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When the Morning Comes

When the morning comes,
you can rise again,
think again,
live again.

When the morning comes,
you can shake off the night;
drawn by the light,
you make ready for flight.

When the morning comes,
you can leave the safety
of your home, of your nest,
and fly to a brand new place.

When the morning comes,
you can greet the sun,
take to the wing
to meet a new day.

When the morning comes,
you can let go the past,
let it die, with no regrets
as you fly away.
Mr. Hughes, Here is my Theme

Mr. Hughes, when I first read your poem
I thought I got it. It is possible
To be different, in race and sense
Yet come to the same conclusion. After all,
I began to write poems soon after the words
Of a dead, white male opened my eyes
To the sheer brightness of the clear, blue sky.
And in times when I couldn't even talk
To my mother, or text my friends, thumb tied,
I could read his works, and many more,
And be calm.

So when I read your Theme for English B
I thought I got it. I really did. It gave me
Something to look forward to for I soon
Was leaving for America, on a journey
To be a poet like you, and when I found myself
In a college English class, the kind with an
Ascending staircase and a big white board
Where was written POETRY in bold letters
I thought that I was home.

I would soon learn how alone I could be.
I never admitted it then. I refused to. Still do, A little bit. I could never connect with them. They wrote of things too foreign to me, and dull. Though I tried to be nice about it my smile fell Like a surrealist painting, and more so They never tried to connect with me. Even the teacher's couldn't communicate What exactly is poetry? I could dazzle The learned with knowledge of the history of verse or Meter, but that implicit closeness I expected From reading your poem, my beloved Langston I couldn't find all six years of college

A single brown leaf in a sea of white flowers. I crumbled while they bloomed. I still do. Thought I listen to what they do. I watch The same shows. The same Movies. I may read More widely, but I've found some who do too. I'm still different and poetry Hasn't bridged that gap at all. Has it failed? Or have I? I don't know.

I still write, though. Mad, in my desire To find a kingdom with these words, not to Crown myself king or lead a fellowship, But to simply find my kin. I guess that is My theme, Mr. Hughes.
Katey Funderburgh

The Language of Dreamers:
An AmeriCorps Leader’s Reflection on Poverty, Hope, and Car Troubles

The inside of my wrist is tattooed with a pencil. Cliché, perhaps, for an English major but more important to me now than it was when I got it in 2019. It was the start of my Junior year, and I was reeling from an Emily Dickinson poetry class that had shattered my world and proved to me that I had something to say. My tiny pencil tattoo commemorates the discovery of my own voice.

Today, the Montana leaves are colored like millions of tiny wildfires and I am 956 miles from my family. I’m homesick. I’m goose-bumped with end-of-autumn breezes. I teach math, of all things! I’m uprooted and uncertain and untethered but when the sun comes through my windshield and shows me the bejeweled Mission Mountains, my heart drops. I have dreamt of golden prairies and endless forests and I am here now, witnessing it all. I roll my windows down and push my sleeves up, the pencil tattoo riding air down the highway.

I’m only two months into my year of service as an AmeriCorps Leader, but my car has broken down three times already. Of course now, during the most unsteady transition in my young life, is the perfect time for my Crosstrek to require almost my entire savings in repairs. This is the universe’s way of teaching me to release control and trust my path, I’m sure. But embarrassingly, I’ll admit that it has caused me to stress-cry in front of my Subaru mechanic (sorry Kyle). So today, as I drive to my service site, I am thankful for sunshine and big mountains and a car that doesn’t sound like it might explode when the key turns. Little victories.

When I arrive, I walk into a high school classroom and begin by checking in with my math students. I’m learning to know how they are doing just by their eyes, regardless of whether they tell me they’re “just fine” or not. It’s become my priority to show them that their well-being precedes any academic agenda. For these students, asking for help is a complex issue; generational trauma teaches many-- especially those in rural, impoverished America-- that vulnerability is shameful and dangerous. Slowly, these students are allowing me to build trust with them. It feels a lot like my car troubles do-- requiring everything I’ve saved, unpredictable, a gradual accumulation of safety and care. It is not always beautiful. It is always necessary. Some days, very little math gets learned. But I have to believe that having conversations about their
hearts and minds matters more than equations, anyway.

After math, I move myself down the hallways to the middle school art room, where I meet with Upward Bound students. These students are enrolled in a program that helps them through high school and into college. It is my responsibility to provide academic and personal support to help them reach for something outside of high school. On this particular day, I’ve brought paper and markers for a lesson I’ve cleverly titled “Planning for Life.” Discussions questions ready, I welcome my students into the room and explain that today, we are going to creatively represent our dreams for college and beyond.

“Why do you think it’s important to think about your dreams in life?” I pass out supplies. They avoid my eyes, suddenly silent. I wait a few more seconds before uncapping my Expo. “Because high school is just one step. Next comes college and then after that, the rest of your life. You are allowed to dream as big as you want!” I pass around my own crude drawing as an example. Across the whiteboard, I write a few question prompts: What life do you dream of having? What are your goals? How will you accomplish those goals?

Slowly, they take to their own papers. I watch their markers create stick figures, tiny families, airplanes, apartment buildings, colleges, and stethoscopes. They create multicolored worlds, and soon, the room fills with chatter. It isn’t that they did not know how to dream. All students know how to envision big and beautiful worlds beyond our own—that’s why I love high schoolers so much. These students just stumbled with the vocabulary of their futures, sticky in their mouths like bubblegum. Poverty is trapping enough to rob youth of the words needed to bring imaginations into reality. I did not know that allowing yourself to dream is a privilege, but it is; dreams represent the hope of cycles broken, families pulled out of poverty, resources no longer so scarce. Hope is a dangerous thing. It must be protected and nurtured.

The bell rings. I pack up my supplies and say goodbye to my students, but one of them is slow to clean up. She lingers with me as I’m zipping my backpack. “Remember when you taught us about safe sex and condoms?” I laugh. Of course I do. A few weeks ago, my students asked me if I knew about STDs, so I brought them pamphlets from the Health Center. I had some discussion questions planned, but was completely unprepared when they asked me how condoms work. I had nothing except my own hand, so I rolled a condom over my fingers for demonstration. I was trying so hard to appear as a confident, non-judgmental mentor for them. And then I freaked out in my car, hands sticky and heart pounding with the responsibility of educating teens about sex. Gross and weird and wild and real. Life is never what you expect.

The student sticks her tongue out when she remembers the
condom. She giggles. We walk down the hallway together. “It’s like, cra-
yz that you help us with all of that. I liked drawing today,” she says. I tell
her how amazing her dreams are and how excited I am to watch her and
her peers grow.

“You are an incredible human who is going to live an incredible
life.”

“I am?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

And she’s gone, running to catch her friends for lunch. I get in
my car and when it starts, I say a little prayer of gratitude in my head. I
run my thumb over my pencil tattoo. My own voice. The dreams of
teenagers. “Yes.”

They are worth it. This is worth it. For all the times my car has
broken down. For my ruined savings account. For an English major in a
math class. For a condom unrolled in the middle of an art room. For a
whole world that needs everyone in it. A thousand times, yes.
Behind the Screen

Behind the screen, I see the notes; bullets plug in the surfaces—
begin at seven twenty
til' the time outside five
Monday, Wednesday, or Friday:
deadlines are now dead.

Behind the screen, I see the mirror
who exposes who I am,
the contrasts of my image,
the shades of the self,
and all my insecurities
in front of the public.

Behind the screen, I see boxes
where I put all my doubts,
the worries of the moment,
those black and white choices,
and the signs of times
inside this tight cabin.

Behind the screen, I see the shadow
that torments me while I rest.
The shadow never goes away
in the light of the day.
Life concerns file up
on the top of my table.

Behind the screen, I see the real world.
The world I try to pause...
The world I try to leave behind...
those noises and the chaos
that make this world real –
the world behind my door.

Behind the screen, I see the person
skilled at smiling in the morning
and of crying during midnights
whose heart bigger than it was.
Called to love and serve,
I hug my true humanity.
Helping Mom Re-Learn How to Write

Mom learned how to write a simple composition long before I entered the picture. I know it wasn’t easy because for seven years, from ages four through eleven, Mom and her sister bounced from one foster family to another. With each new foster family, they usually switched schools too. Most of the families provided little by way of nourishment and no help with schoolwork. However, by high school, she had become a good student. We have her notebooks from senior year and it’s clear that she had learned how to write an effective composition. After high school, the way she applied her skills in writing composition is by writing letter after letter, by hand, to friends far and wide.

Many years later, after a stroke, Mom came to believe that her dead sister Madeleine and their dead father Frank were coming to visit; had already come and gone; or had disappointed her again by failing to show up. Mom’s delusions drove Dad crazy. “You father never did anything decent while he was alive. Why do you think he’ll do anything now?” And when Dad’s heart gave up as he was hoisting Mom’s wheelchair into the trunk, I inherited Mom, along with Frank and Madeleine.

Inhering Mom meant she had to move to an assisted living facility near where my wife Ginger and I live, over 150 miles from where she and Dad had retired. As a result, Ginger and I were nearly the only regular visitors Mom had. We worked jobs that required long hours, but we visited at least three times weekly and talked with Mom on the phone between visits. It wasn’t unusual for us to visit only to have Mom call an hour later weeping that we hadn’t come to see her in two weeks. Still, Mom was a charmer, and developed friendships with some of the nursing assistants. Though she had selective delusions, her memory was sharp, long- and even short-term. It seemed the only thing she couldn’t quite remember is that we’d been there. Or, perhaps, our presence made her long to be together all the more.

Because Mom was always active in both church and community and had a strong set of friendships created over a lifetime, I wanted to maintain the perception that Mom was as good a communicator as ever. I was confident that, if I could maintain that perception, then others would react to Mom as if little or nothing had changed, and Mom would do her best to prove them right. Even though she was geographically at least four to six hours away by car from her close friends, I felt we could make this work, and Mom said, “Let’s give it a wing.”
The stroke had taken away Mom’s ability to write legibly but left her memory, sense of humor, and desire to maintain social contacts intact. Her circle of close friends consisted of twenty people. Because she had lost the ability to write by hand, I persuaded Mom to dictate periodic letters to me. This was a generic letter that would go to all twenty of her friends. After I read the letter out loud to her and made the changes she requested, I then prodded her to dictate personalized inserts. My job was keying the generic letter, merging the inserts, and mailing the letters after Mom scribbled something resembling a signature. I told Frank and Madeleine they needed to butt out of our letter writing and they got the message.

Everybody knew I was keying the letters, but Mom’s ability to write a coherent composition and her personality came through. Her friends experienced the letters as coming from her, and the letters kept her present in their lives. They could feel the letters came from Mom. Her first began, “Welcome to my estate.” Most friends wrote more letters back than Mom sent out, a few dared to call, a couple even made the long drive to visit. The letters helped maintain the illusion of normal social connectivity while building a record of shared history. And, it gave Mom and her friends a paper record that proved their relationships were still alive. When Mom died, at least three of the friends who came to say their final respects confessed, “She was my best friend.” One added, “I wish I were with her now.”

As we enter the final third of life, it’s common for our circle of close friends to shrink for a multitude of reasons. It’s also not rare to develop impairments that impede our ability to communicate, especially by hand. Mom had selective delusions, but her hearing was perfect, she enunciated clearly, she had a deep desire to nourish connections, and she maintained the knack of promoting connectivity in new relationships. Still, we watched her world shrink during her final three years in assisted living, wheelchair-bound. A project like the one I undertook with Mom to maintain the illusion she was as capable as ever of maintaining friendships really worked. It kept communications going with the close friends she developed over a lifetime and ensured that, when the end came, Mom felt like she was still surrounded by a loving circle of friends. If Mom hadn’t learned in high school how to write a coherent composition, none of this would have been possible.
Edith Ojonumi Sani

Teacher Joe

Dear teacher Joe
Your being was a reservoir of knowledge
The way you watched over your student
Without fear or favour
The way you sacrificed often reminds me
That good people still exist

Dear teacher Joe
Thank you for all you did
The way you corrected and impacted
I still remember how you
Taught my infant hand to hold a pen
And my mouth to read every word
That was written in the pages of my book

I remember your smiles and struggles
You didn’t have much
But your all you gave
You were loved my all
Because of your simplicity and uniqueness

Like a shooting star
You often cross my mind
If I could make a wish
It would be to bring you back
I everyday wish you were here
To see how well you have grown

Although you died
The memories of you never did
If a thousand tears could bring you back
I would cry an ocean.

Author’s note acknowledging a writing teacher who influenced her life: David Adeyemi is also known as Davic the psalmist. He is a writing coach and a digital content creator. He runs an online writing group called the Impulsive Writers, where he helps in training writers with his team. He has given writers like me the platform to groom our talents at no cost.
Sarah Law

Space and Grace in Lockdown London

I am not the only one to notice how strangely time seems to have been behaving these past two years. Pandemic Time is at once achingly slow, and zipping past at a dizzying speed. More or less unpunctuated by regular work or social obligations, our sense of temporality has stuttered and slipped away. Our bodies have moved less widely, interacted with fewer other bodies in word or social environments. But what of our sense of space and place? Most of us have been at home for large stretches of the pandemic, inhabiting our dwelling places far more concentrated than before. Has life under various levels of enclosure and proscription altered both an appreciation of known places, and restructured our need and response to the spaces we frequent? This little essay will unpack a few personal reflections. Perhaps some of them with resonate with you.

