

2011-01-01

Unentitled Poetry

Stephanie Cenko

University of Texas at El Paso, scenko@miners.utep.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cenko, Stephanie, "Unentitled Poetry" (2011). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 2053.
https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/2053

This is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

UNENTITLED POETRY

STEPHANIE CENKO

DEPARTMENT OF CREATIVE WRITING

APPROVED:

Sasha M. Pimentel Chacón, Ph.D., Chair

Lex Williford, Ph.D.

Johnny Payne, Ph.D.

Patricia D. Witherspoon, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright ©

by

Stephanie Cenko

2011

Dedication

Dedicated to Sasha M. Pimentel Chacón, my poetry professor, mentor and Thesis Chair.

UNENTITLED POETRY

by

STEPHANIE CENKO, BA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2011

Acknowledgements

I was never good at names. I want to begin by thanking Professor I-Don't-Remember-His-Name who selected my poem for first place in the Manatee Community College Florence Girvin Pentangle Magazine in 2002. (I no longer have the magazine.) I was a senior near graduation at the University of South Florida in Sarasota in Dr. Ray Wonder's Poetry class at the community college. Professor I-Don't-Remember-His-Name encouraged me to pursue my MFA in Creative Writing. At the time, I was unaware such a program even existed. Aside from reawakening my desire to write poetry, Dr. Wonder also taught me the value of teaching poetry at the community college level and reaching out to talent in the local community. Additionally, I wish to thank Sasha M. Pimentel Chacón, my Chair, who unwaveringly believed in me and my work and who compassionately advised me throughout all my struggles. I also wish to thank Prof. Lex Williford, the Director of the Online MFA at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), who has tolerated the temperament of this poet with great understanding. Enrolling in UTEP is one of the best decisions I ever made. My first Professor was Dr. Johnny Payne and I felt very welcomed and appreciated to have entered the online program.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Poetry of Witness; Poetry of Participation.....	1
Issues of Witness and Participation	10
How Poetry Speaks and Fails to Speak.....	17
Unentitled Poetry	23
You Mean Everyone Doesn't Live This Way?.....	24
Akoni and the Latin King	39
The Boat People.....	61
Wishful Thinking.....	72
American Values.....	79
Works Cited	117
Vita.....	119

Poetry of Witness, Poetry of Participation

*I fell beside him; his body turned over,
already taut as a string about to snap.
Shot in the back of the neck. That's how you too will end,
I whispered to myself: just lie quietly.
Patience now flowers into death.
Der Springt noch auf, a voice said above me,
On my ear, blood dried, mixed with filth.*

--Miklós Radnóti, "Razglednica (4)"
("Radnoti, "Razglednica (4)")

For Miklós Radnóti, the poetry of participation in the mid-twentieth century was born from a mass grave and required a fierce attention to ongoing human injustices. Here, specifically, in the poem above, Radnóti, shot in the back of the head, becomes a representative of the other twenty-one in that mass grave and for all victims of the Holocaust. (Babus; Gyôzô) As witness and participant, he documented the atrocities of the war that displayed the greatest depravity of humanity in the twentieth century. However, poets conscience of what they were doing, recording the Holocaust in its unbelievable details, dramatizing the horror through verse, were, along with their torturers, co-creators of our memory of the Holocaust. Without these victims' writing, documenting both fact and emotion, during the war, our narrative of the war itself may be very different and impersonal, with only historians to create it for us. But here, even in the middle of a grave, we find art through poetry, which evidences not only human injustice but the prevalence of human aesthetics, and through that, human will. It is not simply a documentation of the fact of the war but a creation.

"Razglednica (4)" was the final poem written by Radnóti, a Hungarian of Jewish ancestry, in which he foretold his very-soon-to-be execution. Ordered to three forced-labor camps during the Holocaust, Radnóti and other prisoners were force marched from Bor, Serbia towards Germany. Well over a thousand were executed along the way. At one point, Radnóti

was one of twenty-two who was too weak to continue the walk. He and others were delivered to a hospital but turned away. As a result, they were executed in Abda, Hungary and dumped in a mass grave on November 4th, 1944. Approximately a year and a half later, Radnóti's and the other bodies in that grave were exhumed. Among the items he was carrying in his clothes, was a notebook of his final poems written about his Holocaust experiences. This notebook was named the "Bor Notebook" for the region in Hungary where the labor camp was situated. (Babus; Gyôzô)

But must a writer have experienced an act directly to write about it? And furthermore, must the writer write *within* the experience of the act itself, like Radnóti, to participate in it? I submit that while the poetic braveries of Radnóti and others like him are undeniably important, part of the creation of a thing (here, the Holocaust) can come, too, from memory-in-aftermath, such as Paul Celan's "Death Fugue" (Celan, Paul "Death Fugue") on internment, but also, that poems about the thing (whether experienced empirically or not) are just as important in the creation of narrative. Take, for example, Sylvia Plath's "Mary's Song" (Plath, Sylvia, "Mary's Song"), in which she writes "The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent. / It is a heart, / This holocaust I walk in," and are Plath's imagery and emotion, for lack of empirical experience, any less real? If the emotional effect is just as chilling to a reader when created from imagination (as Plath does) as a poem written from one's own experience, perhaps then a poetry of effect can include not just that poetry of physical participation, but the participation of creation, or words, the participation of keeping an event alive in human consciousness through language.

We can distinguish then two types of poets: a narrator of witness who sees what is happening and thus writes about it, such as Wislawa Szymborska's "Photograph from September 11" (Szymborska) about the collapse of the World Trade Towers, and a narrator of participant as

one who actually survives or escapes the tragedy and writes about it from the experience or after, such as Celan and Radnóti. Poems of witness and participation contain the most intimate knowledge of the unfortunate experience with the poem written by the participant being the most intimate.

For example, the poem “On a Sunny Evening” written by anonymous children in the Nazi Terezin Concentration Camp (in what is now the Czech Republic) optimistically declares, “I want to fly but where, how high? / If in barbed wire, things can bloom / Why couldn't I? I will not die!” (Anonymous) A child suffering is a monumental tragedy but children writing first-hand about their suffering further intensify our experience of that tragedy. As a result, the poetry of these participants becomes a powerful vehicle for sharing the hardships and injustices they experienced as victims of the Holocaust. Because we believe these authors, we believe the truth of what they have to say about their own tragedies.

This poetry of participation blossomed within the ugliness of World War II. Jewish people were forced into camps where there was time to reflect and write as an outlet for their torment. The scars of those experiences or the loss of loved ones who suffered those experiences further evoked poetic expression. For example, Paul Celan’s “parents were deported [from Romania] and eventually died in Nazi labor camps; Celan himself was interned for eighteen months before escaping to the Red Army” (Celan, Poets.org). Celan’s poem “Death Fugue” reflects on that dark period of his life:

Death is a gang-boss *aus Deutschland* his eye is blue

he shoots you with leaden bullets his aim is true
there's a man in this house your golden hair Margareta
he sets his dogs on our trail he gives us a grave in the sky he cultivates
snakes and he dreams Death is a gang-boss *aus Deutschland*
(Celan, Paul, “Death Fugue”)

Celan wrote this poem in 2005, well after WWII. Yet, through his memories as a witness and a participant of the suffering at least seventy years later, he creates a memory, both personal and public, of the Jewish genocide that occurred when he was young.

