Look What We Did!

Connecticut Writing Project
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A Call to Act

Michele Abert

The rapid advancement of society has flung the floodgates wide open, allowing students easy passage into a vast sea of entertainment. For today's students records are things that athletes try to break, TV's have always had remote controls, the information superhighway has always been available at the push of a button, and computer graphics have replaced live stunts. This advancement has created a threat to the entertainers known as teachers. Yes, teaching is a form of entertainment. These entertainers currently have to compete with the digitally enhanced, technologically advanced world. With all of the opportunities and interests available, students often overlook the open door to the world of education, seeing it as 'boring' or out-dated.

As a teacher-entertainer I believe in full audience participation. My goal is to get students in my classes to take control of their own education and performance. This goal has become harder to obtain, as students' minds aren't interested in how hail is formed or why earthquakes happen, and are more interested in discussing the TV show that was on last night, what they are wearing, or the newest chat-room on the world wide web.

This issue held true in last year's science class. The students were consumed with their social world. They were so focused on pop-culture that they didn't even look into the window of education, let alone take a step inside. The invitations of learning I extended were not responded to, leaving the theater empty. Students lacked enthusiasm and nothing I did was making its way off the stage. Students put minimal effort and thought into their work, providing me with limited answers. As I reflected on each day's performance, I found that I was a flop and if I wanted to continue I would need to come up with a new routine, and this became my quest. A quest to get my students involved and interested in learning.

During this quest, I attended a workshop entitled "Dittos Don't Build Dendrites." Fully agreeing with the philosophical statement of the title, I was eager to see what 'new' ideas would be presented. While at the conference I had an epiphany and was excited to get back to my class to "wow" them. I realized that instead of me being a one-of-a-kind performance I needed to "borrow" material from their world, their society. I began to think about conversations that had taken place in my classroom. Discussions of singers, TV shows, and movies are always a topic of interest among my sixth graders, so I began to rack my brain to see how I could relate any of this with the subject matter in my science class, and at last the idea presented itself to me.

I eagerly began the next day by introducing students to my new friends, 'sewer maggots.' The name alone created a stir in the minds of the students as they began to wonder why their teacher would be holding something with that name. I began to fill them in on the 'latest news report that I heard' that stated that researchers in Boston have come up with an organism that cleanses sewer water. I further told the students that I was one of a select few teachers who was lucky to obtain them, giving the class the opportunity to observe their cleansing actions over the course of the week. I dropped the sewer maggots into the 'sewer water' and had the students write down their hypotheses on what will happen over the course of the week. The students shared their ideas with their neighbors and with the class. Students became intrigued with these little organisms, and my classroom became a popular place to visit. Over the course of the week students came into my room, before the bell rang, during lunch, as well as their regularly scheduled science time to see if anything had changed in the sewer water. As the sewer maggots moved about in the jar, the students noticed that the sewer water began to change from its original yellowish color to a clearer, cleaner look. On the fifth day, I took the jar of sewer water and began to have the students share what they think happened. Then, I opened the jar, smelled
the water, looked up at them and said, "This looks clean enough to drink," and proceeded to take a huge gulp of the clear water. This steeped the kids, leaving horrid expressions on their faces. I then took a sewer maggot out of the jar and held it in my hand. As I commented upon what a great job they did, one student said, "Eat it!" I looked at the student, looked at the sewer maggot, opened my mouth widely and popped it in, elaborately chewing on the squishy organism. The reactions of the students was priceless. I asked them to write a response in their learning logs, describing their thoughts on what just happened, and then as a class we shared entries. Who knew that renaming raisins and soda would create such a reaction.

Essentially, through this experience, I showed the class that I, their teacher, was a 'lunatic.' This was just what the students needed. They were astonished at my 'craziness' and now came to science excited to see what would happen each day. Students were ready to participate and were beginning to think out of the box. This experience showed students that they do not have to take everything at face value, and that truth is an element waiting to be discovered through dialogue (Berlin 242). Through their writing and class discussions, students were able to reflect on the experiment, detect inaccuracies that may have existed, and arrive at their own truth and understanding.

This experiment worked because I stepped into the students' world to find out what intrigued them. I tried relating to my students. Through observing students, dialoguing with them, and listening to conversations I found that this group of students was fascinated with the current TV show "Fear Factor." I tuned into the show and found out why all of my students were into it. The contestants on the show do absolutely insane stunts, including eating living or dead things that one would never think of eating. By bringing this concept into my classroom and providing them a 'real life' version of the show, the students were able to draw parallels between their TV life and school. They began to create their own understandings of events.

I incorporated Freire's essential instructional stance, his concept of "problem posing" education, which poses questions for critical scrutiny within a collaborative setting (Knoblauch 135). Students questioned the experiment and my actions, trying to find the truth in it. This activity enabled the students to become performers in their own education, producing their own voices and opinions. This let students begin to develop a 'critical consciousness' and recognize their involvement in social reality (Knoblauch 135-136).

This experience jump-started my class into a whole new outlook on education. Students began to search for the truth in every activity they did, finding their own voice and views. I was able to spark my students' minds and provided them techniques for discovering or creating truth (Berlin 245).

