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Wiser for the Time: A collection of Poetry and Short Fiction

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**TRINITY COLLEGE
Hartford, Connecticut**

Creative Thesis Project

**WISER FOR THE TIME:
A Collection of Poetry and Short Fiction**

Submitted By:

**JEFF PRZECH
Graduate Studies, 2013**

**In Partial Fulfillment of Requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts in English
Writing, Rhetoric, and Media Arts Track**

Spring Semester - April 15, 2013

Project Advisor: Prof. Robert Peltier

Reader: Prof. Irene Papoulis

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I chose to pursue my Masters degree at Trinity College largely because of the opportunity to undertake a project such as this one in lieu of the more traditional thesis paper. Creative writing has been a passion of mine for many years and the chance to utilize this passion in the culmination of my studies was one I could not forgo.

I have taken something invaluable from each of the courses I have taken during my time at Trinity College and I offer my sincere thanks to each of the professors I have had the pleasure of studying with along the way: Claire Rossini, Jennifer Steadman, Colin McEnroe, Milla Riggio, Beverly Wall, Irene Papoulis, Gail Woldu, and the late Anne Fitzgerald. I have learned so much from each of these fine instructors and the inspiration for many of the pieces in this collection is directly attributable to them and my coursework at Trinity College.

I would be remiss if I did not offer special thanks to Professor Robert Peltier who had the unenviable task of being my thesis advisor. It was a tumultuous journey for me and I am forever indebted to Professor Peltier for his incredible patience and guidance, as well as his wonderfully astute and helpful comments during the revision process. I must also offer thanks again to Professor Beverly Wall for her open door and support as academic adviser over the years.

Jeff Przech
April, 2013

This collection is dedicated to the artists - the musicians, songwriters, poets, and authors - who have inspired me to write, not only in the present, but also in the past and in the future.

This collection is also fondly dedicated to the two people who have changed my life and changed me in countless ways, my children, Julia and Cody Przech, in the hope that one day they will read this and be proud of their Daddy.

BLANK CANVAS

It started with an eagle
An omnipresent symbol, innocuous
Representing America and my chosen institution
Of higher learning
My initials beneath it,
Representing... me, whatever that meant at the time
And a Saturday morning drive from Boston to Hampton Beach
In the summer of 1995, when I was twenty

The shop smelled like latex and Vaseline
And it was exciting, vibrant
Colors all over the walls
All over the people
I chose my eagle off the wall, the one that would
Forever be a part of me
I sat down in the chair, nervous excitement abounding
The gentle whir of the motorized needle permeated my ears
And penetrated my skin
Casual inconsequential small talk with my artist
A feeling of euphoria washed over me...
Or was it nausea....
As the lights began to spin and fade I realized
This was not normal

Blood sugar low
A quick trip across the street
Thirty two ounces of Coca-Cola and
Dairy Queen french fries
Snapped me back to consciousness
And the process continued,
Until it was done,
And I had a new addition, the first imprint
On my previously blank canvas
I now had the something the police refer to as an
Identifying mark
An eagle perched on my shoulder for eternity
And it was mine...
I learned never to get tattooed on an empty stomach
And that this would not be my last time
How cool I was....

Another shop, several years later
A birthday present to myself

My eagle was lonely
The studio was dark,
The canvas still mostly blank
A vague idea, manifested in a design from a binder
The familiar scent of latex and Vaseline
Trying to fill a vacancy on my body
My left arm
In myself

Another nameless artist
More hollow and trivial small talk
The recalled hum of the needle
Accompanied by.... Pain!
The nausea had a different root this time
An hour later a piece he seemed proud of
But I was not
Two tribal bands surrounding three Japanese Kanji
(Later to be covered up, since I am neither tribal nor Japanese...)
It was non-descript, tacky,
Mediocre
I learned never to pick a piece of permanence off of a wall

Back again, another studio, years later
This time equipped with a concept that wasn't on any wall
A shamrock, owing to my Irish heritage
The number 13, my lucky number, in the middle
A perfect dichotomy, two ubiquitous symbols
Of good luck and bad
Forever wedded on my right deltoid

The studio was unimpressive
Thin decrepit walls, thrown together
The customary latex and Vaseline
Replaced with the odor of cigarettes and stale beer
Proceed to the room in the back
The artist ominous, unwelcoming, intimidating
The obvious source of the cigarette smell
Hopefully not the beer as well...
A huge man with a questionable past
No small talk to be had on this trip
The customary hum of the needle
Delivered no pain this time
A gargantuan artist with a gentle hand
Irony...
And two hours later

A work of art, my brainchild, his creation
Pride

Back again, 2005, ten years since my first excursion
The addiction full bore, high gear
Coursing through my veins
Same shop as my last visit
Walls more decrepit, more yellowed with age
The air heavy with a lingering yet unidentifiable aura
This piece my most meaningful yet,
A celebration, a tribute
To my newborn baby girl

Proceed to the back to once again meet...
Wait... a face I don't recognize
My trust is challenged, my instinct betrayed
(My former epidermal artisan? "Disappeared.")
Desire for the piece trumps common sense
This new artist, Ray Ray by name,
Tattooed from head to toe,
Skull to lips to fingertips
None more foreboding than the teardrops on his cheek
Symbolizing a story I would hear in detail
Over the next four hours

The mundane symphony of the needle
Mingled with the sound of the artist's voice
Laden with expletives and a faint Hispanic accent
He is convivial, gregarious
As he recounts the violent slaying of his stepfather
He speaks of death
As he immortalizes a birth, a life
On my right arm
Ironic, not lost on me
Painless, as my last visit was
Perhaps I was growing accustomed to this?
Perhaps my body art was becoming routine?
Looking down I saw my latest addition
Even beneath the plastic wrap and ointment
Elegant and beautiful
Symbolizing something even more so
Art in its truest and most honest form

Since then, multiple trips
All delivering their own sense of satisfaction

A six hour cover up piece
("Go big or go home," my new master craftsman told me)
An angel's wings, the face of a goddess
Euterpe, Greek muse of lyric poetry
Omnipresent, covering my upper left arm
Almost in its entirety
An ornate design intertwined with the pieces on my right arm
The ultimate gesture of trust,
Letting my artist create as he saw fit
Inscribing the name and birthdate of my newborn son
Etched upon my right forearm
A tribute to him, as his sister has hers
Followed by a bible verse on my left wrist
Phillipians 3:13
"Forgetting what lies behind and
Straining toward what lies ahead"
Words to live by

I will never be Bradbury's Illustrated Man
No circus aspirations here
My works of art tell my story
In black, white
Red, green, and turquoise
They are a chronicle of my life
To this point
On display in perpetuity
I am the museum

Back again, at a time yet undetermined
Blank spaces
On the canvas
In me
Yet to be colored in

This poem was directly influenced by the course I took with the late Anne Fitzgerald, “Body Art in Fiction and Film.” I’ve long been an admirer of the art of tattooing and Anne’s class, through the wealth of material we studied about the history and cultural significance of the art, inspired me to think more deeply about the relevance of tattooing, not only for me, but also for other cultures throughout history. It seems to me that tattoos have become somewhat of a cliché in today’s society, but that has never been the case for me personally.

The poem is a chronicle of my personal tattooing history. It owes a bit of a debt to Mark Doty’s “My Tattoo,” but unlike Doty’s poem, “Blank Canvas” is entirely nonfiction. The poem was originally written stream of consciousness with minor revisions made later. When I sat down to write it I had no intention of writing a four page poem, but that is how it wrote itself. It had to be this long because my affair with the art form has been a long one, almost twenty years. Omitting something would somehow prioritize some of my memories as more important or significant than the others and I would be remiss if I did so. All of the memories are true, as are the characters that reemerge in the poem.

The poem also explores the conflict between getting tattoos because they’re cool, hip, or trendy and getting pieces that represent something much greater, as mine do. Each tattoo I have has deep personal meaning to me and each one was applied to my body after much thought. Prior to taking the aforementioned course, I was ignorant of tattooing and its significance to other cultures. As we learned more about these cultures, from the Polynesian to the Asian to the Hawaiian, I found myself identifying more and more with their ideologies, the symbolism and significance attributed to their tattoos, and developed an even greater pride for the art that adorns part of my own body. Professor Fitzgerald gave me a deeper appreciation for this and I am indebted to her for that. I offer this poem in her memory as both an expression of thanks and as my own tribute to her for expanding my horizons intellectually. I chose to begin this collection with this piece to further that tribute and also because prior to undertaking this project, the collection too was a blank canvas. Now, like me, it is no longer.

REVELATION

You drape yourself in waves
of lavender and lilac
a hundred shades of violet
Veiling yourself
Hiding from my gaze
I imagine your skin
your scent
Plumeria, or perhaps spring jasmine
I imagine what lies
beneath the waves,
A body with the softness and warmth
of the Caribbean sands,
How it might feel
to have your skin
beneath my fingertips
I experience your shape,
your form
I witness the look
in your honey-brown eyes
as you return my gaze
Speak without speaking
Allow ourselves to melt,
become a single work of art,
sharing one another's peace
Content in our nakedness,
Our unveiling
If only for a moment.

In the spring of 2005, I took my first required course at Trinity, Methods and Theories of Literary Study. In that course, we read, studied and discussed the novel *Fantasia* by Assia Djebar. *Fantasia* deals with the oppression of Algerian women, as they are forced by custom to remain veiled, hiding themselves from society behind a thin sheet of cloth. One of the predominant themes of *Fantasia* is the power of the female gaze and how a simple veil cannot extinguish the power of that gaze - it transcends cultural and societal limitations.

This poem is a ghazal, a thousand year old poetic form that was designed to be a sort of poetic “flirting.” The ghazal originated in the Persian culture and I thought a form originating from that part of the world was particularly appropriate for the subject matter of the piece. The fact that the ghazal is supposed to be somewhat like a piece of music, with each line adding a subtlety to the overall theme, made it attractive to me as well.

I wrote “Revelation” in free verse from the point of view of an Algerian man, one who does not approve of the cultural shackles placed on the women of his society. The speaker uses the power of imagination to both literally and figuratively see behind the veil of the unnamed female to whom the poem is addressed. He sees past the cloth, colored in beautiful shades, and looks into the woman herself. It is there that he is able to not only share the power of his gaze, but also to receive the power of hers, and use the two as a source of unity. Cultural ramifications dictate that the moment be fleeting, but pivotal nonetheless.

ESCAPING THE ZEITGEIST

If I just keep still, maybe they won't notice
If I blend in, maybe they can't see
There's not much more I can do –
I've tried disguises, I've changed my address
All in vain.

Every day the pattern repeats itself
It is Groundhog Day
Analogous to trying to escape your own shadow
And as the pale white fluorescent light shines down
My silhouette is formed
Though it bears little resemblance to me

Yet here we are again
I won't look behind me, I can't
I can feel the stare, the presence so tangible
I am held captive in a supposedly safe haven
I have no choice but to laugh at the irony

The question is obvious, "Why me?"
I try to do the right thing
Conduct myself with dignity and grace
Even in the face of society's lack thereof
But it doesn't seem to matter
Not here.

There's no escape, doors slammed shut
In the center of the room, I am cornered
This must be my lot in life
Or at least for this block of time
A target tattooed on my back – literal or figurative

So I'll accept my fate – for now
I will take the glares, absorb them into the back of my head
I will be the patient trooper
Biding my time, surviving the onslaught
Waiting.

Inevitably the tables will turn
And the hunted will become the hunter
I will spring from hiding and attack
And my stalker shall cower in front of me
Revenge will be mine, the sweetest of nectars
And I shall be free.

“Escaping the Zeitgeist” is my personal version of social commentary. It is an allegory with an anonymous protagonist and modern society as the omnipresent antagonist. The term *zeitgeist* is roughly defined as the “spirit of the times,” but in a more negative sense, it refers to an ideology that influences an entire culture for a period of time. The concept is a reflection of the content of a course I took with Colin McEnroe several years ago, *Blogging On*. In the course, we discussed how the internet and social media transformed the world and the way we accessed information. Mind you, this was in the days in which MySpace was in its heyday and Facebook was still a new idea. The notion that the world was accessible twenty four hours a day and indelibly influenced by the voice of whomever was ‘reporting’ the world’s events was in its infancy. In the course we looked at multiple internet outlets and blogs and it was staggering at how the agenda of one could potentially influence the thoughts and ideals of millions.

This poem is a condemnation of the ideology of the early 21st century world that is dominated by social networking and smart phones, TMZ and Twitter. In many ways, there is no peace in our world today, there is no place to hide. It often seems as if someone is always watching, not in a “Big Brother” sense, but more in the sense that the entire world seems accessible at all times. There is no privacy, no sanctity. The protagonist in this poem believes that is not a positive characteristic of our society.

My initial idea for the poem was more satirical than cynical. However, as I wrote it, the tone changed drastically. The heroine (I imagine the speaker to be a female) is on a quest to find peace and solitude in a world and a society that is perpetually “on.” The voice of the speaker turned from sarcastic to desperate as she moved among the herd in her daily life. She views herself as a light in the black, a pillar of ‘grace’ in the face of ‘society’s disgrace.’ She looks for a place to be an individual against the conformity and conventions of the world around her. Despite the pessimism throughout the poem, there is tinge of optimism at the end. While the poem does not have a pleasant ending itself, the door is left open for the possibility of one for the poem’s heroine, as she looks to escape until the zeitgeist evolves.

FINDING A WAY OUT OF THE FLOCK

Their young minds are empty
Not because they are spent
But because they have yet to be filled
With the knowledge of who they truly are
And will be
Of what the world holds for them
And their place in it
They roam
Through a familiar place made unfamiliar
By a challenge I have given them
To notice the neglected, see the unseen

I watch, I observe, I guide

They wander, seemingly aimless
While I attempt to give them focus
A destination
I strive to force their eyelids apart
Compel these pupils to use theirs
Without doing so physically
Provide them an impetus for ingenuity
Nonconformity
Brilliance

Their vision, blinded by the October sun,
Begins to clear
They recognize things that have always been there
But have, to this point, avoided their gaze
And thought

It is autumn
A time of transition
Nature's swan song, its coda
An encore before the lights go out
And winter brings an end to the show
There is a chill, a crispness to the air
And as it cools their lungs
The sun warms their bodies
And illuminates where they will go
Alone
Brave enough to no longer be sheep
But to be shepherds

“Finding a Way...” is a poem about being a teacher and the lessons we give to our students that don’t reside in any textbook. Last fall I took my own Honors Poetry Writing class outside during class with the instruction to walk around our school’s campus and write about what they saw. I hinted that if they truly embraced the assignment, they would notice things they never had before, even though they’ve spent the last four years there. Judging by the resulting pieces, they achieved this.

