freed from our bras with their confining wire and modesty. There was something comic Frankie and both saw about the ridiculous excess of her breasts and the ridiculous absence of mine. She wore a bra that looked like some sort of naval torpedo contraption; mine resembled nothing so much as a lace handkerchief.

Frankie and I walked to the Brancacci Chapel at the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine to see the famous fresco depicting the agonized Adam and Eve upon their expulsion from Eden. From the restored fresco the fig leaves the Medicis insisted upon having painted to cover Adam's penis have been removed, leaving clearly visible his member for any man who wishes to compare sizes. But I'm most taken with the image of Eve's left hand, thrown across her chest in a gesture of great suffering. The First Woman's arm and hand are sufficient to cover her breasts completely, as is mine.

WENDY RAWLINGS is the author of two books, *The Agnostics*, a novel, and *Come Back Irish*, a collection of short stories. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *AGNI*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and other magazines. She teaches in the MFA program at the University of Alabama and generally prefers cheese to desserts, but has a soft spot for black licorice, especially licorice allsorts.

Dream Child: A Reverie

William Bradley

After Elia

Children love to listen to stories about their elders when they were children; they find it fascinating to know that their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other older relatives once had lives like theirs, spent their summers riding bicycles and playing “Marco Polo” at the public pool, whiled away rainy afternoons watching movies and playing videogames, spent holidays and vacations with the extended family. It was in this spirit that my daughter crept between my wife and me as we sat together on the couch to hear about her great-grandparents— Oscar and Ruth Isaacson and Kenneth and Ruth Cooper on her mother’s side, Billy and Marguerite Garrett and William and Eleanor Cook on mine—and other members of the family who are no longer with us, for one reason or another. Of my wife’s paternal grandparents, there is nothing terribly entertaining to say. They were already quite old by the time Emily knew them, and the stories she tells of the overheated Chicago apartment they lived in, or the boiled chicken they always seemed to eat, are unpleasant without being grotesque or scandalous, which make them uninteresting to our Josephine, who enjoys picking up spiders and would like for us to allow her to get a pet boa constrictor. Kenneth and Ruth are more interesting to her, I think because Emily has more stories to tell about them—tales of learning to bake with Ruth, or learning to respect intellectual achievement from Kenneth, the history professor and textbook author. Kenneth’s study was a massive library, with some books well over a hundred years old even when Emily was a girl. It was a reliquary for knowledge, a place where all of the secrets of the world could be discovered. In hindsight, it was probably the place where Emily decided that she too would devote her life to scholarship and books. And though Josephine enjoys hearing these tales of her mother’s girlhood, I think she prefers hearing about my experiences in my extended family. This might be because we don’t have as many pictures of my relatives in the house or in the photo albums. It might also be that she—young as she is—has already intuited that I do not have the same fondness for my extended family that my wife has for hers. I neither dislike nor like these people all that well—some of them are nice enough, others are not, but none of them are people I tend to interact with beyond a Christmas card exchange and Emily’s annual letter updating the family on Josephine’s progress in school and any developments happening in our careers. But this was not always the case. I used to spend my summers in New Mexico, staying with my father’s mother and step-father (Joseph Bradley, my dad’s dad, had been dead several years by the time I was born). The Garretts—particularly Nana—were quite kind, but the smoke from

