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# **Understanding Toxic Cycles and How to Defeat Them**

How Poetry can Heal

WRIT 690

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## Artists Statement

**Analyzing a Toxic Cycle – An Introduction to the Writer**

I am not an emotional person.

I cringe when people cry. I get angry with myself when I cry. I do not enjoy the warm feeling of an embrace. In fact, a hug never felt warm to me, rather, a strange sensation of fear paralyzes me when someone so much as extends their arms out toward me. The phrase “I love you” always carried so much weight in my mind that I judged the world for throwing it around like a baseball until I could hear the thud of the words against someone’s glove. I joke about it but, truthfully, the pandemic was my saving grace when the concept of six feet was created. I no longer needed to create a vague summary of past traumas lingering about me each day as to why I felt uncomfortable being physical with others.

Except I knew the truth but could not put it into words at the time; multiple traumatic events, and abusive experiences, corrupted the fibers of my being. I loathed hugging because one too many people touched me without my permission. I could not handle tears because crying was not allowed in my home growing up; we only understood anger. I flinched if someone told me they loved me because I struggled to love myself, and never felt the love a child should feel from her parents. All these things embedded in my core, but I did not understand then what I do now.

Pain connects us all. What makes writing beautiful is that when one cannot physically connect with another person, her words form the connection on her behalf. Poetry can be used medicinally for both the writer and the reader. The act of writing itself is cathartic for the poet while her words offer a reader the chance to recognize he is not alone in his own pain, which resembles that of the writer’s.

Writing always served as an outlet for me. I first picked up writing at age five when my great grandma gave me my first journal. I was around eight years old when I wrote my first poem, “All the Pretty Ponies.” It touched on the abandonment I felt when my dad brought my stepmom into our lives. I was a roughed-up pony on the other side of the fence looking at a well-groomed family of Paints and Appaloosas. One day, during an argument between my dad and stepmom, I read my stepmom the poem. It was the first time I ever shared a piece of my writing with someone. I wanted her to feel the pain I felt on her arrival. At just eight years old, I needed her to understand the loss and grief I felt as a child who would never see her family whole again. That is when I first imagined my words could create a connection, or path to understanding, between me and another person. Before I was old enough to conduct any research on my own, and understood there was a definition for my habits, I began utilizing poetry therapy to heal myself.

My writing comforted me in some of my darkest moments growing up; when my parents dragged me into custody battles, when my stepmom decided she hated me one day and loved me the next, when a boy broke my heart. Any action that caused a reaction within me pushed me closer to my writing. What makes writing beautiful is that when one cannot physically connect with another person, their words form the connection on their behalf. Poetry can be used medicinally for both the writer and the reader, as demonstrated through research on poetry therapy

### **Overcoming a Toxic Cycle – The Vision for the Poetry Collection**

The summer after I graduated college, I saw firsthand how poetry helps young artists cope with their grief caused by trauma. I earned a creative writing Teacher’s Assistant role for a

summer arts program, BLUR (Blue Ridge Summer Institute for Young Artists). Most of our students did not need a T.A., they needed someone to simply listen to them. Between the professor running the summer program and me, we gave the students that connection they were searching for. They confided in us then confided in the world through their writing.

My professor allowed me to participate in the course and write according to the prompts she gave while also observing her teach the course. Within the last week of the program, she charged me with running a class of my own. I wanted my one day of teaching to show the students how powerful their outlets could be. The summer of 2016 was not only a time for me to serve as a T.A., but I was also discovering my own political voice. I had recently lost a friendship due to political differences, and that weighed on me. This is what led me to create a course theme of tolerance and acceptance as the world struggled to grasp the concept of equality. I introduced the young writers to poets doubling as political activists. Focusing only on minority writers, we discussed LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, racism in society and its ripple effect that created a communal trauma. Whether one witnessed hate through the media, or participated in the movements to end hate, the intolerance of a single group can create collective trauma. Collective trauma is a feeling we all experience when we witness something we cannot unsee.

I experienced an excess amount of that collective trauma when I began working in media. As a television news producer, it became my job to dissect the important pieces of a story to regurgitate to the public. My internal struggle was this: Who am I to decide what is important and what is not? Who am I to say one man's life taken by a gun is less significant than the next man's? Television news became more difficult during the pandemic. The world experienced detrimental levels of grief through traumatic incidents such as separating from families for

months or years, witnessing police brutality become fatal, and seeing a heated political atmosphere spark such chaos that thousands stormed our nation's Capital. I began to question my role as a producer and fear my professional writing was starting to cause pain to others when I lived my entire life wanting it to heal.

Mirroring my internal conflict was the external conflict I was inciting on myself. After spending years cramming any form of emotions I felt down into the pit of my gut, everything started bubbling over. I felt the grief of moving away from home (only months before the pandemic) tangled in the trauma I caused myself through some of my actions, but something offset the two; I bought a house. After buying my first home, I started to see a future for myself. Perhaps it was not in that same home, but I imagined a life where I had my life together the way I wanted it and out from under the toxic cycle my parents looped me into as a child.

That same progress came with regression. At times, I would take two steps forward only to fall ten steps back into some toxic behavior. I drank heavily, I experimented with drugs, all so I could forget the moments that haunted me from my childhood. If I could not physically think, then the nightmares would go away. The problem? To keep the nightmares at bay, I had to be under the influence constantly. I was slower to process the damage I caused myself in these reckless behaviors until I finally had to ask myself if I was truly that person who did not care about her own life anymore, or if I could avoid becoming a statistic by learning to cope with my grief.

Growing up in a rage-fueled household taught me how important words are in dealing with my grief and trauma, whether that is sharing them through writing or therapy. I can utilize them as a weapon in a war or a tool to build a pathway on common ground. I have seen words



break a man's spirit. I witnessed his cup spill after it was overfilled with hatefulness. I have had perversions whispered in my ear, sending chills across my skin. It was in these moments, when I was barely old enough to dress myself for school, that I first experienced trauma on multiple occasions. I never understood what trauma was physically capable of doing to my body. It was beyond my comprehension that my body, not yet fully developed, would rewire itself around the experienced trauma.

I processed all of those memories through EMDR therapy, or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. It is a form of therapy that allows the brain to process trauma in a safe environment. It is commonly used to treat anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. A year into this form of therapy, I wondered why I was the only person in my life trying to be a better person. That was on the hard days. On the more difficult days, I asked myself if I was really healing at all.

This is how I came to form the idea that healing is a cyclical process. Through personal experience, I learned there are truly ups and downs to life. Sometimes those ups are the end stage, sometimes they are only the beginning of accepting what has happened to us. The same goes for the downs; some days we are outraged at what we experienced; other days we are merely shocked it happened at all. This idea birthed the concept of a cyclical, or progressive, work. There needs to be a collection of work that we can use no matter where we stand in our journey. My starting point differs from someone nearby and vice versa. I may fall off the wagon of healing while another person trucks right on through it with grace.

Amanda Lovelace's work "The Princess Saves Herself in This One" also helped solidify my vision of a cyclical collection of poetry. Lovelace's collection is not formatted in a way

where it can only be read front to back. Rather than a biography or critics comments on the back cover, as other books have, Lovelace wrote “The story of a princess turned damsel turned queen.” Lovelace’s simple back cover turned the wheels in my head until I asked, “What if someone’s story started where someone else’s began?” What if the queen fell into a damsel, then became a princess? Or what if the damsel transformed into a princess until she ruled the land? Anything is possible in this world and that is why I want a collection that not only contains words that speak that truth, but I want its format to also represent that.

My poetry collection’s concept is not to have a traditional beginning and end. A reader can start wherever they want in the work, depending on what speaks to them in their personal healing process. The chapbook will be divided into seven chapters, all of which will be titled along with the steps of the grieving process – shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and processing. Through my writing, I have moved through each phase of grief repeatedly all while using the four steps of poetry therapy: Recognize the problem, examine the details, juxtaposition, and application. Each chapter gracefully moves through the steps of poetry therapy so I, as the writer, may surpass that current stage of processing grief. The end of each chapter represents the beginning of a new stage in the healing process and shows the progression of the writer’s poetry therapy. Through this collection I learned grief, caused by trauma, leaves a scar. The physical wound may remain visible, but I can heal the emotional wound.

### **The Christian Scholar’s Strategy**

This poetry collection’s theme is significant to me because I know in my heart what it feels like to be alone. In Isaiah 41:10, God said “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous

hand.” Through my own journey, I can confess I lost sight of God’s hand guiding me along my path next to Him. Even the most devout Christian can forget His grace in times of stress, or when the world is hateful.

When we forget God is with us throughout our journeys, we stray from His righteous path. The responsibility falls on our shoulders to help our fellow Christians and remind them that they are never alone on this earth. God is always with us. This collection of poetry serves as an earthly guiding light on the dark path for those of us who feel we have fallen away from grace. Taking time to process my grief has reminded me no matter how far I feel I have fallen, and no matter how detached I feel, God will never abandon me as long as I follow Him.

## **Poetry Therapy and its Healing Effects**

### **Introduction to Poetry as a Form of Therapy**

Words can heal. This is why memoirists share their innermost thoughts with the public, why journalists tell stories about communities healing together, and why poets illustrate stories of love and heartache alike. Poetry, historically, represented love and longing thanks to the Romantics. Well-studied poets, such as William Shakespeare and John Keats, are often thought of when one thinks of poetry. However, gone are the days where poets only discussed lust. In its place is loss. A common theme found in writing is pain and suffering, whether it is the pain of losing a loved one, the agony of having to make a tough decision, etc.