The speaker in the poem is yours truly. Watching them wander the grounds of our school, I thought about what their lives still have in store for all of them and how they have little to no idea about any of it. Being a teenager in today’s society is a borderline impossible task and the need to conform is daunting. I can only hope I do my job well enough to get them to exit the boxes that exist in their minds and explore what lies inside all of them before they go off to college next year.

The poem itself was written stream of consciousness, with revisions done well after the fact. It is free verse, free form, as my thoughts were on that morning. The main idea is in the last two lines. As teachers we try to teach our students to be leaders and not followers, but I always prefer to phrase it as I did in this poem, to be shepherds instead of sheep, to not be content merely being a part of the flock.

A question occurred to me while composing this piece. I began to wonder if college professors experience these same feelings with their students, particularly the graduate students. It must be different teaching adults, some of whom might even be older than the professors themselves, but there must be a certain similarity, a certain likeness to both positions. We are guides, all trying to lead our students to the proverbial water and hoping what we’ve taught them will compel them to drink.

PULSE

Beneath the burned out buildings
Behind the spray paint tags
Past the empty bottles of three dollar wine
And the rain soaked porno mags
Through the broken boarded windows
Under the fading lights
Around every corner with medicine men
And ladies of the night

The pulse still beats but it's getting weak
An aging dam that's sprung a leak
The signs on the streets are still the same
But little else still remains

Across the rusted railroad tracks
Toward the muddy riverside
Among the displaced vagabonds
With no place left to hide
Above the din of sirens
Under the for sale signs
Around the frames of yellow tape
And fading chalk outlines

The pulse still beats but it's getting weak
A washed up fighter past its peak
The cracks in the sidewalk are still the same
But little else remains

Within these city limits
After the dawn of day
Without the sounds of laughter
When children used to play

The pulse still beats but it's fading fast
How much longer can it last?
The signs on the streets are still the same
And the cracks in the sidewalk still remain
But the present tense disguises the memory

“Pulse” is the first poem I wrote about my hometown of Hartford. It is an elegy for the Hartford I grew up in, which is long gone. I sought to provide vivid images for the reader and, while they are not all actually things I have seen (though some are), I believe that on any given day or night in Hartford any of these things can be real. I don’t recall how I arrived at the idea of beginning most of the lines with prepositions, but I thought it was interesting and challenging and provided a good lead in to the refrain of the pulse. The prepositions give the feeling of ubiquity, constantly there, serving as the new “pulse” of the city. The title itself is a reference to Hartford’s unofficial nickname as the “Heartbeat.”

In Professor Milla Riggio’s “City Scene” course, we discussed at length the way cities, particularly Hartford, were represented in literature and film. As a Hartford native, this was particularly fascinating to me since I felt I had inside information, so to speak, on the subject. The course dealt specifically with understanding the urban scene and how the city of Hartford was represented in literature and in film, including the 2002 film “Far From Heaven” and the memoir “Girls of a Tender Age” by Mary-Ann Tirone Smith, which actually took place in my best friend’s old neighborhood. These two works painted vastly different portraits of Hartford and “Pulse” is my own addition to the Hartford tapestry. It is admittedly jaded in its tone, but the poem represents my personal understanding of Hartford, written from the perspective of someone who lived and grew up in the city and saw the city’s descent first hand.

DUTCH ANGLE

I remember living with the souls of a city long gone
It's been fifteen years since I saw this place with innocent eyes
I walk through barren streets that once echoed with laughter
I know where I am, but something is unfamiliar about it all today

The signs on the streets are still the same
The numbers on the houses haven't changed
But somewhere along the way, my city moved away
Memories disguised by the present tense

How easy life could be at fifteen....
It's been that many years now, vitality and dignity stripped away
I walk with my head up and eyes wide for a better view
I know where I am, but my perspective is distorted by what I see

The cracks in the sidewalk are still the same
Time passes on and each one still in its place
Somehow while I've been gone, the cracks have grown long
Memories erased by the present tense

I still remember when love could come and find you by these fields
But it's been fifteen years and nothing so beautiful can grow here
I turn away listening for the laughter, but it's all quiet now
I know where I am, but the grass won't grow and the fountain doesn't flow anymore

The signs on the streets are still the same
The faces in my mind haven't changed
But like the city, along the way, those faces faded away
Memories expunged by the present tense

Faded green park benches, once alive with stories
Now obscured with painted words we never knew then
No how or why it had to change
Tools of the trades are all that remain

The cracks on the sidewalk are still the same
They don't lead to the places I know
Their directions lie and try to hide
Memories erased by the present tense

In Professor Riggio's aforementioned course, "The City Scene," we learned about the term Dutch angle as it pertains to filmmaking. The technique involves tilting the camera in order to give the viewer a different perspective on what is seen. Use of the Dutch angle is supposed to encourage and enhance tension and stress. The technique can be seen to great effect in the film "Fear And Loathing in Las Vegas," among others.

In this poem, the Dutch angle is applied to the eyes and perspective of the observer, me, as I walked through my old neighborhood in Hartford. Truthfully, many of the lines in this poem came to me as I drove through my old neighborhood, not far from Trinity College, but the idea of the cracks in the sidewalk lent itself to a walk more than a drive. I thought to myself while driving that the signs on the streets were still the same, but not much else was as I remembered it from when I was a boy. The poem grew from there, lamenting what used to be and how it is now, in the "present tense." The poem generally refers to how, as Robert Frost said, "Nothing gold can stay." The neighborhood in which I grew up was never gold, but it held a lot of memories, including the fountain and the park benches at Hyland Park, where I played little league baseball. The words that now cover those benches shall not be repeated here.

The poem has elements of an elegy and of a ballad. There is no refrain, as a ballad would have, but there is a recurring theme in the even numbered stanzas that is 'balladesque.' The poem definitely has an elegiac tone to it, which is what I was going for most. There is a sense of loss, not only of youth, but also of innocence when the Dutch angle of adult experience and perspective is applied to the memories of childhood.

RISING STAR BLUES

What happened to the working class heroes?
Said what happened to the working class heroes?
Who built this city out of blood, sweat and pride

They're looking back now remembering a better time
Yes, they're looking back now remembering a better time
When the city that they love was known for more than its crime

The papers say this city's a living hell
The newspapers say this city's a living hell
There's something that they're missing, I know it well

They said there'd be some changes, but they lied
Yes, they said there'd be some changes, but they lied
Things are no different here, far as I can tell

This used to be a place to raise a family
And the kids could play outside all day and night
Now the kids, they play with guns, no concern for what they've done
Something 'bout this picture just ain't right

I see my city at night on the evening news
I watch my city every night on the evening news
There'll be film at eleven, see what someone else had to lose

A good man died today at a local bar
Another good man was killed today at a local bar
Another light shot out in the rising star

An old man told me it wasn't always this way
Yes, he told me that life here wasn't always this way
Said, "Son, I know you know it's true what I say"

Well they said it's getting better here, but they lied
Yes, they said it's getting better here, I think they lied
Hoping we'd look the other way and let it slide

This used to be a place to raise a family
And the kids could play outside all day and night
Now the kids, they play with guns, no concern for what they've done
Something 'bout this picture just ain't right

The working class heroes have all moved away
All the working class heroes up and moved away

Saw the writing on the wall, and couldn't stay

Inspired, albeit negatively, and influenced by the blues poems of Langston Hughes, “Rising Star Blues” is the third entry in my “Hartford Trilogy.” Again, I credit Professor Riggio’s “City Scene” course for encouraging me to think about the City, Hartford in particular, in a more analytical and literary light. Unfortunately, as the previous two pieces also indicate, that light did not reveal anything positive. Instead, like in “Pulse,” the images that come to mind are of police cars and yellow tape that appear on the news and in the papers on an almost daily basis. Though the city, and my old neighborhood in particular, was founded by working class people, the “heroes” mentioned in the poem, the blue collar values and morals have been replaced by indolence and malfeasance that has caused those heroes, including my own mother, to move away.

I discovered the blues poetry form several years ago while looking for new ideas to include in my Honors Creative Writing class. At the time, I was just getting deeper into blues music, discovering artists like Elmore James, Taj Mahal, and especially Muddy Waters. Blues poetry was a perfect marriage of my two creative outlets, music and poetry. However, it wasn’t until taking Professor Riggio’s class and looking at my hometown through that lens that I “had the blues” about something enough to write about it. The “Rising Star” referenced in the title and in the body of the poem refers to another one of Hartford’s nicknames, “New England’s Rising Star,” adopted several years ago. The irony in the seventh stanza involves Hartford’s disturbingly high murder rate as “shooting out” the image of a rising star.

Mark Twain once said of Hartford, “Of all the beautiful towns it has been my fortune to see this is the chief.” I wonder what he thinks of his chief now looking down from above. These three poems, “Pulse,” “Dutch Angle,” and “Rising Star Blues,” offer my view as an insider now looking back in from the outside.

CENTRAL PARK,
DECEMBER 6. 2011

It was raining that Tuesday
Like when the sky can't decide
If it wants to hold back or let it fall
And the mist in the air
Joined with the mist in her eyes
Then I knew she hadn't given up at all
She said, "Why do you love me?"
I said how can I not?
She moves me like no one else I've known
She said, "Why are you still here?"
I said where else would I be?
The thought of losing her chills me to the bone

And my mind was spinning 'round, like a pinwheel in the breeze
And her eyes burned bright with longing, like the lights hung on the trees
For Christmastime
We both knew we'd come further than either one had ever been
And we both broke down together, to build it up again
And Central Park cried

It was raining that Tuesday
Like the heavens flooding down
Cleansing long lost wounds that'd yet to heal
And the streams on the sidewalk were
Dwarfed by the rivers on her cheeks
And the purging reminded both of us how to feel
She said, "How can you love me?"
I said the only way I know
I pour myself out until the well runs dry
She said, "Why don't you leave me?"
I said I don't know how
Because she's loved me and never wondered why

And my mind was spinning 'round, just like a carousel
And her eyes burned like a beacon, to bring us back from hell
One last time
We knew that this was greater than anything we ever knew
And we both broke down together, it was all we'd left to do
And Central Park cried

The rain ended that Tuesday
Like it was never there at all
We walked a path that took us from that place

To a street fair on Columbus
Alone amid the crowd
She bought a pretty hat to frame her face

And my mind was slowing down, like a candle burnt to the end
And her eyes were warm, just like the sun, the way they'd always been
All that time
We both knew what was left to come eclipsed what lay behind
And we left there holding tightly to what it was we'd come to find
And Central Park smiled

As mentioned previously, in Professor Riggio's "City Scene" course, we discussed how certain elements of the city were represented. While the course focused much of its attention on Hartford, I extended the reach of the course, so to speak, about 100 miles to the Southwest. The poem is mostly autobiographical. The participants are real, as are some of the events that transpire in the poem, the street fair on Columbus Avenue for example. Most of the action in the poem took place in Central Park but rather than merely using Central Park as the setting, I included it as a character as well, personifying it to mirror the emotions of the two characters.

"Central Park" is the first poem I've ever written where the setting is vital. I'm sure there are many poems that have been written either about or even in Central Park. It is an iconic place that everyone has either been to or at least heard of, though I had never been there before the evening the poem describes. As I wrote this piece, I was reminded of songs I've heard and enjoyed in which New York plays a major role, "New York, New York" by Ryan Adams or U2's "Angel of Harlem" for example. I also thought about Carl Sandburg's "Chicago." What separates this piece from Sandburg's is that Sandburg wrote his piece as an apostrophe to the city whereas in "Central Park," the location is the third main character.

"Central Park" is both narrative and lyric in form. As stated before, the events are mostly nonfiction and the poem stays true to the events as they happened. My original idea was to write a song about the events, but as the words came out on paper it was

apparent that what I was writing was much too verbose to be a song. However, the meter and rhyme scheme characteristic of lyric poetry stayed.

CLINCHFIELD RAIL

The soot so thick and black I could carve it with my knife
And it's been six months, or maybe more, since I've seen my lovely wife
I pray I'm home before too long, though that's prob'ly just a dream,
To meet my newborn baby who's waiting there for me

Every day is longer than the one that came before
Carving and moving rock and earth 'til my body can take no more
Two hundred miles left ahead to reach that Carolina line
Got to get that coal to Spartanburg from the old Virginia mine

God willing and the creek don't rise
I'll make it to see my next sunrise
And I'll be home by Christmas time
If the Clinchfield Rail gets through

The Appalachian sky so blue, the sun it burns so bright
As the flame we sit around together singing campfire songs at night
But each night there's one more missing who met his demise
Falling to his death without a soul hearing his futile cries

They're buried in silent graves beneath eighty feet of fill
They gave their lives to make a living and now they never will
Still a hundred miles left ahead to reach that Carolina line
Got to get that coal to Spartanburg from the old Virginia mine

God willing and the creek don't rise
I'll make it to see my next sunrise
And I'll be home by Christmas time
If the Clinchfield Rail gets through

For these tunnels and these bridges I've given up my life
And it's been six years, or maybe more, since I've seen my lovely wife
The boom towns start to look the same as we drive on through these hills
Through the back country land of hillbillies with their Mason jars and stills

The Blue Ridge Mountains stand before me, the promise that they hold
To connect this Appalachian land to the rest of the world
Only fifty miles left ahead to reach that Carolina line
Got to get that coal to Spartanburg from the old Virginia mine

God willing and the creek don't rise
I'll make it to see my next sunrise
And I'll be home by Christmas time
If the Clinchfield Rail gets through

This poem was inspired by a documentary I saw on the History Channel entitled, "Hillbilly: The Real Story." Within the program was a segment on the Clinchfield Railroad, which is still in existence today and runs from Tennessee through the Blue Ridge Mountains down to Spartanburg, South Carolina. The story of the railroad's genesis was quite interesting, involving the need to transport coal from the mines of Southwestern Virginia through the Carolinas, but it was the story of the people involved in the railroad's construction that grabbed me.

The railroad was built by a combination of Appalachian hill-folk and immigrants from the larger cities in the Northeast. The cultural clashes were numerous and many workers were killed in riots due to poor and incredibly difficult working conditions. However, countless others were killed in accidents on the job, falling to their deaths in huge holes that were excavated or blasted along the rail route. Since many of these workers were fresh immigrants they were, in essence, nameless and wound up in unmarked graves fifty to eighty feet beneath railroad lines. This is what struck me most, the tragedy of dying anonymously while simply trying to earn a living and provide for a family. The poem is written from the imagined perspective of a Clinchfield worker, giving insight into the hardships that confronted these men while performing a nearly impossible and seemingly endless task. The railroad eventually stretched over 260 miles and took thirteen years to complete. Though the speaker in the poem has seen only half of that time, the hardships are still evident.