Radnóti writes so that people will remember, just as poets such as Sylvia Plath write, too, in cautious reminder. Plath, of Jewish descent, wrote the poem “Mary’s Song” in which she urges the reader to see the crematoriums used to burn the Jewish prisoners at the various camps:

...On the high

Precipice

That emptied one man into space

The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent.

(Plath, Sylvia, “Mary’s Song”)

Plath writes as a participant of the Jewish faith, but not as an actual witness or participant to the event. Plath writes as a poet of reminder.

While these poets are poets of participation, witness or reminder to the Holocaust, there are many more subjects, although perhaps none as horrific as the Holocaust, that bear witness or participant to adversity. There are poems about other acts of wars, poverty, homelessness, and domestic violence including child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse and the abuses that can come with mental illness. These problems haunt the lower class.

The lower class are a vastly under-represented group of people lacking a voice in poetics, because their situation, seems to some, shameful, self-deserving, or unworthy of attention. As a person who has experienced trauma, who has lived as a participant to the lower class, I am compelled to share some of my stories describing the frustrations, helplessness and hopelessness of being a result of my harsh environment. I am compelled to create a voice in a space in which I feel I have never had one, or, been given the opportunity to have a voice before.

A poetry of participation created from hardship is a poetry in direct line into the experiences of the lower class. A poet outside the margins of these societies can offer a glimpse of the problems experienced by the disadvantaged; however, even with the best intentions, it would mostly be a remote opinion, point-of-view and emotion. A poet actually speaking from within these societies can offer a more accurate and detailed opinion, point-of-view and emotion of how he or she or others really participate within their own region. A poet who lives in the upper class might witness an incident and write a poem about it. The poet of participant who lives within the environment of the occurrence would provide better understanding of the challenges presented than a witness or commentator on the outside could. Therefore, poetry of participation can only be expressed by a participant of that environment. For example, I would be hard-pressed to write a convincing poem about rich people, but to write about my experiences within the lower class would be authentic and, I hope, powerful.

As one who was born in the lower class and who is not in denial about it, I feel I am qualified to be a poet of my peers. I grew up within a continuous cycle of physical and emotional violence in the home. I am scarred by it. I suffer from depression and anxiety. My late mother said to me one day, "My father was an alcoholic, my husband was an alcoholic, and now my daughter is an alcoholic." The neighborhood I grew up in had a bar or tavern on almost every corner. In my small world-view, I thought the goal was to be served in every bar while under-aged. And I achieved that goal! I am familiar with drugs and alcohol, although they are no longer a part of my life. I've had more jobs than I can count and more addresses than I can remember. There have been brief periods in my life when I had no home, or when I lived on a small sailboat, or only in my van. The sailboat was a place to sleep, but had no running water, same for the van. I rarely make the best decisions, because my mental illness results in poor

decision-making. I say all this not looking for sympathy but rather to let others know that I understand how not everyone can climb out of his or her environment, and how an unhealthy environment can damage a person.

I no longer have any of the poetry I wrote when I was younger, though I remember writing at least as early as my teens, one of my poems even being published in my high school annual poetry booklet. I wrote then from need, from a feeling of low self-esteem, taught to me by my parents (and brothers), whose parents taught them that *they* were unworthy too. Since I am considered the “black sheep” of the family and not considered “normal,” (like my two brothers and secret sister are), anyone may argue about my point-of-view, but I write poetry of my childhood based on experiences as I remember them. What I consider my best poetry has been from perhaps the past five to seven years and is all that I have left now. This poetry was mostly written as its events were occurring and now comprises the bulk of my creative thesis.

Poetry is possible in an economy of poverty. It’s an extremely affordable hobby. A poet can get a free pencil from the State lottery-sales stand and a discarded paper bag, or piece of paper to write on. It is a vocation that almost has no class divide: if a person can read and write, she can create poetry. And poetry is portable: the poet can take her product, creating wherever she goes.

In that portability, poetry is rebellion because the poet is free to write whatever injustices she sees, even if she is homeless. A member of the lower class, I’ve written poems about my experiences at various locations as I drifted from place to place, mostly in Florida. I’ve also written of some childhood memories that impacted my life, such as the deaths of my mother and father and their influence on my life. Many of my poems began on small pieces of scrap paper

or in tiny notepads I began carrying around. Instead of taking photos, I would write about scenes as they unfolded, or immediately afterwards.

A poem erupts from deep inside me, until the need is so great that I have to let it out on paper. It's always been this way. Something unusual strikes me or sticks with me for a while and I need to represent it. It's usually on the darker side of life, but that is what fascinates me most. I was the daughter of a factory worker for a wire and cable manufacturer. We had our own small house in one of the poorer sections of Clifton, NJ. Back then, there were no slums in the city that I'm aware of (I was sheltered that way, led to believe that we were different from "them"). The slums were in the surrounding cities or nearby cities. Perhaps because they were forbidden or considered dangerous, I developed an attraction to them or a curiosity from a distance to begin with. As I grew a little older, if the opportunity arose, I would seek out the slums when visiting a new city because I sensed there was rawness and honesty that lived and breathed there that I wanted to get to know. Eventually, I would live in some of those slums.

My first recognized poem in my adult life won first place in the Florence Girvin Pentangle Magazine of Manatee Community College of Florida in 1998. It was about the neighborhood I lived in for a year or so named Duplex City (a derogatory name, because of its association with drugs, crime and poor people) when I first moved to Florida. It was where I encountered the following sight outside my apartment:

I'm walking my dog.
She's black and white.
So is my neighborhood.

A boy rides by
on a bicycle
pointing a lonely,
shiny, silver gun
straight ahead
towards the future.

I say, "Hi."
He says, "Hi."

One would think
this neighborhood
were surrounded
by barbed-wire fence
to keep outsiders out.

Yet flowers blossom here
just like anywhere else. (97)

When I recently discovered the poem "On a Sunny Evening" written by anonymous children in Terezin, I found it an odd coincidence that both "On a Sunny Evening" and "My Neighborhood" spoke of barbed-wire and blooming. I wonder was my poem of twelve years ago child-like with fragmented innocence? Perhaps. My poetry has become grittier as I've grown older, because of all I've experienced and seen as a member of the lower class.

Untitled Poetry has poems of both witness and participation of the events in my life. It begins with a poem about the time my older brother ironed my hand. I make reference to my mother ironing my father's work clothes for the factory, which implies our socioeconomics. I tell how my mother left me in the room with my brother and the hot iron, and the outcome, which resulted in a great break in familial trust for me. This gives a reader a view into an average day in the life of the poet as a child where violence is a matter-of-fact way of life.

My book continues with more poems about incidents of physical and emotional abuse in the household I grew up in. One poem is about my mother's parents who died before I was born and the domestic abuse that was present in their lives. I mention my grandparents in order to establish how the cycle of violence repeats itself from generation to generation with only minor fixes in between. There is an awareness of and also an instilled gravitation towards it that the narrator struggles to pull away from.

The topics in my poetry include homelessness, social-class inequities, drugs, violence, war veterans, slums, broken dreams, death and emptiness:

I walked along
the swamp, after you left
and saw a hollow turtle. (78)

I wrote this poem was written after I separated from my companion (again) and after all I'd been through, felt like an empty shell.

