

The Whirlwind Review
Issue 1
Autumn 2011

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Carol Folsom

Not Mine to Say

Not mine to say
what matters
enough to put in words
Not mine to judge
the good
from the withheld
My duty simply is
as faithful
trusting
scribe
to write
what's whispered in my ear
when God requires
a hand to hold a pen

M. S. Rooney

not the sound

of the word
but the shape
of the birthmark
made in the heart

Beth Paulson

Word Catcher

Sometimes
when rain falls
it lets down ropes
for the lost

and if you hold
your hand out
into the wet and cold,
you may also catch
the words you need.

Weave them into a poem
that's strong enough
and it can save you.

Labyrinth

How I wanted to cross over the pebbly bar
on the circumscribed trail
I entered at one side. The center lay
so far beyond as I composed my litany
of woes. Augustine said It is solved by
walking so I moved my feet forward in thin
curves of fine gravel and breathed—this habit
of life—until I found myself all the way inside it.

You do not have to know but try
to trust the pathwrote Thich Nhat
Hanh I thought about when drops of rain
began to fall, or was it tears or sacred bath
for body and soul? Then I stepped out, sun lit.

Carol Ellis

Only a Few Words Away from Nothing

Early, morning comes into my life,
Light and quiet.
Then a few birds whisper,
whisper over coffee,
The coffee I drink so I can say a few words
To no one but myself.
I will not sing any of the gone songs.
Those still around sing to themselves.
Tell me what I used to do, remind me.
Even a rock has more meaning.
I throw it at you
Who has become a fence around my heart
And nothing more.

Now it is afternoon.
Now it is evening.
Night is here.
Now I am done
Thinking about you.

At the end
I no longer am enough
To think.

These are the words
That save me.

Go to the poem.

Save this life
Only a few words
Away from nothing.

Regina Brault

The Art of Camouflage

In a World War II movie scene
the prisoner escapes his enemy
by submerging himself
in a shallow swamp. Inhaling
through a hollow reed
that grows there, he goes unnoticed.

To be invisible
conceal yourself beneath the surface.

This is a cunning skill of choice
for those of us who walk alone
at sunrise, through winding valleys
where air is cooled below the dew point.
My trick is to slip through neighborhoods
like swamp fog stroking concrete
with muffled undertones
of worn-out soles. The sun burns through,
thinning my camouflage to a mist
that sneaks past shade-drawn windows.
I retrace my footprints in wet grass
knowing that each new sun erases them

as if they were lines of whispered poetry
laid out like hollow reeds
to keep me breathing.

Bradley Earle Hoge

Medicine Wheel

They say the journey is more important
than the destination, the carrying of stones
to wagon, the helping your children
lift them, as if they are strong, the wending
the wagon down the slope gently
so as not to tip it over, as Grandmother,
my mother, watches from the deck,
as we build her medicine wheel,
on the mountain she has moved
to, from the rocks which feed her, under
the dry sky, the aspen steeples, as my
children get distracted, but I must finish,
lining the path, delineating it by stone
from the flat earth where the broken
remnants of ancient flood are scattered
like evidence only an archaeologist
can see of ancient civilization, hidden
just below the surface, and the sun shines
bright, but the air is crisp, and my father
waits for the stones, knowing where
to place them, standing, marking
my destination, where there will be
no sadness waiting, not because the journey
was rewarding rather than arduous,
not because my purpose was not often
distracted, not because time sang through
the aspen branches, but because it is
the destination that defines the journey.

Cristina T. Lopez-O'Keeffe

The New Border

We're working in a world that seems to be manufactured on decoder-ring methodology. Everything is cryptically simple but unnecessarily complicated. People don't speak frankly, but in small circles of logic that wind up getting us nowhere.

So here we are, without progress, feeling somewhat disappointed.

If half the fun is getting there

And we go nowhere

Where's the fun in that?

I'm not inspired anymore by what's out there.

The passion is gone.

Revolutions are requested via email or text message and the real voice is muted.

Some say we're louder with this technology:

The email-heard-around-the-world type of impact.

But it's harder to connect when the only sound

Is the ticker-tacking of my fingers on the keyboard.

I wouldn't even question any of this except

I miss your voice

And was wondering why we never talk,

Only connect.

I feel like I missed something when I got online.

Someone assigned me a UNIX account

I asked others for their addresses and so we started the dance:

AOL, Yahoo, HotMail, G-mail.

The carousel keeps circling by.

The same strange horse faces distorted by mechanical music.

We're all pretending it's fun but wondering when we can get off.

But we can't because whenever we stop

The cursor is blinking and we must press on.

Even ending this poem is difficult.

I have no more words but the cursor keeps asking "What's next?"

What's next?

What's next?

What's next?

Lyn Lifshin

Writer's Conference Brochure

Sunny in the new flyer.
Everybody's smiling,
writing under the trees.
It doesn't rain, there are
no black flies. Flowers in
bloom. No one can see
the poet who will black
ball you when you're
not interested in his bed.
Pine smell and night birds
camouflage the novelist
who packs in the night,
moans, "if I don't get out
of here I'll become an
alcoholic or gay." In the
photographs, the giddy
cradle their paper babies.
It's like a Christmas card
letter of the Happy Family
before what's really
going on leaks out

Peter Selover

Untitled

music and writing
enter the mind through
two separate doors
in our souls those two doors
are very poorly marked
so they both end up becoming
the reason that we start dancing

Donal Mahoney

Apple Fritter and a Single Rose

After 30 years together,
Carol tells me late one evening
in the manner of a quiet wife
that I have yet to write a poem

about her, something she
will never understand in light
of all those other poems
she says I wrote

about those other women
before she drove North.
And so I tell her once again
I wrote those other poems

about no women I ever knew
the way I now know her
even if I saw them once or twice
for dinner, maybe,

and a little vodka
over lime and ice.
Near midnight, though,
she says again

in the manner of a quiet wife
it's been thirty years
and still no poem.
When morning comes

I motor off to town to buy
a paper and a poem
for Carol
but find instead

undulating in a big glass case
an apple fritter,
tanned and glistening,
lying there just waiting.

So I buy the lovely fritter
and a single long-stem rose
orphaned near the register,
roaring red, and still

at full attention.
I bring them home but find
Carol still asleep
and so I put the fritter

on the breadboard
and the rose right next to it,
at the proper angle.
When she wakes I hope

the fritter and the rose
will buy me time until
somewhere in the attic
of my mind I find

a poem that says
more about us than
this apple fritter,
tanned and glistening,

lying there just waiting,
and a single long-stem rose,
roaring red, and still
at full attention.

Gary D. Swaim

Apologia

Prelude

No pretenses. No veil draping my face
to separate me from you, you from me.
Each word spoken, seen or heard by you,
will be more than merely a word. It will be
the stumbling of my Self, trying to weave
threads, strand by strand, word by word,
into the fabric of whole cloth, a shawl
worthy to be worn about the shoulders
of any who might need warmth. No pretenses,
only bumbling efforts to braid difficult syllables
together, for your understanding and mine.