The poem itself is a ballad. Once I decided I wanted to write a poem about this facet of American history, the ballad was the most appropriate form. I wanted to adhere to the classical ballad form of the old English and Scottish folk ballads. The meter and rhyme scheme, as well as the refrain, reflect the characteristics of these classic ballads. I wanted the reader to imagine this poem as one of the 'campfire songs' referenced in the poems, the workers singing it together after another backbreaking day of manual labor. The speaker's expression of hope in the refrain, hope that is not realized in the poem, makes him and those like him tragic heroes on an epic journey, one that they may never see realized.

CUPID & PSYCHE: THE OPPOSING VIEW

INTRODUCTION: Cupid sits in the heavens lamenting his lack of nobility, which prevents his achievement of greatness.

In the land of Apollo
And all who are to come
From the furthest lunar rings
To the center of the sun
Ubiquitous in nature
With eyes that scan the Earth
Intangible to all of those
Mired in the mirth
Stretching arms from summit to summit
This encompasses my domain 10
And the masses who know me not
Help sing my proud refrain
Though my place is one of stone
And worship be the prize
The spirit is in disarray
For I see with clouded eyes
Wings spread wide but fail to hide
As the heavens croon with joy
Among valor, among greatness
Among men I am a boy 20
Pensive with my plight
It's root so much sublime
I invoke thee mortals down below
Call on Cupid most divine

CANTO I: Cupid receives his call from Psyche and they begin their quest.

“Frailty, thy name is woman,”
How may this creed apply
To she who laughs in sadness
And happiness makes cry
My call was loud and bold
Rang through water and wine
Asked to change the sullen sun
A task most ably mine
I held my master with brightened gaze
She had of her neither flaw nor 10
Imperfection, but eminence and grace
Made me yearn to listen more

“My name is Psyche,” she commenced,
 “I have brought you from above
 To give me drink of milk and honey
 And show me what is love.
 A noble task it is,” said she,
 “And but a god could succeed
 You must be siren and lure me
 Be it word or be it deed 20
 For tho’ I am most beautiful
 It runs not through me deep
 And it is what I am lacking here
 That gives me cause to weep.”
 I asked of her no more than this
 For in her melancholy
 I saw my task quite clearly
 Both of mind and of body
 Such wonders I beheld now 30
 All glistened on her face
 No mask could ere disguise
 No time could e’er erase
 I had no prior evidence
 Of her weight, woeful plight
 Yet saw the day in shadows
 And chose to fly by night
 Thus I agreed with roses
 Though the answer was her own
 And began with but three words of faith
 ‘Librar su corazon’ 40

*** line 40: Spanish for ‘Free your heart’*

CANTO II: Cupid and Psyche begin their search for their elusive entity, Love.

“Forward,” she cried,
 “Lead me to my way
 To drink the heavenly nectar
 And see the stars of day.”
 “You are not the first,” say I,
 “Of course, I know,” says she,
 “But if I’ll not come to this among mortals
 Then bring me to the sea.”
 “No promises I offer you
 But rest assured in time 10
 You’ll ne’er lay wanton here
 Your desires shall be thine.”

So to the waters we progress
 Swimming naked as the first
 Exploring worldly mysteries
 While in the blackness cursed
 "Cupid, move us onward
 For nothing yet is clear
 And though we bathe in nature
 My journey ends not here 20
 Take me now to islands
 Nestles all their own
 For I wonder if not solitude
 Is the path which I must roam"
 So thus we went and by and by
 We found our quest's asylum
 The maiden innocence abounds
 The grace of her diadem
 Plush and vibrant was this site
 Yet she saw not what was required 30
 And spoke to me in awesome gasp,
 "O, omnipotence, take me higher!"
 So onward we traivaled
 Wings spanning 'cross the land
 On to wondrous plains
 The spot on which we'd land
 Vast lands to roam free
 Searching for her resurgence
 Yet shrouds that loomed close ahead
 Were cause for her disturbance 40
 "Steal me away once more,"
 The maiden implored her guide,
 "I have come this far with burning brain
 I shall not be denied!"
 So again we rose above the sphere
 Disdain lurked on her face
 We touched on broad white mountains
 Hoping them to be the place
 They rose and fell as did her heart
 Broken in between 50
 We hid among their mist
 Refusing to be seen
 We climbed with strength of armies
 Like those in Homer's tales
 And never paused to notice
 The downpours and the gales
 Indeed our quest outweighed all
 And boundaries could not bind

For we sought elusive entity	
Yes, love we sought to find	60
The mountains were quite barren	
And held for us no treasure	
So to the skies we took once more	
To seek another measure	
We had but one more destination	
A final chance at retribution	
We took in air and ventured forth	
On to forests of illusion	
Passing through the gates at once	
It seemed this was at last	70
The home of secluded oracles	
Alluding to suitors past	
I had a sudden premonition	
In which she seemed to share	
We knew we must press on	
But truly, did we dare?	
Though time was of no matter	
We had put it to the test	
Still now with many hours passed	
Our weary souls must rest	80
Throughout our sundry wanderings	
We had moved without our sight	
For though our images were clear	
We saw them without light	
I held this maiden in such grand esteem	
Of me she said the same	
Yet intangible to my touch	
'La jeune et le belle madame'	
So fabulous to look upon	
The epitome was she	90
But despite her many natural gifts	
Illicit she was to me	
For the spirits in high heavens	
Have set their bated grounds	
Should she set one gaze on me	
Disaster shall abound	
Superior deities have spoken	
My divinity must stay hidden	
Though my task is crystal clear	
Knowledge of me - forbidden	100

*** line 88: French for 'My young and beautiful lady'*

CANTO III: Psyche disobeys the gods and views Cupid in the light. Tragedy rears its ugly head.

The night began with everything
And now had brought us here
To sleep upon a golden moor
Beneath the midnight clear
Inch by inch, mile by mile
We had travelled hidden worlds
Now temporary peace upon us
All pretense lay unfurled
I slumbered for eternities
And never ceased for joy
My new mate, astounding
So innocent, so coy
I knew not what occurred
As I calmly lay at rest
I had no fateful notion
While subjected to her test
I awoke to glaring blindness
A piercing blaze of fire
The candle burning in her hand
Made consequence transpire
Our company interrupted
Our acquaintance now destroyed
Our journey ceased so suddenly
My guardianship now deployed
Like Lot's bride of Gomorrah
Who broke her Golden Rule
Now to be governed just the same
By vicious fate so cruel
Fair maiden's fall from grace
Vigor turned to numb
Desecrated our tranquility
And to temptation she succumbed
She had chosen errantly
Knew no dangers of desire
Her innocence her downfall
Giving air to funeral pyre
A disarming bit of truth
A harsh dose of denial
As Psyche returns to mortals
Banished from our exile
I am rendered powerless
Though I formerly had all
Through Psyche all is lost

None safe from the fall
 It was but love she sought
 Looked to be as one
 In this battle we are defeated
 And tragedy has won
 To the victor go the spoils
 And spoil is what they do 50
 As Helen of Sparta brought on her own
 So Psyche has done too
 Wasted chances prevalent
 In the doldrums now to dwell
 Possibility speaks strongest
 But perhaps just as well
 For Psyche searched for love
 As thought it came with ease
 Yet never knew it doesn't dwell
 In oceans, sky, or trees 60
 She was weak for lack of knowing
 Tears fall on callous heart
 It stains as if with blood
 And rips chambers apart
 But this curse has brought a gift
 And if Psyche shan't accept
 It is perhaps her ignorance
 That leaves her soul bereft
 I now return to gods of all
 Yet my task has not been failed 70
 For in this valiant quest for love
 It is truth that has prevailed
 Matters of the heart of hearts
 Never exclude the mind
 For you are but yourself
 And within the answers lie

In the interest of continuing to attempt and present a variety of poetic forms, I arrived at this poetic interpretation of the Cupid and Psyche myth. At approximately 260 lines it hardly qualifies as an epic, but I tried to use the language and construction of epic poetry to retell the myth from a different perspective. The inclusion of the rhyme scheme made the composition of the poem more challenging, but it is an integral aspect. While the meter is not exactly precise, the poem does flow smoothly and has the vocal quality of a classic lyric poem.

I took poetic license with the original myth of Cupid and Psyche. The most important change I wanted to make was to ultimately have Cupid's love for Psyche go unrequited. The theme of unrequited love is classic in its own right and more appealing to me than the happier ending the original myth has. In following this alternate course of events, Psyche became similar to other classical 'anti-heroines,' like Pandora in Greek mythology, Eve or Lot's wife (referenced in the poem) from the Book of Genesis, for whom curiosity became their tragic flaw. The concept of violating the will of the gods and the trust of Cupid still holds true. Cupid becomes the tragic hero in the poem, falling quickly in love with Psyche only to have her fatal flaw send him back whence he came unfulfilled. The fact that the conflict is unresolved or, perhaps more accurately, resolved negatively, is designed to give the poem a tragic theme as opposed to the aforementioned happy ending of the original myth.

Despite the fact that the poem is set in ancient Greece, I included more modern allusions as well. The quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* fit the theme of the poem perfectly and the reference to Lot's wife from the Bible was an appropriate analogy to Psyche without using the more obvious reference to Eve. Admittedly, the Book of Genesis is by no means modern, but it is relative to the setting of the piece. The inclusion of foreign languages in a couple of the lines was designed to add to the classical tone of the poem.

TO THE CRITIC (WHO SHALL REMAIN UNNAMED)

Thank you for your altruistic and constructive words
We should all feel honored to have our pains and passions assessed
By one so erudite and accomplished as you
In fact, your title alone speaks volumes
Critic....
Passing judgment since the fourteenth century
Your words so plentiful
Your accomplishments so scarce

It appears as though you see your title
Critic....
As license to solely be critical
To find fault
To poke holes in the art of another
How ironic that the title that more aptly suits your role

Hypocrite

Predates yours by centuries
For your inability to create of yourself
Long preceded your proficiency in desecrating the creativity of others
Your prowess existing in denouncing others
For doing what you cannot

Perhaps you view yourself more as Hippocrates than hypocrite
A paragon of artistic merit and integrity
Yet your perception is as incongruous as your judgments
You swore no oath of honesty
Made no vow of ethics
So noble in your patronizing
Behind your shield of impunity from refutation

You are the one who curses darkness
While it is we who light the flame

This poem is not directed at critics as a whole, but at one in particular, who shall remain nameless here. Not too long ago I read a music review of a recently released record in which it was obvious that the 'critic' hadn't the slightest idea what he was talking about. His review contained nothing of substance, only references to the band in question's previous work, which the reviewer blatantly stated he did not care for. The writer actually wrote very little about the record that was supposed to be the subject of the review. In my estimation he neither did his job nor was he qualified to do his job in this instance. It reminded me of a similar review I read years ago in the *Hartford Advocate* about a local band and a concert they put on in Downtown Hartford. That 'critic' wrote, in a very derogatory manner, about the band's appearance, the demographics of the crowd, and the similarity, as he perceived it, of the band to other prevalent and commercial bands of that time. What he ignored in his column was the most important aspect: The music itself. I wrote a letter to the author of the review challenging his "impunity from refutation" in which I questioned his qualifications for appraising the merit of someone else's work and challenged him to pick up an instrument and produce something better. I was not at all surprised when I got no reply.

This poem itself is an apostrophe, directed not only at the aforementioned critics, but also to all those like them. Far, far too often these days a critic sees his or her job as to be critical, finding defects in the art of others, "cursing the darkness" rather than lighting a candle with something original and creative of their own. I did not want the poem to be strictly vitriolic in tone, as bitterness would not convey the proper message for the piece. Instead, I used sarcasm and wordplay to convey the substance of the poem, making the subject more of a caricature than a target. The wordplay, the puns between the words 'critic,' 'hypocrite,' and 'Hippocratic,' were used to keep the poem sarcastic rather than scathing while still expressing the theme.

PASTIME OF A PAST TIME

The snow has passed, gone
The sun shines high above
Bringing the guarantee of revival
Reborn year after year, just the same
Skin as white as the clouds
It aspires to reach
Fresh seams like the smile
Of a circus clown
As he entertains a young child

Time passes, months go by
The scars of battle appear
Beaten day after day
Leather seasoned by the dust
And sweat of hands
Never complaining though

Rewards are tremendous
The shining eyes of a young boy
The dusty memories of a grandfather
Not a castaway, a trophy
An heirloom for generations
Someone lives the dream

Rolling through the grass
As green as a seaside Irish lea
Flying through the sky
As blue as clear as Caribbean waters
Reaching for the clouds,
As pure white as its gristly skin once was

This is American tradition
It screams, "these months belong to me,"
to the dream, to the sounds,
to the sights, to the smell
to the life.

“Pastime of a Past Time” is an ode. I was watching the San Francisco Giants play the Detroit Tigers in the 2012 World Series and I was reminded how much baseball used to be a part of my life. Now, I have absolutely no stake whatsoever in either team, I am a New York Yankees fan, but there was a time in my life where I would watch baseball for no other reason but for, as they say, the love of the game.

As I sat watching the game, I glanced over and caught sight of a baseball I keep in the living room. It was a souvenir from a New Britain Rock Cats game I went to with my daughter, then five years old, in the summer of 2010. It isn't a regulation ball, just a memento with the team's logo on it, but it is still pristine and white, like a brand new ball about to be entered into play for the first time. I recalled being my daughter's age and how much I loved the game then and all throughout my youth. I remember game days where we would get to take a brand new baseball out of its wrapper and the excitement that went along with that. It provided a sense of rebirth for those two or three times a week we got to play. I chose to start the poem with that sense of rebirth that used to come every spring when the snow melted away and the fields became visible again.

Somewhere along the way I, like so many others it seems, lost that pure love of baseball. What was once America's Pastime has seemingly been replaced by video games and other mindless activities that are keeping America's youth from experiencing the joys of the game. The poem is an ode to that joy that I experience as a boy. This piece could have taken the form of short fiction or even an expository essay but, having read “Chicken Soup for the Baseball Fan's Soul” several times, those forms, particularly the essay, have already been done. I believed that the feeling of reverence for the actual object, a simple baseball, would best be expressed in a poem of praise, not unlike Keats' “Ode on a Grecian Urn” or “Ode to a Nightingale.” In addition, my favorite piece of baseball literature has always been Ernest Thayer's “Casey at the Bat” so this poem is intended to follow in that tradition of baseball poetry.