What draws a writer to write about misery? Why not utilize the power of words to uplift and radiate positivity? As Richard Gold and Elizabeth Jordan explain in their research “Grief, Poetry and the Sweet Unexpected,” “there is a commonality in the way people experience and respond to pain” (Gold & Jordan 22). Humans, as social creatures, can relate to the pain of loss and traumatic experiences. Poets utilize poetry as a therapeutic tool to heal their trauma while relating to the grief of others.

### **Definitions to Know: Grief, Trauma, and Poetry Therapy**

Due to the complexity of trauma and its effects, it is important to understand how it will be defined in relation to grief and poetry therapy. Trauma is the catalyst projecting a victim into grief and the medicine is poetry therapy. According to Sven Schild and Constance Dalenberg, the

term *trauma* stems from a Greek word meaning wound (Schild & Dalenberg 820). To best argue poetry's therapeutic effects when overcoming trauma, trauma must be defined as an emotional or psychological wound. Because the wound cannot be seen with the naked eye, rather it is *felt*, a different kind of treatment is necessary.

Grief is the overwhelming feeling of loss after experiencing a traumatic event. The concept of grief is usually thought of in relation to death. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross established the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Tyrell et al). Kubler-Ross' initial findings focused on the person knocking on death's door, but have since been applied to other significant shifts in one's life, such as witnessing a loved one die or abandon us. We can experience the emotional reaction of grief when we lose a relationship, lose a part of ourselves or experience change in life. Kubler-Ross' stages of grief created an historical conclusion that grief is a linear process, but shame researcher Brené Brown argues "almost all of the recent research actually refutes the idea that grief progresses in predictable, sequenced stages" (Brown 110).

Poetry therapy is the cathartic use of poetic form to cope with trauma and overcome grief. Sherry Reiter dates the healing effect of words back to fourth millennium BCE Egypt "where healing words were written on papyrus and then dissolved in a solution so that the words could be physically ingested by the sufferer and take effect quickly" (Reiter 781). In his research "The Arts in Psychotherapy," Youkhabeah Mohammadian cites the therapeutic effects of poetry include "anxiety reduction in cancer patients, improved immune function, pain reduction, linguistic dysfunction in schizophrenic patients and reduction of depression in bereaved patients" (Mohammadian et al. 60). With these therapeutic effects in mind it can be argued that poetry, as a

therapy, can heal grief by separating the writer from trauma, creating a safe space to process that grief, and managing emotional responses to trauma.

### **Separating the Writer from Her Trauma**

In order to properly process trauma the writer needs to separate herself from her grief because reliving trauma is difficult. Experiencing trauma again, or even a small detail that may resemble a part of the traumatic moment, can cause a survivor to relapse, spiral, panic or go into defense mode. If a traumatic incident is hidden from the mind it does not mean the body forgets the stress of said memory. Psychiatrist and trauma specialist Bessel van der Kolk studies post-traumatic stress disorder in war veterans, domestic violence victims, children who were abused, etc. He points out that, even if a person does not consciously remember a traumatizing moment, their body *can*. Van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score* shares research proving that "trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think" (van der Kolk 21). Taking van der Kolk's words into account means that it is nearly impossible for a person who has suffered trauma or serious grief to recognize a trigger point on their own free will because the body and mind want to avoid those stress-related hormones.

Thanks to brain-imaging technology and its advancements, researchers like van der Kolk have come to better understand how the brain relays information from one side to the other and then to the body after trauma. In 1994, van der Kolk studied brain images and flashbacks in

people with PTSD. Research participants would relay a traumatic event to researchers and the researchers would create a script of the event to read to the subject while attached to neuroimaging equipment. Results revealed “that when traumatized people are presented with images, sounds, or thoughts related to their particular experience, the amygdala reacts with alarm” no matter the length of time that has passed since the devastation (van der Kolk 42).

Writing poetry allows the poet to create two narratives, that of the victim and that of the survivor. It is this unique perspective that separates a poet from the victim she once thought she was. Once she tears herself in two, she can further explore the components of that trauma. Her exploration helps answer questions such as who, what, where, when and why. In other words, she learns what her trigger points are and how to manage them in a way that they no longer consume her.

Using the imagination to conjure up other worlds is part of the brain’s healing process. Sherry Reiter argues that “imagery is linked with learning, relaxation techniques, life meaning, and life enjoyment” (Reiter 781). Poets create images through the senses when writing poetry. When a writer weaves words into an image related to a traumatic experience it helps the writer separate herself from her pain and see it in a new light. “Imagery is the language of dreams,” according to Reiter, and poets are the interpreters (781). The brain can process grief and trauma through dreams. Although we may not fully understand the dream, we may find ourselves determining an overall message from the dream. Poets can take pieces of the dream and morph it into something comprehensible for readers while also relaying the final message.

Taking a look at poet Muriel Rukeyser's "The Poem as a Mask," it can be seen how the poet separates herself from the pain of being an oppressed woman. In her first stanza, Rukeyser writes:

*When I wrote of the women in their dances and wildness, it was a mask,  
on their mountain, gold-hunting, singing, in orgy,  
it was a mask; when I wrote of the god,  
fragmented, exiled from himself, his life, the love gone down with song,  
it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself* (Rukeyser 82, lines 1-5).

Rukeyser's first-person narration shows her personal realization that the fantastic worlds she created in her writing were more than just out-of-this-world imagery. The narrator learns her subjects were herself "split open, unable to speak, in exile" from her own being (Rukeyser 82). Rukeyser reflects on former characters of hers and finds herself within them. In stanza two, Rukeyser confesses "There is no mountain, there is no god, there is memory / of my torn life, myself split open in sleep," showing her newfound ability to separate herself from the characters she hid behind (82, lines 6-7).

She pushes the analysis further until she feels more stable in her role as a woman in an oppressive time. She writes "No more masks, no more mythologies," showing she is fed up with the trauma inflicted upon her by societal standards (82, line 9). She claimed she hid behind her poetry, rather than voicing her opinions of societal inadequacies verbally, thus creating her own version of trauma. Muriel Rukeyser brought a subconscious thought to the forefront of her mind in writing her poetry and proved Sherry Reiter's point that imagery "serves as a catalyst for



bringing unconscious material into conscious awareness” (Reiter 781). Propelling unconscious thoughts and memories into our consciousness is essential when healing trauma so the victim may first recognize the trauma itself.

### **A Safe Space to Process Grief and Trauma**

Poetry creates a safe space for a writer, allowing her to process grief and trauma in a judgment-free zone. She will write in a location of her choosing of her own free will. This ensures she is aware of her surroundings and that no threat can come near her. Creating a safe space to write also gives her a confidential place to confront her attacker or abuser without the threat of retaliation. Whereas a survivor might run the risk of verbal or physical backlash from an attacker in-person, she does not face the same risk when she confronts them on the page. Once the poet establishes her safe space, she gives herself permission to progress through her healing at her own pace.

Michelle Hand dives into the “Against Our Will” campaign, a rally to make human trafficking victims feel empowered, and how the campaign offers another layer to the exploration of trauma through poetry. Hand cites K.D. Singh’s comment “that autobiographical poetry offers opportunities for closure and new definitions of self, otherwise obscured through trauma” (Hand 2130). Human trafficking victims who use poetry to process their trauma find a sanctuary in their writing. It is the survivor’s decision if her poetry is read aloud to anyone else, or if anyone outside will ever get to experience her emotions. She chooses how publicly she will confront her trauma, or if that confrontation will remain intimate between her and the page.

A safe space to process is needed for children and adults alike. Richard Gold analyzes the Pongo Poetry Program, which puts poetry therapy into practice with children and at-risk

adolescents to help them cope with troubling behaviors and comprehend why they respond in certain ways to issues. Gold first explains “the activation of the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal (HPA) axis, the so-called stress response, may lead to lasting detrimental effects on physical and psychological health through epigenetic mechanisms and neurobiological changes” (Gold 2). Through the eyes of Gold, over-activating a child’s HPA axis could create long lasting effects that can hinder the body from establishing proper coping mechanisms. Gold explains that because of that stunted growth, caused by the overactivation of the stress-related hormones, children are more open to writing about their problems rather than discussing them verbally (4).

Because of this detrimental effect to children’s growth, volunteers with the Pongo Poetry program visit children in group homes or detention centers to coach them through the steps of poetry therapy. Rather than receiving a prompt requesting the child relive a traumatic experience through a poem, a volunteer sits and talks with the child. Volunteers ask participating children questions about their feelings at that moment or something on their mind. The strategy is to get the child talking, not necessarily about why they behave the way that they do, but to get the thoughts and words flowing. Writers/volunteers are trained as excellent listeners so they may capture the mentee’s voice and story with respect to their experiences. The result is a poem sharing the child’s story in a creative way.

Gold’s analysis concludes in saying at-risk youths were more open to sharing their work once they recognized a commonality between them and the volunteer or others (if in a group setting) (8). Gold sums up the project’s work, in relation to poetry therapy, when he writes “it is innate within people that the poem, as a form, progresses toward a moment of revelation” (8). Gold praises the success of the Pongo program and poetry therapy. Of the thousands of youths

who participated, Gold declares that “caregivers of the Pongo writers, and the writers themselves who were contacted after writing, have indicated that many youths identify as writers after a single Pongo opportunity, and continue to write afterward as a way of dealing with difficult feelings” (19).

Poetry gives back a writer’s power over her own life. She can set the tone through form or imagery as her way of controlling the narrative. Her narrative is no longer in the hands of her abuser, and she is no longer at the mercy of her memories. Hand argues “pity further strips [survivors] of dignity and worth as human beings” leading them to make personal choices about point of view in their works and stronger word choices (Hand 2148). She now has the final say in what happens next in her poem. This separation allows her to close the book on her grief when she is ready. Survivors who write poetry distance themselves from the victim within them, and demand their audiences see them as they want to be seen.

