

Fall 12-15-2012

From Amber to Darkness

Courtney J. Spencer
University of New Orleans

Courtney Spencer
missycouture18@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spencer, Courtney J. and Spencer, Courtney, "From Amber to Darkness" (2012). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1577.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1577>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

From Amber to Darkness

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Poetry

Courtney Spencer
B.A. Dillard University, 2008
December 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am sincerely thankful to Randolph Bates, Nancy Easterlin, and John Gery for their patience, attention, and guidance to my poems. Each teacher has been a gift to me throughout my studies. You all have contributed to the student and writer I am today.

Thanks to my workshop colleagues whom I have had the pleasure to know, grow, laugh, and share with.

I would also like to thank my best friend for helping me with technical issues and encouraging me to forge ahead.

Much love and thanks go to my parents for supporting me and allowing me to be a poet.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface—A Fool for the World	iv
I. The Dark	
My Own Sun God	2
The Dark Side of Me	3
Only a Matter of Time	4
How Women Die Slowly	6
Ten Women	7
Baiting the Generation	8
Goldfish Pond at the Zoo	9
Nightlight	10
II. Squirming for Release	
Mothers and Daughters	12
Before It Rains	14
Nothing	15
Remains of the Day	16
Live Flesh	17
The Mind Is a Lonely Wanderer	19
Lost	20
Abandoned Mice	21
Mediation on a Ladybug	22
III. Breathing Memories	
Tuesday’s Mother	24
The Bathing Ritual	26
Passion Defined	27
Love on the Terrace	28
The Suspension	29
French Bread	30
Crepuscule	31
Vita	32

A FOOL FOR THE WORLD

Day after day alone on the hill,
the man with the foolish grin is keeping perfectly still.
But nobody wants to know him,
they can see that he's just a fool, ...

But the fool on the hill
sees the sun going down,
and the eyes in his head,
see the world spinning around (Beatles).

When I heard the Beatles' song "The Fool on the Hill", I swayed with the upbeat rhythm, but I wondered about the fool's identity. One theory suggests Paul McCartney wrote about Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a teacher of Transcendental Meditation, who helped balance the Beatles spiritually through methods of quiet mediation (Fontenot 1). Another theory describes McCartney and a friend's encounter with a mysterious man (Fontenot 1). After conversing about God's existence, Paul and his friend began searching for his dog. Soon a man appeared and noted the beautiful view; he then disappeared. Today, the jury is still out on the fool's identity. The lyrics reveal an individual content with encompassing the world through his eyes. As the song's subject, the fool seems to have a holistic yet close-minded view. It appears the fool relishes escapism, departing from society and focusing on simpler joys.

This type of literary character is also repeatedly found in William Shakespeare's plays, where they are usually perceived by their counterparts as idiots. Although their jester-like attire and joking behavior suggests ridiculousness, they can indirectly be the wisest voices. Similarly, the fool in the song represents someone who is misunderstood for the way he chooses to see the world. Thinking more about the lyrics, I believe the fool on the hill is me. As a quiet child, I found pleasure in observing the outside world. I sat immobile, never making a sound, but in my

head I could hear voices teaching me how to depict pink carnations in our garden. All around me, people, cars, and clouds moved as my eyes and memory took notes. Growing up, my notebook became my companion as my poet's voice went unheard by my family and peers. Sharing my poems with my high school English teacher, she encouraged me to use my senses so readers could experience my writing. Following my teacher's guidance, I wrote love poems for boys to impress girls, but my work and I went unacknowledged. After taking a creative writing course in undergrad, I discovered writing and studying poetry was an option for graduate school. During my first year in the writing program, I felt the poetry community's embrace. I grew comfortable with my writing and learned I needed to fight for my dream. Because I 'm a poet, I struggle with rejection, doubt my work's quality, and exhaust my consciousness so readers might better understand their emotions and truths about the world.

