

The Blaze Inside a Gray Heart

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Abstract

This thesis is a collection of prose and poetry I have written as a graduate student at both the College at Brockport, State University of New York and New College at Oxford University. Preceding the collection is an introduction which explores my influences, stylistic choices, and voices expressed throughout my work. This collection includes three short stories: two fiction, one creative non-fiction. While one treads the line between observing and living, another ventures through the world of prisoners on death row, and the last unearths the future of the death business. The poetry in this collection can be humorous and somber. They confront family, loss, social injustice, and death.

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Introduction

This thesis is comprised of three short stories divided by three series of poems. Many of my poems and all of the short stories deal with memory. The short stories have distinctly different tones, while my poems can at times have a similar tenor. Being able to speak in different voices is a skill I find valuable in other writers as well as in myself.

My short story “When Characters are Your Only Friends” deals with recalled memories and reflection with age. Set somewhere in the future, we observe an unnamed older woman from the perspective of a spider on the wall of her apartment. Seeing the loneliness that at times accompanies old age, the spider relates and sympathizes. My second short story, “Cruel and Unusual,” follows a prisoner on death row, Kid, through his living conditions, his prison mates, and his recollections. I’ve wondered about being a prisoner on death row, and decided to explore a world unknown to me through this story. The story for me brings up one question: Is the death penalty cruel and unusual punishment? Through I don’t go into the legality of the death penalty, I attempt to pull in details of prison I found through research and press them against a fictional narrative. I don’t know if the question is answered, but it’s there. My third brief piece, “Urns,” creative non-fiction that delves into the future of the death business. What will the future of casket and urn buying look like?

The poems subsequent to “When Characters are Your Only Friends” are more lighthearted than most of the others. Because the short story ends with both characters dying, I felt a need to change the mood. The poems following “Cruel and Unusual” have themes similar to the short story--justice and the question of what is right or wrong. These poems move towards the personal, with poems about my father, Rochester, and my childhood. Family becomes the

centerpiece for many of my poems. The theme of family ties into the poems that explore the relationships in the myth of Persephone. My poetry explores my world and an ancient world, tying race, the complications of family, childhood, and memory. Following “Urns” are poems that explore death and dying. Some are personal and reflective, while others examine death from a distance.

Many of my poems are about memories: some that are mine, some that are my father’s. If I were to name a theme in these poems besides memory, it would be race. Many of my father’s memories of Rochester deal with race in a real way, because he lived through Rochester’s 1964 race riots. Also, having been born in 1933, he lived through racial tension in the United States, as well as the Civil Rights Movement. Some of the stories he has told me, and things I’ve personally experienced, are in these poems. However, not every poem has a racial theme.

As a young girl I was drawn to poetry, and some of my favorite poems were written by Maya Angelou. “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” was a powerful read for me as a young black girl. Learning about slavery tore my heart, and Maya Angelou’s words were sutures. I couldn’t believe the cruel nature of humanity – that people could buy and sell people and children, breed them like animals, and that it would take war to somewhat end it. As a black woman, I have found myself uncomfortable writing about race, and so for a time I didn’t. I did not want to be on a soap box, but at the same time I felt by ignoring race I was doing myself and my race a disservice. Race matters. To ignore the blackness of my life – my father, and how his history affected mine – and reject the memories of my own racial experiences would be a lie. So to be a black writer, and a female writer, I can’t deny those parts of myself.

Phillis Wheatley was the first African-American woman to publish a book of poems. She was a slave and has been criticized for not directly writing about slavery in an expected way. In “Phillis Wheatley, Diaspora Subjectivity, and the African American Canon,” Will Harris states “Although ‘the overwhelming tendency in Wheatley criticism has been to upbraid her for ‘not being black enough’ (Gates, *Trials* 81), a more thorough address of the questions inherent in Gates's assumption about progenitorship places Wheatley's writing at the heart of any definition of an African American canon” (Harris, 27). Gates states, “Too black to be taken seriously by white critics in the eighteenth century, Wheatley was now considered too white to interest black critics in the twentieth” (Gates, 82). I do not hold any poet to being tied to writing about race. For me, writing about my experiences with race feels complicated and difficult – and completely necessary. Wheatley, however, may not have been able to write about race freely like I can today.

In my poems, I claim who I am without being afraid of the consequences or the uncomfortable. Some of my poems deal with loss, specifically the loss of my best friend. He lost his life to the disease of addiction at twenty-one, and writing about the traumatic loss is cathartic and honest. For me, the best poetry is honest, so sharing the poetry that deals with the darkest parts of me is important.

As a creative writing major, I have read many works of literature from many eras, and have often found race to be involved in some way – usually negative. Reading *Heart of Darkness* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are just two examples of this. While I found some literary value in these novels, I became preoccupied by the racism. The Africans in *Heart of Darkness* became setting, and the superfluous use of the word “nigger” distracted me during any reading. Similarly, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*'s Jim felt to be more like a

caricature than a character. Neither the books nor their authors are to blame – they were written during a time where certain language and actions were socially acceptable, and often art imitates life. For me, writing about race and racism today gives a voice to my generation, as Joseph Conrad and Samuel Clemens were voices for theirs.

