

ONLY DEALING WITH

Your dying wish
when we were in no man's land
with worlds bubbling and exploding,
helping each other
over deep water on rocking stones:
no fuss you said
no body on display -
send the carcass to the Crem'.

So, they packed what was left
of you into a zippered bag
the two tall boys with acne
in shiny black suits,
and they drove you quickly away
in a Ford Escort station wagon
so as not to disturb the neighbors.

And as the car turned the corner
the day roared into my head.
'What about my wish!'
Do you hear? I shouldn't have listened,
but no amount of bending from the waist
or touching fingers to the lips
or screaming down the road
will change your mind.

Then the women came with the
meats and the bread.
Death was never about you,
death is never about the dead.
And there are no wishes, do you hear?
no wishes, only dealing with.
After the heart stops
and the moment after that
and the moment after that.

FORWARD FACING, QUIET CARRIAGE

It's time to go. The ticket's in hand,
belongings folded and re-folded,
chosen and released, pared away,
boots pulled on, belt tightened,
old numbers left like marks on a cave wall.

Then the jerk and tug and pull from the platform
and the mirrored meditation as the walls and windows
slip slowly by through fractal faces.

(Something that was a bridge
topped now with a drift of nettle
bramble, a bundle of twigs
where blocks once spanned
is now emptiness;
what was a door, where a journey could begin
is now a window, thick with hanging lace,
spider thread, dust, close-painted latch.)

Time shoehorns the tracks from Cardiff Central
shunting out shadow trains of smoke and smut,
the old iron carriages with the window belts
the tinted sketches of Barry Island or exotic Weston Super Mare.

Through the steam, the blacksmiths and bottle washers
curriers, conductors, telephonists and typesetters
fingers smudged blue from carbon paper
brown from nicotine,
black from ribbon ink
red from cochineal
and the shop girls from the Bon Marche
tired feet in bad shoes before the day's begun
stare sightless out tickets taken

(Something that was a tunnel,
edged with yellow ragwort,
blackthorn and toadflax
is now a singular gaping.

What was a shortcut,
a way through, is now a cave
breathing in but not out,
a weed crammed passage.)

there's no return now,
solitary as tigers
seeing nothing, missing only ourselves,
wearing faces carved by forces of water and fire,
dangerous and unpredictable as air,
we face forward in the quiet carriage
though we know the end of this line
though we know the journey is pitiless.

A POET

If you make that pact of love with beauty,
if you make your poetry in blood
and darkness or by the purling brooks
on the mountains of exile,
if your words are, at the very last,
the only hope for three thousand
voices raised in despair,
then live and die like Pablo Neruda,

child of the patient rain,
emerging from a sea of mud
dying in a sea of mud
books and pages drowned
stanzas suffocated
in a diverted stream;
heart broken, pierced, poisoned,
slain by the blood's own betrayal,
still believing in love's slow power,
washed and burned in a cold jungle

thinking you gave little
when you gave everything;

prepare to bear beauty's full brunt
wrapping you in its rough warmth
tearing out your throat
nailing you to the desert floor
with the dust clouds and
the thunder of approaching hooves;

prepare to bear the bright rose,
the ecstasy of the moon
the silent bones that
will not be made into flutes or drums
with your own mute voice
still naming things in spite of the silence.

When Pablo Neruda died in 1973, just days after the death of his friend President Salvador Allende, Chile was in the grip of a military takeover and his body was laid out in the library of his home. Soldiers diverted a nearby stream, which flooded his house in an attempt to disrupt the funeral. 3,000 people defied the Pinochet government's crackdown by massing together and chanting his poems.

A STRANGER AT THE POETRY CAFE

Through the café window I see them inside
with their folders and coffee cups.
It's going to be serious.
I can tell this by the way the woman
with the sharp black haircut
wields her highlighter
and how the man with the Buddy Holly glasses
arranges the chairs with casual precision.
I hesitate. My pale balloon face floats in reflection:

*I'm in a long line at Metro airport:
The lady in front is small and Chinese,
entirely in black like a perfect bird;
the man behind in orange and green
with matching hat has the posture of a prince.
I'm in the middle wearing beige.
When it's my turn I walk forward. Hello, I say.
The officer says nothing. I am used to California.
I think 'Ah, this is the Midwest!' and smile.
He examines my British passport page by page
like a B movie homicide cop. For a long time.
'Step aside, madam'.
My luggage is brought in and unzipped.
my diary is read and discarded,
my toilet bags are opened,
lingerie old and new spread like seaweed.
The stuff of my life is on the floor
I don't recognize it anymore.*

Inside, the poems are coming out.
Outside, using the mirror window
I take out lipstick and spread Sienna Sunset
careful to blot and wipe the excess off my teeth.
I know this is a shallow act
but sometimes the shallow act is all I have,
the slick slide of color on pale lips
or the reach for meaning
in a few broken lines

LEAVING DETROIT IN APRIL

Once upon a time
I saw you by a turquoise river
stepping into daylight like a lounge singer
pimped and sequined from the night before.
How you hooked me with your songs,
the mad nostalgia of your passion,
your brave children,
poets, dancers, mad philosophers
who with so little to spare
still bring all they have.

Today as I drive away,
trunk packed with lost love and joy,
your attention is elsewhere
winter holding your bruised heart
and I wonder if it's ever goodbye between true loves;
in your old tongue we might say au revoir
or from a deep and ancient place
find another language,
full of breath and sound,
with no word for goodbye.

BUDGET TOURS TO AUSCHWITZ BIRKENAU

The guidebook tells Harriet that:
'In April 1940 a Nazi commission
selected Auschwitz near Krakow for a new camp.
This was because of its ancient trade routes
and excellent modern transport links.'

Krakow is now a party paradise.
Harriet knows this when she arrives by train
for her 18th birthday treat.
She has been studying energy
and the composition of matter.

Travel companies offer Gold Star Excursions:
Auschwitz-Birkenau in the morning
The Salt Mines in the afternoon,
a brief look at the Old Jewish District:
Budget tours start at 20 zlotys.

In Block 5, where the suitcases wear names:
Hanna, Ann, Hedwig, Emma – waisenkind -
Harriet wakes to the pitiless lies
the terrible cold of the furnaces
the luring of children through the metal door.

She conjures the dreadful chemistry
of how her own solid self might
ignite faster, burn brighter, leave less ash
than those motherless bird girls
with no father left to tell the tale.

Her first drink is at the Godiva club.
Wim and Piet buy her apple schnapps.
She dances until 4 am and lets Wim's tongue
explore her lips and teeth while girls in red chiffon
squirm and bend around a pole. A pole!

that's a pun she thinks, as she falls to the floor,
surrounded by all those orphaned angels
lights like halos, feeling the rhythmic rattle of trains
coming closer, over the floorboards of the world.

DELUXE GROUP TOURS TO CAMBODIA AND VIETNAM

From the Mekong River, Lewis phones.
He is floating on an inner tube.
Bank-side bars throw out ropes
and pull you in for beers and noodles, he says,
you can swing out over the water for thrills
thirty feet in the air. Cambodia, he says
is Brilliant and Angkor Wat!

My mind sees only snapshots -
the bloated bodies of water buffalo
in flooded rice paddies, a wall of skulls,
ancient engineering, huge god-faces and napalm.

Lewis calls again, says he took a tuk-tuk
to the sun drenched slaughter fields.
Says the guide smoked hand-rolled
and leaned against the banyan's
grey and naked limbs.
'Here the women, here the men
here the tree, the lush green cassava
where the babies...'
Lewis leaves for Vietnam.

The Ku Chi tunnels give him claustrophobia,
two hundred and fifty kilometers
of claustrophobia and no wonder,
he is nearly two feet taller than the average Viet Cong.

I don't tell him of the other tunnels,
or the forgotten roads and the small girl
running naked with wings of fire.

Lewis is on his way to Hanoi,
'Outstanding Trekking amongst Breathtaking Scenery'
an unwanted itinerary for mothers
on other continents in other times
now remote
as JFK or pterodactyls.

LOVE IS THE REASON IS

Inside this quiet house
where the bowls for soup
and the cups for wine
have been hollowed and stemmed
by a careful hand
a tall stone bottle wears
etched on its shoulders
Love Is the Reason Is
in a circle repeating forever.
So what is poured in
and what is poured out
is always and ever shall be
all that is required
like a band of women
on an ancient vase
hands held feet touching
looking forward looking back
dancing dancing dancing.

ONE MORNING IN DECEMBER

*Mohamed Bouazizi a Tunisian fruit vendor set himself on fire on December 17. 2010
This act set off a revolution across the Arab world.*

Your world is the weight of a melon
the number of oranges in a kilo sack
the difference in price of a peeled
or unpeeled prickly pear,
a simple scale with small brass weights
and a scooped bowl.
Without these the children don't eat
and you pay and pay for what you already own.

But today something shifts
and the cheek will not turn again.
A random cruelty repeated so often,
breaks you so suddenly so utterly
you hunger to call down a cyclone,
a tornado of despair.
And in that swift moment of rage
with all the petrol you can afford
you set yourself on fire
a flame of screaming light.

But how could you know that your mother
would come running
that she would come running into the market place
into the bright catastrophe of your death
raising her hands to shield the sight
dropping to her knees, beating the floor
tearing the scarf and the hair from her head
scooping the flame onto her breast
swallowing the fire

And how could you know that ten thousand mothers
would kneel beside her, and ten thousand fathers
and a hundred thousand children
and more and more gather
to watch you flare and fade
lighting up the dark heart
in all of us,
lighting up
all that's left.

THIRTY THOUSAND YEARS OF WALL ART

Painting in dark places, you mad-capped boys
with brush and torch, can and stick,
one turn away from the cop
or the cave bear, the yellow-eyed wolf;
painting on the black wall, painting on the white wall
in blue for light or red for safety
below the floor of the city where
the lost children are not missed,
or in the one way tunnel,
or the great catacomb,
only a shirt or stained skin against
the suck and sigh of dark waters,
a child's footprint away from the slinking hyena
and the smoke stains;
fueled by fleet ancestors
for the quick tag or tail
under the stalactite
under the riveted girder;
watching until you are what's watched,
running, sweeping your lines, your shapes:
the bold red bear, the waiting owl, the emissary rat,
the nodding rhino, the blue breath-cloud,
the galloping horses, the cluttered alphabets,
the hunched bison, the alien faces, one called hope;
choosing blue, choosing red, choosing white
white over emptiness, white above the abyss,
making your mark not knowing
if it will be five thousand years
or five minutes before
another one comes who knows you,
someone walking on figs or crushed crystal
looking for the signs on the wall,
matching your line, the single line containing
all the bellow and beauty
all the race and rampant joy,
of your own hard love;
reaching through the line, the live line
connecting sinew to sinew, handprint to handprint,
heart to arm, eye to hand,
painting the world,
painting the whole world in dark places.

CONJUGATION

Eventually it all comes down
to the weight of a plum
on wet grass under a tree
resting its plumness
its purple silence
holding its breath until you bend
fold fingers around those misty cheeks
and bite through the skin wall.
Then the shock of sweet
and bright exhalation of juice
as plum bites back
chasing noun into verb
and you are caught
both of you deep
in the business of summer.

AT THIS MOMENT OF ENQUIRY

At this moment of enquiry
aware of the electric grid of friendship
watching the fingers of the water lily
stretch white and lemon above
the green plate of its leaf
hearing the whisper
of water falling on itself
admiring a turtle stretching out
a small back leg
a blunt arrow head
a poignant neck
balancing on the lily pad
like a high-wire flyer,
it occurs to me that now
wealthy as a hummingbird
in a garden of peonies,
could be the perfect moment to begin.

THE FOREST

From the comfort of her conservatory Enid sees a man striding across the large field, which is her back garden. It looks as if he is heading for the forest. At first she dismisses the sight as impossible and continues reading. Then, leaving her newspaper folded next to her coffee cup, she goes out through the sliding glass doors and calls, what are you doing? Hello? He, as if pulled by a dog leash, stops and turns, looks at the house for a long moment then walks directly towards her.