Michelle Hand further argues poetry is a strong tool used by women specifically due to the nature of history. She explains women have historically used autobiographical accounts to connect with audiences in a time when women were to be seen and not heard. Hand identifies this as the Empowerment Theory, the theory in which groups or individuals take control of their lives and diminish “stigma and exclusion” (Hand 2134). With the empowerment theory in place, survivors of sexual trauma write poetry as a method of gaining a sense of control over the chaos controlling their lives.

According to Sherry Reiter, imagery can “help people gain control over their life situation; the viewer or reader identifies with the characters and seeks solutions that are unique and universal” (Reiter 781). When a writer is at a loss for words, poetry can help put those

feelings into words when the writer initially thought it would be impossible; Reiter defines this as “cleansing through the release of emotion” (782).

Contemporary poet Alan Dugan gives himself permission to grieve a failed relationship in “Love Song: I and Thou.” In a poetic letter to his wife, Dugan writes:

*Nothing is plumb, level or square:*

*the studs are bowed, the joists*

*are shaky by nature, no piece fits*

*any other piece without a gap*

*or pinch, and bent nails*

*dance all over the surfacing*

*like maggots. (Dugan 240, 1-7).*

Dugan sets the scene of a home in disrepair. Everything is falling apart from the foundation of the home, to the tools designed to keep it standing. The home serves as a metaphor for his relationship with his wife, illustrating Dugan’s exploration of the pain he feels under the weight of their disconnection. Dugan dives into this lapse further, and the rage inside him, until he reaches this conclusion:

*This is hell,*

*but I planned it, I sawed it,*

*I nailed it, and I*

*will live in it until it kills me.*

*I can nail my left palm*

*to the left-hand crosspiece but*

*I can't do everything myself.*

*I need a hand to nail the right,*

*a help, a love, a you, a wife. (Dugan 241, 23-31).*

Dugan's final image is morbid as he begs his wife for her help in crucifying what is left of the man who once loved her. He suggests he can nail one of his palms to the cross himself but needs his wife's help to nail the other side up. Dugan makes an important distinction in saying "I can nail my left palm / to the left-hand crosspiece" and leaves the right side to his wife (Dugan 241). The right hand symbolizes trust and honor. Think of a right-hand man or placing the right hand on the Bible in a court of law to take an oath. Dugan's violent imagery represents the trauma he experienced due to the unknown path his relationship was taking. Dugan's words showed he felt he was navigating uncharted territory on his own which created information deprivation, according to Schild and Dalenberg's trauma definition.

For Dugan, the image he creates flows from a house pieced together poorly to his celebration of that faulty design until the home's foundation falters. Dugan states "I built / the roof for myself, the walls / for myself, the floors / for myself, and got / hung up in it myself" (Dugan 240, lines 8-12). Dugan begins to identify the problem at hand: He built the structure to satisfy his needs when he should have taken the input of his wife to create a healthy marriage, adding yet another layer of trauma for Dugan.

Dugan's struggling marriage caused him grief, which led him to the inability to self-regulate. Wamser-Nanney argues complex trauma hinders a person's ability to "modulate the overwhelming amount of distress" and leaves the person unequipped to properly handle life's difficulties (Wamser-Nanney 296). This chaos can be seen in Dugan's piece. The images are bent, rusted and grotesque. Dugan illustrates bent nails, maggots and nailing his own hands to a post resembling a cross. Though Dugan was not shot, beaten, or something similar, his estrangement from his wife created an imbalance that traumatized him. As a result, he was unable to properly cope with their troubles or conjure up solutions. Through poetry therapy, Dugan was able to reach his own conclusions about his relationship with his wife and see the marriage was failing.

### **Managing Emotional Responses**

The page, or screen, gives the writer an endless field to explore her emotional responses. Shame researcher Brené Brown states there are 87 named emotions in her book *Atlas of the Heart*, but the average person can only name three: happy, sad and angry (Brown xxi). Brown's data shows the use of language helps human beings to identify and reckon with the surplus of emotions our bodies experience. Through language, and poetry specifically, we can open a space to explore our traumas.

Once the door is open, a writer can manage her emotional responses. When a person puts pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard, her ability to speak more fluently flourishes. She accesses words she does not use daily and takes it upon herself to learn additional words so that she may eloquently portray what she is feeling. Brown's research three core elements of grief: "loss,

longing, and feeling lost” (110). As a writer goes through the stages of her writing, she moves through the core parts of grief, eventually finding herself on the other side of a written piece.

Navigating the mind can activate emotions a writer has buried or not experienced before, to her knowledge. The first step in the poetry process is creation while the second step is revision. It is between these two steps when conflicting feelings, or trauma, are revealed. From revision into the final steps of creation is where the writer takes the time she needs to explore those feelings further. Has she always felt this way? What brought these feelings about? Why does she run from them? Van der Kolk believes it is pertinent for every person to explore their feelings. He writes “only after you identify the source of these responses can you start using your feelings as signals of problems that require your urgent attention” (van der Kolk 235).

While some feel more comfortable talking about their experiences with another, it can be frightening. Confiding in a person takes a great deal of strength and trust that the chosen person will protect your story as if it were their own. A person may feel discomfort opening up to another about a traumatic moment, but she could feel more at ease writing about it instead. The page is like a vault, it only opens when she wants to share her words. Gold supports this argument by elaborating on how the children of the Pongo Poetry Program were known to write about past traumas that they may have never previously discussed with a licensed professional.

Claudia Rankine’s collection “Citizen: An American Lyric,” visualizes the trauma of being Black in America for those that do not understand it. Rankine uses mixed mediums in her collection, using both writing and visuals to tell her stories publicly. The collection opens powerfully with an untitled piece about a catholic schoolgirl who allows a classmate behind her

to cheat off her tests. Three stanzas in on the first page, Rankine punches readers in the throat with a harsh reality of the situation:

“You never really speak except for the time she makes her requests and later when she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person.” (Rankine 5).

Claudia Rankine can cite injustice in a seemingly innocent moment. Rankine attacks this societal wrong from two angles. First, she speaks from an adult narrator’s voice, which can be heard from the assessment in the final line where the narrator understands the little girl feels comfort getting her answers from someone ‘almost white.’ This is not an analysis from a child. Instead it is an analysis from the perspective of someone looking back at a moment from her childhood. The childhood perspective brings about the second angle Rankine points her finger toward: even school age children can be unjust. Society has built boundaries and standards adults must fit into accordingly. Be that skinny, white, rich, well-read or whatever the expected circumstances may be depending on the cultural standpoint. Those standards are projected onto children, who then unknowingly can create traumatic incidents for their peers. This stanza, for example, shows how that trauma impacted the narrator years later even though she could not pinpoint it in the moment as a child.

## **Conclusion**



Poetry allows words to escape from our minds at a time when they are typically bouncing around our skulls. When a person has experienced trauma, or grief, her body physically reacts to that trauma and can cause her to lose her ability to speak. This is a paralyzing feeling, further deepening the survivor's re-living of the trauma, but there is hope through poetry.

Trauma does not have to define a person. Researchers, in both sciences and arts, are finding that by meshing the two worlds together one can truly overcome pain and process emotions in a natural way. Poetry therapy is a developing discipline gaining attention for its healing abilities, even though writing as a form of therapy dates back millennia. If we take into consideration how the body can physically react to trauma, or situations similar, we can understand there is a blockage taking place. This blockage prevents the mind from healing its emotional wounds. Autobiographical poetry helps remove that blockage by softening the edges of the memory until it can glide through our brain's consciousness without causing further damage. After the blockage is removed, we can begin to move on and redefine who we are outside of the trauma that molded us into fearful creatures.

Richard Gold said it best when he wrote "poetry celebrates shared human experience" (Gold 22). Not only does writing poetry lead a writer to explore her own experiences and emotions, but it metaphorically extends her hand to the reader. Reading poetry is as therapeutic as writing it. When we read a poem about someone's experience, we see firsthand we are not alone in our feelings. Someone completes the healing work on the reader's behalf. Poetry as a form of therapy offers an effective way to manage traumatic experiences while also creating a positive outlet for people of all ages. Coping with trauma and finding healthier ways to handle emotions stemming from said trauma takes work. Just as one feels confident in her efforts to

move past trauma, a situation could arise and make her question her labor. Trauma healing is cyclical, not linear, and a person can progress, or regress as needed. Poetry heals the mind, body and spirit and can be used by anyone and everyone, not just professional poets. What matters is the person a writer sees on the other side of her poem, not the one in her rearview mirror.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

- Brown, Brené. *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2021.

Shame researcher Brené Brown breaks down the complexity of human emotions and shows how common it is for people to lump emotions into a generic category. Brown reveals there are 87 human emotions, but the average person can only name happy, sad, and angry. Using the concept of a road map, Brown journeys through the different emotions and how they pertain to human behaviors. For example, Brown argues ‘true belonging’ “is essential to well-being” both physically, emotionally, and mentally (154). Each of the 87 emotions creates the core of healthy human connection.

- Dugan, Alan. “Love Song: I and Thou.” *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, volume 2*, edited by Ramazani, Jahan, Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair. Third edition, W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003.

Alan Dugan explores a crumbling relationship in his poem “Love Song: I and Thou.” Dugan’s poem uses twisted and corrupted imagery to show the marriage is crumbling. Dugan uses crucifixion imagery to drive home the depth of his trauma as caused by the grief of the failed marriage to his wife. Despite the agony Dugan demonstrates, he ends the piece in asking his wife for help nailing his hand to the cross, a last ditch effort in saying he needs her.

- Gold, Richard, and Elizabeth Jordan. “Grief, Poetry, and the Sweet Unexpected.” *Death Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 16–25. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2017.1370413>.

