

WRITING FROM THE **INSIDE OUT**

2009 Volume 4

Daily, she feels she cuts at
The mythic past
1680: Amsterdam. An artist
I've been called—
I can't say.
Until the age when my dog,
years after shrub pines
hot hot hot
This knee malady,
it happened at
the early morning:
fall planting the way

Writing from the Inside Out

2009

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A Gift in Parting

Daily,
she feels them out
with tender hands—
a small, reckless, utterly natural act.
The best have skins neither too thick with bitter pith
nor too thin,
so that when stripped down the flesh comes out
in ragged hunks.

Wondering whether this will be the time he declines,
stealthily she places each on his desk—
an afternoon offering
eyes closed
fearful
hopeful
a complicated risk.

Later,
sometimes when she reminds him,
sometimes in a gesture unbidden,
he pierces stippled skin with the
pocket knife he keeps
just in the case of situations like these.

He makes a clean incision all around,
again,
and again,
barely but surely
missing the meat of his own right hand.

He holds their fruit
upon the tips of his long fingers—gingerly,
his wrist flexed—
a magician with nothing left up his sleeve.

He pries back the neat corners he has made,
places curved segments nearby.
He has the touch, she thinks,
and resigns herself to her hunger.

From the box on the desk
she plucks with a surprising ferocity

a few coarse,
comfortless,
institutional
tissues (the kind one might find in the grimy bathroom
of any cheap Wildwood, N.J. motel)
and hands them to him
to wipe down his now moistened knife.

But sometimes, as she gathers up pieces marked for trash,
he rubs the blade against his own sock
and cotton meets steel

Then
his thumbs press inward
downward,
and under their soft pressure
flesh gives way
two halves, cleanly riven,
though not always equal.

He offers one in his cupped hand, and
her fingertips brush his.
Like butterfly kisses
or the hiss of a whisper,
hidden in plain sight.

The eating comes quickly—
sections parted,
consumed.
The taste to her is always sweetsour, drydamp,
no matter what the fruit itself really holds.

Once,
as she lay on a pine board in a back room
pretending to rest,
he brought her
her portion,
placed it in her waiting,
trembling hand
and murmured,
“communion.”

Writer's Note

After my first few visits to IWT, I began to write all of the time. I became more thoughtful about integrating writing into my classes, not as a means for assessing my students, but as a way to enable them to center themselves, make real their impressions, and give ground to their conversations.

This poem was a leap for me. I freely admit that I have spent most of my life afraid of poetry, sensing that I had no right to think I could live within it, much less produce it. But Carley Moore's 2007 Workshop on Revision gave me the wherewithal finally to imagine poetry's connection to my world. The suggested approaches to revision included a section on poetic work, as well as activities that prompted writers to see the power of image to spur interpretation and argument. I learned how to turn prose into poetry, and to see possibilities, gaps, and opportunities for extension and richness. What I wanted to accomplish with my poem was to honor an image, a moment that called for recognition and articulation.

Tracy Beck-Briggs
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Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Instructions for Children: An Essay in Five Beginnings

-- after "Is I Another: A Talk in Seven Beginnings" by Ann Lauterbach

1.

When my dog was killed, this is what I told people: that he'd been swimming with me earlier that day and his fur was still wet and slick when my son took him for a walk, and he slipped his collar. Sadly, they were walking near a railroad crossing and my dog ran onto the tracks just as a train barreled through.

This is true – but it isn't *true*.

When my son cries that he shouldn't have taken the dog for a walk; that he wishes he'd thrown rocks at the dog and scared him away from the tracks before the 3:35 swept in at eighty miles an hour; when he confesses that he blames himself – all I can say is, "no, no, there's no way this was your fault. It just happened."

But it's myself I blame.

The accident was my fault because I can't help but tempt fate. I see holes in the fabric of certitude and I poke my fingers into them. I was raised that way. My mother always drove with the gas gauge on empty and sometimes we made it to town and sometimes we sputtered out on the side of the road and thumbed a ride. I went places alone that would seem improbable today when we strap helmets on heads and pads on knees and seven-year-olds into car seats. Obviously, safety is a good thing, but Frank O'Hara's poem sings in my ears like an anthem:

Mothers of America

let your kids go to the movies!
get them out of the house so they won't know what you're up to
it's true that fresh air is good for the body
but what about the soul
that grows in darkness...

("Ave Maria," lines 1–6)

2.

"How was school?"

"We had a lockdown," says my son.

"A what?"

"A lockdown," repeat my little girls, ages 8 & 10, helpfully.

"Like in prison?" I say, confused, thinking, "Was there a riot?"

"In case there's a bear," says the eight-year-old.

My son laughs meaningfully and gives me a look from the corner of his eye.

"Right," he says.

“Or a bad person comes in,” says my other daughter. “With a gun.”
“Tell me what a lockdown is,” I say, feeling my throat close, my voice go squeaky.

“All the doors are closed and locked and the whole class goes into a corner and crouches there.”

“For how long?”

“Ten minutes, at least,” explains my son. “I was in biology and the desks won’t move and you can’t open the windows so we sat on the floor furthest from the door and the teacher passed a clipboard around and everyone drew a picture.”

“Why?”

“To pass the time,” he says. “Some people were nervous.”

“What did you draw?”

“An American flag.”

“Do you practice lockdowns too?” I ask the girls.

“Yes,” my middle daughter says. “My teacher said that if someone bad came in our classroom she would help us climb out the windows. You remember Mrs. Kudlo, my kindergarten teacher? She told us it wasn’t bad people we should worry about, but skunks.”

She laughs knowingly, shaking her head at the woman’s naiveté.

3.

When the virgins were murdered last year in a one-room Pennsylvania schoolhouse, the boys pleaded with the gunman to spare them, and one victim asked him to make a deal -- kill *her* but spare the others.

From a distance these girls might have resembled crows in their strict black dresses, crossing a field to get to school with that hop peculiar to girls and birds.

When they were dead and the man was dead, the people of that community tore down the building and built another one. Did it have deadbolts and two-way radios and metal detectors like my son’s school? Did it have windows double-paned with chicken wire? Did they practice hiding away from their classroom’s metal door, all the while calculating the trajectory of ricocheting bullets, plotting their own heroic overpowering of “the shooter”?

The shooter left a note apologizing. The shooter left a note “guess-timating” the number killed. The shooter left a film of himself in battle gear speculating on his fame, his infamy.

4.

My capacity for losing myself in books renders me oblivious to everything not in my own head. It also makes me believe in happy endings.

I'm probably reading the wrong books, since life is teaching me the authority of tragedy. My hubris is in thinking: *sure, my son can walk into town carrying a gold-headed cane and not be beaten up by bullies. Sure, my daughter can wear her hair short as a boy's and boy's clothes despite the kids on the bus who call her names. Certainly, my youngest can wheel a cart around the grocery store and do all my shopping although she's only eight. Why not, if it makes them happy/unhappy?*

My son told me at least three times that the dog's collar was loose. I bought a new one, but it didn't seem to fit any better. I rationalized that the dog never slipped out of his collar when I was walking him. With my son, the dog was stubborn, partly, I think, because my son commanded rather than requested, and the dog said no, pulling his head down and to the side and out of the collar with a quick surety. This is all my fault because I didn't go back to the store and buy a choke chain. Because I thought that they—my son and his pet—would work it out between them. That either my son would stop or the dog would stop, and now it has stopped because one of them is dead.

That's the other component at play: not just that I would rather have my son and the dog experience a little freedom to disagree, despite the dangers, than keep them safely leashed on a choke chain. That I disdain my neighbors who escort their dogs, plastic bags in hand, to agility class and obedience class and canine socialization class. The price I've paid—my pooch—instructs me in the Biblical maxim of reaping what I've sown: self-reliance.

5.

I drive to pick my son up from the high school and am startled to find the parking lot swarming with official vehicles. There's an ambulance, doors flopped open, stretchers on the ground, two fire trucks with lights flashing red and white, and, like a dystopian hummingbird, a helicopter hovering over the soccer field.

I trot through the front doors and into the small foyer. The doors to the main hallway are closed and locked. I can't go further than where I stand. Panicked, I rush into the office on my left.

"What's happened?" I call out. The secretary, who dislikes me for some reason, pauses, savoring her irritation and my discomfort. For a moment, she does not look up from her stack of bus passes. When she does, she focuses to the left of my face, as if addressing someone else.

"Did somebody get hurt?" I insist.

"The seniors," she announces, "are in the gym getting the talk about drunk driving on prom night."

I wait. Surely there's some connection between this strange formulation of nouns and the emergency vehicles outside.

I hear a rumble and turn to see a police tow-truck lumber around the traffic circle. Its oversized hook hauls the hulks of two cars so completely totaled they appear to be mating. Metal mounting metal. The massive truck pulls this mangled sculpture to the high school's main entrance. He drops it there, where it will be visible to all the passing cars, all the casual observers, and he drives away.

Writer's Note

This piece came out of the Writing Retreat for Teachers in July 2008, which I led. Using Ann Lauterbach's essay "Is I Another: A Talk in Seven Beginnings," from her collection *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience*, as a formal model and a topical and/or thematic inspiration, I asked the workshop participants to write an essay in five or more beginnings—not worrying about endings, at all—and to include some quotations from Lauterbach's essay, and from other texts we'd been reading. I drafted this piece that morning, patching together journal freewrites on seemingly unconnected topics: the death of my dog, the wrecked cars on display outside the local high school, an article I'd read in the newspaper—really, these were just the mazy ponderings of my morning laps in the pool. This morning, in the workshop, I challenged myself to find the thread that might wind from one scene to the next, one beginning to another beginning. If you asked me to name that thread, I might mutter, "institutions of learning."