When he is about 30 yards away, she notices his unblinking stare. His pace is so steady and certain she thinks he will walk over her. She has a sudden desire to slip quickly back through the sliding door and close it tightly behind her. This is paranoid, she thinks, it is morning, the sun is just burning the dew off the grass. She can see his footprints following him. His shoes are the type worn to an office. The trousers below the flapping gray raincoat are the charcoal gray stripes of a bank manager or solicitor. She sees all this in a second, this and the long fringe of mild chestnut hair falling across eyes that are not mild at all. In this moment when she really sees his eyes, she changes her mind; she steps quickly through the door, slides it fast behind her, and locks it.

He walks right up to the glass door and stops for the first time looking directly at her or directly into his own reflection; she's not sure which. There is no expression on his face, just the fierce intensity of his eyes. They stand like a couple about to dance separated by a sheet of glass. He stares in. She stares out. He puts a hand up on the glass, fingers spread. She sees a wide palm with long fingers and a highly marked lifeline. What she understands to be the headline dips down into the center of

his palm. She has to fight an urge to match her hand with his, to stand silently with their hands matching on the window. His eyes hold hers. She recognizes that look. She has seen it before in photographs of arctic explorers, those who have returned but have seen too much white.

What, she mouths, what? As if this stranger had spoken and she had not heard. His look is flat and metallic. It is as if a windup toy is stuck against a stone, the forward intention pushing against the fixed feet. What? She shouts this time. Her mouth is dry. She feels a circle of pressure near her right temple. His look has undone her. His fixed gaze has unbuttoned her coat of confidence. It is because he does not see her. She is aware of that now she can see the stains on his shirt, the wrongly buttoned jacket. At some point there must have been a tie. His beard is a shadow on a clean but moist face. Why does she think he has been walking for a long time? Perhaps all night. Until she called to him and changed his trajectory, where was he going? And what was he going to do? There is a spread of moisture now around his hand pressed onto the plate glass and the hand itself is paler as blood is forced from it. He is leaning against the glass, pushing his palm towards her. There has been no change in his expression.

She must call the police. The mobile phone is on the wicker table behind her next to a mug of coffee the morning paper and her reading glasses. She had been reading about a dog abandoned in the woods, taped in a box, pregnant. The cruelty of this act had frightened her, and then she saw him striding across the open field.

In a simple move she turns, picks up the phone and holds it in front of her. Without her glasses she cannot see the numbers but she cannot bear the weakness of

another move. He remains in place. Has he blinked? Is he breathing? She gestures to the phone as if to say, I am calling for help. Do you see how this is?

Without dropping his gaze or his right hand his left hand reaches for the long handle of the sliding door and pulls it sharply. Then again. And again. Then both of his hands are pulling and his face has changed. He is intent on opening the door.

She jabs her fingers at the keypad, knowing where the 9 sits at the bottom right. She jabs it again and again. In the short moment when she looks down at the keypad, the door explodes showering the room with shards and filling it with frigid air. Who are you, she says, who are you? Each second slows to a minute. Everything makes sense now, she thinks, as the glass daggers hit and he climbs through the door, with that terrible look.

Carl feels as if he's waking up after a drugged sleep, but the image that comes first is the shattering of glass and Richard falling into the air outside the office building, his eyes flipped open with final shocking surprise. What came before that arrives slowly, his brain jerkily connecting each past minute with the next. He remembers a scene of shouting and raging, a man walking fast around a desk to grab a collar or arm and yank it hard, punch it, hurt it as much as you can when you don't know how to, when you have never hurt someone before. All politeness has eroded and like flesh melting from a skull, the truth has seeped into the room, turned the air into poison gas and the window into a door. What was it Richard said? Something about the portfolio. The way the portfolio has been damaged. The reason he has lost everything.

Sorry, said Richard. I couldn't tell you before. I told Cynthia first, I felt she should know. She's my sister after all. She needs to know.

But it was my portfolio he said, mine, why did you tell her first? Why?

She's my sister Richard replied again and again.

She wasn't at home last night, or the night before. When did you tell her? When did she know?

A week ago, Richard said.

A week? A Week?

She'd gone with the kids. Who are you? She had said, who are you? Then she wouldn't answer his calls and the portfolio is dead and the house is hers.

And I have nothing and you told her first?

She's my sister she deserved to be told. You're finished, Carl.

That was when he felt the small circle of steel pressing against his temple. There was no gun, only the sensation of metal, cold against his temple, like an old memory or the impression of a dream. But it opened something in him, blew him apart, blew his head open and the next thing the window shattered and Richard was falling.

There was an elevator ride, and a car alarm as he tried to fit the wrong key into his car, then a fast forward into a tunnel and along a freeway and then over a bridge and out into the countryside and miles of curving roads then a sudden swerve of the car and a tire blowing out, and his leaving the car and walking and walking and walking. That was what he wanted to do. To walk forever. Until he heard her voice.

When she was young, between the ages of perhaps 6 and 10, Enid had two recurring dreams. One of them was definitely a dream but the other was more of an impression. In the dream, she was one of perhaps ten people sitting on the side of a hill and the person sitting next to her was a close companion although in the dream she didn't see his face. She knew they were resting after strenuous exercise and that there would be more exertion soon. She also knew they were all terrified. From her position on the hill she could see about a quarter of a mile down the road and in the distance smoke was rising from deep forests. They were heading for that forest; make for the forest, their leader had said. You'll be safe in the forest. A sudden rise of swallows changed the watchful mood into panic and along the road came a jeep followed by a troop of running soldiers. The group rose and tried to flee as machine gun fire sprayed out. A burning pain stopped her and she fell. A voice in her ear whispered, 'Play dead.' She fell onto the ground, her arms and head lying across her beloved's body. Minutes went by as she tried not to breathe or move. Heavy footsteps came closer until she felt a cold shadow creeping across her. 'This one,' a voice ordered. There was a sudden gunshot, the body beneath hers bucked and jerked and hot blood splashed onto her face. She lay there without moving for hours feeling the body beneath hers grow colder and colder.

The second dream that is not a dream, more a sensation, begins with no warning and occurs when she is awake. She feels the metallic circle of a gun barrel pressing into her right temple. With it, comes a wave of defeat. The sudden pressure of the gun barrel links itself to emotions and events indiscriminately. No mood or feeling triggers it; it has become part of her emotional body, like a lover's touch. It forms, presses into her flesh and then fades, leaving a metallic taste in her mouth.

She's never told anyone, because it's so peculiar. Any connection to the unconscious confuses her. She has lived a life of simple order and predictability, the life you would expect from a history professor married to an accountant. Without children or pets and with only a scattering of distant relatives, they have created a careful and comfortable life, which includes books and music, an annual holiday in Italy. Any visit from the unconscious world she ascribes to an imagination inherited from her mother whose short life was lived in the type of feverish activity that Enid despises. Even Daniel's illness is contained inside the safe, rational structure they have built for themselves. But, perhaps because of the dream or some other unexplained influence, Enid has always felt that something extraordinary was in store for her. And just as the window explodes and the man enters, before the slab of pain and the final darkness overwhelms her, she feels a thrill of recognition and thinks, yes, this is it.

There is a woman on the floor. He doesn't know her; he doesn't know the room he's in. He looks at his hands. There is blood running from his fingers, dripping onto the floor, dripping close to the woman who is staring up at him. He knows she is dead without having to check her pulse but he doesn't know how he knows. It's just obvious in the way her jaw has slipped sideways and open. No woman wants to be seen like that, he thinks. Cynthia would never be seen like that. Neither of them liked to be seen first thing in the morning, that's why they had decided on separate bedrooms last year. They could meet with maximum desire, Cynthia in full makeup, then slip away for the darker hours in private. It was a good plan and did a world of good for their sex life. He had originally thought she was being vain, putting attention on things that

shouldn't have that sort of importance in a good marriage. But he went along, because although less frequent because the separate rooms denied the spontaneous moment, the sex, when it did happen was more exciting. She sometimes arrived in the darkness when he least expected it, playing dress up or smelling of cheap perfume and whiskey. It was always different, even the names she called him in orgasm. He didn't mind, he chose the surprising over the regular, which he realized was the way he lived the rest of his life. Inside the framework of a lifestyle regulated by country club and golf meetings he lived with a precipitous anxiety built on speculation and spur of the moment investments. He'd been lucky. It was all a gamble of course, but it had the solid appearance of a planned life. Like so many other lives. They were like so many other marriages. They never asked what would happen if it all came tumbling down. They didn't ask because it was never likely to happen.

The blood is dripping onto his shoes now and pain is beginning to pinch his fingers and arms. He hears a voice calling. It's coming from the upstairs of the house. Enid, calls the voice, Enid? What was that noise? Have you dropped something again? Enid? I need you, Enid. Enid?

He turns and steps back out through the broken door and walks very quickly out across the field making for the forest, not knowing where it leads, leaving the woman lying on the floor and the voice calling from the upper room. If he can only make it into the forest, he thinks, just into the forest. Then he will be safe.

2254 words

DRIVING TO DETROIT

Jan 1st

Happy New Year! I'm on my new laptop (thank you, Jason), having New Year's Day breakfast at a small café on the corner of Grand and Havemeyer in Brooklyn. New resolution – keep a diary and learn Word properly on this new machine. I've landed on the doorstep of my son Jason and his new girlfriend on my way from Florida back to Detroit. They insisted I break my journey and visit them in New York for a 'get to know' visit. So far so good. Got into La Guardia yesterday morning. Haven't offended anyone yet. Touch wood.

Been down to visit my husband's sister in Tampa. She thinks I killed him. I'm a poetry teacher for god's sake. And I was teaching when it happened. I wasn't at home force-feeding fat into his arteries to bring on a stroke. She's insane. I don't know why I went; I'm always trying to please. Seek the elusive approval. I'll never learn, so I had to sit and listen to her interminable rant about the state of things where she was born and where I now live – how can I bear to live there, it's a dangerous, ungrateful city, and now without a man to protect me? I told her I've been doing fine for the last two years since Bill died. And she knows it's not Detroit, it's Ann Arbor. Close but no cigar.

Has it really been only two years? We always say things like, where does the time go? Does time go faster as you age? Of course! We're all clinging onto a spinning ball and Time is our reward for holding on as long as we can. At some point we'll all be hurled

off. Those with the strongest fingers stay on longest. Nothing has changed. I try not to be a figure of melancholy. Widow as victim, sort of thing. I try to be cheery in fact.

People, often strangers – actually mainly strangers - tell me I have great energy. Last night, the MC at the comedy club we went to for New Year's Eve, commented from the stage that he loved my attitude and energy. I was just in the audience! The Mexican woman in Florida who gave me a massage said the same thing. Look, I know that implicit in this remark is the phrase 'for your age'. But how is it my in-laws and my family often ignore me or disregard anything I say? The answer must be that I should treat everyone as if they're strangers, especially my family. Well that's my resolution for today.

The café is getting a little crowded now, with younger folks hovering over their laptops. The windows are streaked with sweat but the sun is shining and there are instructions on the walls about saving a choking victim and also a huge map of the world.

I look at the map and imagine my personal travels as red lines crisscrossing the world. I realize I have been too much in the western hemisphere, and mainly the northern part of that. Then I compare my routes to my grandmother's. Hers would make a miniscule mark in one small place like a furious pen stabbing a blot; mine makes huge wandering scribbles, like the route taken by a trader in impossible times.

Jan 3rd

So many warnings and instructions should be passed from older women to younger women, but we don't do it because we know no attention would be paid. That's why life is falling apart – none of us are paying attention to the obvious. Yesterday I noticed

that my son's girlfriend, a lovely young woman, is obviously suffering with period pains because for the last few days she's relentlessly spread the type of passive aggressive misery only created by surging hormones: making mountains out of the proverbial and doing herself no favors by criticizing her beloved all the time. She smiles with a brittle spread of the lips when she says things like, Jason could you please wash up after dinner *for a change*. I want to shout – go to bed! Stay there until you feel better! Don't speak another word! Instead, I pretend to be enraptured by the emails on my Dell.

Jan 4th

I'm not in a great rush to go home. I haven't told anyone yet, but before the holidays, I tried to modify my mortgage, take my husband's name off the house and reduce the payment. My income is so much less now, and the long years of his illness depleted all the savings. I tried to follow all the advice the bank gave, sending death certificates, filling out forms, sometimes the same form three or four times. Then two things happened. First, I lost my job, second I lost my house. No more home, no more poetry. No more job, no more house. I tried to negotiate, but there's no office you can walk into or person you can meet.