FOR A FRIEND AND LOVER

Your eyes are mirrors
As mine are
In which we see what we cannot
They reveal truths that have been buried
Fossilized
By years of dirt and rubble piled above
And I dig, hacking away like
A prisoner on a chain gang
Toiling away in the blazing oppressive sun
With only the anticipation
Of freedom

I wonder where your freedom lies
And when you will have the means
To chisel away at that which shackles you
And leave it in the dirt
We've piled behind us
I can see the day, the vision is cloudy
Though the day itself is not
When you will move away your hands
Be free to reveal what is hidden
And be free to show my eyes
What is already seen in my mind,
My soul
For the body merely manifests
What lies within it
So peer carefully into my mirror
And find pure beauty

“For a Friend and Lover” is an ode though, unlike “Pastime,” it is an ode to a person rather than an inanimate object. Quite frankly, it is a love poem, a madrigal, though slightly longer than the classic madrigal. It is dedicated to someone who is very special to me and has changed my life in many ways. The mirror analogy in terms of seeing things in each other that we are unable to see in ourselves. I have encouraged her to let go all of the negatives she’s had to experience in her life, to clear from her memory those that have beaten her down physically and emotionally, in order that she may see the pure beauty, referenced in the final line, that I see, in her mirror, and that I know exists inside of her.

This poem came out of some free writing I had done, something I learned to do in Professor Rossini’s Poetry Writing class. Professor Rossini encouraged us to journal, keep a record of our thoughts in the event that something might result from it. I never intended to do anything with it except get my feelings at the time out and down on paper. Once I looked back at it after writing them all down, it was apparent to me that what I actually had was the first draft of a poem. Had Professor Rossini not taught and stimulated me to document my thoughts, to keep a journal or notebook to record my ideas, I may never have been able to recognize that. This poem may have wound up on a napkin in a landfill.

The poem was also an exercise in revision, another skill cultivated in Professor Rossini’s class. The poem in its original form lacked coherence and was just a jumbalaya of words and phrases and needed revision to achieve unity of thought. Prior to taking the Poetry Writing workshop, I was steadfast in my disdain for revision. I believed once the ideas stopped, the piece was finished. It was Professor Rossini who showed me that revision is necessary to take a collection of words and create a poem, a concept I have since ingrained in my own creative writing students.

SONNET 17

I once partook the heavenly nectar
And clearly saw radiant stars of day
They renounced their role as soul's protector
Colors supplanted by drab shades of grey

The skies bleed blackness though the sun still shines
My eyes blinded by one that's come and gone
She lives in my soul, I am thus confined
Condemned to dusk as I await the dawn

I reach out to a figment of my mind
Dulcet tones of laughter echo so bold
Her light that warned me has proven unkind
My weary spirit lies beaten and cold

Yet though elusive, she returns again
I will follow to my predestined end

I could not in good conscience compose a creative writing volume that included so many various poetic forms and not include a sonnet. In my mind, perhaps along with the haiku, the sonnet is the most well known poetic form. Prior to this I had very little experience writing sonnets and, as was the case with other pieces in this collection, I wanted to challenge myself to do something different while at the same time writing a piece in a classic style. The title is somewhat misleading. This is not the seventeenth sonnet I've written. Calling it *Sonnet 1* or *Sonnet 2* didn't work for me so I chose an arbitrary yet realistic number to assign this piece.

Technically speaking, the poem is an amalgam of the Shakespearean and Petrarchan styles. I used the Shakespearean rhyme scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg*. I also adhered to the Shakespearean construction of four quatrains, providing the conflict, and a final couplet imparting the resolution. However, I used the tone, voice, and theme of a Petrarchan sonnet. The speaker is a victim of unrequited love, as Petrarch was with his elusive Laura. He is tormented constantly by the object of his desire and haunted by memories of her, like the laughter referenced in line 10. The resolution provides a contrast to the previous quatrains, offering a glimmer of hope to a hopeless situation. In addition, it also evokes the memory of Petrarch as he pined for years for his love, unable to ever truly give up on it. Like Petrarch, the speaker is exhorting rather than coercing, calling out to his intangible muse. In doing so, he creates an almost mystical figure, though in only one poem rather than 366.

THE FRONT OF THE LINE (THE END OF THE LINE)

The man in the car at the front of the line
Riding slowly and quietly toward the gates
Each mile passes noiselessly
Lost in peaceful thought and dreaming

Riding slowly and quietly toward the gates
The people who have shaped his life are
Lost in peaceful thought and dreaming
Straining to see through an impenetrable mist

The people who have shaped his life are
Traveling in silence, afraid to break the solitude
Straining to see through an impenetrable mist
Unable to bear the weight of the moment

Traveling in silence, afraid to break the solitude
Unable to bear the weight of the moment
Harsh reality reflected in a single tear
The journey has reached its destination

Harsh reality reflected in a single tear
Each mile passes noiselessly but
The journey has reached its destination
For the man in the car at the front of the line

One of the major components of this project was the idea of using many different poetic forms. I knew that not only would this make the collection more interesting to read, but it would also pose a greater challenge to me as a writer, forcing me to step out of my usual comfort zones of lyric poetry and free verse. I assign pantoums to my Honors Poetry Writing classes every year but had never attempted one myself, quite frankly, because the form intimidated me. The notion that each line of the poem had to work not once but twice was very daunting. I challenged myself even further by making lines eighteen and twenty repeats of three and one respectively, a characteristic that not all pantoums possess.

In adding this final twist to the pantoum form, I actually made the theme of the poem work more effectively. The poem is about death, the end of life's cycle. The intermingling of the lines reflects the cyclical nature of life and death, perhaps best said in the book of Genesis:

“...for dust you are and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19)

I did not want to make the outcome of the poem too obvious at the outset, so the image of the man riding in the car at the front of line is purposely ambiguous. He could be the grand marshal of a parade or perhaps a head of state. Of course, the car is ultimately a hearse and that fact slowly reveals itself throughout the poem until the “end of the line” is reached at the conclusion.

ERECTUS MONOTONE

Silence!

As the cats howl and bay at the sun
Her thoughts seem to jumble and fade away
As the horizon begins to bleed grey
The prickly tapestry cascades from her throat
A beacon for the badgers and chipmunks
To gather nuts and shredded legal documents
And commence hibernation a little prematurely this year

It is happenstance
It is serendipitous
Here in the land of free will and volition
But the plasma and magma flow freely and maniacally
Onward and upward toward the
Stalagmites and stalactites that grow
Onward and upward within the brain
Penetrating the sticky residue of stagnant thought

They want to create something that is imminent
Hectic within the bedlam
And their notions vanish into the abyss
While two mimes argue aloud on the corner of Locust Street
One in German, one in Portuguese,
Looking vaguely familiar as their tears smear the greasepaint
Resembling J.R. Ewing and Janet Reno
Afflicted with Patty Duke Syndrome

And we wept openly
Kept company by our glowing friends in the wall outlets
It was wintertime in the Arctic
Darkness in mid afternoon for months
While the judicious sage with the long beard
Pointed out the anatomical flaws
In the headless G.I. Joe figurines
Clutched amid the white knuckles of childish hands

Pulses taken from veins in the temple
And though the deoxygenated blood flows chaotically
A tsunami of platelets, reds, and whites
It barely makes a ripple on the still skin
The necessities are on back order
With no money back guarantee if not completely satisfied
A palpable sense of disgust and shame
Yet still we wait with our paws held up

Innuendos in hushed tones emanate from the bricks
She pretends, with the rest of us, not to notice
The strings that connect the humanized minarets
To the levers and pulleys that guide every maneuver
Everything is conspicuous beneath the glare of black light
The devout lie prostrate on shattered Night Train bottles
While the predatory bananafish prepare to strike
And then silence.

This piece is my foray into the world of abstract poetry. One of my students asked to borrow a book of Jim Morrison's poetry I keep in my classroom and when she returned it, I began to look through it myself. I was struck by the language and, while the words and lines surely made sense to Morrison, they certainly made none to me as I read. Still, I was amazed at how the words captivated me. I then spent some time listening to Mike Doughty, a relatively unknown singer/songwriter whose abstract lyrics always astounded me. I've always been dumbfounded at the lines and verses of Doughty's songs, intrigued by his semantic choices and so impressed by the way his seemingly nonsensical verses flowed together while always keeping the same tone and emotion.

The title of the poem is the name of an obscure early-1990's indie rock band from North Carolina. I heard the name once and it always stuck in my brain. The first word, "Silence!" was taken from one of comedian Jeff Dunham's catchphrases. From there, the poem was entirely stream of consciousness. There are other references to concrete people and things within (i.e. J.R. Ewing and Janet Reno), but even they don't really make sense in the context of the poem. The use of the bananafish is a not-so-subtle nod to J.D. Salinger, whose work I admire greatly. Locust Street and Night Train are song titles from a couple of my favorite bands, but I wanted to include them randomly.

I certainly didn't get it right the first time, there were a lot of touches on the 'delete' key as I searched for the right words. I was mostly concerned with the impact of the words I used, how they sounded together rather than their meanings. Meaning, in fact, had nothing to do with the composition of this poem. Instead, I wanted to keep the same feeling throughout, that frenetic and chaotic feeling I had while writing. The exclamation of "Silence!" at the beginning of the piece was purposely juxtaposed with the more peaceful use of the word at the end, signifying the end of the moment and of the endeavor of composing an abstract poem.

WE ARE VICTIMS OF WASTED TIME

We are both victims of wasted time
Wars within minds ne'er herald victory
We have sinned, destroyed, sabotaged privilege
But buried beneath, it was close at hand
We've rambled the same roads that lead to nowhere
And sought virtue in abandoned spaces
Played the liar, played the fool
Bear witness it shall be no more

Saunter through fields barren and cold
Laughter silenced by shattered fantasies
In a darkened room blackness disguises
And grief shrouds words of promise
Hold tight to dreams of light
Interlaced and dancing naked below
Eliciting the return of fate's pledge
Bathe yourself in it, limitless and free

This covenant, a tangible aspect of my opaque strength
Tongue purging with fire
Mind piercing like a saber
These lyrics used as nails
To crucify the doubt, the angst, the mystery
We will wage battle against cruelty
Cast it aside with ambivalence
Promises unkept brought back to fulfillment

Reminiscence is a dulled blade
Let time be our plaything
Trampling the stones we leave behind
Casting them aside to impede others
We've been cut, but will not bleed
Driven by a hunger that consumes us both
The mist has lifted, an azure canopy awaits
Hearts bonded to heal and guide

This poem began with just the title, which I also decided to use as the first line because I was so fond of it. From there, the poem is a reflection of where my mind took me from that concept of being a victim of one's own mistakes. It is a meditation, of sorts, on battling life's struggles toward perseverance. The theme and message of the poem is that often times the battle must not be a solitary one. The tenacity, in many cases, comes from another, two people fighting as one.

Structurally I had no plan for this poem. However, once I completed the first stanza, I liked the idea of free verse octaves. It maintains a somewhat classical aspect to the poem and differs from the other poems in this collection.

BLUE EYED SOUL

The battered and faded door opens and a rush of heat escapes out toward the brisk October night. An unfamiliar character introduces herself to the bar, silhouetted in the dusky entrance by the streetlights outside. Though modestly dressed, she should be conspicuous by her presence alone. Auburn locks frame her face, skin fair and mild. Topaz eyes survey the room, yet the addition to the scene goes unnoticed. The fetid stench of Marlboros, Camels, and two dollar cigars lingers obtrusively in the air, but our heroine is oblivious. Olfactory senses are muted by the auditory, as the resonant blare of a Hammond organ dissects the air. The pervasive throb of the rhythm section, the deep rumble of bass guitar and the thunder clap of drums, climb the walls and seep across the floor.

And then, casually yet deliberately, the somewhat dormant scene of shadowy figures begins to awaken. A lone, thin beam of light shines upon the dusky stage and a lone, thin figure emerges to bathe in the glow. Ageless and anonymous, our hero's eyes cast down toward an arbitrary spot on the floor. He waits for the opportune moment and then speaks, not with mere words, but through the instrument fixed around his neck and torso. The beaten, road worn Stratocaster articulates what he never could on his own, breathing emotion, emanating anguish, desire, and triumph at once. Chapped hands and calloused fingers glide across the guitar's neck, as they might across the neck of a woman, brushing the hair aside and moving gracefully until he finds the spot where dreams are made. Intimacy is forged as he caresses the neck, each bent string a cry of passion, of pain. It is an exercise in coercion, as each dormant emotion is summoned from the six strings, climaxing in an ultimate symphonic orgasm.

Suddenly, without warning, the musical odyssey is over, as quickly as it began. The band's denouement is gradual and muted, as casual applause falls upon the raconteur, before the sounds of appreciation return to light conversation and the clinking of beer bottles. The spotlight fades and the virtuoso fades back into the relative obscurity of the dark stage and its shadows. At last he raises his gaze from the floor to look upon those he set out to move and his charcoal eyes meet the topaz fifteen feet away. Lips curl upward ever so slightly and, as the gesture is returned, he is keenly aware that he has moved one, if only one, touched a single blue eyed soul.

This poem toes the line between prose poetry and regular prose. When I initially got the idea for this piece, I wasn't sure which direction it would take. However, once I started writing it, I recognized that it was definitely a prose poem rather than short fiction. The language lent itself much more to a prose poem than a short story, and the poem captures a very brief snapshot in time, no more than a couple of minutes. In addition, the characters are never developed, as they could be anyone, anywhere.

The title itself is a slight twist on the "Blue-Eyed Soul" term that has been around since the mid-60's, describing everyone from The Righteous Brothers to Tom Jones to Steve Winwood. Instead of referring to the music, the title refers to the two main characters, the blue eyes of the female and the soul of the male guitarist. As a guitar player myself, I really wanted to poeticize the rather common occurrence of the guitar solo, romanticize it, by having it lead to a moment of romance, even if the moment is fleeting.

I wanted to paint a picture of the club, a scene that is very common, and also illustrate the range of emotions that can arise from emptying yourself into a passion for an unappreciative audience. This is a scene that probably occurs hundreds of times a night in bars and clubs all over the world. What I sought to do was capture the experience for both the musician and the observer, an experience that frequently goes unnoticed. It is a thing of beauty, of poetry, if you will, when music reaches a listener and grabs hold of them, even if only for a moment, and that is what I put in to this piece.