Richard Gold elaborates on poetry therapy and its ability to heal trauma. Gold dives into the Pongo Poetry Program for support. Volunteers with the Pongo Poetry Program work with at-risk youth to navigate grief caused by trauma. Gold believes trauma can be detrimental to development, making the program’s work critical for at-risk youth still developing in their lives. Through different case examples, Gold shows how utilizing poetry as a therapeutic tool helped children process feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and anger in a healthy manner, which allowed the children of the program to flourish properly.

- Hand, Michelle D. "The use of Autobiographical Poetry to Process Trauma, Promote Awareness, and Shift Views on Sexual Violence: Exploring the “Against our Will” Campaign." *Violence Against Women*, vol. 27, no. 11, 2021, pp. 2129-2158.

Michelle Hand digs into poetry therapy’s success in helping young girls who were victims of sex trafficking. In focusing on sexual violence, Hand explores how poetry therapy assists survivors in feeling empowered. In using autobiographical poetry as a tool, survivors get to decide their identities out from under their abusers and set the tone for how they want the world to look at

them as survivors. Hand defends the use of poetry therapy as a method for giving survivors back their voices.

- Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Graywolf Press. 2014.

Claudia Rankine's collection elaborates what it means to be Black in America. Her mixed-media chapbook uses photos and poetry alike. Rankine's poetry demonstrates the trauma Black people endure to this day, and how that trauma creates a collective grief. One example of Rankine's prose tells the story of Serena Williams and how her body structure was mocked by former number-one tennis player the Dane Carolina Wozniacki. Rankine argues a seemingly mild situation such as this sends one message to the world: Be white in America.

- Reiter, Sherry. "Poetry Therapy." *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Theory in Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Edward S. Neukrug, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2015. *Credo Reference*,  
[http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sage/theory/poetry\\_therapy/0?institutionId=5072](http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sage/theory/poetry_therapy/0?institutionId=5072). Accessed 26 May 2022.

Sherry Reiter declares history proves poetry therapy is cathartic because the use of words as a healing tactic dates to fourth millennium Egypt. Imagery, Reiter contends, is the backbone of poetry therapy. When a writer transforms her feelings into an image, she processes the emotions she previously was unable to put into words. Through poetry therapy, the writer first identifies the problem, then further examines the issue, followed by expressing several thoughts and ending the therapeutic process by applying the revelations to real life.

- Rukeyser, Muriel. "The Poem as Mask." *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, volume 2*, edited by Ramazani, Jahan, Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair. Third edition, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003.

Muriel Rukeyser's poem shows the impact of communal trauma. Rukeyser's piece lays out what it was to be a woman in the twentieth century fighting for her rights. She admits she used her poetry at times to hide behind the grief she felt living in a patriarchal society hindering her ability to learn and grow. "The Poem as Mask" is a declaration of injustice, and Rukeyser metaphorically puts her foot down saying she will no longer hide behind the flowery imagery of poetry. Instead, she will call out injustices directly with her words.

- Schild, Sven & Constance J. Dalenberg (2016) Information Deprivation Trauma: Definition, Assessment, and Interventions, *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 25:8, 873-889, DOI: 10.1080/10926771.2016.1145162.

Schild and Dalenberg contend a person experiences trauma when he is faced with the unknown. This information deprivation trauma is what complicates the definition of trauma. While some researchers state trauma is caused by a specific event, Schild and Dalenberg argue the definition is misleading. The two focus on the deaf community, and how a deaf child could experience trauma by finding out a relative died weeks after the fact. Lack of information heightens the negative impact of a situation.

- Tyrrell P, Harberger S, Schoo C, et al. Kubler-Ross Stages of Dying and Subsequent Models of Grief. [Updated 2022 Jul 20]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2022 Jan-. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK507885/>

Patrick Tyrrell and others venture into Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief for those in their final stages of life. Editors explore the five stages and what they look like for a person, then explain why some feel Kubler-Ross's stages are lacking context. The editors argue that, while Kubler-Ross's original model applied to those knocking on death's door, the stages can be applied to other aspects of life, such as the loss of a beloved relationship.

- Van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015.

Bessel Van der Kolk explores post-traumatic stress disorder and its effects on the body. Van der Kolk points out a trauma victim can experience similar reactions to a traumatic memory even if they are not in a comparable situation. This explains why war veterans fear fireworks, why a car crash victim may feel uneasy in a vehicle, and why abused children may shy away from adults. Van der Kolk shares brain scans of trauma victims to further show how development is impacted by trauma.

- Wamser-Nanney, Rachel. "Examining the Complex Trauma Definition Using Children's Self-Reports." *Journal of child & adolescent trauma*. 9.4 (2016): 295–304. Web.

Rachel Wamser-Nanney's definition of trauma is that which is "extended or repeated" (295). In Wamser-Nanney's study, 212 children experienced either "complex trauma," that which occurred in early childhood repeatedly, or those who only experienced a 'common' traumatic incident. Complexly traumatized children, who experienced an interpersonal form of abuse or trauma, regularly demonstrated symptoms from the Trauma Checklist for Children. However, those children did not experience more or different symptoms on the checklist than children who experienced an acute interpersonal trauma (a single event). Thus Wamser-Nanney's research

demonstrates why further exploration of the definition of trauma is needed for better understanding.

- Youkhabeh Mohammadian, Shahriar Shahidi, Behzad Mahaki, Ali Zadeh Mohammadi, Alireza Akbarzadeh Baghban, Farid Zayeri. “Evaluating the use of poetry to reduce signs of depression, anxiety and stress in Iranian female students,” *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, Volume 38, Issue 1, 2011, Pages 59-63, ISSN 0197-4556, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2010.12.002>.

Youkhabeh Mohammadian and fellow scholars study the medicinal effects of poetry on the body. 29 randomly selected female Iranian students were chosen to analyze groups in poetry therapy intervention and groups not participating in poetry therapy. Participants were measured on the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale before, during and after the group interventions. The group of scholars concludes poetry is proven to help ease the effects of depression and anxiety.

**Overcoming Me**



**I. Denial**

## Through Her Eyes

### I. Childhood trauma

I see

his long body pressed into me,  
a tiny sapling struggling to grow.

He wriggles and writhes  
like a worm on topsoil.

I lay stone still.

Hefty hands barrel  
toward my earth.

He gasps for air with greed,  
rolls off me – a ton of bricks  
removed from my chest.

Snores interrupt                      silence;  
my cue to scurry to the bathroom.

Tears trickle down my cheeks,  
I flush secrets down the drain,  
trudge to the living room  
with steel for feet.

I sit stone still  
against the sofa,  
criss cross applesauce, never peeling  
my eyes away from his face:  
triumphant, peaceful.

I sit  
until the sun slowly rises,  
shining light  
on grey walls, dull and dreary  
like a rainy sky.  
Mom walks through the door.

## II. **Blame Game**

Light is absent  
like a parent.  
Smoke chokes Dad's chuckle  
as he drags on a Marlboro Light  
pinched between his peeling lips.  
The scent of Mom's box blonde  
waves crests over her shoulders,  
carefree as I float away.  
Water wells in my lungs.  
Will they notice I'm gone?

## III. **Trauma transforms**

This hospital bed – home to my weak,  
decrepit body. Nervous  
glances bounce around me

at the beeping reminder  
I'm still breathing – a vegetable  
rotting beneath sterile blankets.

Memories thrash furiously  
in my mind, a hamster loses  
control of its wheel.  
A shadow hoisted me  
over his shoulder,  
I kicked  
like a wild horse.  
My screams wandered  
through darkness like a dying  
flashlight searching for someone,  
for anyone.  
He stumbled,  
drunk on power,  
lost his grip on my hips.  
My skull cracked against concrete,  
concrete cracked against my skull.  
A black hole devoured the world.

#### IV. **Awake**

Weary eyelids flutter open,  
leaves glow green  
as the sapling stretches  
toward sunlight.  
Through her eyes,

I see their fears fall  
as they inhale relief.  
I knew this girl well,  
but she never knew me.

### **Salmon**

They say she's brave, like a salmon  
swimming upstream against all odds.  
She ponders the thought, mulls it over.

“Salmon swim against the current  
to create life, then die.  
What legacy can we leave  
if we only remember our spawn?”

Her argument arouses a silence  
over the room like a dense frozen fog.

They counterargue, tell her she's fearless,  
ready to risk her life  
for the sake of her kind.

To which she says, “My life  
is meaningless if  
I die unsuccessful,

no ground to be gained.”

She leaves the room,  
certain she'd never have the nerve  
to truly say why she hated  
being called brave.

Afraid to say she wasn't scared of dying,  
only terrified of feeling teeth  
tear through her...  
Again.

**Orange**

I remember your first steps.  
slipping on orange slices,  
the ultimate fall. Blood  
orange spilled on carpet  
and you cried tangy tears.

I remember your first poem.  
“How come nothing rhymes  
with orange? Snorage, borange,  
pouridge...?” Slant rhymes saved  
your sanity. Nail bits  
cracked like carrots when you stood  
at the podium, a southern accent thick  
like marmalade in a jar.

I remember slicing cantaloupe alone  
in the kitchen. Rust mingled  
with citrus. Time painted the walls  
dull tangerine after you packed your bags.

Your kiss on my cheek tasted of yams,  
toasted marshmallows on Thanksgiving.

Apricots huddle close in a chilly wire basket,  
mandarin marinates in sugar water. Cantaloupe  
plummets to the floor right next  
to a blood orange stain.

