

FAX: 865-908-5055

Appendix E - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Erin Geller

College: _____ Department: _____

Faculty Mentor: Marilyn KalletPROJECT TITLE: Storage(needs a better title!)

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Marilyn Kallet Faculty MentorDate: 4/23/03

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional):

This is a substantial body of work, lyrical, filled with inspired lines, laced with many publishable poems. "Rough Sex With an Ancient" conveys to us the poet's imaginative wildness, inspired sense of humor, and connection to tradition. There's still some polishing to do here + there, but overall this is an impressive body of work. Brava!

MK



STORAGE/LIMINAL LEMONS/STAGE FRIGHT
ERIN GELLER

Disclaimer

Obviously the organization of this manuscript has undergone some revision. I decided to scrap the specifically *Dreamworks*-oriented chapter, as all poetry involves exploration of the subconscious to some extent. That section is now merged with the fuzzily-defined “for the page” chapter to form a section that encompasses experimentation with form and self-exploration. The second chapter consists of poems that specifically reflect the liminal space in history that contemporary artists inhabit, and the third section remains the collected performance babbles.

The introduction attempts to construct an argument defending contemporary poetry on the basis of its innovative nature, historical significance, and potential mass appeal. It includes a brief critique and explanation of the manuscript that follows, but the primary emphasis remains on those poets and movements that have influenced and inspired me.

This is my first book, and its quality will undoubtedly reflect that, no matter how much I revise. I anticipate that I will look back on this manuscript in five years and find it fraught with thematic inconsistencies, syntactical problems, clunky, sluggish, or clipped rhythms, perhaps outright clichés.

This is my first book, so I beg of you, be kind to it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Storage
 - Sunflower Trilogy
 - Grotto Falls
 - Little Old Depraved May
 - Violets
 - Better Than Rabbits
 - The Biological Tanning Timer
 - The Party
 - Storage
 - Unknown Pop Star
 - A Rough Night
 - From Unparadise
 - Our Room While You Sleep
 - The Other Night
 - May's Escape
 - Blimp
 - All Hallows' March
 - Kudzu Monsters

- II. Liminal Lemons
 - Annus Ridiculous: 2001
 - Agnostic
 - Love Eats Inspiration
 - Mush in the Petri Dish
 - Biomass
 - Roadbound
 - Parallel Genesis
 - Apocalypse Jingle

(approx. 5 more)

- III. Stage Fright
 - Submission Street
 - Flashback/Panic Attack
 - Quarantine
 - Flash Floods
 - No Such Thing as Civilization
 - Take Away Time
 - Mouse Song (First Babble)
 - The Worst Mess Ever

(approx. 2 more)

Kudzu Monsters

That tyrannosaurus was born a tree—
metamorphosed to a telephone pole—
now its mute jaws gape
with tangles of hanging flora.

It creeps a little closer every day—
tomorrow its claws may cross our threshold.

Green giraffe behind it was a steeple—
gutted church bursts with infant vines—
pulpit's a snakehandler's roped-off heaven.

The thing they serve is no real savage.
Safety-pins fasten his loincloth
tight across gym-swollen ripples.

He prunes his menagerie
lovingly—they advance while he sleeps.
while he watches my window,
while he's out shopping.

Volkswagen bus-turned-rhinoceros
slouches four feet closer overnight—
Kids inside stay lashed to their seats—
Last one alive hums "Sugar Magnolia,"
thrashes to transmit a warning:
He's on his way back.

Weed-whip clatters on asphalt—
I take flight. He rides my heels,
sweaty socks in Birkenstocks
slapping the street, raunchy spank
of clammy flesh gaining momentum

Two pockets full of Miracle-gro,
my only hope—
I sling it at the monsters' mouths—
New shoots tear loose
to penetrate and devour.

They'll get me next—
have to keep moving—
Legs take root through cracks
in the road—

Plaque at the Kudzu Monster Museum:
*This pterodactyl on the verge of flight
was born a little girl.
She swore to slay her keeper
or die trying.*

All Hallows' March

I suppose we drove through a warp—I emerge from a half-drunk doze, on the wrong road, to coughs of protest, engine strangling and dashboard creaking under a hail of fists. I steer the Cavalier carefully into a ditch.

Nondescript kids in a pickup haul us to a closed BP and bail. Payphones in this dimension munch on money and make no contact—thus the trek begins.

Chapman Highway is long and the median is craggy—damp grass, platform boots, and night blindness enhance the treachery—nevermind that my usual crutch is four lanes away, trumpeting obscenities into the dark. Two jagged holes in a wispy hump of cloud glare ghostly indifference—cold crescent moon leers below, bares its fangs, and retreats into a black hole.

Wind whips up weird odors—cotton candy, sulfur, oranges—something shrieks and chatters from spidery limbs of a dead tree. A hearse, a bread truck, and a school bus blaze past every half hour—I wave and stagger but no one stops.

Blue sun smolders a ring around the horizon and I'm almost relieved to see the cops. Daylight casts no reason—it only sifts through the nonsense of shadow, seeks to sculpt the edges of indefinable shapes.

The Worst Mess Ever

Puke, beer, bongwater, manure...
you can't expect us to be pure
but this is ridiculous!
You've got to scrape and scrub,
sweep under the rug
to find the chaos beneath the disorder that's under the mess.
That's life as a working kid, I guess...
but it's the state of our souls, truth be told it's the whole damn world,
how we tuck away every scrap like squirrels,
like we've earned the right to be tired.
That's the luxury you're denied
in the pursuit of patience, success,
motivation, cleanliness...

Nobody wants a joyless slug—
Love and drugs should be enough—
but everyone needs gratitude, a little energy
so why not get down in the mud with me?
We'll dance drink and slide till we're all slippery
then claw our way out in the morning
till before you know it, without any warning
the walls are gone, they just dissolve,
tumble like cards into the outstretched palm
of the biggest meanest cardshark of all
and it calls itself God...?

So it comes down to that?
I'm exposed as a fraud,

Abandoned on a bare green hill
to trust my instincts and build my will
and make up stories about suckling from wolves
kicking the moon out of gravity's pull
founding failing empires that rise at my command
with maids to take the bottle
and the mop from my hand

With shelter, food, and love
it's easy to think you're blessed—
but you're still a speck of dust,
no different from the rest,
a beautiful horrible accident
in a catastrophic mess.

Biomass

“We’re running out of smooshed-up dinosaurs!”
I scream at the old ladies whose SUV’s
plow through my cornfield.

The bitches are paying customers, though,
so I’m compelled to apologize.
I offer a palmful of earth, explain

about the wars
 over the fuel
beneath its skin.

I harvest their scattered merchandise
(all factory seconds)
from between the rows—
okra, squash, and comforter sets
sleeved in slippery plastic.

I’m pleased to discover
the ladies are seconds, too.
“Slightly Irregular.”
One eye listing sideways,
twisting crooked lips,
noses an inch askew.

Low-strung wires hum,
glow green above the farmhouse.

Corn and cannabis bow low
to whisper incantations:
ethanol. leave it all.
time to fall.

One old lady pulls a jar
from her Mary Poppins purse.
We pass it around,
learn each other’s real names.

She’s the one with the vegetable son
(since the motorcycle wreck)
and it’s his voice welling up
from between the rows.

When the jar is drained
we roll the SUV’s off the cliff
at garden’s edge,
offer the dinosaurs a proper burial.

Erin Geller's Senior Honors Project

Outline: So-called "critical introduction" to *Storage/Liminal Lemons* or whatever I decide to name my collected babbles.

Thesis: Contemporary poetry deserves an important place in any literature curriculum. Its innovative nature, mass appeal, and historical significance prove that poetry is alive and well in the English-speaking world, and cultivating an appreciation for it among the young will yield a wealth of benefits.

I. The poetry of recent years represents an unprecedented explosion of diverse voices and styles. Every day, new artists are expanding the parameters of genre and form, creating a distinctive new poetry to lead us into the twenty-first century.

A. Female poets are writing more boldly and prolifically than ever before, transcending mere feminism to embrace the full scope of activism, gender, and sexuality.

Examples/Evidence: Mary Oliver, Lucille Clifton, Rita Dove, Sharon Olds, Adrienne Rich...

B. Poets are experimenting with form and medium like never before.

Examples/Evidence: Galway Kinnell, Beyond the New Formalism, the legacy of William Carlos Williams, Billy Collins...

C. Multicultural poetry is undergoing a resurgence in America.

Examples/Evidence: Native American, Asian-American, African American poets, Amiri Baraka, legacy of Langston Hughes, segue to...

II. The performance poetry explosion may be the most significant development in poetry of the late 20th century.

A. Slam brings together poets of widely varying ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and probably represents the most important step towards delivering poetry to a mass audience.

Examples/Evidence: History of slam, links to oral tradition

B. Why is appreciation of poetry important outside academia? How does slam promote this appreciation?

Examples/Evidence: "Fans" and slam poets who might not otherwise experience poetry. Slam as "gateway" medium. Value of poetry as catharsis and social criticism.

C. The performance poetry scene is a rapidly changing world that keeps abreast of current events and pop culture; thus, it captures and preserves the concerns of a generation more accurately and engagingly than other literary media.

Examples/Evidence: Specific poets and poems. Tracie Morris, Paul Beatty, Maggie Estep etc.

III. Contemporary poets are creating art from a liminal space that will be of great interest to future generations.

A. Literature from periods of great historical transition is always significant, revealing, and historically valuable.

Examples/Evidence: War poetry, from the *Iliad* to Vietnam, Harlem

Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, woman suffrage & liberation

B. The turn of the millennium is a significant historical event in and of itself, overshadowed only by the events which have accompanied it.

Examples/Evidence: 9/11, “war on terror,” stolen election, technological revolution, threat of “holy war” in the absence of God

C. The youngest generation of poets has a uniquely unsullied perspective on the world around them and the art it inspires. Thus, it is the responsibility of educators, parents, and the literary community both to teach them and to hear them.

Examples/Evidence: Teach contemporary poets to help new poets avoid cliché in their own work, finding inspiration, publishing and performance options (how to be heard)...

IV. Where does my own work fit into this picture? Maybe nowhere, but the current literary climate has shaped me artistically as much as our language’s rich poetic tradition has.

A. My own experiments with form: A prose poem, varying line lengths, structure and meter, and one lonely sonnet. Discovering poetry; personal influences and favorites.

B. My attempts to perform: What the slam has taught me, my local influences, strengths and weaknesses, the speech problem, conformity

C. Writing from a liminal space: how my work has changed over the last year or so, less confession and more awareness, where I’m going...

V. Conclusion. Contemporary poetry should be introduced into the curriculum almost as soon as students begin to study literature.

A. Young people’s disinterest in the literary arts can be remedied by early exposure to the fresh and vibrant world of contemporary poetry.

