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Seize the Revision: A Critical Introduction to a Collection of Poetry Titled “Fill in the Blank”

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Seize the Revision:
A Critical Introduction to a Collection of Poetry Titled "Fill in the Blank"

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

By
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December 5, 2016

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Seize the Revision: Critical Introduction to *Fill in the Blank*

o o o

“Reread, rewrite, reread, rewrite. If it still doesn’t work, throw it away. It’s a nice feeling, and you don’t want to be cluttered with the corpses of poems and stories which have everything in them except the life they need.”

—*Helen Dunmore*, poet

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This introduction is not going to be about anything remotely modeling the concept of a finished product. Rather, it is going to focus on the beautifully long—and dauntingly rigorous—task of creating. A finished product could not have the potential of being something to be proud of if there was not a difficult process preceding it that could be reflected on. It is the hard work that is the payoff in the end.

I write poetry. I read poetry. I enjoy the freedom that words have in poetry; I enjoy how easy it is to play with lines and phrases and how mobile a thought can be. I enjoy how much meaning can change behind words by hitting the enter key and breaking a phrase after just one more word. A little extra white space can speak volumes. I enjoy creating rhythm with syllables and slanted rhymes with laced letters. Poetry is all about having a passion for language and its fluidity. It is also about constantly reworking language until it flows just as it needs to flow.

The process of revision is not about making something better or even about making something complete. It is about playing around with words and erasing and discovering and crossing out and replacing. This introduction to my collection of poems is going to be talking about the process of revision. First, I will talk about other poets that I have read and their different revising processes in the section titled “Revising Poems.” Then, I will reflect on poets that have been an inspiration to me and directly influenced my writing or revision process in the

section titled “Inspirations.” Last, I will point out specific examples in my collection of poems, *Fill in the Blank*, and in the subsequent drafts of my revisions. I will explore which techniques I personally found worked best for my writing process. It is in this last section, titled “Personal Techniques,” where I will incorporate my own poems and compare their numerous included drafts side-by-side.

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Revising Poems

There would be no writing without the revision process. Revising is different than editing in that revising is more about reevaluating a poem; it is about rethinking the structure, the language, the purpose, and the meaning. The first writer’s revision process that I am going to talk about is Wendy Barker’s. In her book *Poems’ Progress*, she gives numerous methods of revision and provides examples of her own writing and how it was changed. Barker says, “Good poetry pushes the boundaries of what we know, or thought we knew” (vii). There is always something new to learn from yourself and from your writing. I’ve experienced through writing that often my poem teaches me something, even though it is merely inanimate words on a page. Writing is a difficult process to explain or even to start explaining. Each section in Barker’s book begins with a poem she has written, followed by a short essay focusing on the individual and unique writing process.

A poem and process that truly stuck out to me was her poem “Practice.” In the short essay that followed this short poem, Barker talks about how the first stanza came to her quickly and painlessly, but when she got to the second stanza, she noticed that she was stuck. Nothing that she wrote seemed to feel right, and she kept rewriting. Finally, she realized that she was not letting the poem speak for itself. Sometimes while writing poetry, it is easy to fall into the habit

of trying too hard to make the words work for you. As Barker puts it, “I was not allowing the poem to develop its own metaphoric logic...the second stanza would not come because I was trying to say something too consciously and superficially. When I returned to the image...the poem found its own ending” (Barker 6). It is here that Barker describes one of the most important concepts while writing and revising poetry: sticking to the concrete image and letting the poem follow.

The next process that I noticed was related to Barker’s poem “One Lemon.” With this poem also, Barker talks about how she had to go back to that initial moment of seeing and observing the object she was writing about—a snapshot of her kitchen in this case—and focus all of her energy on just that moment and the objects themselves. This is so important because behind every poem is this beautiful moment of observing and wondering and asking questions about what is happening in that snapshot of life. After multiple rewrites of this poem, she says, “[E]ven now, I feel the poem is not finished, and want to tinker with it, make it a stronger poem” (Barker 21). Barker refers to W.B. Yeats once saying that a poem is never finished, only abandoned. How does a writer know when to stop tinkering and step away from a poem for good? It is hard to say. I do not think there really is a way to know when a good time to step away is. I know for me that I will always look back on old poems and find at least one word to change. The same is true for Barker. In “One Lemon,” she talks about changing “two daffodils, still dripping / from the garden, still too wet” to “and daffodils, dripping / from the garden, too wet” (21). By only changing one word and omitting two, these lines are made completely different. The second set of lines is so much more vivid and clearly articulated. But even with changes like this one throughout, Barker says that she is not completely satisfied with the poem as a whole.

Barker's discussion about her poems "The Dogs of Sofia" and "Strays"—and her essay "To the Dogs, in Sofia"—references how structure can be either binding or freeing during the writing process. She wrote the two poems first and realized to her surprise that she could not get them just like she wanted them to be. Barker tried combining journal entries and working them into a poem and then tried making connections between the subject and herself, but found that she kept coming up short, and her writing was underdeveloped. Abandoning the two poems altogether, Barker wrote about the same subject in the form of an essay, and she then said, "I needed the essay form in order to say something straight out...without focusing on compactness, on sound and line...I needed a certain amount of freedom to wander around, without a leash or line breaks, to...write what I had to say" (Barker 66). It is always difficult to figure out the final structure of a poem. Sometimes when the structure is predetermined, the words seem suffocated and are struggling to break the limits. Sometimes when the structure is loose, the words seem lost and completely disheveled. There needs to be a balance between creativity and structure while writing. Whether the structure comes first or last, play around with a few different ones. See which structure fits best with the poem, because it is never one size fits all.

Another central focus of Barker's revision process is her focus on a poem's rhythm. While talking about her poem "Black Sheep, White Stars," Barker mentions that she played with the stanza lengths and line lengths multiple times, finding that by the third version of the poem, the lines were too long and wordy. As a result, the rhythm often faltered. Then, "[m]uch of the work of the poem became...a matter of working on sound" (Barker 124). In a draft of "Black Sheep, White Stars," Barker wrote:

Some years he'd show up
like a bird that wanders into a place

every few years on its way
between the poles of two continents. (116)

In the final draft, those same lines were changed to read:

He'd appear like a bird
that wanders into a place
on its way between two continents. (114)

The final draft is not drastically different, and yet somehow so much more musical and lyrical. Barker played around with the musicality of language and focused on the way that the words sounded together instead of focusing on the content of the poem. Obviously, content is important to a poem. However, if the musicality is not there, then the poem will never come to life the way that it should.