Anyway I wouldn't have been able to afford the monthly payments, unless a miracle happens and 60 year old women are suddenly celebrated and in demand. Such a future is beyond even Asimov or Philip K. Dick's fertile minds – so for the next few weeks it will be Goliath and me. The outcome is already decided – in this non-biblical struggle, the banks always win and I am not just a little person, I'm an insignificant little person. So I'm not rushing to get back. It's pouring, yes, it's pouring!

Jan 5th

Flying is no fun anymore. Of course, there's the embarrassment of the public disrobing and the flatfooted walk through X-Ray machines, but it's more the push and press of it all that gets me. The unwanted intimacy with total strangers.

Have you ever had this happen to you? You've run the security gauntlet and now you're queuing up to get on the plane, in one of those floating corridors that everyone rushes into, and you notice, towering over the crowd, a large person carrying 3 or 4 bags, a walking stick, a few magazines, a venti grandi latte mocha, and possibly a small dog in a carry-kennel. They have glasses on a string around their neck and dark sweat rings under their arms and perhaps in other places; they can't stop talking to everyone in line and you know without a doubt that they'll be seated next to you. (This person can be male or female, I'm not making sexist remarks here, just observing.) Panic stricken, you look around for any other single traveler with whom you can swap boarding passes. But it's not to be and your inexorable journey presses slowly along the gang plank, down the fuselage and straight into the arms of the grinning, sweating monster spilling over into your seat. You know it's going to be the worst journey ever and then it gets worse, no food, no room, dirty bathroom, stuck on the runway, etc., etc., That's what air travel is for me now and that's why I've decided to drive to Detroit instead of fly.

Drive, yes.

I like driving.

Jan 6th

Today, I had emails from the following:

1. A group email from the Transformational Breathing Group inviting me to various events upcoming on their calendar. For \$400 I can spend a weekend deep breathing with strangers at the Holiday Inn.
2. An editorial by Paul Krugman about the disappearing dollar, sent by truth-out.org. I haven't even opened this as I'm already too depressed by my own vanished dollars.
3. An offer from my mortgage company to refinance my house.
4. Another offer from the mortgage company to refinance my house
5. And another.
6. A forwarded email from my old University about a free course: Media and Popular Culture in Everyday Life. "Come along and take a closer look at how the media influences our everyday lives. Can we imagine life without the radio, newspapers and Internet? Do we believe everything we read and hear? This taster course will consider how significant the media is in today's society." Are they serious? Such a level of naivety is dangerous in a university. They sent it bi-lingually. I suppose that's better than sub-lingually.
7. A short note from an old colleague at my old job postponing lunch indefinitely.
8. A Google alert about my son's book and a review by a man who sounds demented. His web site is called; 'enlarge my penis and my mind will follow'. I understand nothing.
9. A quick, bright note from a friend in California who has the capacity to rebound from adversity with a glow in her voice, even by email. She overwhelms me. She thinks you can cure yourself of cancer by thinking right and tapping your face.

Jan 7th

Yesterday two things: Talked to my son about the book he's working on at the moment, it's called 4 Horse Women of the Apocalypse – I wonder why? I must ask him where he gets his inspiration. He says he's serious about the new girlfriend, thinks she's the one. I am so selfish, all I can think of is that I'm losing him. I say nothing of course. They say women with sons will spend their later years alone. Sons gravitate to the wife's family in most cases. Too late to wish for a daughter now.

Then I went out with a few old friends who remember me when I was a young, ambitious writer with a talent for the classics, not a jaded widow in her sixties teaching poetry on the fly. Anyway, we saw a show, had a few drinks. For the first time in months I felt alive and wonderful – it helps to have people around you who think you're great! Note to self: always surround yourself with people who think you're great!

Son and girlfriend had terrible argument. I am the reason, apparently, why she's in a bad mood all the time.

Rented a car.

Jan 8

Traveling by car from New York to Detroit takes about 12 hours and includes a seemingly endless stretch of wooded highway through Pennsylvania. Doing this journey in the winter and at night on your own is asking for trouble. The road can disappear or take on the look of a bridge stretching over massed clouds and dark waters. Without going into the reasons why I need to make this journey at night, I'll just say that it's a trip I've done before and I know how difficult it is to do alone. That's why I put this announcement on Craig's List: "Need a lift to Detroit? Keep me awake

and I'll take you there free on Friday. Call Joan at..." My son was furious. The conversation went something like this:

Are you crazy? People have been killed answering ads on Craig's List.

Well, I'm not going to kill anyone, so everything's fine.

No! I mean you might get killed – who knows who will answer? It could be a lunatic or a murderer.

As long as they keep me awake through Pennsylvania I don't care.

Mo-om!

Jan 11

He sounded really nice on the phone. I know enough about dialects to recognize him as black and from Brooklyn. 'Got family back there in Motown. Gotta see them,' he said. We arranged to meet under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass at 5PM when he finished his shift at the machine shop. My son insisted on waiting with me to check him out. I was embarrassed by this attention. I'm not an old lady here, I said. I do have my faculties about me and I'm a pretty good judge of character. Anyway, if you're into killing people, there are easier ways to do it than on a road trip to Detroit!

He was so easy to spot sauntering through the crowd, puffer jacket and shiny blue basketball shirt with a black stretchy scarf on his head. I think they are called doo rags. He's older than I thought, perhaps in his thirties? As he approached, he kept his face turned to one side as if not interested in what was in front of him, his thin legs ferrying him along in huge white shoes. A black rucksack was slung over one shoulder and balanced lightly in his right hand, 'KEATS, the Poems', in that

ubiquitous slim Penguin volume with the green cover. Well, I just about fell at his feet. I was grateful for his sensitivity.

When he asked on the phone if he could contribute to the gas, I said no, just bring some music. He did. Do you like Hip Hop, he asked. Not really, I said. Do you like jazz? Of course, I said. Then I'm going to teach you something about how Jazz made Hip Hop, he said.

My son glowered at me as I pulled away from the curb with D'Wayne fully present and correct in the passenger seat.

We set off through the Lincoln tunnel and out into New Jersey with the beat from the CD player beating like a big heart and, according to D'Wayne, full of drums, loops and dubs; and his warm deep voice talking.

Hip hop, he began, started in the old jazz clubs like the Cotton Club, when guys in the band would make up rhyming toasts to friends in the audience; and then kids who were bus boys or beggars heard these rhymes and they began to imitate them on the street corner, call and response style; then over the years the rhyming got more elaborate and a stolen beat got added – from anything they could grab from a cassette or a tape - and a new form gradually evolved.

D'Wayne lists off a few of the pioneers. I might have the spelling wrong! DJ Kool Herc, Grand Wizard Theodore; (two of the main original hip hop djs then) then, Outafrika Bambaataa, Sugar Hill gang, Melle Mel, Grand Master Flash and the furious five...all these great rhymes – second to none /champion; imitator/dominator/allow me to create it later – they were apparently spectacular when you heard them live; and for every one he mentioned he played me a piece of their music. I was entranced. Listen

to this, he said, getting more and more excited as he lead me through this history. Big Daddy Kane, Kool G Rap - both around 17 years old at the time living in the projects in Brooklyn. What would I love about them if I loved them? I asked.

They're the new poets, he said. Hip hop's just a way for anyone without money to say something or send a message over a beat; they started by using someone else's beat to back the rhyme - whatever they could get hold of - like the intro of Queens 'We Will Rock You' - just a way to let the words out; create, create, dominate, don't imitate. Look, he said, this isn't new. I'm not saying anything new.

Who are the best, I ask.

The best rappers ever? You would have to include: Big Daddy Kane, Rakim, Kool G Rap and later Biggie Smalls and of course Tupac. Some of it went down the wrong road, he said, but we're not talking about that tonight.

We only stopped for quick bathroom breaks or to buy coffee and candy bars, fruit and snacks. Occasionally, he'd turn the music off and we'd sit in silence. It was so comfortable. Or we'd tell each other the most embarrassing things we'd ever done. At one point we just started laughing and couldn't stop - I think because of the sheer joy of sharing the journey. About half way, at least 30 minutes before the border with Ohio, he took the scarf off his head and a great wiry mop of kinky hair burst into life, releasing a cloud of coconut and patchouli.

Who are the best poets ever, he asked. Oh, I said, that's a very subjective question. Be subjective, he said, so I recited Sonnet 29, The Red Wheelbarrow and The Windhover, I didn't feel embarrassed or pretentious at all. He repeated some of the lines, asked me to say the poems again and again, rolling the rhymes on his tongue, laughing out loud

at the audacity of – ‘as a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow bend,’ making it sound like treacle and ice cream in his mouth. Then I spoke the Roethke piece, I Knew A Woman. I can’t even describe the quietness in the car from Clintonville to Youngstown. I missed the freeway and went on the 76 by mistake and had to go through Akron.

It was hard to finish that journey. That’s all I can say.

Feb 1^s

Goodbye house. It’s gone. No longer mine. My stuff is in storage. The only thing I own is my car. A word occurs: nomad. I’ll be a nomad for a while. The job market is as bad as the housing market so not knowing what to do next, I decide to head out. Chicago, Whitefish Montana, Boulder Colorado, Eureka California, Provo Utah. I have friends or family in these places. I’m heading out to visit them. Get on the road; get on the blue highways, the back roads before they’ve all disappeared. Before I’ve disappeared.

By the time D’Wayne and I get to the Rockies, the passes will be open and we can get to Montana. There’s a place he’s always wanted to go – Grasshopper glacier. So we’re going. Why not?

You only really need an email address these days to stay in touch.

I like driving.

2933 words

CROSSING THE LINES

In a small room of the Utopia Spa in Northville, I lay face down under a towel while the woman set warm stones on my back then moved purposefully around the room, arranging, placing, preparing and not speaking a word.

‘Josephine,’ I broke the silence. ‘I came here before. A few months ago. Do you remember?’

‘Yes of course,’ she said with the protracted r and sibilant s of the Middle East.

‘You are the very best,’ I said.

‘Yes, of course,’ she repeated.

Synthetic music seeped in, the kind played in mortuaries and spas.

‘Turn,’ she said.

Now seated near my head she began laying anti-ageing liquid into the lines on my face. ‘I remember,’ she said, ‘you British.’

‘That’s right,’ I said, ‘and you? From Armenia, right?’

‘Armenian.’ She fingered my frown lines and sun-squint furrows.

Then for a while it was just our breathing and the mawkish music.

The silence, as she worked her fingers into my face and neck, was not exactly cold but it was definitely empty. She wasn’t attempting to fill it. On my previous visit Josephine had been chatty and welcoming like a newly discovered relative in a foreign country, all touches and smiles of recognition. It’s always been my way to rush in and fill up a vacuum or a void, but this time, I didn’t.

The day had started off-kilter; nothing major, just the nick of an elbow on the doorway, the stub of a toe on the familiar step, a feeling that something wrong is happening just beyond reach, like next door or down the road or in the places of power. Nothing exact, just a feeling, but I’d nearly cancelled the facial, not wanting

human intimacy on one of those days when life feels as if it's hiding behind the door or collecting in dark clumps in the corners of the eyes. For the last two months, since my mother died, I'd had the unnerving internal image of myself walking the crust of the earth with Time flowing round me and past me, like a liquid wind. Solitary trudging. I'd been in California, Michigan, New York, London and they'd seemed like empty rooms off a corridor. Sometimes, just before going to sleep, I'd had the sensation of being caught up in constant movement, like in a cartoon, where the background scenery rolls by but the crazy rabbit runs on and on in the same spot.

I gave up. I concentrated on her fingers, and tried to be present and aware, to fight the ennui. 'Where in Armenia?' I asked.

Her fingers bored into my head, 'Who knows,' she said, 'Somewhere in Mesopotamia, in the ruins of no man's land between Iraq, Turkey, Iran. Who cares.' She traced lines on my cheeks with a strong finger. There was a smell of geraniums. 'Here a line, there a line. This is my village. This is the line the English mapmaker drew. Today we have a country. Tomorrow – no country. Rubbed out. Finished. Phfft!' Her finger stabbed my temple in the place where I've always imagined you could place a gun barrel.