My challenge as a poet is to be understood by my community and audience. Since I have been a poet, people consistently tell me that poetry is worthless. My father's reaction to me wanting to be a poet was, "You're going to be a starving artist." He viewed poetry as a hobby rather than a career because, to him, "writing didn't pay the bills." Similarly, when people learn that I study poetry, their faces freeze in bewildering disbelief. Even my English Composition students sighed when poems crept into lessons. Complaining it was "too deep" to understand, they said poetry was a waste of time and knowledge on something one can voice without writing. Despite their attitudes, I go against the criticism. If I didn't accept myself, no one would take me seriously as a poet. To me, using words is like eating because expressing my feelings nourishes my soul. Poetry allows me to open up about what makes me joyful or sad. For many people, revealing their deepest feelings is not easy. Perhaps I'm a fool because I'm not afraid to speak my truth, whereas others would hesitate in sharing their lives with strangers. However, writing

like this comes naturally for me because relating to others through poetry is my way of inspiring others to write, voice, and share their emotions.

Although I can recreate scenes and situations from life, there is no guarantee everyone will understand my poetry. Because poetry requires patience, people are somewhat discouraged from reading it. In addition, my writing could unnerve readers because it attempts to explore the known and unknown conditions of the human experience. In my poetry, I employ my senses and memory. Before a subject enters my poem I must visualize it. If I can't experience it, I find pictures and research to make it as real as possible. My readers should see the poem spring in front of them as a world to touch, taste, and smell. For example, my poem "French Bread" uses descriptions like "marmalade" and "memory foam" to describe the bread's taste and soft texture. Furthermore, when I'm not observing the world, I write what I know. The poems in this manuscript are depictions from my "constellation." In Word Painting, Rebecca McClanahan recalls Stanley Kunitz's "constellation of images" as the writer's informative source. She insists that childhood and present events as well as subjects the writer researches designate images in his or her work (99-100). For example, the loss of my brother produces symbols of darkness and helplessness. While reading the manuscript readers might get a sense of these symbols with images of black holes, the absence of sunlight, a deer tangled in barb wire, and quicksand. Unfortunately, readers might find poems about my brother self-absorbed and misinterpret the poems' purpose which is for readers to examine their own grief in relation to mine.

In contrast, I also write about current matters such as diseases and crimes that deserve continuous awareness. Francis Bacon's and Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays about education and behavior have inspired me to write on sociopolitical issues. My aim is to make people care about the hardships we endure as humans. "Live Flesh" and "Tuesday's Mother" are written as

monologues in efforts to convince readers these are real incidents, not just poems. By writing about issues such as human trafficking and infanticide, I aim to remember the victims in hopes that their story may aid someone else.

Throughout the manuscript the dark events of my constellation develop a tension. Readers should get a sense of being blanketed in a fog, but just as it appears to clear, the fog will slowly darken in shades. They should feel a sense of uncertainty and feel unstable as they encounter death, denial, and passion. My intention is to show that even though memory is a profound medium that connects us to our lives and loved ones, denial is more powerful if one chooses to let go of the truth. I think “The Dark Side of Me” illustrates the best tension when the speaker chooses “Denial [as her] truth” to stay close to her deceased sibling. After reading Lord Byron’s tragic poems, such as “Manfred” and “Darkness,” I identified with the Byronic hero because of my late brother. In “Darkness” people, animals, vegetation, the sun, and the earth fall to the consuming darkness. “... Darkness had no need / of aid from them--She was the universe” (lines 81-82). My understanding of Byron’s “Darkness” is that it portrays an apocalyptic end where there is no return to light or life. In the “The Dark Side of Me,” my goal is to engulf the reader in this darkness where there is no sun, water, nor nourishment left in the speaker’s world. Memory and denial seem to converge in “Mothers and Daughters” as the speaker remembers the “hissing hot comb” while liberating herself of that very memory. Moved by the images and action verbs of Margaret Walker’s “For My People,” I described the “sleeping geisha” and “forehead” burns to suggest frustration with growing out hair. Although Walker dedicates her poem to the hard labor blacks endured during slavery, I adopt a similar tone to capture the excruciating process of maintaining African-American hair.

I hope the manuscript’s tension sometimes dissolves with particular poems. These poems

attempt to leave behind the sense of uncertainty and darkness, but only briefly. For example, while “Crepuscule” reflects loss, it attempts to recollect and celebrate my brother’s memory through his “little girl.” Here, memory transforms from the dark and can be cherished. I hope the same sentiment comes across in “My Own Sun God” with remembering my favorite uncle through his “cobalt blue Chevy.” It is the speaker in “Lost” who tries to lose herself in the greatness of the “untamable mystery” (the sea) for as long as she can, which should capture the feeling of being momentarily free. Similarly, the love poems in the manuscript were written with Pablo Neruda in mind. Neruda’s description of intimacy and the body is wondrous. In the first of his *Twenty Love Poems*, the woman’s body is his natural shelter of “white hills, white thighs / ... where he forge[s] [her] like a weapon, / like an arrow in [his] bow, like a stone in [his] sling.” / (lines 1-8). Unlike Neruda’s poem, my poems deal with the body’s senses. “The Suspension” uses touch and taste to make the experience accessible to readers. I hope the smells of “sugary perfume,” and “cooked potatoes,” as well as the taste of “hot salt” work to amplify the act of intimacy in this poem.