I came across a journal article by Robert B. Shaw titled “Stitching and Unstitching.” In this article, Shaw discusses the process of revision and his take on the whole thing. He says, “[W]riters like—and perhaps need—the illusion of control...there is no such thing as writing: there is only rewriting” (Shaw 107). By this, Shaw is saying that through the process of revision, writers tend to feel this sense of control over their writing: they have the power to “fix” what needs to be fixed and to change what they feel needs to be changed. There is definitely a sense of possession when it comes to pieces of writing—like a painter owns their painting—and to give the power of revising to someone else is like handing over that ownership. When I entered my first poetry workshop, I was somewhat unwilling to put my beloved poetry on display for strangers to “fix.” These strangers did not know or understand what I was trying to portray because they could not read my mind, and it is often difficult for a writer to morph their intentions into explanations. I had to give up control: I had to become vulnerable. However, this

ultimate vulnerability is what writing is all about because, as Shaw mentions, the control writers have is only an illusion. There is also an interesting idea in Shaw's quote about the thought of creating. He mentions that there is no such thing as writing, only rewriting. So, when is something actually created? Ideas could possibly just be experiences already rewritten multiple times: rewritten once to get on the page, rewritten again to get it right, and then rewritten again because the first ten times were not good enough. Every writer goes through this process at some point. Shaw also says, "Bad revisions are always puzzling and disappointing, though not all of them are disastrous" (107). Like I have said multiple times so far, revision is a process. There is no shortcut or easy way out, and every writer is bound to have some bad revisions along the way. However, it is these revisions that will only make the writing stronger and the path clearer.

In regards to the time spent between revisions, Shaw says, "The more time passes, the more dubious an attempt at revision becomes" (108). When I write a poem, I crank out the first rough, rough draft, and then I step away from it for a while. After a couple of days—or perhaps a week—I will go back to the poem and reread it with an open mind and fresh eyes. I need that time away from the poem to think about what it is I am trying to say. If I spend too much time away from it, then the motivation to write it fades away and the clarity of the observation I am depicting becomes hazy. I am uncertain about the purpose behind the poem, and my focus is lost. It is important as a writer to find the balance between not spending enough time away from a poem and spending too much time away from a poem.

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Inspirations

Behind every writer is inspiration. In order to be a good poet, you have to read as much poetry as you write. There are three writers in particular that I find myself thinking about while I write. The first one is Robert Frost and perhaps his most widely known poem, “The Road Not Taken.” The poem is short and simple. While reading, one can easily place oneself in the shoes of the narrator and see what they are seeing as they see it. The lines are brief and focused on the narrator’s observations of two paths in the woods. There is no rhyme scheme, but the rhythm is still there. In the following lines, this is clear with internal rhyme within groups of words like “worn,” “morning,” and “trodden” or groups of words like “really,” “equally,” and “lay.”

Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black. (Frost)

Techniques like slight internal rhyme only add a lyric nature to the poem and make it more aesthetically pleasing to read out loud. I keep this in mind while I write. I do not particularly enjoy reading or writing poems with strict end-rhymes, so by utilizing internal rhyme, that structure and unity can still be created.

The next writer whose advice is with me always is Ezra Pound. In his essay “A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste”—a list of techniques to not use while writing poetry—Pound talks about how to create a concrete image. He says, “It is better to present one image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works” (Pound 1). Writing poetry is all about writing and failing and writing and failing again. Without this process, the successful poems would never be created. Pound is saying here that it is better to focus on one crystal-clear image and develop it

completely, than try to focus on multiple not-so-clear images at the same time and semi-develop each one. Quality takes precedence over quantity when it comes to poetry. The biggest thing that I took away from reading Pound's essay was the concept of concreteness in a poem. Pound makes a point to not use any "superfluous word" that does not reveal something or add something to the poem as a whole (2). Extra words are not necessary and just bog down the rhythm. Preciseness needs to be achieved. According to Pound, mixing abstractions and concreteness only dulls the image. "Go in fear of abstractions" and focus on the description of the observation, creating an image for the reader (2). With that, great poetry will be written.

The final writer to be discussed who inspired me was Suzanne Parker after I read her collection of poems, *Viral*. This collection was based on the tragic event of a student at Rutgers University committing suicide after being the victim of cyberbullying. Parker did not know the student personally, and her only knowledge of the situation came from news stories and her own personal research. However, the poems are so intimate and so personal that it seems otherwise. Parker becomes many voices throughout these poems; she is the voice of the grieving parents, of the victim, and of the bullies all at the same time. The poem "Inhale" illustrates this shift in voice when the narrator seems to be from the perspective of the victim's mother:

...Somewhere
in the water
her son's last thought
before need
forced him
to inhale. (Parker 36)

She says in the Author's Note that "[t]hese poems are a response to [the victim's] and other similar tragedies and should not be read as fact" (63). As a writer, it is hard to know where the boundary is. Where is the line between truth and fiction, and how is one supposed to know when to cross it or when to stay far away? Parker found that balance within these collective poems. She does not write from experience, but she writes about experience and the universal process of grief.

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Personal Techniques

As a writer, I personally find myself getting very frustrated with my writing often; definitely more often than I should. The frustration stems from the idea that my writing is just not good enough, and sometimes it feels like it will never get to the level that I want it to be. However, I have learned over the course of several college writing workshops that every writer—even the ones I consider to be the best ones out there—always struggles with the thought that their writing is not good enough, not creative enough, or not unique enough. Knowing that this thought is not mine alone, it is a little bit easier to think that maybe I should not be worried about whether or not I think my writing is “good.” Sure, I have written terrible poems that will never be seen by anyone else but me, but even if I write forty poems like that, I have to concentrate on that one poem that I am proud of. Or maybe those for-my-eyes-only poems just need a little more love, attention, and revision to become something that I can be proud of. Sitting in workshops and hearing what peers and professors had to say about my poems reinforced that everything is open to interpretation. Also, I learned that constructive criticism and ideas from others really helped inspire me to work to revise my poems—a process that I used to dread.