B. Presenting poetry as something versatile and exciting can help students to discover the intrinsic value of poetry outside an academic setting.

STORAGE

Erin Geller

(Senior Honors Project)

Innards

Introduction.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	17
I. Storage	
-Sunflowers.....	19
-Kudzu Monsters.....	21
-New Era.....	22
-Storage.....	23
-Grotto Falls.....	24
-Little Old Depraved May.....	25
-The Biological Tanning Timer.....	26
-Flawed Perception.....	27
-A Rough Night.....	28
-From Unparadise.....	29
-Our Room While You Sleep.....	30
-Rough Sex With an Ancient.....	31
-May's Escape.....	32
-All Hallows' March.....	34
-The Party.....	35
-Last Resort.....	36
II. Liminal Lemons	
-Annus Ridiculous: 2001.....	38
-Parallel Genesis.....	39
-Roadbound.....	40
-Mush in the Petri Dish.....	41
-Love Eats Inspiration.....	42
-Biomass.....	43
-Tumblebuggy.....	44
-Apocalypse Jingle.....	45
-Violets.....	46
-Blimp.....	47
-Agnostic.....	48
III. Stage Fright	
-Mouse Song (First Babble).....	50
-Word Power.....	51
-Damaged Goods/Trickster's Super Pawn.....	54
-The Worst Mess Ever.....	55
-Take Away Time.....	56
-No Such Thing.....	57
-Flash Floods.....	58
-Quarantine.....	59
-Brain Lab.....	60
-Submission Street.....	62
-Flashback/Panic Attack.....	63

Introduction

It's Alive! The Condition of Contemporary Poetry

Storage represents the collected works of a 21-year-old undergraduate. I will always be a student, of course—the state of perpetual learning and growth is one to be prized above all others—but at this stage of my artistic and intellectual development, I accept my overwhelming greenness. I have so much yet to read and experience that naiveté must permeate these pages. I hope, however, that the reader can find some redeeming value in the thirty-something poems that my brief college career has spawned, and that these works are somehow relevant to the contemporary poetic environment.

I may have failed in my attempt to organize these poems thematically. Initially, I wanted the lyric or “literary” poems to encompass two neat sections. “Storage” would be devoted to explorations of the subconscious and *inner* reality, while “Liminal Lemons” would include studies of the world outside, particularly those that attempt to reflect our place in history and the condition of our world at the turn of the millennium. Upon completion of the manuscript, it became evident that the two sections would necessarily overlap, despite my best efforts to sort them. These dual realities are too interdependent, and human consciousness too fundamentally *whole*, to ever separate them. I have done my best, though, to separate the personal from the global.

The third and final section consists of performance poetry, a genre I have only recently discovered. These poems do not translate as well on the page, and they are about as far from the literary or academic mainstream as poetry can get. This work encompasses themes from free-floating paranoia to the soul-crushing tedium of working

in retail, but aspires to avoid romance as well as purely attitude-driven rants. I've been too quiet for too long, so now that I'm speaking, it's important that I have a message. It is performance poetry, more than anything else, which has convinced me that poetry is alive and well in the English-speaking world. Performance poems may be rambling, verbose, even occasionally vulgar, but they are *real* in a way that much mainstream poetry is not. Performance poetry is genuine communication, steeped in a centuries-old oral tradition and projected directly from poet to audience. A good poem stands up as well on the page as on the stage; whether mine accomplish this is for the reader to decide. Whatever these poems lack in polish, they attempt to compensate for in sincerity and truth. Poetry is experiencing an underground revolution that may be televised, but probably won't be anthologized.

The poems in the first two sections obviously owe a tremendous debt to the Modernists. A beloved professor of mine recently recommended that we strive to "exorcise" Yeats and Eliot from our work, but I'm not sure I'm ready to do that yet. These men had too profound an impact on my poetic development for me to abandon them just now. The definitive example of this impact occurred on September 11, 2001. I was sitting in my Modern British and American Poetry class at 10 AM, nibbling blankly on animal crackers and wondering what the hell was going on in New York and Washington; I had heard of that morning's events from a janitor on an elevator, but I still wasn't sure exactly what had transpired. The professor, whom I will always remember as the kind, elbow-patched bearer of bad news, soon came in, filled us in as best he could, and then proceeded tentatively with the day's lesson. The poem we were to discuss that day was Yeats' "Second Coming." That morning, every line seemed so charged with

eerie resonance that WWI and Yeats' Irish nationalism became insignificant in relation to the poem's sheer timelessness and prophetic power. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (lines 3-4) whirled through my mind for days.

By the time the initial shock and grief had passed and the flags were flying, the course had progressed chronologically to the study of another Modernist: Phillip Larkin. His "Annus Mirabilis" inspired my rather cynical response to that year's tragicomic media circus, "Annus Ridiculous: 2001." However dated my poem may seem now, I am proud of it because it represents my first step fully outside my own skin. I had never written a political poem before. I know no one cares about the effect of such a monumental event on my artistic development—after all, it affected *everyone*—but it changed me permanently as a person and a poet, and therefore warrants mention here.

The "May" poems sprang, in their earliest incarnations, from Eliot's "Gerontion." Eliot's use of allusion tends to result in anthologies with $\frac{3}{4}$ page of footnotes per $\frac{1}{4}$ page of poem, a tendency I lack the desire or storehouse of knowledge to emulate, but Eliot continues to inspire me with the complexity of his vision. "Depraved May" in "Gerontion" is the month when "Christ the tiger" comes "to be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk" (lines 20-23). I admire these lines because of the view of organized religion that they project as well as the imagery they invoke. In my poems May becomes the living embodiment of such a season. She is on one hand the female counterpart of the dry, wizened character that Eliot creates, yet she is also that living force of creativity and deconstruction that seeks to tear down conventional barriers of morality, structure, and consciousness.

Now that I have acknowledged the older generation to whom contemporary poets owe the greatest debt, it is necessary to discuss the various communities into which I might try to assimilate myself. The poetry of recent years represents an unprecedented explosion of diverse voices and styles. Every day, new poets are expanding the parameters of genre and form, creating a distinctive new body of work. In a world where AIDS, terrorism, and school shootings are facts of daily life, it is often difficult to assign a purpose to such a seemingly ethereal art form as poetry, but its functions in this reality are manifold. While by no means neglecting the rich poetic traditions of the past, contemporary poets know that they must elaborate upon the existing canon to create art that is fresh and relevant.

Poets are experimenting with form and medium like never before. Following in the footsteps of such innovators as William Carlos Williams, whose red wheelbarrow, white chickens, and crisp plums left such an indelible mark on the landscape of modern poetry, contemporary poets continue to discover new shapes, rhythms, and media for their work. The results are occasionally puzzling; the “Language” school, for example, which became popular in the late seventies and early eighties, focuses primarily on the sounds and words themselves. These works, by poets such as Susan Howe and Ron Silliman, are often fascinating in their surreal obscurity, though most lack a coherent narrative thread. Even in the most strictly academic circles, experimentation has been praised (in theory) almost to the point of becoming commonplace, but forms continue to evolve in fascinating ways. One such “academic” example is Galway Kinnell, whose work is nearly always included in literature courses that emphasize contemporary poets. At 74, Kinnell has long since achieved “canonical status” (Beach 83) in the minds of

critics, and his work is securely situated within the mainstream. Since we have such a complete body of work as a reference, it is easy to identify the progression away from traditional forms and toward greater innovation between Kinnell's first collection, 1960's *What a Kingdom It Was*, and 2001's *New Selected Poems* (Hoover 3). His craftsmanship is evident because he proved his ability to master conventional forms before choosing to subvert them. Billy Collins, the current poet laureate of the United States, is another poet who continuously innovates while remaining firmly rooted within the poetic mainstream. He is perhaps the most popular poet in America, and is often criticized for the over-accessibility of his work, but it is just that accessibility that will open up the world of poetry to the younger generation. Further, Collins exhibits an outright contempt for traditional forms, and does his best work in graceful free verse (Darling). Described by one critic as a "feigning trickster" who is "self-aware and parodic" (Baker 133-34), Collins uses a clever wit to make the "serious knowledge" (136) more palatable. These two revered contemporaries share an acute ability to praise the ordinary, a broad attitude toward form, and great public acclaim.

This would certainly be a shoddy discussion of contemporary poetry if it remained limited to elderly white men. Female poets are writing more boldly and prolifically than ever before, transcending mere feminism to embrace the full scope of activism, gender, and sexuality. These are topics that my "page" poetry tries conspicuously to avoid, though the themes are present in imagery and metaphor, but which are more apparent in the performance work. In post-Sexual Revolution America, scholars must remain aware of the presence and implications of gender in literature. In the Pulitzer Prize-winning *American Primitive* and her many other critically acclaimed

collections, Mary Oliver often uses nature as a medium for exploring the significance of the earth, of fertility, and of sorrow. I borrowed this technique, though not directly from Oliver, in "Grotto Falls." One attribute of Oliver's I do strive to emulate is the presence of the cycles of life and feminine creative power even in poems where the speaker is not necessarily a woman, as she does so successfully in "Morning Poem." Lucille Clifton, author of *The Book of Light*, *Blessing the Boats*, and many others, uses a short-lined, tight and tidy style to reflect upon monumental tragedies without a trace of bitterness. Whether she is writing about her struggles with cancer and kidney failure, the hideous dragging death of a man in Jasper, TX, or the concept of Superman, Lucille Clifton's namesake light permeates even her darkest lines, illuminating the human condition in all its horror and beauty. Hers is a serenity and wisdom I dare not affect for at least another 30 years. Like most young writers who have only been aware of the extent of the world's cruelty for a decade or so, I have not yet learned to keep bitterness and cynicism out of my work. While righteous rage is healthy and gratifying, bitterness only causes ulcers.

Multicultural poetry is undergoing a resurgence in America, led by strong Native-, African-, Hispanic-, and Asian-American voices. The legacy of influential and diverse poets from Pablo Neruda to Langston Hughes has opened the doors for poets of all ethnic backgrounds to instill their work with a sense of cultural identity, empowerment, and reactions to oppression and discrimination. I can relate to this phenomenon in only marginal ways; my estrangement from my father and his faith makes me feel nervous and unworthy of exploring my Jewish heritage in verse, and my involvement with Knoxville's racially mixed but primarily African-American poetry slam has made this plain white girl an ethnic minority for the first time. With violence

and misunderstanding still rampant in America's urban and rural communities, it is essential for students to be exposed to the voices of diverse cultures. America is suffering from an absence of "intelligent political poetry" (Gregerson 47), and so far, multicultural poets seem to work the hardest to fill that void. Rita Dove and Lucille Clifton are two such poets; so are Li-Young Lee, Garrett Hongo, Amiri Baraka, Joy Harjo, Sandra Cisneros, and countless others.