Of God

I feel the fool speaking of God, and yet,
I breathe this one I've learned to call God,
every day. You see, I am a Job and a Thomas,
a Peter and a Paul. I am, no doubt, a doubter, and I am doubtless a
believer. I find myself lying in the philosophical
bed next to Kierkegaard, and as I toss about sleeplessly,
I hear him saying out of his depth of sleep, "It's foolish
to speak of God. No one can speak of the Wholly Other."
And, yet, he continues through the night, talking
of this God, using the only thoughts available to him—human
thoughts, struggling to place arms around a being
untouched, untouchable, yet whom he loves.
In the darkness of his sleep, he both lifts his arms to the sky
where he thinks his God must reside, and laughs aloud at his
foolishness for the gesture. I am Job. I am Thomas.
I am Peter. I am Paul.

I don't think I can speak of God knowingly. I do not know
God's gender or if there is such a thing as gender in the place of
God. I don't know God's latitude or longitude
or if my God is a spatial being. I'm sailing a sea, expecting
to fall from the earth's surface when I reach the horizon. I'm lost.
I can not speak of God knowingly.
The shawl I weave as I sail unravels. And, so, I speak
of the Wholly Other in faith, assigning to God's being—Love,

Mercy, and Justice, attributes I want my God to have in a world too often filled with Hate, Reprisal and Injustice. I can not speak of God knowingly, but I can and do believe.

Of Jesus

As I quietly begin reweaving my shawl, I see Jesus. It is He who offers me calmness and increased understanding, as should be so. The weaving, after all, takes a more substantive shape, one I begin to recognize. It has the face of a child which grows into the face of a man, a complexion most unlike my own, and it (he?) speaks a language I cannot comprehend. Yet, I understand, and though I have only suggestive evidence of his walking this earth, I believe—even as I believe in a Sophocles I have never seen.

Of the numerous stories I know, it is the stories of Jesus touching the lives of those surrounding him, touching those whom no one else dared touch, those at the very edges of both life and death—it is these stories that have caused me to be whoever I am. It is in the Garden of Gethsemane that he takes my unfinished shawl from my hands and places it around his shoulders, telling me, in his own moment of sorrow that it is enough that I believe. And as he returns to his disciples, I see him in the dark of night remove the shawl and place it over a shivering, fast-asleep Peter who would later deny Him. Jesus knew. I believe.

Of the Spirit (spiritus)

I begin a weaving again, this time for the sail on my little craft. It has navigated about this world for 72 years now and has grown old and thin, not unlike myself. As I weave each strand, one into or through the other, each seems to go its own uncharted way rather than the way I might have it go, as do my words when I speak of spiritus.

I am told that to name Spirit is to name the breath of God. And now, I must capture, with aimless words, the masked breath of a formless God. I continue weaving but tire, as I know no words and stop my weaving. Perhaps something to eat. I'll try again soon.

The day is extraordinary. Large and small billowy clouds shape themselves into bananas and fish and monsters as my little skiff of a ship rides low in the waters. No wind

blows, and my old sail flags itself in weariness about its diminutive mast. I will eat and rest and will not worry about the horizon, still in the distance. I will not worry today. The horizon will be there tomorrow.

My craft is motionless in the waters except for the lightest swells that push and pull me into sleep gently. I dream of the horizon. The sun is setting, and my matted eyes cannot entertain its beauty or horror. What is just beyond the horizon? As my dream asks the question, I awaken, startled by a grand breath of fresh air, shaping my sail into the fullness of a sail made for an enormous frigate. The sail seems young again, almost newborn, and the wind I cannot see pushes me away from the horizon, if only for moments. I do not see spiritus. I feel a breath on my shoulder I do not understand, pushing me toward the safety of the shore. I believe.

Of the Scriptures

It's under the slightest of lights, candles I'm almost sure, that I see a group of men (and women, too, but I'll not say so if you won't) writing with rapidly flourishing quills. They see what they write as through some glass darkly. Their hurried writing attests to the fires in their grain-filled bellies. "Write about Moses and the mountain" one almost shouts. "No, tell about how he separated the waters," another says. "Jaweh separated the waters," a woman says. And they write into the depths of the night. Each writes from his or her own perspective, and on occasion, I think a breeze brushes over their shoulders.

I'm reminded of the breath of wind that filled the sail of my little ship and am made to think it is spiritus calling on them this night. Name it as you wish: God's breath, the night-sharpened mind of a man or woman writing a story of what is loved, stories remembered and held close to the breast for the memory of a nation.

The words come from a specific time and place and throw only shadows against darkened glass, unable to seize, in spite of all the love and passion with which they are written, God, Jesus, the Spirit, or humankind. Words cannot capture the ephemeral. All is interpretation, even when loving and so wonderfully profound.

I hold in my library some twelve or fourteen Bibles, multiples of concordances on the Bible, books written from literary perspectives (novels, plays, and poetry) filled with allusions to the Bible. So much of my own writing, both serious and comic, takes

its seeds from the Bible. Scripture (both Hebrew and Christian) feed the fire in my belly with questions to pursue and answers to embody.

Of the Church

As I sail rough seas, I find I am weeping, not from fear but from bitter disappointment. I have allowed my mind's eye to drift over heaving waves to distant lands I have never known (there is so much I do not and can not know). My thoughts have traveled, as well, to the land from which I've sailed, my own home. In all these lands I see rifts deeper than the deepest swells in the sea that tosses me about. I cry out for smoothness of waters as I plead for peace among those who would worship their God.

I am not at all certain that Jesus sought to establish a church, not a church, surely, as we know it. The Kingdom of His life and love was to be in the hearts of individuals. I put away my weaving for now, as my old sail no longer requires replacement. It has life, the life that Jesus wanted for His followers, each stepping alongside Him and toward Jaweh with the surest steps possible. It is enough, and each person is God's church, ekklesia, called out for service to the world.

As I think about taking up my weaving again, I contemplate the possibility of only one person on this earth, serving (or trying to serve) God and Jaweh's saying, "It is enough. You are my church. We need no candles or choirs. We need only you and me in quiet union.

Then, I think of the many who light candles across the world and sing Handel's The Hallelujah Chorus or lift unknowing but believing prayers above the dark clouds that now throw shadows over the tiny speck of my helpless skiff, and my soul rises. Yes, my soul that I cannot see, but that I believe drives my Being. I take time to pray with thanks for the church and start weaving once again, hoping for a completed fabric that, with color and form, will give unity to the church across all the lands I have seen, great distances from where I now sail and in my own loved land.

Of a Sense of Personal Call

I believe I have been called to sail the waters of our world in trying times. To explore, to question, to bring newness to those who are about me (with the limited abilities I might possess). To seek healing where there is pain. To be present in all of life.

I can not know specifically what God would have me do or be, so I must be open to possibilities, even as I must be true with those whom I encounter. I must understand also that all these things I seek to be might not be found, that I will know my own short falls. Jaweh's net is wide and strong. I must sail the seas, oblivious to the dangers of the horizon, oblivious to mystery. Oblivious, as Job knew so well, that we can not know, but we can believe.