Writers of any color may struggle while speaking about race, yet being black myself--having experienced the looks of fear and judgment, being asked questions that are racially motivated, having a father who has experienced police brutality because of his race—these things make my pieces that involve race today important for me to share, and different than what writers of another race might say.

While some of my poetry is informed by Maya Angelou, Emily Dickinson is another influence when it comes to the shape and form of my poems. Form has been an uphill battle for me, and reading Dickinson has helped me see how to turn globs of poetry into clean slices. From Joseph Brodsky, I learned about how to write a little more freely. Sometimes his poems are stories, and I enjoy reading and writing narrative poetry. Brodsky's influence improved my writing. I find his ideas about memory being nonlinear, and reflecting that in writing, to be brilliant. Brodsky was the first Russian author I was introduced to at Brockport, and his work continues to inspire me.

Other works have influenced my writing, such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, although I read this work after I had written my first draft of "Cruel and Unusual." *Invitation to a Beheading* is written about Cincinnatus C., a prisoner waiting to be executed without knowing when it will take place. There are some similarities in the general plot of Nabokov's novel and my short story, but the content and tone are quite different. Franz Kafka is

another author who has influenced my writing. “In the Penal Colony” and “The Judgment” are two short stories I found unique and beautifully written. The torture device in the penal colony haunted me, and thinking of prisoners and their conditions, and the actions that led them to prison, interests me. I find prison to be a controversial (and not quite effective) way to prevent, deter, or punish crime. To me, it is a way for criminals convicted of minor crimes to become more dangerous by socializing with criminals in prison for serious crimes. I explore some parts of these feelings in “Cruel and Unusual,” however I found it difficult to find a crime that could seem innocent and make the main character relatable or less condemnable than the other characters.

While I enjoyed *Invitation to a Beheading* and “In the Penal Colony,” I tried to make my short story’s main character and setting less ambiguous than Cincinnatus C. and the things he sees in his confinement. While the hallucinatory scenes in *Invitation to a Beheading* are bewildering and interesting, I found them confusing, and felt I didn’t know what was real and what was not. This makes the text fascinating, but I prefer writing in a way that does not disorient – a story with a definite story arc.

The short story is also a way for me to unearth different voices. While in my poetry I claim the words I write as my own, when I write a short story I like to create a different narrator each time. This helps me to push myself creatively, and to think of the kind of voice I want to emulate. As a woman, I find using a male voice both difficult and challenging, yet a challenge I want to tackle. Being able to write outside of your gender isn’t easy, but once I get through it I feel a sense of accomplishment that I would not have, had I chosen to write in a voice more comfortable and close to my own. I think being able to challenge yourself as a writer is important.

I challenge myself not only by attempting the male voice, but by exploring cultures that aren't my own. In "Cruel and Unusual" I confront the world of prison. I have not been to prison, but I did do research online to find things I could reproduce accurately. I wanted the sense of prison to come through, not just the bad food and mundaneness, but the sense of comradery between prison mates and the glimpse of humanity and society that is still alive behind bars. While this story occurs in the future, which allows some bending of the rules, I still wanted it to seem like the prisons of today.

I become a spider while narrating "When Characters are Your Only Friends." Somehow I wrote this without having read "Metamorphosis"; I was instead inspired by the myth of eating spiders in your sleep. The spider observes his housemate, an older woman, and eventually becomes obsessed with her. Also set in the future, this story tells of a woman who thinks about what she wants her hologram to look like when she dies, as we have run out of space for headstones and burial grounds and instead have holograms (which don't take up space, but just look creepy). The future is something I'm interested in, and figuring out how things may change over time was something I attempted to discover while writing this piece.

When Characters are Your Best and Only Friends

Luckily, men still died first. Of course it was inconvenient for their wives and husbands, but it happened to be excellent for me. I was able to crawl into the life of a widow only one year after her second husband was buried, and three years later I was still hanging around. Now, because technology had advanced so, and in accordance plastic surgery techniques, I really didn't know how old she was. Could've been 60, could've been 80. God knows I didn't care.

She was a lovely homemaker. Her bed was always made, her laundry hamper empty, her clothes garnished with designer fabric softener. Maybe she was closer to 80. She seemed to have plenty of money. But that could've been due to one of the husbands. She never spoke of a career. Once she spoke of her solar powered hologram grave. She despised the things, thought they were creepy, especially at night. But she still got one.

There's something about tombstones being able to take up physical space that people relish, as if their death didn't materialize because they still held a place on Earth. But there was no space left for burial, and bodies legally had to be cremated regardless. So some marketing genius came up with holograms. At first they made digital solar powered headstones, with profile pictures and touch screen message boards for loves to leave last letters on. But there's no more room. Holograms occupy without actually taking up physical space. I bet it is creepy to see a child run through a hologram, that moment when the two are mixed and life and death touch.

She did once speak of her choice to use a younger version of herself as the hologram, before all the chemicals, before those 5 surgeries. That hologram might've been the last human,

albeit a hologram, that hadn't been physically altered, perfected. She thought maybe one day a great grandchild would go to her projection and wonder why she was asymmetrical, why her eyes were brown, why her skin was flawed by scars and discoloration.

I see her from all angles, and by every meaning of that sentiment. I see her profile, her eyes move, the wrinkle lines in between her cheek and mouth that could be from laughing, but could be from crying. I see her laugh at herself thinking she is alone, I see her cry thinking the same. She laughs when she drops things, which is predictable after some time. But the crying is rare.