Celia Bland
Bard College
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Bunny: A Love Story

I can't say my family is known for its affinity for pets. Both my parents grew up in New York City, so when they married, had kids and moved out to the suburbs of Boston, they traded in sirens for crickets and began the business of adapting to the conventions of suburban life. In part, that meant owning a pet of some kind. We had two cats that ran away from home, which none of us—not me, not my brother, not my sister, not my mother or father—noticed for weeks afterward. We simply didn't miss them. There was a sort of inherent, collective indifference to pets in our family, so nobody noticed or even cared when at first Mittens ran away and then the other cat with the other name followed suit. Goldfish spent less time finning whimsically and more time floating plaintively on the cloudy water of the rinsed out plastic milk containers in which we housed them. We got a beagle puppy from the Harmon litter down the street to replace Mittens and the other cat with the other name, but he didn't come trained and we were hardly qualified to take on the task of teaching a dog how to be domestic and civil. So when Butchie—that's what we named him because of his bullying temperament—never taught himself to *not* bite us kids on the ankles and wrists and every other place the flesh is paper thin, my father decided it was time to sit us down and explain to us that, while Butchie had a clean coat and a healthy appetite, he was far too wild for our family to handle and would have to be put down immediately.

We wondered for just a little bit why there was no other alternative to extermination, but knew better than to question our father's judgment. The dog was crazy, end of story. "Incorrigible" was the word my dad used, and to be perfectly honest, we were not only fine with his decision, we were a bit relieved, ready for immediate healing, eager for the scarlet-spotted gauze wrapped around our scabby wounds to be unfurled.

So I guess that is why it might be considered ironic that, while in fifth grade, soon after the scattering of Butchie's ashes, I would fall in love for the first time. With a girl named Bunny. That was her name. Bunny. Bunny Costas. I don't know if it was a nickname or if her parents favored Easter over other holidays, or if her father chose the name from a stack of indecent magazines he kept under his mattress, or what. But it didn't matter because all that really mattered was that she chose me when the girls chased the boys at recess. Our course took us over dusty baseball diamonds, through netless soccer goal posts, against the distant chug of occupied train tracks, and across the painted United States of America on the pavement behind Ralph Wheelock School, where our momentum would sweep us into the rear door of our classroom, Mrs. Waterman, arms enfolded, dutifully awaiting our return.

And one day I stopped. Right in the middle of the painted map of the United States of America. It might have been Kansas or Missouri or Wyoming, but I let her catch me. And it was a glorious moment, despite, or maybe *because* of our bedraggled, panting selves, the shared spirit of fatigue. The sun smiled on our happiness. Until speech was needed to consummate the moment. Then Time swelled up like a bloated fish. And finally, after our limp bodies had turned erect, I summoned a mouthful of poise.

"You're a really fast runner," I said.

"You are too," she said.

I'm not sure who leaned in first, but, as if magnetically, our lips became fused like two crayons in the sun and we stayed that way. Still. Eyes open. Peering into each other. Cycloptically. We were engaged in a kind of staring contest of the lips, each waiting the other one out, not wanting to disrupt our frozen passion, pasted together in the stillness of love.

My previous life as slumlord for ill-fated cats and dogs and fish seemed a transgression of neglect I was now prepared to remedy. Because here I was, locked in love, with a one-eyed rabbit.

Writer's Note

In her Fictions from the Inside Out workshop in July 2008, Nancy Kline Piore had us read two short stories for class each day, a range of models including works by Faulkner, Chekhov, O'Brien, Hempel, and the O'Connors – Flannery and Frank. Through a varied sequence of freewriting, focused freewriting, read alouds, and discussion, we would work to uncover the “writerly toys” the respective short story masters employed, and then play with them in our own writing. This particular piece, “Bunny: A Love Story,” grew out of an examination of point of view in James Joyce’s “Araby.” In “Araby,” an older man looks back on his 10-year-old self, dramatizing the complexity of first love, in all its fervor and humility. Nancy had us write about a first love, both from the point of view of a young person’s recent first love, as in Toni Cade Bambara’s “Gorilla, My Love,” and from a further distance, an older person gazing back many years before, as in “Araby.” “Bunny” grew out of the latter. I was fortunate enough to have read it aloud at the Thursday night Celebratory Reading. I have played with it a bit more since then.

Matt Brennan
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Self-Exam

Until the age of fifty-eight, Sugi had given very little thought to her body. She was a remarkably average-looking woman: five-foot-four inches tall, one-hundred-and-five pounds, thick straight hair gone salt-and-pepper in her early forties, now cropped close to her skull for convenience. To her older sister June's annoyance, Sugi was naturally thin without dieting or exercising. And, aside from appendicitis at fifteen, Sugi had never really been sick.

Then came The Lump.

Once a month, Sugi stood naked in her shower-steamy bathroom, curving first her right arm and then her left over her head, pressing the thumb and forefinger of her opposite hand into the soft spongy tissue first of one breast, then the other, the way her G.P. Dr. Gehring had shown her. In twenty years, Sugi had never felt anything unusual. She performed the exam mechanically, the way one checked the tires before setting out on a long trip.

So when her thumb pressed against the small, nebulous bead a few millimeters out from her right nipple, Sugi hesitated. Her mind did not automatically register the connection between feeling and meaning. She pressed again, harder, in the seconds it took for her brain to interpret what her body was telling her.

* * *

Sugi's last mammogram, nine months ago, had been normal, but Dr. Gehring ordered a biopsy anyway. Sugi had the test done without telling anyone—not June, her only sibling, or even her niece Elizabeth, a doctor herself. Sugi wasn't worried. She categorized the lump in the same family as a rash—not a normal part of her, sure, but not exactly *not* part of her, either, like a little part of her anatomy gone rogue.

But when Dr. Gehring summoned Sugi to her office to deliver the news, the lump was no longer harmless, innocuous, an unruly outgrowth of her own cells. It was The Lump: vicious, foreign, invading, as if an insect had bored beneath her skin to deposit its eggs.

"Invasive carcinoma," Sugi read off the typed pathology report to Elizabeth on the phone that night. She found the unfamiliar words hard to shape, like she was reading Cantonese. "Two centimeters. There's something about a Nottingham scale..."

On the other end of the line, a pause. Sugi pictured her tall, muscular blonde niece twirling a silky strand of shoulder-length hair around her finger. "What did Dr. Gehring recommend?"

Seated at her kitchen table, Sugi reflexively rubbed her palm across her breastbone, squashing her right nipple to her sternum. "She wants me to see a surgeon." A quick check of the appointment card Dr. Gehring's receptionist had handed her. "A Dr. William Mathis. On Tuesday."

No hesitation this time. "I'll come with you."

"What should we tell your mother?" Meaning June.

Again, no hesitation. "Nothing, for now. It's your body, your business."

* * *

Elizabeth drove down on Monday evening after work. The next morning, they sat together in Dr. Mathis's office while he announced that he wanted to perform a mastectomy within the week.

"So soon?" was the first thing Sugi could find to say. Beside her, Elizabeth sat calmly, elegant hands folded easily in her lap.

Dr. Mathis smiled. He was older, possibly Sugi's age, with a full head of gray hair. "The sooner, the better with cancer," he reasoned.

Elizabeth spoke then, assuming the slightly detached tone Sugi associated with her fellow professors at academic conferences, where everyone was critical of everyone else but careful to maintain a veneer of civility. "So you'd recommend a mastectomy, not a lumpectomy, even though the tumor is so small?"

Sugi had to clench her hands together on her knees to stop herself from reaching up to press her right breast flat against her chest, as had become her habit now whenever The Lump was mentioned. She didn't understand the impulse, didn't probe it.

Dr. Mathis smirked. "Well, Dr. Shaw," he replied, his smooth tone mirroring Elizabeth's, "given the smallness of your aunt's breast and the size and position of the tumor, and of course the invasive nature of the carcinoma, a mastectomy would be in the patient's best interest. After all," here Dr. Mathis inclined his head toward Sugi, letting her in on their little doctors' joke, "why take the chance, just for the sake of beauty?"

Sugi's breast twinged sharply below The Lump, as if the nerves could already feel the scalpel's slice. Right—what was a breast? In some ways, for a childless woman her age, a breast was as useless the appendix. Yet it still pained her to think of having it removed. The idea reminded her rather inexplicably of Greek mythology, of cannibalistic mothers hacking at their own chests, milk mingling with blood around bare, brown feet. Had she ever really read such a story, Sugi wondered, disturbed by the macabre direction of her thoughts, or was the image merely culled from her literary-fed imagination?

Dr. Mathis and Elizabeth traded a complicated series of questions and answers while Sugi tried half-heartedly to pay attention. Normally, it would have galled her to be so ignorant; normally, she would've been filing away terms to Google later. But she found it disconcertingly easy to inhabit the role of invalid just then, to let Elizabeth take charge. To pretend (as the doctors seemed comfortable doing) that it wasn't her *body* they were discussing, just some plastic replica of her.

In the end, after less than an hour in the surgeon's office, Sugi consented with a wordless nod to the amputation of her right breast in six days' time.

* * *

When they stopped in front of Sugi's house, Elizabeth reached across the seat to hug her aunt goodbye. "I'll tell Mom," she volunteered. "I'm sure she'll insist on driving down with me for the surgery."

Sugi smiled at her niece's implied apology. "Well, at least I'll be doped up," she joked grimly. "You'll be the one who's awake to deal with her."

* * *

True to Elizabeth's prediction, June called the next day to let Sugi know she would be there for the surgery.

"Really, June, this is no big deal." Sugi perched on the edge of a kitchen chair, facing down a stack of Family and Medical Leave paperwork for the fall semester.

"Sugar," June adopted her big-sister-knows-best voice, "please don't make light of this. Elizabeth tells me you could have up to a year of treatment if you need chemotherapy and radiation. You can't do this alone."