**When I Look in the Mirror, I Don't Know Who I Am**

Chisel away the marble melded to your legs.  
Bend your left knee like an isosceles triangle,  
ignore the rusty refusal of joints.  
Now, right knee.  
Stand straight up – a tall tulip glowing  
in the Spring.  
One foot forward then the other.  
Careful, calculated steps.  
Solve for  $y=mx+b$  before passing go.  
Look in the mirror and see wild whirling  
cocoa tangles framing an almond face.  
Her complexion a coffee with half a cup  
of cream, too sweet for my taste.  
Her delicate mocha eyes rimmed red, trails  
of terror form the topography through  
the whites of her eyes.



**Maybe You're Lucky**

Allow me to erase his lust  
until the metal scrapes  
against paper, smudging ink  
on your wedding certificate.

I'd never peer into his jade green eyes,  
peace and protection wouldn't hide me  
from the monsters I refused to face.

If I reverse my decisions, we'd never be friends—  
you and me, two peas in a pod nurtured in narcissism,  
the seeds of our friendship never sown.

My soul only half of a whole  
because even with him I felt alone.  
You sheltered me, taught me love—

begged me to face emotions I buried,  
shovel in hand, six feet under dirt.

You dug with your bare hands,

Dirt caked under your nails, unearthing  
my filth to find perjury  
buried beneath my roots.

Tear the weeds up furiously,  
water the soil with your tears  
and soak my sorrows

until they wash down the storm drain  
with the debris  
of my past.

On hands and knees, you set to work  
coating my cracks with fresh topsoil.  
The smell of wet earth wrapping around you.

Sweat seeping from your pores,  
you bury bulbs and pat them gently.  
Slowly standing, dusting off the damage,

you feel your pain drift away  
with the breeze blowing  
black strands across your fragile face.

**Tosha the Worm**

I am nothing  
but an earthworm  
directing itself blindly to his heart.

This body senses no difference  
in the opening and the anus  
unless my mouth chews clay.

Sticky skin squirms in his hand,  
breathing in euphoric oxygen  
as he rips me at the clitellum.

Frenzied motions exhaust  
my dying flesh as it exhales  
its final diffused breath.

He tilts his hand, disgusted  
gravity pulls me close to home  
and I seek refuge.

I regenerate in the comfort of filth  
waiting for time to run its course  
to bring my lover home.

His body housed by dirt

and his heart protected  
in Tosha's soiled casting.  
She nestles in his hollow  
eye sockets, waiting  
for him to collapse on her.

### **Traveler**

Leave your pain on the doormat,  
dry it out in the warmth of our  
home – where the heart is, they say.  
What's in your heart, where did you  
leave it, traveler?

The holes in your sleeves say you once  
carried it there with determination.  
Far too fragile to stow away in a  
backpack, you left the pulsing thing in the  
hands of another while you searched for yourself.

But tell me this –

How can you find a missing half when  
you know your way home?

### **A Trip to the Grocery Store**

I wish I understood what my dad meant  
when he begged mom to stay seated on his lap  
as she spoke softly, “It’s only a trip to the grocery  
store.” I didn’t imagine the separation of two hands  
was a metaphor for the tearing of a heart.

I wasn’t a writer yet.

The pen had yet to grasp control of my hand, with all  
its inked weight. I didn’t understand  
there is more ache in a single “Hello” at the grocery  
store where matured cereals wish for a cabinet  
to call home. Two strangers forget love in their empty  
homes where families wait for the trip  
to the grocery store to end, but it never does.

She never comes home and I never  
put the pen down because her story has not  
been told. We spend so many thoughtless  
seconds pretending to calculate the minute  
that was never ours. Dad does not understand  
that mom cried tears, her cheeks wet with disgrace,

because in that moment she was alone  
with powdered hopes sprinkled on her nose.  
She understood the meaning of eyes gazing  
on your back, probing you to turn around,  
to forget the groceries – that can be done  
tomorrow. As she lay there, in a strange house,  
dad stared into an empty bottle  
wondering how it was possible to drink  
dreams away so easily. He stumbled  
to the kitchen, tumbled to the floor and knocked  
the table over. A pen rolled to me and I finally  
understood that was the only thing my hand  
needed to hold.

**Savory Summer**

Confusion looms over me, the clouds tinged  
crimson. Thoughts rumble through the car,  
clatter beneath the mahogany hood and knock into each other,  
not sure which way is right.

I look to you, merlot veins sketch the troubles  
over your face, and I think of him. The strawberry  
jam scent of his breath. Kisses over  
toast, ginger roots speckle his beard,  
seasoning my apple crisp desires.

My cherry was his for the taking, scarlet  
painted my pores in pleasure. As he stretched  
for the cherry on my tree

I thought of you.

Tomato cheeks ripened in summer daze,  
add a dash of salt and take a bite.

Acid drops between my greedy  
fingertips and karma burns  
deep in my hang nails. Lightning strikes,  
me back to reality, back to this red stop light,

begging me not to drive forward  
with the pace of blood in expanded  
capillaries toward the brick house decorated  
with ruby windows and rose bushes.  
Your hand grips the door handle, intentions  
clear as garnet. Despair is a fire hydrant red.  
Thunder shakes us awake from my red  
reverie, your maroon nightmare, and the brick  
house of my desire crumbles onto him --  
crushed candy hearts.



**Fine for Now**

Eyes trek up my body  
then back down,  
assaulting my skin  
invading my privacy  
all out of *concern*.

Define anxiety using one  
word then wrap it in a  
bow with a pretty little lie.

I tape the placid smile  
from ear to ear on my face.

To look the part, I must play  
the part. I stand still, palms flat  
facing open, gently urging the  
spectator to examine me.

“I’m fine,” not a blatant lie,  
not a whole truth. A filler  
statement sandwiched between  
my reality. I bite down and chew  
quickly, forcing down

fantasies I'll regurgitate later.

When I'm on my knees, praying over  
a porcelain throne, I hope  
someone will stop to ask if  
I'm really okay.

### **Return to Sender**

It's the letter never sent,  
nestled between late bills and  
fake excitement stamped in Holiday cards.

You have the words memorized,  
"I went on a walk today and saw  
a child stumble and fall. His tiny hands  
reached protectively for the sidewalk. Stronger hands  
turned the blow into a helicopter ride.  
I thought of you...  
because I always do."

That's not true.

You know it.

Somewhere in the attic are those memories  
packed away like Christmas decorations.  
Once a year, only once, are you brave enough  
to tug on the drawstring, letting the stairs

unfold, giving you the chance to  
remember your dad.

Not as he was,  
but as you imagined him to be.  
The hero picking you up,  
dusting off your scraped knees,  
kissing boo-boos to make  
pain dissipates.

Suddenly, your head aches as the image  
morphs, degrades into a man with eyes  
filled with rage, towering over you  
with an open hand raised.

His race unrecognizable, but the room  
reminds you of home.  
A place you abandoned long ago.  
You step off the ladder, losing the nerve to grip  
his memory the way he gripped you  
by the neck.

You lift the stairs carefully, not to disturb  
what's left of him in your life.  
You bury the letter further beneath the pile.  
He would never respond anyway.

**I Would Never**

I wish I could test it first,  
see what it's like to jump  
from a fifteen-story window.  
The air tickling my curls,  
forcing my breath back  
into my lungs to savor it.  
It would be my last, after all.  
A sidewalk the last image  
I see, cracks in the foundation.  
My body bashed against concrete,  
blood seeping from my ears  
preventing me from hearing  
screams – mine or someone else's?  
as the world ends  
but goes on around me.

### **Sitting Cross Legged in a Chair Looking Down on a Parking Lot**

Down below me cars rush by like gnats in a summer's breeze. Higher up, tips of leaves float forward and sway back with a delicate cadence. Below the trunks, a woman struts softly down the sidewalk, her eyes fixed on her feet and mine fixed on her. She reaches a cobalt blue hatchback, my chest rises, the door opens. Inside she huffs a heavy sigh that's silent to my ears. She presses the pedal and the speed of the blue blood runs in sync with the tires on the asphalt. The distant sound of D on a piano falls flat, tearing me from my sullen trance. I look back to the palatial window, a blackbird is a speck I try to wipe away. This is why God stays perched on His throne.

**II. Anger**

**Sour Sins**

I don't miss her  
falling around  
stumbling  
to the ground  
scraped knees  
cuts crammed  
with pebbles  
like salty olives  
stuffed  
with bleu cheese.

I don't miss her  
slurred speech  
words plopped  
onto the bar  
*Can I get another?*  
ice cubes  
clink close  
against metal –

shaken  
not stirred.

I don't miss her  
crumbled confidence  
smothered between  
bed sheets strung  
across sweaty skin  
covered in salt like  
the rim of margaritas.

She won't remember.

I miss her  
smile stretching  
ear to ear  
before she sucked  
the sour juice  
of lime, tasted  
tequila on her  
lips, lies licked  
away. She promised  
never again.



**Release Me**

There she goes,  
my sister, my mini-me at  
the ripe age of makeup tutorials  
smudges her youth  
blood red stains on her lips.  
She's 13 going on 30 (not)  
because thieves steal her childhood  
while she dreams beneath the deep  
dark abyss of the night sky  
swallows her dreams whole,  
security blanket strangles her,  
these thieves call themselves  
*Mom and Dad.*

Her soul needs nourishment  
like a growing garden  
sowed in the season  
of apple cider  
and pumpkin spice

but she wilts  
parasitic parents  
snatch her sunlight  
suck life from her.

Why is it *the gift of life*  
if we did not ask for it?

There he goes, my brother,  
my rock – cracked – rolls  
a dollar bill in his hand  
snorts safety for the first time  
in his life, high on the praise  
never given to him by  
*Mom and Dad.*

This boy old enough  
to taste tequila but nothing  
says *Home Sweet Home*  
like canned piss, cold  
as the Rockies  
his tilt-a-whirl head stops  
spinning – a car crash  
nearing its fatal end.  
His *Dad* loved cold beer,  
*Mom* loved miserable men.