Let’s back up for a while. It’s 2019. I’m living the life of a metropolitan introvert. I work from home, writing and teaching online. But I travel into London’s West End regularly, to meet up with my writers’ group in the early hours of the morning once or twice a week (not for nothing is the group called Write and Shine). I love these meetings, especially the regular 7:30a, gathering in the Quaker Meeting House. There’s something especially intimate about walking down a near-deserted central London side street with the dawn glimmering into life. We pour ourselves coffee, and toast bagels, and chat over breakfast in the little community kitchen, and then sit in the gorgeous Quaker library to write in companionable quiet as the day intensifies through the skylight. An hour and a half slip by in blissful creativity. After nine o’clock, the West End has come to life, and my walk back to Piccadilly Circus is through the swirl of city noise; the light is starker, the air less fresh. I pass a small shop selling posters and other pop culture. In its window, there’s a life size holographic cut-out of David Bowie which turns to grace me with a stare as I pass. Just before the country locks down, I notice Holograph-Bowie has disappeared. I should have known that all was not well.

In the before-times, I also shop on Oxford Street occasionally, often at the weekend with my husband. Sometimes we’ll even go to the cinema, perhaps at the gloriously immersive Imax near Waterloo, although more often locally; somewhere like the Holloway Road Odeon where it’s all a bit cosier and nearer to home. I enjoy those outings, the low-key sense of event, the smells of popcorn and carpet and perfume
as distinctive to a local cinema as disinfectant and sickness are to a hospital. This is how the city and its suburbs have been to us for so long it is entirely taken for granted.

Other outings for me include hairdressers, not that I’ve ever liked the experience. Lying prone before a cold sink or sitting damply exposed before a mirror makes me feel vulnerable and awkward rather than pampered. But it’s nice, even in so-called middle age, to feel coiffed for social moments. Every couple of months, one good friend and I catch up with each other at the St Pancras champagne bar. Afterwards, she catches her evening train, and I nudge my way onto the packed Victoria line, still an active Londoner, still flowing through the capital like a corpuscle in healthy circulation.

And there are other frequent routes and destinations for me too. One of them is the two-hour train journey from Liverpool St to Norwich, where I visit my elderly mother. My body knows the routine as much as my mind. Another is attending Mass at the beautiful Anglo-Catholic church of All Saints, Margaret Street, which is a richly decorated but essentially ‘thin’ place, in the sense that its spiritual radiance seems to expand and enclose one beyond the modest proportions of the church building itself.

Well, there we have it. The highways and hostels of my embodied self as they reflect my responsibilities and affinities. In each of them I experience a sort of dwelling. Even the journeys to more ostensible destinations have their familiar patterns. They are routes that have taken root, if you like.

At least, they were.

To paraphrase the famous song lyrics, it’s hard to appreciate this vital architecture of a life until it’s gone. Eclipsed, rather than gone for ever perhaps, although at the start of our first UK lockdown it was difficult to avoid the sense of apocalyptic doom that poured over us like a rolling fog. The virus itself was an invisible miasma that spread and infected faster and further than we could process. The seeping distress that accompanied it was also invisible, but noxious as a London smog of previous centuries. For those strange, fearful months we had lost our places. Instead, home life became a swollen locus of existence as the world around it shrunk into closure.

Of course, I am aware that I’m writing this from a position of relative privilege. As a couple, my husband and I live simply enough and knew we would have money to pay the rent for a while yet. We don’t have children to suddenly home-school. My elderly mother at least had her daily caregivers who continued to visit and look after her throughout the periods of restriction. In some ways, the lockdown simplified, pared-down the possible, removed vacillation regarding whether one would or wouldn’t attend something. One would not.
But it is a fool’s errand to attempt to quantify distress. As the lockdown tightened its isolating grip, I found myself struggling with an almost existential sense of displacement. Having lost my spatial contexts as they had been mapped over the days and the weeks, a lonely floundering set in. I was in danger of feeling displaced in my own home.

The rest of this essay will look at the reformulation of space and community as I experienced it.

Let’s start at the day’s beginning. Living in London, the first thing I notice in those strange April days is the lack of noise. Traffic is at an absolute minimum. Overhead planes are notable by their absence. An uneasy silence blooms. Our cats are spooked by the lack of auditory bearings. On Write and Shine mornings, I am no longer rushing to take the tube to a café or library. But we do what we can. Gemma our indefatigable coordinator sets up a regular 7:30 am Zoom meeting. We gather onscreen from our own sofas and share our emotional dislocation. We name check each other, use break-out rooms – note the ongoing spatial vocabulary – share pieces electronically, and write. My husband presents me with a croissant from his early-morning supermarket raid. I feel embarrassed eating onscreen, so turn off my camera while I do so, and notice others doing the same. Having mastered the tech, and done my best with prompts and freewrites, I feel a burst of success, enhanced by the shared tenure of the meeting. It is my first pandemic-initiated translation into virtual community. We have all touched base – furthermore, more of us have joined, from Westray in the Orkneys, to others in mainland Europe.

I am beyond grateful for this ongoing community. Yet in lockdown, I struggle with it too. Part of the difficulty, is, ironically, a lack of difficulty. Much as I struggled with the early-hour tube journeys to our real-world meetings, the adrenaline rush involved was met perfectly by the real-world company of others, the tables laid with coffee, pastries, and our open notebooks. I missed the atmospheric variety of our meeting places, which also included antiques shop cafes, and hidden coffee shops behind the British Museum. I missed the tangential chats and the synergy of writing together in a place made alive by our collective energies. I even missed the buzz of tubing it home; of bursting into the door having had my outing and been refreshed by our writers’ equivalent of breaking bread and sharing space with like-minded others.

I’m sorry to say that by the end of our Zoom meetings I felt the sugar slump more than I’d felt the creative high, and often ended up napping the rest of the morning away on the same sofa where I’d started with far higher expectations. I’m willing to confess that my not being a natural morning person has a lot to do with this. But for me, nothing has quite replaced the spatial materiality of a group inhabiting our capital’s writerly niches, and all the brisk rituals of arriving and departing therefrom. One day, I hope, our community with reform with a joyful hallow-
ing of place as well as time.

And what about those close-contact activities without which any semblance of personal care gradually declines? Well, I’ve had to hold off on dentists and opticians. I’m just hoping that relatively clean living will tide me over on these two. Although I confess to visiting the ‘emergency domestic bar’ (two boxes of wine chilling at the bottom of the fridge) a few evenings a week with my husband, it’s true. But another routine in the kitchen has fostered an intimacy of its own, and that’s our mutual haircutting. My husband likes a cut every couple of weeks or so, and although we haven’t organised ourselves quite that regularly, I’ve found – we’ve both found – a renewed intimacy in this task of personal grooming. Nervous at first, I’ve become accustomed to the buzz and heft of the shaver as I run it over his head and his thick fair hair is cropped back to a respectable shape. Occasionally I’ve hesitated to apply the correct pressure and he’s flinched in response; I’ve learned a confident momentum is best. We perch my laptop in front of us on a box of cat food on the kitchen table. Photobooth allows us to see me at work, a semblance of the barbers. I lean in, relishing the press of my body against his. We have not left the flat, and yet we have been on a date.

Just occasionally, I’ve let him trim my hair too. Longer, never fancily styled, my locks have simply grown bedraggled over pandemic time. So, I dampen and comb them, and take my seat before the laptop. My husband wields the wiped-clean kitchen scissors and carefully trims an inch from the ends. It’s a simple enough process, but I experience a soft shock of trust as I see his bare arm flex in the laptop image and hear the shearing of my own hair as he gently closes the blades. We catch each other’s gaze onscreen. Nothing is said. Nothing needs to be said. We discover the grace and ease of this domestic sacrament.

Finally, speaking of sacraments, my slipshod churchgoing is unexpectedly transformed over the course of the year by the safety net of online worship. This might be a very personal response, but I have come strongly to believe that praying ‘alongside’, as a daily Mass or other service is livestreamed, allows both a punctuation to an otherwise unstructured day, and is also a means to become aware of invisible others praying alongside me. Far from passive viewing, my sense of being hidden and held within a dispersed congregation has felt proactive, and intensely nourishing. I am not required to interact on a social level, which leaves me free to place my attention on the rites and rituals as they unfold. As my soul settles, I offer my petitions for a global remission of illness and isolation. Restoration of the sick; consolation for the afflicted, as one prayer puts it. I belong to a community of hidden souls, all of us glowing like night lights over a darkened skyline. I am a part of something so much bigger than myself. And this insight at least I will retain as we emerge, blinking and hopeful, into a reopened world.
Elizabeth Jorgensen

A Classroom, Covid Brain

She asks to use the bathroom every class.
She’s not trying to be a sass.
She says her brain feels glazed,
and sometimes, she’s gone for what feels like days.
Her guidance counselor thanks me,
offers to buy me tea,
says, “She responds to your smile.”
But no matter my style,
or even how often I’m nice,
how good my advice,
the same, daily claim:
“Can I go to the bathroom?” She points to her brain.
She’s about to confess:
“I’m stressed.”
I wish I could help her cope,
reduce her mope,
give her hope,
prevent her flee,
and most of all: keep her
in the classroom, with her classmates
and me.
What’s happening now
our world is decaying
we are hurtling headlong
into anarchy
and in our anger
we dig deep
into primordial emotion
fight or flight
stay or go
just keep shooting
there are no easy answers
there never are
but somehow and someway
we need to make that choice
between the red pill and the blue pill
and in that choice
we define our soul
as it accelerates beyond
the speed of light
into dark matter
beyond the event horizon
into the red shift of galaxies
hurtling headlong
away from our center
away from our core
like what’s happening right now
in our cities and in our towns
just keep shooting
reloading the magazine
it doesn’t fucking matter anymore
since no one gives a shit
running rampant
bullets in the brain
blood in the drain
where does it end
or does it
as we descend
back to savagery
lords of flies
roasting human hip loins
pungent with the stench
of seared flesh
apologize pull out his eye.
In 2012, while some charlatan swindled believers into selling off all of their material possessions by predicting the end of the world—a specific date which changed two or three times that year—I worked a second job after teaching college writing so that my now wife and I could afford a wedding reception. While enduring jokes about whose world was actually coming to an end, I ended up working in a warehouse for a busy Best Buy establishment set on the edge of a massive retail area West of Pittsburgh. Though I too often wondered if I could stick around long enough given my low tolerance for people and their rampant entitlement, I ended up staying on until six months after the wedding, well over a year of gainful employment—including two Black Friday sales that, thankfully, resulted in no trampling—and only several months before I moved to Mississippi. Had I known we would eventually make the move, I would have toughed out the long days grading papers and portfolios before a holiday shift of unloading trucks or waking up at 4am on Sunday mornings to scan and replace price tags. Instead, schedule makers had forced my hand by rewarding an innate ability to avoid screwing up basic tasks with increasingly more hours, too much a drain on what I considered my primary job and concern: underpaid adjunct instruction.

But the grind of trying to break into academia began to break me and I looked forward to doing something else that came easily enough. Working the warehouse required that we mostly unload product from a truck and onto shelves that wouldn’t fit the boxes that belonged on them. Sales floor employees often watched, encouraging us with deeply profound sarcasm like, “can’t you work any faster?” Of course, we probably could have, but nothing killed morale quite like trailers packed by a reincarnation of Jackson Pollock. With the heavier stuff on top, these abstract artists seemed to load smaller items first, placing them at the bottom out of some sick pleasure with bigger boxes on top, then buffered it all with refrigerators, washers, driers, stoves, and seventy inch televisions. It became a badge of honor when we each would inevitably have to surf an avalanche of poorly packed product when we lost a game of warehouse Jenga. Still, it could be invigorating. Any other day, if I wasn’t standing in front of a classroom trying to convince adult children (and myself, also somewhat of an adult child) that the standardized text applied to our contemporary writing lives, I was sitting at a desk behind a computer reading their work or teasing out my own silly fiction and poetry.
I wanted a physical job, one that wouldn’t require much thought or concern or anxiety about a semester-by-semester contract that could hurdle me toward unemployment any given Fall or Spring. I could speak freely to the swear-happy crew of reprobates in the warehouse as opposed to the demure instructors two to three times my age. It seemed bad enough I received my first interview based merely upon knowing someone who knew someone (a cronyism which has changed very little in my fifteen years of teaching), but I also felt ignorant of grammar and the ability to write well.

Such anxiety toward my own teaching and issues in academia frustrated me enough to reconsider a career in higher education. The question still lingers; why bother with smarmy academics and their theory of the moment? Or with precious writers unable to evolve with pointed, constructive criticism? Or with administrators inside English departments and literary magazines who speak with more empty corporate-ease than a Mark Zuckerberg wannabe? It all felt, and largely still feels, so impersonal.

When I moved away for the first time to attend a state university, I did so passing up an opportunity to manage a small hobby shop where I entertained coworkers with often obscene, satirical takes on mall memos. A decade later, I guess I had missed the business and the camaraderie it could bring when going to work in the warehouse. Upon my return to retail, with it going as well as working retail can go, the contemplation of giving it all up for anything else began to sound... okay-ish. The warehouse job had offered a break of sorts, a way to put things in perspective; perhaps it even offered a safety net from the insular cinder block walls of a university. Though returning to retail had indeed negatively reinforced why I bothered earning a degree at all, I ended up pretty good at the job and moving up seemed not just possible, but fairly simple.