Drawing upon trends from society doesn't mean you have to sing and dance like Britney Spears, or wrestle vicious crocodiles like the Crocodile Hunter. Use the students' knowledge of what is going on in their world and use this in your classroom. Have the students make the connections. Don't be stuck waiting for your computer to warm up while your student is already logged on and surfing the net. Education is a two-way road, if not a six-lane highway. Students bring as much to their education as their teacher does.
Ex Libris
{from the book}

Patricia Baruzzi

You are elusive, untouchable and undeniably real
as you lie on our nuptial coverlet.
The turn of a page weds us to a place
where time concentrates and inspires us to be one.
Your metered and rhythmic movements
entice and cover me.

I study your imperfect complexion and run my fingers
over its blemished perfection.
Your flesh invites conjugal curiosity
loudly evoking me to go deeper
yet insisting on intimate silence.

We wear each other out with seamless pleasures.
My utterances fail to excite you and yet
you speak in the couplets of an English bard
with an introductory memoir,
penned in 1890,
still romantic after more than a century.

Your frayed edges of spent ribbon mark where
Don Juan proclaims blood, bone, marrow, and passion feeling.
Your nakedness begs to be opened and espoused by a lover.
You are vulnerable.
I am too.

Alone you are pure and unattached,
with me you are stained antique with family.
Your voice stills me with anticipation.
Your scent is natural perfume.
You are body filling and soul increasing.

I breathe you in...

Old Book

[Untitled]

Becky L. Caouette

My father’s face, from the shoulders up (not really a clear picture of him, you understand—more of a sense of it being him), telling me something through the screen as I stare out the door at the incoming relatives and friends, here on our lawn for the post-burial gathering. Unabashedly, we call it a party—at my home. I remember this day in an intuitive way, even though I stayed home from the funeral with my godmother, barefoot and feeling the coolness of the doorjamb rise up through my feet. What I remember about this day consists merely of blurred images; what I remember about this person seem to me to be the blurred images of others.

I know, for example, that New England summers in my then-rural town were either the lush greens of the trees, dripping heavily under the weight of their color, their drops infecting the shaded grass below, or the dryness of a droughted heat, the burnt, painfully needlelike blades of grass only occasionally interrupted by the serpentine intertwining of an even browner sprinkler hose. Those colors would be the backdrop for the blacks and grays of the attendants in mourning, trickling into what would seem to be an Independence Day party—except we were gathering after the death of my twelve-year-old cousin.

If we consider the autumn of our lives to be our later years, my family seemed to have prematurely made their way there, burdened by the shadow (not so much the presence, I think) of this genetic disease that medicine has only recently been able to detect in its carriers. I see this in my sister, whose out-of-wedlock conception of my nephew enraged my parents all the more because she and her now-husband had not been tested to see if either were carriers for cystic fibrosis. I recall our evening prayers, recited on our knees around the bed with my father (but not my mother), perfectly preserved in my memory. We would always “thank you God for making Kelly’s tests come out okay” in our singsong rote; it wasn’t until years later that I was told that we were thanking God that Kelly, my sister, had tested negative for cystic fibrosis and that her countless respiratory problems were asthmatic and allergy-related. Her debilitations would not take her from us.

I see this shadow over my maternal family, weighing them down generationally as I recall the chain that had started the worrying, the birth and death of my Uncle Tommy. Dead at sixteen, only a few years younger than my mother, his picture still hangs on her bedroom walls, separate from the growing number of dead siblings that face us from the shelves of the living room hutch. There are no bad stories of Uncle Tommy, a name I still give him even though I never met him and am now ten years older than he was at death. My other uncles—five more there, with six girls to round out the family of twelve, have their drunken stories, their fights, their failings and mistakes. But Uncle Tommy is preserved perfectly; always laughing, the son for whom my grandfather sacrificed sweat and blood so as to answer every whim, the youngest who will always remain the kid brother. He has no crime, for we cannot blame him for dying too soon, succumbing to the disease that had miraculously bypassed every other child, killing my grandfather’s spirit and control as he did so.
And so the loss of Uncle Tommy stood alone until Maura’s birth and death, the only cousin to suffer from the disease, though she died four years younger than Uncle Tommy had, stealing from us the promise of four more years, at least—perhaps more, with the development of new treatments and medicines, experts and specialists. I would have been eight had she lived to the coveted age, old enough to know her as a person rather than a series of fleeting images: I, whispering quietly, but not being heard, while the oppressively raspy respirator breathed for her in her last days. Her final birthday party, in which my sister participated, but I was too shy—the idea of sitting on balloons until they popped, and hearing that noise explode beneath me, was more than I could bear. A will that distributed all her possessions (of which there were many; like Uncle Tommy, she had whatever she wanted, and gladly) to her cousins and friends, bequeathing me the baby carriage (destroyed, finally, by too much play); a Raggedy Ann doll (truly ragged, though it followed me to my new married home and has a place of honor on our bed); a watch with Lucy of “Peanuts” fame interred within; Mickey Mouse ears. These are what I have of Maura, along with the vision of her photo that hangs, along with Uncle Tommy’s, in my mother’s bedroom.