That is all.

He's the glue come undone

in their puzzling marriage  
one piece missing  
never found again  
the Pitbull ate it, devouring  
any remnants holding  
*Mom and Dad* together  
*'til death do them part*  
*one big happy family*  
photo torn in two.

Roll it up,  
snort. He's braver  
than I am.

Here I stand, watching them  
wither away, neglected.  
Chains cutting my wrists  
iron ball keeping me anchored  
to the children, my siblings,  
*Mom and Dad* do not want  
anymore than they want  
each other to breathe  
air after rain cleanses  
clouds of hate hovering  
around them.

My brain holds the key  
across the room

out of reach  
impatiently tapping its  
foot at me, arms crossed.

It's  
not  
my  
job  
to fill their shoes  
with my size 8 Chuck Taylors

It's. Not. My. Job.

to save my sister's identity,  
only a notch etched  
in a bed post.

It's  
Not  
My  
Job

to unearth his happiness  
buried beneath white sand  
dunes he's dying to snort

It's not my job  
to piece them together

while I fall apart,  
ashes to ashes  
dust to dust.

### **Not Yet, but Soon**

Not ever, you no longer  
have the power  
to control my breath.  
This breath hitched  
in my throat, begging to escape.

    Pressure  
expanding my chest, threatening  
suffocation  
of what little power I own.

Weighing me  
down  
underneath your thumb, crush  
me  
now,  
please.

You're a child playing God  
as ants race for the hills. I'd run,  
but you ripped one antennae  
and two of my legs. I'm relying on you

to get me home. You guide me  
with a stick, careful not to touch

Me.

I crawl closer to home at a snail's pace;  
a trail of mucous leading  
you directly to me. My soft body skids slowly  
over obstacles;  
what a burden  
existing as such a weak  
creature.

**Rest in Pieces**

To the girl I once knew  
whose curved back put the “C”  
in coward. She’ll no longer hide  
from the truth. Her brown curls matched  
dirt embedded under her nails.  
She dug her own grave  
mistake, six feet below her morals.

**My Fellow Woman**

Vanity is beneath your tattered wings, it does  
not lift you in the same way passion  
does. Do not forget the birth of a soul requires heat --  
the heat of our anger creates swirling steam swimming  
around our toes. Those same toes marched us right  
out of our kitchen aprons into tailored suits. Pain  
is not weakness leaving the body because we gave birth  
to the armies. Those rows of armed assassins would perish  
in the face of our extinction. Mend the tears in the flesh  
of your enemies, we must whip the dust into a cloud  
of confusion. Enshroud those that silenced us,  
or thought they did. Eclipse the minds of those  
who defined us as ignorant. Shackle the hands  
holding us hostage. Seize the eyesight of those  
that temporarily blinded us. They won't see  
what's coming next.



**Cold**

My mother called me cold.

I stared straight ahead into a dark tunnel  
where framed lights reflected off painted pavement.

How do you tell the moon that her sun  
does not look to her for light the same way?

Solemn silence shouted through the phone  
but somewhere over the radio waves was a mother's voice,  
distant concerns spoke like a mourning  
dove's early grievances.

How do I tell her she failed me?

Failed to knead compassion and care into my bones,  
the woman that gave me life?

I can't, so I don't.

I listen,  
listen to the sobbing sounds of her regret  
as I recall a baby girl once stroked  
like a woman before she could read  
the chapters of her personal saga.  
Emotions buried deep beneath  
the foundations of her life.

It's when mother says, "You're just like your father,"  
that I push a silent prayer into the air,  
carried by leaves hanging still in the dead of night.

I imagine frustration permanently pressed  
into his brow. The shadow stretched  
across his face, nearly as dark as his skin.

I thank him for teaching me anger.

That same anger safeguarded me like a blanket  
over me when I shivered at the slightest sting  
of pain. I learned not to feel ashamed, but to feel  
enraged because rage builds a barrier between  
you and the world.

A barrier tightly surrounding you, skin on muscle  
tissue. When I tried to love someone,  
I was damn sure mad at myself for wandering  
into weakness like it was an open door

to a cabin in the woods.

I'm still a frightened child

erasing emotions from the chalkboard.

Wishing mom and dad would protect me,

but I know they won't.

How do I tell them that?

I can't, so I don't.

**What I Didn't Know**

I wish they'd told me the truth,  
when someone stumbles, it's my duty  
to dust their dirty knees off.

I'll spin them twice, check for bloody  
scrapes and bruises like grapes.  
“What do you need from me, stranger?” I'll ask.

They'll demand every last  
stitch piecing together  
the fabric of my life.

Not only will I lay them down  
in *my* bed to rest, insomnia  
never allowed me such courtesy, but I will feed  
them 'til they've gorged on every sweet  
morsel of my hopes.

No one will suffer the devastating earth

quake of pain. Allow me to carry  
that burden on my back like a newborn  
baby I never wanted.

Take my joy, there's enough for two.

Take my home, I enjoy a view.

Take my peace, I can share.

Take my sanity.

It's more than I can bear.

**What He Stole From Me**

It wasn't my innocence,  
another man beat him to it  
when I was five.

Nor was it my memory.  
I remember exactly what happened  
that night on the dark street

when he tried to convince me  
he knew best and there was no  
better than him.

I'll admit his way of convincing  
was new to me. I didn't know throwing  
a girl over his shoulder after she says

"No," was considered romantic.  
Maybe I'm broken. No, I'm not  
broken, but my sense of smell is.

Who knew two cracks to the back  
of the head on concrete would sever  
my sense of smell, my ability to taste.

Now I have to lie when friends ask  
“How is dinner?”  
“Delicious,” I respond as if I know.  
When my pasta needs more salt,  
I cry for added flavor and try  
to savor the remnants of myself with each bite.

I guess I should be thankful  
I’m alive. A few weeks too late,  
the front lobe hemorrhage could have killed me.

I can be thankful and angry.  
My anger is thicker than golden  
syrup drizzled over pancakes.

My favorite food and I can’t taste it.  
Science says taste is linked  
to memory, but all I taste

is burnt bitterness on my tongue.  
He lives life unscathed while I’m reminded  
of what I lost with every bite of spaghetti.

I stab each forkful with precision,  
imagining pasta sauce is blood.  
It's all I have a taste for now.

### **Respect My Decision, I'll Respect Yours**

An empty barstool calls to me.  
This one's just right, not too far  
from the bartender, not too close.  
Drunk men ruin it by engaging  
with me, asking about my life.  
A hint of a slur drawing out  
the length of their words. One asks  
"Do you want kids?" He bristles  
like a frightened feline when I chuckle  
and respond "No." Apparently no man  
will want me if I don't willingly  
lie on my back spread eagle for God  
to see and accept the man's seed.  
Because I prefer my stomach flat  
instead of the shape of the globe  
I'm tainted. By not accepting  
stretch marks like a gift, I'm a monster.  
If I prefer a swimsuit on a breezy  
beach over a hospital gown in a sterile



room, I'm an idiot. This man,  
who doesn't know me from Eve,  
sways side-to-side when he's done  
arguing his point. His stench gives him away.  
He reeks of regret while his own son sits  
at home alone because daddy hates himself  
for knocking up a girl at 20 years old.  
Daddy drinks every night trying to wash  
away the flavor of failure. He enlisted  
hoping Uncle Sam would help support  
his premature family, but he drinks  
and smokes every dollar earned. I pity the fool  
who thinks he's better for contributing  
to a society where women's rights  
are revocable and children are merely  
dollar signs when April showers thunder  
through tax season. Glassy eyes attempt  
to focus on me, maybe he's seeing double.  
Compassion softens my core. Tomorrow  
he'll wake up with his head pounding  
like a jackhammer, wondering how  
he'll feed his child after pissing  
away this month's paycheck  
in the bar urinal. I'll wake up  
when I'm ready, sandwiched  
between two dogs and wonder  
what I'll make for breakfast  
or if I'll go out.

We are not the same.

### III. Bargaining

**A Sinner's Lament**

*"Words are easy, like the wind; Faithful friends are hard to find" -William Shakespeare*

I yearned for what I couldn't have, I was blind  
to my hunger. My passion cost me a true friend.  
Lost in lies I forgot faithful friends are hard to find.

Kisses hidden beneath the night with our fingers intertwined,  
deceit drove this friendship to its end.  
I yearned for what I couldn't have, I was blind.

Truths bashed against the enclosure of my mind,  
I craved attention and refused to bend.  
Lost in lies, I forgot faithful friends are hard to find.

Tape tethered my lips closed; my morals were confined.  
I wandered aimlessly, forced to contend,  
I yearned for what I couldn't have, I was blind.

A deal with the Devil, on the dotted line I signed.  
Your faith and reliance on me I can never mend.

Faithful friends like you are hard to find.

I never deserved grace, you remained kind.

We turned our backs on you and left you behind.

Lost in lies, I forgot faithful friends are hard to find.

I yearned for what I couldn't have, I was blind.

### **Taking Up Space**

Don't ever apologize

for taking up too much

space –

for giving yourself room

to expand                    like your chest

when you take a breath

to say "I'm sorry,"

Stop.

Release that breath,

exhale the weight of guilt pushing

you further into your grave.

You're not done living,

brush off the dirt, stains can be scrubbed away,

but you can't be.

You are not a blemish on the face

of this Earth. You are a beauty mark

decorating a canvas. Apologies to Bob Ross

because there are no happy accidents,

only beautiful mistakes

but you are not one.

Your existence is the kiss in a storm  
when two worlds collide with a clap of thunder,  
making hearts race. You are electrifying.