Alone. In the privacy of her living room, Sugi felt crowded. Her sister's well-intentioned concern seemed to be filling up the quiet rooms of her small, beloved house. June pressed, "We all want to help you through this, honey, but you know, Phil and I were talking, and after your surgery... I mean, wouldn't it be easier on everybody if you just, well, came here?"

A vision of June's over-sized house, frilly and fussy like a Victorian parlor, rose up before Sugi's eyes in stark contrast to the clean bareness of her own polished hardwood floors. The only clutter she tolerated was books – books everywhere, books by the dozen, on bedside tables, her desk, the built-in maple bookshelves. She tried to picture herself carting off those hundreds of volumes to a storage unit, living like a permanent hotel guest in her sister and brother-in-law's spare bedroom. She thought of how solicitous June would be, never allowing her a moment's peace to read, or write, or think.

The nightmarish fantasy made her breast throb around The Lump.

"June, it's a breast. They're not lopping off a leg here. Why would I need to move in with you?"

"And if you have to get more treatment?" June persisted, becoming wheedling. "Elizabeth can't take care of you from here. She has her own practice to think of. I could come there, I suppose, but I don't know what Phil would do – he's helpless in the kitchen, and the laundry!"

Sugi sighed. The FMLA paperwork awaiting her, June's petulance, the phone calls still to be made to her underused health insurance all conspired to suddenly exhaust her. "I can only do this one step at a time, June," she declared, weariness paling her words. "Just let's get through the surgery and then we'll see, okay?"

* * *

June arrived with Elizabeth the morning before Sugi's surgery. "I think we should go to one of those special bra shops," June proclaimed as Elizabeth drove them to Sugi's favorite deli for lunch. "I read about them on the Internet. They have these bras so you can't tell –"

"I think that can wait, Mom," Elizabeth interrupted. Sugi realized she was pressing her palm against her breast again and forced her hands back to her lap. "Aunt Sugi will need to heal before we start worrying about cosmetics."

There it was again, that doctorly dismissal of appearance. As if breasts existed only for the pleasure of being seen; as if they weren't part of *being* a woman, just *looking*

like a woman. A sudden fury seized her, at Elizabeth or Dr. Mathis or June, Sugi wasn't sure.

She drew in a deep, cleansing breath, blew it out slowly between pursed lips. Elizabeth glanced sideways at her aunt in the rearview mirror. "You okay?" "Just hungry," Sugi answered tightly, though she wasn't.

* * *

At the hospital the next morning, Sugi hugged her sister and niece goodbye in the hallway before Dr. Mathis' nurse, Sarah, led her back to the brightly-lit pre-op ward. On the way to her room, Sugi glimpsed another patient, a tiny little Asian girl, also preparing to go under the knife.

In her own room behind a thin brown curtain, Sugi undressed. Slipping her bra straps from her shoulders, she glimpsed her reflection in the square mirror above the stainless steel sink. Tentatively, as she imagined herself approaching a new lover, Sugi stepped toward the mirror, arching her right arm over her head, performing the movements unthinkingly, mechanically; she lowered her gaze slowly from her face to her chest, where her breasts hung full and even, stretch marks extending faintly from her dark brown nipples to the deep pits of her underarms, frosted white from her deodorant.

Gingerly, using her thumb and forefinger, she felt for The Lump. Found it only a pebble, much smaller in reality than in her mind.

"Mama!" A cry of delight startled Sugi from her reverie. Instinctively, she crossed her arms over her bare breasts and spun toward the door.

There stood the little Asian girl, clad in a miniature version of the hospital gown draped over Sugi's bed, just inside the pull-around curtain. For a silent, breathless instant, their gazes locked.

Sarah materialized, catching the child up into her arms, breaking the spell. "Sorry," the nurse apologized over her shoulder. "She's a slippery one."

Sugi murmured some placated response. Numbly, she wrapped the paper-thin gown around her thin shoulders. She didn't bother snapping the buttons – she just climbed onto the cot and pulled the starched-white sheets up to her neck.

The Lump seemed to have been magnetized by the child's gaze, as if it was now drawing the most essential parts of her selfhood to it, minutes before the surgeon would slice it cleanly away. She saw now, with impossible clarity, that she had been mistaken to think of The Lump as not belonging to her. The cancer was neither alien nor invading; it had grown out of her own cells, her own blood and tissue. And she saw, now, that her inability to think of The Lump as part of her and her practice for nearly six decades of giving little thought to her body at all were symptoms of the same fear, fear of the awesome power of her flesh: utterly unpredictable, completely uncontrollable, ultimately corruptible.

Even June had been braver than she. June, who lived in perpetual fear of sickness, had suffered through a half-dozen miscarriages before finally, painfully, bringing Elizabeth into the world. June had loved; she had birthed; she had grieved; she had lived.

Sugi pressed her palm to the lump again, confirming its solidity, its reality. This cancer, this rebellious seed, had taken root and inhabited her body more fully than she had ever dared. Sugi wanted it gone, yet it was not her enemy.

Sarah pushed the curtain aside and entered with a tray of tubes and needles. “Sorry about that before,” she said. “Children are just so curious.”
“It’s fine,” Sugi said, and it was.

Writer’s Note

On the first night of Writing and Thinking in July 2008, our workshop leader, Madhu Kaza, asked us to write a version of the “submission notes” that usually accompany an author's work. We read a parody of submission notes by a published author; Madhu encouraged us to try for three versions, none of them “straight,” but all reflecting something we wished we could say about ourselves. My mother had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and undergone her mastectomy prior to the workshop, so I wrote about being a famous oncologist whose research had led to a cure for this terrible disease. As the workshop went on, I found myself returning to this piece in our freewrites. I began composing a short story about an English professor (which I am) who suddenly finds her world turned upside down by a cancer diagnosis. “Self-Exam” grew out of the workshop as a whole, beginning with that first night and continuing on through our intensive work under Madhu’s excellent leadership.

Dr. R. Evon Hawkins
University of Southern Indiana
Evansville, Indiana

Early Birth

For the Tinker-Lamothe Family

1

Years after shrub pines were shadows of witches
dancing in fire, we still see their black skeletons
first – then layers of green saplings
below them like a fog rising
from water. Our children laugh complain
don't see the land scarred by fire,
weren't born then.

2

At the point
the pomegranate sun splits,
red-spangled, loose.

A bass takes a surface plug,
spits it.

3

At the docks earlier
the Nora Grey dried its nets
on the pier, and we wondered
how long they were out to sea
and where: Georges Bank, Stellwagen,
Hudson Canyon, and how crazed they were
after they filled their hold with cod
and rode low on the way home.

4

How strange was the cone I had seen
on a stick at a meadow and in it
a hornet's nest generating itself
had died a broken blossom, ashy
and how tired you were when I called
that night, your cousin bleeding
from the womb again.

5

We were colors, words, smoke
at her wedding years before.
And they waved goodbye
early in the night and were gone
as a quail flies
from the bush, broken
floating
then down.

6

She confessed
to me that each pregnancy was hard.
A miscarriage is like falling on rebar
in a work pit.
You are always feeling it,
always, even when a new one comes
groping her way around
her universe of instinct and fluid.

7

That she won't stay
that her mother's womb won't hold her
must be like falling into fire
or taking the ocean
into your lungs
for a few minutes,
exhaling bitters
then acid.

8

Air and a live child:
the spruce cone seed finds soft roots,
day by day with us.

Writer's Note

“Early Birth” only emerged as a fully realized poem when I decided to look inward to my heart and gauge where I was emotionally. I wrote the earliest version of the poem in a July 2005 Poetry: Reading, Writing, Teaching workshop with Kristen Prevallet. Kristen had sent our group out on a walk around campus to collect images and make reflections in order to turn them into what Kristen called a serial poem. My problem with the first draft of the poem was that it was a seeming random collection of observations –some nice lines and striking images. But I didn’t have an emotional connection to the poem. One intense evening late that week, I sat determined to pull together a poem that meant something to me. I knew I was too much “in my head,” so I took my pulse emotionally. That summer, my wife and I spent much time supporting my wife’s cousin (who is her best friend); she had been undergoing a crisis pregnancy. From this emotional place, I started redrafting the serial poem, bringing it alive by incorporating lines and images from an earlier failed poem. Since then, “Early Birth” has evolved little: I have done some tweaking, altering a line here and there and changing a word or two. And I have yet to show it to my cousin-in-law.

William Mottolese
Convent of the Sacred Heart
Greenwich, Connecticut

Above the Spillway

fall planting
the way my father
set them straight

a skim of ice
above the spillway
quaking aspen

crickets
the pulse in a hollow
of her neck

the angle
of the fruit picker's ladder
autumn light

monastery wall
the smell of wild grapes
fermenting

the gossip
her yard fills
with leaves

a dry leaf
scratches along the sidewalk
All Souls' Day

autumn clarity
the things I remember
in part true

Writer's Note

"Above the Spillway" is a haiku sequence composed of autumnal images that were lurking among the twelve journals, representing the twelve IWT workshops I have taken since 1992. The inspiration for "Above the Spillway" came from the Fictions: Memory and Imagination workshop led by Judith Beth Cohen in 1995 and a prompt based on the first line of "A Father's Story" by André Dubus: "My name is _____ and here is what I call my life..." In addition, my thinking was informed by readings from Patricia Hampl that were discussed at this workshop. While the poem is based on personal observation or

experience, it was through Hampl's "permission" that I allowed for a bit of invention in the crafting of each individual haiku. Although I trace the genesis of this piece to 1995, it wasn't until last year that I decided to link haiku images into a poem I hoped would have a narrative thread, as well as capture the breadth of autumn as I have experienced it in western New York.

Tom Painting
School of the Arts
Rochester, New York

Odysseus [Surfacing]

The mythic past
and then the real—
all the quiet sounds
a face can make.

Yes, that's how I want us—
as if the bough had almost already broken—
our love pressed mouth to mouth.