As a poet, I work to balance connecting with my audience and being true to my poetic voice. Although I view the world artistically to write poetry, this gift sometimes affects the clarity of my writing. For me, words come as Wordsworth said of the creative process in *Lyrical Ballads*, “a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (263) and I write what comes to mind. However, when that happens I risk losing my audience. Confusion enters the poem and what remains are beautiful details and words that don’t make sense to readers. When I don’t keep my audience in mind, my work loses value. Therein, in an effort not to lose readers I must revise for readability. Although I have grown comfortable revising poems, I can over scrutinize words and images. Riding the line as a perfectionist, I can ruin the poem’s development. During revision, I

consciously turn off my poet's voice and read the poem aloud to recapture its initial purpose. The only way to develop an effective poem is to use particular language my audience can understand so the poem's true message can be received.

During the process of my thesis, I discovered that people will continue to challenge me as a poet. Partly because they don't understand what I do nor why I do it. I have to constantly feed my passion to write and nurture my readers. Though the trail seems exhausting, I keep pushing uphill because the fool in me won't shut up until my readers understand our world, poem by poem.

Works Cited

- The Beatles. "Fool on the Hill." Magical Mystery Tour. London: Capitol, 1967. Sound Recording.
- Lord Byron. "Darkness." Lord Byron: The Major Works. Ed. Jerome McGann. New York: Oxford UP., 2000. 272- 273. Print.
- Fontenot, Robert. "The Beatles Songs: The Fool on the Hill." Oldies.About.com. The New York Times Co., n.d. Web. 30 July 2012.
- Neruda, Pablo. "Body of Woman." Twenty Love Poems and A Song of Despair. Trans. Mark Eisner. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. 9. Print.
- Wordsworth, William. Lyrical Ballads. London: Oxford U.P., 1967. 263. Print.

I. The Dark

My Own Sun God

That cobalt blue Chevy revving up
reminds me of yours. A *real man's*
work truck : gasoline-soaked
seats, the smell of Heineken
and barbeque. I could ride
in that dirty dump again.
Your jet-black face always
dirtier than the floors you mopped,
Woodmere Elementary labeled you
a janitor, but I knew you.

Erupting like thunder, your voice
carried the weight of a god. Keys
jingling up the hall, like horse hoofs
pounding earth, announced your approach,
but blinding stature eclipsed your arrival
as my eyes gravitated up to consume
you, my sun, a god.

I miss you pulling out
a drawer full of gummy
bears, and chee-wees.
Baseball caps and that habitual
blue shirt explain why I collect
hats and hate stockings.

I remember the funeral, my dress,
your face freed of stress, handsome,
wrinkled coal. Sleeping god, losing you
remains my first sacrifice.
You went home.

The Dark Side of Me

Living in the dark for three years,
I don't talk to anyone. Out here, I've deserted
myself, as nothing matters without my brother.
Burying my feelings in the catacombs
of my mind, this me blocks new memories.
She marks everything as *self-destruct*
and *danger*.

I 'm a cactus, alone, in an eternal night—silent,
my face rugged as a desert Reg. I've stopped
waiting for rain, my skin continues to thicken.
Sun-deprived spines grow sharp, ready
to unleash stinging words on anyone who tries
to come close, who says, "Do not cry, be strong."
"That's what he would've wanted, for you to be happy."

Unresponsive to touch or feeling, I 'm dead,
a decaying oyster. *Denial is my truth*, acceptance
not optional. Avoiding conversations about him
and locking memories of me as a little girl, climbing
into his bed at night, live inside of me, my shell,
calcified and razor sharp. Here, nothing changes
until something or someone cracks me open.

Only a Matter of Time

8 a.m.