'Oh,' I said, 'I'm so sorry.'

She painted a thick gel mask onto my face and covered my eyes with slices of cucumber and a cool face cloth. Then she moved away. I could feel her presence as it moved down the left side of my body and I had a desire to curl up into a ball and protect my soft underbelly. I repeated, 'I'm so sorry.' Then I couldn't believe what I said next. 'So many terrible things have happened because of bad maps, don't you think?'

There was silence. Then a snort. 'What I mean to say,' I continued, 'is that the Balkans, India and Pakistan, Ireland, the Middle East – maybe all those terrible wars were because of careless cartography? You know, sheer ignorance of the local landscape?'

She picked up my left arm and began scrubbing down it with a very abrasive cloth. Then at last she spoke, her voice low and harsh. 'My grandmother not stop crying her whole life even if she escaped the genocide with small daughter under her

skirts. Cry her whole life. Saw beloved brother beheaded in front of her. Mother rammed with bayonet. Never forget. She could never forget.'

The skin where she scrubbed was painful so I flinched and cried out. She dropped that arm and moved quickly around the table to the other arm, which she seized with force, pulling it up into the air.

'No rest from memories, no rest ever.' she said as she scrubbed the arm with ferocious determination. 'When we come to America, we come like ghosts, carrying ghosts on our backs. As little girl I hear the stories. I hear about our land and our people and the brutalities. Nana tell me everything. She pass it all to me.'

I began to think that my instinct to stay at home had been correct. There are days when staying horizontal is the wisest choice because anything attempted vertically will be inappropriate or foolish or make someone upset. Surely I'm old enough now to recognize the symptoms, aren't I? There are days when I am like a beacon for the aggression of the world. Don't ask me why. Something about me emits a 'She can take it' chemical. Recently, standing on a small quiet street in Venice California, waiting for a friend to pick me up, I watched an old man on a bike cycle past me. Without stopping or even looking at me closely he shouted, 'Fuck off, lady!'

I think I must look like a woman who knows what she's doing. There's definitely something of a black and white war movie about me; the woman who knits the balaclava helmets and rolls the bandages while the bombs keep dropping. And because of early elocution lessons I sound like oysters whilst I'm really winkles and cockles. What I'm saying is that strangers often wrongly categorize me especially on days like these.

'It's always about money,' she continued, 'the maps, the genocide, all about money. English only ever wanted money. My Nana told me English they did nothing while we were all being murdered, nothing.'

I shifted my spine, and tried to pull down my arm, which was really hurting from her rubbing. 'When was this?' I asked, 'How long ago?'

'April twenty four, nineteen fifteen, the day the terror began. April twenty four. Nineteen fifteen.'

Today was April 24, two thousand and eleven.

One part of me wanted to shout, 'I am an ignorant and stupid white woman and I'm so sorry for your pain and your mother's pain and your grandmother's. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Sorry Nana, sorry Josephine, sorry for everything that has ever happened to you that I could possibly have been responsible for or my ancestors could have been responsible for. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.' Another part of me wanted to say, 'Hold on! I'm Welsh, not English! We were raped and pillaged too. My Dad died at 38 in a mine-shaft explosion. We never got compensation. I'm one of the victims too!' But I said nothing.

She dropped my arm. I had the sense of her resolving something in her mind. 'I tell you story my Nana tell me,' she said coming back to my head. She peeled off the mask and as she told the story, she cleansed, wiped and nourished my skin with unguents and aromatic oils, paying close attention to the lines around my mouth and eyes.

'There was a poor man, a very poor man,' she began, 'who believed God had cursed him with bad luck. All his friends had good luck, he thought. But God had cursed him with much bad luck, so one day he set off to find his good luck. He took his donkey and he walked miles and miles until he came to the rocky shore of the ocean.

'Well,' says the man to his donkey, 'I'm not ever going to find my good luck when such a huge obstacle is in my path. We should turn back now and forget it.' Suddenly a beautiful whale rises up from the deep and says, 'Where are you going?' and the man replies, 'I'm trying to get across the ocean to the other side to find my good luck, but I might as well give up.'

The whale flaps her flippers and says, 'Jump on my back and I'll give you a ride. I can take you to the other side.' After a moment to think, the man leaves his donkey on the rocks, jumps on the whale's back and she takes him across the ocean to the distant shore. Just before the whale deposits him on the beach, she speaks to him again, 'I have a favour to ask.'

'I knew it,' says the man, 'there's no free ride. Especially for the likes of me who has no good luck.'

The whale says, 'I did you a favour, now I ask you to do the same.'

'Why?' says the man, 'I didn't ask you to bring me here. You offered. I don't owe you anything.'

'Well,' says the whale, 'I thought you could help me. Years ago when I was diving deep into the coral reef where there are galleons wrecked full of jewels and gold, a huge diamond got stuck in my forehead and it bothers me. Could you please take it out? As a favour to me?'

'As I said,' the man replies, 'you offered, I owe you nothing.'

So the whale leaves the man on the beach and swims away with the huge diamond still stuck in its forehead.

The man then walks for a long time until he comes to a great city. 'Oh no,' he thinks, 'another obstacle.' At the gates of the city a pair of very strong looking guards block his way. 'Halt,' they say, 'Who are you and what do you want?'

The man says, 'I am on a journey to find my good luck. A whale brought me across the ocean and now I am here and I just need to get to the other side of the city to continue my search.'

'Wait here,' say the guards, 'we must ask our leader about this.' And they go inside the gates for a long time. When they come back, the man is almost asleep, but they pull him to his feet. 'Come,' they say, 'Our King, when he heard your story, is excited to meet you.' and they escort him through the streets of the city to a dazzling white palace.

Inside the palace is a gorgeous room full of art and exquisite furniture. Inside the room, a table is set with an array of luscious food and crystal pitchers full of ruby red pomegranate juice. The king who is sitting on a huge throne stands up and dismisses the guards. The man and the king are alone in the room together. 'Please, before you tell me your story, eat what ever you like,' says the King and the man sits down and starts to eat and eat and eat. When the King sees that the man has had his fill, he says, 'Is it true that you are from a distant land and is it true that a whale brought you across the ocean and deposited you on our shores?'

'Yes, that is true,' says the man, patting his cheeks with a silk napkin, 'I am traveling the world searching for my good luck.'

The king, at that moment, stands up and begins to take off all his clothes, revealing that 'he' is in fact 'she', an extraordinarily beautiful woman with long shining hair and skin as soft as a baby lamb. 'Stay here with me,' she pleads, 'I have been living in disguise since the death of my brother, and you can live with me here in luxury, and we will sleep in a bed with pillars of gold and cushions made from rose petals.'

The man, who is quite embarrassed at this show of feminine ardor, says,

'Oh no, I couldn't possibly be cooped up here. I need my freedom. How else will I find my good fortune? I really cannot stay here. Oh no. Please put your clothes back on.'

The beautiful woman puts her clothes back on and in her disguise as the King, calls the guards to the room, and tells them to escort the man to the other side of the city. The man thanks her and in a very short time is on his way out of the other side of the city and into a deep forest. But it is not a forest; it is a jungle, a dense, dark jungle.

The man, who is feeling a bit sleepy now after all the food and the walking, lies down under a tree. Just as he's about to close his eyes, he hears a rustling sound and through the leaves appears a large lion. 'Hello,' says the lion, 'what a surprise to find you here. What are you doing?'

'I am a man cursed by God with bad luck, so I am on a journey,' says the man, 'to find my good luck.'

'What a coincidence,' says the lion, 'I am doing the same.' And with no more talking, the lion ate the man right up.

Josephine moved from her seat and placed warmed towels over my neck and chest. There was a long silence as the story shifted and turned in the room with us.

"Ah," I say at last, "that's a good story. Your Nana tells very good stories."

'Indeed,' she said.

I sat up on the table and swung my legs around so I could see her.

She finished folding towels and cleaning away the cotton balls and the small bottles of her trade then turned and smiled, a smile that contained both of us, that acknowledged both of us as part of the same clan, women with children and grandchildren, women with so much life behind, so little life in front. We smiled at each other across that ancient desert of unspoken dreams, faltered wishes, unspeakable joys, unspeakable tragedies. Across all the lines.

2395 words

BLIND DATE WITH WILLIAM

I'm sitting on the wall outside the pub nursing a shandy. It's all dusky air and late summer with the sort of sky you see in fairy book illustrations, you know, one bright star as the sun's going down and dead quiet except for a cow in the distance. I'm really enjoying a bit of peace and the chance to take my shoes off. Shouldn't have bought the buggers. Who can walk in things like this? You can stand in them but you can't walk, and even standing is agony after about 10 minutes. But I want to look nice especially tonight. It's a blind date set up by my brother. I shouldn't worry but I like to look my best and apparently this chap used to live here and he knows the place so I don't want to let the team down, do I? Anyway, I'm just taking a moment for my toes to have a breather and the way I'm sitting? I just hope no one comes round the corner for an eye full.

Suddenly, Etta comes banging out of the pub. She's got a glass in her hand and she's moving really fast and her face is a picture. Stupid git, she says, in what you might call a piercing whisper, what a stupid git. And she throws herself down onto the grass next to the wall, not dropping an iota of her drink, mind you.

Phew! she says, that was a close one!

She's talking to herself she is.

Look at me, she says, I'm shaking! Get a grip would you? I can't believe it! And she knocks back the whole glass of wine.

Then she sees me. Oh my god, hello Sal, she says, is that you? Haven't seen you for ages! Oh god, sorry to ask but can you go get me another? I can't go back in there. Please, please pretty please? Tell Mike it's on my tab, ok?

I leave my shoes. Cab? I say. No, Merlot she says. I go into the snug and Mike comes round from the saloon and takes my order. Etta with you? he asks. Yeah, I say, and she told me to tab it, ok? She went out of here like the proverbial, he says. She alright? Dunno, I say. I carry a Merlot for her and a refresher for me back outside. She's still sitting on the grass and she's laughing. What the hell is up with you, I ask, giving her the glass

O Sal, she says, I can't believe it. I'm a grown woman with kids, for god's sake! Seein' him's done this! I can't believe it. One minute I'm leaning against the bar, quiet as a mouse not bothering no one then he walks in and wham! It's just all come flooding back!

What you talking' about, Ett? You're not making sense you aren't.

It's Billy, she says as if I should know. Billy Morgan. I must've looked dense because she repeats Billy, Billy who lived up the terraces. O no, she says, right, I forgot you didn't move here till we finished school. He'd a been gone by then. She lets out a small wail. Oh I can't bear it, she says.

What is it, I ask.

Oh, Sal, Billy, Billy Morgan just come into the pub. I haven't seen him for bloody years and look at me. She stretches out her arm so I can see she's shaking.

I sit down next to her on the grass and say, what's got you, Ett?

She takes a large gulp of wine and says, him and me and everything we did together. Him and me.

What did you do, Ett?

Oh we were the best of friends, she says, with one of those proud faces like you make when you talk about your kids. Then she's off and babbling so fast she doesn't even stop for a gulp of Merlot.

It was always Billy and me, she says, everyone knew it. I can't remember when it began. We always knew each other. He lived just up the road, see? Oh, we were wild! Especially in the summers. It's like we were running all summer. We never sat still. I had no curfew coz I had 4 brothers. But his mother Barbara, divorced she was, she would come home and cook for them and they all had to sit down to eat. Together.

She says it like it's something holy. And there's a short pause while she drinks. Then she's off again.

I never knew nothing like that. There was Dawn, Stewart, Billy, Ecky and Oggy. Billy's mother would call them all in at 10 every night. I could stay out as long as I liked. Billy and me, we were unbeatable. Everybody said. Bikes, pogo sticks, we were the best. When we ran, we were the fastest. We could knock on doors and take off like the wind. They'd never know it was us. We were the fastest in the town; we could do rounders, roller-skates, swimming, tide pooling, climbing! We were the top knobs. Though I could run faster than him. And jump higher. But he was better at darts and throwing stones. Billy called me Henry, never Henrietta or Etta like my friends call me. It was always Billy and Henry.

She made little hooks in the air with her fingers to denote special.