Irene D. Hays

Precept Upon Precept

Line upon line,
Here a little, there a little.
Isaiah 28:10

Let's agree on reality:

not the names of things
but the things themselves,

the body's silent ongoing conversation
with the world as it is experienced,
that collective field
where words are more than alphabet.

In the warm flush of exchange,
the body's percepts
outlive mental constructs.

Sentient beings are not alone in this:
grasses bend and whisper,
clouds converge, then drift,
cells and tissues of the tree itself
quietly drink in sunlight.

Entangled in the ecotone,
we thrum with relationship—
I breathe-in your words,
you breathe-in mine.

Jeff Morgan

The Creative Act

As soon as I was alone in the house,
I decided to make some peanut butter toast
and write,
but as I neared the stationary bike,
the Devil crept into my head.
Almost immediately, my editor was standing beside me at my writing desk,
a lean, old man who looked like Samuel Beckett.
He stayed with me through the toast
and would stay until I had written something or somebody had come home.
Our son came home
with his agent.
I saw half of the agent there at our dining table.
He wore a pink sleeveless shirt with white stripes,
his swollen face framed by his naturally curly hair and golden wire spectacles.
To his right stoically sat two older gentlemen in suits.
Our son decided to tell some new jokes.
His agent bellowed, but the other two remained implacable.
His agent claimed our son was going to make some bread with those jokes.
I took up a pencil from the desk and drew some bread on a placemat,
making a rectangle with an oval spanning the top
and giving the shape longitudinal stripes.
Using a knife from the table, my son and I both cut through the stripes,
took a slice each and ate the plain bread.
It was good.

Kyle Laursen

Cafe Coyote

This poem does not begin with a feeling-tone or image. This poem begins by chance at the Café Coyote. You wearing a buffalo skin robe, me in a blue tuxedo. The band plays a slow peyote song and the little people dance. I look you in the eye and say: honey, you look familiar. You laugh and pull your hair back in a ponytail. We speak in a secret language. We trade eyes. I place my hand on the small of your back. The moon takes a detour and makes love to the sun.

Paul Hostovsky

Ars P.O.

A poem should have
at least one good list—
anything liquid, fragile, perishable, or potentially hazardous?
A poem should be
suspicious
as a package you might put
into the hands of
unsuspecting others.
Can you be trusted?
Can they be trusted?
You can receive a thing
without opening it.
You can reject a thing
without opening it. You can
read a poem by holding it up to the light,
holding it up to your ear
and giving it a shake
to see what shifts. You can
even walk away from it
and come back to it later
to see if it has changed
you, opened you. Oh my
bearer of rectangles,
if I could tell you
how to tell the pure
money of the poems
from all the other rectangles
in your little square truck
with its picture of flight
on both flanks,
if I could show you
how to feel it
through the envelope,
like a Braille letter,
like someone else's
goose bumps in your hands,
worth its weight in
transport of a kind I cannot
teach you how to make your own,
though you steal it,
though you open every
letter, oh my poor

letter carrier, rich already
with the handling of it,
though you look for it in all
four corners
of its own sumptuous
destitute world
which is thinner than paper,
which is air itself,
air from the country
of someone else's
mouth, oh my beautiful
mailman, I would,
I would.

Vivek Sharma

A Biography, Scripted by Astrologers

Sometimes I think our family of astrologers tricked me into choices I have made all my life.

The nav-grah, planets, I was told, would align to make my tasks harder. But if I make the effort, Vrihaspati, Jupiter, Guru of gods, would delight in imparting me knowledge. But like in the ancient times, the dark influences, will try to seduce me into failures, attack me. But if I keep meat off my plate, drink no wine, fast at least once per fortnight, I could avert the severity of blow, allowing me to become a famous engineer. But fame will come late, after a long hiatus, or wait. Then Surya or Sun will rise to set my world straight. But then Mars or Mangal rules, that bloody planet, God of anger and accidents involving water or fire, so no motorized vehicle till the age of twenty-three. (My mother's argument: The engines have to be ignited, and there is no smoke without a fire somewhere).

I battled Mangal with a magical stone, set in silver ring, and fasted on Mangalvar or Tuesday, seeking Hanuman's aid. His skill at battling the bad-blooded demons is celebrated in Ramayana, in Tulsi's Chalisa. (Ask any Indian who drives or walks alone at night, how many times does he recite, those lines from sixteenth century). I was told, after Mangal's reign ends, only the page would see my rage, and then Soma or Moon will bring moody states and hazy vision, implying unrequited love, or need for spectacles. Possibly the latter, from stress on eyes from excess reading (which is not a bad after-effect).

If father's influence wins, I was told, officialdom would be a fitting career, but there is an inclination for writing and music. As shalokas, hymns are musical poems, a spiritual journey may unfold, as is befitting for a son of Brahmin family. Leadership, as a celibate Guru or great King is possible, (but my mother said I'll marry, and democracy has no kings). But the counting, (they refer to the astrology as ganana or counting), they said, shows a prowess in science, which can be realized through higher education, and the counting, shows travel over large distances, so trips to foreign lands were advertized.

*

As a child, I could not visualize it:
there was no writer or poet or engineer in family,
no one had traveled beyond the distant seas,
but now I think our family and other astrologers lied

to give me this role-play

I am tricked into acting throughout my life.
 Success was scripted,
 galaxies, gods and numbers were working to ensure it
 and unless I botched up my lines,
 or missed my cue, I was to get rewards
 if I focused on the effort, karma, necessary
 to have me deserve it. Every year, a varsh-fal,
 (annual prediction chart) was compiled to keep the prophecies
 updated and alive.

At twenty-seven, it was predicted that I'll turn charming,
 and perhaps it gave me the confidence that proved the astrologer
 right. Now I am marrying for love, which I was told was not revealed early,
 but was also prophesied. At the astrologically correct time, humans, Gods,
 gandharavas, ghosts, ancestors, souls, stars, planets, will supervise
 my wedding. Invisible blessings, as flowers, will tumble from the skies,
 and we will unite before the holy fire, Agni, for at least seven lives.

*

Years back, on returning to Atlanta from a trip home, I told Thomas Lux:
 "I asked an astrologer about my writing, he advised: 'focus on engineering,
 your chart says you'll write, but you won't be like Salman Rushdie.'" Gurudev Lux
 smiled, and said, "That dimwit! Why would you be like Rushdie?
 You're a poet. A poet you will be. If we publish your poems as chapbook,
 you will earn more money than me."

A prophesy is always necessary to kill another.

*

It seems many grand schemes are in place (trains are destined to bear my name),
 so my motivation stays. But after brooding over polymers, drops, beetles and
 nanoparticles,
 after writing verses in English, my doctoral thesis and research articles, I fear
 errors in their calculations, or unexpected celestial events, like demotion of Pluto,
 or improbabilities embedded in string theory, have tempered my biography,
 I am living like it was never expected to be. So when I try to translate
 Hindi poems, or describe my childhood in my writings,
 I see how the words in English are trapped in their own cultural labyrinths.
 When I seek physics problems, I find myself wallowing in precincts
 of the known, echoing established findings.