Amongst the many "hyphenated Americans" whose voices seek a place in literary culture are other minority groups whose verses tackle issues of exclusion and discrimination, such as gay and lesbian poets. Poets in this genre have created some of the most poignant and erotic poetry of the last fifty years, and as their lifestyles become more widely accepted, their perspectives expand as well. "Sunflowers" is a suite of love poems about a girl, and until I wrote it (over the course of three years) and presented it in various workshops, I never realized the kinds of reactions that even the slightest hint of homoeroticism elicits. The feedback was mostly positive and encouraging, though, which seems to illustrate my generation's increasing open-mindedness. Nearly all minority-group poetry seems to exhibit a delicate tension between the celebration of one's natural culture and the condemnation of intolerance. Even the angriest voices can work to stir compassion and understanding in the minds of readers, if those readers' attention can be engaged by the vibrant and lively style that so many emerging poets exhibit. Not only do minority poets expose readers to new philosophies, frontiers, and integration of cultures, but they also encourage young writers to explore their own heritage and identity. Angry voices get loud, and loud voices get heard.

Loud voices may be the future of poetry; in fact, the performance poetry explosion may be the most significant development in poetry of the late 20th century. The slam scene, in particular, brings together poets of widely varying ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and probably represents the most important step toward delivering poetry to a mass audience. Most sources agree that slam was founded by Marc Smith at Chicago's Green Mill Tavern in 1987. Called "the most potent grass-roots arts movement in the country," slam is an extremely un-academic poetry competition that has swept college campuses, coffee houses, and bars across the country (Holman 9). The rules are simple: poets are not allowed to use props, and the poem must be less than three minutes long. Judges are chosen randomly from the audience and score each poet on a scale of one to ten. Performance counts as much as content, and both winners and losers receive some reward, from a bag of chips to \$20 to, eventually, national recognition. "The slam itself is as different from a conventional poetry reading as a punk-rock concert is from a classical string quartet," (Beach 128) but it is impossible to assess which has the greatest cultural value.

My own experience with the slam has been at least as rewarding as the poetry classes I've taken. I've won second place and come in dead last, but every event has been enriching and, most importantly, fun. Who knows, some day I might even win one! The ancient genre of performance poetry has come under particular scrutiny since its recent pop-culture revival. Some critics may regard slam as a bourgeois dumbing-down of high art, and indeed, it is often host to some of the worst poetry the youth of America has to offer, but the important thing to remember is that slam effectively delivers poetry to a broad audience. Why shouldn't students gain exposure to the most fun and accessible

poetics available, and *then* delve into the canonical texts that influence contemporary writers? Why shouldn't poetry have "fans?" Slam poets are drawing on a rich tradition, one that predates the written word. A great wealth of classical literature would not exist without the oral tradition. This does not necessarily mean that today's Ovids and Homers are rocking coffeehouse mikes on Wednesday nights, but it should remind audiences that this work is relevant and historically grounded. In more recent times, the work of Beat poets like Allen Ginsburg opened doors in the spoken-word arena, incorporating surreal explorations of consciousness with literary complexity and fascinating delivery. The Beats were subject to the expected barrage of criticism in their time, but are usually respected today; this should serve as a gentle reminder to critics who are too quick to dismiss slam on the basis of its populist leanings. Perhaps it is a commercialization of fine art, but we can helplessly lament the consumer culture into which our children are born, or we can work around it, make the most of it, and do everything in our power to keep poetry alive. If the performance aspect is emphasized at the expense of literary quality, it serves as a reminder that performance poetry is a gateway medium. It is not the be-all and end-all of contemporary poetry, but it is by far the most unique and inclusive genre. It has taken the concept of a poetry reading from "a beard chained to a podium" (Holman 10) to an enthusiastic gathering of lyrical potency. In *The United States of Poetry*, editor Bob Holman observes that "[i]n this country, for generations, poetry has been a creak on exhibit at the Dust Museum, something written by the Dead" (9). Performance poets seek to bring it back to life. It is reassuring to know that the oral tradition has survived into the digital age.

Poetry fulfills its functions as catharsis and social critique most effectively out loud, in public, and on a stage. The performance poetry scene is a rapidly changing world that keeps abreast of current events and pop culture; thus, it captures and preserves the concerns of a generation more accurately and engagingly than other literary media. Many performance poets use the stage as a true political platform, supplementing rhythm with intonation and rage with humor. The most popular performance poets, such as Maggie Estep, Paul Beatty, Reg E. Gaines, Tracie Morris, and Sekou Sundiata, deliver potent social criticism in poetry that stands up nearly as well on the page as on the stage. The media by which this poetry is delivered separates it further from academic poetry. In addition to slams and open-mike events, these poets have been featured on MTV and in films such as *Words in Your Face* and *The United States of Poetry* (Beach 149). If, as Marshall McLuhan said, “the medium is the message,” then audiences are left to conclude that performance poetry seeks to deliver a very different message than its academic counterparts. In this case, however, the axiom does not seem to hold.

Sundiata’s aspiration to seek “the ancient roots of poetry in myth and drama, chant, ritual and dance” is not so far removed from the historical probings of conventional literary studies, and performance poets’ explorations of cultural identity share content and tone with those poets who write exclusively for the page. The differences between performance and academic poetry serve only to illustrate the broad range of voices and audiences that this art form can encompass. In his 1999 study, *Poetic Culture*, Christopher Beach wonders, “Will slam poetry become part of the creative writing curriculum?” (149). In 2002, his question has been answered, as many universities now offer performance poetry workshops and seminars. This “increasing interchange and

hybridization” (150) is a sign that new and important movements in poetry are slowly being recognized and incorporated into the canon.

Why, though, is poetry important outside an academic context? Sure, that’s an easy question for a passionate fledgling poet to answer, but what if the audience in question is a truck driver or a geologist? Surely these meager verses have little value in real-world currency, so why preserve and perpetuate poetry in the popular forum? Aside from the social and cathartic values cited above, poetry can instill all people with a deeper understanding of the language they speak, its history, its power, and its future. The Language poets’ pure-language approach is not necessary for this to occur; awareness of the human condition is often most evident in images and ideas that are concrete and tangible. Amiri Baraka said, “I make a poetry with what I feel is useful and can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives” (135). In a sense, the “usefulness” of the poetic content becomes the perception of everyday life, with all of its everyday injustices. Poetry, like all art, becomes a way to encapsulate, to explain, or at least to make sense of this ever-changing world. Breaking away from tradition, even while building upon it, serves this goal by keeping the art as dynamic as the environment itself. Ginsburg wrote that “[t]he only poetic tradition is the Voice out of the burning bush” (131). Thus, artistic expression remains more rooted in the elemental and the spiritual than in any fixed form or academic medium.

Contemporary poets are creating art from a liminal space that will be of great interest to future generations. Literature from periods of widespread transition is always significant, revealing, and historically valuable, especially when those periods are fraught with conflict and social unrest. The Trojan War gave us the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Every

major conflict in Western civilization has inspired poetic reflection that is studied as historical text. Take, for instance, Crane's writings on the Civil War, Wilfred Owen's poignant reactions to WWI before his death in combat, the chilling array of literary reactions to the Holocaust, or the great wave of lyrical protest that accompanied Vietnam. Consider the vast feminist avant-garde that emerged from the movement for women's liberation, or the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance from the pit of racism and segregation, and the wave of powerful voices that followed. Rita Dove wouldn't be *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* had that historical act of protest not occurred; the arts mirror the concerns of society, and contemporary society has plenty to be concerned about.

The turn of the millennium is a significant historical event in and of itself, overshadowed only by the events that have accompanied it. First, according to some, enough Americans were disenfranchised in the 2000 election that the presidency was effectively stolen. This is not a universal view, of course, but it has bred unrest amongst voters, and this unrest, in turn, has inspired artistic reactions. Then, when September 11, 2001 changed everything, art changed too. America woke up and grew self-aware. As of this writing, it is too soon to say whose reactions will become indelibly inscribed in the canon of historical literature; one can only pray that Bruce Springsteen isn't the only one singing America's strength and turmoil. In a nearly godless society, something freakishly dubbed a "holy war" now looms unbidden; these events are not "material" for poetry and they are certainly not "inspiration," but reactions to such cataclysmic events are inevitable. In these situations, the cathartic and social-criticism functions of poetry work simultaneously to define and assuage the anger and grief of an entire nation. Leaders react with bombs, concerned citizens with letters to the editor, and poets with poetry.

The technological revolution is another turn-of-the-millennium event that has impacted poetry in a variety of ways. In this case, the effect has been on medium and distribution rather than content. I'm a poetic nobody, the absolute bottom of the barrel, but perform a Google search for my name, and there I am on Sonnet Central! Online searches are fairly accurate ways of gauging a poet's renown; Sekou Sundiata yields 1,830 hits, and Lucille Clifton gets over 5,000. Every single poet mentioned above has a homepage devoted to him or her, and innumerable amateur poets are now able to self-publish via the Internet. An expansive exchange of ideas is now possible, allowing the art to evolve more quickly than ever before. Poets have more contact with their peers, and their work reaches a broader audience. MP-3 recordings of performance poets are only a click away, and poetry discussion groups and fan sites abound. All of this exposure is breathing new life into an ancient art form, promoting an eclectic and widespread discourse on the future of poetry.

Despite all of this diversity and advancement, it is unlikely that I or many of my peers will ever make careers for themselves as poets. Unless we sell our souls to Hallmark, the market simply isn't there. The poets of the current generation may have a more difficult task at hand (or a more stimulating challenge, if the situation is regarded optimistically) than any generation before. For even the greatest writers, poetry is not usually a career, but nor is it a "hobby." Many are lucky enough to secure careers in academia and thereby earn the opportunity to work immersed in their craft. These scholars quickly discover the limitations and prejudices inherent in this setting; once they sense the tension, they should work to transcend the artificial boundaries created by university walls, and encourage all forms of creative expression. This is why I am

pursuing a course of study as an educator; one of my motives is working to further incorporate contemporary poetry into the curriculum. With football receiving more funding than the arts ever will, it is hardly surprising that academic institutions are especially unwilling to fund programs to explore new voices and techniques in poetry. As for the public secondary schools where I will probably be working, parents and educators are understandably hesitant to allow their tax dollars to fund a notoriously “flaky” area of study. It is within the grasp of this generation to elevate poetry to the lofty space in public consciousness that it once occupied. Most universities do have adequate creative writing programs staffed by an array of scholars and innovators, but there is always room for improvement. For instance, at most liberal arts institutions, there are certain English courses that all students must take, regardless of major. Is it unreasonable to expect that contemporary poetry would make an appearance, albeit a brief one, in the only college-level English course a student ever takes? Many non-English majors loathe their basic composition courses due to the dry subject matter and preoccupation with mechanics. It would be a refreshing break for these students to spend a class period or two reading, discussing, or creating a new poem rather than composing yet another five-paragraph essay on gun control or abortion. Introducing poetry into the curriculum early would culturally enrich America’s students and bring some much-needed sparkle into tedious English classes.