As I received my first poem assignment from my first poetry workshop, I wrote my heart out and spent quite a decent amount of time writing and “perfecting” it. When it was my poem’s turn to be workshopped, I quickly realized that I had no idea what I was doing. I did not know as much about writing poetry as I thought I knew, and that was okay because that is what I came to college for. Nonetheless, I was still a little disappointed. The poem that I am talking about is titled “Drowning” and can be found on page 3 of *Fill in the Blank* (attached after introduction) followed by three previous drafts. One major weakness of this poem, and something I never really thought about at all before this workshop, was its complete ambiguity and abstractness. For example, in Draft #1 the first stanza is, “In a quicksand of longing / she is forever stuck.” Longing for what? Why is she stuck? Why can she not get out? What is forever? This stanza alone has so many questions and no concrete image to tie it down. And so, I changed it to this:

In a quicksand of longing she finds herself stuck.

Stuck in this grimy molasses she struggles and fights,

but fighting only makes it worse.

The sand is ravenous and it tugs her further down

with each thrash of her arms.

No one is there to help.

Even though a quicksand of longing is still abstract, it is now tied down to the image of grimy molasses. There is now an image of someone thrashing their arms trying to escape quicksand. I had to refer to Ezra Pound’s philosophy on abstractions. I had to give a reader something to grab on to. I also added specific images throughout the poem that were not there before like “waxy Barbie-d legs” and “caked foundation.” This poem could still definitely use more tweaking, but it came a long way from what it was at the start.

The next poem that I am going to talk about, titled “Tree Pulp,” is one of my favorites in this collection and can be found on page 15 of *Fill in the Blank*. The continuing theme or metaphor behind this poem is that everything mentioned in it is made out of paper. I wanted that to be very clear. However, in the Draft #1 of this poem, the paper metaphor did not seem prominent enough for me. There were lines like this one:

From way up high you can pinch things:
place them in front of your squinting eye and in between
your thumb and forefinger, then squish and its gone.

You meet someone who you think is strong
and then they fold
in half and in half again until they are nothing
but a little square of paper that can't be folded anymore.

This first stanza has no reference to anything paper and the second stanza could be stronger. Somewhere in the middle of the poem, there is a shift and the metaphor gets lost. I needed to go back and fix the coherence of the poem so that this shift was not so obvious. I changed the previous two stanzas to this:

From a marginal distance you can pinch these paper things:
place them in front of eye-squinting and in between
your thumb pad and forefinger, then squish and they're recycled.

You meet someone you think to be cardboard-strong
and then they fold

in half and in half again until they are nothing more
than a little square of printer-paper
that was defeated by mathematics.

The first line has a play on the word “margin” and then a mention of recycling in the last line. The second stanza modifies strong to being cardboard-strong and the paper folding at the end was made clearer as well. Just little changes like these made the poem as a whole much sharper and really strengthened the metaphor that I was playing with.

The next poem, “contents breakable,” found on page 23 of *Fill in the Blank*, was an experiment with structure. The entire poem is written with no capitalization, even after periods. The idea for writing a poem like this came from several different poets. One of them was Evie Shockley, author of “the new black.” Shockley said during a question and answer session for the Brockport Writers Forum that she thought capital letters were ugly—that they disrupted the flow of a line of poetry, and that is why she did not like to use them. Many other poets have tested the boundaries of grammatically correct capitalization, such as Adrienne Rich and E. E. Cummings, and yet their poems still seem to work just fine. So, I felt it was time to experiment. I don’t know if not using capitalization in “contents breakable” added anything to the overall meaning of the poem, but I have to agree with Shockley when she said not using capitalization definitely makes it more aesthetically pleasing.

Besides the structure, another thing I played with in this poem was the ability to create an extended metaphor. In Draft #1, there were too many different metaphors working against each other to gain the upper hand and the main metaphor of a porcelain girl became lost in the mix.

The poem read like this:

her porcelain smile cracks; it breaks.

when faked for enough days,
her mouth was glazed and fired that way:
a smile like a full moon partially covered in shadow,
pretending to be a crescent. an artificial one.

.....

she is fragile: she hears the storm coming,
but the storm is not outside. it is her.

When this poem was read in a poetry workshop, I was given the constructive criticism that I was trying to create too many metaphors at once—porcelain, moon, and a storm—and instead of keeping them all, I needed to choose one and develop it deeper. So, I chose the porcelain metaphor and ran with it. This is definitely an example of depth being better than breadth. The final draft of the poem reads like this:

when kneaded for enough days,
her mouth was glazed and fired this way:
a fake smile bristled with paintbrush hair,
like a full moon partially-shadowed,
an artificial crescent.

but this porcelain was not made to shine.

.....

her china doll fingers cannot squeeze and glue
together her ribcage anymore.

By incorporating terms like “kneading” along with the ones “glazed” and “fired” that were already there, I made the porcelain metaphor clearer and stronger. Instead of just saying that the girl was fragile, I extended that description by describing her fingers as china doll-like while she tried to glue herself back together. When it comes to metaphors, it is better to have a solid one all the way through a poem rather than trying to distinguish between multiple ones while still trying to develop them.

The last poem that I am going to talk about is titled “The Four Top Hats” and can be found on page 31 of *Fill in the Blank*. The revisions of this poem were focused on making it less prose-like and more poem-like. The first draft lacked vivid imagery and sounded too much like a narrative. I was not trusting the images to stand on their own, and I was trying to create a story out of it. For example, Draft #1 had the following lines:

He glances at his three close friends, and wishes
his life to be more like theirs; for their faces are not
pinched with agony when they realize the night is over.

The poem then became about unanswered questions like: why was his life so bad? Or what did his friends have that he didn't? Or what was he running away from? The poem lost the central image of four men, dressed in suits, leaving an opera. I was creating too much back story that did not need to be created. When I went back to this poem, I cut out a lot of the narrative and added more vivid and concrete language and details. For example, I added these lines:

He knows when all is said and done, he is left tapping
the sand through his own hourglass
with no one else to blame. He taps
whole days away.

Without getting into a narrative about why he is so depressed, I took an abstract idea of depression and tied it to a concrete image of a man tapping his days away like sand in an hourglass. This kind of concreteness and vividness is what this poem needed.