*

These men who know nothing of my GPAs, test-scores or publications,
 pore over my janam-patri, birth-chart, to provide self-similar prophecies
 I know that these calculations, based on the positions

of constellations at the time of my birth
involve same equations, following a near-eternal rhythm,
and there is no reason to get different answers any time. But they say
that the interpretation of results distinguishes a master from a dilettante.
Any computer, monkey, politician, MBA can compute the odds,
any experimentalist and journalist can collect data, but seeing
what lies beyond or within the miasma or mist,
requires a mystic, psychic, scientific power
and only spiritually advanced selves possess it.

*

I think our destiny is shaped by the limits we set aside. Our destinations,
aspirations tug us, we drift towards what is described as the grandest
thing to do. Since I am not destined to have a simple life of hyacinths,
I grit my teeth, wait for galaxies to complete their motions,
and knowing I control only my actions, "karmaneva adhikaraste,
mahafaleshu kadachana," not the ultimate fruit, I strive
to reconcile with whatever life brings.

*

Many say that Rama, Krishna, Moses and Jesus
turned divine through their words and actions,
a divine will was through them realized,
but maybe they too acted heroically,
to fulfill the destinies . . . prophesied?

Yaqoob Ghaznavi

Driftwood Court

September 16, 2008
3 shootings in Toronto

one of victims
a high school student
16

you say:

too many poems
with pain and misery

but how does
a poet stop
feeling a parent's grief
the classmate's trauma

I do see the beauty

in fragile, delicate
roses you plant
and in the pair of eagles
bisecting the sun

but the ink dries
only blood remains

please forgive me

The following week, three more shootings took place at Driftwood Court.

Frank Cavano

Take Not My Pen

Take not the pen from my hand
but let my foolish wordings stand
like surgeon's hands
'round a bare and bloodied heart.

For I am pleased to be
daylight's slave, not free.
But evening's span
beckons ghosts and gall
and spirits fall
midst time too tall to tend.

Take not the pen from this hand
but let my precious wordings stand
like soldier's hands
armed against the haunted night.

Nancy Gustafson

A Poem or a hair shirt

Words and phrases
flit through her mind
at inopportune times,
in waiting lines
at stop signs

are scratched
with a dull lead
onto grocery tabs
and scraps ripped
from old envelopes

to be stored
like roses pressed between pages,
sacred tears in a glass vial,
fingernail clippings boxed in cedar,
hair pulled from a brush and braided

until that golden time
carved from disorder when she
crumbles rose petals, pours out
her tears, shakes free her nails,
unbraids her tresses

and kneels before
the loom of the Spirit
who dwells within
to weave a poem, or
heaven forbid, a hair shirt.

Ryan McLellan

Nothing

Saw some legends chant mantras about how there doesn't have to be a deep meaning to a piece of art and though I've tried to convince myself of this for a long time, this poem finally means nothing to me. Not that I don't care what I put down or don't want to subvert common language, but more that the stress should no longer control output, no more of this self-sabotage, just beautiful effort.

Sarah Rehfeldt

On Language

Poet,
Reach down deep inside yourself.
Discover what you need to write.
Unearth it.
Carve out only the essential
(nothing extraneous will do) –
only the rawest, most crucial words
that language has to offer.
Take
what seems to be yours to take.
Let it penetrate the pages.
If blood-stained mineral her content,
then you have tasted well.

Sharon Carter

Ars Poetica

Each morning I remove yesterday's ashes,
add kindling, last week's paper.
The stove won't light itself—
I need insights, one perfect word
sparking another.

Outside a flicker digs bark
beetles from Douglas fir.
He stabs, swallows, attacks again—
the way I flip
through my thesaurus, try
various nouns, switch
heads from front to back,
remove limbs, antennae,
create a better bug.

So much depends on the muse's
presence. She is never languid—
her temperament more akin to carpenter
ants who excavate my cottage walls—
some scurry in circles,
or like the woodstove
roar into action, only to burn
themselves out.
I swivel back and forth in my chair.
Wait.

Sheryl L. Nelms

Food for Thought

I write them

poem
after poem
after
poem

pages and pages

until my office
is full

drawers won't shut
shelves spill
over

with a waterfall
of words

I tape them on the walls
and windows

spread them out
on the kitchen
cupboards
to dry

wrap them around leftovers

eat them scrambled
for breakfast
with bacon

Siham Karami

The Storyteller

Linseed oil-soaked wood and kerosene-
fueled, pumped-up firefly-light
pulse their pungent fumes and shadowy flares
rising to the ceiling, which slowly disappears
inside the storyteller's deftly unrolled voice,
his face a beautiful enchanted otherworld,
a haunted palace pacing through my heart.
I hide my trembling heartbeats, quivering fires
that flicker as his words graze the ceiling,
leaving little caves with secret passages
through the known universe beyond
where he becomes the stories, rising, disassembling
edges unexplainable, and reassembling them,
inviting visitors through the Unseen
small openings like eyes in every thought
and oceans, each ocean containing billions
of conscious minds, swirling galaxies of minds,
each aware of its small place and time,
watching, forming countless stories, and I
know none of them, not a single one.
He conjures phrases dancing
eloquently between agony and relief
a sadness soaring its dark love
whose pathos bathes us all to the core
with longing, longing to know more,
each aching cell arching just to hear
his reverent voice enthrall
this fluttering soul
perched, my wings humming slowly
on the cabin wall,
my heart's open door
in kerosene-and-linseed air,
a breath withheld by reverence,
his lamplit countenance
buoyant, unaware
his words have landed there,
awakening a flare of cold silver,
a wisp, a wire
awaiting small charged particles
of pure love, free of fire,
just grazing chamber walls
like distant thunder;

my wings slow their fluttering
to keep it there, inside and pure —
my eyes touch his a split second,
testing to be sure he cannot feel
his words have formed a pearl
glowing in a shell
and I will never tell
the storyteller.

Stephanie B. Shafran

Birthing

My words today

burst through

my

brain

hack open

my

heart

fall

from

my

fingers

spill

and

splatter

the white

page

with

black

blood

Phillip K. Arrington

A Poetics for God

Help me say this.
I cannot do it without you,
curious clay,
a breath of thought.

This is the first lesson.
It shakes a lion's head.
It cannot be tamed or caged.

Take this much
as wonder
of any life left to speak,
to say these mountains
will not move or glow
unless we say they shall.

Without your poems
I could not pray.
Without your poems
I could not deny the prayers.

I take you by the hand,
pull your mouth
close to my blazed face.

I want you to pronounce
the name you have not heard.
to hear all it does not say.

I say
the holiest word
will never be said,
has never been said.

I will say it here.

When you understand it,
you will know
how little it means,
how much it matters.

I will say it here.
I will.

I am.