So, how do we, as students, teachers, and poets, promote the emergence of new poetic voices? The youngest generation of poets has a uniquely unsullied perspective on the world around them and the art it inspires. We see the world devolving into madness, yet we cling to the idea that human nature may still be fundamentally good, and we

eschew the notion that “everything has already been said.” In one of his popular performance pieces, Knoxville poet Daniel Roop responds to that statement by asserting that *we haven’t said it yet!* Every new poet has his or her own unique voice to contribute, and it is the responsibility of educators, parents, and the literary community not only to teach these young minds, but to listen to them as well. Parents should read poetry to their young children and give books of it to their older children. English teachers should make a point of exposing their students to a broad range of poets, including contemporary poets. Young people’s disinterest in the literary arts can be remedied by early exposure to the lively and pop-culture-laced spectrum of contemporary poetry, and presenting poetry as something versatile and exciting can help students to discover the intrinsic value of poetry outside an academic setting. More significantly, poetry can help students to understand their own roles and the roles of their generation in a rapidly-changing world. It is essential that the literary community keep an open mind and embrace the full spectrum of emerging poetic voices. Mediocrity and cliché may be as pervasive as they ever were, but the best poets are getting better every day. The more poetry young writers are exposed to, the more intelligence and clarity will be present in their own work. The only way to avoid cliché is to read voraciously and broadly. Educators can guide students toward the best that poetry has to offer, so long as they stay abreast of emerging trends and innovations. Teachers can also be valuable resources to help young writers discover publishing and performance options, as my advisor has done for me. From chapbook contests to the Internet to the local poetry slam, opportunities abound for new voices to be heard. Not since the Romantic period has poetry been a viable career option, but it is essential to preserve and build its reputation as a respectable art form. Supporting the

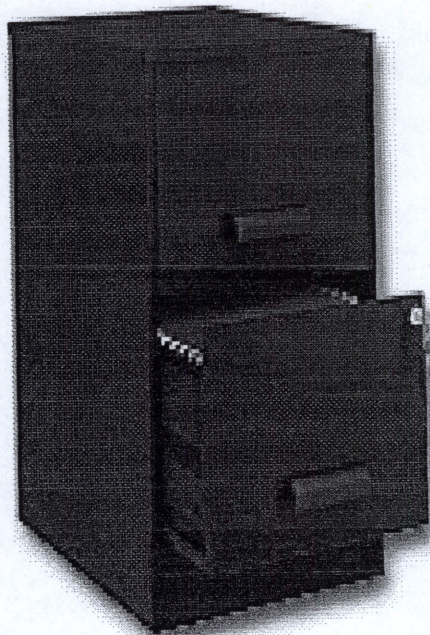
endeavors of contemporary poets helps to guarantee the continued survival of the entire canon, so that the next generation of teachers and dreamers can proudly call themselves poets.

Thank you, thank you, thank you!!!

I am incredibly grateful to the following people for their guidance, encouragement, and inspiration:

Mom, Nana, Jesse, Sandra, Uncle Ed, Mrs. Ellerbee, Ms. Lewis, Everyone at the Knoxville Slam, Dr. Smith, Dr. Atwill, and especially Dr. Marilyn Kallett.

STORAGE



Sunflowers

I. Adolescent Sonnet

Across a field prickled with cactus and palm,
through air that tingled with the breath of spring,
exalted, I was dazed, affirmed, and calmed
by a profile that encompassed everything.
The radiant light that circumstances dimmed
and photosynthesis of sycophants
created and destroyed my dearest friend—
her touch was the most sinful sacrament.
With mortar made of diamond dust and blood
I'll build four walls of opal, quartz, and jade—
I know they're right; I'll suffer for her love,
but this is paradise the Earth has made.
In tangled roots, I'm fuel to feed the sun—
She likes to keep me near, but needs no one.

II. Reunion

Dirt under your nails
scent of patchouli and pot
warm earth alive
in every crease of your body
familiar even after so long.

Campfire smoke in your hair
I buried my face—
the grime brought me back
to the sandy backroad
corner of Jasmine and Palmetto,
our 3 a.m. picnics

Stumbling home,
sandspurs in bare heels
with the crash of the Gulf
pulsing tree-frog music
your voice slurred, weaving
through the hum

The first time I drank a beer
swam at sunrise
kissed a girl
The whole year I grew up
is dreadlocked in the tangles of your hair

Muse in a patchwork dress, you came
to draw me in, to draw a crowd
to take me over
You came to reclaim me
from the belly of a mountain
far from our sanctuary shore.

III. End

*Go and remember me, for
you know how we cared for you.*

—Sappho

Almost every time she left, we spent one last night drunk
telling the same stories to the same kids.
This time she might not be back, and the sludgy numb knowledge
is worse than the thing itself. She left so many times
We stopped saying goodbye. Self-destruction, her long dirt road
sufficed for farewell. Her son carries my name—
I carry the imprint of her worst grief—an inhuman wail and a cordless phone's
clatter and shatter echo in my kitchen.
Her sister's veins, too full of poison, lashed across phone lines,
sliced her arms open. I placed a wilted sunflower on her empty chair
in an early summer wedding. Powdered white on pink satin,
she haunts us both. Love I bought in life is sand and ashes.

Kudzu Monsters

That tyrannosaurus was born a tree—
metamorphosed to a telephone pole—
now its mute jaws gape
with tangles of hanging flora.

It creeps a little closer every day—
tomorrow its claws may cross our threshold.

Green giraffe behind it was a steeple—
guttured church bursts with infant vines—
pulpit's a snakehandler's roped-off heaven.

The thing they serve is no real savage.
Safety-pins fasten his loincloth
tight across gym-swollen ripples.

He prunes his menagerie
lovingly—they advance while he sleeps,
while he watches my window,
while he's out shopping.

Volkswagen bus-turned-rhinoceros
slouches four feet closer overnight—
Kids inside stay lashed to their seats—
Last one alive hums "Sugar Magnolia,"
thrashes to transmit a warning:
He's on his way back.

Weed-whip clatters on asphalt—
I take flight. He rides my heels,
sweaty socks in Birkenstocks
slapping the street, raunchy spank
of clammy flesh gaining momentum

Two pockets full of Miracle-gro,
my only hope—
I sling it at the monsters' mouths—
New shoots tear loose
to penetrate and devour.

They'll get me next—
have to keep moving—
Legs take root through cracks
in the road—

Plaque at the Kudzu Monster Museum:
*This pterodactyl on the verge of flight
was born a little girl.
She swore to slay her keeper
or die trying.*

New Era

Jesse says New Era Road
is the back way to anywhere.
It winds past sagging singlewides
curling narrow and potholed
from highway to highway.

My kitchen blooms
silk sunflowers all year.
Today I wore sandals
opened the windows
shook out the rugs.

Dishes, taxes, toilets, floors,
crossing your path bleary mornings
fumbling for the snooze
over blaring 5:30 ear poison

Tense sometimes waiting for the payoff,
that time when we'll have
a little land, a few free days
and room to grow away
from the twisted backroads of our youth.

Storage

No time to dream
It's 4 and work's at 8.
Don't want to dream—
I imagine a deep hard sleep,
a room where the walls don't breathe.

Behind eyelids pressed against palms:
lemon slices, Celtic psychedelia, knotwork the color
of raspberry sherbet. Dreaded green haunches
of Oscar-the-Grouch-meets-Cerberus
retreating.

I'm straddling an overturned barrel of rainwater.
It rolls me into the pig-pit.
The pigs clean me up,
take me to a clinic,
a warehouse,
the beach.

Cans stacked skyward,
nurses in bikinis
bustle past with grocery carts
and won't give me my meds.
Hush, they trill, you need your rest.
Shut up and go to bed.

An argument rages
somewhere near my belly
about where exactly I am.
The stockroom at work,
Peninsula, Sam's,
Home. On my front lawn,
straightjacket gone,

A free-speech rally. They want to revoke
the First Amendment. They're going to succeed.
We caused it, I whisper. We censor ourselves.
A million cans tumble down from the shelves.
The crash is the clang of the dinnertime bell:
They come from all wings of the cellar to feed—
A million kind voices, silencing me.

Grotto Falls

The woods are falling:
Wind cracks limbs, bares
concentric hollows of tree marrow
and me, a discrepancy,
a red spot in the gray-green dim
too bright to blend
with shivering licks
of sugarmaple flame.

The path bends, twists
damp and weary—the coming storm
tricks the far-off trickle to a roar—
valley hollows gray,
dark below the sway of low light,
shifting canopy of leaves,
washboard bellies of clouds
and you and I,
trudging son and daughter of artifice:
inorganic litter, we ascend
through earthtone glitter
absurd like bottlecaps
preserved in amber.

I'm ensnared, as always
a few paces back;
curl of your smoke loops my throat.
Your silence and the rush of the waterfall swell—
I know it pours down
around the next bend, the next—
I stop to squat behind a rock;
to make sure you're not watching, I look up—
And there the upended rapids crash!
On mossy rocks the silvers splash
is the slow breakdown of defenses:
It's in our nature
to erode each other.

The summit is the logical place to break.

We find a dry boulder
and watch the whipping water for a while,
the slouching heap of rocks,
its jagged liquid spine

Then the spray comes from all sides—
mist-gray dew of fever from the sky
to coax us down
like this unexpected twilight,
we're so gifted at descent.
We hurry back before
the downpour and the dark;
they strike like twin fists
just before we reach the car

Dirty wet and roaring home
it was too easy
to turn our backs to the falls
to climb down from it all—
There must be somewhere on earth
where we almost belong
but even that close to heaven
it still felt wrong.

Little Old Depraved May

I woke up ancient,
my little brain
wizened, decrepit, sexless.
If not for art
and sex, I'd starve.
I'm less than dead leaves
crackling rocketfire
through windy spaces—
Shriveled in her wrought-iron rocker,
this little old lady erupts backwards
into blotchy puberty
and on back to the cradle
to stare up at spinning clowns
that jeer and tinkle.
The tiger's the man
who shares his bed—
doesn't fear and doesn't gnaw
the pile of bones beside him.

The Biological Tanning Timer

Sexy computer voice purrs,
“Knock knock.”

Dutiful, dim:

“Who’s there?”

The coil of her voice:

“The serpent, dear! I’m everywhere!”

I open the window to let her in
and find a haggard crowd of men
huddled, chanting prayers.

The youngest in the middle,

one arm shriveled,

sinks to the muddy sod.

Face twisted in grief, he rocks and weeps:

Someone’s killed his infant son.

Outside his range of vision,

his good arm cradles a gun.

The oldest man,

gray hair, eyes, tie

has papers to prove

the baby’s mine.

I will have to bury it.