Mostly, we are marred
by what we cannot have. Mostly,
the thing desired is desire itself—
how it makes the body shine
in one direction.

Mostly, we are standing in a boat—
perilously small—and yelling at ourselves,
Row, or get out.

We had to piece it together—the absence
and the lack inside us—prove
ourselves noteworthy of the epithets
already owned. I was a hero

dreaming of being a hero: language
driving me hard on its scripted
sea. *Wooden horse*—

blue-eyed Athena or Zeus's
ravenous thunderbolts—tropes
I had to dwell in, having had the run
of the entire sky.

How the notes choke
in a difficult passage, the heroic
dactyls inked in, crossed out,
then inked again across the skin.

What part of the song
is not the part where the oboe
breaks your heart?

The tender hands of morning
literally *fingers* of the body—
words made flesh
in the story's measure.

Of the many selves
in a difficult passage,
the ones we know best
are those who do not speak.

How many times I've wanted to take an axe to the silence. The sun would rise and the mind would rise—but the story had its own on-going-ness—birds rearranging the sky, the road home always obscured by another departure. So many times, I had to sit too with my head bowed—dreaming of a proper sea. And you, Penelope, you were no help—no partner in this—your heart absorbed, your attention pointed elsewhere.

How many islands of regret—
“I” (false pronoun) falling through a body
it cannot devise: first “nobody,”
then wide-eyed statesman—cunning
orator—or the self’s

archipelago. Oh heart,
with your many vessels, how far
on this sea must we go—we
who are not born knowing

how to love the world. To describe
the world is to come closer
to who we are, and thus we require
the objects of our failures—
we no, not *our* . . . but
the unimaginable forms that imagined you. . .

Writer's Note

“Odysseus [Surfacing]” developed after a November one-day readers’ workshop, *The Odyssey & Louise Glück’s Meadowlands*. During the workshop, I had been jotting down in the margins of my own notebook phrases and words that caught my attention as participants read from their own writing and as our conversations unfolded around the idea of “homecoming” or “return.” A month later, I went back and read my writing and discovered that there was an interesting dialogue between the marginalia and my own freewrites. In this dialogue, I began to hear a voice and let this voice determine what I culled from the notebook. The entire poem is thirteen sections long; it has been edited here in the interest of space.

Peg Peoples
Bard College
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Splashed Boy

It happened at the annual gospel meeting at the Christian Chapel Church of Christ at the Crossroads. It was the last Sunday of the weeklong Come to Jesus He Will Save You Campaign for Christ in Monroe County, Mississippi. All the young people had put printed fliers on the windshields of every parked car they could find. Well, almost every parked car. Several of us begged and begged to go to the parking lot of the First and Last Chance Honkytonk. Sherry Gay West argued with the adults that the clientele at the First and Last Chance needed the gospel the most, but all the parents decided that safety should come first for the young people.

“But Jesus preached among the sinners,” Sherry Gay kept on. Then Sherry Gay’s mother Lorene who had a growling alto voice told Sherry Gay to hush.

“You can’t take a risk like that with the young people. I’ve heard tell they sell beer and cigarettes and Lord knows what else in the parking lot,” Roland Covington announced. Back at our house Mamma said that Roland ought to know all about it and when I asked her why, she just turned on the mixer to high speed for the pineapple upside down cake that she was making for the Sunday Dinner on the Ground.

Anyway, the church had been bragging about the good crowds they’d been having at the gospel meeting. On Wednesday night they had to pull out the folding chairs. It was Teen Night and all the other Churches of Christ in the area allowed their teens to come to Christian Chapel. Most of them had already been baptized. As everybody knows the gospel means good news, the good news to know the truth which will set you free, and the truth is simply to hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized. The baptized teens came because of the new youth minister at Christian Chapel who looked a lot like Tom Cruise and because nobody in Monroe County had cable TV yet.

But this Sunday was the closing of the Campaign for Christ. Me and Eddie Ray got permission to sit together, and even more important, we had already received a “go ask your mother—go ask your father” response about Eddie spending the night at my house. The badminton set that Mamma had ordered from Sears had come in and was waiting for two ten-year-old boys to put it together and play until it was way past dark. The backyard light and the lightning bugs kept us playing until *The Tonight Show* came on or until Daddy made us come inside. The visiting preacher was Brother Ralph Ashby from up at Holly Springs. Even though everybody was about ready for the gospel meeting to end, they were a little skeptical of the whole week’s experience.

“Brother Ralph can flat out preach now.”

“You can tell he’s been to college.”

“I knew his daddy.”

“He can sure quote Scripture.”

“Wonder how long it took him to learn all that Bible?”

“He’s learned some Hebrew and some Greek.”

“He’s a lot smoother than the last time he was here.”

All agreed on the smooth part and that Brother Ralph could still preach the Bible and tell you how to be saved without knowing Hebrew or Greek. You didn’t need college to tell somebody how to get saved.

Brother Ralph Ashby would appreciate all these comments from the congregation,

but he knew that he would never be invited back to Christian Chapel unless the number of baptisms and responses went up. There was talk that his recent college education had kept him from preaching about hell and brimstone. “Folks got to be scared of hell before they take their salvation serious,” Uncle Oliver said.

“You mean we’re supposed to scare them into salvation?” Mamma asked, but Daddy gave her a look because he knew nobody could ever change Uncle Oliver.

In spite of fetching good crowds and attracting all the area teens with the new Tom Cruise–look-alike youth minister, we had had only one response. Just one. And that was poor old Mavis Walters who had a habit of going forward and being restored. Mavis was baptized when I was in the second grade, but she kept going forward, walking down the aisle during the invitation song, whispering something into the preacher’s ear and then the preacher would announce to the congregation that God was good and had touched Mavis’s heart for her to recognize her sin to ask forgiveness. What the sin was nobody knew. Made you wonder. Like I said, Mavis had been down that aisle so much that old Uncle Oliver said that the current Come to Jesus He Will Save You Campaign for Christ couldn’t claim Mavis.

“Mavis keeps them aisles hot,” Uncle Oliver said.

“Well, at least Mavis is sincere,” Mamma said.

“I don’t think the girl gets enough attention at home,” Aunt Lois said.

“Mavis is just plain crazy,” Daddy said.

What everybody at Christian Chapel was worried about was the number of responses. Last year there had been five baptisms and two restorations, not including Mavis Walters. When a person got baptized at Christian Chapel, it was well known that his or her name was added to the Book of Life. But on a more earthly matter, everybody wanted to see that number on the membership board (handmade by old Uncle Oliver when he was young) go up, up, up. Another baptism would make that number go up. That number had stayed at ninety-nine for nearly a year, and everybody worried that Christian Chapel was not growing like other Churches of Christ. New Hope was growing by leaps and bounds. They were at nearly three hundred. “That’s just too big,” Mamma said.

“Well no wonder they’re so big,” Daddy said. “They got a fellowship hall with a kitchen and they’re about to break ground to build a gym.”

“Blasphemy! Blasphemy!” Granny Blaylock said.

“The Church house is for worship only. You can cook, eat, and play ball at home!” Uncle Oliver said.

I better tell it here that the dinner on the ground I mentioned earlier was simply that. The dinner was outside, not inside the church, on homemade picnic tables. Eating inside the Lord’s House was not allowed. For that matter, drinking, smoking, cussing, gambling, dancing, shorts, short skirts, men with long hair, instrumental music, and speaking in tongues were not allowed either.

And now here it was the last Sunday of the gospel meeting and everybody had their hopes up to hit one hundred on the membership board. Some folks were thinking of me and Eddie Ray. We could make it one hundred and one. But we had already met with our regular preacher, Brother Hoyt Hathcock, who decided that we had not reached the age of accountability. Granny Blaylock was devastated for me, or for her maybe. “I won’t live to see my only grandson be baptized,” she moaned. “I don’t know if I’ll make

it to see Christmas this year.” Granny had been dying ever since I could remember. Brother Hoyt tried to calm her by saying that Jesus was 12 years old before he reached the age of accountability. I got confused thinking about that. Jesus was a grown-up man, over thirty years old, before he was baptized in the river Jordan by his cousin John the Baptist who ate locusts and wild honey and had long hair and a beard. Maybe I should wait another twenty years to be baptized. We didn’t have a river by the name of Jordan, but we had the Tombigbee River and I didn’t have any male cousins, but I liked the idea of a bearded man who ate locusts and wild honey totally immersing me in the water. But I never told any of this to Granny.

By the way, I may not have reached the age of accountability, but I knew that baptism meant total immersion. No, sprinkling does not count! I worried about my Methodist friend Dennis and my Baptist friend Wanda and I wanted to tell them the gospel truth that according to Brother Hoyt, Uncle Oliver, and Granny Blaylock they were going to hell because Dennis and Wanda had only been sprinkled. Mamma told me not to, which was good thing I suppose. She grew up Methodist, but changed her wicked ways by being baptized after she and Daddy got married.

Brother Hoyt often used an anecdote about baptism. His sermons were serious stuff and he could scare the hell out of anybody preaching about hell fire and damnation, but he told us this story about a some children who came upon some stray cats. They decided to play church and among the many props they made do with was an old wash tub full of water so that they could baptize all the cats. Each cat was totally immersed as the child playing the preacher proclaimed, “I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The children even threw in a few songs such as “What Can Wash Away My Sin?” and “Though Your Sin Be as Scarlet.” When the children got down to the last cat, things went awry. The boys just couldn’t hold that cat under. It howled and yowled and scratched and clawed with panic. The cat kept on scratching and biting until finally the child-preacher remarked with defeat and acknowledgment, “We done all we could, brothers. We’ll just have to splash some water on him and let him go to hell.” The whole congregation busted out laughing, except Mamma. “Now see here, brothers and sisters, out of the mouths of babes!” announced Brother Hoyt.