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After discussing the process of revision through the lens of other poets and through my own personal experience with how difficult of a process it can be, it is important to emphasize how crucial revisions are in creating. There is nothing to be afraid of when it comes to revising—be excited instead about reimagining a poem and making it something that was not thought about before. A writer cannot be closed off to suggestions or criticism, and I have learned that through participating in workshops with other writers who were just as apprehensive as I was.

Also, it is important that each and every writer create their own process of revision that is most comfortable for them. I, personally, cannot revise a poem right away after writing it. It takes me a few days, sometimes weeks, to return to the poem with fresh eyes and fresh ideas about where that poem can go. Some people need to revise right away or they will lose motivation. I play around with structure and line breaks until I find something that works best with the poem, but some people are very strict about their form. There is no right or wrong way to revise; simply seize the process.

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Fill in the Blank

A Collection of Poetry

By Allison DeRose

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Drowning

In a quicksand of longing she finds herself stuck.
Stuck in this grimy molasses she struggles and fights,
but fighting only makes it worse.
The sand is ravenous and it tugs her further down
with each thrash of her arms.
No one is there to help.

She should have seen this coming because:
her house was never big enough; she needed more rooms to fill with her isolation,
her clothes were never right; she packed her closets with vain and Prada,
her hair was never blonde enough; she bleached away the piercing pain,
her boy was never good enough; she desired attention and not affection.

What she expected perfection to be—
fame, fortune, and everyone's undying lust to be
just
like
her
—will never come.
Emptiness fills the void in her.

In a quicksand of longing she attempts to tread
with her waxy Barbie-d legs, but she is not trying hard enough.
Her unwillingness to let go of the treasured paper bills is weighing her down.
Soon she realizes that the surface of the hole she dug—with her own shovel
and well-manicured nails—is unreachable.
And it was all simply because she was never happy enough;
she was unable to accept herself, and instead covered her beautiful flaws
with caked foundation and orange-tinted self-tanning lotion.
She did not realize that blemishes, imperfections, and mistakes make life a
little less lonely to live.

Drowning – *Draft #1*

In a quicksand of longing
she is forever stuck.

Her house, not big enough;
her clothes, just not right.
Her hair, not blonde enough;
her boy, just not quite

what she expected
will never come.

In a quicksand of longing
she treads so as not to drown.
But the longing keeps pulling her
further and further down.

The surface is now unreachable
and it was all simply because
she was never happy enough;
satisfaction forever on pause.

Drowning – *Draft #2*

In a quicksand of longing
she finds herself stuck.
It was inevitable because
her house was not big enough;
her clothes, just not right.
Her hair, never blonde enough;
her boy, just never quite

what she expected...
fame
fortune
everyone's undying lust to be

just

like
her
...will never come.

In a quicksand of longing
she treads in order to not drown.
But, she is not trying hard enough and
the longing keeps pulling her
further and further down.
Soon she realizes that
the surface is unreachable
and it was all simply because
she was never happy enough;
unable to accept her beautiful flaws.

Drowning – Draft #3

In a quicksand of longing she finds herself stuck.
Stuck in this grimy molasses she struggles and fights,
but that only makes it worse.
The sand is ravenous and it tugs her further down with each thrash of her arms.
No one is there to reach for her extremities.

She should have seen this coming because:
her house was never big enough; she needed more rooms to fill with her isolation,
her clothes were never right; she packed her closets with vain and Prada,
her hair was never blonde enough; she bleached away the piercing pain,
her boy was never good enough; she desired attention and not affection.

What she expected perfection to be...
fame, fortune, and everyone's undying lust to be
just
like
her
...will never come.
Emptiness filled the void in her.

In a quicksand of longing she attempts to tread
with her waxy Barbie-d legs, but she is not trying hard enough.
Her unwillingness to let go of the treasured paper bills that run her life is weighing her down.
Soon she realizes that the surface of the hole she dug herself—with shovel
and well-manicure nails—is unreachable.
And it was all simply because she was never happy enough;
she was unable to accept herself, and instead covered her beautiful flaws with caked foundation
and orange-tinted self-tanning lotion.
She did not realize that blemishes, imperfections, and mistakes make life a
little less lonely to live.

Mob Boss

Strangling under acres of lead
pressure.
Alienated from death?
No. Refusing to die.
There's a word for that: resilient.

Visiting an empty stage. No one sits
in the rows of seats, the captive audience
is long gone. And yet,
it appears to be enhanced by ghosts;
by the ghosts of past
roses thrown. They lie in heaps on the wood,
pathetically trampled but
still not wilted.

Unforeseen and staggering betrayal
of that figure—that dark and shadowed figure—thought
to be a friend.

Red

On the slab of concrete that she calls a porch,
she sits in the white rocking chair.
A chair made from wood so splintered it looks
crafted out of broken bones.
She rocks slowly and doesn't seem to notice.
She doesn't seem to notice that the paint is starting to chip,
like disregarded egg shells.

As the sun joins the morning sky, lips meet the mug filled with
chamomile tea for a taste and she clears the phlegm in her throat.
Reaching into the cotton pocket of her sweater, she
pulls out a battered and broken black leather coin purse.
She undoes the safety pin that holds the zipper together.

Nestled between a nickel and a few dimes lies
the canister marked Fierce Red Dragon.
She glides the tomato red paint across
pursed and swollen pink water balloons.
Three lip smacks later, the lipstick settles like pebbles
in the cracks of the sidewalk.

She stashes the canister away with the coins
and tucks the purse away.
She pats her pocket absentmindedly
and presses the sole of her shoe on the concrete to make
her chair slowly start rocking once more.
She takes another sip from her mug
and doesn't notice the rosy lip-stick stained rim she leaves behind.

Thinking of Summer

Remember me when I have gone far away.
So far that no amount of trekking
heavily-wooded forests will lead you to me.
Hiking steeply smooth rock of cascading mountain-sides,
peering down at the countless miles left beneath you,
will never grant you permission to reach for my hand again.

Recall my face
in the sun rays meeting your radiant smile,
as pores of your skin welcome Vitamin D.

Think of my touch
in the wind-still rain kissing your shoulders;
in the lush grass planted in soft dirt under your feet
as you dance to the drumbeat inside your head;
in the daisy reaching slowly towards the sky with leaves
nibbled by hungry caterpillars;
in the specked ladybug flying past your vision.

Evoke the memory
of my voice when I have gone light-years away.
Recollect my words
in the cracked lightening,
in the angry clouds,
and in the rustling wind.