Awakened by the alarm,
her eyes open to the sun casting
the window's shadow on the wall.
His arm pulls her by her ribs, closer
into his lower chest. Giving into his
clutch, she lingers, kissing
his forehead.

8:10 a.m.

Outside, the public world
calls with worry. He stretches,
elbows the wall. She yawns out,
Watch it! He laughs and bumps
the wall again, harder.
Above his bed, his poetry of life:
wooden plaques that read
FAITH, LOVE, HOPE, LIVE.

8:13 a.m.

Wouldn't that be funny? he says,
If LIVE and FAITH fell on your head?
and LOVE would put a knot in my head?

She asks, *What do you mean?*

He explains, *Life and love could be the death of us*
because you don't have fun, go to church,
nor live...and I'm at a loss for words
when it comes to love!

She soaks up the silence.

What? he shrugs.

8:20 a.m.

She sits on the edge
of the bed wishing she'd
never had ears, that he
did not speak to her
that way. Akin to a deer, tangled
in barbed wire, her eyes glaze
over, darkening. Injured
and hopeless, life is draining
away. Open-mouthed, she departs
from their world. Inside her,
a new private world unveils
doubt: she thinks, *Am I a living corpse?*
the walls close in on her, the creaky
whine of a screen door sounds
and their yesterdays fall apart.
Afternoons of naked passion and
monthly anniversary cards get left
behind. Blinded by sun, he lies
face down in his pillow reaching
for her but feels only her back
bathing in the sun's warmth.

How Women Die Slowly

Killing Eve could not have saved women. Before the juicy bite, whispers from the serpent's tongue confused women. We had the answers men did not. Our minds scrambled wild like fire ant mounds someone kicked in. Disturbing thoughts panicked us, depriving our minds of seeing clearly.

We are Beauvoir's *Second Sex* searching for self, only to find ourselves dying of curiosity, jealousy, selfishness, insecurity, and promiscuity. We build ourselves up with the blocks that sabotage woman from blossoming. Slowly, we give rise to a new Medusa--the creature every man fears seeing and wants to behead. Sometimes we are strangers to ourselves more than to men. Hating other women, she strengthens her fragile ego. Satisfying desires for L-O-V-E only, she forsakes those she hurts. She assumes the worst after gunning down the truth. Hours of staring into the mirror, she cries, "I'm ugly." She sacrifices her body to men offering nothing, only to suffocate in her own toxic quicksand.

Ten Women

He lined them up
like bowling pins, then
struck them down without
warning. Women were his
profession. He used the lonely,
the vulnerable, the divorcées,
burning through them faster
than their money. He asked for
red convertibles, help with
a few bills—until one woman
delved past his charm to
find a string of women
and phone numbers.

Breaking them from the inside
out, he bore drops of death into
the silky folds of *their pocketbooks*.
Opening their purses did hurt,
but not protecting *their pocketbooks*
cost them twenty-one years
to life. Money could not buy them
new bodies or *pocketbooks*. His lasting
affection: an HIV infection.

Ten women, some who altered
their hair and makeup to protect
their identities, sat before the studio
audience. One after another, women
shared stories of his affairs
with neighbors, other women refusing to
go public, his imprisonment for aggravated
assault with a deadly weapon.
A tearful hour exposed how disease
does not discriminate, and you
only get one body, one life.

Baiting the Generation

If you want happiness for a lifetime help the next generation. --Chinese Proverb

Dreaming in blue-green,
I plunge into open sea merging
with its life & evolving creatures
of the deep & peach coral reefs.
Sinking slowly the light fades.
Oh, how the luminous winged creatures
seem like our children, our
future. The stingrays fly
as children pretend to: arms spread
eagled & tilting up.

Blankets of mud & sand drift away
as their wings flap forward
pushing them into the sea's current.
Tired of waiting to find the next
meal & gliding over gritty surfaces
they have grown beyond curious. Leaving
behind the familiar reefs & sounds of home,
they follow small schools of fish zipping
through the water like lightning, feeding
among sharks. Hungry for more, they fly
carelessly into the blackest of the blue, burying
themselves in shadowy depths until light
glimmers at the ocean's top.

Waving through the dark, they endanger
their lives, using feelings to detect what's right.
In this underworld, their jaws taste everything
floating close to their mouths. Living in the places
where eyes cannot see, who will shine tunnels
of light down to remind them it's okay to go home?