But Brother Hoyt was not preaching this last Sunday of the gospel meeting. Christian Chapel really needed that membership number to go up to a hundred and we all wanted to give Brother Ralph credit. He needed to walk away with a successful campaign for Christ under his belt. So far, there were no strong candidates for baptism. One of the teens, Patsy West, who had attended on the Wednesday Teen Night, had discussed being baptized again because she had been so young the first time. But after a long talk with the youth minister who looked like Tom Cruise, she decided against it. I asked her why and all she said was that Randy, the Tom Cruise look-alike, said that she had already been saved.

“And that’s all he said?” I wanted to know.

“I can’t doubt a man who said he got the call from God while he was drinking a beer and driving a tractor,” Patsy answered. “Of course he doesn’t drink beer anymore.”

“Does he still drive a tractor?” I asked and then she just prissed off.

One thing me and Eddie Ray had noticed on that Wednesday night was a boy and a girl a few years older, definitely within the range of the age of accountability. They

didn't seem to be affiliated with any particular church. Mamma noticed that they were back again on Friday and here they were again on Sunday. Come to find out that, Shirley and Ronnie Motes were brother and sister who had been staying with their grandparents that summer. A long time ago folks at Christian Chapel had tried to save the grandparents, but Granny Blaylock had reported that the Motes were just too far gone. "When you got drums, guitars, speaking in tongues, and an occasional snake handling, you might as well quit," Granny announced.

But there they were—Shirley and Ronnie Motes. Word got out that they had been talking to Brother Ralph about their personal salvation. Shirley claimed she had got saved at some Bible camp sponsored by the YWCA, but insisted Ronnie had done nothing to get saved except for his recent visits. Shirley did all the talking. Come to think of it, nobody had ever heard Ronnie say a word, a sign right there that something was off.

And here we are now at the final minutes of the Come to Jesus He Will Save You Campaign. Brother Ralph has outdone himself. He came real close to preaching hell fire and brimstone, but mostly he talked about how beautiful heaven must be, where there would be no sickness, no pain, no death. After all the stanzas of "Just As I AM," nobody went forward to be saved and everybody thought that we would be stuck with 99 on the membership board. But Brother Ralph asked the song leader to lead us in one more invitation song, "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling." Just when we got to the "Ye who are weary come home" part, Ronnie Motes commenced going down the aisle. He kept looking back at his sister, Shirley, who motioned for him to go on, but he made it all the way to front to Brother Ralph. When Brother Ralph announced to the congregation that Ronnie had expressed his intention to be baptized, everybody was so relieved. Some of the old women started crying. Then Brother Ralph asked Ronnie to stand.

"Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?"

"Sir?"

"Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?"

Ronnie just stared back at sister Shirley and she nodded. And then he looked like he wanted to run out back the door. Instead he nodded yes to Brother Ralph that he believed. Well, they went back to prepare for the baptism. Brother Hoyt went back to help Ronnie dress in his baptismal robe since there was no other male relative. When it came time for the official baptism, the curtains opened and there stood Brother Ralph in his rubber suit and a petrified Ronnie who kept looking out at the audience toward his sister. When Brother Ralph closed his eyes and prayed, "I now baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"—nobody really knew what happened. After the prayer, Brother Ralph tried to lead Ronnie into the water for total immersion and Ronnie started crying. As Granny said, "He was way too old a boy to be crying." He cried for Shirley and he grabbed at the glass petition and he grabbed at the curtains. It turned into a wrestling match. Wiry Brother Ralph was trying to dunk an overweight teenage boy. Just when we thought Ronnie was going to break the glass, Brother Ralph jerked the curtains closed and we all sang, "O Happy Day When Jesus Washed My Sins Away."

The membership board changed to 100, but Uncle Oliver still claims the boy

wasn't totally immersed. Since Brother Ralph was the only witness, he claimed he got the boy completely dunked and thus saved. There could be nothing worse, at least in Monroe County, Mississippi, than being known as nothing but a splashed boy.

Writer's Note

In the July 2008 Writing Retreat for Teachers we enjoyed the inherent freedom of working on drafts that we had already begun. While I focused much of my writing energy on an unfinished story, "Marguerite," I inevitably hit writer's block. Efforts at sleep failed. I finished reading a chapter from Jonah Lehrer's *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*. I tried sleeping again, but thankfully the muses still visit after midnight. These images of a failed baptism long ago in rural Mississippi kept dancing around. I got up, again, and started writing. I showed "Splashed Boy" to our insightful instructor, Celia Bland, who urged me to finish it. In fact, she even sent all the class members a couple of friendly e-mails encouraging us to keep writing. Hope the readers enjoy it as much I enjoyed writing it. Regarding the other piece—now titled "Marguerite: Not in Memphis"—I've doubled the length (it may be a novella), but it's not "there" yet.

Billy Pullen
Germantown High School
Germantown, Tennessee

A Weed's Memoir

I've been called many names
Not all of them nice.

In French, my name means tooth of the lion
Which makes me seem fierce
If you cut me down
I rise back up with a vengeance.

The bright yellow of my youth
Tempted old women to become tipsy on homemade wine
And seduce suitors.

Later, abandoned, I folded into myself
Turning white

Emerging with a bristly old head
Tiny white parachutes
Wished upon by young girls
And carried away on the wind.

Writer's Note

It was a perfect summer day during the Narrative Thinking workshop some years ago, and no one wanted to stay indoors to write. Our assignment was to wander the campus, find a flower we recognized, observe it and go to the library to do a bit of research on it to inspire us to write. Being from the city I never really learned to identify flowers, and although I spent quite some time looking for a familiar daisy, tulip, or black-eyed susan, the only "flower" I found that I recognized was the lowly dandelion. Feeling a bit defeated, I picked the weed, headed for the library and did a little research about it. As it turned out, what I learned about the weed earned my respect and I happily composed its memoir.

Janet Saltzman
Red Hook High School
Red Hook, New York

Cutting Mangoes

She cuts at the mango randomly. Over her shoulder she tells me something about how she'll be travelling for work again next week, while making a second meandering gash into the mango.

"I hate visiting the Bombay office," she says. "No one there understands my projects."

The mango is almost too ripe and a viscous pulp is working its way up the handle of the knife, edging off the cutting board, gathering the strength to make a dive for the floor. I can see that a bit of the goo has snagged the cuff of her loose sweater and it sways like a leech, reaching for her wrist.

"I wish we had some wine," she says. "White, that would be perfect."

I make a sound to signify that I agree but I'm distracted, staring. As if the seed were an unexpected obstacle, she starts to dig blindly around it, searching for an edge.

"Here," I say as I make a move to take over. She stops talking and pulls her hand away, as if to protect the knife. I push on, explaining; "You have to cut along the pit, work with the fruit, not against it. I showed you before, remember?"

She stiffens but doesn't move. She lets me feel foolish, holding out my hand.

"It's easy," I say to ease the suddenly mounting tension. "Take a look at it first, don't start cutting at a soft spot. Lay it on its side and cut smoothly from one end. Don't just stab into it without paying attention."

"It's fine," she says. "I've cut mangos my own way before and survived, you know." She's not looking at me and I'm glad.

"Ok," I say, "but that mango's going to be ruined. Let me finish it up."

But with that, she drops the knife, blade first, onto the counter. She turns around, moving out of the kitchen, in just such a way as to avoid facing me. I consider telling her about the bit of mango on her sleeve, but she's already in the dining room.

I start to repair the mango but juice and pulp are now everywhere and it's hard to grip. I yell to say that we have an open a bottle of gin and there's some tonic in the fridge. No answer. "You know, instead of wine," I say letting her know I'm not holding a grudge.

I slide the mango into two bowls. The mashed bits go in first, followed by the neater cubes, which nicely cover the top. I consider getting the gin but quickly abandon the idea, as it would take time to put it all together. I find her in bed reading. She's taken off the sweater and I wonder what the mango leech is currently infesting inside the hamper. One of my dress shirts?

I make a move to hand her one of the bowls, but it seems more natural to just set it on the bed next to her. I sit and begin to eat, trying to act as if we had planned to eat in bed all along. Although really I had wanted to suggest we eat on the terrace and enjoy the night air. Maybe bring out a candle. The gin and tonic would have been perfect. But I can't suggest that now.

“Am I not supposed to show you the simple way to cut a mango?” I ask. She hasn't touched her bowl and she doesn't look up. The mango is too ripe and tastes slightly carbonated. I swallow it down.

“No,” she sighs after a short pause. “It isn't that. We've gone over this before, remember? You've got to take a look at the situation first. Don't start at a soft spot. Don't just stab into it without paying attention.”

Writer's Note

This piece began in the Writing and Thinking workshop led by Madhu Kaza in July 2008. I believe the prompt was to describe a situation of aggression. I traveled back to my last aggressive moment and I landed in my kitchen. The piece is not autobiographical but I certainly have been in arguments over the best way to cook/chop/wash something. I guess I was interested in by the situation was how people can be remarkably unconstructive when they are frustrated.

Dharma Sears
The American Embassy School
New Delhi, India

Self “As Is” and Becoming

This knee malady began at an art workshop. I have come up with several possible practical, physical causes of the problem: standing for lengths of time watching the artist complete a demo painting, sitting for long periods of time on a camp-style stool and possibly compressing my knee joint, or perhaps new walking shoes. Upon returning home, I consulted my favorite mind/body connection book, Louise Hay’s *You Can Heal Your Life* and discovered that knee problems are associated with pride and arrogance. Well then! That opened up a whole new view of my knee problem, because I had been silently and arrogantly criticizing others for their arrogance! Hay recommended compassion and forgiveness among her suggestions for healing. I recited her mantra-like affirmations, thought positively; I let my family wait on me while I sat with ice packs around my knee; I took Advil; I massaged the knee with arnica cream as recommended by a friend.