Summon me
when I have gone ten thousand oceans away.
Dredge for me in the sandy expanse of the shore,
in the shells the hermits call home,
and in the salty waves combing the seaweed's long green hair.

Please tell me
that you will search for me when I have gone away.
Reminisce in the blissful things,
in the light, and in the calm.

Please make sure
that you ponder the thought of summer while you are
remembering me when I have gone away.

For Sale

The dreadfully grungy couch
being carried to the curb and dumped
on the side of Pearson Lane.
Full of hair from the Golden Retriever named Patches
and stubborn coffee stains from
spillage during the morning news.
Full of rips, and tears,
and lusciously lumpy cushions.
It has seen many date-night cuddles
and jumping children exploding
after too many chocolate-chip cookies.
It smells of OdoBan that couldn't cover up wet dog
and forgotten Goldfish crumbs.
No one wants this couch for sale.
The couch full of missing Mancala marbles.
So, it sits on the side of the road
waiting for the early morning garbage pick-up.
Replaced by a leather sectional sofa
complete with perfectly proportioned pillows.

The Pen

Thoughts travel around someone's mind,
through the folded maze of the cerebrum.
They are trapped and probing desperately for a way out.

They sometimes trickle through the ear canal,
or crawl down the throat and over the tongue.
Then, they are loose ideas drifting about in the alluring air
like a piece of wandering pollen looking for a home to germinate.

Fingers were itching to create,
so in those hands was placed a slim cartridge brimming with black ink;
ink as black as the bottom of the Mariana Trench.
This cartridge had a point at one end, sharp enough to cut through the fibers
of white paper and ooze ink to leave behind.

As the pen danced and poured out this
rainstorm of words the clouded brain could no longer hold, flames began to spark.
Flames sparked and they continue to burn because now,
now there is an invisible, gossamer thread that can never be cut.
A thread from mind to paper, and paper to world.

The Sound of Chirping

- I.
A tightly quilted nest
can be found cradled in corkscrew willow limbs,
hidden behind a curtain that is
alive with olive green.
- II.
There is a single stick poking out
farther than the rest and a cotton ball
of jet-black fur caught
in the bramble, beside the gumball wrapper.
- III.
Mama bird clutches the side made with
carefully selected twigs,
slightly damp from recent raindrops.
Her talons bite through like sharpened pencils.
- IV.
Brown osprey feathers gradually fade into
metallic gray; melting milk chocolate
dripping over silver coins.
- V.
Citron eyes scan the air, piercing marbles
searching for great-horned owls that might
fly a little too close to her nest.
- VI.
A fish squirms
as it's captured between the beak.
A largemouth bass fighting against
two relentless steel doors
nailed shut.
- VII.
Three hungry stomachs reach
up towards the fins, gills, and scaly skin.
Pieces drop quickly and
slide down the drain.
- VIII.
The fish isn't squirming anymore.
- IX.
Her work here is done.
- X.
The sea hawk flies and
she leaves behind the distant echo
of chirping.

Too Deeply

And these are my vices:

Constantly examining another girl's hairstyle to see if mine looks better—which it rarely does.

Compulsively organizing my closet by color—even though I thought that was normal.

Coffee—I need not say any more on that matter.

The more than occasional bowl of—sometimes low fat—ice cream.

An almost unquenchable thirst to be perfect—so I settle for “aspiring” to be.

A hunger that isn't hunger, but something like fear of graduating—a real job? What's that and how do I get one, like right now?

Spending money on things I don't need but wish I did so I could have some sort of tangible excuse—money burns holes in the pockets of my Michael Khors purse, I swear.

Listening to people's words too closely—guess everything isn't as literal as I make it.

And then taking offense too easily—probably due to my inability to recognize a joke when one's been made.

Drowning in the poems of others—and avoiding my own empty notebook waiting for my inspiration to hit with blow horns, streamers, and confetti that spells “Congrats”.

Going to the gym—for me or to please everyone else? I try to convince myself it's the former not the latter, but now I'm not so sure.

Holding emotions inside for way too long—I'm convinced I may spontaneously combust one day.

Shutting myself in my room—sometimes I don't feel like dealing with people.

Watching three hours of Criminal Minds on Netflix—because I can.

Caring too much and loving too deeply.

Sitting through a Nicholas Sparks movie—just so I can cry.

Struggling with depression—but learning that being alone is not always so lonely.

Run

Time is always running dry:
The rooster perches at the peak of the barn and crows
and the oak grandfather clock chimes its last tone.

Nothing has permanence; say goodbye
to the sturdy pool-deck plywood, which bows
under the weight of running bare feet after some time.

Seasons do not stay in town for long; the leaves sigh
and take flight as the wind blows
its gusty breath. The bass tones from the chimes hung in the oak tree ring.

Plans are made, carved in marble stone, but often go awry—
the wood-burning oven is aflame, the readied dough
is risen but forgotten. People are running to catch time; to chase it; to escape it.

Historically standing buildings of bricks and riches and wry;
even the magnificent French châteaux
will one day crumble. Its existence is not grandfathered into the clock of nature.

Our soft and fleshy hands can blindly grasp, but will never touch “why?”—
because no matter what, every inch of green blade will eventually be draped with snow.
The hands of the clocks will always be running around in circles
and the oak grandfather clock chimes its last tone.

Tree Pulp

We are living in paper
towns; driving paper cars;
beating paper hearts crushing
on paper people.

From a marginal distance you can pinch these paper things:
place them in front of eye-squinting and in between
your thumb pad and forefinger, then squish and they're recycled.

You meet someone you think to be cardboard-strong
and then they fold
in half and in half again until they are nothing more
than a little square of printer-paper
that was defeated by mathematics.

Our days are measured by the number of paper coffee stirrers
we toss over our shoulder like bothersome hair, by the number of meetings
marked red on paper calendars hanging from paper
walls that only see us from the edge of the bedsheet and up,
by the number of texts we send saying "I'm sorry—running late,"
by the number of yellow lights our car angrily down-shifts for.

Weigh your hours by the number of times someone holds
the door open so you don't have to, by the number of forkfuls
that stroll down your throat, of words you admire on the tip of your breath,
of times you can catch your smile in your hand and hold on to it.

Do You Fold? – *Tree Pulp Draft #1*

We are living in paper
towns with paper people
and paper cars and paper hearts.