Issues of Witness and Participation

*the brown boy lies dead spit slipping red
from his mouth in bubbles to the dry cracked dust
of the ground sucking it up like the juice
of a stepped-on orange.*

--Andrés Montoya "fresno, august '92 "(19)

Nature versus nurture is a common argument used to judge individuals in specific socio-economic classes. In general, it is reasonable to believe a wealthy child will follow in her/his parent(s) footsteps and also live a well-to-do life. Likewise, it is reasonable to believe that a lower-class child will also emulate their parent(s) by becoming a laborer. Children generally idealize their parent(s) and aspire to be like their mother or father when they grow up. Especially for the lower class, there seems to be no other options available. Those born in a lower-class environment often feel trapped and powerless. They struggle to keep a roof over their heads and food on their plates. Alcohol, drugs and violence can plague the environment. With so many stressors in life, the arts, then, become, too often, an unaffordable luxury. The lower class have less exposure to the arts and less exposure from the arts. Poetry, for example, will often address the interests of the most educated and financially successful individuals while not speaking to or for the poor. Therefore, I am compelled to be a voice from and for the lower class.

When a news article appears online regarding violence in an economically-poor neighborhood, no one is ever quoted as saying, "I'm shocked! I never thought this could happen in my neighborhood." Violence is expected in lower-class areas and it arrives in many forms. There is street violence between gangs; there are rapes, muggings and murders and there is domestic violence which includes child abuse. Andrés Montoya's poem above focuses on violence faced by the brown Chicano male, which is a very real thing. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will exclude race and focus solely on economics from a woman's point-of-

view, because I am a woman and because I'm writing about people divided by economics, not race.

The violence in *Unentitled Poetry* focuses on is mostly domestic violence and the lasting damage it can inflict on the individual harmed. As mentioned earlier, it begins with the narrator's childhood experiences of physical violence mostly from her father and brother and emotional violence mostly from her mother. The daughter is the child of a factory worker and stay-at-home mother in a home where there are no dreams dreamt. There is never any mention of a college future. (As a matter of fact, when I did inform my mother of my plans to attend college, she said to me in a very nasty voice, "You'll never finish." In all fairness, it did take me about twenty years to receive my Associates degree, but I achieved it.) The narrator was never expected to achieve any kind of success. Instead, the daughter is continually belittled. The narrator switches from adulthood to childhood participant memories.

There are some problems unique to women, for example, women of the lower class are most likely to experience poverty and/or homeless as a result of domestic violence. "For years, advocates have known that domestic violence is a primary cause of homelessness for women and families." (ACL.org) Domestic violence includes physical and/or emotional abuse. From watching how her parents interact and from her interactions with them, the narrator travels a lifelong journey within cycles of physical and emotional violence during her childhood to cycles of emotional violence in her adulthood. Including references of violence in my poetry will not end violence, but it will help people to become more aware of it.

Victims of child abuse can grow up to have their own families and repeat the same learned cycle of violence. They may also become violent on the streets or engage in other anti-social behaviors, such as robbery, prostitution, drug and/or alcohol abuse. Conversely victims of

child abuse can lead productive lives by rising above their circumstances into successful careers, one being that of poet. An example of such a poet is Sharon Dubiago who wrote about the child molestation she experienced by the hands of her father.

Sharon Doubiago broke ground when she began writing confessional poetry about the sexual abuse she suffered from her father beginning when she was a child and her mother's rejection of Sharon when she informed her mother of the horrors. These painful memories are captured in her poetry. She sharply and shockingly provides details of the abuse in her poems, for example in "100 Memories I Don't Remember" she writes, "My father / undressing me under the house." This is a disgusting image of a man, a father, taking advantage of the trust his young daughter has for him and abusing his position of authority as a parent. Doubiago's poetry of participation holds the reader hostage as witness in an effort to create awareness and cessation of these types of violations towards children.

Doubiago also writes, "We can't remember / everything. / We can't forget anything." Personally, I find that to be very true. I have loss of short term memory, but I can remember what someone did to me forty years ago. I wish I could forget. However, how can Doubiago ever forget, "'Daddy in his bath would show me how he masturbates / the word more forbidden than witnessing masturbation.'" Doubiago writes as a participant of the abuse. There is a boldness in her straightforward willingness to write her truth. To embellish these heartbreaking events would lessen and cheapen them. Dubiago is a genius in her complex simplicity. She taps into an extremely uncomfortable subject and smacks the reader over the head with it. The reader feels shock, anger and disgust for this happening to a little girl. The child abuse is heart wrenching. For Doubiago to evoke such emotion from the reader is testament of her skill as a poet.

Doubiago continues her story by writing about her mother, “she was never the same, I was never again / her child.” Once again, Doubiago uses simple, to-the-point telling. The mother in denial and subsequently blaming the victim leaves the reader with uneasy emotions about this childhood reality. Her writing is brave, raw and unforgettable. Doubiago channeled the memories of the abuse she suffered into her poetry and is now a successful, award-winning poet.

Doubiago’s poetry is in the form of a dramatized confession, such as Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy” where she compares her deceased, oppressive father to a Nazi:

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you. (75)

“Confessional poetry is the poetry of the personal or “I.” This style of writing emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s and is associated with poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W.D. Snodgrass.” Robert Lowell was its pioneer with his breakthrough book *Life Studies*. (Poets.org) Many of my poems are written in the first person and are also confessions of a participant. The “I” in poetry brings the poetry at its most intimate and personal level. A reader is more likely to relate to or be moved by an individual with a name than by a group of anonymous, down-trodden people. The “I” can appeal to the “we” of the group and also encourage the “other” to understand their concerns. The “I” is not an egotistical exploit. It is rather reaching out personally to the reader one-on-one. Writing about my past traumas will, hopefully, give voice to the voiceless who are silently suffering in the lower class. In a sense, the poet becomes an advocate for victims of child abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, poverty and other vastly ignored ills of those on the bottom rungs of our society.

According to the National Coalition for the Homelessness, major causes of homelessness include: “a growing shortage of affordable rental housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty...age...gender...families...ethnicity...victims of domestic violence...veterans...persons with mental illness...persons suffering from addiction disorders...employment (declining wages and unemployment).” Another often overlooked factor is prisoner release. (Metraux)

I feel it is important to write about the world of the lower class that privileged society is desperately trying to ignore. How are they ignored?, one might ask. The best example I can give is of the man I once saw about twenty-five years ago in a subway station in Manhattan. He was wearing old, worn and torn, dirty clothes. One of his legs was exposed and it was severely infected, possibly with gangrene. He lay silently with his head propped up against the wall. Sadly and shamefully, I kept walking by, like everyone else. He was one of the voiceless who desperately needed a voice. There are many more like him, every day all over America. They are ignored, they suffer and they die lonely.

The National Coalition for the Homeless gives a rough estimate of the percentage of Americans who are homeless “to approximately 1% of the U.S. population.” (National Coalition for the Homeless). Homeless is a temporary condition for some and others are unaccounted for, because they are not living in shelters or obvious sites. Most must stay hidden in order to avoid harassment from police, public authorities and uncaring citizens who find them to be a nuisance.