After my first few months working retail again, the store saw major turnover in management. I found myself the crafty veteran who earned credibility with others by moving swiftly around the store, not breaking or stealing anything, and bothering to show the newbies something once in a while. It earned enough trust that people in charge began scheduling me to close the warehouse on occasion. Among my responsibilities then, management wanted recaps from every department sent via internal email. This entailed a rundown of events, successes and failures, challenges or obstacles, and plans moving forward to complete daily, weekly, and possibly even monthly tasks. Though it seemed like busy work for higher ups to feel better about their leadership, I used the opportunity to make us look good, or to shift any possible heat on us elsewhere (like not finishing unloading a delivery).
I took notes over my shift prior to typing the recap about occurrences or what needed to be completed, forming them further by chatting with anyone who happened to be working to see about the day’s events in and around the warehouse. Sometimes a co-worker or manager would call into the warehouse and I’d take their temperature on things. Maybe someone failed to show up, or a smaller morning delivery arrived late or not at all, or a special order never came through the system (or worse, a customer trying to pick up a special order that we didn’t have), or some other odd circumstance preventing us from finishing the usual work of stocking shelves or fixing those annoying product alarms that go off every five minutes.

That I performed the writing process and acted as a guide—or instructor—to newer employees in the warehouse didn’t occur to me until I ended up teaching first year writing courses in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. My only goals in retail had always been to go home early and maintain autonomy toward doing our jobs while playing ridiculous games like Indiana Jones. But in doing so, I ended up helping along the way, like with my immediate manager, a guy younger than me trying to move up the store hierarchy. He had been the one to hire me on the spot when I told him the warehouse would be a second job to my teaching college writing courses. I liked him and his energy, a cherubic smiler always on point and willing to listen to others and make himself the butt of a joke. He was my direct supervisor, yet constantly asked me for advice about the store, like where to put product. Whether he knew it or not, he made people feel valued. And the man needed some help writing emails to his superiors.

The rest of my coworkers began learning about what they called “my real job,” an erudite among the unrefined, a guy who went to Panera Bread for lunch—if he could afford to eat at all—rather than McDonald’s. Yet, instead of the feared passive aggressive laments over failing a course by some draconian instructor taking off entire letter grades for misplaced commas, many asked for advice on how to approach faculty, how to balance their work-school-life schedule, and yes, how to write. When they wanted advice on how to succeed in school, I generally told them to show up, do the work, and don’t fall asleep. “And stay off your phone,” I would almost always add.

When they tried telling me they were too dumb for school, I delighted in telling them that I barely graduated high school and failed the very course I ended up teaching more than any other (Research Writing) in my career. I liked telling them that I passed the course when I, unsurprisingly, shed my attitude about school and decided to show up and put forth an effort. One cannot learn much passively, like if we merely talk about writing, students will know exactly what to do. We need to practice it. In that sense, anyone can learn to write; I am walking, talking, typing proof of it.
I find myself relating this experience to first-year writing students much more often, imploring them to understand that they cannot avoid facets of the writing process. They will lie to themselves much like I had done in my attempt to find work outside of my primary career. We probably can’t force the writing process on those who resist it with the ignorant power of a thousand suns, but we can remind everyone of its intrusion upon our lives, even if only through the internet alone. Still, we deal with it elsewhere too. The all day Sunday advertisements with a bit of football in between; the incessant news articles pushed to our phones; the internal communication of our employers. Even our favorite reality television show requires story editors and back end processes to make the show function; behind every Kardashian is someone planning out how to publicize a Kardashian behind. The writing process implores us to look a little harder at what we read and watch and interpret, and then wonder and explore why we do it.

Like many of my students wary of the process, I can cry “I suck as a writer” too and show them hundreds of rejections over the years. I tell them the same thing I tell myself in jest: “Well, maybe it’s time to stop sucking then.” Nervous laughter often ensues. So I share my experiences, and that even after committing to writing and its teaching for so long, I still try to get away from it and the anxiety it brings in relation to colleagues and their prowess, or students and their wanton dismissal of it. And yet, the creeping desire of creativity, the sensation of needing to get it down on the page, electronic or otherwise, never leaves, the sense that we’re in this whether we like or not, indelible.
Teaching Sophomore English*

My class sits in a six by six cube, I read the section of *Huckleberry Finn* to them where Pap’s wrath and delirium tremens cause Huck to fabricate his escape plans. They ask, Have you ever cut-out,

*do you really want to be here*

*teaching us while the sun is shining*

*and feel it on your face when*

*the bugs haven’t come out yet,*

*Can’t we sit on a sheet, pretend*

*it’s the raft, you can be Jim*

*and read to us outside*

*about the simple Mississippi*

*without tests and quizzes,*

*making the team, PSAT’s,*

*being smaller than Freshmen,*

*just to float like Huck,*

*loll in the grass...*

I remind them of the sun
In their eyes, the wet grass they’ll have to sit on, the inevitability of black flies, the hunger of wasps and hornets until a few switch sides and they argue back and forth—
I read in a low tone until
they come back, sedition defeated,
Huck smears pig blood and wishes
Tom were with him—