Goldfish at the Zoo

Dusty grey water
flashed mandarin orange
scales and silver tails.
Those tails! those tails!
danced like heads
of dandelion seeds
scattering underwater.
I could not look away.

Those masters of the pond
flashed a kaleidoscope
of red, orange, silver,
black stripes and spots.
Hypnotized, my eyes closed
in, but my feet glued
to the concrete. Swishing
more and more, they grew
larger than my body, enough
to swallow me whole.

Before my eyes succumbed
to the water, they chose another
child closer to them, a boy.
Circling their world—an abyss—
he laughed. Furiously fanning
their bodies, they scurried about,
leaving the center of the pond
open.

He did not feel his leg
slipping in until he fell
sideways. Brushing their tails
away from his splashing, they
curiously pecked at his shoe
settled on the bottom.

Nightlight

When she strikes the match, flickering topaz
entrances her. Without his matchbox, Daddy
might quit smoking and forget
about rum cigars. Clenching the box,
she burns one out, then another, until
a new fire inside outshines her nightlight.

Before the wood begins to curl, her hands
ready themselves to supply the coming glow.
Shaking the box, she listens for more. Pinching
a new match, she sees topaz before she strikes.

Hearing the small roar, she sees red tip ash
to grey, then white to wood until Mommy's
voice disturbs her bliss. As the sound nears,
her hands let the match fly. When the door opens,
Mommy peers at the covers. Snuggling between
plush bears, the match's sparks spread and spoil
sleep as the bears' smiles begin burning in topaz.

II. Squirming for Release

Mothers and Daughters

On television an old Mauritanian woman raises a cane at a girl whose nose and mouth are hidden by a bowl. Doe-eyed, the girl peers at the camera, her mouth opens as a British voice translates. My parents sent me here. My mother said, You will be happy, beautiful after. But before finishing “beautiful,” the woman, her “fattener,” returns with another bowl of lard and milk. Smiling for the camera, the woman says, “She will be a bed of flesh for her husband.” Cameras zoom in on the aspiring bride, who swallows silently and closes her eyes to keep the milk down.

For my mother, beauty lived in hair. “Good hair”, she felt, was presentable and long. My mother brushed beauty into my hair for twenty years. After graduating college, I decided I owned my hair. Burying her face between her hands, my mother couldn’t watch as my hair floated to the floor like feathers. “Why now?” she asked. I smiled telling her it was “Something new.” The stylist felt it too—this was the first cut. This war was mine to wage alone. For once, I began shedding it all:

Gone was the little girl who squatted between Aunt Ann’s thighs while she massaged coconut grease into my scalp(three days a week.) The hissing hot comb that sent snake-like smoke clouds high into the Sunday evening air disappeared. Hair, forehead, neck, and ears would stay burn-free. Days of sleeping uncomfortably like a geisha: (on my hand, on one side of my head, so Shirley Temple curls lasted for a week) were over. High school Saturday mornings no longer consisted of five hours at the beautician: An eternal morning and evening of relaxing hair, of shampooing, drying, and 30 more minutes of drying because it would not fully dry, of goodbye trips to Wal-Mart for Vitamin E capsules—the beautician’s cure for cowlicks. As my hair was bobbed, I smiled at the mirror. Silenced by the snips, mother studied her grown daughter who had chosen her beauty—for herself, but with less hair.

*Dipping the empty bowl forward,
the girl shows the fattener she's had enough. Nodding
at the girl's bowl, she smiles. Musing
at the camera, the girl's eyes drift from
the lens to elsewhere : (She is an obedient
daughter, her body will please her soon
to be husband.) She lets go of the women
with high blood pressure, the women who lost
some mobility, the women who were
once happy brides.*

Before It Rains

The emerald frog cries
like a little girl screaming
for light in the dark,
a rhythm of silent pauses
and cries. The pygmy
orange butterfly flattens
itself in the top corner
of a window pane, like
a pressed flower petal.
Smells of the earth rise from
the warm concrete and soil
as the sun tails mountains
of clouds that paint over trees, signs,
and people in shades of grey.

As I walk out, the first drop
lands on my forehead, then runs
a cool bead down my cheek. More
rain drizzles on my face,
my eyes close remembering
that day: your pinstriped, brown, button-down
shirt flapping in the wind. Our first
conversation growing between green
garden chairs, and your magnetic eyes.
Feeling you close, I anchor my umbrella
at my side and surrender like a sail
in the wind, as rain saturates my hair.