I continued to be obsessed with my knee problem, not only in my mind, but also in every conversation, every piece of writing, every step—even every breath, it seemed. And then the guilt poured in. I began thinking of those with real problems, that is, with serious illnesses. My knee problem was a hangnail in comparison. It wasn’t a screaming-for-morphine type-pain; it wasn’t a root canal; it wasn’t one of those head-pounding, can’t-stand-up-or-sit-down-without-throbbing-pain headaches. It was merely discomfort at every step. It was occasional throbbing, a disconcerting nerve or joint discomfort. It was an ongoing, nagging “I’m still here” pain that spoke to me while sitting, standing and walking—especially walking after sitting a while. “Am I just a weakling?” I asked myself. “No!” I would argue. I can usually dismiss pain—I don’t even use the word pain, normally—only forcing myself to say “discomfort” instead—usually! I had given birth to two children, with no medication; I felt I was the queen of pain threshold.

This trauma just happened to occur the week of my sixty-sixth birthday. Although I used to look young for my age (as a bride at 21, strangers at the door would ask to speak to my mother), I notice that the reflection in the mirror resembles my mother more now than that young bride. The graying hair and deepening crow’s feet seemed like a caricature of who I had been. So the knee “distraction” coupled with the birthday left me feeling old and inadequate. Coping with this in the privacy of my home was one thing, but I was scheduled to attend the Bard workshop the next week and wondered if I would be able to navigate the physical demands of a college campus. When I arrived on campus, I discovered that the physical navigation was less of a challenge than the internal mental navigation I was to experience. I hobbled around. I tried walking from the dorm to the dining hall, but I found it very tiring, very slow, and, yes, painful. But just as disconcerting as the physical discomfort was the feeling of being old and disabled. And I worried: Is something terribly wrong, something serious, or is this just a stiff knee? Should I be walking on it or a seeing doctor? And I was angry. Why did I have to have this problem and why now, when I was away from home and trying to learn? I was frustrated. I was embarrassed. I felt compassion for the elderly (the “other” elderly?). I was afraid. I didn’t know how to get out of the obsessive pity pit.

As I dealt with the physical trauma, I also dealt with the mental. Several years ago I listened to an audio tape on creativity by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, author of *Women Who*

Run with the Wolves. She described a technique she used of tapping into a kind of writing guide, by imagining a dialogue. I decided to try it and at that time felt that the Fairy Godmother in the Cinderella story might be the right guide for me. I imagined the sweet little ol' granny-like bibbity bobbity boo woman in the Disney feature cartoon. I see her now in her benign plumpness, dressed in her flowing blue robe, with the most endearing grandmotherly face. I assumed her magic wand could fix anything. And, indeed, she had “spoken” to me many times before with an uncanny wisdom that the situation had needed. So I called upon her and we began our conversation. First I whined about my malady, entreating her to help me. As always, she replied sweetly by asking questions about my plight and deftly forcing me to think:

“Can you make my knee better?”

“It will be fine in time, Sweetheart. Healing of both mind and body takes time, my dear.”

“But you have magic and can make it happen quickly—like that bibbity bobbity boo stuff you do.”

“You have magic, too, you know. Sometimes the most powerful magic happens when we do it ourselves.”

“But I worry about this knee thing making me feel and look old.”

“I recommend not worrying. It seldom helps anything.”

“What does help?”

“That’s part of your magic. Just going on—acting ‘as if’ you are what you want to be.”

“But how do I stop the thoughts while I act ‘as if’?”

“You know the way out, the rest of the magic. Don’t worry. Write! Write it out. Write your way to a better understanding.”

So my task is to write it out, write it away. What’s the problem? I’m struggling because I don’t want my mindset to make my knee and my attitude and my health worse. I believe in positive thinking, and our ability to have control, and here I am thinking all these negative thoughts. Let’s explore them.

I don’t want to admit that... I’m old. Is that it? Am I afraid of being old? Is that what this knee ordeal represents?

I don’t want to be handicapped? Is that what I fear? So many people cope with *real* handicaps and many have triumphed to be shining examples of the power of the human spirit.

I don’t want to be a burden to my daughters. I want to be able to enjoy all the walking and activities of our upcoming August vacation—seeing family and then enjoying Mackinac Island again. And there are future trips we have planned. I want to remain healthy and vibrant for many more years.

I don’t want to die? Is that the fear? Tears well in my eyes as I write that! Is that what I am afraid of with my knee obsession? No. I have never been afraid of dying. I am not afraid of death. I feel that “my God” or my “Goddess,” if there, knows and understands all I have done during these sixty-six years and will welcome me with open arms if that is what happens on the other side of death. I believe, or want to believe, that there is a spirit side of us and that this body is merely a temporary shell of our current “self-ness.” So I don’t fear death. I am more afraid of death or illness causing a burden to my two daughters and my granddaughter. So what is the issue behind the knee issue?

Is it just aging or old age that I am resisting? I’m definitely feeling old and crippled now—and I don’t like the feeling at all. I don’t want to have that perception of

myself—or of old people in general. I’ve wondered if I am walking like my mother. I have relatives using a walker to get around. Am I afraid of that? Do I have a prejudice against old people? Against people with disabilities? Unthinkable! Do I fear being one of them? Am I feeling older not just because of the knee, but because of the ever-increasing mop of gray hair? It seems ironic that I used to resent being considered too young to buy a drink or to be seen as too young. I remember as a new teacher being embarrassed when a stranger entering the class room would not be able to find me if I was not at the teacher’s desk because I blended in with my high school students. Is that why I am resisting and resenting aging and disability? Is this my perception of myself or am I resisting others seeing me as old? Is it the mirror I fear or is it the public?

About ten years ago, I remarked to my students that as I grew older, I thought I would rather be an eccentric old lady than a crazy old lady, but I didn’t know what made the difference. A clever guy at the back of the room piped up with one word, “Money!” We all laughed, of course. I recounted that to a young teacher in her 30s and said that I didn’t want to be seen as a crazy old lady. She asked, “Why do you care what people think?” My first thought was, “Of course, I care what people think of me! How could she ask such a silly question?” But I realized that I believe my generation was very much raised to care what others think. It’s only been in more recent times that people have come to the mentality of “do your own thing” and “be yourself” and so forth—the modern independence from traditional conventions. So, at present, I do care what others think of me. But, I suspect, the more important question is this: What do *I* think of myself?

The answer to the question began to emerge after reading Ann Lauterbach’s “As (It) Is: Toward a Poetics of the Whole Fragment.” The opening fascinated me and connected to my dilemma:

When you pick up a piece of crockery in a secondhand shop, often there is a little white tag on which the price is written, along with the phrase “as is.”

“As is” indicates that

the object, say it is a cup, has a flaw: a crack or a chip or some other anomaly testifying to

past use. . . .

“As is” suggests the distance

from perfection which the object has traveled

through the course of time. . . .

My brain seized this passage. I copied it. I realized that it speaks to me because of my current focus on my knee, my body, my age—indeed—my self, my “self-ness.” My mental obsession with the knee and all it represented was preventing me from doing and being what I wanted to be and do. It represented my “flaw.” It represented my distance from “perfection,” the perfection of my younger self. My current focus on my age represented my journey through “the course of time.” I realized that I wanted to embrace the “as is-ness” of—my self, my current self, but have been resisting it. I imagined—even drew a caricature of myself, with a large white tag, stating “As is.” I suppose I might not appeal to some who wander through the secondhand shop of life, but I want to at least appeal to *myself*.

As I contemplated that secondhand shop and its collection of chipped cups and other assorted items, I saw them not as castoffs or junk but as treasures and testimonies to past times and valued experiences. Those who keep such shops and those who wander among the items, breathing in their stories, pay homage to the memories the artifacts represent. Such a store honors the “as is-ness” of the items, indeed honors even the cracks, the chips, the rips, and the stains. Those flaws show that the items were used, were vital objects of peoples’ lives. They are, therefore, still worthy of a place, “as is.” This realization led me to want to honor my flaws of aging as valued signs of my travel through time. I began to see the flaws as earned badges of being older. The manifestations of the passage of time we bear represent some of the most fulfilling moments bestowed upon us older folk.

I realized that getting older has not always seemed like a burden to me. A few years ago my college roommate and I decided to return to our 40th reunion. We had not seen each other for twenty-five years and were to meet in the Denver airport. Wondering if we would recognize each other, I e-mailed her that I would be wearing my sixty-three-year-old, overweight grandmother disguise, so she should keep that in mind as she watched for me. She replied that she would be wearing the same disguise. It was heartening to remember that age is not necessarily a bad thing. I am still in awe that I can look back on some forty years as an adult, yet I am also proud of that accomplishment. As I contemplated these issues connected to getting older and my “anomalies testifying to past use,” I realized my gratitude for the journey. For me this means my pride in two grown daughters and the joy of Rebecca—my granddaughter. She has been a delight to my heart for almost 10 years—she’s nine now. I loved her before she was born, and I have cherished her in the flesh from her birth. I love reliving the moment I first saw her. My daughter passed her to me, and then Rebecca and I were alone in her room. Her newborn eyes stared at me with that dark intensity only newborns have, and I felt a connectedness with her that is almost beyond words—child of my child, daughter of my daughter. Time stopped and I felt I had known her through eternity. Her piercing eyes said “I *know* you. I’ve known you before. We shall always be connected.” Our souls touched and embraced just as my arms embraced that new life.

So yes, the journey “through the course of time” has manifested in the gray hair, the wrinkles, and even the aches and pains I feel now. I choose the “as is-ness” of my current self since we cannot choose only the pluses but must accept them with the minuses as well. In fact, all would be the same without the opposite—yes, yin and yang. It takes me so long to come to the wisdom of the ages!