From way up high you can pinch things:
place them in front of your squinting eye and in between
your thumb and forefinger, then squish and its gone.

You meet someone who you think is strong
and then they fold
in half and in half again until they are nothing
but a little square of paper that can't be folded anymore.

Our days are measured by the number of coffee stirrers
we toss away in a hurry, by the number of meetings marked red on calendars
hanging from walls that only see us while we sleep at night,
by the number of texts we send saying "I'm sorry but I'm running late,"
by the number of yellow lights our cars angrily slow down for.

Our days should be measured by the number of times someone holds
the door open for you, by the number of forkfuls you put into your mouth,
by the number of kind words you hear, by the number of times you can catch
your smile in your hand and hold unto it.
Hold unto that.
Hold on tight.

Do You Fold? – *Tree Pulp Draft #2*

We are living in paper
towns with paper people
driving paper cars
beating paper hearts.

From way up high you can pinch things:
place them in front of your squinting eye and in between
your thumb and forefinger, then squish and its gone.

You meet someone who you think is strong
and then they fold
in half and in half again until they are nothing
but a little square of paper that can't be folded anymore.

Our days are measured by the number of paper coffee stirrers
we toss away in a hurry, by the number of meetings marked red on paper calendars
hanging from paper walls that only see us while we sleep at night,
by the number of texts we send saying "I'm sorry but I'm running late,"
by the number of yellow lights our cars angrily slow down for.

Our days should be measured by the number of times someone holds
the door open for you, by the number of forkfuls you put into your mouth,
by the number of kind words you hear, by the number of times you can catch
your smile in your hand and hold on to it.
Hold on to that.
Hold on tight.

Tree Pulp – *Draft #3*

We are living in paper
towns; driving paper cars;
beating paper hearts crushing
on paper people.

From a marginal distance you can pinch these paper things:
place them in front of eye-squinting and in between
your thumb pad and forefinger, then squish and it's recycled.

You meet someone you think to be cardboard-strong
and then they fold
in half and in half again until they are nothing more
than a little square of printer-paper
that was defeated by mathematics
of paper-folding.

Our days are measured by the number of paper coffee stirrers
we toss over our shoulder like bothersome hair, by the number of meetings
marked red on paper calendars hanging from paper
walls that only see us from the edge of the bedsheet and up,
by the number of texts we send saying "I'm sorry—running late,"
by the number of yellow lights our car angrily down-shifts for.

Why not by the number of times someone holds
the door open so you don't have to, by the number of forkfuls
that stroll down your throat, of words you admire on the tip of your breath,
of times you can catch your smile in your hand and hold on to it?

Hold on to that.

The Cemetery at Night

Walking feet stride
down a rock-lined aisle.
Mere inches of dirt, worms, rocks, and roots
separate the soles from the rounded cover
protecting those sleeping below.

Section M; Row 119.

To the right—a stone struggling past
weed's chokehold, engraved *Daddy*.
The pauper family could not pay for anything more
extravagant. So, he remains unnamed, with no marble-chiseled angel
to watch over his dreams. No one will ever know who was lowered
into the ground there or what his name sounded like on the tongues
of his children, except the people who matter.

To the left—an American flag teasing the wind
with its wave, bathed in the backdrop of a red summer
sunset. Below: the underground bed
of a First World War Veteran. Survived the war—
but death would not so easily give up its chase.
No one will ever know what his long life was filled with
or how many bullets his armor of courage deflected,
except the people who matter.

They shall never forget.

The Cemetery at Night – *Draft #1*

Walking feet pass down an aisle marked
by lined rocks. Mere inches of dirt, worms, rocks, and roots
separate them from the sleeping below.
Section M; Row 119.

Glance to the right—a stone struggling past
the choking weeds, engraved *Daddy*.
Paupers, the family could not pay for anything more
extravagant than that. No one will ever know who was lowered
into the ground there, except the people who matter.
They will never forget.

Glance to the left—an American flag teasing the wind
with its wave, bathed in the backdrop of a red summer
sunset. Placed next to the underground bed
of a First World War Veteran. Survived the war—
but life would not give up the chase
of death. No one will ever know what a long life is filled with,
except the people who matter.
They will never forget.

The Cemetery at Night – *Draft #2*

Walking feet pass down an aisle marked
by lined rocks. Mere inches of dirt, worms, rocks, and roots
separate the soles from the rounded cover
protecting those sleeping below.
Section M; Row 119.

Glance to the right—a stone struggling past
weed’s chokehold, engraved *Daddy*.
Paupers, the family could not pay for anything more
extravagant. No one will ever know who was lowered
into the ground there or what his name sounded like on the tongues
of his children, except the people who matter.

Glance to the left—an American flag teasing the wind
with its wave, bathed in the backdrop of a red summer
sunset. Below: the underground bed
of a First World War Veteran. Survived the war—
but death would not give up its chase.
No one will ever know what his long life was filled with,
except the people who matter.

They will never forget.

The Cemetery at Night – *Draft #3*

Walking feet stride down an aisle marked
by lined rocks. Mere inches of dirt, worms, rocks, and roots
separate the soles from the rounded cover
protecting those sleeping below.

Section M; Row 119.

Glance to the right—a stone struggling past
weed’s chokehold, engraved *Daddy*.
The pauper family could not pay for anything more
extravagant. So, he remains unnamed, with no marble-chiseled angel
to watch over his dreams. No one will ever know who was lowered
into the ground there or what his name sounded like on the tongues
of his children, except the people who matter.

Glance to the left—an American flag teasing the wind
with its wave, bathed in the backdrop of a red summer
sunset. Below: the underground bed
of a First World War Veteran. Survived the war—
but death would not so easily give up its chase.
No one will ever know what his long life was filled with
or how many bullets he shielded his body from,
except the people who matter.