You are bold enough to walk down the street,  
in all your glorious grace, vibrant like  
a tropical sea.

Be kind, be caring

but take the space you need.

**Invasion**

Claw at my throat,  
tear the skin back,  
layer by layer  
reveal muscle sheath.  
I can't breathe.

Rip my hair  
by the fistfuls  
scratch my scalp  
until it bleeds.  
I can't think.

Scrape my nails across  
my arms, dirt and flesh  
caked beneath my beds.  
The itch I can't scratch.

Who?

What?

Where?

When?

*Why* aren't you fixing *our* problems? They ask me.

Drop what you're doing  
right now. They demand me.

My dreams can wait.

They need me...

My responsibility,

my time,

my energy.

They want my all.

I'm trapped,

encased behind these glass walls

nowhere to hide

I cower in the corner.

I need my space.

**If You Could Be Anything or Anyone, Who or What Would You Be?**

Would you be Spider-Man, scaling  
walls to sights we only hope to see?  
Weave me a dream catcher. Make  
my nightmares fade into the blackness.

Maybe you'd be a firefighter, stronger  
than a hippo protecting those you love.  
Rescue me from this burning house,  
I set it ablaze trying to demolish our past.

You could be an astronaut, a chef,  
anything you want, just don't be *them*.  
Don't be the people who left us stranded  
on this island to fend for ourselves.

Me and you, just us two, too young  
to know our left from our right,  
their rights from their wrongs.  
We loved them still, mom and dad.



I thank them everyday for gifting me with you,  
wrapped in your blanket, decorated with bears and balloons.  
When they put you in my arms, I knew  
you could never be like them, no matter what you do.

### **We're Terrified to Face the Demons Lying in Wait**

i guess you're right  
some days i forget to  
watch the fireflies

we can't do this anymore,  
our embrace has become an eternal winter.

but i do see the orchid revived  
like your kisses on my inner thigh,  
droplets of water absorbed through roots.

i miss the soft green grasses of warm  
spring nights and the butterfly kisses

and the little virgin church girl puckered  
her lips to whisk the monarch on  
while we committed sins in the oak trees

these barren oaks know all my secrets

like the bumblebee knows its lilac

secrets built an unforgiving  
highway between us, the black  
pavement cracking beyond control.

a great rift crept into the crevices  
of my mind and i loved the ecstasy  
i saw your footsteps glisten as i padded  
through dew covered grass in search  
of pale pink peonies, unaware.

darkness deepens before my eyes while  
the light behind me shrinks

fireflies direct a silent orchestra  
in the darkened fields of lilacs and  
peonies-where oak trees keep secrets.

**Wait**

Weight always finds its way  
into written words.

The weight of the world  
on her shoulders  
of his body on hers  
of a feather,  
weighing options

on her back

in a corner where she may not fit.

Wait.

This is the weight we cannot handle.

Numbers knocking the scale over  
expectations.

Walking a thin line between  
a fat chance and slim to none.

No one would know the difference  
from the weight of water  
and the weight of pain  
on her heart.

She waits – beneath weighted  
words, wondering how much  
she did  
or did not  
eat today.

Weigh your words carefully.

Wait your turn,  
for the perfect moment  
to lift the weight off  
your shoulders.

Design a corner of your own, don't wait  
any longer for permission  
to simply exhale  
the weight holding you down.

**Yield to Me**

Even the Great Oak trusts the soil to hold it up right,  
He rests all his undying faith into the depths of the soil.

The soil supports him and he supports many,  
The soil grips to the Oak's trust with no complaint.

But even the soil softens and the Giant Oak falters,  
Only to be caught by the pines.

They support the Great One when he cannot do so himself,  
The Oak trusted the soil and the soil let go.

Eventually the Oak rots into the soil,  
Because in the end two souls belong as one.

**They Call Her Catherine**

I fear the capacity of empty space  
forming a tight maze in my cranium.  
Breakdown US history, grammar  
skills, and general chemistry  
into molecules -- electric impulses  
of bumper car attachments. Learn  
names of those that were unafraid --  
Harriet Tubman  
Rosa Parks  
Mary McLeod Bethune  
Memorize the sound of the mourning  
dove's evening gospel wrapped  
like a noose around my neck  
and I lament  
the monotonous sound of leaves  
falling into place --  
again and again  
There is a floating dock  
where you sit, in the haze of my subconscious longing,

ever so patiently. New knowledge laps  
your toes in curious waves, wondering  
where you are. I was much too young  
in that room stuffed with dead silence.  
I checked my own pulsing veins to see  
if I too could walk barefoot, beyond  
the gloomy glares glued to the floor,  
and into the dew droplets of a new morning.  
A faithful floor deserves better than mudded  
boots trampling its beliefs, testing the strength  
of its foundation. How many virgin acres thrive  
for you to roam freely? Tilt the maze forward,  
back again. Lean with your boat in this stormy sea  
and sail away safely into the light of my memory.

**To You: I Do(not)**

Chivalry cannot be dead if it never existed. Lay your princesses  
of false hopes to rest, locked behind pillars of pretense,  
on the shoulders of a prince. Trek through seas of stares carrying  
the cadence of your hectic heartbeat. Jump through golden hoops  
to touch love's stubbled jaw. Rigid like the iron blade  
held to your fragile throat, slicing "I do" from the tonsils.  
The serpent suffocates your sanctuary of opinions and thoughts  
sealing your identity -- crimson wax cements sins etched on wood pulp.  
The apple never summoned you, the bittersweet tang of its endocarp never  
grazed your gums in the way my teeth will graze the soils of your earth.  
I'll sharpen Excalibur on the whetstone deposited in my grasp by your father.  
From one man to another we give thanks to our Father, who art in Heaven.  
Thy creator of love and love itself. He gives us this day our daily  
control: this Master of the House, this house we call a home. In His name I cultivate  
your gardens burdened by gardenias, daisies, lilies. Utter not a spoken  
word unless spoken to. Language is a gift of man, a gift you shall never receive.



**Virginia Red Clay**

He dreams in pigments of the Mother's sacred  
realms. Dirty beaches speckled with sin,

clouds of smoked bone -- the fog of reality,  
red ochre the color of Autumn.

Stroke the brush across the page,  
inhale gum arabesque  
and promise me whiffs of sobering

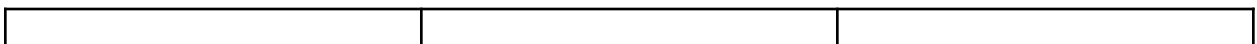
skin -- we can't keep selling our bodies  
to liquid amber. He saw your fingers embed

in my cheeks, river clay in my mouth. I blinked  
the mica from my eye -- he was no longer there.

Grind my teeth down to dust, mortar and pestle  
your mistress.

And take the road less traveled by --  
the terra verte of my dreams.

#### **IV. Depression**



**Out of Position**

Her face twisted not in pain  
but confusion as she teetered  
on the decision to stay  
or go.

Her keys flailed in her hand  
as she searched frantically  
but she didn't know,  
the lights were on  
but no one was home.

*Let me drive you home*

She declined with a wobbly  
head shake – she's an infant  
incapable of holding  
herself upright.

She gets behind the wheel  
concern contorts her face  
again as her brain tries

to defrost the fog clouding  
her eyes.

She opens her eyes wide  
takes a deep breath,  
puts the car in drive  
swerves down the driveway  
onto the interstate.

Sleep sneaks up on her  
whispers a lullaby  
in her ear, her head  
bobs up then down  
like an apple  
in a bucket of water.

She loosens her grip  
the wheel whips right  
into concrete, hub caps  
scrape like wheelsets  
on railroad tracks.

She jolts and jerks  
the wheel, spirals  
like water down a drain,  
the car comes to a stop.

Tears taunted her caramel

eyes now melting in the heat  
of her own fear radiating  
through her.

Four ways flashing,  
she rammed against  
the car door, falling out  
to her hands and knees  
the rain soaked  
brown curls into wet  
noodles on her face.

Through the downpour  
she could see the edge  
of the bridge  
the ink-black night  
calling to her  
to sign the dotted line  
and promise to surrender  
legs find the strength  
to lift her up on her feet  
but refuse to move forward.

She could jump.

**Rehabilitate Me**

My pain is slow-moving  
like a Gila monster  
dragging its scaly  
skin over my exhausted  
muscles. His venom  
propels through my veins  
consumes me like a forest  
fire. I sink deep into sleep  
until my pain transforms  
into a cougar crouched  
behind bushes stalking  
my remains abandoned  
by the Gila monster.  
He picks over what's left:  
bones snap, flesh rips  
until there's nothing left.

**Triggered**

It's okay not to have all  
the answers. To feel trapped  
in a ball pit, unable to stand  
with no ledge to grab. Breathe beneath  
the sea of color – there's still air  
to take in if you allow yourself breath.

That stabbing chest pain is fear  
frazzled with anxiety. Letting go  
of what you cannot change is like floating  
out from below the waves of orange  
and green, your body lifts bit by bit.

First, your shoulders, as the weight  
melts away, going downstream.

Next, your hips raise above the pool,  
your stomach dips like a meniscus.

Drift this way until a helping  
hand saves you from the sea.

**She Is**

She's silent because the world  
is too loud. Voices, music, sirens  
blare in her ear.

She's thoughtful when everyone else  
jumps head over heels into conclusions.

She's saving her energy  
for the fallout of man –  
too tired to focus,  
too sick for medicine.