I have not yet completely solved the problem of the knee; it still does not feel “right,” and I have to solve the physical issue there. But I am making progress on the mental issue of the knee. It’s not just my knee. The issue is seldom the issue. It’s the feelings the knee ailment has given me: anger, worry, frustration, resentment, compassion, sympathy, fear, even a touch of ageism. Through Lauterbach’s piece, I came to see that I am the “as is” cup. Age and my journey through time have shaped who I am, and I need and want to accept that reality each day, the “as is-ness” of myself and accept and embrace myself as I am.

In one of those serendipitous moments that life brings, I was fortunate in hearing Lauterbach read the very piece that brought me to this realization. The reading was to be held in an old manor hall. As I walked from my dorm to the gathering, I approached the

building from the stone terrace at the rear. Some stones were broken and weeds were growing in some of the cracks. The building seemed in disrepair and showing signs of its age. However, when I entered the large hall adjoining the terrace, I felt embraced by the ambience of the old manor hall: warm, cherry-paneled walls, hand-carved ceilings, a welcoming fireplace, and vintage sconces lighting the grand drawing room. It spoke of the beauty of past ages. The aged wood and the character of the room whispered of the quality of longevity, the beauty of the old, the richness of antiquity. Although the grand hall did not show its flaws or chips or cracks earned over the course of time, it clearly evoked the value of years of use, spoke of the essence of experience, and the sublime comfort of being true to its age. The room spoke to me and helped me appreciate and embrace that which has traveled “through the course of time”—even my self now, “as is,” and in the future.

Writer’s Note

After receiving a grant to explore creativity through writing and painting workshops, I came to IWT intending to write about creativity. Instead, my body took my mind in another direction. A painful knee became first a distraction, then an obsession, and then—through the thoughtful prompts from workshop leader Irene Papoulis, the support of my Writing and Thinking group, and Ann Lauterbach's essay—an inspiration. When discussing our choices for a final writing piece, I told my group that I was torn between the “creativity” pieces and the “knee thing.” Irene asked, “Do we get to vote?” My group encouraged me to go with the “As Is” piece. My writing came full circle: instead of writing about creativity, as we writers repeatedly realize, I needed to let creativity lead the way. The various writing prompts we explored fell together in a kind of quilt, and thoughtful reading by journal editor Alfie Guy helped me find the thread that brought it all together.

Donna Singleton
Reading Area Community College
Reading, Pennsylvania

Making Flowers

It's hot hot hot. Luke has stripped off all his clothes in preparation for going to bed. Michael and I have procrastinated too long. Luke still has no air conditioner. So his ceiling fan is whirring around, creating a breeze that only allows you vaguely to recollect a time when the fever of this heat was broken. "Make the flowers, Mommy," Luke says, his voice warm and hopeful. I take his top sheet, which has major league baseball team logos all over it, and fling it up into the air as I grip one edge. It falls on his body like flower petals, like feathers. Luke reaches up to kiss me, and the time when I will no longer do this for Luke grows nearer.

Writer's Note

This began in a Writing and Thinking Workshop given at Friends Seminary in Manhattan by Emily A. Miller, June 1998. I cannot find the prompt, but I have never forgotten this little piece. Emily had us write five "short talks," each on a different index card, and we read them aloud. The index card limited the amount that we could write. I do not remember how we came up with the topics for the "short talks."

Sarah Spieldenner
Friends Seminary
New York, New York

Portrait

“Portrait of a Gold and Silversmith” (Northern Netherlands School)

Oil on Panel @1680

Portland Art Museum: Portland, Oregon (July, 2007)

1680: Amsterdam. An artist, working in the shadow of Rembrandt’s contemporaneous accomplishments, sets his palette of colors to a wood panel, painting a portrait of a fine-metal craftsman in his shop.

Later, a friend of mine tells me that the painter would have known that working on wood would be less forgiving than a stretched canvas. Either out of financial necessity or brazen confidence, he chooses the more challenging surface. Without the malleable depth and give, absorption and forgiveness of a workable stretched canvas, the wooden panel would have required, at the outset of every stroke and color applied, that he know well his own intentions.

All the more startling then is the masterful glow of light from within an otherwise dark room, shining from the silver smithy’s face. His right hand motions my attention to the sparks of silver surrounding his latest creation. Even so, he looks slightly afield from where the portraitist would have had to stand, and so too from my own position; his gaze instructs someone other than his portraitist to heed this work. Neither pride-filled nor joyful, the smithy’s face conveys a matter-of-fact intent: in his left hand, the elegant silver fruits of his craftsmanship.

I am gathering such detail, setting what’s visible to me onto my page, trying hard to forestall premature surmise as to the artist’s motivations or intended audience, the speculative bane of an anthropologist not yet long enough in the field. Yet, the more I gather, the more a story reveals itself, the dialogue I want to sustain with this smithy’s time and place a telltale of something I need to know.

Outside the window to the smithy’s right, a hillside of dark green forest, a rampart looming further above. The fortress’s sheer wall, barely visible, suggests an imposing, powerful vantage point. From the rampart, looking down, this workshop I’ve entered would easily be confused with hundreds of other indistinguishable urban rooftops.

A long-handled hammer lies casually upon the worktable, next to a canister of twenty-seven different punches. All he needs, the smithy’s glance affirms, with which to fashion the elegance expected by those who commission his exquisite craftsmanship.

His cloak, pulled together at his collar by a simply rendered gold brooch (surely of his own making), is set off from his neck by a fine salmon pink scarf, meticulously tied four-in-hand, without the final wraparound with which we are so familiar in the neckties of our own time. A dressing gown, also salmon colored, peeks out below his knees; his white satin cuffs reveal his considerable girth with which he has grown accustomed.

Alongside his tools, on the wall behind him, are hung the icons of his sensibilities: eight plaster casts of domestic scenes. Socrates on his deathbed, preparing to drink the hemlock poison, holds forth upon justice and the duty of the Athenian citizen; Castor and Pollux, the stellar twins, or perhaps Romulus and Remus taking shelter within the wolf's care; two young children's heads, in profile, face each other; a domestic scene, with classically draped figures, underscores cultured aspirations even within daily routine.

The painter's evident compulsion to document the workshop to its every detail holds me to my list, and stays any semblance of my adherence to museum protocol. As a sixty-year-old man, so much of what I look at, make meaning from, derives from cultural practices. As I deliberately catch the artifacts of a smithy being alive, I have little interest in ceding floor space to the next exhibit visitor.

Also pegged to the wall: a row of twelve different wooden mallets; three prongs for reaching into the molten forge that renders precious silver and gold both soft and pliant enough for meticulously punched relief; a slim spatula will draw the artifacts from their molds. Within the window frame, a good eighteen inches deep (given the heavy brick construction of the time), wire cutters and a jeweler's balance, its two shiny dishes upon their sides with rawhide supports draped about them.

Back to the table, the thin hammer's handle, and six or seven different pliers and tweezers inserted in a rack beneath the window looking out upon the forest's green. Elegantly carved spindles support his table; a parrot's head and wings spread across the peak of the chair that supports his solicitous posture.

Beginning with the smithy's exhibiting hand, through the array of his various instruments, across classic plaster models, out the window, and back again, from foreground to background and back to my own time, I come full circle to my own place, standing before his successes.

I consult the exhibit catalogue, soon impatient with how the authoritative description of this same image puts the silver shimmering pot in "his right hand." The catalogue mistakenly describes "his left hand as gesturing toward his creation," when actually his right hand does so. Is this a curatorial convention, to describe "right" and "left" in terms of the museum viewer's own perspective? Immersed as I've become, inside this man's world in which the nature of his work, self-image, and status are gleaming through to me, such contemporary exhibit conventions seem intrusive, obtuse, unwelcome.

Yet I find myself resorting to conventions of my own, an ethnographer trapped by a plethora of particulars, set interpretively loose within one image from a bygone age. I return to the carefully tended elements of his material culture, enticed by inferences I can't escape.

Two fist-sized busts, apparently of silver or pewter, are set before the smithy on his worktable. Neither is mentioned by the catalogue: a mature woman's scarf-draped head

and a puffy-cheeked, healthy child with precious curled locks. This must be his wife, her modest demeanor, glancing downward, balanced on a small porcelain pot; their child's head is set upon a broad spool painted a gentle wash of red. Salvage, perhaps, from a neighboring tailor's shop.

Displaying his accomplishments with the calm surety of someone who has done well, exhibiting his art to authenticate his mastery, the smithy can expect a lifetime of commissions.

Simon Schama, in his interpretation of Dutch culture in the Golden Age, argues that art of the late 17th century in Amsterdam set out to keep track of society's changes, among them the birth of a newly constituted "middle class," its members making things worthy of purchase, their values thereby producing the prospect for lives of their own choosing. Work would be taxing, driven as it had become by the expectations of eager clients. But labor is no longer the backbreaking, crude-hewing task of the farmer or the common field hand. Now, the sheer delicacy of wrists, the fine articulation of fingers wielding the instruments of a trade, can draw wealth and a future to even a smithy's life.

The smithy no longer has to struggle to feed an extended family through subsistence labor. Instead, he designs his own space, culled from the value he himself generates, supported by the capital of those who count on his craft to complement both their own status and their future continuing aspirations.

So why his avoidance of the artist's eye? Why his informing glance diverted away from the portraitist and from me? I grow uncertain that, on the basis of what is visible in his portrait, I can ever answer my own question. And yet, as I move from my list of what anyone can see, to what I am drawn to infer, to speculate about, to wonder, I grow wary of my enthusiasm for the narrative of time and place that I seem to be inventing.

The smithy very probably assures his wife's well-being and even that of his child, the chubby flush from a bountiful diet. The two of them are public testimony of his accomplishment, mother and son, as they venture out into the sprawling city. The two small busts embody a newly constituted egoism of the 17th century. The craftsman, and others like him, can count on his small household's future. Through a skill that is his own, he invents a newly constituted personhood, upwardly mobile, participating in the experiment of an emergent middle class.