their constantly-burning cigarettes would get into my eyes and throat. The combination of smoke with dry desert air would lead to massive nosebleeds for me, the kind that would go on for 30 or sometimes 45 minutes and would sometimes leave me exhausted afterwards. So I would try to spend as much time outside of the house as possible, taking golf lessons with my cousins—Katie, Joey, and Chip—and my brother, Steve. After the morning golf lesson, we would go back to my cousins' house for a quick lunch before deciding how to spend the afternoon. We might go back to the Country Club to spend the rest of the day in the pool, or we might get on bicycles to ride to the convenience store several miles away to buy Cokes and Charleston Chews and *Garbage Pail Kids* (“What are *Garbage Pail Kids*?” Josephine asked. Before I could think of how to explain, Emily said, “They were these silly cards that dorky kids used to waste money on.” To correct her and say, “Actually, they were stickers,” would only confirm my nerdiness to both my wife and daughter, so I don't). This was how we spent every summer, from June until the end of July. Then, we would return to our home in West Virginia in time for my mom to load us into her van and drive us to New Hampshire to see her mother, Nana Cook, as well as my Uncles Brad and Michael, Brad's wife Fran, and my cousins Sue and Kate whose father, my mom's brother Billy, drowned while saving his daughters from an undertow when we were kids. Nana Cook had had a history of psychological problems even before the loss of her eldest son, but she became particularly vicious after he died, telling anyone who would listen—children and adults alike—that my cousins were responsible for their father's death. Stories about Nana Cook fascinate Josephine, and I have to be careful not to make my grandmother sound like some type of witch or other agent of supernatural evil—Josephine has already inherited her father's obsession with horror movies, and I don't want to give the girl nightmares. More importantly, I don't want her to fear the mentally ill or have a two-dimensional understanding of this woman in our family who caused and experienced great pain. Also, I don't want her to think that I disliked these trips to Nana Cook's; it was quite the opposite. We would go fishing on Brad's boat, go to the movies while Nana took my mom shopping, go to the beach with Fran. But most of all, I liked Nana Cook's house for the basement. Nana Cook and her husband, Papa, had moved into the house when I was little, and I imagine Papa might have had some ambitions for the finished basement that went unrealized after his health started to decline. He managed to put a pool table down there, but the ornate wet bar went unstocked, and the area—stretching the entire length of the house—was unfurnished save for a desk and an office chair in a room off to the side, as well as the washer and dryer installed behind folding closet doors. Nana got rid of the pool table after Papa died, but I still loved to play down there, in my own private Batcave (“Because your father was a nerd,” Emily pointed out, an observation to which Josephine giggled her ascent). I conspired to stay on Nana's good side, so she would leave the house to me in her will. I would install the largest, most state-of-the-art computers in this basement, to assist me in my war against crime as surely as Batman's computers helped him. I would even wall off the doorway that led down to the basement and install a fireman's poll in the bathroom that contained the trap door that we tossed our laundry down. At this idea, Josephine loudly reiterated her mother's accusation, “Dad, you're such a nerd,” and something about this accusation made me think of the Superman comic books I loved as a kid, and love to this day. Specifically, it called to mind the Alan Moore-written story “For the Man Who Has Everything,” in which the villainous Mongul uses mind control to fool Superman into thinking that he still lives on Krypton, and is married and raising a son, Van-El. It's a trick, designed to put the Man of Steel in a catatonic state and trap him in his

most cherished fantasy. Of course, Superman eventually realizes he has been tricked (with a little help from Batman, Robin, and Wonder Woman), and he lets go of the illusion, difficult as it is, telling his beloved Van, “You’re my son. I was there at your birth and I’ll always love you, always, but... but Van, I... I don’t think you’re real.” Why did this come back to me at my daughter’s accusation of nerdiness? And why did I look at this child, who looked at once like my wife and like someone I’d never met before, someone whose features grew faint the more I tried to focus on them, as she said, “I am not of Emily, nor of thee, nor am I a child at all.” And then, I remembered the phone call from the fertility clinic 15 years before, the voice on the other end of the line telling me I didn’t need to bother providing a third sample—the chemotherapy treatment had made it so that there was no way I would ever father a child. And I remembered going to take a shower so that no one in the house would hear me crying over the water. And I remembered how Emily and I decided we would adopt a baby when I was 36 and she was 34, once we were settled in our careers and were certain we could afford the expense. But then I lost my job, and we had to live several states apart—sleeping in the same bed during summers and on holidays and some weekends—in order to continue to pursue our career goals as English professors. And I realized I was not sitting on a couch at all, that I didn’t even own a couch anymore, and that neither Josephine nor Emily was beside me. I was alone in this dark apartment. My daughter, my Little Lamb, is nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. She is what might have been, but maybe, maybe, she is also what still might be. I’m older than 36 now, but there might still be time. So she waits upon the tedious shores of Lethe, until the time she can join us and be called Josephine.