They start a letter to a friend
about their devious plan to break
them out of school without getting
caught.

~~~

A new student opens the door,
holds some kind of science project
with feathers—I point to the corner
with skateboards, softball
gloves, tennis racquets,

and track shoes—the new
student folds his greasy wings,

and sits on his hands.

A new admit slip, program, schedule,

emergency contact form and its

protracted fear balance on his knee

until I help him up,

open a folding chair-desk,

and give him a copy of *Huckleberry Finn*

—he rolls his eyes then mimics

a smirk I remember,

but can’t place—

an unusual silence
flies across the room
like lost quillst

~ ~ ~
The class ogles from
behind their blue and orange
bangs, their brand name t-shirts
and cargo pants, their yanked down
midriff shirts, hiked up hip-pants
—they see him, blond and too tan
for May. His eyes go from
window to window beyond
the parking lot. He feel
their singular stare—
answers the murmuring room
—Icarus, my name’s Icarus.

Says he’s an exchange student
from an Island near Crete
and I think, where’s the segue here?

The bell rings, I call him to my desk.
—We’re halfway through...
—Already read it.

You like its symbolism:
the river of life, the evil
land of civilization, the avid rogue,

the voice of the narrator,

irreverent innocence, triumph

of the individual—

shall I go on?

—What do you like?

—Triumph of the individual,

    of course.

—Go on.

—Figure it out for yourself,

    I got places to be.

—Wait a minute, you can’t
do as you like, we have rules here.

He grabs his wings,

heads out the door.

—Hey! Now, I have
to call the office.

I’m calling the office.

~ ~ ~

I call the office. I write
this disciplinary referral,
and when I see him weaving
between the cars in the parking lot,
I call the office. Again.

He falls on his chest, clamps wings and harness to his back. Rolls up, runs headlong into the wind. Elbows back above his shoulders, he crouches, then like a gymnast leaving the pommel horse, vaults himself into the air.

I’m still clutching my facsimile of the original Huckleberry Finn—it’s the smile; his elation as he took off revealed the Tom Sawyer in me.

*Previously published in *The WatchTower, Spring 2007 and Vox Populus, 2011*
Senioritis

Howard split a fifth of Tanqueray and puffed on a poorly rolled joint and drank more at lunch—all with Peter—and he had just barely made it through his last class without feeling like he needed to vomit. Now, recovering like a sparrow devoured by chance after an unexpected flight of fear, he sat in math class, numbers senseless and unfollowable, leading to the same miserable self-embarrassment day after day, indigo and flower extract—Lisa’s fragrance—sweet as his grandma’s iced tea—billowing from taste to feeling as he thought about how it wouldn’t be much longer. At lunch, he did nothing but talk about her.

“I think tonight might be the night,” he told Peter, passing the warm metal flask.

Peter took a swig, his jean jacket in the wind like a serene and frayed cape. The forest rocked around them. “Oh, yeah, man, you deserve it. And I got a good feeling.” Peter tossed him the flask. “Think fast,” he said. Xavier dropped it and Peter squinted at him as though their friendship confused him and he said, “Not too fast in your case. Let it come to you.”

Xavier picked up the flask. It was empty.

“Party’s over,” Peter said, slinging his backpack around his shoulder.

They carefully started back the quickest way possible, reciprocating an understanding buzz and laughing at how it was all about to be different.

That’s why when Xavier woke up and blinked a dozen times Peter’s laughter and an unwilled peacefulness like some faraway wind’s hissing gave his repressed shame a place to be lonely, unwinding rhythms deep in his head. Numbers still equaled letters? He looked at the clock. Less than two minutes were left. Silently, no one paid attention. Old Mr. Dawkins spoke to the blackboard, his handwriting attached to his voice, which was lazy, and he knew those last days before graduation as some forty years of farewells compiled into a few hugs and well-wishes. He knew no one cared right now, that there were more important things on their minds, and he knew that they’d start packing up earlier and earlier.
Xavier was first. The shuffling of his books and backpack pushed forward tomorrow’s baseline and then someone else followed suit and then the teacher accepted that he had to stop and turned around, his glasses too small for his face as he sighed himself to balance, awestruck by how all those seconds had become minutes and days and then weeks and then so many years, as he was on all those last Mondays. His students waited for him to excuse them though.

Xavier departed like he’d been released from trial proven innocent of a crime he had committed and he entered into the halls’ necessitated near-chaos. Growing more nauseous as the familiar disoriented for penance and due to the spinning and his impatience, he changed his labored and unreasoned route to the nearest bathroom but he did not make it. A group of freshman and sophomore girls stopped talking about how cute his brother was. The clattering of Xavier’s puke and bile interrupted them. The smell of overflowed hot sewage rose and an expanding crowd gathered.

He escaped upstairs and turned into his science class’s room, on guard and alert enough to notice that some guy, who looked like he was a student but wore a suit, was standing in front of the board, observing them as though from a greater distance than he actually was, interested in the alchemy more than the individual, their lightheartedness and unbridleness—their freedom and compensation—an all-healing elixir that wound those passions which drove him.

“Happy Monday, ladies and gentlemen,” he said without delay once everyone was seated. “My name is Mr. Xavieres. I’ll be your teacher for the rest of this week. Mrs. Connop got in a car accident this weekend. Your principal, Dr. Walton, said it was not that serious but Mrs. Connop will have until next year to recover. He told me to let you know that she’s staying at St. Katherine’s Hospital for the next two days at least and he encourages you to go visit her.” He repeated what happened to this woman he’d never known, reinventing some tragic scene with the cinematic part of his mind, bringing it back to life hour after hour. Then, he did a roll call.

“It’s great to meet each of you,” Mr. Howard said robotically. “Now we only got a week, but I will do the best with your names that I can.” There was a moment of not knowing how to transition—the fatigue one feels as the finish line becomes visible for the first time. “Looks like we are on page 236 in your books.” Compelling the students by habit, leaning on their respect and newfound sympathy, he opened his and waited for each of them to open theirs. “Butylated hydroxytoluene is a compound that companies add to food to preserve color and flavor. It’s fifteen parts carbon and twenty-four parts oxygen,” he read, conceiving attachment and more meaning like an actor. “Three experiments were conducted. In the first experiment a hundred and fifty milliliters were prepared.”
As Mr. Howard’s voice found a comfortable tone, Xavier’s head began to nod until his chin rested on his chest. His eyes blinked at a decreasing rate and then closed. His head still bobbing, he heard Mr. Howard say, “So if we look at table two,” and he looked at the table and feel to sleep within seconds. The tranquil sleight of hand of a dream blossomed out of the electric-like lines that separated the darkness and undefeated shadows trailed him and Lisa while they stood next to each making a right angle like two empty streets about to intersect without lights, fate, or reason governing what moved above them. He felt formless but paid no attention to this feeling because of Lisa’s voice. “You won’t never understand your love. It’s something too special and you won’t never want to understand it neither,” she said with the warmth of a much needed rain during the summertime, exuding potential and all that he believed she could be, her eyes looking at him in a way he could never have imagined in real life. His palms stretched as wide as his fingers would go to her voice like it would mold him. He pried himself back awake having determined a hole in the dream’s logic and blinked the cloudiness out of his eyes.

Fully recommitted to his cause, Mr. Howard was saying, “So really all that you see and all that you will ever see is the past—each of the little moments—everything—and everyone who’s been in your life. All that’s the past. So really one could say that the future will just reflect the past. Maybe? Does now reflect your past? That thought even—is just what I’m talking about. Light, ladies and gentlemen.”

Xavier stopped paying attention, seeing no need to. Disregard, unfulfilled suspense, sober thoughts, and not being all there led him back to his dream and Lisa’s ubiquitous voice, a salvation beyond him. “Do you remember when we were younger and we’d sneak into the R-rated movies. You loved me even then?” she asked in his arms, an unveiled cold blue sky revealing the last minutes of a desire reflected in the clear puddles he had taken from a dream to dream. “We’d danced to the radio. Do you see?” His thoughts convexed ecstasy and deepened their fates, connecting them like a tunnel. “You loved me then,” she told him, the liquid form of her most distilled memories funneling through her as the solid form melted away and she started dancing, becoming less and less, to music that Xavier could not hear, praising and worshipping that weaving and alive legato, wanting to hold and kiss him, wanting her pure heart to sustain those movements, what logic made her most natural incarnation like water under his bare feet that he could move through forever.

Falling with motivation, showing mercy to the dreamer, a faithless dark blinded him before she was gone and he woke up, his vision blurry and uncertain, his left hand still asleep, the room empty. He heard a voice that he did not recognize repeating his name.

“Xavier? Locke? Xavier Locke?”
Landing one lanky and drunken ballplayer’s step, awkward and too soon, he tried to stand.

“You Ron and Vera’s boy?”

As though he had been trapped by the promise of freedom, Xavier said, “I was.” Not sure where they were heading, recovering all those unseen parts that they’d taken him through, his legs, undecided as to whether they should fight or flee, stuck him in that brief soundlessness that was like a space of non-existing—the being strong that was often requested of him. “I loved your mother very dearly. She was special. She was by far the best singer I’ve ever seen,” Mr. Howard said without much behind his eyes, not looking at Xavier, but looking at a poster of the visible spectrum that was taped to the wall. “Christ, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I can remember those lullabies.” Xavier nodded and left, uncontrolled. His next class was World History. Gratefulness mellowed him. Lisa sat next to him even though there were no assigned seats. He had less memories of his father. He had not yet become skeptical of oneness. Lisa, who he experienced each time at the end day, spellbound him to the point where he never learned much about the world’s history. After class she told him she had a family dinner but said she would be at his house at seven-thirty sharp. She was mad about being tested that last week and went on a tangent to Xavier about this and that and then she hugged him for listening. She expected him to be flabbergasted. She got nostalgic like a weeping willow inches from touching the ground and said goodbye close to his ear with the intention of teasing him.

Xavier couldn’t account for how he got to the forest. Peter arrived and they did their secret handshake, which was only a few years younger than they were.

Peter pulled out the trusty flask, unscrewed it, and gulped. They started down the path that they’d invented freshman year.

“You good? All set?” Peter asked, drinking without getting drunker—the taste offsetting, pains offsetting.

Xavier nodded. He saw the light popping in the corners of his vision. “Give it here,” he said. Peter tossed him the flask. This time he caught it one-handed like a wide receiver.

“You better slow down, boy. You already drunk as hell.” They entered Xavier’s neighborhood, this retired ghetto somehow kept dignified by its inhabitants. “How about dinner?” Peter said. Xavier raised the flask. “Here, here.” He drank and handed it to Peter, who drank and tucked the flask into a special part of his backpack and started on this anxious and cryptic spiel about how pointless education was considering all the circumstances and the odds, his voice unraveling into a line
that made Xavier have to force himself not to vomit.

Instead, Xavier guessed what his grandma had cooked. Right after he opened the door, that sweet Cajun smell of fried catfish floating through the air as though the air’s ability could never fully be known glued his senses together and he felt his warm heart beating. Xavier breathed it in deeply until he sneezed. His younger brother, Benny, ran up to him. He asked Xavier if he was ready. Xavier stopped murmuring, “I’m good,” to himself and said, “Ready for what?”

“Ball. Wednesday you said you couldn’t play because you had homework and then you said you couldn’t on Friday because you were doing something with Peter and then you said you couldn’t play on Saturday because you were tiiiiiired, then you said you couldn’t on Sunday because it was the Sabbath. I’m starting to think that you’re dodging me.”

“Me dodging you?”

“Yeah. Like a little scaredy-cat. Who’s afraid of losing.”

“Yeah right. We’ll go after dinner.”

Benny said, “Eat up. You’re gonna need it.” He ran by Peter, who had been listening and was already on his second plate. Xavier grabbed a big filet and drank a cold glass of water.

Peter foresaw the best with Xavier like a visionary guiding one of his people. They explored as many angles and possibilities as they could. Peter wished him luck. They did their secret handshake and Peter went out the side door and immediately started drinking his usual homeward share that stung but kept the impending and inevitable violence bearable.

Less than a minute after the door shut, Benny yelled Xavier’s name.

“Let’s go. It’s getting cooler. No more excuses, Xavier. It’s the perfect time. We’ll get back just around Grandma’s bedtime.”

“You got an hour. I got a girl coming through.”

“Sure you do. Sure you do.”

The way there, Benny moved from foot to foot like a boxer warming up before a defining match versus prophecy, unable to fathom that glory evaporates out of reach. Still they went at Xavier’s pace. Benny played against his shadow and for form’s sake. Xavier had no objective.

They turned onto the street and saw that the park was unoccupied, neglected, and Benny heaved a long shot at the edge of the court. It went through the chainless metal rim without noise. Benny got the ball
almost before it hit the ground. His energy motivated as though the angel Gabriel had visited him the night before. Benny crossed over and shoulder faked and faded away and that miracle went in with the same noiselessness. “First to fifteen,” Benny said, the ball bouncing back to him like those hours he had spent practicing that weekend had forged an attraction. “Check.” He tossed Xavier the ball like it was a four-leaf clover and Xavier tossed it back to him like it was heavy. “Oh, and win by two, of course.” Xavier bent into a stiff defensive stance. Benny jab-stepped left. Maintaining eye contact, exhaling with his first step into Xavier’s ear, he drove to the basket and finger-rolled the ball in. Xavier couldn’t even turn fast enough, their reactions reflexive and betraying—Xavier coughing, trying to loosen up his whole body with one stretch, Benny with the ball again, working desire and achievement into his sole purpose, this test seemingly on everything he knew, his body and face unreadable.

“Check,” Benny said, recognizing what time it was by his shadow’s length, and Xavier tossed the ball back stronger than before.

Benny took a dribble, got free, and pulled up. “Two nothing,” he said before the shot when in.

After that Xavier made him earn everything, adding a bloodsport component, and picking up cheap buckets whenever he could. He’d knock Benny down and look at him like nature might look at its animals while exacting cruelty.

Xavier only said, “12-10, right? Win by two?”

Sweat-salted Tanqueray pursed Xavier’s lips. Down 14-11 and coming to bitter acceptance like the outnumbered, he licked them to no avail, his memory’s muscles as unreliable and weakened as his body’s. Xavier guessed what time it could possibly be, losing focus to the untying darkness preluding what looked like a stormy night. Benny saw his chance and dribbled two steps back and heaved an ill-formed shot that hit the backboard and boinged on the rim and went in.

“Bennyboy, congratulations, bud,” Xavier said and his hands dropped to his knees. “No, you know what, you don’t deserve no congratulations. You at your best beat me at my worst. That’s what it took.”

“Your worst?”

“Yeah, my worst, Benny,” Xavier said almost in a whisper, his breathing forced and conscious. “I’ve been drunk since Thursday damn near so my body ain’t right and I got a date with my dreamgirl so I can’t even think about no game and—so good for you, Bennyboy.” He mocked applause, clapping his hands in Benny’s face.

“Excuses, excuses,” Benny shouted.
“I know one thing. I know you ain’t never beat me before and you won’t never beat me again,” Xavier shouted back.

“You ain’t never gonna beat me again. I won’t let it happen,” Benny said.

Xavier didn’t respond and just started heading home in the hurry that he was in. He had thirty minutes, exhausted, sore, swallowing nothing in hopes of somehow helping his empty and bubbling stomach. He abdicated to time like a prophet because he understood that curves bend just as easily the other way. Benny followed him with a vanquisher’s regretful pride. Xavier remained the same amount of steps ahead and didn’t say anything. He made sure he got in the shower first. The water lustrating, as old cares seemed to spiral down the drain too, he hummed “Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be),” embellishing where he wanted, conceptualizing Doris Day as either yin or yang to Lisa’s touch kneading the pain from his aching muscles.