Nothing

In France, no one cares
if you are American, but
they gladly accept American
dollars with their *ne rien* smiles.
They will speak Spanish before
English.

It is nothing to accept
kisses from a strange man. *C'est
juste un bisou*, two on each cheek,
but then kissing turns into *un café*
on *rue de Paradis*. Under the table, his fingers
take pleasure in raping your thighs.
He intently gazes into your eyes
and says, *I desire you*. Because it means
nothing for this man to express how
he wants you, to bend you over slowly
and fuck you like a dog. *Nothing wrong
happened*. His advances are not vulgar,
nothing special.

PDA en France c'est original, bien sur.
Every café parades an orgy
avec clothes and like entering the bakery
or boarding the bus, this is nothing.
Saying *bonjour* to the baker and driver
is a must. Without it you will not
be served because *en France*,
Bonjour flies out faster
than American cowboy spit.

Remains of the Day

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Why? You're more like the devil ruining my life.
My denouement—worshipping you, those brown
eyes, then crowning you first on my heart's dais.
Now a black hole remains, sucking the daylight
from my eyes. Silence consumes me every day. I knew
this relationship's end: breaking up, our weekly déjà-
vu. But I always let the dog have his day. I want you
pushing daisies, but no, that's too easy. I want a woman
to love, leech, and leave you a dazed fool. Ah, to see
the day you are crushed by the monster of love. Until
then, I will piece together the debris of me and pray
this damned heart can really love again. I will, I swear.

Live Flesh

Rubbing the crumpled piece
of photo between my thumb
and forefinger, I recreate her.
My mother's face—the only
reminder of home they did not
rip apart. The door opens
as light penetrates the basement,
the first step creaks. I stuff
the piece in the mattress.

The men muscle Texas downstairs before
she cries out, "I want to go, I don't
want to model, I've changed my..."
The men push her to the mattress
as she screams. Nodding at the men
to restrain her, the butcher, cups her
mouth, "Shh..., it will relax you."
With the needle in, her body
goes limp.

"Grab me another blue eyes,
blonde, skinny, Midwestern." Adjusting
his collar, the butcher climbs the stairs
smiling at his guests,
"Nationality? Age? Height? No problem,
I've got quality selections."

Soon I hear a, "Not tonight please"
as they drag Nebraska upstairs. The door
slams and I hear the butcher's voice trailing.
"Tonight's specials are...
International and American buyers welcome."

As bidding opens, I muffle my ears
in the pillow, yet can't help but relive
my first night—minute by minute, man
after man pulling my hair. Opening
my eyes to tears, I stare up at the ceiling.
I am upstairs with the costumes, makeup
vanities, and men.

Sneaking past them all, I head
to the top floor bathroom. Locking
the door, I face the open window.
As I push my body forward,
the fresh air invites me.

The Mind Is a Lonely Wanderer

My mind, like water, is fluid and destructive, shooting streams of thoughts from last week into today's sea of memory. Trickling slowly like droplets, diseased memories disturb my mind. Full of hurt, they bubble over, sending rifts through my spine. I have no companion, no one to keep my mind from overrunning. Thoughts run like rapids burying themselves under the crash of waterfalls. Untiring, they rise from surging mists to meet clouds of happier memories, but nothing happens, nothing is forgotten.

My brain often chooses to leave behind boundaries: this body, the world. Seeking more stimulation, my mind branches off as someone else in a what-could-have-been world. Now wandering past window reflections, it loses itself in drifting seagulls. Resting along the lake with the stench of fish and crab, its worries are carried off, disappearing like rainbow fish, as the pelican's bill closes over them and swallows.

Lost

Drunk with the moon and stars, I lie on wet sand.
The moon is like a moth enveloped by starlight, a field
of scattered dandelion seeds, still, frozen in time. But there is no
wishing here, since stars cannot blow out like birthday candles.
I think, *the dark has more delight than the stars!* The dark holds
black holes, silence, and space to swallow. As the ocean's margin fades
into night, my fear of never being free drowns in the ocean's roar.
I want to be the ocean, a part of it, the untamable mystery,
always moving, unraveling like waves. My mind sails out to the sound
of waves—a restless, rustling journey. The rustling, that rustling
calls my soul to make my bed on the beach. Breathing with the ocean,
my chest rises and falls with the coming tide. I take in this rhythm
while the ocean's mist extinguishes the memory of this
world: a pulse of people and problems.