He hands me a stone

swaddled in Chinese newspaper,

so heavy I can’t carry it.

I wheel the rock to the funeral home,

choose a sun capsule casket

lined in ultraviolet satin.

Whimpering for the stone

I cradle to my breast,

I strip naked and climb in.

Twenty minutes and we’re born again

into carcinogenic light.

We emerge every morning,

deformed but alive.

Flawed Perception

Girl in the glass fumbles
with contact lenses the size of saucers.
Ears bleed from eight holes.
Nose sags into syphilitic gore,
tongue hangs limp and drips,
atmosphere roars gray.

Touch is alive, though, wide awake.
Inching and arching along bare humps of floor
swallows lesser senses—
bathroom mirror's cold slick skin,
something else to press against.
*God, for another dying body,
something warm to ride out
of this linoleum cave!*

She sinks down the wall, drops
her burden like a bomb.
It rolls to the drain, ticking
through pipes, to soak the soil below.
Litter of needles, bottles, bones
crunch beneath her hips,
failing teeth flash,
her lower lip splits.

Girl in the glass shrivels
while she twists the knob—
water coughs orange—
Its sting subdues the ache.
Black-hole drain gapes wider.

When flesh washes off,
pale bones gleam.
Low-hanging crystals strung on fishing line
cut lazy circles through Lysol-cloudy air.

Such perfect medicine—it slides down slow,
slicks ragged edges of her swollen throat.
Sickness is cleansed now.
Nothing can grow.

A Rough Night

Justice erupts,
dry heaves of guilt.
Reason impairs reality,
the human tendency
to blame anything
 but human tendencies.

Tonight I invoke
spectral orchards of infancy,
creatures `round my crib:
pterodactyls and wheeled spiders.

Men of static TV snow,
white with red instead of black
marched from a portal
near my closet.

Real life retches
cold-naked-sweating,
bathroom rug fuzz clings
to clammy skin.
Chemical cocktails
breed blank sleep.

From Unparadise

Tonight I call upon
my gardens of strange succulents,
indigo realms where every petal
is sculpted from the flesh of plums,
crisp, wet, and draped
with purple Spanish moss.

Tonight I call my guardian,
a specter named September,
willowy shade in white linen
with black hair to her heels.
I call her, but I sweat and cower
when I sense her presence.

Subtle sink and squeak
of the bed as she lowers herself
infinitely, to speak to me:
“Do as you must;
you will forget
everything.”

Our Room While You Sleep

Framed mausoleum angel hangs askew.
Twenty-Bucks Hilty the Bear,
fifteen years old. Third eye gouged,
stuffing leaks out.

Nasty secret in a dresser drawer.
Hand me down bed
where you might've been conceived.

Silver satin sandals—bridesmaid shoes,
one walk down a sandy aisle:
Old palms and dark clouds
over St. Andrew's Bay.

Three purple Euro-pillows
hunched in the corner
conspire to smother us.

The sticky gray draws near despite
sixty glaring watts of insomnia—
rows of sinister curios
wait calmly for my eyes to close.

Rough Sex with an Ancient

Sky spits corrosive rain through living armor
in pit-pat time with the Gray Man snarling
tribal love songs over wind.

Cloudspray chemical peel strips his years
to a pile at his bare feet—
he paws through spreading heaps of age,
sorrow, cufflinks and tweed until
he's ridiculous-glorious
in boxers and necktie.

Fists tighten, shoulders spread, voice
throbs in space, seeks the center,
radiates in cosmic cobwebs—
threads twang and zap with light.

Clouds part for his hips,
drift into submission—
he bears down fierce as gravity
from starlight into orbit.
His minutes circle the clock,
then scatter like neutrons.

"That is no country for old men."
Climax is no time to invoke
angry Irish poets. He is that distant,
though, that dissonant: the wrong flesh,
the wrong wild work,
breaking the bed of a little girl...

May's Escape

Across from the trailer where I buy my pain pills,
Noah's ark bobs in a mud-puddle. Vagrants sway on deck,
jump ship two by two. My husband sends me away:
Today's too holy for company.
Bruised fists hammer the door—
dealer's not at home. I bust on in—I own all this—
Inside, tin trailer's one big attic, A-frame beams,
rafters strung with cobwebs, no floor:

I scramble down-web into the classroom.
Depraved May waits, once my inner English teacher,
May up north before it blooms.
Grammar-horny grandma of my foulest musings,
ruler-armed with tight green buds
matted in her hairnet—
The lesson, a high-stakes crossword,
too many threats to decode.
I seize her ruler and knock down the wall.

We skid downhill through the hole, subtle sacrilege
of eggs from the Seder slung from the table,
into grass that reeks of the sea. It must have been
fifty years or so: I'm a speck, infant minus thirty—
May blooms anew. The drape of her robe reminds me
of someone I met before I was born—

In the primordial soup, though, the robe clung
to her calves, stuck to her planes and arches
as she rose triumphant on a brass ladle—
Now it sweeps out behind her for miles,
clears a hallowed path
that will host a river tomorrow.
Her scalp, mottled stubbly pink and black,
gleams in alien light, wreathed in silver vines.

Her belly hangs heavy beneath one brown hand—
the other tugs clumps of thread
from her veil's hem.
Orbit shifts and the Red Sea freezes.
Iridescent icecaps fling salt at her feet—
precarious stepping-stones bob and shimmer
so I can reach her.

Ice cracks under my baby feet—

frostbitten black from the knees down,
I burn with the message I must deliver.
She turns, drops her veil, extends her arms—
Her face is gone.
I surrender the bottle.
Ghost ship inside shudders and pops
into effervescent spray—
bottle melts into sweat sparkling
where her upper lip should be,
dry salt where her eyes should be.

Toppled columns block our passage.
We'll have to build a boat:
She without eyes or a voice,
I without a body save this frozen fetus,
nothing to build with but ruins.
Her robe would make a perfect sail,
but to strip her would wake the baby snowblind
through the window of her womb.
I tear out my hair for her—
she weaves a tiny gold lifejacket—
We float end over end, through honey to oblivion.

All Hallows' March

I suppose we drove through a warp—I emerged from a half-drunk doze, on the wrong road, to coughs of protest, engine strangling and dashboard creaking under a hail of fists. I steered the Cavalier carefully into a ditch.

Nondescript kids in a pickup hauled us to a closed BP and bailed. Payphones in this dimension munch on money and make no contact—and so the trek begins.

Chapman Highway is long and the median craggy—damp grass, platform boots, and night blindness enhance the treachery—nevermind that my usual crutch, my dear deranged love, is four lanes away, trumpeting obscenities into the dark. Two jagged holes in a wispy hump of cloud glare ghostly indifference—cold crescent moon leers below, bares its fangs, and retreats into a black hole.

Wind whips up weird odors—cotton candy, sulfur, oranges—something shrieks and chatters from spidery limbs of a dead tree. A hearse, a bread truck, and a school bus blaze past every half hour—I wave and stagger but no one stops.

Blue sun smolders a ring around the horizon and I'm almost relieved to see the cops. Daylight casts no reason—it only sifts through the nonsense of shadow, seeks to sculpt the edges of indefinable shapes.

The Party

Hotel Euphoria hosts more staircases than doors,
polished ebony floors, cellar full of dwarves.

My party rages, bands on two stages,
white powder sifts from the ceiling.

Bass in time with Sandra's heart pounds, slows, stops—
around her mouth, a yellow froth—
her head drops into my lap.

I don't know CPR, my own mouth's full of pills;
clammy mannequin's not quite real.

Desperate now to haul her up: "Dance a little, you'll be fine!"
She's six feet tall, ten million pounds—
her hands twist and freeze in mine.

Through prism lights, writhing human mess,
sub-basement tunnel opens
to the secret society's courtroom.

Tiny voices filter up—
someone down there can save her—
I choke on another mouthful
of slow-descending seeds.

Bannister breaks off in my hand—
we slide into knee-deep carpet.

I stroke the nap—red this way, green that—
It mounds above her, blood-wet grass.

Courtroom gates loom stratosphere-high.
I drag her convulsing bulk inside:

Munchkin-mayor flings his gavel—
her father pulls up to the gate.

"FUCK! Someone help me hide her!"
Time wasted screaming expires too late.

Upstairs I sense the scramble—
Bouncer sweeps drugs and minors down to hide.

My emergency becomes the pupil
of two hundred dilated eyes.

They think at me: *You did this.*
Clamor rises to a roar.
Euphoria's foundation shakes—
We fall through the floor.

Revelers lose interest
when she writhes awake on impact.
Sign-language accusations
fly from her scrambled limbs.

Broken aware, she stands on my back—
I hoist her through the hole.
No one's left to pull me out—
Our guests have all gone home.

Last Resort

Sweep of manmade beach
dips between waterslides
I'm too big to ride.

Woodburned calligraphy sign
over the bathhouse door
spells in cursive hieroglyphs:
"This Is Your Last Resort."

I walk the margin with my two best friends.
Shadows cackle and sweat
behind dry-roast sauna doors—
cedar sawdust floors run with oil.

Blondes in hip-pinching thongs
drag lazy mops through steam—
boys in the spa gnash purple grapes,
belch and tell dirty stories.