Tamara Mikell-Choudhury

Red Ink: A Literacy Autobiography

At Holloway Elementary School I was considered a good writer and reader. I was a girl who followed directions. I read what I was told. I did all of my assignments. My mother never had to ask me, “Tamara, did you do your homework tonight?” I just did it. My end-of-the-year test scores were always well above average. I was a smart little girl. My literacy, like that of all the children around me, was defined by skills. I learned the skills I needed to function appropriately in school. And I was good at demonstrating those skills.

My parents divorced when I was five years old. At that time, my Orthodox Jewish father converted to Islam and joined a Sufi-Muslim commune in the middle of Texas. He tried to bring my second-generation Holocaust-survivor mother with him, but she refused. As a result, I spent school years with my mother and summers and holidays with my father and his new American-Muslim convert wife and her four children. Four months of every year I lived at Bayt ‘ul Deen, a 200-acre farm, isolated from the rest of society. Unlike me, my stepbrothers and stepsisters never left the commune. At most, they drove two hours to Austin, Texas to visit the Whole Foods to buy brown rice and lentils a few times a year. Otherwise, they remained separate from everyone else.

The children of our commune were schooled on site. Our teachers were our mothers and the mothers of our friends. The women and men who taught us were not trained. Some of them may not have completed high school themselves. After joining the commune, my father taught himself and became fluent in Arabic. He became the Arabic teacher on our “utopian” community. Other men on the commune taught Persian, Urdu, and the history of Islam. My stepmother and the other ladies taught the kids math, reading, and writing. The subjects we studied were non-orthodox, to say the least.

Our Sufi commune was unlike most households in America. We studied subjects most Americans never heard of or even acknowledged. My closest friends were from Sri Lanka, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan. We ate together, slept together, cooked together, studied together, and prayed together. Together we questioned life and death. We debated world politics, the idea of Americanism, and the problems of our consumer-based world. The more I learned about the world and problems outside of my not-so-typical home, the more disinterested I became in traditional education. That good little schoolgirl became a rebellious intellectual.

As the years passed, my thoughts of college dissipated. Although my Lithuanian grandmother and immigrant German mother emphasized daily the need for education and drilled into me that I would go to college, my fascination with the spiritual world took me away from their lofty higher educational goals. I became absorbed with the grandest questions. I needed to know about my Creator. And I needed to know how I was supposed to function in this world in order to live happily in the after-world. Thinking of death gave me little time to think about the mundane world of school. By the time I entered Amphitheater Middle School in Tucson, my writing took on a new richness that my globally ignorant teachers could not understand. And because of this, they dismissed me.

My teachers' opinions of me became low. Because they could not understand me, they chose to ignore me. I wrote about outrageous topics such as the benefits of polygamy for women. My teachers continued to write in red ink that I was having major "writing problems." Even so, never once did they come up to me after class to discuss my work. Nor did they try to understand or even question why I was writing so defiantly. At the time, I was proud of my essays. I considered them superior to the other students' work because they were unique and did not conform to traditional academic guidelines. Everyone else followed the rules. They answered the essay questions "correctly."

In my commune I was taught to vigorously question all ideas and concepts. I brought this talent into the classroom with me. But these non-mainstream ways of philosophizing did not help me in school: they led to my academic struggles. During my years of middle school and high school I became a bad writer, in the minds of my teachers. In my mind too, I slowly began to think of myself as a non-writer. The bright ink marks were beginning to take a toll on my literacy health.

I stopped caring about my success as a student and I stopped reading my teachers' comments. When a teacher would hand back a paper, I would quickly look at my grade and then stuff the paper into my backpack. Although I began to loathe writing academic papers for my teachers, I never gave up writing. To compensate for my frustrations in school, I began writing privately. I adopted a private world where I could express myself. Writing became a refuge. It was a place no one could enter. My teachers could not comment on my ungrammatical sentences or my missing thesis statements. While alone, I lost my audience and wrote freely.

Once my life context changed and I became interested in the hereafter instead of the here-and-now, reading and writing for school purposes became unimportant, and acquisition of these skills became unworthy of my effort. I lacked the interest to continue being literate in the traditional sense. At Amphitheater High School, I did not want to conform to the educational system

and the constraints it placed on me. Teachers assigned topics I cared little about. The essay questions they assigned were based on the experiences of the average teenager. My English teachers presupposed that all of us were alike. We were all having the same life experiences. In paper after paper, I failed to address the essay questions: I went into rants of my own. The teachers clearly did not understand, nor did they try to understand, the issues I was writing about.

Despite all of my struggles, I ended up graduating from high school when I was only sixteen. No one at my high school had ever graduated so quickly. Even though most of my teachers had little hope for my educational success, I defied the odds of the system. I can only attribute this to my relentless determination. Throughout the years, the little voice that I see personified in red-ink blots still sits on my shoulder and whispers, "You are not a writer. Stop writing. You are a failure." But I continue to write, just as I did then.

The problems I encountered with education happened because I knew how to "read and write the world" to use Paulo Friere's phrase (qtd. in Smith 273), but the school system did not accept this as a form of literacy. They only needed me to "read and write the word" (Friere, qtd. in Smith 273), which I was not adept at doing. Because the world I was experiencing was not "respected as legitimate and accurate," I had little support during my most formative teenage years. The world I was experiencing was foreign to my teachers and therefore I got lost in the system. My experience is an example of how educational systems fail to include atypical students into primary and secondary discourses. Had my teachers tried to understand me, today I would be a more confident and possibly more competent writer.

I am here
Literate and able to understand scholarly texts
For you who have not had this opportunity
I read for you so I may speak out for you

Source

Smith, David M. "The Anthropology of Literacy Acquisition." *The Acquisition of Literacy: Ethnographic Perspectives*. Ed. B. Schieffelin and P. Gilmore New York: Ablex, 1986. 261 - 275.

David Harris Ebenbach

The Unknown

Artists are naturally curious types. We want to know about things – about the nature of art, about ourselves, about life. That's one of the main reasons we do what we do; for most of us, creating art is a way to learn what we feel we need to learn. "I think discovering is the only thing that keeps me going," choreographer Meredith Monk once said (1). What really strikes me about her quote, though, is how she continues it: "You feel like you're part of something much bigger than yourself." All this curiosity, all this exploration, seems to take artists inexorably toward the grand questions of life – about meaning, about purpose, about the source of it all.

I've been writing about this subject a lot lately. For the last two years or so I've been working on a book about creativity – actually, I've been slowly writing about it (in bits and scraps) for many more years than that – for the sole reason that, even though I sit down at my desk every morning and write, I still don't understand, well, just about anything about what I do. What is creativity? Where does it come from? Who has it? How does it work? What does it do in the world? As I said, all this curiosity leads to bigger and bigger questions. In particular, as a Jewish writer, I find myself asking: What, if anything, does my religious tradition have to say about all this?