Where she lived last wasn't like the houses she raised children in, or like the house she bought for her second marriage. It was petite... it was snug. Fitted on one floor was all her life amounted to: a TV, a kitchen, a bathroom, that place where sleep happens.

I'm starting to think I sound obsessed with this woman, but she really is the only thing in my life. I tried other obsessions, going for long walks, yoga, never swimming because it would certainly be the death of me, but it all just ended up leading to her. Thank God those men died first, because if swimming didn't kill me, surely *they* would have.

"Why is old age so terribly lonely? I spent all this time creating a life just to end up watching TV...old movie stars dueling to the death as a comeback... what's it called again... *Dueling with the Stars?* ... One day I'll thankfully die."

"Don't think like that. We have each other." I can't stand to hear her so depressed.

"I feel like the only friends I have left are characters."

"At least they're funny. Friends aren't always funny."

“All I can look forward to is the knowledge that one day this boredom will end. But it better not be before the season finale... that would be just my luck.”

“Always with that dark sense of humor...”

“I wonder how dying feels... God, I hope I’m not left in some embarrassing position to be found in. I wonder if you really poop when you die.”

“Well, I think by the time you find out there’s nothing to do about it.”

“I bet it depends...” She pauses, and in a silly voice finishes “No pun intended!” She laughs at her own dark punch-line. She really can be funny sometimes.

She spends an uneventful afternoon cooking herself dinner, watching her favorite reality TV, and masking her face with age reducing chemicals. Then she starts watching TV from her youth: Grey’s Anatomy. I think watching people die helps it seem less daunting that it will soon happen to her. Or maybe those are her best friends.

I always go outside at dusk to eat. I spin a web of delicacies on the small balcony, watch the sunset and feel the earth cool. We like to eat alone, we like different cuisine. I notice a moth drowned in citronella candle wax. It looks like it had tried to escape, but some attractions are fatal. I take my last bites, slide through the sliding door, and take my position in the room. The hospital beeps slow to another character’s death.

“I should have spent more time making friends that were women. I bet there are a thousand widows doing this exact thing.”

I could tell she was having a dismal night. She was watching the last episode her favorite character was in. She started turning lights off, making sure the dishwasher was loaded and

running before she unmade her bed and tucked herself in. I wish I could feel the warmth of her body.

Tonight, I will.

I begin my hike to her bed, my black legs aching. The distance isn't as short as I imagined. I inch my way through the hallway, past pictures of people she used to know. Creeping steadily, I glide through the cracked door into the prevailing darkness of her room. I can feel the warmth of her body radiating through her blankets. She unknowingly sleeps with her mouth open, and the heated moisture of her lips beckons me.

I scale the side of her bed, feeling the exhalations of breath from her nose like a personal fan. I sense the bed swelling and receding with the panting of her slumber. I climb up the floral pajama arm to her soft neck. It smells like jasmine. I feel the tiny hairs on her cheek as I make my last steps. And as I snuggle into bed with the object of my observation, I decide to try to swim in the warm pool of her lips. From the characters I've seen, lips are the remedy to the unanswered question, so that is where the journey will lead me. As I lean in for the kiss, I can feel her throat getting tense... closer...tighter...and as she takes her last breath, her throat relaxes...

My Maintenance Man

Master of tiling, keeper of fake new
light bulbs, replace my blind cracked
by a toy helicopter. Complain about
your late night hours, lean in so I
taste your on-call beer and lick your
cheap dinner mint eyes.

Light my furnace.

Leave leafs of thin yellow paper in my
red door frame and I will pile them neatly
in a corner of a room I don't need. Come, snake
my drain again, we both know you didn't
the first time. Drive backwards with no warning
along your crooked salt path. Kill the bees,

fix my drip drip dripping fridge, snap that

drawer in place before I call back. Paper giver,

if you fix it, I'll leave it, just don't lock me out.

My first car was worth less than \$1,000. It was the mint green

Ford I drove since I was in high school. One night on the way to the Monroe Ave inner loop exit, I heard a whirring sound. The transmission

dropped at the red light. We pushed the Ford across the street to a spot near Kinko's

where I stripped it of its belongings as my friends started walking to 7-11 to buy a blunt. They thought I ran out of gas. I was 19.

My second car required more pushing. It was a Neon, I was a delivery driver,

and it stopped going in reverse. I could only pull into driveways with an incline. I suffer from ADD. I constantly forget and end up pushing with one hand on the wheel.

The first time I ever stole from my mother was her credit card. I spent over \$1,000

the summer before I left for college. I didn't think she'd get the bill until I left for Fordham. The credit card company called 3 weeks

before I left to let her know they suspected a ring of people had

stolen it, and if she didn't pay the bill they would look further into the matter to make arrests. She paid the bill. When I was arrested the first time

for shoplifting, the judge told me my bail was \$1,000.

Ridiculous. The bracelet was \$25. Additionally, we wanted to see how much we could steal in one day, and after counting

price tags and sewing holes, it came to over \$1,000. Not even the

clothes I buy can survive without holes. That summer I was 17. Three years later I worked two jobs, I made \$1,000 a month selling

pizza to fat people and telemarketing. I earned every penny.