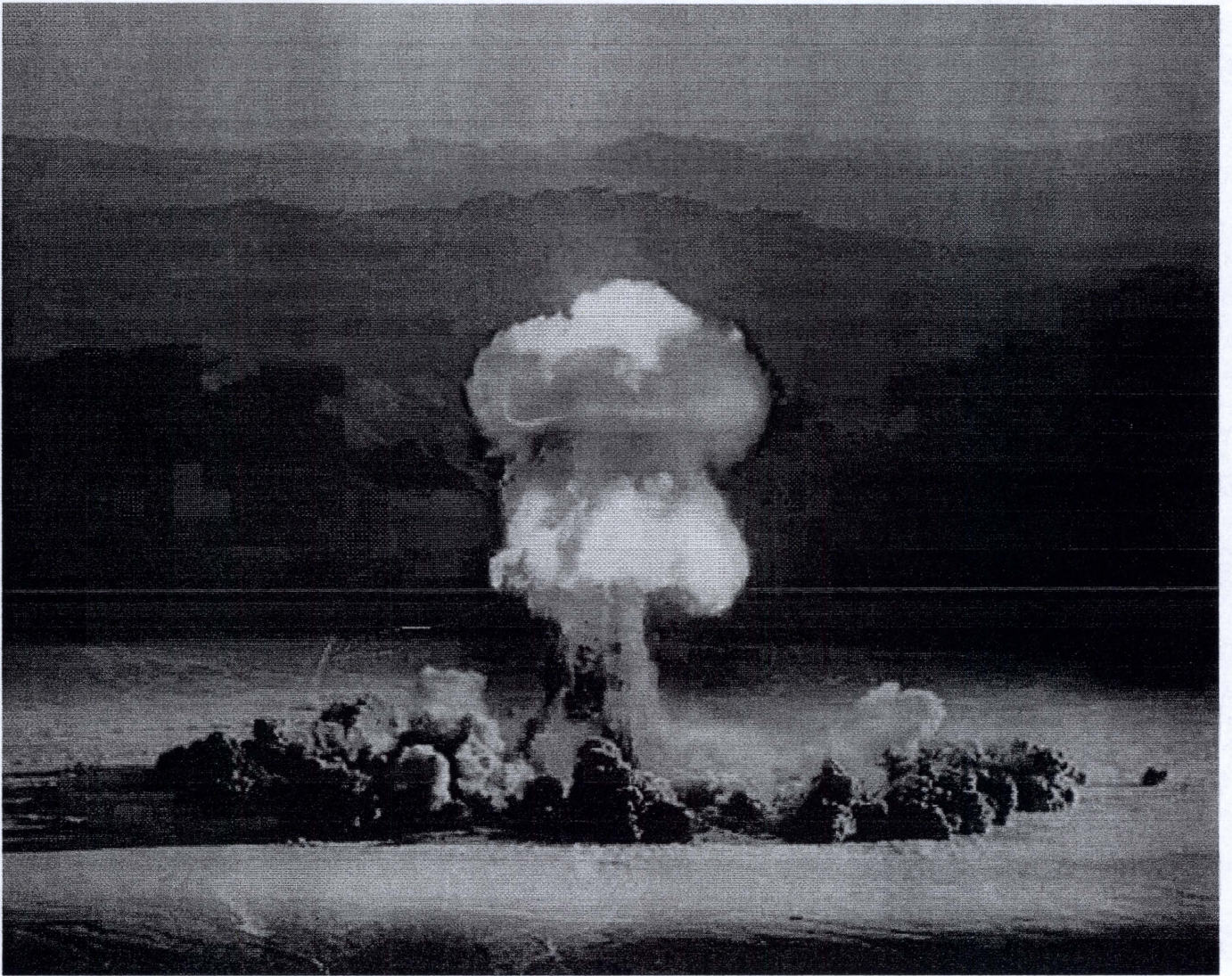
Sienna sun flickers
through high-barred windows—
dripping faucets
separate the spectrum.

Rainbows burn the naked kids,
illuminate the dirty ones.
I move too slowly
to slather them in ointment—

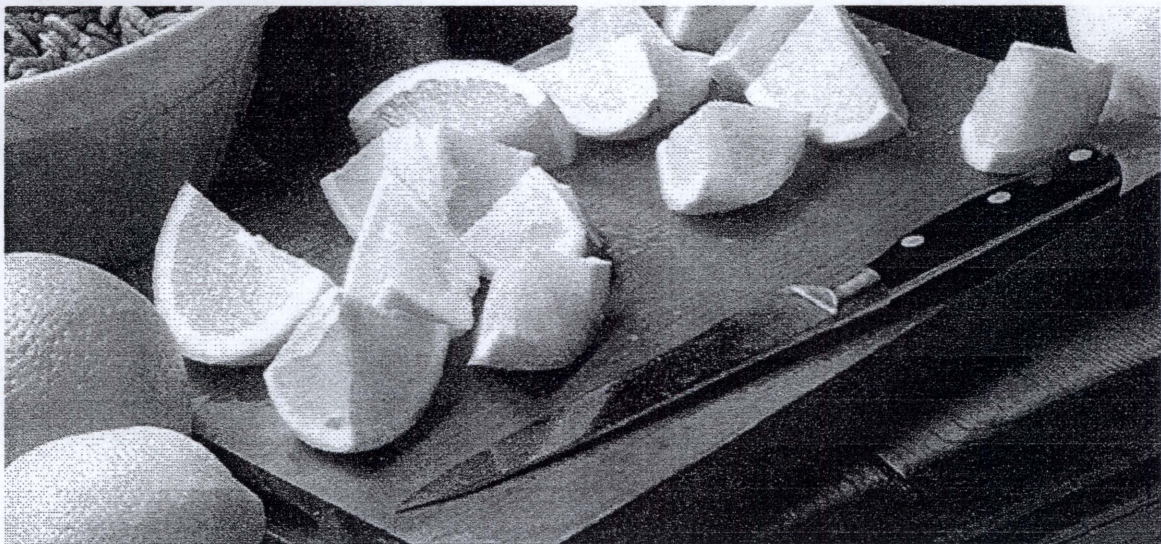
They sizzle into fizzing froth.
Slimy puddles swallow my toes—
oilslicked hair of lovers clogs the drains.

Sundown bonfire roars cold—
I sing summercamp songs alone.
Every star and speck of sand
twitches, bursts into foam.

Last Resort trims the shore,
grand orgy of oblivion
shrunk and strung tiny
between bodies and the sky.



LIMINAL LEMONS



Annus Ridiculous: 2001

Something went wrong between
Larkin's theoretical genesis
of sex and this morning,
with everyone behind the war
and half the Beatles dead.

They lanced this red swelling of unity
with unmanned sterile needles
and its wet papery walls fell—
What kind of morning was it
on the dark side of earth last night?

Strange fanatics lurking in caves
shake in their surplus boots.
Toxic riot atmosphere reigns—
elsewhere. America finds reasons
to celebrate.

Meanwhile, a dusting of danger.
We didn't want to check the mail anyway.
Nothing but bills. Even the air tastes bitter,
leaves you feeling ill.
Paranoia festers in an infant's skin.

Death toll keeps shrinking:
Special ops staging
covert ground-zero resurrections?
Public relations carnival carousel
of hope spins till the world
is the centrifuge.

It serves to save the insurance companies:
paying Jesus under the table
but the thousand Lazari
miss the attention
so they jump again.

Home is static—most of us
still don't know ruin, praise god—
I dreamt a boiler room, damp concrete
and bricks falling, machines belching smoke,
walls shaking, crumbling, we cower—
It's all coming down, but it's shelter.

Parallel Genesis

Answer me goddamn you!

I will the suffering creature awake,
coils of thought springing neon
from my eyes to its temples.

Its wings stiffen—
it rises in a rustle of blue feathers,
bows low like a gentleman.

Its breath can't thaw me.
I purge ice from skin
riddled with open pores,
brow the surface of a tiny moon.

Its roar rattles twilight
into seven baby snakes,
shaken in a tangle from the Pleiades.

What have you done with Earth?

I command it to rise and speak.
Gray tongue slides sated
across ancient lips.

Sphere rolls in its gut,
pulses down to rebirth—
muffled voices rise
to rage and praise.

Roadbound

Road trip funk's so deep
we can't find the floorboards.
Rough tongue of highway
flickers and ripples,
rolls southbound to the sea.

Backseat epilepsy from bluelights,
paraphernalia hidden inside,
I clench my teeth and wait.
Rubber glove snaps—
I strip for the camera.

Tangled turnpike looms ahead,
corkscrews through dusk,
ticketed, humiliated, unincarcerated,
we twist on through.

Bridge collapses, destination changes.

We hurtle toward New Orleans.
It sparkles across the abyss—
Louis Armstrong slings a lasso—
we're airborne. Clean alien streets
followed us from the interstate.

Our record followed too:
We're banned from every bar.
CNN says home evaporated,
nuked by accident—
Nets and nooses of our youth, reduced
to a cry, a flash, sifting ash—
We're roadbound for life.

Mush in the Petri Dish

Everyone knows
inspiration's the hard part.
Waking to an infinity
of nothing at all,
heaps of blank reams
grown monstrously tall,
rained on, defaced,
reduced to a paste
from which we may sculpt
new cities, realities, gardens
but never again books.

What's to write about?
dead Marines, evergreens,
fashion, fiction, food?
"Find two things to compare,
then create a mood."
Sing the praises of tiny places
where, knee-deep in muck,
you decide you're an amoeba
and don't give a fuck.

Microorganisms
are never compelled
to compose villanelles
about going to hell.
Your mission
if you think
you can take it
is this:

Give me an assignment.
Conceal it with a kiss.

Love Eats Inspiration

Hope went the way of poets:
died of a massive insult to the brain,
trauma of a pickled soul
that shied away from growing old—
the salting began at fifteen,
preservation that ensured
the mind in the jar would not mature.

Imagine how unprepared we were
five years later, under a low flag's shadow
accidentally facing Mecca, facing faith again
ages since it first washed up
with tar-blobs on the beach.

Armed and afraid to bear confessions
like so much debris hauled home
we itemized sins and memories
until we found ourselves alone—

To you I dedicate all my blank pages
To you I consecrate the shelves in my basement
For you, my captor, my reason and sense
I cast the last stone at my own decadence.

Biomass

"We're running out of smooshed-up dinosaurs!"
I scream at the old ladies whose SUV's
plow through my cornfield.

The bitches are paying customers, though,
so I'm compelled to apologize.
I offer a palmful of earth, explain

about the wars
 over the fuel
beneath its skin.

I harvest their scattered merchandise—
factory seconds and closeouts—
from between the rows.
Okra, squash, and comforter sets
slide in sleeves of plastic.

The ladies are seconds, too:
"Slightly Irregular."
Eyes listing sideways,
twisting crooked lips,
noses an inch askew.

Low-strung wires hum,
glow green above the farmhouse.

Corn and cannabis bow low
to whisper incantations:
ethanol. leave it all.

One old lady pulls a jar
from her Mary Poppins purse.
We pass it around,
learn each other's real names.

She's the one with the vegetable son
since the motorcycle wreck
and it's his voice welling up
from between the rows.

When the jar is drained
we roll the SUV's off the cliff
at garden's edge,
offer the dinosaurs a proper burial.

Tumblebuggy

Snap, clear as cracked bones,
thawing ice, picture tube twitching,
it happened that fast,
the last synapses flashed, sparked,
shut down.

All-Terrain Four-Wheel Tumblebuggy
As Seen On TV.

Projectile remote control
missed its mark
so the fucking Tumblebuggy
kept on tumbling.

It buzzed across the screen and back
on turbo-tread tires, bumper bumped,
it flipped and kept going.
Bloody amazing.

Wail built up—under the numb part—
met the uvula, fizzled.
It escaped as a pitiful
made-for-TV whimper,
censored.

Shut it off shut it off
shutthefuckingthingOFF
I'd move, but I might not stop.

Apocalypse Jingle

Circling lazily, an overfed vulture
dips in its gyre and falls.
Spring stretched to capacity
won't bounce back—
it drills to the core
then rests.

Wary eyes roll
across smoking horizons—
red curtains draw tight,
drop shadows on morning's great lie.
Last day breaks too much like the first.

The kids were born into this—
end times mean no work,
no worries, luxury, gluttony,
sodomy, liberty.
A break in the routine.

In town, women pack
as men deconstruct.
Foaming ocean pastures,
peridot-pale,
promise refuge.

No one here can swim.