Perhaps it is because I have no fleeting images of my own of Uncle Tommy that I allowed him to die years ago and can listen with ease to my mother’s stories of him. Perhaps, too, it is because he is one of many dead aunts and uncles on my mother’s side. The family has buried half of itself. But Maura’s death confronts me still, and I do not know why. In fact, much of what I do know of Maura comes from others. I know I was quite young when she died, but I have to calculate to understand that I was four years old, a time when memory is unsure, crafted by the stories of others, carefully placed by the timekeepers of the family. Her voice is lost to me; I can only hear it through the mimicry my mother employs when she tells the story of how Maura cried when my mother punished Kelly.

Even her face is shaped in my mind in two pictures, taken from paper, not life: the one of her in her obituary, and the one that hangs on my mother’s bedroom wall. I see her in no other way—my mind can only vacillate between those two images—it has none of its own. She was thin, with a feathered hairstyle blunted in what was called, when my sister acquired it years later, as “The Dorothy Hamill.” When I stare at her photo, she seems longer than her years would suggest, yet she still looks too young to be twelve and too young to be dead. Her drawn face—it must be hard to fatten them up when you gradually cough away your life—with its huge eyes and plained, flat cheeks that slide down to her mother’s pointed chin are what stay in my head. But that photo is someone else’s captured image—again. I remember the birthday party, the funeral party, the respirator. Everything else I know about Maura I have been told, right down to the fact that she taught her older sister to smoke. Everything that I have is what the rest of my mother’s family has, too.

We share not only these memories, then, but also the burden of her death that no one seems able to bear. Her parents, divorced and remarried to each other more times than I know, who witnessed drug addiction and alcoholism in themselves and each other. Her sister, a mother now, though estranged from their mutual father who has not yet seen his grandchild. Haunting thoughts, lodged in the back of our minds, whenever a new baby is born. Will this one be the next generation’s loss?

But I wonder if anyone else reads this legacy as I do, with a silent, guilty joy. Oftentimes, I think myself a traitor for the thought that gleams out whenever I think of this family burden: luck. And I want to banish that thought from my mind, blow it away like dust from the picture frame so that I can settle complacently with these shared memories of Maura. Considering my family, lucky seems like a sadistic joke. Yet I count on my fingers the number of babies we’ve had, and the numbers that have lived and are living healthy lives. If we consider that, when two CF carriers conceive a child (as my grandmother and grandfather did twelve times), the chances that baby will have CF are one in four for every birth. So all of my aunts and uncles could have had CF, or none of them. Likewise, they all could have been carriers and married carriers (as Maura’s father and mother did); thus the 36 or so grandchildren that my grandmother welcomed into this world could have all exited before she did. But we didn’t; only one did. And so I find myself silently, secretly thanking God for sparing the rest of us the possible wrath of his statistics. Perhaps Maura’s death lingers around me still because I feel as if she has been sacrificed for my sisters and I, and my guilt is one of a survivor.
The sheets are impossibly clean.
Dinner at six sharp.
Through curtains starched white
the scent of the river swells
edgy gray and
silently keening.
She hears what is mute there,
what rushes away,
what recedes and
moans below the surface.
Everything the river can't say makes her
rise like vapor to the window
where she glistens
but can't evaporate.

The Introduction

Jennifer Dahl

It is a very humid and hazy summer day. The air is incredibly thick. The sky grows dark and thunderclouds move in quickly.

I’m driving my Jeep, on my way home from my crappy summer job. I was hired at the “Arnold Palmer” golf course to perform general maintenance tasks. The only good thing about my $7 an hour job is it is minutes from my home.

The hard top is off my Jeep and the bikini top is up, a sure sign in my world that summer is here. The rain starts, sporadic, heavy drops at first, then as if someone has turned the faucet on full blast. I pull into my driveway and jump out just as the first clap of thunder is heard. I run up the path and on to the deck. I take shelter under the small overhang of the second floor, just long enough to fit my key in the knob and thrust the door open.

I am beyond drenched. My sweaty t-shirt is soaked, my paint splattered blue jeans are sticking to me, and my muddy work boots are leaking brown ooze on to my mother’s white kitchen floor. “Shit!” Thankfully, she isn’t here. Outside the sky is black, too black for four in the afternoon. A bright flash of light breaks my stare. Maybe it was more than one flash; the light seemed to flicker.

I take my boots off, wipe up the floor, and proceed to the basement. I throw the “Arnold Palmer” baseball hat on the pool table and revel in the fact that I have the house to myself. I flick on the TV, crank open the windows of our sub-basement, set my chair into position, and grab for my SEGA hockey controller.

Another flicker of lightning followed by a clap of thunder followed by another flicker of lightning, and another flicker of lightning...and then the thunder again. It seems unrelenting outside. “Shit!” I realize I am going to have to wipe down the seats on the Jeep before I go out later that night.

I direct my attention to my tournament. I find my saved game after pressing the A/B buttons at the speed of light. I have gone through this ritual so many times, I feel I don’t even need to look at the screen anymore. A, A, B, A, arrow down, arrow left, start. The whistle blows, the puck is dropped the lightning flickers, the thunder claps loudly this time. “Cool!”

My players are racing around on the ice, I shoot, I miss, the other team brings the puck down to the other end. I steal the puck back, the thunder roars, the sky is blinking like a strobe light, the whistle blows, “icing”. The ref drops the puck again. I feverishly begin pressing the buttons, A, B, A, arrow up, arrow up, left, left, left, left. I win the face off, I am traveling toward the goalie, I am in position to score and, instead of pushing C to shoot, I am compelled to look out the window. There they were, the bluest ball of light I have ever seen and the loudest bang I have ever heard. I have never seen that color blue before.