TEMPORARY NONFICTION (A Monday Night in a Sandwich Shop)

"All the world's indeed a stage and we are merely players." - Rush, 'Limelight'

It is a normal night, calm, brisk at worst
I sit in solitude with my makeshift feast
Cold cuts on Italian bread with lettuce and light mayonnaise
Coca-Cola with plenty of ice
And a table for one in the corner
Nothing to read during my repast
No copies of the *Hartford Advocate*
No sports page left over from lunchtime diners
So I look up and observe

The one-eyed man in the opposite corner is staring
At what I cannot tell
His conversation with himself barely audible from my position
He seems to have full understanding
Perhaps from the perspective of the glass orb
In his right socket

Then there is the innocent child
Whose elders are failing at their task
A fact evident in her lonely and distant eyes
It is obvious that all she wants
Is to be
Even if she does not yet know how

Looking away is the untamed girl
She is dressed in black that hides her
From who she really is
She sits waiting for her mated slab to exit the mens room
Pierced, grimacing, with earlobes the size
Of the sound holes on my acoustic guitars
She gazes longingly out the window
Knowing nothing else will come

They are all strangers to me
Never seen before, probably never again
But there are stories in their being
Perhaps fiction, perhaps not
I imagine the truth of their lives
While they live it in technicolor
I seek the same clarity in their lives that they do
I refill my Coca-Cola,
Deposit my trash in the receptacle

And move on to the next scene
Of temporary nonfiction

I had the original idea for this poem years ago, originally written on a napkin, and revisited it for this project. It is an example of observational poetry, but was very simplistic and in dire need of revision. The theme of the poem is expressed in the epigraph, a line from “Limelight” by the Canadian rock band Rush, borrowed, of course, from William Shakespeare. I’ve always found a lot of truth in that line, and believe that in many ways everyone we see on a daily basis, be it regularly or fleetingly, is acting out a part in their own play and these individual vignettes make up the world around us.

Kris Kristofferson, in his song “The Pilgrim,” sang the words, “He’s a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction.” While Kristofferson wrote these words about Johnny Cash, I believe they apply to many of the people we cross paths with in our lives, including the characters in this poem, all of whom were real. The details and depictions of each character are, with one exception, also real and unexaggerated, though poeticized a bit for the sake of the piece. The ‘one-eyed man’ had a glass eye and mumbled to himself incoherently the whole time I sat there, incorporating gestures as if he was having a conversation with himself. The child was actually a little boy but I decided to change the character to a little girl, probably because my first born child was my daughter and I have a soft spot in my heart because of that. The boy was simply being ignored by his parents and, though I was not yet a parent myself at the time, I could tell he was hungry for his parents attention. I got the sense that this scene was not uncommon for him and I lamented that notion. The girl mentioned in the poem was also young, probably a junior or senior in high school, and she was dressed in a gothic style. She, like the little boy, had a far away look in her eyes as if she wanted more. Her ‘mated slab’ was, I surmised, her boyfriend and her eyes showed no joy when he joined her.

These “characters” all shared a common trait in that none of them seemed happy in their present circumstances. It is a trait I shared with them at the time, which is presumably why I was so intrigued by them and inspired to write. They were partly truth and partly fiction and I assigned my version of their individual truths to the fiction I observed. Each of them was discontented with their temporary nonfiction, the state of

their lives at that moment. Like actors in a play though, the scenes are fleeting and I hope they, like I did, found a piece of nonfiction that was more fortunate and permanent.

ANONYMITY

I.

Alone in silent darkness, surveying all there is to see
Hands, bound and harnessed, attempt to grasp the air
Desperate prayers inaudible and obscured
The entirety of the world existing within these walls

Conversations with the angel lying at the bedside
Wondering if she is tangible, palpable
Or just a figment of a clouded mind
Pain elicits a cry, but it is suppressed, stifled

II.

He wandered the streets alone, muttering to himself
For no one here would listen to his words, his pleas
Neglected, forgotten, for he was not like them or you
His words fell on deaf ears for fear they might be true

Visible in his eyes, apparent in his words
He meandered alone in winter time, singing with the birds
Could have been the blue-eyed son, if given the time
As he screamed out his suffering, begging for his mind

Alone in the road, in a rocking chair
Invisible, unnoticed, past the point of caring
Earth still spinning, yet naked to his eye
Forced to muse on how it felt to be alive

III.

Alone again
Face down in a lazy river
Adrift
Port of call undetermined
Rising
Raises his head, surveying
Questioning
The hows and whys
Lamenting
Both the journey and the destination
Sinks
His body and mind beneath the surface
Dies.

This poem is culled from several notes I had compiled in my journals. It is the story of a man, any man, an everyman, who struggles with mental illness and ultimately loses the battle. The poem consists of three different stages, indicated by the Roman numerals. Each of the stages came from a different entry in my journals, but they fit together to tell a singular story in verse.

As the poem begins, the subject is in an institution, most likely a state operated hospital, where he is just a number and gets little individual attention, hence the unanswered cries in line eight. In the second stage, he has escaped from the institution and is alone in society, aimless, homeless. He gets little more than derisive stares from the public. Even though he has been freed from his captivity, little has changed. The rocking chair referenced in line seventeen refers to his bodily mannerisms, the constant motion and spastic movements associated with certain types of mental illness. In the third stage he meets his tragic demise. He has a final moment of clarity when he picks his head up out of the water, but when he sees no change, no hope, he succumbs to his suicidal desires. The structure of the third stage leading in to the end of the poem is abrupt, mirroring the end of his life, and purposely lacks sentiment and emotion.

I DID IT

I see things
Probably a lot more than you think
Probably a lot more than you see yourself
I am an observer
Perhaps in a prior life I could've been
A renowned sleuth like Holmes or Poirot
Or I could've been regal like Queen Isabella
Giving Columbus a blessing with a wave of my hand
Though I am not a seer,
I see things
Not clairvoyant like Nostradamus or Tiresias,
Nor one who will divulge your destiny for a fee
Using silly props like tarot cards or a crystal ball
I am a spectator,
But no more an innocent bystander
I toe the line of the periphery
But I exist In Media Res,
I blend in to this environment
More an ethereal spirit than a cunning chameleon though
For I am not about deceit, I have no desire
To shroud myself from those around me
Unabashed, Dignified, Aware
I see things.
And when the time is right I will articulate,
Put words to my observations, to enlighten
Anyone who will listen
So do not confuse my reticence for something else
That would be a catastrophic error on your part
I am neither aloof nor detached
I am simply the other side of the coin
My silence is silver so my words can be golden
So even though you may not, be aware,
I see things

This free verse piece is an exercise in point of view. It is written from the perspective of someone who is unnoticed in society, whether it be the reclusive hermit who never leaves his apartment or the quiet kid who sat next to you in geometry class. There are always things about these people that the rest of us don't know, either because they are hidden or because we never bother to look. This poem gives a voice to those people and is supposed to show us what we may have missed.

The title is purposely vague. "I Did It" could refer to any number of things, depending on the reader's own point of view. Perhaps the speaker holds a secret that will change the world or how the world is viewed. Maybe she (I hear this poem spoken by a female) is a victim of some sort of abuse, be it physical or mental, and is ready to strike back. Or perhaps the speaker just has a greater understanding of the world works that will manifest itself in future greatness while the rest of the people she observes toil away in obscurity. She is, as the poem states, "an observer" and while so much of the world has lost that power of observation, the speaker has not only kept hers, but sharpened it to be used when that "fatal error" she references is made.

IL FAUT AIMER

“ Pour comprendre il faut aimer” (Fr.: To understand, it is necessary to love)

Truth in love is a glorious commodity
And is sought after by
Masses of souls with burning chambers
Who miss each beat as it passes
Yes, this elusive entity
Lost often before gained
So many fail to see
Clear though it may be
Yet losing often precedes winning

Universes rise and fall
Gardens bloom and wither
Heavens crumble to mortality
Lest the poet forget his muse
In time she will be conjured again
Never letting go

Ah, letting go....
A perplexing decision
When made consciously, willfully
Better still to let freedom reign
Embrace the autonomy of self
Stand on the edge of that precipice
Breathing air so clean and crisp
Invigorating
Before taking that leap over the edge
Into free fall
With the ground nowhere in sight

The uncertainty
It can make your knuckles turn white
To cling so tightly to something
That can kill you from the inside out
Save yourself from yourself
You are not Dickinson
You are no Plath
When the feeling is unconditional
Without reins
It is not deserved
But simply received

Take off your shawl of darkness
Let it fall at your feet like

Confetti in Times Square
As the New Year begins
Cry away your anguish
Drop by drop
Let it puddle and pool at your feet
Like beads of wax from a solitary candle
Lit to light the black

I do not speak French. The phrase that serves as the first epigraph and title to this poem is one that I heard somewhere years ago and has stuck with me. I find a lot of depth and complexity in this simple maxim. The first part of this poem is my reflections on love as others see it, as a 'commodity,' an intangible object rather than an action.

The second part of the poem, the final three stanzas, has the speaker addressing an anonymous female (hence the Dickinson and Plath references) who has failed at love. The speaker advises her that she must first love herself, the 'autonomy' in line twenty, before finding the courage to abandon her inhibitions and reservations. Only then will she be able to love and, consequently, understand what loving and being loved encompasses.

JULIA ROSE

I watch your little hands grasp the air
And wonder what it is that you see
I watch you sleep at night, a tired angel
As you slumber so peacefully
I watch you smile sometimes, as you dream
I hope it's a joyful reverie
And when tomorrow brings a new beginning, I will be here
As you start building memories

I watch you grow a little more everyday
I live to see your smile
You reach out for me, so I can hold you
Though I know it's only for a while
You forever see the joy in simple things
And are the leader of your own parade
And like the innocence I see in your face
I hope your inner music never fades

Now four years old, my little girl, you're growing more each day
When you're sitting down beside me there's so much I want to say
It matters not how hard I try, mere words cannot describe
The radiance in your angel smile and the wonder in your eyes

There will come a time I'll look back at where you are right now
I will wipe away a tear or two because you've made me so proud
There are certain things in life I love, but none as much as you
And I pray I'll always be a man who can be looked up to

The little things are those I look to most and what I always see
Like in your crib at six weeks old when you first smiled at me
I recall a hospital room at one day old when you began to cry
I gathered you in my arms and sang your life's first lullaby

The day I thought I lost you was the worst I've ever known
And on your first day of school it was me who couldn't let go
I never once believed that anything would make this grown man cry
Until you took your little hand and put it in mine

So from time to time I'll pick you up, and sit you on my knee
And begin trying to give back all that you've given me
I thank you for the things I've felt and for the many things I've seen
I thank you for showing me true love, and everything that means

Eight years old you are today
Still growing more and more each day
As you start to see your future, bear with me,
I have words that I must say

As you come into this world
Where not everything is fair
Know that when you stumble
I will always be there

Be proud, believe in who you are
Always mean the words you say
Be brave enough to face the crowd
When they try to lead you the wrong way

When life presents you choices
Be honest and be true
Never doubt that I will love you
No matter what you do

For now I will lead the way for you
As you start down this unknown road
Very soon you'll walk beside me
As you begin to grow

Finally, when the time is right
For you to make your way your own
You'll always find me right behind you
Wherever you may go

May you always try to learn from the mistakes that you make
May you always walk with pride down whatever road you take
You have the choice to live your own light
Make it shine for you, shine the way it does for me

We walk together, we talk together
You are life's meaning to me
And I know undoubtedly that through your eyes
You see the good in me

This poem was incredibly difficult to write. I have been trying to write this poem for years, likely the number of years this poem encompasses, but I was never able to get it right to my standards. The poem is about the most significant of topics. Though the poem could be applied to both of my children, this piece is about my daughter, my first-born. The different segments of the poem, again indicated by changes in construction, represent the phases of her life thus far - infancy, pre-school age, and full fledged second grader.

The poem is culled from vivid and specific memories I have of her growth and progress to this point in her life. Though she will not be eight until a couple of months from now, I like the poem better in increments. Like "Anonymity," this poem exists in stages, again indicated by the variety in line lengths and meter. The difficulty was trying to write something meaningful without sounding trite.

The first section of the poem symbolizes the beautiful innocence small children inherently possess, an innocence that is lost far too quickly in this day and age. I hope this poem will be a memento of that innocence as my children grow older. The second section included memories of my daughter's early childhood, which I was also happy to document in this piece. The final section contains advice from a father to his children. It is a daunting task to grow up in 21st century society. As a parent, it is a frightening prospect to have to guide and teach my children the difference between right and wrong in this sensationalized world. Like Holden Caulfield, I would love to be able to save them from losing their innocence, but I know that is an impossible task. It is my steadfast hope that I will be able to impart these lessons to my children as they grow older.

SANDY HOOK

Where is God today?

Eighteen children lost
Stolen,
Murdered,
By a madman who thought it just to
Make others, innocents, feel his pain
To end so many childhoods in a vain and heartless attempt
To avenge the one he never had

Eighteen children
Who will not open their presents this Christmas
Eighteen children
Whose wishes to Santa Claus will go unfulfilled
Eighteen lives
Extinguished far, far before their time
For nothing

I went to a hastily planned vigil
And unabashedly shed far more than eighteen tears
For the victims of this tragedy
(A word far too often overused in this society,
but completely fitting this day)
I sat. I prayed. I tried to ask why, to find meaning
But there are no answers,
There is no meaning to be found here

The thought occurred to me:
“My God, what if that was my daughter’s school?”
What if that was my little angel?
What if my world ended today
The way it did for eighteen fathers and mothers?
I rushed to see my children
Broke most traffic laws en route to my daughter’s elementary school
Not much different, I imagine, than the scene of today’s heinous crime

I saw her through the cafeteria window
Tears of joy, thankful, though I knew she was safe
I squeezed her when she emerged
I would not let go
And said to her, “Daddy loves you”

I had to hide my tears from her,
For unlike the eighteen little children in Sandy Hook,

My little girl still has her life ahead of her
Unlike the hundreds of little ones who survived,
My little girl still possessed her innocence,
Innocent of the horrific knowledge
Of what occurred only forty five miles away
Her bright eyes still shone
Her smile still glowed
And I said a prayer

I thought of the teachers,
Those who chose the same profession as I have
I question myself,
Would I have had the courage to make the ultimate sacrifice,
To be a true hero?
I see the assassin's name
Lucifer incarnate
And I hope that the fires of hell engulf him
And never extinguish

I count my blessings, and they are two
My beautiful little girl
The same age as those eighteen lost
My young son
His young life, just barely begun
As others have so suddenly ended
I will hug my children even tighter,
Love them even more than before
If that is even possible
Knowing there are eighteen sets of parents
That can no longer do the same
My tears are shed for them, for the angels they lost
And for my own angels who are alive and well

Where is God today?