The working class also is experiencing its share of economic insecurity. The term “living from paycheck-to-paycheck” has become so common-place, it’s almost lost its meaning. For the working class, their employers pay them enough to ensure they will return to work, because the pay barely covers living expenses and there is no extra money for any luxurious get-a-ways. Many of the working class work two or three jobs in order to make ends meet. When something

goes wrong, like the transmission of their vehicle blows, they are usually left helpless and unable to pay to fix the problem. One of my poems, “The Mechanic,” addresses the plight of the mechanic struggling to stay in business and the customer who is sarcastically suspicious of the mechanic’s diagnosis:

The mechanic prays to Jesus
for vehicles to break down.
There’s more crucifixes in his office
than in a Roman Catholic church.
Some guy waiting next to me,
dressed in linen and wearing
designer sandals, is picking his toes
like a gorilla. I step outside
to get some un-fresh air where
customers are inhaling, stunting
their growth. Back inside, I say
to the mechanic, “You’re so busy
today”. He says, “Thank God,”
and makes the Sign of the Cross.
He tells me he found three things
wrong with my car. Must be:
One for The Father,
One for The Son,
One for The Holy Ghost:
The Spirit of Truth. (81)

“Between 2007 and 2009, the share of working families who are low-income—earning less than 200 percent of the official poverty threshold—increased from 28 percent to 30 percent. This now means that nearly 1 in 3 working families in the United States, despite their hard work, are struggling to meet basic needs.” (Roberts) Working-class families are the lower class who are struggling to survive while they are doing what they were taught to do when they were growing up: to become a laborer. Unfortunately, the laborers are being greatly exploited, on the brink of homelessness and at times resorting to food banks in order to feed themselves or their families. Worst of all, things do not seem as though they will be improving at any time.

What used to known as the cushy middle-class is falling out of existence into the lower class. “The middle class is slowly dying off because wages no longer keep up with the cost of living...While the country as a whole grew richer the amount of work required just to stay even in the middle class went up 62.4%! Why? Because the richest one percent now enjoy almost all of the benefits of our economy. It's great if the rich get richer, but not when it is at the expense of the rest of us!” (Johnson) Corporate greed is destroying the quality of life for all but the one percent of the population who enjoy the greatest wealth. Langton Hughes pretty much sums it up and sees what’s coming in “Let America Be America Again” (Hughes):

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I’ve never once seen “Poet” placed under Help Wanted in the Classified section of any newspaper. As an unemployed, impoverished poet and corporate flunky, my poetry is not influenced by commercial sponsors, a boss, or a company that will fire me for writing my beliefs. I have the freedom to practice my craft without censor, to date. I speak for the powerless people of America, not for the powerful corporations of America that are so distanced from humanity that they could possibly be from the underworld, here to abuse the lower class.

While I write from my very own experiences, I join in the tradition of writing about the impoverished and disempowered, such as Sandra Beasley, Langston Hughes, Yusef Komunyakaa, Philip Levine, Carl Sandburg, , Gary Snyder, Susan Yuzna (to name a few) also write. (Poets.org)

How Poetry Speaks and Fails to Speak

*They tell us that the Admiral
Is nice as he can be
But we never see the Admiral
Because the Admiral has never been to sea.
--Burle Ives from "We Saw The Sea" (Ives, 52)*

Mocking and satire are tools used by the lower class to protest against the abuse suffered from those in power. Mocking and satire are also techniques used by artists, such as poets to protest the inequities brought on by those in power. In the above excerpt for Burle Ives' song, a certain satisfaction and sense of humor is derived from mocking the Admiral. The fact that Ives mocked the Admiral and never the less was included in the *Navy Song Book* is quite an achievement and to be admired, because he was embraced and appreciated for his work by those he mocked. In my poem I mentioned in Section II about the mechanic, although he is struggling to survive in the failing economy, he is still a figure of power over his customers who must trust him when they go in for a simple oil change and then are told they need a thousand dollars' worth of work he just discovered. Some mechanics, in my opinion and experience, take advantage of the vulnerabilities of the customers who rely on transportation as part of their survival. Mocking is oftentimes the only outlet for expressing injustices towards the lower class, especially against corporations and politicians who have more rights than the lower and so-called middle class. Of course, the humor is a mask, like a thespian's, to momentarily conceal the societal diseases the lower class are suffering from. Once the mask is removed, the frustration, hopelessness, depression and all other ill feelings still remain.

The thespian's mask brings reminder to poetry being the textual derivative of song. It can be traced at least as far back as the ancient Greek tragedies and their choruses which were song lyrics. Today, music makes corporations lots of money. Poetry does not. Doubiago's

poetry books are not outselling Britney Spears' music. Country and Rap music which often explore societal ills outsell poetry. The music itself is part of the big sell; however, even if Doubiago's verse were put to music, I doubt they would be in the top hundred. There's nothing romantic or glamorous about her subject matter. Sex sells, but not the child molestation in the vein Doubiago writes about it. Her poetry is an uncomfortable read and its translation into song would be the same.

In regard to subject matter in poetry, lyrics, and ancient Greek choruses, class differences segregated people at least since 350 BCE when Aristotle wrote *Poetics* in which he states:

“The character will be good if the purpose is good. This rule is relative to each class. Even a woman may be good, and also a slave; though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless... There is a type of manly valor; but valor in a woman, or unscrupulous cleverness is inappropriate. Aristotle further insists a “character must be true to life.” (Aristotle)

In my book of poems, there is no male hero of valor. The narrator is a common woman whose triumph is her ability to survive and get through yet another day. She is part of one of the lowest classes of her society who are not unlike slaves. The slaves/workers of today are indeed considered “quite worthless”, even though they are the backbone of commercialism, because they provide needed labor. They are, however, considered disposable. Workers are let go and if they find another job, it is more-than-likely at an even lower-wage position. Thus, looking back at Aristotle's world, women today might have advanced somewhat in certain parts of the world; however, slaves/workers are still considered trash in America. Humans seem to have a great resistance to equality (and peace).

One giant barrier between the lower class and poetry is the use of polysyllabic words. Generally, the lower class embrace a simple vocabulary. One exception might be the song “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious” (Sherman) that I learned today is from the musical “Mary Poppins”, which I’ve never seen. Yet, this multisyllabic “word” entered my neighborhood when I was a child and I learned the word but not its origin. This song is more accessible to the lower class than poetry. However, upon reading the lyrics to “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious”, I discovered historical references to early Egyptians, Druids, Greeks and Romans. Historical references such as these often alienate the lower class, because they lack an education. Teachers at public schools today are stretched thin by lack of adequate budgets, having to parent children whose parent(s) or guardian(s) are struggling to survive and many times lacking in adequate parental skills in a society that is oversaturated in drugs, sex and violence. And when daddy is the drug dealer, what is being taught? In environments such as this, the arts become a luxury.

In regard to song, when manpower was the only source of fuel in powering a ship at sea, chanties (or shanties) were created as *chants* or songs to create a flow of physical movement of the *merchants*. (TheSeaShanty.net) Chanties (a word of French origin) were songs of common laborers. The word has also taken a turn to represent the unimpressive homes of those living in squalor, *shanties*. The sounds of words in poetry and song help to create meaning in an undefined and meaningless world. Songs, such as these simplistic chanties of the common people, indirectly found resurgence through the poetry of the imagists who focused on the economy of words.

William Carlos Williams’ poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” is an excellent example of simplicity in poetry:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens (Williams)

Williams was a doctor who wrote poetry in lay-persons' terms, yet "The Red Wheelbarrow" is an open-ended or open-beginning poem that leaves vast white space on the page for the reader to ponder what is depending on the red wheelbarrow. The simple words create striking images. I can see the red wheelbarrow sitting in the wet grass and the white chickens bak, bak, baking while free-roaming on the farm with an old-fashioned farmhouse in the background. I'd like to see readers' drawings of the images that fill their heads as they read this poem, and I imagine, because Williams drew it with words so clearly, the drawings would be nearly the same. The rich imagery exists, even though the language is simple. Williams was one of the imagist poets who abandoned over-adorned poetry for simplistic poetry that defined the common American. And it is in this simplicity through which Williams brings poetry to the people.