I wake up on the floor. My chair is knocked over, the TV is off, my game has disappeared. Did I score? Why can’t I feel my legs? The thunder is clapping away outside as if applauding my efforts to stand and walk. I glance at the clock, it is flashing twelve. I drag myself upstairs, grab the phone, and lay down on the couch. Outside the sky is still dark, and it looks like someone is squirting the window with a fire hose. Yes, more lightning and more thunder.

I dial the numbers of the only number that I can remember at that moment. “Why is my ring finger numb?” Hammy answers. I tell him about the light and my legs and the TV and heard my lips saying to him, “I think the lightning hit me.” The phone goes dead. Is he right? Am I full of shit?
I lay on the couch, breathing labored, mind racing, legs still numb, another clock flashing twelve. There is not as much "noise" outside now. I am not sure how long I have been laying there when I hear the back door open and the crinkle of a raincoat. My mother's wet head comes into view. She is talking nonstop about how she has been trapped in her car in our driveway for the last forty minutes. She was too afraid to step outside of her car for fear of being hit by the lightning. I laugh, and tell her about my adventure inside the house.

I didn't know it then, but it was the adventure inside the house that stormy summer day that turned me into what I am. For awhile, I was oblivious to the sudden surges of power that would happen around me; oblivious to the streetlights going out when I walked under them; oblivious to sparks when I would plug something into the wall; oblivious to the dog not wanting me to pet him.

I am not sure exactly when I did start to pay attention to it all. Maybe, it was when my SEGA system shorted out, unexpectedly; maybe, when the headlights on the Jeep stopped working; maybe, when I blew the motors on two mowers at work; maybe, when Hammy noticed that I was glowing.
dorm. One suitcase, the last child to leave home, actually his father had died that year, the year he arrived on this campus. What had it been like for him? If she felt absolutely terrified, how must he have felt?

"...and the dorm master caught us, and we had to clean the floors of the bathrooms for two weeks!"

"Tom, let's not tell morbid stories. Elise doesn't need to hear your failures. Right, Elise?" Her mother looked pale. Elise nodded to her as her father parked the car in the circle of the main building.

"Come on, let's go inside and find out what dorm you are in so we can unload the car." Her father actually sounded excited. She stood in the brick walkway of the entrance, skirt rumpled from the three hour drive, sweat stuck to the back of her blouse. She hated these clothes already; they made her look as frumpy as she was. There were what seemed like hundreds of kids and parents milling around. Her father threw on his sports jacket and began walking toward the brick steps. Her mother walked beside her, quiet and resentful.

"Hey, Tom, how are ya? Nice to see you." A balding man, six foot two, sports jacket and khakis threw out his arm and hit her father on the back.

"Nice to see you Forrest. You have a child starting this year too?"

"Sure do. Our class has ten sophomores this year. The best showing of any alum."

"Elise, this is Mr. Hershey, one of my classmates from '49."

Elise stuck out her sweating hand, "Nice to meet you Mr. Hershey."

"My daughter is inside. Come on, I'll introduce you."

"Forrest, you remember my wife, Cindy."

"Of course I do. Nice to see you again, Cindy. It's been a few years since our last gathering."

"When was it, five years ago, for our 30th?"

"Yes, Forrest, it was. How's Nancy, is she with you?" Cindy, the perfect socialite; she always amazed Elise with her polite demeanor and perfect candor with people she barely knew. Elise didn't recognize the nervousness in her mother's voice.

"Yup, she's here. She is with my daughter. They are registering. Come on, I'll show you."

The foursome headed into the building, the men ahead, sharing stories and Wall Street talk. Elise and Cindy followed, tremulously. Suddenly, Tom was surrounded by classmates and acquaintances. "Hey, Tom, great to see you...Tom, old boy." Elise burrowed within herself. Cindy emulated Tom's social demeanor with a smile.

Elise strolled out into the August sun, a sticker on her oversized adolescent chest reading Elise Campbell, '49. She belonged somehow, to another class, to her father's past. In her arms, she had paperwork galore, some keys to her dorm room and maps of the campus.

Lunch was in forty-five minutes. They would have to unload the car quickly. Cindy was beside her, rifling through permission slips and calendars of events. Tom was having a hard time breaking away from his classmates.

"Come on sweetheart. Let's go take the car around to the back of the dorm. Hop in, Dad will catch up to us."

Elise wiggled back into the Volvo. As they headed toward the main gates, she looked over at her mother who sat perfectly upright and inches from the wheel. She was clinging to it. Elise thought to herself, Mom, we could keep driving, right out those gates, home, back to New Jersey, I could come home with you Mom. Her mom smiled at her.

"Honey, I am so worried that this isn't the right move for you. Please don't feel..."

"Mom, it's OK. I am looking forward to this. Just drive the car, OK."