He turned the shower off, nature claiming his body, and he dried off quickly and went to his room and got dressed and laid on top of his sheets and waited for Lisa, all dizzy. Her knock opened his eyes. He heard his grandma talking to her at the door. Their voices buzzed and rejuvenated him and he kip-uped out of bed like an insuppressible martial artist. He ran to the door, saying her name.

They looked at him like he was just a little boy and they were two women, branches of that same nature, smiling for young and old reasons. Lisa told his grandma that it was nice to meet her. Then Lisa went towards him as though she were one his grandma’s daydreams about girlhood, a strand of emotion that the old woman associated with daises. Content and hopeful, she watched them go, continuing along that daydream until it splintered off.

They sat on the floor of Xavier’s bedroom as though they weren’t the same age. Her scent jaded the room and passed into Xavier lungs. Their test was on Mongolian culture. Lisa understood history with empathy. She explained that all great leaders returned home constantly. Home and the idea of returning triggered something in Xavier—movement but getting nowhere, which he related to graduation and the unchanging nowhere that he believed would follow. He thought of him leaving her or her leaving him and then coming back to emptiness and what leadership was and how not having her was the same as him not telling her all he wanted to and her not saying all she had to say to him.

He said, “I see what mean and I definitely agree with you.”

“Okay? You understand that concept then? Because I’m sure that will be on the test.”

“Yeah.”
“Good. We’ve been talking a lot about what makes each leader from every society different. Self-control, letting their people be as free as possible,” she pointed to a picture in the book. “But they also inspire fear among the rich.” Xavier looked at her finger, darker at the knuckle, nails painted intricately, and he saw a Mongolian in armor decapitating a Turk in silk. He couldn’t wrap his head around killing for happiness, the cycle that Lisa regarded as natural from origin to now. “What I find fascinating is that they all prayed and looked for guidance from above. These people called it the Eternal Blue Sky.”

With his back against the wall, tolerating his soreness, the rain coming down for the first time that year through a strong wind that re-arranged the meddling dust throughout the night—warmly and unwarranted and all around—he fell asleep while Lisa went to the bathroom. She came back to something that was peaceful and she felt blessed to witness a boy so vulnerable and under no pressure, the strips of street-light entering in between the blinds, an unbroken pattern, his hypnotic gentle breathing like a lost rhythm in the stillness. She sat and studied more. Then she grabbed all of his pillows and placed them on the floor by his feet and laid back and equated King Lear to Genghis Khan, the last thing she’d think before waking up at noon the next day.

Then she thought, the light now the sun’s, oh my, Lisa, where are you? No, no, you didn’t. Xavier. Xaiver. This boy loves you you know because you can feel it but he won’t know how to love right but there is no such thing as loving right or wrong. You’ll need a man that much is true not always—you’ll want a man—to keep you warm—on certain nights—you love him—they can get colder they can definitely get colder—love is what—what, Lisa? She whispered his name like she was incanting a mantra. His eyes opened in a newborn way and that was how he looked around the room too.

“Lisa,” he said as though her name were his way to life. “Lisa.” He saw the sunlight. “What time is it? Good God, what are you doing here?”

She marveled at the window’s view of the mending sky like a castaway waiting for someone and assimilated those illusions that her dreams had told her she had to make real: the sun and the passing of time and her place within it all.

“It’s right around eight,” she said, “and I don’t know what I’m doing. We fell asleep.”

“Together?”

“Studying.”

“Wait. You said it’s eight?”

“Yes, the sun is lifted just above the horizon and...”
“My grandma. She wakes me and Benny up at 7:30 every morning.”

His hangover slithered, throbbing, from the back of his head to the middle of his forehead. He rushed to Benny’s room. Benny was wrapped in his Superman sheets and then Xavier rushed faster to his grandma’s bedroom.

Cold air swelled as though removed from this world, silent and intimate, as Xavier’s shadow couldn’t move either, just as stunned in the unforgettable as its owner, but it vanished, nonetheless. Magnetized, saying her name evoked love. This love mutated in his stomach and surged up into his throat and time slowed. This slower time expressed itself in a new dimension. He checked her pulse. There was nothing. An extrasensory panic set in. The moment felt like forever and forever felt like it might just be a moment after all. He didn’t remember knowing CPR but he pressed his lips to hers and made the perfect seal. His unspoken prayer fleshed out with each breath as a Chardonnay colored light and the multi-lingual harmony accompanied by those chimes that had greeted her initially and then again at the gates like water freeing from sin. His grandma turned from the throne. Life reconciled with her and her two angels and the unconditional and the translucent and Paradise and knowing. The voice inside and outside of her said, “Open your eyes he still needs you,” and she found herself as close to Xavier’s eyes as she’d been since she had held him as a baby after she had delivered him in that same room.
Nnadi Samuel

Before we gave it some English

Things of cul-de-sac comes in a round phase:
black orb, wearing a Nike stain,
waiting for some English— to spin
& boot our word class: a barking eight & part of speech,
where war is an adverb named before a sling, whittling our dead-end.
The points, scoring a high pitch on peeled walls, to patch a purpose.
so many men lift to this sport;
butting the air, like bearded reptiles
tossing their red heads to memorize the glyphs: a keeled font— schwa,
rebent in a
sound where all consonants means loss:
your version of syncope, bringing stress to this poem.
a coyote howls to these letters, missing it's teeth how we miss the intrusive r to pair a
diphthong: a twin & upturned language— since this world too is spinned up.
stretched, like a tongue making a French effort, till we gave it some English,
even when other race never hopped to this sport.
In a different clan, a different need brings them to forge their letter from gargoyles,
guttering home a sibilant— spilled rough, to sound their careless hush notes:
a variance, like the twin walls pushed to our dead-end:
saying, we can now storm the street, & boot a word class reckless,
without sustaining our gifts.
Wrongful Grammar

hear me out: I demand a metaphor that grants me the luxury of wielding a language bright enough to mirror my wound the tiny gash of my pores—first full stop to know the world as it is. I gravitate towards each phrase like a weighty gerund, paradox left in my wake. can't I have my daughter in perfect tense? a gowned paraphrase: girl in reverse, dating a harmless fricative. her ever-loving spouse, amending his pronouns from they/he. with this vowel schwa-paired, I opt out of the binary in well suited syllable; brandishing a verb to-be.

my lips jammed into a murmur, locked out of its exclamatory duty. see: no one can say for sure what grammar read me out of context: when I squash my cheeks, lifting the poor medal of language to create a scene. my eager hormones—the cursive outcry scrawled so legibly you'd ask, what part of speech crowned by a long stain, wrecks my bloodstream?
A Glossary of Artillery Terms

Iowa tenderizes our immigrant flesh into the havoc of a rifle,
    stale on a woman's lip.
language pulls me to where a female rips her lungs— dragging
the
    black alphabet that mourns her passing away.
she mouthwashes an adjective, trims her nail till its red tip takes
    the form of a loud verb. to cherish where I'm
from
is to add guns to our part of speech, It is to be at peace with the
    waltzing hotness of a missile. the cloud— a white
sheet, pierced by a loaded projectile that isn't firework.
    I wish to account for this place, & not lose my tongue
to a death-plague that shapes like this
country— stabbed onto a pie chart. this year, violence preserved
    my
delicate life. In the next, I want to have more crime in my name.
    Minnesota's temper veining through my wrist.
I love it for its other half mirroring my loss.
    lady, dulling her skin to die at her own pace:
too bright to keep up with this town. each darkness finds me falling
    in love with this body alive, but for a while.
the
rib cage of females I've known crosshatching as countries at logger-
    heads.
    you cherish where I'm from by loving it sideways,
without the tip of a gun pointing at your heartbeat. in our palm: a war-
    fare.
    in our thoughts: a woman derailing a stray bullet with
prayer beads.
the way she pleads “the blood", as though we haven't shed more of that
    lately,
    as if this red-faced object isn't me bullet bright, dashing
my
    loin to the
ground— if that's the softest way to call this body quit. I
wish
to amplify my
bones, to make a loud statement. I’m wounded by the consonance of 'Iowa' mud-
breaking through my lips, as a cannon hawking a well-
dressed
echo. I sustain the entirety of grammar in a verse looted at gunpoint.
you survive
this country only by dodging the voiced
bilabial plosive— that goes boom! everywhere your
feet touches.
Molly Nichol

Every Dancing Flame

“All of which mattered little. There was the fire, promising life with every dancing flame.”

- Jack London, To Build a Fire

Dear Edmund,

I write to you about the two little girls who play in the woods. They are out every day, all day. They seem to be twins, for they appear and dress identically; they have unbound hair and wear pastel-colored dresses, as is the fashion for girls their age.

No weather—not rain, nor sleet, nor snow—forces them to abandon their games, during which they dance around the old well on the edge of the forest. Their childish squeals seem to float around the house, entering in any window that I have propped open to dispel my home of the unbearable summer heat.

Many times I’ve considered going outside to ask them the whereabouts of their mother, their home—but every time something stops me. Edmund, something scares me about these girls. When they are breaking from their fun around the well, they will stare up at my window here on the third floor. Mayhaps it is merely chance that they look when I am pacing my chambers, or writing to you, or polishing my rifle—but something does not feel right. I sense their eyes on me as I am going about my business, and it discomforts me greatly, sending shivers up my spine and prompting me to revive the fire in my grate.

Perhaps I am simply unaccustomed to dealing with the antics of children, so if you have any words of wisdom, I incline you to share.

I welcome your proposal to have Benjamin come stay with me, and I express my gratitude that my family business may be passed on despite the fact that I am an unmarried man and have no heir of my own flesh and blood.

Please let me know the details of his arrival as soon as possible. I’ve enclosed an amount that I think ample enough to begin this process.

Say hello to Mary and the children for me.
With best regards,
Your brother Silas

~

The little girls were watching the window while the man penned his letter. The flame of his candle swayed, casting shadows on the walls, and every so often, he would glance up from his desk to check if the girls were still there.

They were always there.

Heads tilted up to the house, they stood by the well. The plank roof creaked in the slight breeze, the small wooden bucket stirring. Insects crawled on the rough stones and buzzed in the thickly-warm air—but never flying too close to the girls. They skirted around them, soaring into the sky. The sun descended to the west, leaving behind streaks of fire.

~

Greetings Mr. Wellington,

I have been working diligently to uncover the mystery that surrounds your estate. It seems that your grandfather, George Wellington, lost the deed to the land in a fire, as he did not trust in banks to keep his deed secure.

Wellington accused a neighbor, Mrs. Theresa McCoy, of setting fire to his house. This claim was dismissed by the entire town due to Wellington’s known drinking problem. He was afterwards laughed out of court when he tried to sue for damages.

This house was rebuilt by Wellington and his sons. The only part of the original estate that remained intact was the well on the edge of the southern forest.

Of course, since the deed is lost, the only way your nephew will be able to inherit the estate is if you file for a new deed.

Yours in service,
Hugh Alexander, P.I.

~

Silas Wellington did not know much of anything. He did not know how to go about procuring a deed, nor how to cook his roast over the fire without burning it, nor how to catch the fancy of a lovely lady.
But least of all, he did not know the history of the house.

The girls danced around the well, running and twirling in circles. Their chatter rose around the forest and hovered to the man’s study, where he was bent over his desk.

Silas did not care to listen much, but on the few instances that he tried, their voices seemed too quiet to hear and their words too indistinct. He would then shake his head, admonishing himself for being distracted, and return to what he was writing.

~

Mr. Alexander,

I thank you for your dedication to my situation. I find your information tremendously helpful. Since the passing of my father, I have wished to learn more about my ancestors and the estate, and you provide the key to that knowledge.

Have you any details about the accusation from my grandfather to this Mrs. Theresa McCoy? I await your response. I have dropped off the envelope with your secretary, including more payment to address my aforementioned question.

With my gratitude,

Silas Wellington

~

Silas Wellington was in the parlor for tea time. Through the window he could see the girls leaping around the well, playing some sort of tag. The skirts of their dresses bloomed like flower petals in the wind, and their hair—waist-length and light-colored—drifted behind them.

They were ethereal, like the angels painted in the cathedral near Silas’s childhood home. He’d escaped to this church for a bit of peace and quiet, which he couldn’t get around Emund’s children. But unlike his siblings, Benjamin had been calm and collected, even as a small child. That was when Silas had decided to make him his successor.

Silas sifted through the mail scattered on the coffee table. He threw the bills back on the table, nearly landing on his plate of orange-flavored scones, before he reached the envelope with no return address.

~
Greetings Mr. Wellington,

Your payment is not sufficient enough. My secretary will forward a letter to you at the soonest convenience.

Mrs. Theresa McCoy suffered the loss of a loved one in a fire in her own home. This drove her to insanity, during which she was accused of setting fire to your grandfather's house, and her husband placed her in a mental institution. She would continuously tell the nurses that "he" started the fire and "took them from her." She never named any particular person, but I would assume that your grandfather is the man of whom she speaks.

As long as you are satisfied with my work, I believe that this is where the book of your family history closes. If you need more work done in the future, you have my address.

Yours in service,
Hugh Alexander, P.I.

The girls made their way across the lawn. They had never ventured past the well.

But there they were, placing each bare foot before the other, never rustling the grass that the man was too busy to cut.

Busy reading in his study, Silas Wellington didn't notice the girls abandoning their usual post, their eyes trained on his window as their pale feet took every slow step toward the house.

The door to the house was oak and large, and a bronze knocker adorned it. The matching doorknob remained untouched with the girls' approach, but it turned, seemingly of its own accord, and the door swung open.

Dear Silas,

I would advise you to leave the girls be. They are only children, and they mean no harm. Occupy yourself with other activities, and allow them to have their fun, even if it is to be on your property.

Benjamin will be arriving on the stage in two weeks time. He has things to settle here before he can leave. I thank you for the sum you enclosed, as it will pay for his train ticket and for his new clothes that are more suitable to inheriting your business.
Write soon,
Edmund


The girls passed through the foyer to the parlor, pausing at the mantle, upon which were golden, oval picture frames. Black and white pictures showed a woman with her hair pulled back in a tight bun, two boys on her lap; a Union soldier holding a rifle; and finally, a man busy over the freshly-laid foundation of a house, grimacing at the person behind the camera.

The girls did not move a muscle, but this last frame fell off the mantle, crashing onto the dark wood floor and splintering in a way that metal did not. The glass shattered into a million pieces, and a stray spark from the fireplace landed on the man’s face. Within the blink of an eye, a flame consumed the picture, and it shriveled up, quickly turning to ash.

The girls watched this happen with empty expressions before turning their attention to the golden candlesticks. One of the candles toppled off the mantle to the carpet, and a fire caught, spreading steadily around the parlor before trailing to the hallway that led to the staircase.

Dear Edmund,

The strangest thing about these girls is that no one else seems to notice them. I’ve inquired in town a few times, but every time I am informed that there are no pairs of twin girls within these parts. Even the gardener and the maid give me odd looks when I mention them.

But while I sit and write this, I look out at the well, and they are nowhere to be seen. This is most unusual, as they typically appear and disappear when the sun does.