People would shout after us. There they go! I never wore a skirt, I was a terrible tomboy. My Ma despaired.

Ettie laughed in a sad way and as the light softened her face I could see how pretty she must have been all those years ago, before Ivor Williams happened to her. Before drink was the only comfort. She went on.

Now mind this is years ago, she says, when we was kids. Him and me, we were tight as ticks. He had that orangey rough sort of hair and eyes like bright blue sea, and his knees would get all chapped. And he laughed at all my jokes. God.

She drinks again, and looks up at me.

Can you believe this? she says.

No I say.

Then she's off again. One Saturday night, she says, there was a dance in the memorial hall. I think I was just 13 or 14. He was a year younger. We had a flagon and a Pony in the toilet then we all walked up to the back of the Chapel. There was like a stone pool there, with no water in it. It was where they did their outdoor baptisms. But if you laid down in it no one could see you. We were lying in this baptism trough looking up at the stars, giggling from the Babycham I should think and he leaned over and kissed me. I remember gasping. It took my breath away. It was lovely. And he kissed me again. It was like an angel kissed me, god's truth. Soft and feathery and warm.

She sighs a deep old sigh, and stays in the memory for a long while. Then she changes tone. But then, she says, he tried to put his hands down my trousers and I said, 'No Billy!' I didn't like that. I said 'I'm not ready for this.' I was too young, see? I knew I didn't want that then. I knew it. I don't care what anyone says about me or the

way I was then or the way I am now, I knew it wasn't right to do it with him, not then. We were both too young. It was different back then. But, oh, she whispers, oh.

She gets really quiet and leans back against the wall. A light is turned on upstairs in the pub and I can see she's crying.

What happened, I say.

Monday morning in the bus on the way to school, I'm sitting in the front with Di and Sian and Anthony Jones shouts from the back of the bus,

'Oi, Etta, so you wouldn't let Billy feel you up on Saturday, eh?' Well, that was it. It was finished between us. I said to Billy, 'How could you tell anyone? It was private. Private. Just the two of us.'

She's quiet again and takes another gulp of wine. That was it, she says, I was so hurt and too proud to back down. He came to the door everyday for weeks and weeks. 'Are you coming out?' he'd shout. But it was finished. It wasn't what he did. It's because he told. It was private.

She shivers. I was 14, only 14, she says. Billy was 13. Then his family moved away. Not far. He came back once, on my wedding day. I was 17 then and pregnant. He took me to one side and he said you should have married me, not Ivor Williams. But I did, god help me, and he married Amanda Pritchard from Ferryport and they moved away and I haven't seen him since. Until just now that is. Oh My God.

She's silent now and both of us sit listening to the night and to our own breath and the distant sounds of glasses and laughter from inside the pub.

I sneak a glance at my watch and think it'll be getting busier in the saloon bar now, and he'll be looking for me. I said I'd meet him 5 minutes ago. As I move to get up, Etta turns to me.

My life, she says, how different it would've been. Stupid git. Such a stupid git.

I pat her arm, kiss her on the cheek and get up. The shoes are hard to put on and I balance myself against the wall. I just need to get through to the saloon and out the front door with William before she comes back in.

1650 Words

ON PATARA BEACH

The beach is longer and wilder than Lois expected. It takes almost five minutes for the three of them to walk to the eastern end, the place where the current is strong enough to take their bodies out into the Mediterranean. The smell of rosemary and lavender is an unexpected comfort and the pale sand shifts easily under her sandals. Nick drops the blue canvas bag next to a rock like a head emerging from the hot ground and gazes at the sea. Paula moves to his side and the two of them stand together looking out across the water.

He's still watching us, Lois hears her mother say.

He'll stop, says Nick.

Shouldn't we wait until he leaves, she asks.

They look back along the beach to where a small boy is busily creating a fortress in the wet sand; beyond him are a few families in bright swim gear on beach chairs and a small café serving beer and snacks.

Perhaps, he says, and then bends forwards, takes the wine bottle from the bag and presents it to Paula like jewels on a pillow. Ready?

Paula nods. Nick pours wine into two alabaster goblets. Lois watches as they drink one then two whole drafts each.

Are you all right, Nick asks Lois.

She shakes her head, and Nick reaches out to touch her dark curls, now streaked with pewter and silver.

How quickly we age, he says, how quickly we lose ourselves.

Now we're here, Lois begins, moving closer to him. The rest of the sentence hangs in the air like a small bird.

This last moment will ask everything from all of us, says Paula.

So sorry, Lois, my darling. Nick puts his hand on her shoulder. What frightens you most?

Losing you forever.

Impossible.

The waves curl and froth, beating in and out with slow breaths.

I wonder if my grandfather ever stood on this beach, says Nick.

I'm certain, Paula says, and brought your grandmother here to dream about America. Not much has changed. I expect they'd both be shocked by the presence of the amphitheater and the portal. Never dreaming they were right under their feet. Paula laughs. He must have thought the history of his people had been carried into the sea, washed away by the river, eroded by the sand.

Her small body suddenly begins to shake. Nick puts his arms out and pulls his wife close into his chest. Lois stares at her father's profile above her mother's white hair. It is the profile you might see on an ancient coin, noble and imperious. Age has been gentle with him, she thinks, in so many other ways it has been gentle.

Nick and Paula stand for a long time holding each other and looking into the sea. Lois eventually walks into their embrace and the three of them hold each other as

if in a slow dance. She can feel the skeletons of their bodies, like simple teepees of bamboo and willow twig. The waves will carry them away, she thinks, break them apart and carry them away.

Don't be afraid, says Nick. No daughter more loved, no parents more fortunate.

His words are beginning to slur. Lois tightens her grip.

You have to take a walk now, darling, says Paula. The drink is working. Take the path up the cliff. See what's on the other side. I expect the view will be wonderful.

Remember, don't come back for at least half an hour, says Nick, and don't forget to take the camera.

I don't want you to suffer.

We won't, darling, that's why we're doing this, remember? Long painful suffering or this. This is our choice. Paula pauses and hugs Lois very hard then releases her quickly. We've talked enough. Please. Paula kisses her and moves away.

'There is a time for many words, and there is also a time for sleep,' Nick says.

Lois takes a few steps from them, and then turns. She watches her parents standing together under the bleak blue sky and thinks; this image will be in my brain forever, until I too am dead and gone. Whenever I think of Turkey or the Mediterranean, read Homer, smell rosemary or even see a boy building sand castles on a beach, this image will arise. I will never be free of this.

She walks quickly towards the path leading up onto the cliff, away from her parents, away from the people she loves more than life. At the bottom of the path she takes a quick snapshot of them walking away from the blue bag and down the yellow

sand to the waves. As they step into the foam, their white hair seems to shoot light. They feel her attention and her father looks round and waves her away. The two of them continue their walk into the sea.

Lois hurries up the cliff path, tears staining the front of her linen shirt. She pushes herself to walk faster than her sandals will allow, and the right one snaps open releasing her foot into the sharp stones of the path cutting two of her toes. There is a slice of pain and a spurt of blood. Lois lets out a howl, the pain releasing her grief. This is wrong, she thinks, this should not be happening. How could I have agreed to this?

They had discussed this for more than a year, planned it carefully in such detail, imagining every possible outcome or obstacle, even this one: that she might lose courage, that she might turn back and run screaming down the beach, shouting for the lifeguard, for the police, for someone to save them. They mused that in theory she could let them make their choice and go, but in practice she could be undone by the dreadful awareness of her own loss. She remembers her mother's simple, 'Please, if you love me let me go.' 'I don't want to put a plastic bag over my head in a sordid hotel room' Nick had said. 'I want to choose the landscape of my departure. The means of my leaving.'

When she reaches the top of the cliff she sees the curve of the headland and the rocks sticking out of the sea like old teeth. Behind her she can only see the furthest part of the beach, the café and the lifeguard hut. To stop running back down the path she sits and wraps her arms around her legs, inspecting the cuts on her toes. It is impossible not to imagine what must be happening to them at this very moment. Her mother's thin legs and small feet being pulled now by the current, her delicate arms

waving helplessly like strands of pale kelp. In the last moment when the water fills her nose and she takes that unnatural breath in, against all instincts, will she panic? Might another option present itself as the pictures begin to flash in front of her eyes? Might one of the resident sea turtles, gently scoop her onto his back and carry her to shore? Might her father's arms, so used as they have been to making long swimming strokes, act in spite of his will and strike out for land? So much of our life is instinct, she thinks. Whatever we will, whatever we plan, so much of it is only instinct.

She stands up suddenly certain, and with a pang of joy thinks, that if she runs back along the path and down onto Patara beach, she will see them struggling back to shore, their hair flat and white with foam, their frail bodies jerking like marionettes through the waves, but laughing and holding each other. We tried, they will say, we tried but we couldn't sink. Can you believe it? We couldn't sink! She takes off her other sandal and starts to run, her heart kicking and plunging, a middle-aged woman with a stained shirt and bleeding feet, stumbling down the path.

She was crying before they went in to swim, says the boy. His eyes are bright with the importance of what he has witnessed. She walked up the cliff and they went in to swim. She was crying. I saw her with these. He holds up a pair of plastic binoculars.

Why were you watching them, asks the policeman.

The old man looked like my grandpa, the boy says. I thought he was my grandpa.

Why didn't you swim with them, the policeman asks her. Weren't you afraid for them at their age?

My great grandparents were from Patara, she says. Being here was a dream for my father. His name was Nicholas, after Saint Nicholas, who was also born here, right? Santa Claus, right? She is babbling now. Patron saint of children, sailors and travelers. Poets, thieves and the falsely accused.

She says it as if it has been learned by rote, as if she is reading it off a board.

The current is particular here, says the policeman, their bodies may not be found for a while. I'm sorry. We have boats out searching. She nods. They had been drinking, he says. Was that normal for them to have wine before swimming?

'The wine urges me on,' she quotes, 'the bewitching wine...'

He looks at her. Homer, she says. My mother was a classics scholar.

She twists the handkerchief in her lap.

No it was not normal. Not normal at all.

1583 words

ANOTHER THING THAT HAPPENED IN 1957

"It began when I was twelve. Everything in your life that's really important starts from something trivial." DONALD HALL

In the sidecar of the motorbike, Minnie clings to the cross bar, her thin body dipping and bobbing behind the Perspex screen. They are on the A48. When she tells her friends that she's 'done' the A48 on a motorbike, they stare in awe. The A48! It's magic. Like saying Broadway or Oxford Street. There's glamour in a road name especially one that points west.

Minnie shuts her eyes against the wind and fights to keep her stomach in one place, knowing that if she concentrates hard enough she can visualize the journey she and her Dad are making. She conjures the map of Wales in her mind; it's like the profile of a pig with Anglesey perched like a party hat on its ear and the snout foraging the Irish Sea. She imagines them speeding out of the fat cheek chops of the Valleys, along the jawline of Neath and Swansea, avoiding the sultry lip of the Gower and out onto lower Pembrokeshire's pig nose.

In Minnie's mind-map, the A48 runs past a pirate compass, thick black marks of trails and treasure and the heraldic badges of local barons. Then the Sunbeam 1000 moves westward, leaving the A48 for secretive B roads and lanes, from one badge to another, one family to another, from the cozy to the Spartan, from the town to the country, from the known to the mysterious, from the safe to the dangerous. Minnie loves and hates this journey; it happens every summer whether she likes it or not.

As soon as they are off the main roads, she can make her eyes into slits and see the blurred high sided lanes, the snapping cow parsley, the stalks of stinging nettles swiping at the side car, the swirling clouds of insects. The countryside hurls itself at

her in chunks; blasts of hot air then swift pools of shade and eventually a thrilling taste of salt-spiced air. The bike speeds across the winding bridge over the salt marsh, past a small gypsy boy waving a red scarf, past a small herd of Jersey cows swaying and sauntering from one field to another: Minnie's eyes saucer at such a close up view of lurching flanks. Her Dad's white shirt billows like a spinnaker as the village comes into view: the row of white council houses, the squat Norman church and the shimmer in the sky from the huge sea beyond the hill. They roar past the clock tower, the Ebenezer Chapel and the lone petrol pump standing like a veteran of the crusades. You made it on one tank, she shouts.