One day I looked at the payroll and saw my manager had been moving hours from my paycheck to hers. 10 hours of overtime is one tenth of \$1,000.

When I lived in the Pines, 3 months of rent cost slightly over \$1,000. At my annual

VMA party, I drank Four Lokos for the first time. The cops made a mistake thinking my apartment was the scene of the robbery. It wasn't. They surrounded my car

and searched me and my friends. One drunk guy said he was 19.

He was really 20. When they threatened to unleash their dog to search for drugs that weren't there, I said something like Ya fucking kidding?

the cop decided to arrest me for cursing when he had no business

stopping me in the first place. It cost over \$1,000 to replace the window in the back of his car that I kicked thinking it wouldn't break since they never do

in the movies. Movies deceive. When I make my annual pilgrimage to New York City, I don't drive and never spend less than \$1,000 on my mom's card but now she knows.

Cruel and Unusual

“Yo! Lemme get ten today,” Kid mutters to Gruff. It’s hard to keep friends in this end of the prison. They’re all on death row, but Gruff hasn’t let Kid down yet. Well, the flutes haven’t. They’re pretty much the only reason Kid’s still alive. Flat square strips that resemble acid, but they’re tabs of infection. Sweet little stamps with an insignificant X in the center, worth more in here than any other drug could be.

“You got it, Kid. Careful, these are a little sicker than the usual.” Gruff looks just like he sounds. He takes the blades out of his commissary razors, so he hasn’t shaved for months. The hair on his face is gnarly, and his raspy voice gives him an old movie star quality, like a Clint Eastwood cowboy.

“Yeah, yeah.” What’s the point of being careful? Kid doesn’t care anymore.

“Whatcha need ten for anyway?” Gruff asks. Ten is a tall order of flutes in the joint.

“Got that appointment today. I’m stocking up just in case.” Kid flops his hair to his right side. The layers fall perfectly in line, mimicking sand settling on a beach after a wave bleeds back into the ocean.

“Gotcha Kid, okay.” Kid slaps up Gruff and there’s an exchange, then he pops two flutes before heading to the weights. Kid’s up for a new execution date, and this worked the last time. See, people don’t get put down if they’re sick.

These guys are all in here for different shit, but basically, they’ve all killed someone, or at least been convicted of it. Some killed more than others, some on purpose, and some not; but

no matter the situation the bottom line is the justice system decided they shouldn't live. Kind of a fucked up thing for a state to decide, right? These guys should've thought of that before they decided to live in a state with the death penalty. Anyway, Kid killed someone during a robbery gone wrong. He didn't mean to... honest. But either way he's paying for it with his life.

Weight room's always packed, so Kid heads over to the 50 pounders with his eyes to the pale floor. It's not quite yellow but not quite white. It's something. Lotsa guys in here will jump you just for the fun of it. It's the Exit 11 Prison, and the wardens out here don't give a fuck what happens to these guys. They're on death row anyway.

Kid steers clear of the skin-heads; they're always stirring shit up, beating on people in the gym just for the fun of it. One day someone's gonna fight back, like the wind fighting trees; broken limbs and total destruction. The indoor gym is a decent size, even air-conditioned (probably more for the two guards than for the prisoners). The sterile flavorless air kinda reminds them of their old lives, back before they were murderers, back before they were a lot of things.

"Hey Kid. What, are you getting fit for the table?"

"You know it, Double." They call him Double cause he committed double homicide. Not very clever with names in here, but hey, whataya gonna do? Double does look scary as fuck, though. He can rip the heart right out of a guy's chest and take a bite; arms thick as a waist, veins popping out like he juices every day, streams of venom, tributaries of life, leading to the sea of his foul heart.

"Fuck's the point of that?" Usually PDRs just give up on physical fitness, use every penny in commissary for candy and anything other than monotonous prison food.

“I’m getting sick, Dub; works better if you work yourself out.”

“Hah! Makes sense now. Work it out, Kid!”

Kid pulls in close and whispers “Might need you to knife me later if mine don’t kick in.” They fist bump and Double heads to leg weights. Kid has been shanked before--asked another PDR to do it for him. Couldn’t do it himself. It was the first time he was being checked out for execution, and the first time he realized he wasn’t ready to die. He feels trapped in a nightmare that had been lasting over a decade, and even though he feels 50, he looks the same as he did when he came in at 22. No wrinkles on his face, his skin soft and glowing. Without sun damage or drugs, without cigarettes and bottles, his body looks the same as it always did. Kid is 33, on death row, and freaked the fuck out.

Since they ruled it “inhumane” for PDRs to be in solitary for, well, life, not knowing when they’d die, now death rows walking get an hour in the gym. A humane hour to plan assaults and self-induced torture... Maybe some guys should be in here, who knows. Double killed his parents, but he’s been on death row for 15 years. Without an hour out every day, he mighta gone fuckin’ bonkers by now. Hung himself maybe--plenty of other guys did to escape this place. He’s stabbed himself before; it kept him off the table. Claimed he was mentally unstable, and psychologists wouldn’t take on a case where they had to make a guy better just so he’d be healed enough to die.

“Young?”

Kid is pumping on his back, arms from a straight line to a 90 degree angle. His head is teetering between well and ill, and the sweat beading and sliding from his face to the floor could be from the weights or the fever.