In other news, I am in the process of obtaining the deed for the land. I am enclosing copies of the letters from my private investigator, who gave me news of a fire—


The hairs on Silas Wellington’s arm raised, and his fountain pen stopped scratching on the paper. He could hear something—soft popping sounds, and a gentle roar. His mind snapped to nights in the parlor, reading the evening paper on the loveseat, a glass of wine on the side table.

Setting down his pen with a clink, he stood to investigate the
source, his chair catching on the carpet. He crossed the room and grabbed the brass doorknob—but drew his hand back quickly. The skin on his hand flared; the metal was hotter than the summer sun at noon.

He pulled his shirt out of his pants and used the cloth to protect his hand as he threw the door open—only to be met with a wall of fire, singeing his eyebrows and heating his skin like a fever.

Taking a step back, he slammed the door, the force shaking the door frame. Flames consumed the wood as soon as he did, tearing at the stained-glass arch above. Silas’s head whirled to the window, and he hurried over to it, almost tripping when the corner of the carpet caught his shoe.

The heat had already surrounded him. His breath struggled to reach his lungs through the thickness of the air. In a moment the fire would engulf the entire room, and it was a matter of whether he would burn or suffocate to death.

He knew every second counted.

Picking up his desk chair, he rammed it into the panes of the window, the sound of glass breaking not audible over the shriek of the fire. He glanced back at the door, seeing that the fire had spread past it, eating at a corner of his desk. The letter he had been writing was curling up, the whiteness of the paper swallowed by red and orange.

He knew he lived out in the middle of the country, nearly half a mile from any other person.

Silas threw himself at the window, thrusting his arm out in the clear air, the broken glass around the frame like a halo slicing into his arm.

He knew no one could hear his scream as the fire crept closer to him, millimeter by millimeter.

Below in the parlor, the girls leaped around in the flames, their feet brushing the wood and carpet that were blackening to ash. They danced, and danced, and danced.
Taru Heizu

the key of C by me

the key of C has no sharps or flats
there’s nothing special about it
yet everyone loves it
i don’t believe it

the key of C is the first key on the circle of fifths
there’s nothing special about it though
yet it’s so popular
i don’t believe it

the key of c is used in so many songs
again, there’s nothing special about it
yet the key is amazing
i cannot believe that
Colin Ian Jeffery

First lover

When I was young, free, easy, spirited
Innocent, sweet, without time hard pressing
I walked golden swaying fields of wheat
Enjoyed companions of esteemed childhood.
Life was rich, full of adventure, golden days,
Dreamt then of what true love might be.
She, was my first lover, gentle, beautiful,
We lay naked in secret woodland glade
Made love, climaxed, made love again.
Craved for wonder of each other’s body
Made vows to be soulmates until life’s end.
Thought hearts were tightly intertwined
Never to be crushed, broken asunder
With her lost and married to another.

Voices

Voices from long ago call echoing in my dreams
Memories of childhood, joyous, sweet, innocent
Bright golden summers seemed never ending
When happiness reigned, days rich with love.
Family supporting, encouraging, guiding the way.
Parents and brother long gone, grave deep.
Now, in old age, anthric bones, blood pressure
Difficulty walking, time cruelly speeded up
Destination into the grave and final sleep.
Love, often fleeting, breaks heart, weeps the soul
Throughout life seeking for meaning and truth
Knowing blue planet is like single grain of sand
Among vast desert of stars expanding outwards
Into the eternal blackness of space never ending.
Danielle Mikals

No Cold Feet Here

“Are you certain you love him enough to marry him?” my mother asked. No. I thought he was fine, neat, and a bit boring. Luckily, there was nothing about him that I found wholly objectionable.

“I’m sure,” I told her, smiling. I could hardly turn back now. Our whole family was in town. His relatives were here. The ceremony was going to start soon. A quick ceremony, a long reception, a honey-moon, and then I would be free.

The white dress had been chosen by my mother. My sisters had voiced their opinions, deciding on gloves and the veil and earrings and I had said nothing at all. I had submitted to their choices.

I didn’t mind the shoes they choose or the particulars of the bridesmaids’ dresses. They had spent most of their life tossing me their hand-me-downs, anyway; why not let them choose what I wore to my wedding?

They expected me to be acquiescing. My sisters had needled me to do their homework through our school years. My brother had shouted at me for not doing his chores correctly.

They demanded that I be acquiescing. My parents had required me to tend my siblings, to keep the house, and to present a pleasant countenance at all times. Failure to do any and all had been... unpleasant.

I took a breath.

There was a marriage waiting for me. The reminder eased some of the memories away.

I was sure that there are others who look upon their wedding days with joy and anticipation. There are others who would be moved to matrimony for the sake of true love. They probably go to the altar with joy in their hearts, looking forward to a new chapter in their lives. I had no such misconceptions. It isn’t some grand romance. It is not a fairy tale.

My groom, pleasant and predictable and lacking of demands, would be waiting for me at the altar. We would exchange vows and I would be free from my family.

I would be free from the harping of my sisters. I would be relieved of the demands from my mother. I might just be trading my current obligations for a new one, but I would take the risk. I knew what
was waiting for me if I didn’t.

He was a quiet spoken man. He was amiable. He adored me. I didn’t love him. It would suit me all the same

He wasn’t cruel. That enough would be a reprieve.

I would be out of my family’s grasp. No more demands from my father, no criticism from my mother, no being told to look after siblings. No more watching my older sisters’ every whim being met and my younger brother cheered at every turn while I was expected to be quiet and do as I was told. I would be free. All I had to do was coddle one man who was mildly boring.

There were worse trades in life.

I wasn’t being cynical; I was being practical. “I will be so happy,” I assured my mother.

The smile was genuine.
Jeff Burd

Reception

Jerry just texted me a selfie. He’s sporting a classic black and white tux and is raising a champagne flute—tell everybody I said cheers and congratulations. He’s funny like that, which I don’t think people really appreciate. I’m probably the only one thinking about him right now because everybody else is too dumbstruck by this spectacle. The place is decked out in scarlet and cream. Crystal everywhere. A platoon of tuxedoed waiters are delivering drinks straight off a martini luge. There’s a banner hanging over the wedding party’s table: Your Greatest Love Is Your Greatest Life.

I can’t take that banner seriously. Not with the way Brian pried Suzette away from Jerry and made her his bride. She was supposed to be Jerry’s a few months ago. People know this, but I don’t think they care.

We talked to Jerry and told him don’t crash this. We promised to get together with him to balance the situation out, but we can’t compete with Brian’s dad. Deep pockets. Deep. This place is a palace.

Jerry was real calm about the situation. He’s always calm about stuff. I don’t think people appreciate that about him. All he said was don’t worry about it and that he understands. He’ll let this go and move on. I think everybody thinks he did and he has, but he hasn’t.

I know because a few of us got here before this place exploded. We were looking for a bottle opener, so I wandered back to the kitchen. Everybody was so busy they hardly noticed I was there. I stumbled into the walk-in pantry and saw a huge pyramid shape under a plastic cover that had to be the cake.

I pulled the cover aside just to look. Damn. Huge. Three tiers covered in thick cream frosting with scarlet trim. Candy pearls all over. On the top tier, the bride and groom figurines were facing each other. Except it was just the bride grinning blind love at what looked like a half-smoked cigar. The top of the groom was melted down to the waist and had dribbled into a black puddle.

I caught a whiff of lighter fluid, and that’s when I knew it. Jerry has this gunmetal Zippo he bought some time back. There’s a red and yellow “Have a Nice Day!” emblem on one side, complete with the smiley face. He doesn’t even smoke, but pipes, bongs, candles, whatever, if something needs lit, he’s on it fast and smooth. He smiles and
says, “Let me help you out.” There’s a click to flip the cover, the scrape of the flint wheel, another click to close it, all with a whiff of lighter fluid. You get used to that smell, like it’s almost friendly.

I went to put the plastic cover back over the cake, and that’s when I really noticed the base. The decorator had written out in huge scarlet script letters: *Your Greatest Love Is Your Greatest Life*. Except there was a pale pink smear where the “f” was supposed to be in “Life.” You could see specks of the deep scarlet cake underneath where the frosting was thinned out. The “i” and “e” had been linked with a shaky line. Once I saw it, I laughed. There was no missing it.

I scraped a bit of frosting from the side of the cake and licked it off my finger, and then bolted.

That was two hours ago. Now the servers are wheeling the cake out. It’s still hidden under the plastic cover. Everybody’s quieting down except for some ohs and ahs. The band stopped playing. Suzette and Brian are waiting hand in hand, grinning blind love at each other. The photographer is lining up for the unveiling.

I move in closer so I can get a shot to text Jerry. He’ll appreciate that.
Mr. Lakatos’s Wake

Gabor had to knock on the Lakatos’s door because his mother was carrying the cake. There was a noise of shoes from behind the door before Mrs. Lakatos ushered them in from the stairwell with clucks and chatter. She lived in the apartment on the first floor. Gabor and his mother lived on the third.

Yesterday, when his mother arrived home from work, she told Gabor that Mr. Lakatos senior had finally died. For the past few weeks, it was common knowledge in the apartment building that he probably would die soon. He was 98 years old.

After his mother told him the news, she decided to bring a cake. Gabor knew he would likely be going with her to the wake.

“There will be no one there my age,” he said. He was the only person in the building under the age of 55...a good deal under since he was still in school until May. The other tenants had been living in the building for what seemed liked decades already when he and his mother had moved in three years ago.

His mother was firm, “We’ll both go.” She baked the cake yesterday evening, and now they were being whisked into the apartment by Mrs. Lakatos with a non-stop stream of gratitude.

In a way this was extremely kind of Mrs. Lakatos. Gabor and his mother were Hungarians but not in the same way that the rest of the tenants were. Gabor’s grandfather had immigrated to the United States during the 1950s revolution, and Gabor had spent most of his childhood growing up in Cleveland. It was only three years ago, in response to a job opportunity, that Gabor’s mother had decided that they should move back to Hungary to make a go of it.

Gabor had strongly resisted this because it would mean that he would be leaving behind his entire elementary and middle school experience. However, his mother had insisted that it would look good on a university transcript if he could show that he had graduated from high school in Hungary.

Most of the experience of the past three years had been good. But there were the occasional sensitive cultural moments that Gabor didn’t quite know how to interpret. And as he and his mother entered Mrs. Lakatos’ apartment, he was utterly uncertain how to act.
Gabor was right about the rest of the company. When they entered the living room, he counted ten other people who had arrived before them. They were all older than his mother. An elderly couple was hunched together on the couch with their tea. Several severe, black-skirted women were posted by the window across the room, which looked out onto the street below.

The building was number 26 on Bartok street in the eleventh district of Budapest. It was built at the beginning of the twentieth century and was generally considered to be a favorable place to live, unlike the post-Soviet apartment blocks that dominated the outskirts of the city. As he accepted a cup of tea from Mrs. Lakatos, Gabor could hear the women at the window talking about the Soviet tank.

“It came right through the alley between the buildings and turned its gun.”

“For over an hour.”

“No, just for a few minutes. Enough, though. We left our apartment and went into the bomb cellar across the street.”

This had apparently happened in the 1950s. The gossip in the building was that the column of Russian tanks had advanced up Bartok street on their way to do something with the rebellion. What was less clear was whether a tank had actually come into the back yard as they claimed. These stories were easily passed around. But it was likely that something had happened back then. The outside of the building was still pockmarked with old bullet holes.

Mrs. Lakatos and Gabor’s mother joined the black skirts by the window, and Gabor saw his chance. He walked over to the wall of black and white family photographs and busied himself with them. They seemed oddly familiar as old pictures do. There were several pictures of the family. He could see Mrs. Lakatos growing from school-girl to woman. Occasionally, Mr. Lakatos senior could be seen in the back row of the pictures. The last picture of him was from two months ago on his birthday. He was sitting behind a table which held a small cake. He looked very frail.

Gabor turned back toward the room. If he waited a few more minutes he reasoned that he could give an excuse to leave. He moved back toward the table to refill his cup. He glanced back toward the front hallway. That was when he noticed. The hallway was lined with stacks of old newspapers.

Gabor left his cup and walked to the hallway. The stacks were in chronological order moving backward. The paper color started to yellow as the rows went back in time. He put his finger on the most recent stack and slowly walked down the hall. He could feel the papers growing more
brittle under his finger as he moved.

When he reached the last stack, he was near the wall at the rear of the apartment. Gabor picked up one of the papers from the last row. It was from November 5, 1956. There was a black and white picture on the front page that showed several young people walking down a street in a foreign country. They were carrying a large home-made sign which read, “Helpt Hungary.” The faces on the people seemed eager and excited. But he could not tell what they were thinking.

At that moment Mrs. Lakatos came down the hall with a tray of empty cups. Gabor straightened and looked up at her. She paused and glanced at the rows of papers. “Oh, they belonged to father. But they’ll have to go. Fire danger.”

She looked down at the newspaper he was holding. When she saw the picture on the front she smiled and gave a small shrug.
My third grade teacher could flick her wrist so fast I could never see it coming. She was like a frog, or lizard, or one of those reptiles who could snatch a fly in mid-air with her tongue. I could never catch one barehanded, not even touch one with a fly swatter, but she never missed. If she was in a good mood, she slapped our knuckles with the flat side of her ruler. It made a loud, smacking sound that drew everyone’s attention, like a fat man doing a belly-flop into a crowded pool. It didn’t hurt much, though, and the mark would fade by the afternoon. If she was in a bad mood, she sliced your knuckles with the edge of the ruler like a knife. Silent, deadly. It hurt like hell and left thin white lines and red marks on my knuckles. My dad asked me about those marks once while we were eating dinner, and her ruler disappeared shortly after that. We never saw it again, but we knew it was still there, lurking somewhere in her desk. My penmanship, though, was never the same.
Morgan Driscoll

Forms’ Function

These days you have to wonder: why the hell, when even writing free verse is so hard, you’d ever choose to write a villanelle.

and then, to dare to think you’d write it well?
There isn’t much ambition to be bards these days. You have to wonder why the hell that is, when hip hop music seems to sell and rapper’s decadence, the best reward you’d ever choose. To write a villanelle,

though, wouldn’t help achieve that lavish lifestyle.
I think Poesy’s still compulsory at Harvard. These days you have to wonder why. The hell of rhyme and counting every syllable. Mountebanking that you’re using words you’d ever choose to write. A villanelle just reads as something artificial.
An archaic form that has to be endured these days. You have to wonder, why? The HELL I’d ever choose, to write a villanelle.
“Hear me out,” the gray mouse said to the other mice gathered. “We all agree we can’t go on living this way anymore, right?”

The others nodded. There were mumbles of agreement among the mice.

“The way I see it we have two options. We can move—”

“Move?” a mouse in the audience yelled.

“No way!” another shouted.

“I’m with you!” the gray mouse insisted. “I don’t want to move either. None of us do.”

“You can say that again!” yet another mouse yelled.

“Our other option,” the gray mouse said, “is to get rid of the cat.”

The crowd fell silent. One mouse somewhere near the middle stood up on its haunches. “You mean,” the mouse said, and it ran its tiny paw across its throat.

“Kill the cat?” another mouse shouted. “What is wrong with you!”

“He’s lost it,” a mouse near the front said to another. Then he yelled, loud enough for the gray mouse to hear: “Mice don’t murder!”