Elise and Cindy had grown apart in the last few years. Elise was a difficult teenager. Cindy didn't like to see the false front of age on her daughter's face. She didn't like the stoic adult like detachment in her daughter. She hated Elise's attitude, her independence, her inability to need her mother any longer. Wasn't it just a few years ago that she still was invited into her daughter's room to make collages with her, to read her stories. Elise had all but disappeared to Cindy. And now, this face, this child grown to adult in a few brief seconds that it had taken Cindy to worry about the other children. Cindy felt the tears well up; she choked them back. It had been a difficult few years. She hadn't dealt with her own mother's death very well. She had leaned too heavily on Elise, expecting her to grow up too fast, to help her with her grief. She, now, was motherless and every day that passed she felt the void that her mother's death left within her. Her trips to Dr. Roger had been helpful, the pills he had given her helped her to get through the long days while Tom was at work. But the children were so noisy at times, Elise so distant, Tyler so difficult, Martha so allergic to the world and little Timmy, so small still. She was overwhelmed with her own inabilities as a mother; almost as if she lost all her patience and kindness when her own mother succumbed to a rare bone cancer. And now, here she was, parking a car with the remains of a daughter, dropping her into a life that did not include her any longer. Was she giving up this child to some greater cause that defined Tom's anxious exhilaration for success within a small community of alumni? It all seemed wrong, like a bad dream gone worse into the darkness of fear. Cindy felt a shudder move from her feet to her fingertips as she pulled the car into a spot by the back door to the horrible brick dorm.

Elise fumbled with her folds, her clothes all disheveled. Stepping out of the car, she did not notice her mother falter or the fact that she had to hold herself up with the car door. A girl with a long pony tail, plaid ribbon tied in a perfect bow, khaki skirt and an oxford shirt smiled at Elise.

"Hi, you new?"

"Yeah," Elise answered. "I'm looking for room 314."

"Up the stairs, go right, end of the hall."

"Thanks." The girl smiled at her. Perfect teeth, perfect legs, perfect hair. She loped along ahead, directing other families toward the dorm. Her name tag read "Alexandra." A classy name, probably another relative to the famous Hershey family. Elise suddenly felt the need to move quickly, and she opened the rear trunk and began unpacking her belongings. An old trunk with her father's name on the lid took up most of the right side of the car. He had used this trunk in Korea and had not wanted to buy a new one for her. This one was perfectly acceptable for her clothes, her sundries. She was embarrassed by his need to use old attie players in her new life. Her clothes, mostly new attempts at a dress code, Elise's first. The Junior High that she came from did not have a dress code. Her "peanut" hip huggers did not make the trip. Her "peasant blouses" that hid her adolescent fat were not allowed. Corduroys, button down shirts,
long skirts, and v-neck sweaters, a real loss to Elise as she had defined herself nicely, hid herself wondrously within the confines of bigness. Now, everyone would notice her. Or not.

"Hey, you guys. What’s the rush. I turn around and you’re gone. I thought you headed back to New Jersey without me.” Elise’s father joked. Cindy waivered with the bags of food and the few small plants she had brought to decorate Elise’s room. Elise cringed. New Jersey, her best friend, Jenny, her crush Ritchie, they were all starting high school next week without her. It would be so easy to turn around now.

The afternoon sun fell with shadows on the golf course. The excitement was diminishing as the station wagons began to leave. The campus had an odd, eerie quiet to it. Elise watched her mom fold in the hospital corners on her bottom bunk. Elise and her roommate had shot out who was to get the top bunk and Elise had lost. Her father carried her Radio Shack stereo back down the stairs to the car, as Laura, her roommate had a beautiful stereo system, Advent Speakers, 100 albums, tape deck and all. Laura was a jock, too. Her mother put the gray army navy blanket on her bed, and Elise kissed with the little closet space she had to share. Laura’s bunk was decorated with a fine tapestry, lots of throw pillows and an old stuffed animal. Elise watched her mother carefully attend to the old comforter that used to be in her sister’s room before they had painted it and de-allergized it. It was floral, pink, and spoke of childhood. Elise felt threatened by it, afraid that she was already cast into the second had the thrift shop experience that had ruined her in elementary school. Her mom volunteered everywhere, brought home clothes from the thrift shop for her, unpacked them like they were gold nuggets from California. Elise despised the old clothes, the smell of them, the thought that they may have come from someone else’s body. She hid them in the back of her dresser drawers, hated them, knew that they gave off a dark spirit to her new clothes.

“OK honey, how’s that?” Cindy finished making the bed, puffed up the synthetic pillows that she had retrieved from her parents house when her father had sold the farm. The floral sheets reminded her of how much she wanted to redecorate her own bedroom. She and Elise had gone to TJ Maxx in Groton during the summer to buy sheets for this dorm room. Two sets, one lavender floral, the other a nice bright floral. She knew how much Elise would appreciate the newness of the sheets and the lightness of the pattern. She never had spent money on sheets before, not like these. She was almost jealous as she tucked in the flowers and spread the quilt upon them.

“It looks nice Mom, thanks.” Elise looked at the bureau that she had to share with Laura. On a stand, Laura had arranged thirty different ribbons for her hair. Elise had never worn a ribbon in her hair, yet she was oddly jealous of this plethora of color and style. She glanced around her as her mother sat exhausted on her bed, now.

“Mom, do you think you could send me some ribbons for my hair?” Elise spoke tentatively, as if she did not want her mother to feel her insecurity.