As I hold my children tight, He is here
And I say a prayer
Of thanks

There are no notes or witty explanations for this piece. As I was in the midst of working on this project, the horrific tragedy in Newtown, CT occurred. I was compelled to write this poem out of unspeakable grief for those who lost their lives and, perhaps equally so, those who lost their little children. I am a lot of things, but I am a father first and I cannot begin to fathom, nor do I wish to, the pain those families must have experienced and are certainly still experiencing, now and forever.

Initially, when I wrote the poem on the afternoon of December 14, 2012, there were eighteen children confirmed deceased. Of course, the number eventually increased to twenty. However, I wanted to keep the poem as it was when I first wrote it to keep those initial emotions intact. There were some edits made, necessary because of the stream of consciousness nature in which it was originally composed. My emotions got in the way of the poetry in some places, but the original sentiment behind the poem is intact. It is honest and was cathartic to me. Even though I thankfully had no connection to the unspeakable tragedy in Sandy Hook, it affected me very deeply as a father. I believe the poem reflects that and the poem is nothing without that emotion.

ETHOS MUTED

The sun was setting over the area known as the Dust Bowl - the open space, one of the few on campus, that led from Middle Campus to Upper Campus. If you were a freshman or an unfortunate sophomore headed back to your dorm, this was potentially a less than pleasant trek. Walking west, the sun just peeked over the tops of the Upper dorms and smacked you right in the retinas. Still though, it was pretty walk in mid-October. The leaves were still struggling to remain on the trees, but those that had lost the battle crunched beneath the feet of students heading back after a long day of higher education.

It was about this time every day that I saw her. I almost felt like I knew her after six weeks of passing like strangers every day. We were strangers, actually, but it didn't matter to me. This was the highlight of my day, a singular ray of light against the corona in the sky, which lit me back up after six hours of equations and chemistry labs. Today was extra special - the weather was getting chilly and on this day the air had a crisp Bostonian autumn feel to it. My nameless muse had gone deep into the closet and pulled out a lovely wool sweater. I must confess, I've always loved the look of a thick wool sweater on a lovely lady.

As I got about halfway down the path, there she was. As usual, I got a nice big lump in my throat. I paused my iPod in my pocket, just in case any words were shared. Kings of Leon would have to wait for the moment to pass. As we neared each other, I mustered up the intestinal fortitude to make eye contact and the lump in my throat magnified ten fold when she returned my glance. And smiled. This was it, this was my chance, my in. As she passed, I stopped and turned to say something. I opened my mouth and nothing came out. I choked, literally and figuratively. I cursed myself deep within, turned back down the path to the dining hall, and cranked my iPod up to full blast. "My sex is on fire..." Caleb Followill sang in my ears. He had no idea. Still, there was always tomorrow....

This piece was supposed to be a prose poem, much like “Blue Eyed Soul” which appeared earlier in this collection. However, while “Blue Eyed Soul” had the language and characteristics of a poem, this piece does not. As I was writing it, it was apparent that the piece was more prose than poem, a vignette of sorts. It has a plot, characterization, rising action, a climax, and denouement, albeit brief.

In Professor Wall’s class on Rhetoric, we discussed the concept of Ethos, “your voice.” This was, and still is, a very intriguing concept to me. I had a note from that class, though I took it several years ago, asking, “What happens if you lose your voice?” This story is a literal interpretation of that question, firmly entrenched in the archetype of unrequited love. While the concept of Ethos took on far deeper meaning in the context of Professor Wall’s course, I wanted to simplify it to apply to a typical male college student. The scene takes place at Boston College, which I attended as an undergraduate, but could easily take place at any institution that shares similar geographic characteristics. I chose Boston College for the obvious reason of my fond memories of the school, but also because it was crucial for the finer details that the scene be set at a place I knew extremely well.

While taking an independent study course in short fiction with Irene Papoulis and another student, we worked specifically on different elements of the short story, setting being one of them. In doing so I learned that when writing about place, time of day and time of year are integral aspects of establishing setting. I wanted this scene to take place in autumn, my favorite time of year, so I sought to create as vivid a scene as possible by describing both the location and the time of year as authentically as I could from my own recollection. The combination of the setting and the protagonist’s adolescent nerves rendering himself speechless, in essence muting his ethos, paints the full picture.

NORTHEAST KINGDOM

I turn the steering wheel past 45 degrees and take the sharp left turn up the driveway. I feel, as well as hear, the freshly fallen snow strain, crack, and cough beneath the weight of my oversized American SUV. The snow packs into the treads of my all season tires, causing the truck to skid ever so slightly before coming to rest in front of the detached garage. As I step out from the driver's seat, light powdery flakes are blown at me, dancing chaotically in the stiff northwesterly wind, many of them gathering on the lenses of my glasses. The flakes, like the air, are crisp, but not unbearably cold.

It is said by many in these parts that the sky is bluer in the Northeast Kingdom, this section of Northern Vermont where I have come again to escape and decompress. It is not blue on this night though. The canopy above is as black as the ink that will produce this homage. Still, there is a clarity in the blackness. No pollution of any form exists to desecrate this scene, this air. The only light sources are the stars, millions of miles away, yet more tangible because I am closer to the heavens here, and the penetrating glow of the moon.

My breathing, like my pace, is slower up here. There is no pressure, no heaviness bearing down on top of me. I feel the chill in each breath that meanders and drifts up through my nostrils and down into my lungs. The rawness in the air is sobering and provides an enhanced acuteness of the senses. I turn my body away from the road and toward the expanse of land behind me, the celestial light illuminating the expansive terrain. The panorama stretches seemingly forever, the gently rolling hills, a lush deep green in the summer, now concealed by snow. The mature and infinite pines are bathed in powder as well, all the way to the Canadian border, only a scant couple of miles from this spot as the crow flies. There are tracks etched into the foot of fallen snow, some made by the creatures that make this spot their home, others made by the snow machines, by the animals, human animals, who make it their playground. Tomorrow I will join them, the deer and moose, the carefree riders, mixing a reverence for the natural beauty of this place with the adrenaline rush of speeding through it at eighty miles per hour, the snow capped pines whipping past in a blur.

But that is for tomorrow. Tonight is for memories, recollections of childhood, both my own and that of my two young children. A locale such as this only exists in imaginations and postcards back amid the urbanization we call home. One day my young daughter and son will be here with me, reveling in the natural beauty of this pastoral scene. One day they will experience this place that technology and rapidly expanding society have yet to discover and besmirch. One day I will share all of this with them, look at the wide smiles on their faces and sparks in their eyes, and show them what is still possible in this world, their world.

But that, too, is for another day and another time. I take one last deep breath of the invigorating Canadian air blowing in from over the hills and turn to go inside, knowing that this scene will still be here in the morning, lit by the purity of the Northern Vermont sun, undisturbed.

Several times a year I travel to the Northeast Kingdom in Vermont, where my father and uncle both own homes on large parcels of land. Whether or not I'm going there to work as a musician or not, it is always a vacation, a welcome respite from the cacophony I am used to. This piece describes my most recent visit this winter, but could easily describe any of my wintertime trips over the last ten years. The first time I went up there I was amazed at how far behind the rest of society this place seemed, with its dirt roads, lack of traffic lights, and dearth of cell phone reception. The more I went back though, I realized that in many ways this part of the world is quite a bit ahead of us. It's a three dimensional postcard that I've often referred to as, "the land that time forgot." Now I'm thankful that time hasn't found its way up there yet and I wanted to capture the look and feel of the land, specifically upon arriving at my father's house late at night, which I usually do.

"Northeast Kingdom" is pastoral prose. I don't feel that the language of the piece is appropriate for a poem, as it leans too much toward the narrative, but it still maintains a quality that pays homage to the land, almost as an ode would. This piece straddles the line between poetry and prose more than any of the others I've written, but regardless of how it is classified, it accomplishes what I wanted it to. It uses words and language to paint quite a vivid and accurate portrait of what I see every time I step out of the car. As I go back and reread it, I recognize the reverence in the tone of the piece. I can see what I'm describing very clearly and I believe the reader can do the same. It really is a beautiful place, one that I know I will continue to visit for the rest of my life. I look forward to bringing my children there when they are old enough to appreciate the beauty and the stark contrast to the world we live in, driven by technology.

TAKING THE WATCH, LEAVING THE CHAINS

“It’s time.”

The words echoed off the pale grey concrete and cold steel as if they were spoken inside a cavern. The echo of the words had barely faded when they were drowned out by the unmistakable cacophony of the guard’s keys as he forcibly entered my domicile. Funny, when someone else does that, they wind up here. I chuckled to myself, knowing the irony would be lost on my visitors. Granted, my space was not technically ‘mine,’ but once you’ve spent enough time in here, you grab hold of anything you can. This six by ten cell had been my home for exactly 2,815 days, 16 hours and 27 minutes. Now it was all coming to an end. I suppose you could say I was being evicted.

“You know what to do, Jennings.” This was the guard’s version of ‘Good Morning.’ You’d think I’d be used to it after all that time, but you never get used to it. I’m not even sure they knew my first name. I was quite sure they didn’t give a shit. Frankly, I didn’t give much of a shit about them either. It was nothing personal, I held no hatred or contempt for the guards. I suppose if I was in their position, I’d be an asshole too. I won’t say they treated me fairly during my stay, but I can say they never treated me unfairly either. They just did their job.

Anyway, I dropped to my knees and interlocked my fingers behind my head as I waited for them to finish their business in my cell. I silently wondered why they went through the whole production on this day - in a little while, it wouldn’t matter anymore. They searched under my mattress, behind my commode, on the shelf where my spare starched white prison issue jumpsuit lay neatly folded. All the usual places before they turned their attention to my person. I guess they actually thought there was a possibility I was going to shank one of them as we walked out of cell block D1. I could only shake my head at their foolishness. Where I was going, they certainly would not be following. I didn’t want their company anyway.

“All clear.” I passed their physical examination and was led out of my cell and into the hall. A faint sliver of sunlight came in through the window slats at the far end of the hall. I tell you, every time I saw that light it seemed miles away. It seemed a hell of a lot closer today.

The guards and I began the slow walk down the hall, passing the cells of my brethren as we walked. I made eye contact with a few of them; we acknowledged each other with a slight nod as I passed. I had seen other men walk this walk before and learned through experience that this was not an occasion for words. We reached the end of the hall and reached the huge iron door that led out of the block. I swear this door must have come from the ruins of a Norman castle. Maximum security: no shit. As the door’s buzzer sounded like an air raid siren, I took one final look back and couldn’t help but recall all that brought me here in the first place.

It was an unusually hot summer in 1963. The excessive heat made for a very tense atmosphere in Dundee, our little town in the Mississippi Delta. Dundee was, and maybe still is, a little farming community in Tunica County. If you ever find Dundee on a map, you’d be the first. The swelter made the work, difficult to begin with, almost unbearable. The infamous Mississippi Mud was almost like tar. To make matters worse, several farms had gone under recently so there was a lot of competition for those few

farm jobs that were left. I was lucky. I had steady work as a mechanic, fixing just about anything with wheels and a motor. Business was good - a lot of those old farms that had no money also had very old equipment. When it broke, I was the man who'd fix it.

You always hear about people being in the wrong place at the wrong time. On August 10, 1963, I became living proof of that. Like I said, things were tense that summer. I remember the night like it was yesterday. In a way, it was. That was the last real night of my life, at least as I knew it then.

I had just gotten off work and was going to stop off and grab a beer on the way home. As I walked across town I noticed the sun going down over the Mississippi River and into Arkansas. The sky was like some painting - orange, yellow, and pink all mixed together headed out West. I'd lived in Dundee all my life and never once really noticed how pretty that sunset could be. Strange how it happened on that night; it was the last one I'd see for a long while.

As I got close to my gin tank of choice, I heard a scream coming from the back of the empty lot next to the bar. It was tough to see in the twilight shadows, but it was obvious some sort of ruckus was going on. As I got closer I made out the shape of a young lady looking at me with eyes like she'd just seen the devil. I'd never seen her around before, but I could see that her face was bloody and her shirt was all torn up. As my eyes adjusted to the dim, I could see why. Her arms were pinned behind her back and were held there by a man who I did know and who was obviously fixing to have his way with her. I'll admit, there was a part of me that said, "This ain't none of your business. Walk away." But I wasn't raised that way. I remembered what Teddy Roosevelt had said: "Knowing what's right don't mean shit unless you do what's right." Something like that anyway.

I told the guy very calmly to leave her alone and as he moved toward me, the flash of light in his left hand told me I'd best be ready. He came at me with the blade of his Bowie knife pointed right at me and I had a choice to make: Kill or be killed. My years of labor had been good to me and I was built pretty good, at least I was back then. The guy was a lot smaller than me, but that knife was a damn good equalizer. He cut me on the forearm while we fought - I still have the four inch scar to prove it - and that's when I snapped. I wrestled the knife from him and got him to the ground. As I wrapped my mechanic's hands around his throat, I noticed that the girl, his victim, was nowhere to be found. I've never seen her since, never even got a 'thank you.' I looked back down and tightened my grip and it all gets fuzzy after that. All I can remember is his eyes, wide and terrified. At that moment, it was his turn to see the devil.

Next thing I remember I was face down in the dirt with a knee in my back and handcuffs on my wrists. I didn't stand a chance. Down in Mississippi, when you beat the hell out of the sheriff's nephew, you're going away. Didn't matter that it was self-defense, especially after the Bowie knife mysteriously disappeared. Didn't matter that I was trying to stop him from breaking that girl, especially after she disappeared along with the knife. I couldn't afford a decent lawyer and that was it: I had to go, that's what the judge told me. It was wrong. I knew it, and a lot of other people did too. The story got a lot of attention when I first got arrested, but it was all forgotten by the time I was sentenced. That was November 25, 1963 - the same day as President Kennedy's funeral, which didn't help. The president's murder made it certain that I was now back page news. Damn Lee Harvey Oswald. I got shipped off to the Mississippi State Penitentiary,

commonly known as Parchman Farm, the only maximum security facility in the state, and the home of the Hospitality State's death row. Southern hospitality at its finest. That was Parchman.