**Riding with a back seat driver: Anxiety**

Cotton balls speckle blue skies, warm air rushes over the car  
as the wind catches wisps of curls to tickle my cheeks.  
Cars zip by below on the highway as I glide over the bridge above.  
Bass beats drum in my ears sending shockwaves down my skin.  
A stoplight flashes green to red, forcing my hand. The car crawls  
like a turtle toward the light, waiting.  
When suddenly  
the clouds are painted gray  
darkening with anger  
at what? I cannot say.  
Perhaps I should have apologized  
to that friend years ago  
or maybe my boyfriend doesn't  
love me the way the grass loves the rain  
they can't be mad I haven't called  
my dad in weeks,  
so what then?  
My heartbeat quickens  
with the pace of horse hooves  
hitting a dirt track

losing control over a single rock  
snapping its thin leg –  
such a trusting creature  
to think its legs could support  
the weight of its stout structure.  
Sweat beads collect my fear  
in bubbles across my forehead  
running for the hills, up  
and over my cheek bones  
before I can catch them,  
stop them from giving  
me away. I yank  
my sleeves up my arm,  
hair stands straight up  
like soldiers called  
to attention  
ready for battle  
I grip the steering wheel  
and fall forward  
as my hands slip  
down the wheel.  
I park the car.  
They know I'm a failure.  
I can never be  
what I aspired to.  
I'm a fraud  
and someone knows it,  
though I don't know who.

I pinch my eyes shut,

breathe five times

in

and

out

until the muscles in my shoulders loosen,

throwing the ball of stress down the field

out of play.

Warm rays reach for my cheek, and cup my face

like a man in awe of his partner – afraid to lose any time with her.

When I'm ready, I breathe in

one

more

time.

My eyes open lazily, exhaustion stuffs me full.

I can take no more.

I blink once, twice, three times

flushing out the fear

of "What If?"

The light blinks red to green,

putting the car in drive

I pull away from my reverie.

**Face the World**

Wipe the tears from your eyes

Rinse the dirt from your arms

Scrub the blood off your legs

Are you ready to face the world?

Tuck the shame into your back pocket

Brush the remorse through your hair

Pin the lies to your ears

Lace the guilt around your wrist

You're ready to face the world.

**I've Forgiven You, Now It's Time You Forgive Yourself**

I remember the feeling, too  
burning for someone to want you.

It cripples you, brings you to your knees  
leaving you screaming "Please?"

Longing rattles your mind forcing you  
to leave behind the person you fight for

even when your body's sore.

In your frazzled state, you become a danger  
to yourself, willing to end the night with a stranger.

Ignore the stale taste of fermented yeast  
while someone's worshiping you at least.

A moment only lasts as long as it takes  
to eat a short stack of pancakes

in a 24-hour diner, where the waitress is tired  
from her double shift, and the cook is wired.

A place for you two, crammed away in a booth  
where you told her everything, except the truth.

Now you're covering up, saying it was fine  
when you wish *she* was someone else

a tale as old as time.

### **The Difference Between Indifference and Depression**

is a line finer than brittle hair

bound to break under stress.

Depression seeps deep into pores,

indifference is the oily shine in sunlight.

The difference teeters on the scale

between obese and plump

like a plum, too round to find

where one ends and the other begins.

Driving down the highway, the difference

is harder to spot than a road sign hidden

behind trees.

It's knowing the difference between left and right,

but still confusing the two.

How many times do we have to do this?

This dance around the room,

searching for the exit.

This volley back and forth,  
barely missing the net?

The difference is buried beneath  
questions left unanswered.

Yet you somehow manage to smile,  
no one can tell the difference.



**Two Weeks Too Long**

Radio silence stirs  
my thoughts around you  
into a tornado ripping  
memories from their foundation.

I'm not stable on my own  
two feet in these 110-mile  
per hour winds.

Rain storms drown your words  
out, washing you away  
until you dissipate from my vision.

The skies clear and I still feel  
you like humidity making the air  
sticky and moist, the most hated word.

This water cycle of thoughts  
rotates through for two weeks,  
bringing me back to you.

I can smell you in the air,  
feel a breeze unsettle the trees.  
The calm before the storm sweeps  
me off my feet.

### **Nightmares are a Girl's Best Friend**

because they visit her every night,  
no invitation needed.

Terror makes her heart race and be  
still in the same beat.

Treacherous truths wrap their arms around her  
like a weighted blanket, tucking her in tight.

Feverish fears burn her alive,  
but night sweats keep her cool.

When all is said and done, she misses them.  
They're the only ones that call.

**Warning Signs Ignored**

Laughing until tears start to roll,  
unhinged joy.

Eating too much, belly aching  
for a break.

Moving too fast, sitting too still  
outrunning loneliness but hiding in a crowd.

Seeking solace in a rambunctious room  
from screaming thoughts.

Signs so bold and bright,  
you ignore them with delight.

## **V. Acceptance**

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**To Be Like the Sparrow**

A precarious sparrow is perched  
on a narrow branch of an old peach  
tree. Neck yanking with the tick  
of a clock to eye the worm burrowed  
in cool citrus. Green as the leaves,  
famished like the sparrow,  
the worm eats through house  
and home. Only to see the sparrow,  
his beak a needle point  
poised to strike. Wind whispers  
in the sparrow's ear

*Do not fear going forward  
slowly, fear only to stand still.*

### **A Serenity Prayer to the Rain Goddess**

The things we humans can create, can summon  
but we cannot control the rain.

Unexpectedly, she pecks on our windows  
whispering wonders of loss, of love  
soothing our sighs, begging us to listen  
eyes closed, to droplets dropping down  
gutters, into puddles. Trickling off trees  
blades of grass dripping in diamonds.

She cleanses –  
the air of our impurities,  
our skin of its sins,  
our minds of their anxieties.

She is a fresh breath,  
a second chance,  
a clean slate.

Never staying longer than needed,  
only drenching us when we're drowning  
in our sorrows.

Reminding us of what we cannot control.

**“Just Miss You”**

My skin crawls like it's itching  
to escape me, but I won't let it.  
I need something to hold on to.  
Hair raises up on my arms, under  
the command of the person  
who owns those words. A stranger  
to the life I live now, but my body  
reacts instinctively. A primal sense  
trickles through my toes, as I stand  
barefoot in the dew diamond grass,  
it seeps into my blood stream and travels  
to my nose. I smell him.  
He's ripe from the summer sun,  
like a cherry tomato,  
I want to take a bite.  
His pungency is sprinkled  
with a hint of fresh linens,  
and I could cover myself in him.  
I need to hear his husky voice soothe  
my troubles with its velvet touch,

and taste the tang on his tongue.

Lemon heads, pucker up,

but I know I can't.

Instead, I fold the words up neatly

to keep in my back pocket.

### **Learning to Trust What I Know**

*"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." -Maya Angelou*

Learning to trust what I know

is not like riding a bike. I don't remember

who is on my side, who's friend or who's foe.

Betrayal sears my memory, no matter how long ago.

It burns in my chest like an ember,

reminding me of who I clung to when I was low.

Now I'm gun shy like a scared doe

running through the forest in late September

when the leaves crunch and nothing will grow.

I'll never give up as long as the rivers flow

My strength is building, I can feel the tremor

pulse in my veins each day I go.

Over the cliff, I can see below

the person I should trust, refusing to surrender



as she grips the rocks, waiting for my hand to show.

It's time to trust her, it's the least I owe  
to myself; to be my own mentor  
guiding me through each decision, steady and slow.  
Learning to trust myself is harder than you know.

### **Saying Goodbye**

*Dedicated to my Stepmom. May you always be proud of who we've become*

Not a tear slipped down my cheek  
when you left us that week.

It was halfway through November  
and I'll always remember

how agony and fear shattered my dad,  
as time stole the lover he had.

He asked me "How do I find your sister?"  
and begged me to come home, his voice only a whisper.

I played my part, I filled in your shoes  
after your absence left us broken and bruised.

I think of you now when I have a second to spare.  
I close my eyes tight to feel you in the air.

**She's Your Spitting Image**

Melted chocolate eyes and her button nose  
bring your face to mind, and the way her eyebrows  
lift like the wind beneath your wings.

Her skin is golden honey like yours  
if the sun kissed you.

When she smiles, her rose lips  
blossom, revealing pearl white teeth.

Her walnut ringlets spring to life  
with the same bouncing energy you had.

She's your spitting image  
as if you never left.

**Greg**

floats into a room like a bubble bouncing  
toward you. He pops with pleasure  
when you selfishly reach for him.  
He tickles your skin.

Bottom belly laughter makes knees  
weak. Tears flood until the dam  
breaks, washing dirt from cheeks. Vibrations  
hum through the core like the low *om* of meditation.

Greg wafts through morning mania,  
French vanilla permeates the air. Lanky  
limbs embody a hummingbird's grace,  
by a kitchen window flitting from one feeder to the next.

Woven ringlets, like a pig's tail wound too tight,  
douse gardens with summer sprinkles.  
Sunlight shines between cluttered clouds  
cutting diamonds out of damp pavement.

Nighttime falls, sand weighs down  
eyelids. His arms wrap around you like a fuzzy  
blanket, worn from too many cycles.  
A blanket you will always keep.

### **Coming to Terms with Myself**

I made my bed and I still lie on it  
despite the piles of dirt I stir when I roll.  
I befriended my secrets, they no longer shackle  
me to the bed posts. Demons do not haunt  
me when I close my eyes. I root  
my heels into the earth, and thank the Mother  
I'm still standing on this side of Her soil.

**Freedom is Not Free**

Freedom is a ballerina radiated in fluorescent stage lights

She must rise up and hold...

    until she counts eight beats.

Her feet twist like a grapevine, *entrechat*

Then she *chasses* to the right

And *pirouettes* once,

    then twice,

    a third time

    four.

The beauty of her *arabesque* is that of a swan, silently  
floating on pointed toes.

But her elegance is censored, a vixen trapped behind  
plexiglass.

The performance credited to the choreographer.