“Sure, honey. I’ll go out to Lehner’s this week and see if they have a special on ribbon. I don’t want to have to buy quantity though.”

“Never mind, Ma. I have a few barrettes.” Elise knew her mom wouldn’t go to Lehner’s and she absolutely wouldn’t splurge for a foot of thirty different kinds of plaid ribbon.

“Come on, pumpkin, walk us out,” her father hugged her close to him. She could smell him; she could always smell him. She quaked beneath his power. “You make me proud, Elise.” And the words made her strong. Her father walked beside her as they ascended the three flights of stairs to the Volvo. Her mother walked behind.

Behind them, a group of girls were headed over to the dining hall. They were laughing and commenting on friends they had in common. Elise was isolated in her terror.
The yellow Volvo wagon stood empty except for her stereo. Her mother crawled, atrophied toward the passenger door. Her father jubilantly strutted with his arm around Elise.

“We expect great things, Elise.”

Her mother quaked. Her father hit her under the chin as if she was a ball player on his team. “I won’t disappoint you, Dad” Elise felt infuriated that other kids had friends to go to dinner with. How could she possibly walk into the dining room alone.

“Well, then we are off. Back to Jersey. Give us a call tomorrow, Lisey. We want to know all about Orientation.”

“Bye Dad. I love you. Thanks for everything.” Elise shut the door behind him.

Her mother slunk into the car. Elise walked toward her, reaching out her arm, her hand, her fear. Her mother looked at her, tears running down her cheeks. No words expressed themselves as she held her mother’s hand. Elise bent down on her haunches and looked into her mother’s eyes. The pain was like lightning, the fear of being stuck without shelter. “Mom?”

“I love you, Elise.” She shrank further into the car.

“Mom?”

Elise wanted a hug, she wanted to feel like a child, to be held like a child. She wanted her mother to stop this insanity. She wanted to curl up in her mother’s lap and go home. Her mother turned to her father, away from her. Away from her and her new life.

“Bye, Mom.” Elise shrugged and stood at attention as her parents drove off.

Hadn’t she seen Charlie on campus? God, she needed a cigarette. She had promised herself that she wouldn’t start again, no cigarettes, no alcohol. She was going to be a jock like her roommate. Charlie was her cousin’s boyfriend, the only person she knew on this campus. She couldn’t find him if she didn’t venture to the dining hall. She walked back up the three flights of stairs to her room, holding back the tears, remembering the stern end of the Volvo as it had disappeared. How the hell was she going to go walk across the green by herself and enter a dining hall with one hundred new faces? She walked into her room and sat on her bed. Here I am, she thought. Here I am, in the Berkshires, at some incredibly prestigious school, here I am.

Elise sobbed as she thought of her parents traveling away from her. She sobbed because Jenny wasn’t with her. She sobbed into the floral sheets and listened to the sound of a guitar being strummed softly somewhere. The dorm was quiet, everyone was at dinner. She sobbed because she was hungry. She listened. The guitar was mournfully subdued. It was Dan Fogelberg. She wiped her tears on her flowers. She stood; she walked toward the sadness.

The door of 312 was solid oak. She listened. “I have these moments so steady and strong, falling so holy and humble, next thing I know, I’m all worried and weak and I feel myself starting to crumble.” Elise knocked. Kim answered with her guitar in her hand. “Hi. I am wondering whether you want some dinner? I’m kind of afraid to go alone.” Kim had beautiful strawberry blond hair. Her guitar was part of her. She smiled. “Yeah, I’d love some food, I think. My stomach is kind of in knots.” Elise smelled the tobacco in the room. She smiled.

“Let’s have a cigarette first.” Kim turned and put her guitar on her tapestried bed.

“Cool.” She handed Elise a Vantage. They blew the smoke out the window.

“Do you have smoking privileges?” asked Elise.

“Sure, my parents don’t care.”

“Mine do. They wouldn’t sign my smoking privileges.” Elise felt better now.

Cindy blew up. “God Damn it Tom. Elise isn’t ready for this type of experience. I am so angry to drop a child...” and she sobbed into her perfect handkerchief.

“Ah, sweetheart, she’ll be fine. Elise is one smart girl. She is going to excel. She’ll love the sailing team; she will make some lifelong friends. It’s going to be OK.” Tom massaged Cindy’s upper leg, hoping to relieve some of her pain.

Cindy felt the pride in Tom’s caress. She couldn’t help but feel his past resurfacing, his own pain.

“Why, Tom? Why must we leave our child in the brickness of tradition? I hate bricks. I am going to paint our bricks white, Tom. I hate the fact that we have given up our parenthood for education, for some ideal. She is my daughter and she needs me. I need her. I can’t do this, Tom. It isn’t right.” Cindy felt her insides die. Her mother, her daughter, her life suppressed into some cyclical canyon of darkness.

“Sweetheart, I can turn around. I can go back right now and get her if you want me to. This is what Elise wants. She wants a chance at greatness. Don’t take away from her intellect with your emotion. She is going to be fine. She has the best teachers in the country. Trust me, OK?”