Almost at the end of the village, the bike whines and coughs to a halt outside a pink washed cottage. They park in the shade of a hawthorn tree by a hedge of bramble, honeysuckle and sloe. Minnie's ears feel clamped by sea-washed shells.

As she leans back to gaze up at the sky, body still wobbling from the motion, her father slides off the bike and across the lane to greet two women, wearing identical wraparound aprons, headscarves and boots, who are waiting in a small garden of snapdragons and foxgloves. The older woman has a wiry build and a russet face like a ploughed field, the younger one, is built like a cairn and balances a baby on the plateau of her hips. Not another baby, thinks Minnie, watching her father stretch his broad back and shake the dust from his dark hair. Made it in two and a half, he says proudly. Don't rush death, says his mother. Keep still, you little bugger, says the younger woman to the squirming child on her hip. Nice to see you too, Kathleen, says Len to his sister as he disappears through the darkness of the front door.

Minnie hauls herself out of the sidecar, dragging her bag and books from the nook behind the seat. She totters through the door on sailor's legs, smelling the

lavender floor wax, which only just covers deeper smells of mildew and burned meat. The small hallway is pea green with hand-painted sprays of daisies and butterflies flying in varnished formation. Minnie feels a wash of longing, remembering how she and her mother painted these on the only summer they spent here together. She is not quite sure why her mother doesn't come with her any more. Working is the excuse she gives. Just working. She leaves the bag and books on the floor and opens one of the doors from the hall. Inside is a small sitting room dominated by a spitting, steaming, black hob fireplace and featuring a mahogany sideboard, barnacled with ashtrays from New Quay, tiny porcelain shoes from Pwllhelli, framed postcards of camels and palm trees with Greetings from Suez in hot red letters. The walls are papered in ivy and hung with calendars from the Royal Wedding and the Coronation and tinted photographs of bleak faced women in black. A new photo of a baby in a fur hood with rabbit ears draws her attention. I'll be lucky to get a moment to myself, she thinks gloomily.

The scullery door is open; her grandfather is bent over a bowl of bread crusts soaked in tea with a glum looking black and white sheep dog gazing up hungrily from the stone floor. At the other end of the long table, her father is happily watching his mother sawing bread with a huge knife and his sister Kathleen setting out plates of thick ham slices and onions. Minnie is a stick figure in the doorway.

Hello Gramps, hello Gran, hello Kathleen.

Her voice is lost in the clashing of plates.

Hello Milo, she says to the dog.

Milo's dead, that's Cracker, says Gramps.

Suppose you'll be wanting tea, says her grandmother.

Please, she smiles.

Get yourself a plate then, orders Kathleen.

Minnie chooses a welsh cake, a slice of seed cake and a pat from the brilliant circle of yellow, weeping, butter.

You look like a scarecrow, skin and bones says Gran without looking.

Sorry, says Minnie as the cake turns to ashes in her mouth. The ocean, still echoing in her ears, is pierced with the cries of drowning sailors.

Where am I sleeping, she asks.

My room till your Dad goes back tomorrow, says Kathleen.

Minnie wants to lasso the sun above the horizon and keep it there.

All right Len, asks Gramps.

Fine ta, says Len.

The sun sneaks onto the oil-clothed table in curdled beams. Minnie imagines distant cities where women stand together smoking cigarettes, choosing fruit from market barrows listening to jukebox music from the open door of a café.

As soon as everyone is distracted by food, she slides out under the table, creeps into the hallway, and picks up her bag. The other door from the hallway is decorated with a line of painted gladioli. She clicks the latch and enters. The room smells of old bibles and in the murky dimness she can just make out the squat harmonium with its

bared yellow teeth and the shape of a large black pram with its hood up. There is also a small photograph of her mother, looking up to the camera, her hair in blond waves, smiling. It's a black and white image but Minnie sees it in color; the pale blue eyes, the yellow hair. She presses one of the harmonium keys, releasing an ancient breathy moan and creating a stirring inside the pram. Making quickly for the stairs, which are built inside a cupboard, she mounts the steep linoleum feeling her way in darkness.

The upstairs rooms slope like the inside of a pyramid and the warm trapped air is pungent with the vinegar smell of chamber pots. She takes a dark green book with brushed gold lettering from her bag and lies down on the nearest bed letting out a long breath, letting the speed of the road die away. She relaxes the muscles of her eyes and unfocuses them in the ritual of finding old favorite faces hidden in the rose patterned wallpaper. Nero is easy to find, so are Edward the Seventh and Magwitch, then there is her mother in a hat like a meringue next to a cherub with puffed cheeks. Minnie reaches out a hand to touch the image. Voices and plates crash from below.

"Three years!" I cried, "Were you ship wrecked?"

"Nay mate," said he, "Marooned."

I had heard the word, and knew it stood for a horrible kind of punishment common enough among the buccaneers, in which the offender is put ashore with a little powder and shot and left behind on some desolate and distant island.

"Marooned three years gone," he continued, "and lived on goats since then and berries and oysters."

When she wakes it is to the sound of the motorbike spluttering into life. Minnie hides her book and races down the stairs and out into the garden where the growl of the bike is receding and Gran is pulling limp leaves off the hollyhocks.

He's gone, she says.

But he wasn't going until tomorrow, he promised, says Minnie.

Got your mother to blame for that, says Gran.

She takes a large pitcher from the top of the garden wall and hands a smaller one to Minnie and together they step through the gate and out onto the lane.

Purple night clouds loom from the west as they walk silently together in the dimming light, the wind beginning to hum in the telegraph wires, blackberries on its breath. Ahead, planted solid by the road is a small farmhouse with lamplight sneaking through floral curtained windows and next to it, a stone barn. As they approach, a dog growls and she can hear cows clatter and jitter.

Jinx, shouts Gran.

There is a scrape of a wooden stool on flagstones then the flap of boots.

Right-o, a voice calls, come on in then.

Minnie follows Gran into the dark barn where, in a circle of lamplight, a tall thin woman stirs a bucket of creamy milk. Behind her, huffing and shifting, the cows are bulky shadows.

So you're here Min old girl, says Jinx. Is it those damned holidays again, Reen? She fills the small pitcher with thick yellow milk and hands it to Minnie.

Wait outside if you don't like spiders, says Jinx. They're coming out for the night, right Reen?

Minnie backs out of the barn holding the warm pitcher to her chest and listens to their voices rise and fall on the evening air.

Rain tonight, Gran says, mushrooms tomorrow?

With bells on, says Jinx.

Minnie can smell the rain that will fall before morning and taste the firm earthy flesh of mushroom. Just outside the village, is a large field with an ordinance beacon set on top of a rocky tumuli; this field, she knows, is the best for mushrooms. She likes to sit on top of the white stone plinth, watching the early sun spark the sea and the islands into light, hearing the seagulls shout for place on the air currents, watching Gran and Jinx turn over the great white saucers of mushroom.

Who can blame him, Gran says, she's never there, doesn't know her place, a man has needs, so it's not his fault.

Well, says Jinx, shame really.

There is a clank of metal in the barn. Minnie holds her breath as an owl hoots and swoops over the field. Something's about to die, she thinks.

We're off, says Gran and Minnie hurries behind her down the lane feeling the looming darkness breathing at her neck.

Just then the noise of horses topped the rise, and four or five riders came in sight in the moonlight and swept at full gallop down the slope.

At this Pew saw his error, turned with a scream, and ran straight for the ditch, into which he rolled. But he was on his feet again in a second and made another dash, now utterly bewildered, right under the nearest of the coming horses.

Next day, Minnie is trying to get the baby out of the pram and into the house for tea, with a toddler kicking at her shins when a bright loud voice shouts,

Not yours I hope! No, can't be yours, no tits!

Dot, cries Minnie, delighted to see her friend leaning against the garden wall.

Down for the summer then? asks Dot.

Shh, begs Minnie. She puts the baby back into the pram and plops the toddler under the hollyhocks with a small green painted toy truck.

Your mam with you? asks Dot.

No, she's working. Going to come down later if she can.

Been left to the demon Kathleen and her evil brood, snorts Dot.

She'll hear, panics Minnie.

Gloomy old cow, says Dot, what's she got to be so miserable about anyway. Minnie feels a twinge of guilt and pleasure. Dot leans her bike against the wall and moves to the gate. Leaning over it, her black curls falling down into her eyes she says, did you hear about Brenda?

What? asks Minnie, thinking that every year she has to renegotiate friendships with the locals.

In the hospital in Milford, says Dot, threw herself off the cliff at Wick.

Minnie is stunned. Dot warms to the news.

Tried to kill herself, fell a hundred feet; dog saved her, barked like hell till Ronnie Codd got off his tractor and looked over the edge; her Mam and Dad are furious.

Why'd she do it? asks Minnie.

She is reeling inside at this news. Brenda is a quiet dumpy girl with pink plastic national health glasses.

Buggered if I know, says Dot.

They are silent for a moment thinking about this. A door slams inside the cottage and the toddler lets out a bark. Dot prepares for a fast getaway.

See you, she shouts, and cycles off down the lane singing Volare o o o o in many octaves very loudly.

Was that Dot Davies, asks Gran flinging the D's like daggers.

I passed the 11 plus, says Minnie, did Dad tell you? One year early. I'm going to the Grammar. She holds the quiet toddler before her like an offering.

Failed grade three piano I heard, says Gran.

While the others are inside having tea, Minnie creeps into the small shed where a butter churn stands draped in a grey sheet under a chair hanging from the rafters.

She has made a small nest in the far corner with a pile of moth-eaten curtains and hidden beneath the dusty folds are her book and her butterscotch drops. She opens the cover of her book and thinks about Brenda. What could have been in her mind as she jumped off the cliff? Did she fall into the sea or the sand or the rocks? Was she afraid? Brenda is transformed into an epic figure braving unheard of pain and suffering. Minnie can't wait to see her again. She imagines Brenda as the noble Klara and herself as her loyal friend Heidi, holding her hand, bringing her comfort.

Later in the back garden, as the evening sun is gilding the chicken coop, Minnie smooths the velvet petals of a dahlia, plucking up courage to use the outhouse which stands like a gothic hovel at the end of the garden path, its spider ruled interior masked by a tin door. She can feel the onset of the chronic constipation she always gets here and comes up with a four phased plan; first, make sure no-one is in the garden; second, run fast into the unlit interior with eyes shut; third, sit down, holding breath and prop ghastly door open with foot because most of the spiders live behind the door; and four, get out of there as fast as possible. The only problem with this plan thinks Minnie is that the square box of Dettol toilet paper is also behind the door. She screws up her eyes in practice for the run and then Gramps emerges from the outhouse carrying the whole toilet, which is a large oil drum with a rubber tire around its rim. It is brimming full. Better go behind the runner beans, he says, pouring the smelly stew into a hole near the potato patch. Did you think I couldn't see you?

She squats in the sharp green smell of the beans and watches as the scullery window becomes a beacon in the dusk, the oil lamps throwing up gargoyle shadows on the walls. Gran and Kathleen are arguing. Kathleen is directing traffic with her beefy arms. Minnie can hear them shouting. Gran is saying,

Don't be daft Kathleen, baptism won't change anything; look after your babies and wait for Donald to get back.

I'm washing away the past, says Kathleen.

I'll put you under the pump if you like, says Gran, bloody show offs those bloody Baptists.

Kathleen bellows, men can't be trusted I know that, and leaves the room.

After a few moments of dense silence, the harmonium wheezes into life and Guide Me O'er Thou Great Jehovah slams into the night followed by the indignant crying of a baby.

The red glare of the torch, lighting up the interior of the block-house, showed me the worst of my apprehensions realized. The pirates were in possession of the house and stores: there was the cask of cognac, there were the pork and bread, as before, and what tenfold increased my horror, not a sign of any prisoner. I could only judge that all had perished, and my heart smote me sorely that I had not been there to perish with them...They had set me with my back against the wall; and I stood there, looking Silver in the face, pluckily enough, I hope, to all appearances, but with black despair in my heart.

Minnie sits among the runner beans for a long time, until the moon comes up and the shadows of the garden force her inside. This is when her life changes. Books will save me, she thinks suddenly and with total certainty. Books will save my life.