A lot had changed since I was brought here in '63. After a while, I was allowed to read the newspaper almost daily - I had a thing for crossword puzzles - and I was constantly astounded by the evolution of the world while I sat detached from it. Dylan had gone electric, teenagers in Frisco were preaching free love, and a few guys from NASA had gone and walked on the moon. Johnny Cash even did some shows at Folsom and San Quentin out in California. Though my daddy would never forgive me if he knew, I cursed Cash all the time for never bringing his show here, though I sure didn't blame him. Daddy always loved Cash. I think he saw a lot of himself in the man in black. They'd both come from the cotton country, both worked like dogs in the fields during their formative years, and both had a thing for June Carter. Unfortunately, my similarities with the Man In Black persona were slightly different. We'd both spent a good deal of time in prisons. His, of course, was voluntary. Mine was not.

In addition, the United States was at war with some country in Asia I'd never even heard of. The Vietnam Conflict they called it. It didn't make a hell of a lot of sense to me, but what did I know. All I knew was that my cousin, Ricky, had been sent over there and didn't come back. From what I read, that didn't seem like much of a rarity. My aunt and uncle lost their youngest son while I was in here. I'd lost more than a little too.

When I was on the outside, I never once thought I had it all. Far from it, in fact. I did have it better than a lot of others I knew. Steady job, a decent little clapboard house out off Highway 3, and, most importantly, a good woman. I'd known her since we were kids. Her family lived on the next farm from ours. We'd been in love for as long as I could remember and married as soon as we could afford it. We had just found out we were going to have a baby when I got myself into trouble and wound up here.

She came to visit for a while, maybe eighteen months or so. She missed a little time when our son was born. She never brought the baby on visiting day. I never got to see my son. After I while, she got tired of me asking and stopped coming herself. She wrote me a letter a few months later saying she was sorry, but she couldn't raise a son whose daddy was locked up. I haven't heard from her since. Never got sent a school picture, nothing. She never even told me his name. That's loss.

So here I was, surrounded by a bunch of goons in matching khaki uniforms walking me down this dank and dimly lit hallway for the last time, pondering my circumstances and my fate, soon to be realized. I'd been a number for the last seven and a half years and I was caught in a numbers game again. About a year ago I read an article in the *Clarion-Ledger* about how Alabama next door had redone their system of correctional facilities. They'd opened two new prisons in December of '69 and now Mississippi was feeling the heat. Parchman was overcrowded, no doubt about that, but like everything else, you get used to it after a while. I guess the state had enough though and it was time to thin out the herd a little, which is what brought me to this day a little ahead of schedule.

As we walked along I was stopped by the prison chaplain. Fact was, I'd forgotten about God and Jesus a long time ago. Still, it was nice of the reverend to have a word

for me. I was more than a little worked up and he steadied my nerves a little bit. Then there I was: the end of the line.

I was led into a room even smaller than my cell and handed a plastic bag. "Put these on," was what I was told. I obliged. I felt different when I came out of that room. I hadn't worn anything but prison whites since 1963. "You ready, Jennings?" came the question from one of the guards. I couldn't speak, all I could muster was a weak nod. "OK, time to go," he replied to my gesture. I'd heard that line before. On my way out I noticed the wall calendar and was reminded again of the date: August 10. I just smirked and shook my head. Irony is a cruel bastard sometimes.

From there a door opened, far less imposing than the one leading out of the cell block, and there was the light. The sunlight. I hadn't seen it like this in a long time and as I stepped out of the Mississippi State Penitentiary for the last time, I fought the urge to look back. I'd heard about men, hard men, becoming something they call 'institutionalized' but there was no way in hell that was going to be me. They had a taxi cab waiting for me at the gate. I got into the back and the driver asked me, "Where to?" That was a damn good question. I didn't know the answer to it, but as I stole a quick peek back at the walls topped with barbed wire and the towers manned by guards with rifles, I knew I wasn't going back there. I muttered something to the driver and I left the Farm a free man after almost eight years. As I rolled along to freedom, one thought kept coming back to me as we rolled along the dusty country road.

Thank God I hadn't killed that son of a bitch.

I wrote the initial version of this story for an independent study in short fiction I took with Irene Papoulis and another student. Prior to this, I had zero experience with short stories. All of my previous writing experience had been either poetry or songwriting. I wanted to challenge myself with a completely different form and step outside my comfort zone, so to speak. This story originally started with the first two words, “It’s time.” I wrote these two words down in one of my notebooks and decided I wanted to write a story starting with these two words. I was intrigued by the myriad of possibilities that those two words provided and I had no idea where they would take me until I sat down and started writing it. Once I started, I didn’t get up until the first draft was complete.

The title of the piece is taken from a somewhat obscure song by my favorite band, The Black Crowes, called “Good Morning Captain:”

*“... feel like a thief that knows he’s been framed
for leavin’ the watch but stealin’ the chain”*

The meaning of the chains is somewhat obvious, the shackles that prisoners are often required to wear. The ‘watch’ is a reference to the stereotypical gift given to those who retire. In a sense, the main character is ‘retiring’ from being an inmate so he is taking the watch while leaving the chains behind. Like “Leave A Light On,” there is intentional ambiguity in the story. I attempted to lead the reader to believe that Jennings was about to be executed for his crime and the flashback sequence was his life flashing before his eyes as it was about to end. As it turned out, the “final look back” was, of course, because he was being paroled. I very easily could’ve had the story end in an electric chair, but I decided not to because, quite frankly, I liked the character I was creating.

Writing a short story proved much more difficult to me than a poem. Poetry is often amorphous, but a short story, of course, has many elements that are integral to the narrative. Not the least of these was creating the main character. I only gave him a last name, Jennings (a tribute to one of my musical idols, Waylon Jennings), because he is

in many ways an everyman, a victim of the quintessential “wrong place, wrong time” scenario. As I wrote I found myself thinking for the character, trying to figure out what he would say and how he would feel, what he learned from his hard luck experience. The major lesson Jennings takes from his time behind bars is to count his blessings and relish his freedom, realizing that he

The most challenging and interesting part of the story, at least for me, was the research. Even though it is fiction, I wanted it to be historically and factually accurate. The fact checking, from the geography to the color of the prison issue uniforms in that time, took longer than the composing of the story, but was ultimately as satisfying to me as the final product itself. This story is a piece of literature in the Americana tradition, with a true Southern setting and a believable, if fictional, plot.

DON'T GET FOOLED AGAIN

“So Al pokes his head in the room and says, ‘Hey, Sci-Fi, you finish that sample yet?’ The question was followed by the obligatory chuckle at the inside joke. It was all just a play on my name - Jenna Sciferani. It’s pronounced “SHIFF-ER-ON-E” but that never stopped them. The dumbest part about the joke is that we’re all scientists around here. It is, after all, a lab. Jesus Christ, I’d been working at the lab two years by then - you’d think the joke would’ve gotten old.

The lab in question was the New Jersey state forensics laboratory, located in scenic Hamilton, New Jersey. Hamilton is just a stone’s throw from Asbury Park, home of New Jersey’s messiah himself, Bruce Springsteen. I fucking hate Bruce Springsteen. It’s borderline dangerous to say that around here, sacrilegious even, but I don’t care. No one’s going to come get me now anyway. Give me Bob Seger or John Mellencamp any day.

You know, New Jersey gets a bad rap - I’ve heard it called “Dirty Jersey” a million times - and a lot of it is warranted. The beaches are pretty nasty, Atlantic City is a cliché in and of itself, and I think everyone knows about the stench from the garbage dumps along the Turnpike. Smells like a hot plate of roadkill stew. And, of course, we have J-Woww and Snooki from “Jersey Shore” to further the stereotype even more. I have to say though, for being the armpit of America, Jersey built itself a pretty impressive crime lab. Must be fallout from “The Sopranos” or something.

Like I said, I’d been at the lab for about two years. I graduated from Rutgers with a double degree in biology and chemistry and then got my Masters degree at the University of New Haven up in Connecticut. I needed a little change of pace after being in the Northeast all my life so I got my Doctorate in Forensic Science at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville in 2006. I got the degree, but the whole experience pretty much sucked. I wasn’t sure the rednecks would take too kindly to a girl from Newark. They didn’t. To be honest, I think they were a little intimidated by me. I guess the notion of a girl wanting more than a cheap ring and a guaranteed lifetime passenger seat in an F-350 was a little foreign to them. Besides, try getting a decent slice in Knoxville sometime. It’s like I was looking for a fucking villa in Tuscany.

You’ll have to excuse me, I’ve got a bit of a mouth on me. That’s what my grandmother always said. She’s right about that. I’m an educated and intelligent woman, but I still swear like I’m auditioning for *Goodfellas 2* or something. Can’t help it. Nonna, my grandmother, said I got it from my father. I’ll have to take her word for it on that one - I never met him. Never saw my dad even once. To be honest, I never thought about him. Not at all. When you get used to having something, or in my case *not* having something, it makes it harder to imagine things any other way. I never knew why he didn’t stick around and I really didn’t care. He had his reasons and I feel pretty good about the way I turned out. My mom died in a car accident when I was eleven and after that Nonna raised me.

The accident was a hit and run, really. They never found the other driver. I think that’s what sparked my interest in the kind of work I do. At first, I wanted to be a cop but when I got to high school (Our Lady of Good Counsel, thank you very much) I found that I did really well in my science classes. Besides that, I liked them too. I’d never been much of a student, but I think that was just because I hadn’t found anything to really

pique my interest. But, when the O.J. Simpson trial became such big news in 1996, I saw what forensics was all about and I wanted in. That was my junior year in high school so it all worked out perfectly. Forensics seemed like a perfect fit for me, getting the chance to put away assholes like the one who killed my mother. I knew I'd never solve that one, but at least I thought I could prevent someone else from going through what I did. So far, so good.

Which brings me back to why I'm here in the first place. The sample.

Like I said, New Jersey has a pretty bad reputation. Places like Jersey City, Trenton, and even my hometown of Newark have a lot of crime. A lot of it is street stuff - drugs, prostitution, gang violence - your garden variety degenerate criminal activity. But there are some nice towns in Jersey that you don't hear about, affluent suburbs that produce things like *Real Housewives of New Jersey*. These are the types of places that you don't see on the evening news. Which is why what happened in Cherry Hill was such a shock to so many people.

A couple of months ago, a very wealthy young woman (probably a trust fund baby) was murdered in her condo. It looked like a burglary gone wrong - forcible entry, everything in disarray, the usual. Cherry Hill hadn't had a murder in a couple of years so this was big news, from New York all the way to Philadelphia. A lot of important people were putting a lot of pressure on the lab to solve the case and fast. No one ever seems to understand, it's just not that easy. We don't have huge staffs of beautiful people, we don't drive around in Hummers, and the catalog of The Who doesn't play when we go to a crime scene like on television. It's a lot of work doing what we do and this case didn't look like it would be any easier than our hundreds of other open cases.

We had very little to go on. There was zero evidence of sexual assault so that was a dead end as far as evidence was concerned. All we had to go on was a cigarette butt, a Bronco to be exact, found outside the victim's condo. There was no way to know initially if it was the perp's or if it belonged to the goddamn mailman. The cops could figure that one out. My job was to extract DNA from it and, ostensibly, identify a suspect.

I'd been working on it for a couple of days when I was finally able to pull a sample. I ran the profile through CODIS, the national DNA database, and was surprised to see hits to a number of very old, and very cold, cases. They were scattered all over the country: Winchester, Virginia in 1982. James Island, South Carolina in 1984. West Memphis, Arkansas in 1986. Kearney, Nebraska in 1987. Galveston, Texas in 1990. I couldn't believe all of these cases were open and had no leads until I remembered they didn't have DNA testing back then, at least not to the extent they do now. Something about that last case rang a bell too. I couldn't place it at the time, but Galveston, Texas was strangely familiar. I knew I'd never been there or anywhere near there for that matter. All I knew was that it was a smallish city on the Gulf of Mexico. I didn't dwell on it for too long though. I had work to do.

It wasn't until I really looked closely at the profile that I realized what I'd been missing. The profile, definitely male, was perfectly normal except for one thing. The suspect was a carrier for an extremely rare genetic disorder known as Menkes disease, which causes a very severe copper deficiency in the body. I had to look it up on WebMD to remind myself, but I found out that Menkes occurred in about 1 in 300,000 births.

Very rare. Males can be carriers of the gene without having the disease manifest itself in the individual. They can then pass it on to their children, again without the disease manifesting itself.

There was another reason I was so interested in this particular diagnosis. In grad school, one of our assignments was to do a genetic screening on ourselves. That's when I found out that I was also a Menkes carrier. I knew at the time that there was only one way I could've wound up with that gene: my father. I remember thinking at the time, 'That bastard. Can't even send me a birthday card every year, but he gives me the gift of kinky hair disease.'

That's when it hit me. Birthday card. My father hadn't sent me a birthday card since I was twelve years old. I still had the last one he sent me though and when I went home that night I pulled it out and looked at the postmark on it: Galveston, Texas, January 23, 1991. I remember thinking he'd even mailed it a day late. Bastard.

I didn't know much at all about my father. All I knew was that he was a brief fling my mother had that led to me nine months later. My mother, God bless her, never said a bad word about him, though she sure as hell could have. She hardly ever spoke about him at all. I'd never so much as seen a picture of him. He took off before I was born and that was it. Like I said, he sent me birthday cards every now and then but the last one was almost twenty years ago. The thought that this would be the way I'd be introduced to my long lost, and almost long forgotten, old man just about knocked me on my ass.

I was still in a little bit of a daze when I got to work the next morning. I barely even noticed when someone shouted out, 'Hey Sci-Fi, rough night?' Usually I'd respond to that with something about the speaker's mother, but not today. I had too much on my mind.

I was sitting at my desk, looking over the information I'd gathered the day before and wondering if it could all be true, when my supervisor walked in and asked me how the case was going. 'Sci-Fi, (the incredibly clever nickname had climbed to the top of the ladder) you got anything on Cherry Hill yet?' I knew he was still under a hell of a lot of pressure from some idiot congressman who was trying to earn points for re-election. I hadn't yet had time to figure out what I was going to do. Whoever had provided me with the DNA sample was not in the system so there was no definite way to identify him. Really, the only evidence at all was an old birthday card and my own genes. Certainly not enough to convict someone but.... I don't know, it was just too much of a coincidence. I kept asking myself, 'What if I'm wrong? Do I really owe him any loyalty? He's my father, but he's never been a dad to me.' I finally just asked myself what my mother and Nonna would want me to do, what they would think was right. I decided I wasn't going to let myself get fooled again and I told my boss what I was thinking. I didn't even go to his arraignment and I haven't been to a single day of his trial. Don't plan on it either. I just did my job. It's what I've always wanted to do and, like I said, I just wanted to put the assholes away. This one just happened to be related to me. I'm not proud of putting my father away. I'm proud of the fact that I got a killer off the streets and brought him to justice. Hopefully the jury sees things the same way. I don't know how they couldn't - the evidence seems pretty cut and dried - but juries can be unpredictable. You never know what they might do."