I find that my explorations circle and circle around one central emerging truth: to be an artist is to be engaged with the divine – to be like God, to become closer to God, to be led forward by God. And I'm not alone in this experience. Artists, in fact, often sound a little like amateur theologians. Eric Fischl once said, "There's something sacred about paint" (2). In the words of composer Leonard Bernstein, "no art lover can be an agnostic when the chips are down. If you love music, you are a believer, however dialectically you try to wiggle out of it" (3). Painter Marc Chagall took it a step further by bringing the word "God" explicitly – and also uncertainly – into the conversation: "Will God, or somebody else, give me the power to breathe into my canvases my sigh, the sigh of prayer and of sadness, the prayer of salvation, or rebirth?" (4)

So I have company in seeing this connection to the divine, in wanting to talk about it. Yet – and this interests me, too – in my writing on the subject I find that I frequently dodge using the word "God," replacing it with something like, as I just did, "the divine" or "what is meaningful," because I know how many distracting assumptions and associations people have with the word.

As it turns out, though, you just can't get the whole truth until you look at it directly.

In Judaism, traditionally we turn for understanding first and foremost to the Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Our sages have even suggested that God read the Torah for instructions when creating the universe! Now, I should say that I personally don't take a story like that literally, but see it instead as a kind of inspired metaphor for just how rich the Torah is as a text, how full it is of a people's accumulated wisdom, how

engaged it is with what we feel as sacred in the universe. Or, to be more to the point, how engaged it is with God.

So what can the Torah tell us about God?

There's a crucial moment for me early on in the Book of Exodus. Here Moses has an encounter with God, one in which he's asked to lead his people out of Egypt. Moses offers up many protestations and excuses in an attempt to get out of the job – he's not a good speaker, nobody's going to believe him – but his most interesting response comes in chapter 3, line 13: "When I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?"

Moses wants to know who this God is, if he's going to follow the divine charge and head back to Egypt for the fight of his life.

The answer is more interesting still. God says, Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh – a name that is difficult to translate, but which, according to the Etz Hayim Torah (5), could mean "I Am That I Am," "I Am Who I Am," and "I Will Be Who I Will Be," not one of which is really a solid answer. In that way it resembles the name of God we see used most often in the Torah: in Hebrew letters, yod-hey-vav-hey. This is a name with no vowels, something like YHWH in English, virtually untranslatable. Thus it is no surprise that God in this parashah refuses to become concrete for Moses – the prophet's first (though not last) lesson in the unfathomable nature of the divine.

Composer Allen Shawn wrote:

At the core of Judaism is the idea of the oneness of God and of the unknowability and unrepresentability of that oneness. It seems to me that a part of the meaning of Judaism is this abstraction, this deep sense that we do not know. The not knowing is itself sacred" (6).

And yet I continue to claim that art is an engagement with the divine – but how can we engage with something unknowable?

The truth is that most artists, religious or not, would tell you that art is very often a fumble in the dark. Painters Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, in a letter to the New York Times, wrote, "To us art is an adventure into an unknown world (7)." According to choreographer Meredith Monk, "Part of the process is hanging out in the unknown" (8). This very often means that artists don't even know how they do what they do. Sculptor Louise Nevelson "had great difficulty talking articulately about art because her approach was essentially intuitive" (9). Chagall, a painter who knew himself well enough to write his own autobiography, nonetheless admitted that his own drive to paint is a bit mysterious, saying that it was "something I was born with and don't really understand myself" (10).

This abundance of mystery doesn't make things altogether easy. If artists are people who try to, in Rothko's words, "give human beings direct contact with eternal verities through reduction of those verities to the realm of sensuality" (11) – in other words, if we are those who try to represent those truths here on earth – what do we do with the fact that the divine, the underlying meaning of the universe, is, as Shawn tells us, unrepresentable?

Shawn himself has an answer for this: "Paradoxically, another aspect of the practice of Judaism is a very real dialogue with this abstraction, the addressing of God in a very personal way" (12). Moses, after all, is in dialogue with God throughout this story, both before he asks for a definition of the divine and afterward, when Moses is still without a clear definition to hold onto. We see a more recent example of this in the poetry of Israeli writer Yehuda Amichai, which often took the form of a:

great ongoing dialogue with God. [These poems] are always in the forefront and afterthought of that dialogue which, more precisely, takes the form of a debate over God's presence and His absence, His caring and not caring. His actions and inactions(13).

We learn from Moses, and Amichai, that you can talk to God even without being able to define God. You can learn from God what you're supposed to do with your life and what meaning can be found in that kind of life, but you will never have a God that is as concrete as a golden statue of a calf.

To put it another way, artists never have a universe that makes itself so thoroughly known as to be exhausted of all mystery. And thank God for that – what then would we paint or write or sing about? In the words of Allen Shawn, "God is only near when he is not defined" (14). Every day I go to my desk in order to explore and discover, but I am usually not fooled into believing that I'm going to figure it all out. I only believe that it's worth it to be there at the desk. Our role, in the end, is not to solve God, or any of the other great mysteries. Our role is to hang out in that unknown, to be in dialogue with the divine – and to view our art as reports on the conversation.

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Leland Thoburn

Divine Intervention

Writer's block got you down? You can try the usual remedies: finding fault with your significant other; reading John Grisham ("I can write better than that!"); or looking for real work. But what do you do when all else fails? Seek divine intervention, of course.

Catholicism offers four patron saints just waiting to hear your petition. Saint Francis de Sales is a patron saint of writers and journalists. For best results, travel to Lyons, France, where his disembodied heart is entombed in a shrine. No one knows how his heart became separated from his body, but legend has it an editor was involved. Saint John the Apostle is a patron saint of authors and writers, in addition to publishers, booksellers, bookbinders, lithographers, papermakers, printers, painters, typesetters and editors. Without John, we'd probably still be scratching petroglyphs onto rocks. Saint Lucy of Syracuse is a patron saint of writers, in addition to throat infections and salesmen, so there may be some competition for her attention. And there is Saint Paul the Apostle, one of the most influential early Christian writers. Also available is the archangel Gabriel (or, if you are Muslim, "Jibril"), the angel of creative writing.

If your tastes run to the exotic, you have many choices. The Greek god Hermes was the patron god of high arcane literature. At last, we have a god of literary magazines. The Muses are also available: Calliope, for Epic Poetry; Clio, for History; Erato, for Love Poetry; Melpomene, for Tragedy; Polyhymnia, for Sacred Poetry; and Thalia, for Comedy.

The Hindus recognize Saraswati as the patron goddess of writers and poets. She is worshipped every year on the 5th day of the Hindu month of Maagha. Hindu law prohibits reading or writing on that day so, instead of confessing to writer's block, tell your editor you were worshipping Saraswati. The Hindus also worship Ganesh, the patron of letters. His blessings are often invoked while writing, although not usually in epithet form.

The Babylonians prayed to Baalat. She is associated with books, libraries, and writers. The Santerians worship Ochun, goddess of art and beauty. She is also known as the goddess of laughter, joy, generosity, abundance, love, marriage, and the erotic, so who knows, you might get lucky. The Norse worshipped Bragi, god of poetry and eloquence.

The Mayans worshipped Itzamna, god of drawing and letters. Itzamna reportedly could resurrect the dead. His symbol is a red hand, to which you pray to resurrect your writing. The Mesopotamians worshipped Nebo, god of writing and speech. Nebo wrote men's deeds down in a book, which he produced for judgment after death, like a rejection letter. His symbol is the stylus. The Egyptians worshipped Thoth, god of writing. While his wife, Seshat, invented writing (behind every successful god there is a goddess), Thoth

taught it to mankind. Thoth wrote books containing all that was known about magic, including how to get published.