Philip Levine's book *What Work Is*, like Williams' poem is also a sort of poetry-for-the-people, focusing on the working class. All of the poems in Section 1 of his book are one-long stanza, like one-long workday followed by yet another. As a result, all the thoughts are crammed together into one intense, urgent message with each individual line being a poem within the poem. No words are wasted in any lines of Levine's poetry. The poems' content and form demand attention.

In this way, white space in poetry relies on word and form with the words emphasizing the lower class pushing against and being pushed out by the empty spaces of commercialized society. In “My Grave,” Levine end-stops with a punctuated line shorter than the rest which creates a sense of finality and an inability to speak. (25) Montoya makes use of this same technique in some of his poems in *the iceworker sings and other poems*. The abrupt, startling endings force the reader to pause and pay attention to the reading, because the page is left with unexpected white space that represents what is not said regarding the injustices inflicted upon the lower class.

In his four-line poem “fresno, august ’92,” (referenced above) Montoya uses the end-stop, thereby, leaving a broad white space in which to ponder a boy’s murder. The poem is end-stopped and all lines have groups of words spaced apart from each other. This placement of words causes the reader to pause and reflect on what has happened. The spacing of the words also represents the blood dripping out from his spit. The tremendous amount of white space on the page speaks the unspoken of the injustice implied in the poem. That the boy is brown and the author is Montoya, leads us to believe the boy is Chicano, and likely historically poor. The flowing of blood from his mouth lets us know he is freshly murdered, most likely shot. That he has to suck it up tells us of an injustice carried upon him. The “stepped-on orange” tells of being stepped on by society and could be a reference to the migrant workers who visit Florida in season to pick oranges as labor. The third and fourth lines bring greater shock and disgust to the reader with its staggered placement. The fourth line is centered as the brown boy is the center of attention for the moment. This poem is gripping with its hard-core story telling of hopelessness and the miscarriage of justice. The greatest injustice, however, lies silently in the empty white space that waits for the next boy to fall victim to this cycle of violence.

Likewise, Levine's "My Grave" is a look at death through the eyes of a participant of the lower class:

...this is cheap,
common, coarse, what you pass by
every day in your car without a thought,
this is an ordinary grave. (25)

The poem end-stops and leaves the reader at a sudden white space at the end of a life, an ordinary life now given no regard and "passed by." The lower class live unremarkable lives. Once dead, they're lucky if there are any family members who give regard to their grave or ashes. Many of this lower class live and die the same: unnoticed. As an aside, "My Grave" also makes use of the harsh "c" sound in the words *cheap*, *common*, *coarse* and *car*. The repetition of this "c" sound emphasizes how life and death at times can be harsh.

Long ago, I read somewhere that a good writer appeals both to the masses and to academics. That is my goal. If not, I'd prefer to appeal at least to the masses. I write in common language, the language of my ancestors and my neighbors. I write about the concerns of common people that should be the concerns of the elite as well. As most people know, everything in life is not and cannot be beautiful. In resisting the floral romance of the poetry of the past, we begin to write a new, perhaps "uglier" poetry, which speaks more truthfully of our experiences. Some of the ugliness the lower class face on a daily basis is easy to turn away from, but I choose to hold up a mirror to that ugliness in order for *everyone* to see -- the educated, the uneducated, the rich, the middle class and the poor -- how humans are living in their own country, to represent such living, and to name it as unacceptable. In this way, in writing about what I know, in naming what should be named and what society should change, I hope in my poetry, the lower class persevere.

Untitled Poetry

You Mean Everyone Doesn't Live This Way?

Every Sunday holy
days, my mother religiously
ironed five sets of my father's factory
pants and shirts.

Once my brother waited
till mother stepped away.
He told me to close my eyes,
place my hand on the ironing board.
The iron stood upright, hot as hate,
my mother in the other room.

No. You're going to hurt me.
Trust me, he said.
I closed my eyes and complied.
He ironed my hand.

My hand still bears the scar
of that triangle of trust.

What a good baby! She never cries. Why? No one listens.
No one sees. Clumsy me. Silence is better than listening
to Mommy calling me ugly. Silence is better than violence.
I know. It's my fault. I'm clumsy.

I found outside live people who call themselves normal.
Mommy calls me abnormal. Classmates don't call me.
Claudia said: fireman is my father; drunk is yours.

Funeral discovered me, the daughter, my mother never
acknowledged. The mourners had no idea. Where's
her son, Dick? You. Who are you? Nancy never told
us she had a daughter. Not daughter, normal or wanted.

Riding in the back of your black Ford Galaxy 500, rocket tail fins,
license plate GZW-243, through downtown Passaic to Symbol's ShoeS
where the neon soldiers marched side-by-side on the sign above its door.
Past the tallest building in town, where the tooth fairy lived on the top floor,
I was sure.

Once home, I placed the shopping bag of my new, once-a-year pair
of shoes on the kitchen table.

You beat me
and beat me
and beat me.

I asked my mother,
your wife, why?

She said putting new
shoes on the table brings bad luck.
She was right.

The girl, in the blue dress, not-yet a woman, traveled barefoot through the green and brown woods with her tan wicker picnic basket. You, in your reddish-brown fur said, "Come here, little girl and indulge in this sprig of beautiful flowers." She didn't notice your furry, foxy ears, pointy as the devil's, or your sleek, white-tipped tail, long and pointy as the devil's. She trusted you. Amidst nature's elements, she fell spell to the allure of your poisonous flowers. She collapsed into your muscular arms, her toes dangling in the stream.

By the time you were through ruining the white-lace innocence of her dress, the local townspeople and forest animals stood around watching, doing nothing, except talking about what a bad little girl she was. The girl seduced by the foxy devil. The angel-trumpet accomplices bowed their heads. She trusted you.

The day Daddy dropped dead on the boardwalk
nothing stopped, except the crowd, to gawk.

Wheels of chance and the Ferris wheel circled.
Sea shore waves clashed while rain drops hurtled
against our faces as the ambulance took
the dead man away.

To see him our last chance.
Before casket. Before grave.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Breaking point.
Fist through the window. Blood up to his elbow.
Putting the cat into a locked metal box chained
up with the crucifix on top was scary enough, now
Sirens! Sirens! Sirens! Coming to take him away.
Mother says I hope he's wearing clean underwear.
Ambulance hauls him away. Mother shrills:
I can't take it anymore! I can't take it anymore!
I quit my job to visit him at the institution.
Psychiatrist cried. I sat wondering, Hey, shouldn't
I be the one who's crying? My brother's afraid
he'll hurt someone.

Was it Mr. Bubbles who lied and promised us a tub
full of gigantic bubbles?
Was it Bonomo Turkish Taffy that said it tastes like
ice cream whose lies destroyed him?
Perhaps *Father Knows Best* did it to him.
It surely wasn't *Winky Dink*.
He never talked to me.
Too many lies in this family and on TV.