Kid wants to get a few more reps in before this pre-execution appointment. The higher his temp, the less likely he'll die. He doesn't even notice the warden calling his name.

“Young?!”

“Yeah! Coming!” It's easy to forget your name here. Kid follows an officer to a room where he's shackled, hands and feet, and brought to another room with a couple doctors. They're sitting at a table across from where he's standing, the gatekeepers of death. He recognizes one of them from the last time he was in here, a year ago; she's the physician. The other guy must be the new psychologist. It's been eleven years since he was convicted and sentenced, and he's been avoiding the period at the end.

“Mr. Young, I assume you know why we're here, but I'll repeat just in case you forgot from last time.” She's pretty nice, given she might be about to hand out a death sentence. She's wearing a black pantsuit with a white coat, no makeup, because who's she trying to impress? She has Kid's file on the table. After opening it, she continues.

“We're here to evaluate your physical and mental health because a date has been set three weeks from now for your execution. If you are deemed fit, we will check in with you two weeks from now to confirm your physical and mental health.”

“Blah, blah, blah... Make sure I'm fit for slaughter. Let's get this over with.”

The physician gets up and heads over to Kid.

“How do you feel knowing you took someone's life?” The psychologist is getting started too.

“I see you got a new psychologist. Yeah, I feel bad about it. It wasn’t supposed to happen, it was a mistake.” Kid’s been through this a few times before.

The physician straps on one of those blood pressure cuffs and puts on her stethoscope. She starts pumping, looking at her watch. Kid feels the cuff expanding and his pulse throbbing underneath it.

“Do you see how you contributed to the situation? How your presence and possession of a weapon lead to this outcome?”

“Damn it, yeah, I get that I shouldn’t have had a gun. But I fucking tripped. I mean, I get there’s laws against having an illegal gun and armed robbery, but that bullet wouldn’t have gone anywhere if I didn’t fucking trip.” He’s getting a little feverish, and his headache is making him snappier than he’d usually get. Or maybe it’s thinking about his victim that he doesn’t like. He never thinks about any of it.

“Kid, you gotta calm down while I’m taking your blood pressure,” the doc says soothingly.

“Yeah, yeah okay.” He takes a couple deep breaths. She starts pumping again.

“So you still can’t admit responsibility?” the psychologist asks with his head tilted down, eyes looking over his glasses. They’re probably designer brand, maybe his suit, too.

“I just said, if I didn’t fucking trip, none of this would’ve happened.” Kid feels the cuff almost cutting off his pulse, it’s so tight. He’s sick of the same questions when the answers aren’t changing.

The psychologist writes something down, but it's clear he doesn't think Kid's learned anything.

"150 over 95, that's a little high. I'm going to go ahead and take your temperature, ok Mr. Young?"

"Yep, do what you gotta do."

"Your eyes look a little red, too," the doc adds.

"Don't worry doc, I haven't been drinking." He can feel his throat starting to swell and a prickly feeling move through his neck to the top of his head--dizzy. The doctor takes out a thermometer and sets it in Kid's left ear. Two seconds later it beeps.

"Are you feeling ok, Kid?" the physician asks.

"Not really. Think I'm getting sick again. The set up in here, sleeping next to a john, what do you people expect?"

"You're burnin' up, Kid! 103."

"Shit, guess it's not gonna work out this time."

"*Maybe* not." The doc rips the blood pressure thing off; the sound of the Velcro pulling apart is the closest thing to music Kid's heard in over a decade. Besides the inmates that sing alone in their rooms. Sometimes he can hear a wailing blues tune vibrate on his walls and onto his skin. Sometimes it feels like it sinks right through.

"When am I gonna find out if I'm goin on the stainless steel ride? *Maybe* I got stuff to do if I'm dying."

“Well you’re not dying, but you’re definitely sick. We’re going to have to reschedule.”

The docs flip through their schedules, trying to find a time when they’re both free.

“It’s gonna be... about another 6 months.”

“Thanks, doc.” He got six months to live in a good way.

The officer comes to take Kid back to his cell. Luckily he only has to spend the next 22 hours alone instead of the 23 his past prison mates had.

On their way to his cell Kid sees a body being taken out from the cell next to him. It’s 3 Strikes. Only six years through his sentence, he found a way to kill himself. Kid didn’t know how he felt about suicide. It seemed unnecessary with the flutes around, but maybe 3 Strikes just wanted it to be over. He’d been in prison before, and now back in prison for life, he decided to cut his short, himself. He’d probably shanked himself, or maybe he hung himself; Kid would never know.

During the hours in his cell, Kid didn’t have shit to do. The lights would be on all night, and the only thing to look forward to would be dinner being slid through his door. A some-kind of meat sandwich with too much mayo and nothing else on it, applesauce and a bag of off-brand chips. The beds were metal with futon-strength mats on them, a pillow with no case that stunk after 6 months of drool, and no one to talk to. This is how Kid spent most of his time: sitting on the cool floor of his cell thinking about his life and wondering when it would be over.

The fever’s getting lighter; Kid can feel the sweat slowing simultaneously with his pulse. Having extra flutes would come in handy if they decided to do another check-up the next day. Sometimes they do that: trick an inmate into thinking he is free and clear for another six months

just to be deemed healthy the very next day. He'd take a couple before breakfast and a couple before his work out just in case.