“Maybe not,” the gray mouse conceded. “But that cat murders us every day. How many mice has she killed? Fifty? A hundred? I can’t even keep count. We have to do something.”

“But kill her?” the mouse near the front said. “Come on...”

“Maybe you think killing is an acceptable way to solve a problem,” came a shout from the crowd, “but most of us think it’s disgusting. It goes against everything we believe in.”

“But—” the gray mouse began.

“Just stop!” a particularly big mouse shouted. The size of him, and the strength of his voice, made all the gray mouse, as well as all the
others, fall silent. “I think you’ve said quite enough,” the big mouse added. He stepped up onto a matchbox, which made him tower over the other mice. He looked around. “Doesn’t anyone here have a better idea than him?” he said.

“I have an idea,” came a voice from near the back. It was a young mouse. Her voice was high and squeaky.

“Shhhh, everyone,” the big mouse said, quieting everyone down. “Let the girl speak.”

The little mouse cleared her throat. “Instead of killing the cat,” she said. “Why don’t we put a bell around her neck. That way, we will hear her when she approaches. Problem solved.”

The mice were silent for a few seconds, then they erupted in cheers and shouts of approval.

The gray mouse at the front of the room, who had gathered everyone there in the first place, looked around in disbelief. This is the idea they like? A bell around the cat’s neck?

“Excuse me, everyone!” the gray mouse shouted. His voice was drowned out by the noise of the crowd. He yelled louder. “Guys!” he yelled. “Guys!” They all quieted down just enough so that the gray mouse could be heard. “Who will put the bell on the cat’s neck?” he asked.

That volume of their voices increased, a loud chatter that made the room deafening. But almost as soon as it began it died down. The mice’s heads swiveled from the gray mouse at the front to the little mouse in the back, the one who had proposed the bell-around-the-neck idea. They stared at her.

“Well?” someone in the crowd said. “Tell us. What’s the plan?”

The little mouse shrugged.

“What about you?” the big mouse on the matchbox said, looking at the little mouse.

She shook her head vigorously. “No way,” she squeaked. “Never.”

“Well, someone here must be willing to do it,” the big mouse guessed. He looked around. “Well?” he said. “Is there anyone willing to put the bell around the cat’s neck?”

There was dead silence. Not one mouse moved.

“In that case,” the little mouse in the back added. “Maybe it’s better if we just move.”

The crowd erupted in complaints and shouts and the big mouse put his hands up and shushed everyone. It took him a minute, but he
quieted them down. He turned to the gray mouse at the front of the room. All the mice turned to him. “All right,” the big mouse said. “Go on.”

The gray mouse pointed to himself as if to say Who, me?

“We’re listening,” the big mouse assured him.

“But I thought it goes against everything you believe in,” the gray mouse said.

“Just humor us,” the big mouse replied. “Nobody here wants to move. And nobody wants to die trying to put a bell around a cat’s neck. Tell us your plan. How can we kill the cat? You do have a plan, right?”

“Oh, I have a plan,” the gray mouse said. “But before I go into it, I’d ask that the young ones leave the room. This isn’t something for little ears to hear.”
Erika Dreifus

Fabrication

It had been years since she’d last written a new piece of fiction—Barack Obama was still a first-term president at the time—but here she was, determined to flex what she feared was an irrevocably atrophied muscle. Never mind the MFA degree in fiction, the published collection of stories, the minor-but-meaningful award the collection had garnered. So much time had passed, a full decade during which she had realized, or perhaps persuaded herself, that she had no stories left to tell; that changes in her day-job schedule and family commitments had left her without the stretches of time that had always fed her fiction-writing before; that thanks to texting and Twitter her attention patterns had definitively swung away from the form. Now, she was testing all of those assumptions. And she was terrified to discover how true they might be.

She’d signed up for a workshop to help herself along. Because in the entirety of her middle-aged life, she’d never (not once!) failed to meet a deadline. Surely, a workshop would compel her to produce something.

She’d tried to make things easy. The workshop met online, so she didn’t even need to leave her apartment. Moreover, this workshop focused on flash fiction. Which meant, in the most basic terms—short fiction. Really short. In the case of this workshop, 750 words, maximum. (She’d reconfirmed the word count with her instructor because, also in the entirety of her middle-aged life, she’d been a rule-follower.) And the icing on this cake made it even more tempting: The instructor was one of her own kindest, most generous, most talented friends; she believed, as strongly as she was capable of believing anything, that she could withstand this instructor’s most brutal feedback.

Still, she had no clue what she was going to write.

As if it would help, she was continually clicking over to Twitter, where she encountered a steady stream of links to other people’s published stories, or the latest chapter in the Cat Person saga, or so-and-so’s musings on “auto-fiction” or MFA programs or antipathy toward novels and stories in which the main character was a writer. (And those were the benign finds, unlike the retweets and quote-tweets reminding her that the world was full of antivaxxers and anti-Semites and a lot of really awful people, realizations which never failed to plunge her into paralyzing despair that wasn’t conducive to writing anything, let alone her first fictional work in forever.)

An entire weekend remained before her own first piece was due
in the workshop’s Slack channel. She could always go back to the very last story she’d tried to write (yes, during Barack Obama’s first term), the one her mother had even granted her permission to try to publish. (She always felt compelled to seek authorization when mining her mother’s childhood for story ideas replete with the conflict and deprivation that her own youth, the one both her parents had worked so hard to give her, had fundamentally lacked.) Sure, that old, multiply-rejected story was 1,500 words over the word count her new workshop leader had stipulated. But hadn’t one of those flash-fiction prompts she’d been cutting and pasting into a dedicated Word document suggested exactly that? *Find a story you’ve written that isn’t quite working; chop it down to exactly 100 words; give it a new title.*

But that old story just felt so—tired.

She skimmed prompts and settled on another one.

And so it came to pass that with the 32nd of the 50 random sentences she made herself sit there and type out—so the prompt directed her to begin, to simply write 50 sentences as quickly as possible—she produced one that promised a glimmer of potential.

Yes, it was a piece about writing. And maybe it was auto-fiction. (MFA degree and Twitter discourse notwithstanding, she still wasn’t entirely sure what that term meant.)

But it was 750 words. And after a bit of polishing, it could be dropped into the Slack channel.

And while she may have imagined it as she’d forged ahead, sentence by sentence, something had clicked. It wasn’t muscle memory, exactly. Or maybe it was because, wasn’t the heart a muscle, after all? What else could be pumping through her bloodstream that old, beloved, and oh-so-specific sense of energy and happiness that she associated with knowing that she was writing something that was *working*?

Yes, revisions—and rejections—would follow. But for now, those magical moments of fabrication were more than enough.

~

The author wishes to thank and acknowledge Nancy Stohlman and Kathy Fish for sourcing the prompts cited in this piece and Sara Lippmann for facilitating the workshop which produced it.
Laura Donovan

Nostalgia

Once upon a time, there was a little town called Luftsiw. Unlike most little towns, many of its inhabitants did end up leaving once they had grown, traveling far and wide, never to return. The numerous departures weren’t because the town was crime-ridden or lacking in economic prospects, nor were they due to any ignorant outlook shared by the locals who did choose to stay. In fact, it was an overall safe and welcoming place in which to grow or to raise a child.

The education their children received was a good one, the local stores and stations were all sensibly situated right on Main Street, the weather was always warm, the town’s roads were lined with trees and fire hydrants in equal measures, and tombstones and memorials stood proudly in the grassy parks down at the end of Memory Lane. These parks melded into beaches where the waves rushed over the sand at an almost alarmingly frequent rate. There, dangling off the sides of the piers dotting the beach, were multiple pairs of nondescript feet, swinging above the water as friends watched the sepia sunset together.

The air was filled with the echoing sounds of seductive, soothing waves smashing and slicing and squelching the sand and of the songs on playlists titled “Classics” and “Happy Summer Mixes” playing on repeat. These notes, these natural hymns, wove throughout the love-scented air; intoxicated by their own meaning-making, the friends forgot their woes, oblivious to the scratch-like skipping of their songs in time with the rhythm of their feet as they walked home (in the residential area down Delirium Drive). They laughed over how they are everything that they ever were.

Their laughter struck a chord in the figure who watched them from a distance—a distance of both spatial and temporal detachment. This figure was an old, old man, somewhat bent and crooked of stature. He leaned on his walking stick and looked upon his happy childhood. He watched as history repeated itself so effectively, so efficiently, that the happy, bright assurance of those young friends could have been the old man’s, verbatim, from long ago. They would learn, though. They would learn, forget, and then learn again, just as he had, time and time again. And whose, the old man couldn’t help but wonder, past-self do I replicate? Who has looked back at me with the bittersweet clarity of hindsight? With the resigned thought of, ‘They will learn. One of these days, after one too many times, they will learn.’
It seemed, in the end, that the inhabitants of Luftsiw who did leave had left because of the pain it had all caused, the specific pain of disillusionment just one too many times. The romanticized lies—the unattainable promises—led to a deep longing that could never be fulfilled, that could only sit and fester like sores. The town made it impossible to forget that the good old days were just that: old days that were long gone. New distractions from a new life could only do so much, as they would smooth over the rough edges of longing and aching sickness, smoothing over and over like a tender tongue over a missing tooth. Like waves over sand.

The elderly man turned away from the beach’s ocean-swallowed sandcastles, the park’s pretty grass, and the cemetery’s solemn memorial to memory. There were new details to focus on, like vivid, vibrant cracks in an old monochrome photograph. Something once loved is (bitter)sweet and all, but as the inhabitants of Luftsiw who did leave travel back toward their hometown, they start to notice fallen trees, ancient potholes, broken glass and windows, and the wounded and broken scenes that they have long outgrown, realizing that perhaps there was a reason, after all, that something once loved is no longer... and that some things in their past perhaps ought to remain there.

Hearts twinging, no longer able to be blinded by the glamor of delusion but grateful for the memories (even if they weren’t so great), the inhabitants of Luftsiw who did leave turn around and leave once again, never to return, until that lie catches their eye once more.
Titus Naso

On Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote a poem the which he titled, *Dejection: An Ode*. When I read it for a class in college it drove me nuts. I could not understand why anyone would want to celebrate the negative emotions in their life. Why not just focus on being happy? So far went I along that train of thought, an answ’ring poèm I was moved to write one night in Sophomore year at 3am: three stanzas of rhyming verse mockery, a poem which I titled, *Kind Weed: An Ode*. It extolled the virtues of getting high: the buds, the baggies, and the glass bong hits. That was my response to S.T. Coleridge.

I find myself, twenty-five-plus years on, writing my own dejected poetry and sympathizing with Mr. Coleridge, his unhappy thoughts and drug addiction. And looking back upon his work just now, I find I envy him his turn of phrase. My own verse is bumbling, pedestrian; he sings of the moon, Aeolian lute, the evening sky, the clouds and sparkling stars, and the young woman who kept him up nights, to whom he spilled his secret confessions of hopeless love outside his sad marriage, to whom his thoughts turned in the dark midnight.

I had, in my book, just one passage marked: “And in our life alone does Nature live.” It struck me as quite Buddhist at the time; it was, O Coleridge, an insightful line.
Editor’s Note: For this feature, teachers are encouraged to write in response to prompts they have created for use in the classroom or workshop.
Malina Douglas

Disturbance

He did not know what would happen when the sounds reached him. Subtle sounds that drifted out over slippery, dark streets as the city of Edinburgh tossed in a restless slumber. Sounds that Malcolm dreaded to hear.

Malcolm turned the dial of the radio till he was submerged in a cascade of symphonic metal.

Bang, bang, bang, came the pound at the door. Malcolm opened it just wide enough for one eye to peer out.

A woman stood with her arms crossed, her large pale form wrapped in a bathrobe, a pair of pink slippers peeking out from the hem. Her broad fleshy face was set with dark eyes that glared at him.

"Wha' do yeh want?" demanded Malcolm.

The woman scowled. "It's two in the mornin' and some of us need to sleep around here!"

"Well I can'nae sleep," said Malcolm.

"I can see that, but at least give the rest of us a chance!" She stomped back down the stairwell but her slippered feet made no sound.

Malcolm slammed the door.

The radio was still blaring. He turned it down. Then turned it up again.

"So what if the auld hag can'nae sleep," he said aloud to the empty room. "I'm not goin' to let her dictate my life. I'm a free man." He picked up a wooden spoon. "Free—" he banged it against the wall. "Free," he banged again. "Free!"

Then he returned to his drumming practice, two wooden spoons against the kitchen counter. "One-two-three-four, one-two-three-four," he bellowed to himself, pretending to be his own drill master.

So what if he worked in an office? One day he would be the drummer in a famous rock band. He would show all those colleagues who gossiped about him behind their computer screens. Just wait—he was still engineering his escape but one day his boss would stomp over and find Malcolm's desk cleared out. If his company investigated, they'd find a disconnected phone, an empty flat. Then they would flick on the television and there he would be, drumming away with drumsticks of
fury in the centre of the stage while a rock band played to screaming hordes. They'd probably blink, shake their heads and look again because they wouldn't be able to believe it, they'd refuse to. His success would be so far from the realm of what they considered possible they would probably not even see him.

He picked up his drumsticks and ran to the other side of the room. Waved them in the air as a mock-conductor. Closed his eyes. He could almost hear the crowd screaming *more, more, more!* A *steady hum* rising into a roar.

*Bang, bang, bang, sounded the door.*

“Fer cryin' out loud,” groaned Malcolm. He flung it wide open.

“What is it?”

It was beady-eyed Sue again. Her over-plucked brows were drawn together and her mouth was compacted into a hard knot.

“Turn doon that racket!” she demanded. She tried to push past him, to ferret out the source of the disturbance.

“But the noises outside—”

“Jus' turn it doon, for Heaven's sake!”

“There are monsters out there, don't yeh get it?”

“Monsters like you, sure. Please—”

“No!” Malcolm slammed the door, catching sight of her entreat- ing look.

Now those small, pleading eyes were imprinted in his mind and he couldn't get them out. He lifted up his drumsticks but the image of her eyes reproached him and he knew she was standing in the hall with her arms still crossed, waiting. With a huff and a groan he shuffled across the room and shut off the radio.

Silence. Malcolm squinted at the window. A lone man passed beneath the light of a yellow lamp. He paced the floorboards. The only sounds were the pad of his feet and the creaking of the floor like the voice of an old friend.

He couldn't stand silence.

But as he stood still, he began to hear sounds. The rumble of a car engine, a distant tapping, snatches of voices. The city was alive and stretching itself like a beast stirred from slumber.

There it was. A low, steady thrumming. An undercurrent, running fast and deep beneath a scatter of other noises.
Malcolm felt the sound stir in his bones. Before he could stop himself, he slipped his drumsticks into his coat pocket, pulled on his coat and opened the door.

The hallway was empty. He slid a key into the lock, listened for the clunk of the bolts, wound down the stairs and out to the waiting night.

Fresh chill air stirred against Malcolm's cheek. He saw a smudge of stars and felt threads of sound pulling him forward. The thrumming sounds hushed his foreboding, and he followed. It seemed as if he was meant to.

It had just rained. Asphalt glimmered with a sheen of moisture in the glow of the street lamps. Malcolm walked without a notion of where he was going, till he found himself facing the great grey-stone bulk and pointed roofs of St Giles Cathedral.

The sounds had grown to a pleasant keening. On the ledges of the building he saw them, curling, hunching, or leaning, lifting small mouths to the sky to pour out their songs.