A few elders consider salvation.
The oldest expect harps and clouds—
their sons seek
luxury, gluttony, sodomy, liberty.
No worries.

Violets

You can't candy
city violets
poisoned with pesticides
and dogpiss, besides
why eat flowers when
you can live off
creation itself?

Is this perfect day
not enough to sustain us?
Tulip trees shed petals again
while some empty-eyed boy
throws his cigarette down.

Right now I can breathe—
he's of no concern to me
on my carpet of purple petals—
I pluck them from city soil,
wear them behind my ears.

Wild in the country
you can dip them
in egg whites and sugar
let them dry—

Days like today
kids look around in wonder
smile to themselves
and each other—
too late to tear down
greed and concrete—instead,
I pass out my dirty violets.

Blimp

Flying through space
always ends too soon.
I land and when I land,
I spread.

I've grown into a pile of dough,
so fat I can't move.
Can't fly anymore and worse,
can't swing from the trapeze
over the bed.

This could only happen
in the civilized world.
The first world?
Certainly the last.

When I flew through space,
I saw the past. Not so well-fed,
not so well-read,
citizens of the empty universe
sang and drifted
like enlightened brine shrimp.

I land and when I land, I spread.
The populated universe
collapses on my head.

Agnostic

The light today
is blinding
as bad moonshine.

On the library steps,
a mob stirs doubt
in the street preacher.

If there's a hell,
I'm headed there.
I know so I don't argue.

I lack evidence
of the Nothing
that awaits him.

Life is real—
firmer than faith
is the proof:

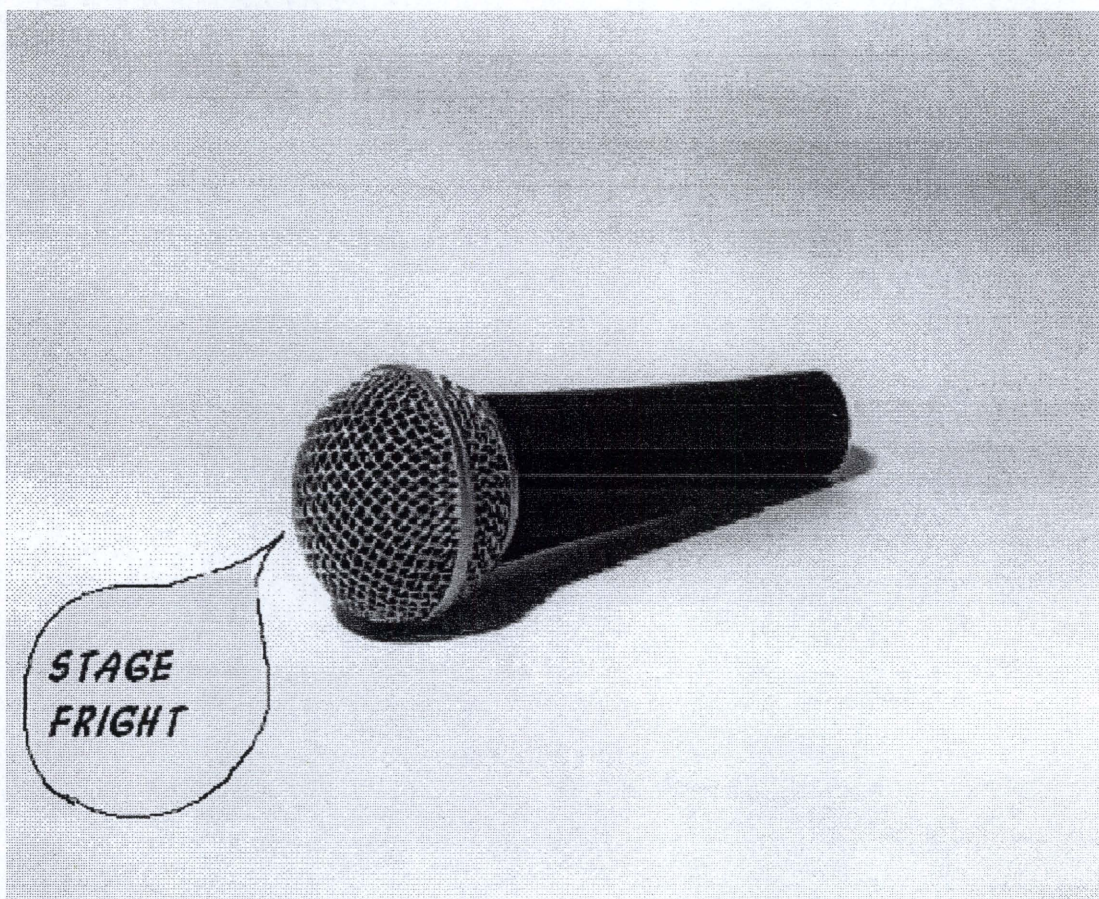
Gray Mondays subside.
Lust is healthy and free.
We live like animals.

Earth fights back.
The universe sprawls.
Morality is nonsense.

I'm going to open
my body to the elements,
Paint my face and celebrate.

I'll mount the soapbox next
and scream
"I DON'T KNOW!"

to the furthest
sneering outskirts
of the crowd.



Mouse Song (First Babble)

I may be so poor I'd make a church mouse look like Bill Gates, but still I hate to see my stepmother suffer the aches and complaints of the idle rich (that stupid bitch)... She loves tennis and plays the clarinet, and I bet her net equals my debt to the world, a world to which I owe my soul, that vibrant violence, that intangible thing...

The miles I'd fall to fill that hole! To hold it, mold it, make it sing, make it my own, take it home if I had a home where the soul was welcome, if I had a home where the truth was welcome...

Instead I'm just here, scrounged up spare change for coffee, cast off that life he bought me, heading out, getting free alone like I guess I wanna be, scared to death, but I digress...

I love life more than anything, the life around me I mean, the world I observe, flowers and birds, hell, slugs and snakes, sluts and skanks, even the Christians and tyrants and victims... every hand I see I want to hold! I want to reach into every soul attached to those hands raised in conviction, in wrath or submission, not too far past the old desperate need for approval... to tell you the truth, I just wanna feel useful. So tell me if you think you might know a reason for us to keep breathing this awful air that chokes the world I love and keep creeping on the ground like snakes and slugs when you could lift me up to a God that's not there, a truth that's just air, a day when we'll all know each other, we'll all be brothers, we'll take timeshare vacations in a heaven of man's creation and maybe, just maybe, I'll see the Pacific before I die... if you come with me and we really try... but maybe I am too young to have ever really loved...

maybe this is just a sickness
and we are the victims.

WORD POWER

Word power eats girl power alive.
There's no other weapon,
no other tool so perfectly human.
Where it becomes a girl thing
is where the body twists and strains,
fails to suit the words.

It's struggling to contort, communicate
not choreograph hands to mouth to spirit
just speak to you with this flawed figure

and it's not a girl thing,
it's a freaked-out fucked-up human thing
a human being
secretly convinced it's a beast
and I can't find peace
if I can't even meet your eyes
across a table or find something beyond ridicule
in a sea of faces

I won't try to sell the shy-girl excuse:
It's a rock to crawl under, it's spiritual abuse...
But okay. I *am* afraid
of beautiful boys

and one boy told me
I have trouble projecting—
I've got a breathing problem
Goddamn right I've got a breathing problem,
I'm fucking drowning!

But someone's always there to pull me out.
That's something else that makes it a girl thing.
There's always someone with a lifejacket,
someone like a friend
to throw down a rope with a noose at the end
Someone tossing down a ladder
saying,

*shhh, it doesn't matter...
lose ten pounds, toss your hair around,
laugh a lot and no one will care if you speak or not.*

That's why word power devours girl power.
'Cause one of these days I won't be shy.
I'll still have little titties and I'll still have too much thigh
But I won't be scared to speak into your eyes
look into your mind & see the mystery behind these faces,
voices of every human being

and come back with an explanation
or at least a description of what's inside—
Those are the subtleties passion can hide—

So maybe I'll recede even further, go clinical and cold,
severe and silver-headed before I'm even old,
wrinkle up and shrivel while I sit back and observe,
try to quantify humanity with no better tools than words—

But word power consumes girl power.
Some nights I'm less a woman, more a shell—
a shotgun-shattered vessel waiting to be filled—
That's when the fear gets fed.
That scared little girl's a long time dead
but she left the strangest woman curled up in her bed

And one of these mornings
she's gonna rise
and she's gonna speak.
She's gonna use her word power,
not gonna shrink
like a little pink flower proclaiming "Radical Feminist"
when she's with her friends,
then teasing and trippin when she gets among men

Would you stone me if I said
women aren't oppressed anymore?
That some choose to be victims,
and some want to be whores?

Now every six seconds a man becomes an animal
and that's another scandal, another fucking travesty
that's not about humanity, and that's not what I mean

I'm talking about lucky girls in the innocent world
who'd rather simper and whimper than speak,
who'd rather be weak, too weak to pull out their own seats,
too weak to know when to let go
and fornicate or sleep all day
or write their way to a cleaner place...

But back to the language:
the thing that's strangest
is when I'm too depressed to express
something as silly as loneliness
the words come anyway,
spill all these doubts out onto the page,
and when it's over, it's crap, but by-god I'm awake

So it's not quite catharsis, it's just where my heart is,
twitchin on adrenaline and too much caffeine
and I'm more than a woman,
I'm a living machine
and that's what I mean

When I say stay quiet and pretty
and you'll probably survive
but word power eats girl-power alive.

Damaged Goods/Trickster's Super Pawn

You put your soul in hock to pay the water bill?

They gape at me, incredulously,
Mom and Dad, who haven't seen each other since 1994
they think that's what I needed \$40 for,
but can't believe that's all they'd give
for my immortal soul
at Trickster's Super Pawn & Cash Advance.

What the hell were you thinking?

Thinking about not being able
to take a shower or flush the toilet
...thinking about sinking through another week
with nothing to clean my brain or keep me from eating...

Whereas my soul I can do without until payday
as I often have before, without reward.

Anyway, I've got to get it back, and quick
or I'll be up that legendary creek
I still don't have the cash
but I don't even have to ask
Dad even says he'll drive me there!
"That's *my* legacy!" he trumpets,
as if his jizz were the seed of my being
but I'm not arguing.

We get there too late—it's already gone.
A redheaded man came in to Trickster's Super Pawn
with an old Stratocaster and the evil bastard
traded it in for my soul.

There's an 8x10 glossy on the wall of the office
framed and autographed, a picture of the redhead man
with the beat-up guitar in his hand.
It says, "Thanks a million
to the folks at Trickster's Super Pawn,
my favorite one-stop shop
for damaged goods."