Kid doesn't know what time it is until his breakfast slides through. Seven AM, off brand cereal, milk in a bag, a kid sized pancake, two sausage links, a few grapes... Five hours later, a corn dog minus the stick, french-fries, packets of ketchup, baked beans, fruit salad, another bag of milk, but Kid only wants the corn dog and fries... too lazy to open the ketchup packets or use a utensil... 4 hours later...

"Gym?" The wardens come by every day and ask if the prisoners want to go to the gym, as if anyone would say no. Kid gets up, but he's a little wobbly. Blood rushes to his head like a backwards waterfall. He stumbles down the hall, following a line of prisoners to the gym at the end of the hall. He stares at the ground, and it looks more orange than muted yellow. His head starts pounding to the rhythm of footsteps, painful and annoying. By the time he gets to the gym he's shivering, and no one notices. He goes for the 50 pounders, but his muscles ache from the workout yesterday. The 50s are on the floor, so he settles for the 30s on the shelf above them.

Kid's been lifting for 15 minutes before he remembers the flutes. *Shit*. He's sweating, but he reaches into his pocket, grabs, and pops them. He starts wilting with every rep, and he can feel his pulse throbbing through his hands, head, neck, and chest--everywhere his heart beats. He starts to panic when his shirt is sopping in less than a minute, so he reaches in his pocket to see if he took more than two flutes by accident.

His hand comes out empty. He shoves both hands in both pockets, reaching around, turning them inside out. He stares at his wet hands, tasting his own salty sweat. They are all gone. *Shit*. He took six. Six flutes, at one time. The perspiration from his illness and weights

coalesced and fused the flutes in his pocket. Kid tries to get up but he starts to feel rocky.

Meanwhile, some guys start arguing in the gym: skin-head murderer vs. regular murderer. One guy is holding Kid's old 50 pounders as fists, daring the bald guy to do something. Kid's almost unconscious by now, but the last thing he sees is a naked head land next to his, blood pumping out of it, eyes piercing him.

"I'm sorry" is the last thing Kid says. See, he killed, well, a kid. He hasn't really felt bad about it – he always says it was an accident. Convinced himself he wasn't guilty. But now he finally gets what the doc was trying to tell him. He sees the guy dying next to him, but the face, the eyes, belong to his victim. The kid's eyes are rolling back, his head bleeding just like when Kid tripped and shot him. That is his only apology; it falls on careless ears. He always thought a bullet killed that kid. Turns out, it was him.

Jaywalking in Arizona

is a punishable offense

if you're black

and it's night.

If you want to feel

hard pavement on your face,

jaywalk in Arizona.

The officer treated her

like a criminal. The campus

looked on.

One called the police

on the police

for treating her violently.

Her black arms behind

her back, she asked for respect.

She got 9 months of probation.

The officer continues to serve

his kind of justice in

California, in Missouri, in America.

Land of the free, home of the brave.

Rochester, 1958

My dad wore crisp ironed suits
to The Pythodd. People dressed with
class back then, he'd say. To get in
the club you had to wear a jacket, shined shoes.
One night he was black and on a sidewalk,
so the police thought he robbed
a place around the corner. He was
picking up his brother for a night out,
waiting for the door to open, smelling
the cool August night air. There would
be no dancing in the paddy wagon. Thrashes
from the billy clubs left blood and blood and
stitches held the crest of his dick in place.

After A Blessing

There is no loneliness and no together

bounding ungladly to Rochester.

Welcome, eyes, at home once more.

Darken as we step over barbed wire,

in my arms. Ripple tensely, contain

your unhappiness. Black and white

have been grazing all day, shyly,

in separate pastures, alone.

We have come, so has soft twilight,

the sun bows like wet swans.

A light breeze walks over to me,

and if it blew I would break. Munching

on darkness, we love each other.

I would like to hold delicate wrist

skin in my left hand, but I am

black and white. Out of my body

tufts of spring suddenly caress my blossom,

kindly. They have gladly come out of the willows.

A New Kind of Renaissance

A new kind of Renaissance,

a black one. Keep the

castle, swan, but give the gold

chain and put it on

a Brotha's neck.

Save the white

for the white beater, and brown

for his skin. Syncopated

heart beat and a dead letter

in hands, his face reveals nothing

but everything that hasn't

moved. Yeah, you can put

a Brotha in the painting,

but the castle stays guarded,

the gates are closed.

Red Van

On sick days I rode
shotgun with my dad, delivering
lunches to secretaries on break.
My favorite was clam chowder.
Now I hardly ever enjoy his cooking.

On healthy days, the red van led me
to pianos, dances, gymnastics.
Embarrassing, clunky, dirty
Red van. Mom said “Someday,
somebody’s going to write ‘junk me’ on it.”

On the way home
from those blacks and whites,
us sisters strapped in the one
other seat, witnessed
the door swing open wide.

After that, the van was left
in the driveway until the right day
when it was gone.

It left the driveway only
sinkholes to remember it by.