And so I am left startled by the anonymity of his portraitist, another craftsman eager to establish himself. Is his proud subject's gaze, cast slightly aside, an artistic convention of the time? Or a signal of an awkwardness felt by the painter?

On a hard surface, borrowing the tension of light and dark that Rembrandt is riding to his own renown, daring to emulate the master without a forgiving canvas, the portraitist risks a great deal. Perhaps that is why he refuses to sign his own work. Finishing a portrait very likely commissioned by the smithy, the painter prepares himself for the delight of a

subject pleased at the outcome. But he must also have steeled himself for the impact on his own future should his client's expectations be unsatisfied by a poor resemblance.

To craft his own family, his own child's well-being, the painter is obliged to square off his artistic competence in the presence of another's accomplishments, attempting something of worth with his own hand. Is he a poor man not yet sure of his talent? Or perhaps a young painter, emulating Rembrandt, apprehensive that any resemblance to the master's work could be interpreted as a regrettable indiscretion, thereby threatening his aspirations?

Or might he instead be an elder master, finding his technique eclipsed by Rembrandt, opting for anonymity as shelter from unnecessary humiliation? Certainly he would have heard of Rembrandt's spectacular public destruction of his own work, driven to impulse by the vagaries of taste among a fickle new middle class, drawing discretionary confidence out of its own emerging wealth. Would this artist, in chosen anonymity, wish less association with the lauded van Rijn's intemperance?

And in the middle of all this, I grow apprehensive that what I bring to the moment, three hundred and twenty-five years later, bears its own concealments. My own inferences and speculations, borne of a 21st century sensibility, seem to be leading me further away from this meeting of two artisans, one artist facing off with another.

I can't help but imagine at least this to be plausible: both of them are wrestling with modernity's promise, of an accomplished, recognized individualism that can be earned, not assumed, chosen rather than assigned. But this conversation, between one accomplished subject, celebrating himself by commissioning his own image, and one aspiring or aging Dutchman, eager for but wary of the fortunes and misfortunes of an ambitious middle class, ends in a curious anonymity.

The painter with no name envisions a smithy's leap from a paucity of means to certain recognition and renown; yet the painter himself holds back. Less ebullient than his subject, more sober in his craft, he tracks with light and subdued color a society's new face.

A bold act, and the stakes are high. With each gentle, intentional stroke upon the carpentered crudity of a wooden surface, he risks his own aspirations, gambling with the prospects of being judged. Redirecting his subject's glance away from us both, he supposes what a modern modesty would require of him. Diverting his subject's direct gaze, there is only an intimated trace that we, present and curious, could be witnessing the meeting of equals.

Meanwhile, Rembrandt, well versed in his times, has already begun slashing away at the excesses of an emerging middle class.

My own vantage point, in spite of its speculative conclusion, is haunted by my own remove from the intimations of a painting. The follies of status and taste hover about,

now even as they did in 1680. For these two artisans, creativity's success has begun to link itself to the idiosyncrasies of being in the right place at the right time; fortune and undeserved misfortune lurk.

And I, a 21st century witness to the invitation of one man, a painter, into the life of another, confound the moment with my own sense of immediacy, presuming to join their silent but charged conversation, intrigued so unexpectedly by their intimacies, embedded as they seem to be within the material artifacts of a culture that surrounds us all.

Writer's Note

I find students skeptical that a dialectical notebook (DNB), considered before the fact as an assignment, will provide them with anything they would recognize as the "first draft" of an essay. I remind them of Norman Maclean's invocation that thinking is the movement from what is visible, to what you hadn't noticed, to what wasn't even visible to you before you began thinking. And so too, the notebook moves from first column observations that anyone could make, to your very own second-column inferences and speculations, to third-column peer response (fresh eyes to the rescue, seeing what you hadn't yet seen), to fourth-column wondering, needs, even new and better questions. The frame for a crafted essay! On this day, I had joined a group of young writers at the Fir Acres Workshop in Writing & Thinking, relishing flight from my director's duties, looking for relief to the assignment provided by my colleague, Jess Lamb: a dialogue with a work each of us would choose, part of a travelling exhibit of works by contemporaries of Rembrandt van Rijn. Sure enough, like some of my students, I was hesitant that the DNB would lead me to a satisfying result. Yet I began. As the details gathered in my "field notebook," so many particulars, I was drawn further into a 17th century culture I previously had had no intention of attempting to enter.

Robert D. Whittemore, Ph.D.
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Inhaling the Sea

The early morning sun poured down on the kids and me. Upon boarding, I had immediately sought the front nose of the boat to lie down to quell my queasiness. As the boat raced deep into the waters off Key Largo it bounced and lurched, and I took deep breaths of the salt air as I closed my eyes behind my sunglasses and adjusted my bikini for the least conspicuous tan lines. Even with a towel underneath me I could feel the thrusts of the prow bruising my spine and shoulder blades. The unpleasantly ripe smell of poorly groomed fourteen-year-old boys added to my nausea as they clustered against and above the expansive windshield of the boat. Their feet hung down like rows of sausages and the crew had to peer through them as they navigated their path. The girls lay in front of and beside me. I grimaced as one of their hooded figures cast a shadow on me, but she was too engrossed in her iPod to notice. Rebecca and Heather chatted loudly next to me and self-consciously tugged at their bathing suits. They gamely attempted to braid each other's windblown hair.

The ocean seemed infinite with only points of darkness and light. The crew monitored the approach to the shipwreck site and started making preparations for dropping the anchor. "Clear the deck!" "Time to suit up!" they yelled as they decelerated. The kids grabbed their towels and tried to grip the handrails and move to the back of the boat. The waves were rocking the boat, and no one but the crew and Wes had their sea legs. I hit my head hard on the fiberglass wall of the cabin and felt for blood. Under a cover in back was a center double row of PVC cylinders vaguely holding air tanks in place. Draped over them were all manner of buoyancy vests and wetsuits—some inside out, some blue, some black, some even neon green and silver. The tanks were big and heavy, often weighing fifty pounds. We checked the air, put the nylon straps around the tank, then commenced the ultimate torture, the wetsuit shimmy. We cursed under our breaths as we tugged on and up the spongy, clammy, wet, and shockingly resistant foam-like skins. We banged into each other like bowling pins and desperately fought the mounting nausea as now the boat had anchored and tilted to and fro as we did battle with the evil neoprene.

A girl lost it first, gakking her Waffle House breakfast and turning white. Then Rebecca in turn became pale. The domino effect of vomiting was in play—the sight, the sound, the smell can be cruelly contagious. Now we were in a panic. The crew surveyed us nervously and bellowed, "Pull on your tanks, get in line, and get in the water now!" One of the boys retreated to the steering wheel and fussed with his buoyancy device, trying to evade notice. I hurried to the seat next to the back gate of the boat, rinsed my mask in the white bucket of sea water after smearing it with anti-fog goo, adjusted my gear, awkwardly put on the long, overly pliant fins, and stepped backwards to the opening with Heather. We were checked, then nodded to each other and fell back into the dark ocean. It was rough, choppy than I had ever experienced despite growing up at the beach. The waves rolled up and down, and only releasing air into our vests kept us afloat. Heather was flailing next to me, her head sinking lower with each merciless set of murky waves. Her eyes were wide with fear. I felt my heart racing so fast, faster than when told by a loved one, "We need to talk," faster than being told you need to see the boss; it was the speed of primal fear, the explosive pounding of imminent loss. Heather was shaking

her head and going under, refusing to use either of her regulators. I heard nothing but her mute cries and forced my regulator into her mouth as we both inhaled the sea.

Writer's Note

I wrote "Inhaling the Sea" during the July 2008 Fiction from the Inside Out workshop led by Nancy Kline Piore. She encouraged us to experiment with different narrative views and styles. I wrote this during a focused free write. It was based on a weeklong eighth grade scuba diving trip during which the students were seeking certification after much training and classwork. I did revisions after submission to *Writing from the Inside Out*.

Katherine Zambetti
Holy Innocents Episcopal School
Atlanta, Georgia

Writing from the Inside Out was founded in 2006 by a small group of IWT associates. Published once a year, the journal is a showcase for and celebration of selected new works that have emerged from IWT at Bard workshops. Inside each issue, you'll find a varied collection of stories, poems, and essays that include process notes from the writers. IWT is a place where the collaborative spirit thrives and where we believe that there is deep connection between writing, teaching, and learning.

Interested in submitting your work? For the 2010 volume, please send a hard copy of your piece along with a cover letter and contact information by **September 30, 2009** to:

Brigid Dorsey
IWT
Bard College
PO Box 5000
Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504

If your piece is accepted for publication, you'll be asked to submit a process note at that time.

Annandale-on-Hudson
May 2009

Dear Reader,

The writers included in this volume of the IWT Journal write out experiences that are common to all of us—illness and disease, family tragedies, spiritual revelation, canonical texts that hold our imaginations. But they write in different genres, and each entry is distinct in style, tone, and voice. They are poems, essays, stories, memoir, and mixed genres. Each author employs “writerly toys”—or moves—that shaped everyday experience into fiction, poetry, collage, or essay.

Following each entry are reflections on how the piece came into being, a process note that the editors asked writers to include in their final edited version. Reflective writing about how a writer has made a story, poem, or essay—its origins, what was deleted, and what was added, once the idea began to be shaped—is a central practice in Institute workshops. It contains clues to the writer’s thinking as she or he constructed the piece. These process pieces are an important reminder to us—teachers and writers—that writing is constructed, is made, sometimes out of a sequence of free writes, sometimes out of a failed draft of a story or essay, other times out of responses we receive from others.

We look forward to reading your work in future IWT Journals.

Regards,

Teresa Vilardi
Director, IWT

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