Abandoned Mice

I shoveled a hole in the earth
and found three baby mice.
Motherless, clumped together
like clay pieces. Flesh-red
skin covered black blind eyes.

Under the afternoon sun,
naked translucent skin
exposed white intestines.
Like unwanted king-cake
babies¹, they kept their
hiding place a secret. No reward
would follow, only responsibility.

Their mouths opened as
they kicked at a parade of ants
that attacked like children
jumping into a busted piñata.
Picking at their vulnerability,
the struggle ended.

And they cried out
as humans sometimes do—
in grief. *But what could I do?*
Squirming for release,
they reached for someone,
or something, called *mother*,
as pain ate them raw.

¹ King Cakes are a New Orleans tradition during Mardi Gras. Inside each cake is a plastic baby; the person who finds the baby has to host the next king cake party.

Meditation on a Ladybug

Ladybug of the beach,
how did you arrive on the sand
or avoid the blow of a foot?
As the ocean exhales across the shore,
you cling to a blade of grass jutting
from the sand. Your shiny blood-red
shell parted in the sun exposes wings
to wind. Short black legs latch on as
grains of sand try to bury your black dots
below the swirling sand.

While the ocean's deep breaths continue
to draw you in, how long will you wait ?
Take-off time ends as spring tempts
infinity. This moment marks your year,
your life. Insect of instinct, teach us how
we, too, can ascend before
life pulls us under.

III. Breathing Memories

Tuesday's Mother

I. The Lake

Seagulls witness the bruised peach dying
in the moon's rising arms, but they follow
me as I tie a lop-sided bow on the bag.

*Her heartbeat in my arms
is a scary sound. I have to hide
her. I cannot tell.*

The restless water lapping against
the rocks seems to quiet down as I sail
her out in a garbage bag. *Let water
be her grave.* As I walk away, the splash
echoes like ice cracking.

*Her heartbeat was the scariest
sound I ever heard. I have to hide
her. My parents must not know.*

II. Behind Jail Bars

My parents deliver the news:
“The police found her Tuesday afternoon, her legs,
cold as ice, dangling by the water's edge.”

*Her heartbeat was faint. She had
to be dead. But I couldn't tell.*

“Her black hair matted
against her pastel purple skin.
Her miniature fingers balled up
in a fist. The news people
said the hospital or fire station would
have taken her.”

“You could have told us, they said,
“what were you thinking?”

Scratching her head confusedly, she speaks as it comes to her:

Day by day I carried this secret. That's all

I could carry...So light

in my arms. Her heartbeat

was so faint I thought she'd

died. The umbilical cord,

that bloody towel,

I wanted to...

The Bathing Ritual

Noon again: the water roars
from under the faucet
emptying into the bath tub.
As lunch approaches, his career
demands action, but for now
she is commitment, a full-time
responsibility. He hides bars
of soap and disinfectant
from her reach. Undressing
her, he leads her to the tub.

In her room, he listens for
her voice while she bathes. Ready for her
sweat suit and diaper, he stares past
the wall to recall the doctor's news—
Her memories will slowly deteriorate.
His eyes do not swell but harden
like oak. He returns, towel in hand,
wrapping her like a child. His arms
resting around her, he remembers
her washing him after school, the bubbles
bursting against his toy boat, her
scrubbing his ears clean.

At the mirror, he sits her on a stool,
pulls her sweat suit over gray ponytail.
While he hums, she stares at herself: a girl,
dark crescent moons drooping beneath
her eyes, her grandson by her side.

Passion Defined

Call me courtesan,
Juana La Loca, or
Cordelia, some say,
“Catastophe’s child,”
because my skin tastes of cin-
namon and my lips are hot
beds like the bakers’ kitchens.

I am the blind course
men try to escape;
the knight and rescue
women chase and quench.
I am the moment before
the climax—the ecstasy,
the pregnant kiss numbing the knees.

I penetrate all
 hearts, virgins who wait,
the scared running from
 pain, fools in love with
love soldiering on, limbless,
 the homeless hearts emptied of
warm blood, buried beneath ice.