Skinamarinky Dinky Dink

In a dark room with my father,
our song plays. *The Elephant Show* gave
us a song for bedtime. “Yes sir!” “You’re my
baby,” “No, sir!” “I don’t mean maybe.”
Even if I’m nifty at fifty I knew my dad
wouldn’t be there, even then. I knew
one day, my dad would be gone.
At ten, he was sixty-five, the chances
of him seeing my wedding are shockingly
low, forget fifty. When I figured this out,
I cried with convulsion, wondering how
forever could exist, if it did. Wondering
how I could survive without Daddy.
Our night dates became longer after
my childhood epiphany. I’d beg him

to stay. "Let's sing it one more time, Daddy!"

And he always gave in.

Family Tree

This is for my family, my *Real World*.

Four strangers picked to live in a house
where I'm the pseudo son, working to bleed breaks
and carry the heavy things my dad
no longer can. My sister,
the wild child. Turns out there is a son,
he's fifty-nine. My dad doesn't talk to him
so I'll never meet him. That's what he said
over his Dewar's with a splash of water.

My grandparents stopped being polite to my parents
until me. When their twenty-something Italian daughter
married a forty-something black man in the 70's,
silence was chosen over family. When my mom's
father died, I was her support, holding her up
with my arms. Her sister's cancer has taken
over her body, and I'll hold my mom again.

People could think my dad's insensitive:
he's desensitized. He lost those people already
and more. My mom spent her holiday
on the phone with her brother, talking about how
losing her sister would affect her for years.

Then she'd see me and my sister, and my sister's
twin daughters, and I'd feel guilty for shoving
so many sisters in her face.

My mom never wanted to lie about Santa,
she would say "We're being silly pretenders."

That's why she told us we were adopted
when we were young. So it wouldn't be
a lie. Sometimes I wonder if my blood parents
look for me. Then I wonder if I have
brothers and sisters. Then I think, I don't want
to buy more Christmas presents.

Forsaken coats

sway on a bar

outside an exhibit

of uncaught glances

and distressed

footsteps.

Umbrellas wait

for rain in a gift shop

where impromptu hipsters

buy berets and books

on rainy Thursdays.

A bass bleats under

guitar strums,

the fountain's splash

commiserating the blue

melody's swing.

Love Myth

i

With her fresh face and broken heart

a girl will need her mother

all over again.

When she's back

Injected with youth

she takes a toll

on me, making me

grey, knowing my

open arms; addicted

when it's been too long.

There some kind of

hold, like he's her

heroin. She can do

better, she knows.

But he is her horizontal

partner, crooked

and offbeat, a mismatched

pattern of love missing

my endurance like trees

miss leaves and I

mourn her

bad relationship. We call

him Hades; it's just another word

for 'my youth is gone, my daughter lost.'

ii

I wish she would leave

for good, knowing a man

wouldn't love her

and shoot her up, love her and

routinely leave. That's what

happens, being her first, being

around. But she leaves

and she owns the world.

She, my continent

when I have her,

the world in my veins

and it seems like almost

love when she's gone.

But she comes back,

we destroy each other.

iii

Where did I go

wrong? My lessons in love

taught to sacrifice

monogamy for want, like

the uncle of her love,

dangerous like me. She could have

anything but this man

who won't choose her.

coming and going

taking and leaving. She's

just foolish, guided

by the wrong cells.

Echo

Mother knows best, she always says

So. She can't let me be an adult, but

I do adult things. I make love to a man

While he presses the needle deeper

Into my fresh skin, leaving a mark

Of love. She must be jealous, daddy is

Always off with someone else. She doesn't know

Reality. I miss her. When I'm gone,

slivers of my heart are missing,

everything becomes dark, except light

He gives. But as many times as I leave him,

He leaves me, and I'm left to go back

To things I've left before and back. And

It repeats.

It repeats.

To things I've left before, and back. And

he leaves me, and I'm left to go back.

He gives, but as many times as I leave him,

everything becomes dark except light

slivers of my heart are missing.

Reality; I miss her when I'm gone,

always off with someone else. She doesn't know

of love. She must be jealous, daddy is always

into my fresh skin, leaving a mark

while he presses the needle deeper.

I do adult things, I make love to a man.

So? She can't let me be an adult, but

Mother knows best, she always says.

Urns

2035--Wal-Mart has just added a new section to their superstore. Between hover-boards, the newest televisions that now project 3D images, and liquefied meals in soda-cans, is the Death section. Stocked to the ceiling are shiny monuments and ordinarily stylish urns for the lowest price in town. (If not, bring in an ad and they'll match that price, guaranteed.) Although they may not be one of a kind like "the old days," you can choose an urn from materials like ceramic, wood, and stone or patterns like argyle, zebra and cheetah. Now you can buy a place for your family's ashes or a grave-metal along with your genetically altered bananas, weekly gas ration, and fashionable packs of socks. A mom hurriedly discourages her children from playing underneath a model casket when she sees one peek-a-boo her way out.

This may be the reality of Cherise's prediction of the future: when corporations take over small businesses in the area of cemeteries. Superstores like Wal-Mart could become the arena in which people choose their final resting place, and accessories. Grieving adult children walk through rows with roll-back pricing to decide what's best for their lost parent. Wal-Mart will sell gleaming metal headstones, because Montgomery Ward sold them and realized they don't erode as quickly as stone. People will request bar code stickers on their head-metals, so that survived-by loved ones can scan them and "like" their machine-etched grave on the most recent version of Facebook.