My father from Hell to Heaven, I was
a remarkable disappointment to him.
I defied my father's heritage. I learned
in school to be ashamed of my well-worn
shoes and coat. A factory-worker's daughter;
not a lawyer's. Dad never missed
a day's work until after he died
on the boardwalk of Seaside Heights, NJ.
I knew there was a reason he insisted
on taking a day trip there in the rain.
I'm the granddaughter of a shepherd
I never met. He immigrated from Carpethia
to America for freedom and the Capitalist way.
My father was a remarkable disappointment
to him. He decried the advertiser's ways.
Later I begged for Play-Do that I saw
on a commercial.
Dad served as Sergeant in the US Marines
during WWII in the Guadalcanal Campaign.
He turned down the State Trooper position
He put down his guns.
I'm glad he's dead today. I'm glad
he missed the Twin Towers tumbling,
glad he missed Fort Hood, the second
Depression and BP's treachery.
Today I am one of the powerless,
as he was before me.

Look both ways when you cross the street.
Make sure the oven's turned off before you leave the house.
Don't slip and break you neck on that carpet.
Mom was always cautious.
Afraid to live or let me live.
Mom had a doctor appointment. A good new doctor.
She was finally feeling better.
She looked both ways before she crossed the street.
Rich old lady late for her hair appointment speeding
down the street struck Mom,
her flying into the air.
Mom landed
in the hospital.
Had to learn to walk again.
Waste of time.
She died there of a blood clot
from the leg to the heart.
Lesson to learn.
Rich old-lady, dentists' wives driving
Cadillacs don't get tickets.
They get away with murder.

Section 13, Russian Orthodox, Block C, Row J, Plots 14 & 15
I walk to your graves and bury the crushed snake placed
above you. I gather the uprooted rose bushes I once planted.

I peer through the red, square-shaped, snap-open-and-close
opera glasses, a souvenir you once bought me
from the Statue of Liberty, and look back to the past.

I see Seaside Heights, the Ferris wheel, wheels of chance,
pink cotton candy, candy apples and salt-water taffy.
I see daddy drop dead on the boardwalk in front of my
younger brother. Me telling my older brother, He's dead,
when we arrived home minus one.

I see you crossing the street and getting hit by that dentist's
wife in her Cadillac running late for her hair appointment.
I see me rushing to your hospital bedside and you opening
your eyes and your first words to me, "Where's Dick?"
my younger brother.

I adjust the opera glasses and see you loving John,
my older brother, and finally me.

Younger than me, naive, innocent, we married.
We had no window to jump out of
so poverty meant nothing.

The Navy drafted me where many soldiers fell.
Drafts of beers went down the hatch. On leave,
three sheets to the wind, I violated my family.

You died so early, left me
before I could leave you.

Our babies hated me.
Your mother took them in.
They never sought me out.

The Bowery welcomed me and my new friend:
rum. My grandchildren never looked for me.

Potter's Field NYC
buried me:
the unknown sailor.

You slammed my head against the ice box.
After that, it was always thumping
in constant rhythm.

Rhythm like our babies' screams beating
inside my skull.

They were little girls, your daughters,
beaten and beaten.

You sailed to war, lured by the sirens'
last calls for alcohol.

Something in my head burst open.
The world drifted away.

My babies learned to stop crying
in my mother's Catholic shrine,
with her promise to keep you at bay.

Midnight dance begins.
I push you. You push me.

We jump, up, down.
Safety pins, Doc Martens.

Thrift store black.
Anything, as long as it's black.

Momma hates me.
Don't want to know about yours.

Shove you some more.
Sex Pistols. Ramones.

Sissy's brother died in Nam.
City named a street sign after him.

Bob's brother dropped some acid.
Dove into an empty cement pond.

Dave's Sergeant drugged him
to face battle. Clash.

Who's checking into the asylum
today?

More fun than a barrel of monkeys
on my back, I sell beer, cigarettes,
lottery tickets and gas at the Circle
Eleven to all the suckers who keep
coming back for more.

A customer/nurse bragged
he was a guest at a \$1500 a plate
dinner sponsored by a pharmaceutical
company. I said no wonder I can't
afford my medicine.

My co-worker and I, in between
Customers, talk about life, his wife
he ex'd twice, about how his mother,
son, then brother died, about him being
a retired hockey player with no pension,
how his pizza business went bust,
how depression runs in his family,
how we now work at Circle Eleven
selling Natural Light beer,
wondering about natural selection,
selling killer Kool's, watching
seniors gamble their monthly
Social Security checks on the state-run
scratch-my-ass lottery tickets, while
we wait for the call from Corporate
informing us before the holiday weekend
to raise the prices of gas.

The State of Florida told me I was crazy
when I tried to foster a troubled child.

Florida Department of Children and Families
told me that no one with my upbringing
could ever come out normal.

So I asked why they were wasting their time
on all those neglected and abused
children they claim to help, when the State
and the Shamalot Agency both believe
these children are permanently defective.

At least you all are making a good living
off of the defenseless, I said.

So when I applied for Social Security
Disablity and needed a reference, I told
the Florida Region of Social Security Disability
to ask the Florida Department of Children
and Families, in other words, to go ask themselves.
DCF already said I was nuts.

Akoni and the Latin King

I remember the day my father nailed above my bed the wooden cross with the golden Jesus. The son of our Father who art in heaven was just as frightening as my father on earth. Ten years later, my father's defective heart quit. Decades later, the gold peeled and revealed a plastic Jesus.

I sit alone so often trying to quiet the chaos while Remembering mountains of snow and endless seas of spirits I traveled through all the while repeating the sins of my father. My father's father was from the land of Carpathian Mountains and vampiric violations.

My father fought in Guadalcanal, my mother let slip out one day. My father trapped in the mindless repetition of factory work. When he was young, they made fun of his worn-out clothes and lower-class immigrant's son's accent.

You speak through tikis and totems you carve, karate and fire-war dances, while I read and write my poetry. Your Japanese Filipino Polynesian father told me that before the war, his Filipino father was referred to as Don and when they moved to America, they were spit upon.

I slept with rats and serpents. You read the entire Bible, in jail. In your continued self-imposed celibacy, you came to my door like a unicorn, rested your head so calmly in my lap, while I ran my fingers through your long black hair and gently scratched your back.

We sat in the quiet, quiet for hours on end, so as not to hear the stomping rage, the violence, the screaming, the crying, the voices saying we were stupid, ugly and clumsy. Those voices we once believed sometimes still refuse to cease.

We silently share these moments of peace, while our semi-silent, submissive Italian mothers lie in their graves.

My secret, forgotten- half-sister recalled that when we were little,
Our father took us for a Miller High Life ride in his Ford Galaxy 500.
Her mother, his ex-wife, cut off the visits, told him never to return.

My scarred sister and her therapist agree: our father abandoned her.
Had I known, I would have turned him over to her immediately.

My sister hissed on the phone (one of the few times we ever spoke)
told me of the evening that daddy lay passed out on the living room
floor, the drapes sliced to shreds from his war-tour souvenir: a machete.

I never saw his machete. It was before his second and final wife, my mother,
and before he gave up drinking during which we suffered as our self-esteems
were shredded, like the drapes.

My father never much talked to me, especially about the fires of war.
I'll never know what demons he fought.

My friend, Akoni, has a machete through which he carves totems and tikis,
unlike my father's abstract drapery display. Akoni, born in the Islands, tells
me that as a child he was shown the machete as a tool for farming and clearing
through jungles, not as a weapon.