3052 words

THE LITTLE SHACKS OF LIFE¹

*How finding the right form at the right time forwards
the creative writing process*

Recently I picked up the latest New Yorker magazine and a sentence written by the contemporary African American novelist, Edward P. Jones, sang out to me: “*It is amazing the little shacks of life we can build when it seems that so much is at stake.*” That phrase, ‘the little shacks of life’, refers to love letters he wrote as a teenager and even though the love affair soon faded, the writing of the letters had woken a different passion. He realized that he loved writing, that he was indeed ‘a writer’ and his life path was set.

When I read that sentence, I recognized that it perfectly described how I feel about the poetry and prose in this dissertation, (and the other pieces I have written over the last year and a half that didn’t make the cut). My own ‘little shacks’ - the poetry and short prose I’ve been working on - became not just the correct vehicles at the right time for my own growth as a writer, they really did become small temporary shelters at a time when there was so much at stake in my own life.

The decision to write short prose and poetry for this dissertation was a surprise. Reading poetry has always been an important part of my life, but I never imagined I could aspire to write it. When I began the work of the Masters Degree in 2010, I was a novice writer and my experience with creative writing had been minimal and solely of a theatrical nature. So I assumed that dramatic or script writing would take my interest because of all the years spent working in theatre and film. But fortunately the Trinity St. David’s creative writing course demands that each student master four

¹ Edward P. Jones, American novelist and short story writer, quoted in The NEW YORKER Magazine Summer Fiction Issue, June 13 & 20 2011 p.94

different forms of creative writing, so I was encouraged to step outside my comfort zone and explore alternatives. Immediately the prose and poetry modules allowed for a more instant and yet rigorous means of expression that definitely appealed to me and also had the effect of nurturing and expanding my creative life. Even though I enjoyed the script writing modules, prose and poetry were what seemed necessary to find my own voice and create a practice of writing. Happily, this choice has also led to new understandings about art in the service of personal growth. In the introduction to her book about memoir, Natalie Goldberg, author of the seminal book about becoming a writer *WRITING DOWN THE BONES*, writes, “*We have an intuition that it (writing) can save us. Writing is the act of reaching across the abyss of isolation to share and reflect...Often without realizing it, we are on a quest, a search for meaning.*”²

At first, pessimistically, I was concerned that my attraction to the short form might be because it appealed to my natural ‘butterfly brain’. But, choosing short form prose and verse was not an easy way out at all; it was just an easier means to access thought and feeling at this moment in my life. I also realized that poems and prose, like any other form, take as long as they take and gestation time alters accordingly.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO WRITE A POEM?³ by Pamela Beasant

MacCaig, wily old master,
trotted out the unvarying reply:
two fags.

It always drew a laugh.

He meant

² Goldberg, Natalie, *OLD FRIEND FROM FAR AWAY, The Practice of Writing Memoir*, (2007), FP A division of Simon & Schuster p.xxi

³ Beasant, Pamela, from *LITERARY LANDSCAPES* (2008) as printed in Am Baile, an online Scottish literary resource: http://www.ambaile.org.uk/en/item/item_audio.jsp?item_id=85743

don't over or underplay the art.
Don't make it god.

But his eyes -
Sulven pools smarting in a Rose St pub -
betrayed the devotion of a life spent
watching, smoking,
filling volumes.

A poem and a short story take different times to mature and I have found great satisfaction in working on different poems and short stories at the same time, going back and forth, putting one away to 'rise', or knocking another down, like bread dough; putting one in for its final bake, or discarding another for lack of leavening. The shift in intensity, the variety of mood as I worked between one piece and another lead to two things: I real joy in the variety and a more ruthless approach when it became necessary to edit the work. I began to love picking a poem up and putting a short story down, knowing each had further to go in its stage of development.

Writing in these forms also satisfied my innate need, (and the reason why I was involved in theatre for so many years), to explore many worlds, inhabit many minds; in the way an actor moves from play to play, inhabiting many characters in a lifetime of performances. So I felt at home with poetry and short prose sensing my own natural proclivity for these shorter forms.

Another purpose for these forms and a lucid description of their energy was presented to me whilst driving up the 605 Freeway in Los Angeles, listening to National Public Radio's Fresh Air program. Dave Davies was interviewing the brilliant novelist and short story writer Jim Shepard. * Shepard was speaking about his love of the short story form and what he said riveted me:

*“I am drawn more to the guerilla warfare nature of the short story, where you have a very small force and you get in quickly then you get out again.”*⁴

That description was delightfully new to me. But, he also talked of the overlap between the circle created by the writer’s interest and the circle created by the subject matter. He explained that in the sliver of overlap between the two is where the writer’s compassion lies. Hearing this, I realized that my life long desire to inhabit and explore different events and characters, previously expressed through the medium of theatre, could be fueled by a more personal need. Exploring characters or events through research and writing would allow me to make sense of the world, fall in love with it over and over again. It is a cliché that we write to make sense of the world, but I had no idea that the clarity of research and writing could have anything to do with building compassion. The truth of this has fuelled all my attempts at creation and allowed me to examine the themes of my life, or the subjects that naturally arise in the scope of my curiosity. Then the chosen forms, by their very nature, allowed the building of small places of habitation, bringing a sense of harmony into the chaos of the everyday. Edward P. Jones referred to them as shacks for a reason, not mansions or semi-detached bungalows but shacks, the knocked together necessary shelter of a nomad or a temporary settler on a long journey.

The building of these ‘shacks’ for emotional purposes has a complimentary and practical use, which fits well with my philosophical understanding of how natural rhythms work in our life and culture. Most of my life I have worked in a four to six

*Shepard, Jim, American novelist, short story writer and professor at William’s College, author of *YOU THINK THAT’S BAD*, a collection of short stories, and the novel *PROJECT X*

⁴ From an interview with Jim Shepard on NPR’s *FRESH AIR* June 20 2011
<http://www.npr.org/2011/06/20/137151021/you-think-thats-bad-fiction-of-the-unfamiliar>

week cycle of creative action, demanded by the rehearsal of a play. It is a cycle that is comfortable to me, with a definite beginning, middle and end. How could this natural cycle be used now in my life as a writer? Would I need to learn a whole new cycle of action? My theatre work had been founded on an understanding of energy learned from the great director Peter Brook. Years ago I had the privilege of working with him in Paris where he had formed an international theatre company. In the company was a Japanese actor who had been thoroughly trained in both Noh and Kabuki theatre. One day he explained to all of us the difference between Western and Eastern notions of energy flow in theatre and music. The difference for example between the Western beginning, middle and end, or in theatre terms, Act One, Act Two, and Act Three and the Japanese concept of natural rhythmic progression, Jo Ha Kyu.

“Six hundred years ago, the Japanese Noh master, Zeami, said ‘Every phenomenon in the universe develops itself through a certain progression. Even the cry of a bird and the noise of an insect follow this progression. It is called Jo, Ha, Kyu.’”⁵

This can be roughly translated as, "Beginning, Break, Rapid", where JO = beginning, HA = Break and KYU = rapid end. And in terms of time lengths then you could compare the cycle to the time on a clock face, where JO might be 12noon to 5pm, HA would be 5pm to 11.55pm, and KYU would be the last few minutes before midnight. In Jo Ha Kyu, all actions or efforts should begin slowly, speed up, and then end swiftly. And as soon as the end arrives, a new cycle (Jo) begins. This makes for a circular not a linear energy, implying that the end is only the beginning of a new cycle; or that the beginning of something new has grown out of something that has ended.

⁵ Oida, Yoshi, with Lorna Marshall, THE INVISIBLE ACTOR, (1997) Routledge. Inc USA ISBN 0-87830-079-1 p.30

“This rhythm of Jo Ha Kyu is quite different from the Western idea of beginning, middle and end, since the latter tends to produce a series of ‘steps’ rather than a smooth acceleration. In addition, the concept of beginning, middle, and end usually only refers to the overall dramatic structure of the play, while Jo, Ha, Kyu is used to support every moment of a performance as well as its structure...even a single gesture such as the raising of an arm will commence at a certain speed and end at a slightly faster rhythm...the sense of onward progression is never absent.”⁶

This rhythm has always made sense to me. I recognize its explanation because it applies perfectly to the natural cycle of a theatre rehearsal period, and also to the performance itself. When the curtain rises on a good play, you get the sense of intruding into a world where an important event has just occurred and that event is the reason for the action you are about to see. Also, at the end of a play, you can often sense the beginning of another. Shakespeare is brilliant at this. At the end of *MACBETH*, you sense a whole other play, starring Malcolm, even if it hasn't been written. This sense of new beginnings hot on the heels of the ending is very obvious in the History Plays. You only have to think of the end of Henry 6 part 3 to vault forward into the inevitability of Richard 3.

Another way to define Jo Ha Kyu is like this:

JO is “serene introduction”, HA is “extended and detailed narrative information” and KYU is “an ending which is surprisingly sudden”.⁷

In my estimation, a perfect example of a poem that exemplifies Jo Ha Kyu is Rainer Maria Rilke's,

ARCHAIC TORSO OF APOLLO translated by Stephen Mitchell

We cannot know his legendary head

⁶ Ohida, *INVISIBLE ACTOR*, Lorna Marshall, p.31

⁷ More information about Jo Ha Kyu can be found at many web sites like this one:
http://www.renkureckoner.co.uk/A_Dynamic_Pattern.htm

*with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,*

*gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.*

*Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:*

*would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.*

The sudden ending of 'You must change your life,' is absolute, yet there is the sense then of how the life might change after the poem, after the poet has been totally affected by the vitality of the statue.

I have used the notion of JoHaKyu in all my creative work and now, dissecting the movement of my own prose pieces and many of my poems, I see that this progression is definitely visible. There is often a slow build, a messy middle and an end that comes quickly. Then there is the possibility of another poem or story beginning where each leaves off. In fact, a whole new story could be said to have happened before any of the poems or stories begin. A descriptive example of Jo Ha Kyu in action can be seen in a sonnet I wrote on the death of my husband. The literal end of a life has come so quickly that it is almost unseen – or death came while the poet is distracted, but its finality is undisputed:

SONNET

I have seen the light leave and the breath stop

*I have seen the muscles of his dear face
give up all fight and the clenched fist open
like a flower. This leaving and stopping
happened right there, right in front of my eyes
that swift and final sleight of hand happened
as I stroked the soft wing of his hair
as I watched the slow light flicker and leave.
But it was as if I had turned away
to lose all track of what still held me there
and watch through the closed window of his room
a small bird on a bough suddenly sing,
bounce upward through the tall and greenest tree
and fly away not even looking back.*

An example of Jo Ha Kyu in the prose selections might be the tale of the woman who likes to drive in DRIVING TO DETROIT. By saying ‘yes’ to the unknown, her life has altered. At the end of the story we only need to know that she is still moving, but now in a totally different direction, to understand that another cycle of Jo Ha Kyu has begun. After a slow build, and a long central section about things other than herself, there is a swift decision and ending of that part of her life.

“So we’re going. Why not? You only really need an email address these days to stay in touch. I like driving.”

THE POEMS

As presented here, the poems are in an emotional order, telling, as a collection, a larger story that means something to me and hopefully also represents an arc of

discovery in the reader. The whole group clearly represents the journey I have been on and am still on, both as a new writer and as a human being.

Franz Kafka once said about a book, that it “...*should be an axe to break up the frozen sea within us.*”⁸ I think that could apply to poetry also. (If not to the reading of a poem, then definitely to the writing of one.) My poems have followed my life experience this year, clarifying or accentuating the choices or issues presented to me as I struggle to express my response to the world.

Because writing is a newly chosen path for me, I have paid close attention to the advice of more experienced writers, reading as much poetry as possible - ancient, modern, romantic and realistic and at the same time wrestling with the reason to write poetry at all, which is expressed so clearly by Rita Dove,

*“A poet struggles to render into words that which is unsayable--the ineffable, that which is deeper than language--in the hopes that whatever words make the final cut will, in turn, strike the reader speechless.”*⁹

Finding the courage to write in the headlights of great poetry has been a daunting test. If that’s not difficult on its own, then finding the time to put the poem in the drawer, so the distance for good editing and shaping can occur, has been even more of a challenge, given the time frame of this dissertation. So I proffer them as works in the process of becoming poems!