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WILLIAM BRADLEY doesn't eat dessert, but he makes a mean ham and green chili quiche. His work has appeared in various magazines and journals, including *Brevity*, *the Missouri Review*, and *the Normal School*, but you don't really care, do you?

You're thinking about that quiche (and you should-- it's delicious). He has recently finished revising an essay collection titled *Cells*, and he'll make a quiche for anyone who owns a press and is willing to publish it.

Kim Addonizio,

I was in the final year of my undergrad, and scared as hell, when my professor handed me your book of poetry, *Tell Me*. The book had a few of his scribbled notes left behind on the pages—*Good slant! Wow, what a list! YES! This just made me remember last night’s dream, Here’s beauty from what is not traditionally beautiful, This nails it!*

That professor never asked for his copy back. So I kept the book with your autograph on the cover: *For Jesse, Cheers!*

I hope he doesn’t mind.

You see, I was in the middle of applying to graduate school. I had no idea where I was going to end up or what I was going to do. I knew I loved writing—but as for a specific type, I had no idea. Yikes.

I met with Professor Millner early every Wednesday with some terribly written poems and we’d work on dissecting and reviving them. He pushed me to keep bringing new material in. And at one point he asked, “Well, what is it that you really want to write a poem about?”

I stumbled with something along the lines of, “I’ve been haunted by the idea of my family’s struggles lately. I just don’t know how to write about them or any of that dark stuff without sounded whiney. I don’t want to send out a collection of diary entries in my application.”

And well, that’s when he reached into his bookshelf and we met.

Your writing is a unique blend of sass and vulnerability. You connect to the reader by eliciting a response, good or bad. As I continue to grow as a writer, I want to take these risks on the page, push boundaries, and move beyond what is safe in writing. Just like you. Awe, shucks.

You’re just—wow, I’m blushing—my woman crush. And I know I might sound like a thief for keeping that book, but I did give him a Starbucks gift card. I do hope that counts for something.

You really are no stranger to poetry or its craft. Your work is for beginners or experts. For poetry haters or lovers. For anyone. You can make anyone feel anything, I swear.

You have the ability to write both honestly and intensely without ever feeling the need to apologize.

Tell Me is an incredibly well written work with reflections on life, love, heartbreak, alcoholism, jealousy, depression, the good, and the bad. These relevant topics stick with the reader long after they've finished reading your work.

I still can't get your lines out of my head. Lines like...

"I love the frosted pints you come in,/and the tall bottles with their uniformed men;/ the bars where you're poured chilled/into shallow glasses, the taste of drowned olives,/and the scrawled benches where I see you/passed impatiently from one mouth to another..." (45).

And "I tell my heart to be patient, that joy returns,/but it doesn't want to listen./It wants to tell me/that the storm comes toward us,/heavy with each named grief,/and slams all the windows/in the empty house" (47).

And when you describe *Last Call* as "it's the house/of the blind, and the dead, of lost loves/who come to claim you, finally, holding open the swinging door, repeating over and over/a name that must be yours" (54).

Or describe alcoholism as, "She sees how he ruins his own beauty,/how he craves the gold pour of rum into the glass/with its single cube of ice, its splash of red juice,/ how the threadlike veins rise to the surface of his cheeks/the way carp in a pond come up for bread" (83).

These lines beg to be read. These words grip, stir, define, and document. They remind the reader of the whirlwind that life is.

Your writing captures a story—all of our stories—of human experience. You uncover realities while being attentive to line and image.

I think that poetry is learning the craft and following instinct. It's about letting the unconscious work to unveil the truths onto the page. It's a healing and response to life. It's of loss and gain. It's the honesty, the persistence, and the vulnerability of the language. It's putting words to an experience that might not yet be defined.

And you do all of that.

So what I'm saying now is thank you. Thank you for inspiring me to address the uncomfortable and the challenging. And many thanks for helping me stay sane through the terrible graduate application process. *Whew!*

With sincere gratitude,
Brittany Cagle