Akoni showed me his machete.
And he talks and talks and talks to me.

Akoni gleefully collects trash and metals
and stashes his treasures in secret hiding
places like a ferret.

Frying pans stashed in bushes, trash-can
treasures on church rooftops, scrap metal
snuck into friends' backyards: all are Akoni's
trademarks in at least three counties of Florida.
Some treasures he'll trade for money
at the scrap yard where the scrappy dogs
scratch and limp in the dirt.

I collect shoes and boots, but I don't trade
mine in. Occasionally when life becomes
intolerable, I give or throw most my stuff away.
I keep having less and less things. Soon we'll
be able to take off in Akoni's pick-up truck
with Melissa the Cat and never come back.

"Is that your chicken?" a local asks.
Every time something is out of the ordinary,
Akoni is always the most likely suspect.
At least, it was a beautiful, expensive chicken
with long, black feathers, we were told.

Trying to figure out how to stay together,
we realize homelessness is a crime
in America, of America.

I cling to the three plastic
interlocking Lincoln Log Cabin promise
pieces you gave me and dream of us running
away to unclaimed land.

You'll build the log cabin I always dreamed of
and fires for food and warmth. We'll have goats
for milk and cheese plus sheep because they're cute.
We'll grow our own vegetables and live
by solar and wind power.

We'll listen to deer and squirrels running,
the gentle snapping of twigs as they pass.
I'll look into your dark Asian eyes
that hypnotized me the first time I ever saw
you from a distance at the Bridge Street Festival.
You performed the Samoan fire-knife war dance.

I missed it. With the scarf tied around your head I took
you to be a gypsy. For a year that image of us gazing
at each other from afar haunted me till you came into
the Circle Eleven where I worked. I said "You eat fire."
You laughed and asked, "Who told you that?" Later
I learned it was the first time anyone there saw you laugh.

You explained to me that you were not a carnie,
but a professional Polynesian performer.
Yet I could see you'd always be a gypsy like me.

I remember arguing for the homeless
when those living in comfort would say
the homeless like to be, want to be, homeless.

You and I were wandering aimlessly,
conversing circularly, when we received
an open invite to a homeless campsite.

Dave said it was legal, approved
by the developer, just to close the metal
gate upon entering and exiting.

Most of the trash lay piled in one giant heap.
Clear plastic bags contained aluminum,
spent beer cans for recycling.

A paperback book lay face down.
Some napkins were scattered around.
Dave said to keep it clean.

Ross was sitting there smoking
a hand-rolled cigarette.
Dave said no drugs were allowed.

Tents and pick-up trucks were their homes.
Dave and Ross said they'd traveled the country,
and to beware of the FTRs. They warned

if you're going to sleep in a box car, to have
a machete on one side of you and an ax on the other.
The FTR's were dangerous dudes who've

had nineteen killings recently attributed to them,
Ross said. The FTRs were a group of disgusted
Viet Nam vets who organized in a bar somewhere

in Montana in the 1980's. They claimed the freight
trains and switching yards as their territories and decreed
themselves The Freight Train Riders of America.

Dave said some freight-train hoppers say The FTRs never bothered them, while others say the FTRs would push men off of speeding box cars, to make them look like suicides.

Shootings, serial killings, drug trafficking, food stamp scams, prostitution, drug and alcohol addiction are all associated with the FTRs.

The FTRs, Ross said don't want any other transients trespassing on their turf, including bridge underpasses. But the cops turn their backs on the murders,

seeing the homeless victims as no loss to society. Black bandannas for the original northwest gang members, red bandannas for the southern, and blue for the central states.

I was wearing my fluorescent-yellow bandanna that day.

I left you on New Year's Day.
I found us an apartment
but you wouldn't help with the rent
and went out partying instead.

You compared yourself to Tarzan
and me to Jane trying to take
you out of the jungle to civilize you.
I committed suicide

by throwing all my pictures away.
I threw my entire past into the trash
and took off on my misguided spiritual journey
to Las Vegas with that Bible-toting Devil.

I walked in the desert cold in my camel-hair ex-wedding coat
to the women's shelter where workers dragged a lady out as she
pleaded for her box-cutter knife to end anyone's life, shouting
I'd rather go to jail than to the Salvation Army!

Men (and men only) from Metro ransacked her backpack
with their white, latex-gloved hands. The forgotten yelled,
laughed into the night, moaned and cried alone while I
sort-of-slept on the top bunk with some other woman's
hair on the sheet. I was next to the door that the restless
shuffled and slipped in and out of throughout the night
to the common area while letting rays of light
glow like lightning bugs flying out of a prism
into the barracks-like room.

I dreamt, once again, of that disgusting, demented demon
man who stole and killed my childhood.

Viva Las Vegas!
Oh, to be caught in a manic state,
in a manic state.

He ain't coming back no more.
I left him in the dry, desert dust.
He ain't coming back no more.
all he brought was disgust.

My license expired before issue date,
A tricked slick scam. I remember
that hideous Circus Circus's
clown's sidekick Slots-A-Fun,
where the manager followed us
around the casino, because we were
eating free donuts and drinking free
coffee but not gambling.

And Penny Town where I'd line
up every day for a free wooden
nickel to exchange for a free soda
and a ticket for a chance
to win something stupid.

And the Riviera where I'd line
up at the bogus slot machine every
day and win either the same cup or
same deck of cards each time.
(I left all that stuff behind.)

And the free, daily slot-pull
at the Sahara with the chance
to win one million dollars or junk
or a gambling credit to try to sucker
us into spending money we didn't have.

The Budget Suites we stayed at where
everything was for a fee and on the coldest
of cold days, Security came and took our
blankets, sheets, pillows, pillow cases,
and towels away, because we could no
longer pay the fee. And the toilet paper,
of course, came with a fee.

The Budget Suites where upstairs we heard
bathtub water running twenty-four-seven,
till street talk told us there was a meth lab up
there. Hey! What kind of former gang member
and ex-heroin addict are you anyway?
So old school, you couldn't figure it out.
No wonder the Latin Kings don't waste
their time looking for you.

The Budget Suites where the bounty hunters,
drug dealers, gang members and prostitutes
were all familiar, along with the occasional gun shot.
They'd knock on our door asking to use the phone,
anything just to try to get into the room.

There was the abandoned, emptied inside-out handbag
on the side of the Legendary Stardust Casino
with its strap sliced in two, sliced off of some
unsuspecting woman's shoulder.

Where the expression get a haircut, get a job is true
for every non-Station casino submits its applicants
to a multiple-hair-strand drug test.

Here's something you'll never see again,
you called to me the first night. I ran
outside to see an alley cat; you saw a mountain lion.
Like how you saw glamour, sparkly opportunity
and I saw broken people with broken dreams.

Las Vegas!
Where every bathroom off the gambling section
of the Las Vegas Boulevard Strip is out-of-order.

We took a bus ride tour to pick up your son at the airport.
There were so many advertisements on the bus windows
that when we looked out, it was like gazing through
a honeycomb: wasted lights and prostitutes blurred through.

Mostly we walked, trying to stay one-step ahead of the homeless
whose defeat hung over them like the cardboard boxes they slept
under, towards, at and past downtown.

The lawn of the bus station was blanketed by the unblanketed.
The destitute lay stranded, so dehydrated from the sun
they could no longer cry.