Very few of the poems in the enclosed collection are based on ancient forms, (only unrhymed pentameter sonnets feature here). Of course, I set myself the task of reading about and applying many of the forms described in books like Babette

⁸ Kafka, Franz, as quoted in THE ART OF THE SHORT STORY, Gioia, Dana and Gwyn, R.S (2006), Pearson Longman, p.163 ISBN 0-321-33722-0

⁹ Poet at the Dance: Rita Dove in Conversation by [Rita Dove](#) interviewed by Robert McDowell, Poets.org <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16653>

Deutsch's POETRY HANDBOOK, knowing that it is vital to understand available forms; but most of my poems are free verse, because I am still struggling to find my subject and what drives me to write. Linda Gregg, American poet and winner of the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, describes my present predicament in an article called, THE ART OF FINDING:

*"I respond most to what is found out about the heart and spirit, what we can hear through the language. Best of all, of course, is when the language and other means of poetry combine with the meaning to make us experience what we understand. We are most likely to find this union by starting with the insides of the poem rather than with its surface, with the content rather than with the packaging. Too often in workshops and classrooms there is a concentration on the poem's garments instead of its life's blood."*¹⁰

My understanding of prosody is as yet more instinctive than learned, and although a lifetime experience with Shakespeare's texts have given me a gut response to the rhythm and weight of a line, my academic understanding is still limited. In trying villanelles and pantoums, my rhyming is clumsy:

PANTOUM ON WOMEN FRIENDS
*Today I was thinking of friends
How lucky I am to have them
How their fearless beauty transcends
Inspiration: how can I show them*

*How lucky I am to know them
Those women who answer my call
Inspiration: how can I show them
How much I adore them all*

*These women who answer my call
Like goddesses of ancient story
How much I adore them all -
Their grit and their wit and their glory*

¹⁰ Linda Gregg THE ART OF FINDING, at Poets.org <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19260>

*Like goddesses of ancient story
They transform and metamorphize
Their grit and their wit and their glory
My constant delightful surprise*

*They transform and metamorphize
How their fearless beauty transcends
My constant delightful surprise
Today I was thinking of friends*

VILLANELLE ON AN OLD LADY WHO CAN'T DRIVE
FEELING LONELY VISITING HER SON IN A STRANGE TOWN

*New in town Joyce was forced to walk
Flagging strangers when she lost her way
So she could meet new people, make them talk*

*Her son put arrow signs in paint or chalk
Made at night bright yellow on the gray
New in town Joyce was forced to walk*

*Following signs on the corner of each block
Pointing the way home if she might stray
So she could meet new people, make them talk*

*The sudden signs made police and public squawk
And blame it all on terrorists at play.
New in town Joyce was forced to walk*

*The signs on every corner made them balk
A son had tried to help her with the spray
So she could meet new people, make them talk*

*Was all she wanted, not to peer and stalk
Just to hear a voice bid her good day
New in town Joyce preferred to walk
So she could meet new people, make them talk.*

I am not excusing my lack of technique or begging off the whole issue of style as I am deeply aware in my current writing of the rhythm and music of a poem, the internal dissonance and assonance, elision and alliteration, metaphor and meter,

understanding that, “...*poetry as an art is intimately bound up with verse as a craft.*”¹¹ What I am saying is that until now, my poetry has had to be primarily about content, “*its life’s blood*”. As the years pass, I shall, I hope, become more skilled at the craft and better able to utilize other forms to express content.

On reading through the final drafts, I became aware that the poems also fall into natural groupings.

Some of the poems, I would classify as personal poems, reflecting my inner world; AT THIS MOMENT OF ENQUIRY, STRANGER AT THE POETRY CAFÉ, CONJUGATION, ONLY DEALING WITH, LOVE IS THE REASON IS, LEAVING DETROIT IN APRIL and FORWARD FACING, QUIET CARRIAGE. ONLY DEALING WITH IS in response to the death of my husband of 35 years. In a way, I suppose all the other personal poems are also responses to his death, as well as a coming to terms with living alone after a long marriage. Some are in praise of friendship, which can heal so many wounds, or of finding temporary peace by closely observing the natural world.

The other poems could be said to be responses to the outer world, politically or culturally. Some, like ONE MORNING IN DECEMBER, grew out of my despair that an ordinary person, a worker made insane by small repeated tyrannies, could be driven to perform such a desperate act of self-immolation. This poem is based on a true event; my imagination went immediately to the horror, not just of the event itself, but also of how a mother might experience it. It is a political poem, although it was written from the heart of compassion. I had to figure out how anyone could do such an act and then how that act might have fueled a movement. Other poems, like 30,000 YEARS,

¹¹ Babette Deutsch, POETRY HANDBOOK, 1957, Funk & Wagnalls, Library of Congress Catalogue 57-6502 and 62-7981, p.26

AUSCHWITZ and CAMBODIA grew from an attempt to understand the complexity of time and place; how we are both connected and disconnected by time.

Trying to stay rooted to the particular has been my goal in all the poems in this dissertation. I tried to take to heart what Stanley Kunitz, the National Medal of Honor winning American poet said, when he wrote,

“One of my supreme influences was that visionary soul, William Blake, from whom I learned that generalization is the refuge of scoundrels and hypocrites, whereas art and science exist in the organization of Minute Particulars. Nearly all my poems are attached to a specific location and have their source in a definite experience.”¹²

THE SHORT PROSE

The Pulitzer Prize winning author Annie Dillard wrote, “A writer looking for subjects, inquires not after what he loves best, but after what he alone loves at all.”¹³ I had to look very closely at the fiction I admire and also at the subjects of my own prose to check out the veracity of this statement, but it is true. The stories we admire are often stories we could never have imagined writing, because they are not within our realm of obsession. (I think this notion of a writer’s subject matter also applies to the poems included. In fact, I believe that Ms. Dillard’s quote could apply to all writing, including nonfiction.)

Each of the six prose pieces included here represents a small obsession with an event or a feeling or sometimes, as in THE FOREST, with a notion of precognition and how under duress the collective unconscious might be shared with a stranger.

¹² Stanley Kunitz as quoted in POETSPEAK, In Their Work, About Their Work; Editor Paul B. Janelzko (1983) COLLIER BOOKS, NY ISBN 0-02-043850-8 p. 75

¹³ Annie Dillard, THE WRITING LIFE, (1989) Harper & Row NY, p.67

Edith Wharton, whose book on fiction is a great help to any writer regardless of their chosen medium, says that a short story should be: “...*the natural unembellished fragment of experience, detached like a ripe fruit from the tree.*”¹⁴

The wisdom of these great women writers helped me with all the creative writing in this dissertation, but they were particularly helpful with the prose pieces. I was concerned that the ‘event’ of some of the stories was too evanescent or lacking in narrative. For example, CROSSING THE LINES. This story is an attempt to illustrate how women try to understand each other when on the surface the only thing that connects them is blame and suffering. It posits that perhaps by changing the stories we tell each other a new potential can be created. But is that enough? Is it a vignette, not a short story? According to Ms. Wharton’s quote, it is enough. It is a fragment of experience. Whether it’s ripe or not is another matter for a different judge!

A question then arises concerning the nature of the ‘fragment of experience’; does it matter if it springs totally from the imagination or can it be manufactured in some way from one’s own life experience? On one hand, Daphne Du Maurier, the British novelist is often quoted as saying that “*all autobiography is self-indulgent.*”¹⁵ (I haven’t been able to find the exact source of this quote, in spite of reading the only autobiography she wrote¹⁶ but it is ascribed to her on multiple Quotation web sites.) But if she is correct, how is it possible NOT to use our own emotional or intellectual experiences? How, can we refrain from adding some of our own autobiographical material to anything we write; we have, after all, only our own life with which to color our imagination.

¹⁴ Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (1966) Octagon Books NY, reprinted from Charles Scribner & Sons, Library of Congress 66-28379 p. 43

¹⁵ "Daphne du Maurier." BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2011. 26 June. 2011.
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/d/daphneduma111918.html>

¹⁶ Du Maurier, Daphne, *MYSELF WHEN YOUNG*, Virago Press, London (2004) ISBN 1-84408-096 X

The great Italian film director Federico Fellini takes a different position, saying, “*All art is autobiographical, the pearl is the oyster’s autobiography.*”¹⁷ In that the pearl grows from the oyster’s attempt to deal with the grit and grime of the outside world, then we could say that all writing is a kind of autobiography, and an attempt to transform the grit of one’s life into something of value.

Certainly all the enclosed prose pieces are in some way fueled by personal experience, but none of them are total autobiography. The closest to autobiography might be ANOTHER THING THAT HAPPENED IN 1957, in which I have drawn on childhood memories to pad out the notion of a young girl learning of her parents impending divorce through eavesdropping, atmosphere and inference, and CHANGING THE LINES which is based on a real event.

In DRIVING TO DETROIT, a few different experiences of my own were patched and altered to create the situation in the fictional life of the unnamed woman who likes to drive. The other stories are imagination at work on a theme; the right to a dignified death in PATARA BEACH, and as mentioned before, the shared collective unconscious of two strangers meeting under duress in THE FOREST.

Edith Wharton makes an interesting statement when she clarifies the nature of short story: “*Situation is the main concern of the short story, character of the novel.*”¹⁸ I’m not sure that this is absolutely true but it has been true for the genesis of the enclosed short pieces. It was a situation that first came to me,

¹⁷Federico Fellini, as quoted in BrainyQuote.com 27 June 2011
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/f/federicofe100177.html>

¹⁸ Wharton, Writing p. 47

I hope that the situations described in this collection of stories are vivid and compelling enough to pull the reader through to the end. I hope they present a true depiction of decisive moments, ones that arrive unexpectedly and unasked for, and have tremendous consequences. In PATARA BEACH, even though the daughter Lois is fully aware of the event she has agreed to participate in, she is still unprepared for the unexpected wave of true emotion.

Three of the stories, BLIND DATE WITH WILLIAM, A DRIVE TO DETROIT and CHANGING THE LINES are in the first person, because they are epistolary or narrative in form. BLIND DATE and DETROIT are attempts to write in the idiomatic voice of a character. The remaining stories are in the third person subjective.

“The effect of compactness and instantaneity sought in the short story is attained mainly by the observance of two unities: the old traditional one of time, and the other, more modern and complex, which requires that any rapidly enacted episode shall be seen through only one pair of eyes.”¹⁹

Biding by Edith Wharton’s dictum, all but one of the prose pieces enclosed is seen through one pair of eyes. In THE FOREST, I am attempting to connect two people through a shared unconscious event which has sprung into being at a moment of heightened experience; but even so these two points of view tell only what happened just before we meet them and only give us a small glimpse into their conscious minds.

I am aware that I lack the kind of imagination that leads to prolific plot making, turning and twisting the reader’s expectation until the plot itself achieves a remarkable freshness. I can only aspire to take a small situation or a response to an issue, an idea or a notion that stirs up a response in me, and then add my own personal imaginings to the way that issue could play itself out. Life is what intervenes

¹⁹ Ibid.

when you are trying to write and not everyone has the sharpening stone that Hemingway had access to when he described this problem,

“In going where you have to go and doing what you have to do, and seeing what you have to see, you dull the instrument you live with.”²⁰

Before January 2010, I had written only a few educational essays, adapted a play and been a ferocious reader. Graduating into becoming a writer has been a remarkable and emotional journey. It is a journey I can see might take forever and is one of the most fulfilling of my life, regardless of any future outcomes. I am still aware that as Edward P. Jones says, *“You are always becoming a writer. You’re never really arriving. You’re always starting at the bottom of the mountain.”²¹*

As I said in the beginning, it is those ‘small shacks’ that have helped me find a focus for myself as a writer. Perhaps one day I will dream of different architecture, perhaps of bungalows or castles!

5210 words

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²⁰ Hemingway, Ernest, Preface to *THE SHORT STORIES*, Scribner NY 1938 ISBN 0-684-80334-8, p.3

²¹ Edward P. Jones, quoted in *OFF THE PAGE*, *Writers talk about beginnings and endings*, edited by Carole Burns, WW Norton & Co. 2008, ISBN 978 0393 33088-5 (pbk)

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