They will never forget.

contents breakable

when kneaded for enough days,
her mouth was glazed and fired this way:
a fake smile bristled with paintbrush hair,
like a full moon partially-shadowed,
an artificial crescent.
but this porcelain was not made to shine.

she pulls her phone from its lived-in pocket
and clicks a message: "*i miss you & i love you*"
hits "send" to her husband while leaning
into the softened shoulder of another man.

she turns her head to hide from the world
and her nose tips a cheek
specked with grizzled hair. to breathe
would be to give away her hiding spot.
she breathes out.
her gossamer resonance makes him shiver,
as if he can smell the lies on her breath.

her china doll fingers cannot squeeze and glue
together her ribcage anymore. the cracks
have proven to be a difficult puzzle.
they don't fit together seamlessly. the edges
of her pieces are too chipped with deceit. she is tired
of digging around in her chest trying to find
any last shred of real. a ding sounds
from her cradled hand. a reply: "*no, you don't*"

her vitrified eyes were looking
from behind the translucent bomb shelter she built.
diffused into thinking that secrets can be kept,
and that glass walls won't shatter.

her porcelain smile cracks; it breaks.

when faked for enough days,
her mouth was glazed and fired that way:
a smile like a full moon partially covered in shadow,
pretending to be a crescent. an artificial one.
but, porcelain doesn't always have to shine.
she pulls her phone out of its lived-in pocket
and clicks a message out across the screen:

"i miss you."

she hits "send" to her husband as she leans
into the softened shoulder
of another man.

she knows better.

she is fragile: she hears the storm coming,
but the storm is not outside. it is her.
she turns to the cheek specked with grizzled hair
and breathes out once.

no, she doesn't.

her gossamer wind makes him shiver.
her china doll fingers cannot squeeze together
her breaking heart anymore. she is tired
of digging around in her chest trying to find
any last shred of sanity. her phone dings
from her cradled hand. a reply:

"no you don't"

the glass bomb shelter she had built proves faulty
and crashes in a circle around them.

they both go up in smoke.

when kneaded for enough days,
her mouth was glazed and fired that way:
a fake smile bristled with paintbrush hair,
like a full moon partially-shadowed,
an artificial crescent.
but this porcelain was not made to shine.

she pulls her phone from its lived-in pocket
and clicks a message: “*i miss you & i love you*”
hits “send” to her husband while leaning
into the softened shoulder of another man.

she turns her head and her nose tips
a cheek specked with grizzled hair.
she breathes out.
her gossamer resonance makes him shiver,
as if he can smell the lies on her breath.

her china doll fingers cannot squeeze together
her ribcage anymore. she is tired
of digging around in her chest trying to find
any last shred of real. a ding sounds
from her cradled hand. a reply: “*no, you don’t*”

her vitrified eyes were looking
from behind the translucent bomb shelter she built.
diffused into thinking that secrets can be kept,
and that glass walls don’t shatter.

Letter to a Pit-bull

Your teeth are answered with a wince
when you were just trying to smile.
Dogs can smile, too.

Scars welded as mutilations,
tattooed on pink skin. The lines parallel
and crisscross the journey of the whip.

I see wet noses poke out of jail-like doors. One
nose sits on a face with no ears, and another
trails to a body with no tail.

The chart marked “stray: at-large” dangles
from an eye-level hook,
like steak in front of a ravenous lion.
But, you are neither ravenous nor lion.

I count your ribs: sharp, sharp, and sharper.
You need one hundred treats,
but I only have five
stuffed into a coat pocket.

From the other side of the metal bars
I reach for you.
Hang in there, Baby Girl.

Letter to a Pit-bull – *Draft #1*

Everyone winces away
from your teeth: daggers—
but you were just trying to smile.
Dogs can smile, too.

I drift asleep in the bed
that I have made—but how do others?
Staring at the scars welded
in fur; mutilations tattooed on the pink,
vulnerable skin of the canine who thought
he was going home to be a pet.

They force you to fight; to use your teeth
like a swinging axe, to use your power
like a truck racing down the highway as the
speedometer inches up toward 100. No one
is to come out alive. You are only doing
what you're told.

I look into dejected, misunderstood eyes; they
plead. The deepest ocean, I am searching
for the bottom. Instead, you are drowning.
But, baby girl, I am drowning, too.

Letter to a Pit-bull – *Draft #2*

Everyone winces away from teeth
when you were just trying to smile.
Dogs can smile, too.

Scars welded as mutilations,
tattooed on pink skin.
Wet noses poke out of jail-like doors.

The chart marked “stray: at-large” dangles
from an eye-level hook,
like steak in front of a ravenous lion.

I count your ribs: sharp, sharp, and sharper.
You need one hundred treats,
but I only have five.

From the other side of the metal bars
I reach for you.

The White Doe
After the French fairy tale written by Madame d'Aulnoy

Once upon a—
castle covered with ivy and vines,
there (naturally) lived a cursed princess.
A touch of sun would prickle and morph
her skin until it was doe's fur.

Jealousy (in the form of—you guessed it—
her evil step-sister) carved a hole
in the roof of her carriage and rays leaked through.
Her skin was teased and she turned into a doe,
one that did not want to return home.
And so, it wandered through the forest—
never (it seems) a good place to be.
It surely is not a place for a princess, with
its dirt and darkness and echoing “hoots”
of owls that are always watching.

The princess' prince was head-over-heels in
infatuation, but angry that he could not wed her immediately.
Her secret was a secret that was never whispered
into his ear. So, he pouted—in the (dark) forest—with a bow
and an arrow. He heard a twig snap and shot
the arrow straight
into the heart of his doe-eyed princess—

because love-at-first-sight love truly dies
and fairytales' endings are always too predictable.

The White Doe – Draft #1
After the French fairy tale written by Madame d'Aulnoy

Once upon a—
castle covered with ivy and vines,
there lived a princess.
Every princess has a curse:
the sun pricked and morphed
this one's skin until it was the fur of a doe.

Jealousy carved a hole in the roof of her carriage
as she traveled and rays leaked through.
Her skin was teased and she turned into a doe,
one that did not want to return home.
And so, it wandered through the forest.
The forest is never a good place to be.

The princess' prince was so in infatuation,
but angry that he could not wed her immediately.
Her secret was a secret that was never whispered
into his ears. So, he pouted—in the forest—with a bow
and an arrow. He heard a twig snap and shot
the arrow straight
into the heart of his doe-eyed princess—
because love-at-first-sight love truly dies
and fairytales' endings are often too predictable.

The Four Top Hats

The old man at the opera sneaks a swig
of whiskey; a swig of fatigue from a flask tucked
strategically into his jacket's hidden
breast pocket. His mind sways like the
dancing liquid he leaves behind for later.
He knows when all is said and done, he is left tapping
the sand through his own hourglass
with no one else to blame. He taps
whole days away.