The drive home was a silent eulogy to parenthood. Cindy spoke of what was needed in the home now that Elise was gone. Tom bounced from his own experiences at prep school to the remainder of the children, but his persistence in supporting Elise was hurtful to Cindy. They stopped to get a hamburger at Mt. Cisco, a neighborhood bar-restaurant. The smoke made Cindy uncomfortable.

Elise didn’t go to dinner. She was happy to smoke cigarettes and pull on the bottle of vodka that Kim had snuck into the dorm. They played and sang for hours together. When Elise went back to her room at ten, they had to check in with the hall monitor. She brushed her teeth five times, told the dorm master how tired she was and went to bed quite drunk...
The Garden
Valerie Leeds

Your car buzzes by
You whir past
Notice me
But I wait here for you

A palette of colors
Indigo
Crimson
Saffron yellow
Amethyst
White Lavender
Each painting framed in
Soft green
I will be your art gallery

Deep blue
Alight with Luminaria
And White Glitter
Startettes
Fireworks
And Twinkle Pinks
Feel my Breeze
And be warmed by my
Meri Flame
I will be your night

Dine my on plum
Prickly Pear,
Peach Symphony,
Tangerine Gem,
Cheddar Pink,
Tamarinds,
Cherry Bicolours,
Blackberry Lilies,
Nibble through
My Strawberry Fields.
Drink deeply of my Chocomint
I will be your banquet

For you I have tiny rubies,
And Silver Mounds
I can be your lady of Larkspur
We'll dance the Orange Tango,
Do the Rumba Fire.
Or float away on an
Ocean of Sea Stars
Lie down on my Sleeping Beauty
Drift off on my Snow White
Let me Whisper
My Fairy Tale

So do not pass
My Impatiens wait for you
Let me caress you
Under the arm of
My shade tree
Where my bees buzz
And dragonflies whir
“Never forget who you are!”

Ms. Nafissatou Mboj

I am Nafissatou Mboj, Nafi for friends. I am from Senegal, the most Western part of Africa bathing in the Atlantic.

After primary school in my native town, I was selected after a nation-wide exam to join a girls gifted school: Ecole Normale des Jeunes Filles (which used to be the West African girls school). Its homologue, the boys’ one has produced all the African Statesmen. I then joined the University of Dakar and the national Teachers’ College.

I am a high school teacher with 30 years of teaching experience and I supervise trainees in my class. I have attended many seminars inside and outside of my country: ESP in Birmingham 1984 (England), the Millennium Seminar (2000) in London, but the one I liked more was the YMCA Camp 1982 which gave me a taste of the US. That’s why I applied for the Fulbright Exchange Program in St. Louis (Mo) 95-96.

I am divorced with five children. I have a nice family: my brothers and sisters are very supportive and my children adore me. Everyone does his best to please me.

My dad was a traditional chief, a close cousin to my mum.

They both came from Senegalese royalties. My great grandfather’s dad was the last king of the Northern region called Walo. With the invasion of the French colonists, the former Senegalese kings fought fiercely against them before signing peace treaties. Then the descendants of the former kings were sent to France to learn in special schools and returning home, they were the ones who were ruling their former kingdoms in collaboration with the colonists. My dad was one of those princes. He was a traditional chief (chef de canton) from 1948 to 1960, the date of Senegal’s independence. He belonged to the association of notable and wise men and each President of the republic needed their advice and their suggestions on how to deal with people in their regions.

The image of my dad is so vivid in my memory. It looks like a lively picture in the bottom of my heart: my dad was a good looking man and very open-minded. He went to Koranic school and could read and write the Koran very well, went to French school that he didn’t really finish because as a prince he had to go to France for military service. He could then speak Arabic, French, Wolof, and Pular. With two other ethnic dialects he communicated with the people he was ruling. The traditional chiefs wore a kind of uniform that was a red gown, with a black velvet African hat, and yellow leather boots.

My dad was a generous person. People would always come for money, food, or help with personal problems. He would always do his best to satisfy them. He used to tell me: “Never disappoint people. Always try to do something for them; richness doesn’t mean having a lot of money. It means being compassionate and taking care of people’s problems. Richness is in the heart.” But he was a bit selfish in regard to his feelings for his kids. He used to tell people “I love my kids more than I do for myself; please don’t touch them.”

I’ll never forget the year my dad went to Mecca for pilgrimage. For Islam, this is one of the five pillars. Dad left home, up North of the country and came to my house in Dakar where the international airport is. For the little time he spent with me, I noticed that he was sad and had a special concern about me because I was pregnant. “Take care of yourself and never be upset by anything.” “Dad, this is not my first child, this is my fifth one!” I would answer. He then would smile and say “I feel concerned because of the problems with your husband. And I would answer: “Don’t worry! You know that I am a strong person.”

I still remember the day he was leaving: my relatives, my sisters and brothers got together in my house to prepare the farewell dish. People were eating, laughing, and socializing, but my father seemed absent. I tried to tease him, “Dad, will you do prayers for me at Mecca?” He smiled and said, “You do know that I’ll do more prayers for you than for anybody else because you’re my first gift from God.” He took that opportunity to give more advice: “Never forget where you come from, whatever happens, always show your dignity.” Dad took the plane that day, and we stayed home, talking about his coming back reception.

I was eight and a half months pregnant, stifling with marital problems, but I was happy. I felt the support of my kids and family at any moment.