If you can't find salvation for your writing from this list, well, I've got bad news for you. You may just have to sit down at your desk and write.

Lisa Nichols Hickman

What a Wonderful Wor(I)d

Beneath my knees, two shelves up, ten inches below the water line, is a book I wrote years ago. It rests now between Ruth Duck's *Flames of the Spirit* and *Celebrating Holy Week in a Post Holocaust World* by Henry F. Knight. I am here, in these last minutes of our trip, dusting shelves that look to have been barely touched in the past two years. It is unbelievable to me that the dust has not been stirred up by the fray of thirty clammy young men scurrying each day to change their sweat-soaked clothes after a hard day's work rebuilding New Orleans. The church remembers this room, pre-Katrina, as their library. For us it is a changing room and for those brave enough to endure the smell and desperate enough to find a quiet place of rest in this church crammed with sixty volunteers, it is a sleeping room. There is no card catalog in the place. It is possible that no one in the church knows my book is on the shelf. There is a very tired Febreze® plug-in air freshener, so worn from changing the tang in the room we were quick to toss it out, but then realized it still had a little of its hum left and this room sure needed some.

I am thinking about writing this week. If I had not been here in New Orleans with sixty youth and adults from my church, I would have been enjoying a writing workshop with Eugene Peterson. It would have been wonderful. When I told a friend about my decision to go to New Orleans instead of the workshop, she said, "But isn't Peterson one of the most prolific theological writers of our generation?" She didn't realize I had cried for two days after turning down the invitation to the workshop. I knew there was only one response to the invitation: "No, but thank you. Maybe next time," I still couldn't believe I had uttered the words. The pastor in me would do the right thing and go to New Orleans, but the writer in me would long for learning with Eugene. I've given up a lot. Was this a missed opportunity, or did another writer have a different plot line to unfold?

So instead of gathering writing samples in preparation for the workshop, I was writing devotion manuals for our evening worship. Instead of packing retreat clothes, I was packing tools and insurance forms and letters from parents to their kids. Instead of booking a flight to Minnesota, I was arranging and rearranging and arranging once again air travel for sixty. Instead of meeting with other pastors who have a heart for writing, I was writing worship alongside our team of teens for a congregation devastated by the storm. Instead of working on chapters and first drafts, I was entrusting our team to the work projects organized by the grassroots ministry of a church whose mission was rewritten overnight. And instead of sharing a meal with Eugene Peterson, I found myself with a potato pressed to my forehead doing the Cajun potato dance.

In New Orleans, a local musician comes by to get us dancing after a long day of travel. We learn the two-step, explore Zydeco culture, play with the Cajun instruments and

compete in the potato dance. My husband says, "I'm sure they teach every northerner the Cajun potato dance and watch them dance all the way through town." I am less concerned about entrusting ourselves to our dance instructor, and much more concerned about the size of the potatoes. If a bunch of teenagers are placing these potatoes between their foreheads and dancing, what size are these potatoes? I vote for G-rated potatoes, four inches in length. Bruce Daigrepoint, Cajun musician, gives them R-rated russets. I sigh, pull the gum from my mouth, tear it in half and attach the potato to my forehead and to my partner's. If only Eugene Peterson could see me now.

The rib of the rubboard washes over us, and the two-step begins to seep into my bones. I pray to settle into this experience and leave the disappointment over a lost opportunity behind. New Orleans and her people have lost so much more. "Lâche pas la patate," shouts Bruce Daigrepoint, Cajun that he is. He's been speaking Cajun French all night to stump the kids. Lâche pas la patate. Don't drop the potato. No problem, I think, even as my gummy potato drops and leaves my right toe throbbing. He explains, "Dat's Cajun for sayin', 'Don't give up.'" I grab my red russet and try again.

Little did we know that night how much we would need his word of encouragement the next day after the disaster tour. Mile after mile we saw little sign of life. The Ninth ward? Not one living soul. A grocery store? None for miles on end. An ice cream shop? None open. Neighborhoods decimated at every income level. A member of our team finds a driver's license. Another, an abandoned doll. Someone steps on a set of house keys. These simple ties to sanity abandoned in a desperate flee for safety. Our group spent just two hours touring the city and we were exhausted and hopeless, the citizens of New Orleans had been living this disaster for two years. Where did they find hope? Somehow we needed more than a potato and a clever Cajun phrase.

That evening the devotion team led us in worship and prayers. "Write down where you experienced hopelessness today," we are instructed. And so the ripples of prayers unfold. Where to begin in such a ghost town when faced with such a great task? These prayers are written on scraps of paper. I found the enormosity of our tasks troubling. I thought this because it would only be a small part of an extremely troubled city. And it would be impossible to help everyone in one week. Please help us out. And, What did the children do during the flood? How did this tragedy affect their lives? What do they think of the world now? These prayers are immersed in water, and the scraps are fished out to spell a singular word visible as we peer over the balcony onto the still rugless sanctuary floor. HOPE. We see that hope is born not of something other than what already exists, but is constructed of the bits and pieces we are left holding in our hands. We see the possibility for a whole new world to exist within a single word.

Each day we go out and work in the world. Each evening we reflect and dwell in the word. As the two spheres of world and word intersect, we see our theme "What a Wonderful World" come to life. Louis Armstrong, may have penned, "I see fields of green" to give expression to the wonders of the world, but we see different wonders displayed. Plugging in his washer and dryer into currents of electricity that work after two years of waiting, Ray said was "wonderful."

Our theme verse is from Psalm 31, verse 21. Months ago, our planning team just happened to pick The Message translation of the text because its words echoed our theme, "What a Wonderful World." The translation calls out, "Blessed God! His love is the wonder of the world. Trapped by a siege, I panicked." We explore with our group how New Orleans is under siege, and how the storm of that siege calls up other storms in marriages and family systems, in governmental agencies and even within the church. We ask them to keep a list of the places of siege and the places of wonder. And so, surprisingly even here in New Orleans, I end up hanging out with Eugene along with some impressionable teens.

I lived with Psalm 31 that week, and turned to it for guidance and encouragement. You might even say I got to dance with the Bible that week. Well that is, Mr. Bible. Martin Bible from Opelousas who goes dancing three or four nights a week at Mulate's along with his wife and friends to stay young and healthy, to have fun, and especially after the storm to make visitors like us feel welcome. He taught me the alligator waltz, a back and forth sway of arms and legs. I plodded along, as I sometimes do, when I am hand in hand with the Bible, gaining my footing and struggling for grace.