He rises from his seat and his eye's key
turns the lock of a woman's sly grin.
The man tips his hat, gives a sad smile
that he knows she will not understand.
He wishes her to dance a little more
in the inscriptions of his gaze.

But he turns his back slowly.

He then joins—no he disappears
into the crowd; all topped with
removable black towers.
Men trying to add a few extra
inches to their stout frames.
All trying to find their place in the
sea of moving nightfall.
But, the man, he is fine sinking right
into the middle of it.

The Four Top Hats – *Draft #1*

He sighs as the opera comes to an end.
He does not want to return home.
The dread crawls like spiny lizards
across his increasingly aging skin as everyone else
around him applauds with appreciation.
He was enjoying the night away from the chaos.
The nagging about how withdrawn he was.
About how she knew he would much rather be
anywhere but here, here with them.
The constant pattering from five children's feet.
He heard it as the sound of his long lost dreams
falling through his grasp and hitting the floor
like lose marbles you can't seem to catch.
He glances at his three close friends, and wishes
his life to be more like theirs; for their faces are not
pinched with agony when they realize the night is over.
He rises from his seat and his gaze holds strong
with that of a woman, grinning slyly.
The man tips his hat, gives a sad smile
that he knows she will not understand,
and turns his back slowly, shutting off their electric connection.
He then joins—no he disappears
into the crowd; all topped with
removable black towers.
Men trying to add a few extra
inches to their stout frames.
All trying to find their place in the
sea of moving black.
But, the man, he is fine sinking right
into the middle of it.

The Four Top Hats – *Draft #2*

He sighs as the opera comes to an end.
He is old, and just snuck a swig of whiskey.
He drinks his fatigue from a flask tucked
strategically into his jacket's hidden
breast pocket. His mind starts to swim like the
dancing liquid he leaves behind for later.
When all is said and done, he is left tapping
the sand through his own hourglass
with no one else to blame.

He rises from his seat and his eye's key
turns the lock of a woman's sly grin.
The man tips his hat, gives a sad smile
that he knows she will not understand.
He wishes her to dance a little more
in the inscriptions of his gaze.

But he turns his back slowly.

He then joins—no he disappears
into the crowd; all topped with
removable black towers.
Men trying to add a few extra
inches to their stout frames.
All trying to find their place in the
sea of moving nightfall.
But, the man, he is fine sinking right
into the middle of it.

The Longest Ride

It all started because two people fell in love
with life: with catching fireflies
like glimpses across the classroom: the living room
where smiles made it feel like home and homemade
meals were always warm: always warm in the summer
and summer nights that ran into summer mornings:
mornings leaving for work but still
goodbye kissing.

It all started because two people fell
in love with each other's time: time they are
running out of and trying to hold on to: holding on
to wrinkled hands as they walk into the grocery store and wait
in the check-out line with a bouquet of sunflowers: flowers
for their anniversary spent reminiscing upon their longest ride:
a ride that started all because two people fell in love.

The Longest Ride – *Draft #1*

It all started because two people fell
in love with life: with catching fireflies and catching
glimpses from across the classroom: the living room
where smiles made it feel like home and homemade
meals were always warm: always warm in the summer
and summer nights ran late: running late to work but pausing
for that goodbye kiss: that kiss soaked with tears
of joy after she said yes to him down on one knee.

It all started because two people fell
in love with each other: other parents smile
at their bundle of joy but this one is special
and the special day comes: the day closes
and the crib is offered their precious gift: a gift
of parents' pride as their daughter drives away
to college but they only see the little girl: the little
girl who is now the young lady they raised her to be.

It all started because two people fell
in love with each other's time: time they are running out
of and trying to hold on to: holding on to wrinkled hands
as they walk into the grocery store and wait
in the check-out line with a bouquet of flowers: flowers
for their anniversary spent reminiscing upon their longest ride.

The Longest Ride – *Draft #2*

It all started because two people fell
in love with life: with catching fireflies
like glimpses from across the classroom: the living room
where smiles made it feel like home and homemade
meals were always warm: always warm in the summer
and summer nights that ran into summer mornings:
mornings leaving for work but pausing
for that goodbye kiss.

It all started because two people fell
in love with each other's time: time they are now
running out of and trying to hold on to: holding on
to wrinkled hands as they walk into the grocery store and wait
in the check-out line with a bouquet of sunflowers: flowers
for their anniversary spent reminiscing upon their longest ride:
a ride that started all because two people fell in love
with each other.

The Price

We spent all of our money
on surviving. Each breath
costs one nickel more than the last.
But, the lungs keep breathing
and nickels are being thrown
even though we want it to stop; our pockets are emptying.
They are empty, like the inside of a drum.

Our lungs are matching our heartbeats.
We can hear them in our heads as we hum
the pain into a tune bearable.
Heartbeats that sound much like a drum when it is hit
with no choice but to resound
the echo.

Be careful, your next breath might cost you a nickel you don't have.

We have been groping for that misplaced backbone
that has been tucked away between Doubt and Fear.
I haven't had one since my hundredth breath yesterday.
Today, I bought the materials to zipper my spine
with the money I saved holding my breaths
in the crawlspaces of my lungs.
My backbone isn't going anywhere now.

These tears are too expensive.

And I can't hold my breath anymore.

The Price – *Draft #1*

We spent all of our money trying to survive.
Each breath costs a nickel more than the last one.
But, the lungs keep breathing and nickels are being thrown
even though we wish it would stop; our pockets are emptying.
They are empty, like the inside of a drum, but our lungs are matching our heartbeats.
Heartbeats that sound much like a drum when it is hit with no choice but to resound
the echo inside its hollow chamber beneath its head.

Be careful, that breath cost you a nickel you don't have.

We have been groping for that misplaced backbone.
I haven't had one since my hundredth breath yesterday.
Today, I bought the materials to zipper my spine.
My backbone isn't going anywhere now.

Can we afford to smile anymore?
The full beam smile might have to wait.
We will save up the twenty dollar bills for that one.

The laugh almost bubbles out, but we remember
we spent that last dime hidden in the closet on the step
we took to make it out of bed that morning.

We are glad we saved money on that smile,
because the tear that just hit the floor was expensive.

We spent all of our money trying to survive;
but wait, I just found one more nickel.