Come closer, children.
Catch this slowing burn—
a tickling tease
in the throat, a light blow
that maps small constellations
on the backs of naked necks,
the pill that arrests hearts.

Love on the Terrace

Garden beds of canary tulips
waft in the breeze. Around the brick
wall, ivy wraps, sprawling
before the table where one
wooden chair turns it back to the
muddy Mississippi. The sky frames
the artist painting. Her full lips
thirsty themselves watching
the tension in his muscular back
as he finishes the last stroke
of clouds to her sky. Backing
away from his creation, he turns
to his muse.

Uncrossing her legs, she smiles
gleaming with sweat. His
thumbs rest under her eyes,
he begins smoothing her over
enticed by bone structure. He palms her
cheeks flushed with heat, warm
apricot. Pleased, he traces a delicate
heart from her nose to her chin.
Farther down, fingers travel to her
center, her heart.

Circling back, he parts her lips
with his tongue. After a long blink
she exhales, inching to the seat's
edge. His eyes ask,
"How do I get inside? Trust me?"
Not questioning him, she opens
herself, obeys his hands, her heart
beginning to throb. Lightly
his fingertips travel to her
arms. Turning over the sensitive inside
of her wrist, he blows softly
as her chair gives way.

The Suspension

I awake in our ocean of sweat,
the sheets draped loosely around
my shoulders and legs, like a sari.
I see last night: my finger tracing
the curve of your back igniting
us. We wrestled off clothes.
My legs positioned on your knees
helped you to roll off pink cotton.
Your teeth flashed like pearls in
the darkness. My tongue trailed your
body, tasting hot salt; your fresh skin
smelled of cooked potatoes. I lingered
above your navel teasing muscles
that pulsed under pressure.
I, a moth,
burned under
your flame
slowly,
undone,
asphyxiated,
in brushes of moist kisses.
Our bodies' friction
concocted a sugary perfume
cloud that floated around us.
Hanging in the air, we slowly
parachuted back to the bed,
as we made something
not called love,
something scandalous.

French Bread

New Orleans style gets it wrong.
French bread has a soft light brown shell
and breathes like memory foam
when pressed. It is not cracked pieces
of chewy leather housing shrimp, lettuce,
tomato and mayonnaise. Nothing
is poor about French bread. Real
French bread, *le pain francais*, is
addictive. Sadistic. Torture.
To enjoy, eat it with every meal.
Take butter and spread it down
the fluffy middle. Smother with sticky
apricot, the bittersweet taste of marmalade.
Silence overcomes, then a sweet and salty
explosion occurs—fruit and butter marry
like never before, and you taste bread, or
maybe a hint of the air. So light. Amazing!

Crepuscule

Joys are not in life but in moments of memory²

In the quiet night, the moon rises
before me. He is the emperor of twilight
while his children, the fireflies, flash
in the tree tops like the glittering Eiffel
at dusk. Their blips of green are magic
blades of grass. Growing wings, they up-
root themselves, free of the earth below.
Their lights are like my memories of you: bright,
materializing in the sticky open air, clear, but
trailing the past world into the present. All at once,
we are together again. Dancing on your knees,
you twirl me under your arm. Grandpa's lamp
fades from amber to darkness. Alone, my hand
pulls back nothing. I fear the years
coming to erase you—my memories,
the place I house you,
where you are as real as I am.

Brother, my mind constantly rebuilds a nose,
the lips, that gapped grin. You are not here,
but your daughter is—chasing fireflies
with her purple butterfly net. Dashing
in the Bermuda grass, she leaves
soft foot prints seeking something
besides photographs. After two swings
and a miss, she throws down her net;
crying over “stupid bugs” she “can’t” catch,
she is as impatient as ever,
your little girl.

² Inspired by a passage in *Winter in the Abruzzi* by Natalia Ginzburg

VITA

The author was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She earned her bachelor's degree in English from Dillard University in 2008. She joined the University of New Orleans graduate program, the Creative Writer's Workshop, to pursue a MFA in poetry. While in the workshop, she worked as an English Composition instructor and was published in the *Maple Leaf Bar IV Anthology of Poetic Writings* and *Ellipsis*. After teaching for two years, she decided that teaching Composition and writing poetry are professions she plans on continuing. She is currently seeking more publications and using her passion for writing to assist anyone in need.