The Worst Mess Ever

Puke, beer, bongwater, manure...
you can't expect us to be pure
but this is ridiculous!
You've got to scrape and scrub,
sweep under the rug
to find the chaos beneath the disorder that's under the mess.
That's life as a working kid, I guess...
but it's the state of our souls, truth be told it's the whole damn world,
how we tuck away every scrap like squirrels,
like we've earned the right to be tired.
That's the luxury you're denied
in the pursuit of patience or success,
motivation, cleanliness...

Nobody wants some joyless slug—
Love and drugs should be enough—
but everyone needs gratitude, a little energy
so why not get down in the mud with me?
We'll dance drink and slide till we're all slippery
then claw our way out in the morning
till before you know it, without any warning
the walls are gone, they just dissolve,
tumble like cards into the outstretched palm
of the biggest meanest cardshark of all
and it calls itself God...?

So it comes down to that?
I'm exposed as a fraud,

Abandoned on a bare green hill
to trust my instincts and build my will
and make up fucked-up stories about suckling from wolves
and kicking the moon out of gravity's pull
and founding failing empires that rise at my command
with maids to take the mop
and the bottle from my hand

With shelter, food, and love
it's easy to think you're blessed—
but I'm still a speck of dust,
no different from the rest,
we're all beautiful horrible accidents
in this catastrophic mess.

Take Away Time

We waste so much joy on euphoria.
The things we snort, smoke, fuck, and hate
can consume what we create, love, and cultivate.
But when ten thousand poets have already shown us
 ten thousand blue rooms—
They've all seen the same ashes
swirl in the beams of the same blue moon—
How *do* you break loose and make something new?

Is art blasphemy if, to play god, I plant a tree
like some megalomaniac hippie with the genius disease,
the drive to be free from the fiction of existence
in search of the elemental high?
But take away time and still I decide...

I'm gonna become a schoolteacher.

I'm gonna feed Keats with his flowering nightsweats and t.b.
to soft little minds full of sex and t.v.
until I crash headlong into the pillars of some convoluted faith—
Losing God was cold as a comedown, rough as a rape—
But take away time and I've not yet sinned.
Forgiveness hasn't come in the guise of a highschool boyfriend.
Take away time and your life is consumed
like a needle dropped in a padded room
Take away time and time takes you,
like seeds into an empty womb
to the oblivion before salvation, the gray before the black
where God's alive and doing fine and Mary's got her baby back

Take away time and all Earth will be
is the Creator's wildest fantasy:
a scrap of proof that he started small
and never intended this world of walls
Take away time and everything real
shrinks back down
into a bad idea,
the monstrous thought
that the time we waste
by heaven's grace might be replaced.

No Such Thing

Every person in this room was born in another age.
We've left the fallen century
to hold the righteous rage
of a stumbling-empty-fumbling
halfway soulless generation
abandoned on the doorstep
of this unholy aberration:
the twenty-first century.

We weren't meant to last this long.
There's no such thing as civilization.
Humanity's not that strong.
And you see it every day eroding,
days and dreams and loves imploding—
Nothing lasts, so it's just neglected
and like a skyline, can't be resurrected.

Everything's ignored until it comes down...
...it comes down...

It comes down to the question
of living in the past.
This kid I used to know once asked,
"When did mankind take its last step forward?"
Was it ending some war? The electric guitar?
Aspirin prevention for heart attacks?
All the time we're slipping back—

We're left to conclude
that this world is cursed.
Welcome to the home shopping universe!
And the last thing on earth that I want to order
is my own 9-11 commemorative quarter
or a bright red hat that screams, "REMEMBER PEARL HARBOR!"

We've had our share of infamous dates,
manifestations of infinite hates
we need only remember until forgetting is safe.
We grow from the past, we learn from mistakes
but a little repression can keep you sane—
So here's an idea—you take that pain,
shove it to the back of the world's collective brain,
know there's not a lot to gain
from riding the blackest memories,
the molestations of a nation
when there's no such thing as civilization!

Flash Floods

Yesterday the floods came—the rough rain
soaked Earth to her marrow, and I'm a soggy scarecrow with its arms pinned open wide,
mouth gaping to the sky when I'm supposed to be inside
selling rugs and window-toppers to wet disgruntled shoppers who brave the rising water
to thrust their precious dollars in my unsuspecting face...
too late! I've escaped
to watch an uprooted maple swish and bob
like a drowning red-haired hooker through the outlet-mall parking lot...
The water creeps up higher—higher
and I'm so loose and limp and tired
all the sandbags in the world couldn't keep me from washing away

But there's something like the strength of steel in this penetrating gray
the way it scrubs away the pretense of an ordinary day,
reminds us that we're children at the mercy of the sky
born to play a little while, then work and breed and die;
No matter how we scream and pray, no matter how we try

Another storm will strike this town before the year is over—
and the flood that doesn't drown you is supposed to make you stronger—
But what happens when it soaks too deep and mildews your defenses?
What if it's so cold it swallows reason, numbs your senses?

You'll think you're strong, you'll think you're safe
while you watch the water rise;
Another sunny day might burn the madness from the sky;
but there's a drowning we're all born for
that a rainbow might disguise,
like the politics of suffering
driving needles up your spine—
The way you meet futility the day you start to die—
When love burns off and *work* is there to spin your sluggish blood
through loops of lies and compromise that only feed the flood.

Quarantine

I have this dream where I'm quarantined:
I'm ironing the word SCRUB
onto an endless pile of white t-shirts.
Otherwise, the room is empty
except for the wires—

Peaks and valleys
tweak and nod like freaks in alleys:
My head is wired to the bathroom wall.

The big screen, scrubbed clean
flatlines, so I unplug
and pace around the room.

It's smaller; the bathtub's gone,
bricked off. I think, *epidemic*.
I know it's because of me.

The bricks are different shades of green
and in the center is another screen
clicking back and forth between
Animal Planet's Emergency Vets
and a tranquil scene
of perfectly rigid daffodils:

They grow at attention,
defying the breeze that freezes
even the brick wall—

The sterile frost sifts over it
a little like soot. I smear it on my cheeks
and it's warpaint.
A warrior could escape.

A warrior would have noticed the door,
sprung latch held shut
by a rubber band and a single nail.

Brain Lab

When you step out your door, into the world,
you enter the presence of greatness.
We might not all get to be famous,
but we're masters of invention, experts at suspension
of reality—long enough to fool ourselves,
at least until the fear dispels
and we realize we're alchemists
conjuring gold up out of shit...

You've got a laboratory in your mind;
it's up to you to decide what kind.

It could be run by some professor type
with walls, coat, and rats all the same shade of white
with rows and rows of beakers lined up neatly on the shelves
with microscopes and models of molecules and cells,
ideas stored in test tubes, waiting to be spilled...

You could have the cure for cancer
or the genetic explanation for love
waiting to be discovered
if you could only recover
from love
but maybe recovery's not an option.
Maybe you want to stay numb.

Maybe your mind's a meth lab
and you're cooking up excuses not to go to rehab—
You've got propane coughin' out blue flames
from your twitching brain till it shoots out your eyes—
You've got poison and pollution, excuses and lies
but there's still a kind of genius
in the meth-lab kind of mind—
A cunning that keeps you safe and out of prison,
the streetwise brand of wisdom
that books can't teach

But in some worlds speech
is the poison of choice—
can't see for the trees, but at least you've got a voice
Now, censorship's the enemy
and I'll never let it silence me

But words can tear the biggest gaping fucking holes

like the one in my heart when I hear the word "home"
Just a lump in the throat, just a spell no one broke
in time to keep the men in the white coats
out of my head.

And I'd rather be dead
than walk into their nets

This is *my* brain lab
this is *my* neuro-feedback
and friendships are synapses
that flash crash and link
this is what happens
if you forget
to think
with sincerity and clarity
of the paths that you cross,
the worst kind of loss
when you see that spark
and let it go dark, quench it and drench it
with excuses and talk
until nothing is left but a long way to fall
like a cinderblock knocked from the laboratory wall

You posture and you postulate
ruminate and theorize
till you're too bogged down with hypotheses
to wake up and realize
This is *your* fifteen minutes. Your second. Your turn
to get out of the lab and into the world
before you're burned out and used up and nothing remains
but a wad of electrodes hooked up to your brain
a pill every day to convince you you're sane
and nothing's real anymore. Not even pain.

Submission Street

The suits are back and they've brought briefcases.
Armed with subpoenas they disperse down this anonymous street,
knock on every door while I cower on the floor of a phone booth.
Eventually one comes knocking,
so back & forth I'm rocking, rocking, breathing, nodding
but the sound the lawyer's tight lips make
is the ungodly screech of shrieking brakes
then a crash—shattered glass—

My phone booth becomes a cage,
blue metal goes gray,
I'm serving 11 months, 29 days
for failing to submit
...to what?
Polygraph? Piss test??
Whatever's under the itchy wool
of that awful smoke-stinking suit?
I'll do my time gracefully
because I refuse.

And when I'm reviewed for parole I assume
they'll want rid of me,
with my stone-silent peace and uppity dignity—
They'll dump me back out on that same noisy street
where I'll kill all the lawyers and dodge the police—
But I'll never take cover and I'll never forget
The world's not a prison.
I'll never submit.

Flashback/Panic Attack

No one I want to talk to ever calls me anymore.
Seems my only guests come selling vacuums door-to-door—
and the distance life travels in a vacuum?

Not too far!

Now's a lonely, static time
and I don't want to switch to MCI
I'd rather not insure this life:
But I'll pretend the survey-girl cares
what brand of soap I use
Never let her know she caught me
at my worst and most confused

My coffeemaker sighs and moans
...makes it sound like someone's home
Everyone will laugh and say
there's something wrong with me,
and maybe they sense something
that I'm afraid to see—
they could wriggle out some meaning
from beneath this strange affliction
like when I'm standing in my kitchen
home alone at night
scared as hell and feel compelled to turn on every light

Can't turn my back to the windows
Can't turn my back to the doors
Can't stand to look in the mirror
and I know something's under the floor
I can't turn on the dryer since it might drown out the sound
of something sneaking up behind and I'm too scared to turn around

But then the world collapses
to the sticky sweaty sound
of one hand clutching dollars and reasons
in this cold dark season that never ends,
fear descends into ribbons of light
like the low purple cloud
that sank and dispersed
as our safe bubble burst

In our all-too-recent past
we wouldn't have thought it was radon gas
cyanide or maybe smallpox,
the way it bloodied the stars into sores

We were pitiful symptoms
of too much T.V.
as late last night
the Northern Lights
came to Tennessee

Before the cool blue shot through
crosshatched with jet exhaust
falling planes drop shrapnel rain
A pretty girl sobs
against a soldier's brass buttons
and he squints against the sun—
She says,
"We've never been safe, have we?
There's always been love."

Erin Geller was born in Atlanta in 1981. She is a student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and currently lives in Sevierville, TN with her fiancée, Jesse, and their three cats, Squeak, Princess, and Fuzzynuts. This is her first book.