The planes from Mecca were scheduled, and I knew by the press that the third plane would arrive on Monday at ten. That day, early in the morning I wore my nice clothes, gave the instructions for the cooking to be done, and went to the airport with my cousin. We arrived and went to the place reserved for the families. There we were waiting. I waited until twelve, watching some pilgrims pass by, hurrying to meet their families and very happy to be back safe and sound. But no dad. I saw a doctor I knew and asked him about my dad: “Your dad will be here tomorrow, or definitely after tomorrow. There have been changes in the scheduling of the flights.”

I was a bit puzzled, but I believed him and went back home: everybody was disappointed.

We went back to the airport again and the same thing happened. We waited and waited until twelve. This time I saw my uncle coming from Mecca too. I ran to him, but he did his best to avoid me, trying to be busy with his luggage. I caught his hand to greet him and he said “I didn’t know that you were pregnant. This is something!” I began crying. “Tell me what happened to my dad!” I screamed. “Nothing” he said, “He’ll come tomorrow” then left before I could ask anything else. That night, I didn’t sleep at all, and my baby was restless. My mum who was waiting in her house up North was calling all the time and we kept comforting her.

The day I’ll never forget in my life arrived. After a tiring and sleepless night, I took a quick shower and called my cousin again. He arrived and advised me to stay at home. I didn’t even listen to him: “I want to see my dad before anybody else” I said.

We did everything quickly this time and waited just five minutes. My cousin saw somebody he knew who was a pilgrim too. After greeting him quickly he asked, “Have you seen my uncle?” “Your uncle?” the man repeated, “the pilgrimage staff is still looking for him; he disappeared.” I couldn’t hear any more. My baby jumped up to my heart before I fainted. When I came back to life, I was in intensive care at the hospital. All my family was jostling around me, everyone trying to comfort me: “Dad is not dead, he just got lost, they are looking for him……” I went
back to sleep.

They have been looking for him until now. The man responsible for the pilgrimage mission came to my house with a big suitcase full of presents that my dad had bought before disappearing. "I know that your dad is still alive," he assured, "I presume that he didn’t want to come back, that’s a wise choice."

I carried my pregnancy for eleven months and finally delivered the baby on a holy day of November, the very day the prophet of Islam was born. Mohamet Zidane was named after the prophet. This is a religious obligation to name the baby after my dad.

Some years after he was born, I got divorced and today I thank God. I thank my dad, too, because he always told my mum, who wanted her daughters to be submissive, that he sent his daughters to school to free them from man’s power and domination.

Dad, thank you for having given me the opportunity “to fly with my own wings.”

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Learning: Pantoun

*Eden C. Stein*

I work to live close to the earth.

Bending low releases me to fly.

Hurting, growing, healing begins with birth,

green leaves framed against blue sky.

- Bending low releases me to fly.
- Following rules can set me free.
- Green leaves flutter in blue sky,
  sparkling sand leads to the sea.

- Following rules will set me free.
- Black of night precedes break of day.
- Sparkling sand leads to the sea.
- Roaming lost to find the way.

I work to live close to the earth.

Roaming lost to find the way.

Hurting, growing, healing begun with birth,

Black of night precedes break of day.
Sax on 57th
Heidi Turgeon

A jazz lounge in the Chicago area. As the old wood door to Sax on 57th slowly opened dim lighting and empty round tables caught his attention. A scuffed wooden dance floor was now completely engulfed with matches of four feet shuffling back and forth, some feet seeming to almost never move. Faces, with cheeks blushing from a mere whisper. Eyes glistening and twinkling as intimate conversation passes between their lips. The percussionist swishes his brush ever so lightly across the drum, barely loud enough to hear over the white baby grand as it plays that Tommy Dorsey tune.

His eyes dart around the smoke filled room as he searches for someone that he could escort up to the dance floor. He looks left, he looks right,... Any silky, printed gowns that he sees, any rosy blushed cheeks that seem to glow through the thick grey smoke all seem to be spoken for. As he makes his way through the crowded aisles, he is overcome from an aroma so luscious that he needs to continue moving around until he converges with whatever or whoever possesses that fragrance. He discreetly skirts by a table that he thinks may posses a possible partner. The attractive brunette jumps up with excitement, bounces over to the old-wood door that he came in through earlier and embarrassingly, practically strips him naked as she propels her body at his. Their lips lock, they remain like this for what seems to be forever, then finally melt away from each other’s hot and bothered bodies to exchange niceties, about their days, about what they would eat and drink.

He’d had enough. It was time to depart. He couldn’t stand coming to these types of places anymore. He told them that he was fine, that he didn’t need companionship. He had that once, but she’s gone now. She was taken from him without warning. But they said “Come to Sax’s. You never know who will be there. You just never know.” He was alone, always secluded. He had learned to like it that way. He tossed down the last sip of his Black Label, let out a discouraged sigh, and headed towards the door. For some reason his eyes were gazing down as he arrived at the old-wood door. It opened first, and as his eyes lifted they immediately locked with the ocean-blue eyes that were staring him right in the face. No words were exchanged. He simply held out his arm, she gently slipped hers in his, and they proceeded to slowly move to the dance floor. They spent the remainder of the evening dancing, smiling, engaging in conversation, and just enjoying each other’s company.