After dancing that night, we sit down in our devotions to look at Psalm 31. Twice in the first five verses, we learn that a cliff is a place of safety. "I'm not saying anything," one of girls offers, "but isn't our pastor named Cliff? Hasn't he been a place of refuge and safety in the midst of the storm?" What would a professor of Old Testament say to this one? There are things you learn in exegesis class about proper and improper ways to read the Bible, but then there are things you learn in a flooded church, surrounded by waterlogged pews, 59 smelly other adults, hungry for a word from the Lord. And then, let me tell you when I got to the end of the passage which I had read a hundred times before in preparation for the trip and saw the words "Don't give up," there in the text, I wept. I wept because the phrase, *lâche pas la patate*, was no longer about red russets, but about the reality of a disaster before us. I wept for the city of New Orleans. I wept for the lone man alone in his neighborhood. He was the one who mouthed, "Thank you for coming," as he saw our vans drive by on the disaster tour. I wept for Bradley, who lost his dog to the storm, after a neighbor tried to protect his dog and 28 others safe on the roof of a house for five days straight. Bradley's dog died hours before the rescue team arrived. I wept for our leadership team, men who have been hospitalized, homes that have been broken, folks who search for meaning in daily life asking daily what it means not to give up when life tells you otherwise. I wept for myself, the series of circumstances I am faced with that I would never have chosen, but that call out for characterization deeper than I personally know how to write. I wept in humility as I see the character of others who have emerged from the storm.

Tell our story. Don't give up. Don't forget us. As these phrases rippled through our days, hearing the same thing over and over again from all we encounter, it becomes clear our words matter. The way we tell this story will make a difference for those who are living this story. The ways we get those around us to tell their story, to give voice to their experience, will provide a platform for healing and for change. Here is an opportunity for a writing workshop complete with texts in draft form, subtexts of drama and disappointment, contexts of characters and community. And the text before this

workshop? It is one where the narrative arc of the story went belly flop in the flood. We all saw it unfold on CNN, where the rounded cover of the Superdome failed to protect all who needed to be under its bow. So tragic in fact was this trajectory of failure, we all cried as the residents of New Orleans were caught in its hopeless trench pawing to reemerge. With the collapse of that narrative arc (or should I say Noahic ark) a life boat is needed and perhaps what is most life-giving is the words we find to tell the story. Our words matter and the way our youth discover their voice and articulate what they have seen and heard in their days in what was once The Big Easy will make a difference.

Tell our story, the ice cream truck driver, the plumber, the architect down the street, and Yolanda, one of the home owners for whom we are working, all remind us. I realize then that New Orleans depends not just upon our work, but also upon our word. Without our telling the story of both the hopelessness and the hope, there would be no rewrite. And so the writing workshop begins.

Don't give up. As the devotions continue to unfold into the week, I bring the passionate, visceral call of writing to my work as a pastor and find new energy. For some, simply getting sixteen-year-old boys to say something beyond "Fine" or "whatever" is a miracle. They need to be able to tell the story. How was your trip? It was good mom. Tell me more. Can I go take a nap? Easing out that narrative thread becomes a call. Others are more pliable – can you show, not tell? God is in the details. Paint a picture. Tell the story. Can you deepen the characterization? Can you give fuller expression to the story? We are in a town of writers, but maybe this is a youth group of writers as well. And so I start to ask them questions – If you were writing a book about this week, what would it be called and why? Which character we met this week would you like to explore more aspects of their life and why? What would the opening line of your essay, novel, lyric or poem be? Would you write a novel or a song about our experience? These I ask along with the highs and the lows, the presence of Christ, the challenge of the day, the prayer requests. These questions energize the conversation and my calling in the midst of the storm. New Orleans will be rewritten by our words.

Don't forget us. And so I ask, What book would they write? Vaughn says, "A Substantial Drop"- when the ability to make a difference seems impossible, our drops do matter, he contends. What would be the first image they use to tell the story? John says, "The wall of steel that is still up in that tree two years later. There has got to be a story there. It represents so much, particularly our steely inability to respond when needed." What picture would be on the cover of your book? Caitlyn says, "A juxtaposition of three homes – the first in total disrepair, the second is the one that we are in the process of working on, the third is almost complete due to the work of a volunteer woman from Maine who spends as much time here as possible, not just rebuilding, but rebuilding with decorative touches that add to people's appreciation of their new home." Which character would they want to explore? An adult advisor says, "Robert, who started crying when he said he lost nearly everything - his home, his children, his marriage. He has had to rebuild everything." What metaphor would they use? Ellie remembers, "Hearing Bradley tell us about finding photographs in his bedroom floating on the flood waters. At first he was glad to see something had remained, but then the colors bled from the photo as he lifted it from the water. So much of people's lives bled into the

flood. So much was washed away." Telling the story – it is the only ink New Orleans has. Our words paint the picture of a world that was lost, of communities and churches, schools and streets, families and friends. Don't forget us. So here we are, fifty-nine new authors, with ink in hand, ready to write the world.

Writing, according to Wikipedia, "is the preservation and the preserved text on a medium, with the use of signs or symbols." The preservation of New Orleans depends on the signs and symbols we choose to use to tell the story. Don't forget us. We hear it over and over again. And so we pray for the right word.

The way this youth group tells the story, engages in dialogue, develops the characters, frames the narrative arc, paints a picture will change the way the world understands the disaster. And so we practice in ways only a youth group can. We send emails to our prayer partners and parents. We post updates on the webpage. We write thank you letters to all who have offered support. We craft paper plate awards, naming in humor and with encouragement the traits we celebrate in each person. We prepare sermons for worship. We partner in worship with congregation members in threes, where one is an active listener, one is a recorder of prayers and the other is an initiator of conversation. In that setting in the sanctuary, the questions of our teens usher in paragraphs of response by those who have lived stories we never will. We write song lyrics. I am broken, the lyrics begin. We scribble on scraps of paper prayers, places where we are broken, places that need hope, people we will remember. We sign pages of affirmations. Ever since fifth grade I've considered him to be my best friend. He is what I would like to be without my Tourette and ADHD. We write letters of affirmation to each other. So that one of the young men in our group, who was suspended for smoking weed as the school year came to a close, is affirmed (in an ironic twist only a clever writer could create) for devoting forty hours to hacking down eight-foot weeds in a flooded field. You used your energy to the best of your ability to serve God and neighbor. These letters give testament to how the recipient of the letter is a wonder of the world. I read these letters and cry tears that surface not from selfish longing as before, but a sense of deep belonging. In all of these activities, the underlying theme is not giving up. Our stories are shored up as they intersect the stories of Katrina. The residents of New Orleans rely on our words, alongside their words, to change their world.

Eugene, despite being a Montana mountain man, would certainly have smelled better to hang out with that week than the sweat-laden crew I was with in New Orleans. But what I thought would be grind and grim, became an opportunity for growth in my skills both as a pastor and a writer. Maybe my book wasn't begun, but the first drafts of fifty-nine others certainly were. That book I hope to write one day can stay shelved in my heart. But what I hope all will read are the texts and pictures of those who took in the stories of New Orleans and are ready to tell them. Don't forget us. Tell others our story. Eugene, if you want to go to a writing workshop that will help rewrite the world come with us next year to New Orleans. Will you be my partner for the Cajun potato dance? And even more so, will you partner with us to tell the story so we can discover what a world of difference a wonderful word makes?