Andrew Henderson hit the stop button on his digital recorder. He had only been writing for *New Jersey Monthly* for a month or so when he was assigned Jenna Sciferani's story. Henderson had been a journalist for over twenty years and had written for newspapers and magazines all across the country, mostly in the Southeast. The pay wasn't great, but he'd found creative ways to supplement his income.

At first he wasn't that interested in Jenna's story, but once he heard all the details from Jenna herself, he couldn't help but be sucked in. She was quite a character too, unlike anyone he'd ever met. She was part science nerd and part biker chick, an incredible mind with a dirty mouth as its speaker. He'd listened to the tape every day for a week now and every time he just shook his head. He remembered the way she spoke with her hands, how she was so unapologetic when she'd let an F-bomb drop. He remembered how passionate she was about her work. Mostly he remembered the thick grey clouds and gloom in the sky the day of her funeral. Jenna Sciferani had been murdered the day after her father's case had ended in a mistrial. She had spent her life trying to put murderers away and had become a victim of one, another statistic. "What a waste," he thought to himself as he swallowed his daily copper supplement and lit another Bronco.

This story, like the one before it, provided its greatest pleasure to me in the details. Like “Taking the Watch, Leaving the Chains,” I wanted this story to be factually correct. I therefore took the time to research the New Jersey State Crime Lab, doctoral programs in Forensic Science, Our Lady of Good Counsel High School, and, of course, Menkes Disease. I derived a great deal of satisfaction knowing that while the story is a figment of my imagination, the finer details were real.

The story grew out of my affinity for crime shows. The title, “Don’t Get Fooled Again,” is a tongue-in-cheek reference to The Who song “Won’t Get Fooled Again,” which is the theme song to *CSI: Miami*, one of the shows with the beautiful people and Hummers referenced in the story. Much of the jargon used in the story came from shows I enjoy, like *Law & Order*, *Law & Order:SVU*, and *NYPD Blue*. I had no experience writing a crime story before this piece but, like with many of the poems in this collection, I wanted the challenge.

I have a great respect for the short stories of J.D. Salinger. I’ve always found his stories to be unique in that they are more character-centric than plot-centric. Because of that, this story needed an engaging character who is almost polarizing in her mannerisms. Jenna Sciferani fits that mold. She is equal parts brusque and brilliant and battles an obvious internal conflict due to her fractured family life. She becomes sympathetic because of this. In the interest of developing the character further, I told the story from her point of view without the benefit of outside narration until it was necessary, after she’d been killed. Jenna is the type of character that is most effectively developed in her own words.

I also wanted to make the conclusion somewhat shocking, as Salinger was fond of doing in stories like “Teddy.” Jenna’s death was unpredictable and the ending is ultimately ironic with the revelation that after wrestling with her conscience and making the decision to put her father away, she got the wrong guy. I did not want to develop the Andrew Henderson character because, though he is eventually revealed as the murderer, the story is essentially not about him at all. The story is about Jenna and her

regrettable fate. She is a victim of the quintessential “wrong place, wrong time” scenario, a trait that most of the characters I write about possess. Perhaps that is a reflection on me, perhaps it is just something I sympathize with, but I find the victim of fate story intriguing and it is an archetype that is relatable to most readers.

LEAVE A LIGHT ON

The only light in the room came from the still-lit Newport butt in the ashtray and the flickering neon sign from the Sunoco station that bore in through the tattered drapes. The dim light was enough to make out the torn wallpaper, the stains on the carpet, and the filthy clothes strewn about. A pair of jeans she couldn't place lay crumpled in the corner.

She had not closed the door behind her - she didn't care if anyone came in - and in the humid summer air she could smell the putrid stench of the sewage treatment plant a few miles north in Hartford.

She sank down on the floor of her thirty dollar motel room. The one chair had a broken leg and on the bed she might catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the wall. She knew exactly what her reflection would show, she just didn't need the visual reminder. The heat and sting were still there on her bottom lip and she could feel where the dried blood ran down to her chin. The only thing keeping her cool in the July heat was the barrel of the gun she held in her right hand. She rubbed it across her neck, her forehead. Her temple. She stole the piece from one of the delinquents she'd been associating with and was damn certain the gun had a history. At only nineteen years old, she knew the same could be said of her.

The room was too quiet, there was no chance of sleep. She tugged on her hair and took a deep breath before pulling herself to her feet and shuffled toward the room's dingy bathroom. She hit the switch and the light from the bare bulb on the wall blinded her for a moment. As her vision returned, her eyes fell on the cracked mirror. Though she tried to be strong, a few tears began to trickle down her cheek. As the salt from the tears mixed with the taste of her own blood, she began to look closely and examine her reflection.

With her hair pulled back into a ponytail, she could see the edge of the tattoo on the nape of her neck. The ink took the form of a small angel with her mother's initials in the two wings. She had gotten it on her eighteenth birthday, just fourteen months before. Back then she always wore her hair down. She chose the spot on her neck so her father wouldn't see it. She smiled, her first one all day, remembering her attempt at teenage deception, trying to keep the memento a secret from her father. The tears quickly returned, however, as she thought of what her father would say if he could see her now.

As she turned on the rusty faucet to wash the blood and grime from her hands, she couldn't help but notice the track marks on her forearms. A feeling of shame washed over her as she thought of all the punishment she'd put her body through. She had always rationalized her behavior to herself - that's what addicts do. "If only I hadn't..." She caught herself before the thought had a chance to develop.

Still, she never could've imagined that the seemingly innocuous pills prescribed to her after her mother's accident could've led to all this. At first it was a small dose of valium. "Just to help you relax and get some rest," her psychiatrist had said. She half-smirked as she remembered this. How ironic that her little yellow pills were known as "mother's little helper." It was her mother that she needed, both then and, most especially, now.

The valium had helped her relax, just as the doctor promised. So, when her shrink prescribed some anti-depressants a mere six weeks later, she didn't question it. First it was Xanax and, when that didn't work, Prozac. The Prozac didn't have much effect on her so a dose of Cymbalta was added to it to increase the medicine's potency. Nothing seemed to work. A simple chemical could never be strong enough to dull her memory. It was just too much to ask.

The snow falls in blankets in Northwestern Connecticut. She never should have been out that night but, like many teenage girls, she was insanely stubborn. It was a party, after all, and anyone who was anyone was there. But, when she looked out the window fifteen minutes before her curfew and saw the snow coming down like a tidal wave, she knew she was going to have to make the call home. She had a pretty good idea her parents would be furious, but her hands were tied. There was no way she could drive herself home - she'd only had her license for four months. When she made the call, her mother answered which secretly relieved her. Her father tended to be far less understanding. Her mother was far from thrilled either, but did what any good mother would do and agreed to brave the elements and come retrieve her baby girl. She never made it.

Back in the musty motel bathroom, reality set in once again. By now, she was almost numb to the memories; That night, her mother, the reaction of her father, the alienation and depression that followed... all of it. It hadn't been easy for her and her father didn't help matters any either. She always knew her father blamed her for her mother's death. Even though he never came out and said it, his actions spoke much louder. In the months following the accident, her father became distant, cold even. In a time when she needed her father for comfort and consolation, he wasn't there, first figuratively, then literally. He kept erratic hours and she often found herself alone, much like she was now. Her father wasn't there for her and wasn't around to see his little girl spiraling downward, her descent due in no small part to the amplified amounts of antidepressants she was ingesting on an increasingly regular basis.

The pills had taken over. When her own prescriptions had run out, she took to buying them from kids at school. Illegal prescription drugs were tough to come by in Litchfield County, Connecticut so once her diet of pills increased, she found herself having to look elsewhere. First it was in Torrington, then Waterbury, and finally Hartford. Once the commute to and from the city got too much for her, she just stopped going home altogether. She rationalized that if her father could do it, so could she. In fact, she wondered more than once if he'd even noticed.

Inevitably, the pills stopped being enough. She'd met enough people, certainly not friends, who made it so finding other ways to satisfy her cravings was not difficult. Within a few weeks, she was immersed in a lifestyle she never could have envisioned where she came from. Her nights were spent getting high on whatever she could, wherever she could. Days were spent coming down and panhandling, trying to scrounge up the money for that night's fix. She was alive, barely, but she was certainly not living. She found herself doing things that sickened her with people that sickened her even more, sacrificing her body in every way imaginable. It was as if someone else had moved in to inhabit her, evicting her to simply watch helplessly from afar. Not anymore.

She took one more quick look in the mirror and made her resolution. Helplessness was no longer an option. Control would be hers again, one way or the other. She left the bathroom, leaving the light on, and made her way back into the shadows of the motel room, dragging her feet as she moved. In a pile next to the television, she found what she was looking for: a lone stick of incense, originally purchased (or perhaps stolen) to conceal the scents of whatever was going on that particular day. She found a lighter in her pocket, pressed in to the edge of the stick, and sat back down against the wall. As she blew softly on it, the incense lit and the room began to fill with the smell of pine. She smiled again. Until now, she couldn't figure out why she'd chosen that scent. Sitting there in squalor, it dawned on her: It smelled just like her back yard at home. She closed her eyes and could see it all so vividly: Her father chopping wood from the pine trees on a crisp October afternoon while she and her mother raked piles of leaves in the yard. Her father would take some of the wood and start a fire in the chiminea on the patio and that smell, that smell of pine would waft through the air, just as it was right now.

A small popping sound, accompanied by a flash of light through the still open door snapped her out of her trance. She was slightly disoriented at first, but quickly realized what she saw was a late Fourth of July celebration taking place just over the mountain in the next town. There was nothing to revere in this setting, however. As the fireworks display increased its intensity, a different sort of vehemence crept into her mind. Her mind raced as the pyrotechnics continued their bombast, creeping toward a climax. The lights flashed in iridescent colors, clouding the faint glow of the incense, and hiding the shadows that circled outside room number seven. Explosions echoed through the night air and as the show reached its zenith, one final blast, accompanied by a brilliant flash of orange light, brought the scene to an end and returned everything to darkness.

This story had its genesis when I was working on write a prose poem. The longer it got, the less it became a poem. The piece seemed to “want” to be a short story, so I obliged. I actually started writing it in a hotel room and the title is a tongue in cheek reference to the Tom Bodett voiced Motel 6 commercials, but the title is also referenced briefly in the story.

I’m a big fan of J.D. Salinger’s “Nine Stories,” particularly the fact that the stories are more character-centric than plot-centric. Salinger’s stories focus on the people who exist in them and brief segments in their lives. This story started with this vision of a strung out young girl alone in a cheap motel. That notion is a little cliché, so I needed to give this character, unnamed because she could describe so many others, more detail. The setting could be one of many cheap motels on the Berlin Turnpike, which runs from Wethersfield to Meriden, Connecticut. Growing up I used to drive down the Turnpike often, in awe of the characters I saw mingling and loitering outside the myriad of roadside establishments. The protagonist in this story was probably one of them.

The character is a pitiable one, and her frustration and disenchantment with her life reach their zenith at the story’s climax. The conclusion is intentionally ambiguous, a homage to Salinger’s “A Perfect Day For Bananafish,” which ends with the sudden and shocking suicide of Seymour Glass. This story can be interpreted in multiple ways. Either the final blast and burst of orange light are the gun being fired into her temple (a la “Richard Cory”), or simply the finale of the pyrotechnic display referenced in the final paragraph. The reader’s affinity for the character will dictate her ultimate fate.

FILTHY ANIMAL

A shark in shallow water
Swimming perilously close to the shore
It smells the blood in the water
and attacks
It has teeth, and when it bites
it does not let go
until it has taken what it wants
A limb, an arm, a leg
a soul

A vulture circling overhead
Perched and awaiting its onslaught
Ready to strike noiselessly
It smells the meat on your bones
Feasts on the wounded
and attacks
Tearing and clawing
Cinching its talons around what it wants
And leaving a mere carcass behind

A viper waiting in the weeds
Slithering from the fissures in the Earth
Like Lucifer himself
Sneaking silently under the cover of darkness
Seeks out the defenseless
and attacks
Burying its fangs beneath the skin
Injecting the venomous poison into a victim
Committing incoherent murder

A jackal roaming the prairie
Awaiting its serendipitous prey
Its aggression comes before and after the light
A crepuscule
A scavenger without prejudice
It attacks
Indulging on the isolated, the forlorn
Thriving in the remains
And the traces of what was

It is mental Darwinism
A battle for survival of the fittest
It is kill or be killed
Devour or be devoured

This filthy animal is not endangered
Will never render itself extinct
A silent and cowardly assassin
That terrorizes and seizes upon the innocent
I will devour
I will kill.

This poem is an extended metaphor. The “filthy animal” I speak of in this piece is depression. This poem was not at all inspired by any of my experiences as a graduate student at Trinity College. Instead, it was inspired by the personal struggles that I endured in the midst of composing this volume of work. Writing this collection was one of the most difficult tasks I’ve ever taken on, and would have been so on its own. However, after beginning the project, I became embroiled in the most adverse situation I’ve ever endured in my personal life, enduring a marital separation and a lengthy and taxing divorce process. I also have two young children so learning to be a single father while trying to shield them from the incessant drama of the situation proved very complicated. In addition, the stress I incurred has physical manifestations as well, which have fortunately subsided.

During this time, it was extremely difficult to find the clarity and inspiration necessary to focus on creative writing. However, once that personal situation was rectified, I was able to finally reassign my energy to completing this project. I did struggle with depression due to the personal issues I was having and it acted like a predator. I had no plans to write a poem about it, but one night as I sat the concept of my depression as a shark smelling blood in the water just came out and built from there. The metaphor truly extended itself. It has been said that the best poetry, the best art, comes from depression and times of sadness. This piece came out the way it came out at the time and is a brutally honest reflection on a period of my life that I’m glad is over. The culmination of this piece is proof, to me more so than anyone outside observer, that I triumphed over the cerebral predator, I won the battle of mental Darwinism. It took a lot out of me, but not everything. I devoured the predator, I killed it. It truly was a filthy animal but it did not defeat me, I defeated it and I am proud to say so. I am proud that this collection has reached fruition. The choice to place this piece last in this collection will always be a reminder to me of how arduous the task of composing it was and how rewarding its completion has been. As I close the book, so to speak, on this volume, I close the book on that chapter of my life.

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