Death is a profitable business. Cherise's husband, a monument dealer named David, just sold an eighteen crypt mausoleum for something like half a million dollars. It's one roomy chamber that at some point will be either lined or piled with the deceased of a single family. Sales like this could become more infrequent as more and more people choose cremation over

burial. The Cremation Association of North America has reasonable explanations for the increase in cremation (vs. burial). Their website gives these (among other) reasons: “Level of education is rising. Ties to tradition are becoming weaker. Regional differences are diminishing.” Cremation is cheaper, and in the current American economy, it’s no wonder that people are becoming less concerned about what happens to their bodies after they die. The level of education is rising, but so is the amount of poverty. The tradition of the poor becomes a regional similarity: Why not take advantage of one more sale, even if you’re dead?

David takes Cherise on a date night. On their way to a movie or a meal he pulls into a cemetery. He wants to show her something. She notices the ground is “freshly adorned with grass seed” as he leads her between headstones of strangers and flowers left long ago to a two person walk-in mausoleum. It’s made of Bahama Blue granite, which Cherise describes as having “blue veins.” Walking into the crypt, Cherise admires the hand etched carvings that she says “you have to be a man to do.” David looks at her, inhales deeply and says “Smell it... it’s decomp.” Cherise says “it takes a special talent to work with stone”. It takes a special talent to work with death.

One of the (new) Seven Wonders of the World is the Taj Mahal, a white marble mausoleum constructed for a grieving husband’s third wife. Could discounted metal tombs and commercially sold urns become a wonder? Will descendants far in the future find the same tombs in China and America and think there is a Pangaea-like link, beyond economics? Cherise has already decided to have her and her husband’s ashes put into a two foot columbarium with their names etched onto the front. Determined to break the law even in death, she intends for their ashes to be harmonized for eternity. (Cherise explains that technically mixing ashes is

illegal, but the most that would come of it would be a fine.) When asked if she had any concern with her body being cremated, Cherise says, “No. Besides, I prefer hot to cold.”

Whittling Bones

There's more than meets

the birth of graffiti

in a neon boneyard.

Silence has what the traveler

saw: angels, anarchists,

and god, nude in variation.

Projector eyes produce

celestial conception: god in

child's pose while seraphs

ignore and sing thrice holy.

How I learned not to love

and lust is a testament in wood.

Higher Ground

A confused piece of mountain

floats into the sky

wanting to cast its own shadow.

The sun, happy to help,

rises slightly to

lengthen the darkness

through barren fields, and water

that rushed before its calm

or the other way around.

Green grass glistens

hoping the mountain

will fill up and drench

the dewy ground so

feeders will be

forced to higher ground.

After Beginning to Green

Unmissed, I can see myself again
in this great unfurling – no longer blind
to the bruises left under a thin veil
of ectoplasm that surrounds the cellular
center of my reality. My un-healable welts
form the lemon called me. I see the glue
and tape; it is no longer transparent.
Unmissed are the scars from my arms
to my soul. Like my father always said,
“We are born dying.” I didn’t know
he meant from the inside out.

Another Kind of Clock

How can you meet

A tree? Kaleidoscope

Leaves fall

Turning autumn naked.

Leaves tell what

time It is. Weather determines

Leaves, leaves determine weather.

Today they are orange yellow

Brown dying.

The birds

Haven't left, they

Die too? Trees are like

Sundials. Sundials don't die.

Dying leaves smell

like frost. The sky

will mourn with cold

tears, no one else.

If I touch the snow,

Will it die too.

Half Empty Casket

It's a snowy November,

like the one when you died.

I can still see your breath

balance in the air, floating

towards me slow. We stood

in your driveway eyelocked

across the top of my car.

We laughed, we didn't know why.

The sun was shining

while white puffs passed

by your flaxen hair,

and you smiled that crooked

smile I miss.

And you made that face:

puckered lips,

eyes crossed.

The mortician almost got it right.

But your eyes were closed

like options,

and your t-shirt wasn't stained,

and I wasn't by your side.

Dissonant Coda

He is not surprised to find
me alive, just surprised to find
himself dead. He was dynamic.

His hands stuck to my pink
pillow case trying to scale death.
He couldn't pull his soul back into his body.

The soft cadence and drummed
tempo of my heart were predictable,
trite, metronomic.

Who turned down his volume

And left me unconscious

and unwittingly snuggled,

with a corpse at rest?

As We Slept

As we slept, death

gazed across the fields.

A three of hearts under

my heel. Embers

tongue the same piece

of bare forehead,

the cannon wheel

a pillow. Before

the sun kisses sky,

death will surely

look elsewhere.

It wears man's smudge
and shares man's smell;
the Earth you become
which you promptly feel.

Your form cut to dirt
found under your nail,
creeks of youth convert to
seas at your last exhale.

The tree cherished as you die
outlives; grown from dust left by.

The burning passion that kept you alive
transforms to flames your body won't survive.

The breeze that blew across your skin
cools your ashes with whooshing wind.

And yes! The Earth will pull you in
so you become those things again.

My Name Is

Silence. Waves crashing,

the sea? Silent movement.

Dream leaf, like the black fish

picked up by seagulls.

Sure and swimming,

then – food. We are

the fish of dreams.

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