It had been three nights since the gargoyles of Edinburgh began singing. They sang deep throaty songs and high pitched melodies, and no one could figure out why or manage stop them.

City officials stuffed their mouths with cotton wool and labourers poured concrete down their throats but when night came, they coughed it up in chunks that scattered the pavement and continued their songs.

The effects were unpredictable.

People wandered the city till they forgot where they were and stood delirious, laughing. They tore off their clothes and plunged into the Water of Laith to escape the sounds or strained to reach them, climbing battlements and perching like birds.

When the first light of dawn broke over the tiled roofs and spires, the gargoyles would be back on their perches, spending the day with mouths frozen in silence.

Few people went out at night now, except for the foolish or curious or those already mad enough not to care.

Malcolm had stayed home each night, wary of the rumours that buzzed with anxiety and rang out like bells of alarm. Until now.

As Malcolm stood watching, a gryphon above a doorway spread
its wings and launched into the air. It let out a series of fluting notes and Malcolm tried to copy it. The gryphon paused and spiralled down to the ground beside him. It fold its eagles' wings and tilted its lion's head up to him.

The presence encouraged him, and Malcolm sang louder. As he sang, the voices of the gargoyles rose in cadence around him. Some were broad-faced and froglike with little round ears that sang songs like glad croaks. Others had broad toothsome mouths, webbed ears and claws, dragon scales and duck feet.

It was music he'd never heard before, a swirl of sound that swept him up and kept him there, among heights he had never sought to reach.

As the song increased in tempo, Malcolm sang louder.

Gargoyles whizzed in the air above him, spinning and reeling, heads lifted in song. A glint of an idea caught at him and Malcolm took out his drumsticks. On the ledge of the statue of Duke Walter Francis, he tapped out a tune to the rhythm of the gargoyles.

This is it, he thought. This will be my hit song!

A surge of ecstasy swept him upwards as he sang and banged louder.

He heard the notes slowing but longed for the song to go on. He stretched out his voice to long baritone sounds. The gargoyles slowed their circling and drifted back to the walls of the building.

The sounds faded, leaving Malcolm with a sense of emptiness, and yearning.

With a fluttering of wings and a shuffling of bodies, the gargoyles resumed their positions. Malcolm gazed upwards, hanging onto the melody, resolving to keep it forever. Just wait till my neighbour hears this!

He slipped his drumsticks into his coat pocket and began to walk, down the broad cobbled way of the Royal Mile, along rows of brick flats, stone archways and darkened windows. Past narrow closes, still steeped in shadow, where claws scrabbled on cardboard and a dark forms skittered. The streets were abandoned and would have seemed eerie, but a sense of unusual lightness buoyed him along. Unseen birds twittered above him and clouds revealed seams of sky as night lifted to a purple-blue like a bruise.

As dawn tinged the cloud-bellies rose, Malcolm paused, frowning. The strains of the melody were retreating like shadows, scattered by daylight, just beyond reach.
Author’s Note: “Disturbance” began in a writing workshop I gave at a bookshop in Kiev, Ukraine. I asked each participant to give an attribute of the main character. They gave the following: he is an office worker, he is under a lot of stress, he is short of sleep, and he can't stand loud noises. After that, I set a timer and we all wrote for twenty minutes based on those characteristics. The writing session was followed by a round of sharing in which we gave each other feedback. I find it endlessly fascinating how everyone writing to the same prompt always comes out with such different stories. I later expanded the few hundred words I had written into a short story, keeping the title I gave it at the workshop, Disturbance.
The Collector Beyond the Glass

Beyond the window, through the drifting snow, a black stallion runs circles in a ringed fence. The woman stands in the center, whip in hand. My sleeve squeaks against the window as I clear the fog from my breath. Both appear like dark mirages beyond the cries of the wind. Snow slides off the roof in a dizzying gust blurring the world beyond the glass. Impatiently, I wait for the swirling snow to dissipate. The horse runs and runs, sometimes bucking. It’s mesmerizing. The fire, the fury, of the stallion. It stirs me into a sense of waking as I remember fragments of home. Oven-ready lasagnas and cinnamon candles. Crackling fires and red, red wine.

The horse stops and turns toward the woman. Facing her, he runs. The woman holds her ground and the force of the stallion plows into her. For a moment, it is nothing but awe and terror as the woman flies backwards, seemingly dragged through the air by an unseen force. She crashes, body snapping against the ground. The horse rears, but comes back down and backs away. I cannot help the woman, but sincerely, I only wish to free the stallion. Even him, I cannot help. The window doesn’t open and neither does the door. The woman calls herself a collector of beautiful things.

Prompt: Students are told at the beginning that this will not be collected, and no one will have to share to alleviate the anxiety of beginner writers. The teacher can write along with the students. Step 1) Imagine at the end of the hall is a door. Once you open the door, you can become any character, or person you choose. Consider who that person is. 2) As you walk through the door, you enter a room and on the far wall is a window. You peer outside. You are only an observer and cannot participate in life beyond the window. What season is it? What scene unfurls beyond the window? Infuse as many of the five senses as applicable to your description. 3) Before the story ends, consider one thing that the narrator/character looking out may want.

Bonus step: Have the students highlight their favorite line, consider if any lines can be deleted for not moving the story forward, and if there are any places for concision, or stronger diction. This is simply to help
them treat their own work as a piece of art in progress.

**Time Allotted:** Ten minutes, but often with an extra five given upon request.

**Reason:** To allow students a chance to freewrite, sharpen their visualization and editing skills, and remind them in any piece of writing that they must consider the narrator’s voice.
Stephen Schwei

On Beyond

Absorbed by a 10-year-old, insistent boy, time after time, this book captivated me page after page, daily readings to relive experiences, as if old friends have returned. Galloping through the historical, traditional alphabet, finding it insufficient for all needs, just enough most of the time, but we must keep going in search of something more, landing on letters to fill the gaps for mythical creatures and fantastical beings. Nutches in nitches, on beyond zebra, places to let imagination run wild.

Quieting any possible critics, it is restricted now because of a stereotypical image, a shortcut taken to portray an unfamiliar concept in a comfortable way. Vultures descended to wish it away or blame it on xenophobic and racist ways. Yesterday’s unfortunate shorthand zealously zapped from our culture.

Author’s Note: “On Beyond” was developed in response to the prompt to create an abecedarian poem.
Contributors

Juliana Amir has been teaching English composition, among other classes, for six years, learning as she goes and finding joy in the way each class is inevitably different. She finds delight in giving students the chance to participate in the art of telling a story.

Teresa McLamb Blackmon is a retired English teacher from eastern North Carolina. During her career as a teacher, she taught English I, English III, Yearbook Journalism, and Creative Writing. Blackmon is an active member of the Johnston County Writer’s Group and the N. C. Writers’ Network. Her love for English led to her teaching and her teaching led to more writing and working on her own craft. Her first book of poetry, Daddy Said, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2020. She most recently took a NCWN class on digital publishing taught by Katie Winkler. Blackmon lives on the family farm with one goat, two donkeys, and one very spoiled Dachshund.

Jeff Burd has taught Creative Writing at Zion-Benton Township High School in Zion, IL for the last sixteen years.

Laura Donovan, passionate about the agency writing grants, has been teaching writing for most of her life; while currently a university professor, she first was certified in secondary education and—even earlier than that—worked with her mother in their pre-K daycare center, teaching the physical act of writing.

Malina Douglas is inspired by the encounters that shape us. She has received numerous awards, including the Editor’s Choice in the Hammond House International Literary Prize and Official Selection for the London Independent Story Prize, Fourth Quarter 2020. Her publications include Wyldblood, Opia, Typehouse, and Flash Fiction Magazine, among others. She has also been published in two anthologies—When it is Time and All Those Things You Thought Never Mattered. She has taught writing workshops in England, Ukraine and India and co-hosted a weekly writing group in Goa. She can be found on twitter @iridescentwords or at iridescentwords.com.

Erika Dreifus, the author of Quiet Americans: Stories and Birthright: Poems, has taught writing at Harvard University. She is currently an adjunct associate professor of English at Baruch College/CUNY. Since 2004, Erika has published the e-newsletter The Practicing Writer for poets, fictionists, and writers of creative nonfiction. Web: ErikaDreifus.com.

Morgan Driscoll is a commercial artist who lives in Connecticut. He has a few non-commercial things to say and so writes poetry to say them, figuring it is as good a way as any to go unpaid. He has been published occasionally and until now, obscurely, but not so much that he can’t be found with a google search for anybody interested.
Zary Fekete has worked as a teacher in Moldova, Romania, China, and Cambodia. They currently live and work as a writer in Minnesota. They have previously been published in Goats Milk Mag, Shady Grove Literary, SIC Journal, Warp10Fiction, Reflex Fiction, and Rabid Oak. They enjoy reading, podcasts, and long jogs in the countryside.

Katey Funderburgh graduated from Regis University with a double-major in English and Peace & Justice. She is currently an AmeriCorps member, serving in a high school in rural Montana. Though her free time is spent writing and reading poetry, she serves her students by providing math help and college readiness counseling.

Mike Goodwin has taught composition, literature, and creative writing courses at various colleges and universities for nearly fifteen years. He currently teaches at the University of Pittsburgh. Beyond teaching and writing, he spends much time with his spirited three-year-old son.

Mark Hammerschick writes poetry and fiction. He holds a BA in English from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and a BS and MBA. He began writing in grade school and has contributed a number of poems to literary journals over the years and has been published sporadically. His English professors in college convinced him to keep writing, make it a habit, he has been writing ever since.

Taru Heizu’s favorite English teacher is Mr. Gordon, who brightened Taru’s day with his dry, slightly negative humor. Recently, Taru has channeled this negativity through his thoughtful pieces of writing and has found a safe place to express himself.

Colin Ian Jeffery is an established English poet and novelist with world-wide reputation, his books can be purchased from Amazon and all good bookshops. He was seven, a choirboy, when he became entranced by poetry after hearing the vicar read the twenty-third psalm. The beauty of the words struck his soul like lightning and his Muse began to sing. He then found poetry was being read on the BBC radio Home Service and would listen in awe and delight to such poets as Dylan Thomas, John Betjeman, and Ted Hughes. Taught English literature at St Thomas Moore Catholic school --- then wrote novels and poetry.

Elizabeth Jorgensen is a writer and teacher. Her memoir, Go, Gwen, Go: A Family’s Journey to Olympic Gold, is available now (Meyer & Meyer Sport, 2019). Hacking Student Learning Habits: 9 Ways to Foster Resilient Learners and Assess the Process, Not the Outcome is forthcoming from Times 10 Publications (Spring 2022). She teaches writing to juniors and seniors in Wisconsin. Learn more on her website: lizjorgensen.weebly.com.

Sarah Law lives in London and is a tutor for the Open University and elsewhere. She teaches creative writing across the genres with a specialization in poetry where she is frequently published. Creative nonfiction work is forthcoming in Writing Bad, Samjoko and elsewhere. Her first novel is forthcoming in 2022 with Wipf and Stock. She edits the online journal Amethyst Review. Follow her on Twitter @drrsarahlaw.
Danielle Mikals is employed at UMBC. She enjoyed her Professor’s guidance towards exploring new genres. She was able to hone her ability to clarify the motivation of her characters and to keep focus on the intent of her work. The advice led her to be published on 805lit.org.

Titus Naso’s love for literature was fostered by Mr. Kendall, a high school English teacher who made reading books a fun and deeply personal experience. During the pandemic lockdown of 2020, Naso decided to write a poem a day for the next year. His poem “On Samuel Coleridge” is a selection from that project.

Molly Nichol is a current high school student in southern Illinois. "To Build a Fire" was a short story assigned by her English teacher, Mrs. Savage, who has encouraged Molly not only to pursue her passion for writing but to publish her work as well.

Jay Nunnery is a writer, teacher, and musician who calls many places home: Wisconsin, New York, Louisiana, and California. Recently, he completed the book *Alms, Louisiana, a collection of twenty-one interconnected stories*. Currently, he is working on a screenplay called *The Circuses* when he is not teaching high schoolers or making music.

Scott Peterson, before retiring, was a teacher and curriculum specialist in the Mattawan, Michigan schools. He was co-director and a teacher-consultant for the Third Coast Writing Project at Western Michigan University. He also taught writing classes at the university. He is co-author of *Theme Exploration: a Voyage of Discovery*. His poems and essays have appeared in *Longridge Review, Encore Magazine, Plain Song Review, Boomspeak, Home and other Places* as well as other journals and magazines.

Jose Joel Robles teaches religious subjects to senior high students. As a teacher, he has a lot of things to do, such as preparing lessons, checking and recording tests, and giving feedback. However, JJ loves to write to express himself. So, he chooses poetry because it’s direct and concise. “Behind the Screen” is his first published work.

Jim Ross taught Composition while substitute teaching through four years of grad school. After becoming a school-focused researcher, he continued teaching composition to fellow researchers who hadn’t learned in school. Teaching composition became an integral part of parenting. This piece describes adaptations made so post-stroke Mom could dictate letters to stay in touch with friends.

Nnadi Samuel, an English tutor, holds a B.A in English and literature from the University of Benin. His works have been published or are forthcoming in *Suburban Review, Seventh Wave Magazine, Quarterly West*, and elsewhere. Winner of the Miracle Monocle Award for Ambitious Student Writers 2021 (University of Louisville), the International Human Right Arts Festival Award 2021, and numerous others He is the author of *Reopening of Wounds* and *Subject Lessons* (forthcoming). He tweets@Samuelsamba10.
**Edith Ojonumi Sani** is a young Nigerian Poet, She lives in Jos, Plateau State, with her parents and siblings. She writes mostly about the happenings around her. You can connect with her on Facebook@Edith Ojonumi Sani and on IG@edithojonumisani.

**Stephen Schwei** is a Pushcart-nominated, published poet with Wisconsin roots, now living in Houston. As a child of two educators and beneficiary of great teachers, he has written poetry most of his life and novels recently. [www.stephenschwei.com](http://www.stephenschwei.com)

**Sameen Shakya** is a recent graduate from St. Cloud State University, MN where he pursued a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing. He is originally from Kathmandu, Nepal. His aim is to write poems that delight and instruct. His poems have been published in several print and online publications, including Upper Mississippi Harvest, Kaleidoscope and Havik, along with national dailies back in his country.

**James Siegel** is a gifted and talented consultant for Portland Public Schools. He holds a BFA in writing from Brooklyn College, an MA in TESOL from Adelphi University, and an MFA in writing from Stonecoast. He was a finalist for Bob Costas’ Excellence in the Teaching of Writing Award. He read the piece published here, “Teaching Sophomore English.” as a visiting artist and helped students start their own poems at Wheaton College, (MA) this past fall.

**Wes Tern** writes stories and teaches classes. His work has been published in Flash Fiction Magazine, Brilliant Flash Fiction, WINK Magazine, Blue Lake Review, and elsewhere. He lives in Florida.

**Wil Michael Wrenn** is a poet/songwriter living in rural north Mississippi. He has an MFA from Lindenwood University and is a songwriter/publisher and member of ASCAP. He has published three books of poems -- *Songs of Solitude, Seasons of a Sojourner*, and *Enid Lake Mosaic*. Wil Michael’s experience with the writing instruction he received in courses at Lindenwood University was, in his words, “transformational and inspiring” -- it helped him to be a better writer and to write in other genres in addition to poetry and songs. His website is: [https://michaelwrenn.webstarts.com](http://https://michaelwrenn.webstarts.com)
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