Upon our return from the Roman Catholic food bank, you pushed the shopping cart we found abandoned on the street that we put the free food from the mission in. The mission where the social worker of Christ treated me like a disciple of Satan. Outside the mission, there was food thrown on the sidewalk, because it was not the lasagna it was rumored to be, but instead galumpke. You pushed that damned cart for miles down Las Vegas Boulevard. I can still hear its wheels rattling over the concrete while I tried avoiding the stares of curiosity and contempt from the passers-by peering at us and inside our cart. While fancy rental cars raced, flashed past us; however, don't jaywalk or you'll get a ticket. We walked past racks after racks of glossy advertisements of beautiful naked women and men for sale, while the ravaged prostitutes stumbled down the streets.

Where you can pick your Elvis-themed-wedding at a tacky chapel or rent a prostitute or do both.

Boxes lined the sidewalks, beer bottles and rags tucked into bushes, more boxes pushed up against fences, evidence upon evidence of homelessness, of people sucked into a brightly-lighted black hole that stole the life and money of its victims.

Whereas the casino owners' status seemed to be raised above any god's, who now tear down the so-called-old, only to build up new money magnets for the well-dressed to stand beside all that is glitter.

Although I must admit, I will not miss that hideous Circus Circus clown when they do finally tear him down.

The disillusioned whose skin became wrinkled from the sun and cracked from the cold desert nights, dressed in remnants of clothing remain invisible to the money-blinded naked eye unless, of course, you're pushing a noisy shopping cart down the Strip.

one more game.
one more game.
one more drink.
one more drink.
one more john.
one more john.
one more drug.
one more drug.
one last breath.

There was the t-shirt souvenir shopkeeper who sat in his tattered sofa chair with the springs and stuffing popping out, considering it a throne while he ordered his workers about.

The chapel with the old-as-Vegas fake horse and carriage standing outside of it. Where you said you'd marry me, till your son betrayed you and told me you were still married to his mother.

Ratted you out, told me too that the reason he watched *Scarface* repeatedly, obsessively was because he hated you and every time he sees someone get shot up in that movie he puts your head on them and instead imagines you getting shot up over and over again.

Phony fiancé. And I never did get to sit on that fake horse with my rented wedding dress on. I left right quick, traveling grueling Greyhound bus transfers after transfers for four days.

I was so happy to be home, sadly, even glad to get my job back at the Circle Eleven where the cops always visited and one said to me how he admired my having the boldness to throw caution and my possessions to the wind, to take a risk, to follow a dream. Then the next week, I read in the local newspapers that he was transferred to a different Sheriff's station for joining an on-line all-girls' motorcycle club. He was rejected by one, but accepted by another where he made the mistake of sending cell phone photos of himself in ladies lingerie to one of its member's whose husband was very much unappreciative of.

The day I came back from Vegas,
you gave me the shirt off your back.

The faded-grey, cotton-knit, surfer shirt
left for takes in the poor people's bin
at the Dolphin Laundry Mat.

Slight color remains in its pale, thin stripes
of blurred, yellowish-greens across the chest
that somehow brightly shine in the sun.

The shirt is a survivor. Our friendship
survived by your forgiveness.

I returned to Bradenton Beach
from Vegas with two suitcases.
I briefly slept on the floor at Captain Horne's,
till you introduced me to Angie's in Kissimmee.

After Angie threw you out,
I lay in bed for seven days
and tried to starve myself,
till I found out on the internet
it could take at least a month.
My cola addiction left dehydration
out of the question.

I wrote on my pink cut-up t-shirt
in black fabric marker "2B
or circle slash over another 2B?"

You were my chauffer and bodyguard
as we drove through Florida, Georgia,
Tennessee, Kentucky and one minute
of Alabama. (I figured anyone who
would take six police officers to restrain
him while resisting arrest without violence
would be a good pick for protection.)

After fourteen glorious days (except
for the night you pulled up to the crime
scene in downtown Louisville and asked
the police and paramedics where DaVinci's
Pizzeria was) we returned to Kissimmee.

You slept in my rental car outside Angie's
trailer. The next morning we picked up
your pick-up truck at the Baptist church
after arguing with Angie and fled,
wandering through central Florida.

Nelli and Deli took us in, fed us and let us
sleep in their children's beds (without their
children). We showered and I stored some
of my not-so-very much stuff in their shed.
We departed and spent two nights sleeping
on a blanket on top of a sheet of plywood
with a thin blanket over us in your truck.

Then I became too much for you
and you dropped me off at Captain
Horne's. You said you can't even
take care of yourself, so how are you
going to take care of me?

We were riding around town and you
stopped at the traffic light and dropped
a quarter in the big, yellow plastic bucket
of the firewoman with the neon yellow safety
belt on and asked her to pray to God, Buddha,
Mohammad, Jesus or whoever she prays to to
take you the hell off of this lousy planet life earth.
Our demons are compatible.

You lift the hood of your battered blue
Ram pick-up truck and push something to start it.
I don't know what it is. I'm just glad it works. It runs.

Its X-Mas season and people are running
from store to store and mall to mall,
because the TV tells them to.

At Captain Horne's, the TV never shuts up.
The men in the trailer speak crudely
of women, booze and sex.

When they're apart, they complain about
each other, but when they're together,
it's one big happy party.

I'm thankful for the roof,
outdoor shower and indoor toilet,
but not for where I am.

You told me you had a man-to-man
talk with Captain Horne. I asked if you
discussed me as a piece of property.

You said yes, but that my trust was worth
millions of dollars, so he'd never be able
to afford your asking price.

Captain Horne said he's sick of my homelessness.
"Do not bother me again with your homelessness!"
I'm sick of my homelessness.
Surely, it must bother me more than him.

Akoni said to fend for myself
on the coldest day of the year.

I remember during my divorce
pulling my rusted, faded blue
Ram 150 pick-up truck
into the Target parking lot.

I was crying, unable to drive.
I wanted my mommy.

Then I remember she'd been dead
over a decade.
But even if she were alive,
she wouldn't comfort me anyway.

There, in the shopping center parking lot, I came
to understand that only animals are born without sin.

Why don't you just put a pacifier in my mouth
and place me in a wicker basket with a pink
baby bunting blanket over me, the next time
you decide I am a burden and drop me off, again,
on someone's else's doorstep?

He called me a spinster.
I told Captain Horne the thought of lying
naked next to/with him terrified me.
It was his idea.
He told me no wonder
my ex-husband left me.
He said Akoni doesn't want me,
isn't getting along with me,
because I don't sleep in the nude.
He said if he married me and found
out I slept with my clothes on,
the marriage (his mirage)
would be over in a week.
THAT HE WOULD NEVER MARRY ME !!!
That I was a fraud.
That he would have me Baker-Acted,
because I must be crazy for never having had sex with him.
When all I wanted was to sleep on his floor.

Enjoying my spinsterhood while watching
exotic birds waiting for scraps from tourists,
fending for themselves.

Cats and raccoons dumpster hunting,
fending for themselves.

Employees arriving daily for work at the Circle Eleven,
fending for themselves.

A blind man with a red windbreaker walking his black dog,
fending for himself.

Me drinking coffee on the once-white bench now painted
brown at my former employer, the Circle Eleven,
fending for myself.

Today, the prostitute does not
have a heart of gold or silver.
He sleeps with an old woman
to keep from the shivering cold.

There are no miracles in prostitution,
even on 34th Street in Manhattan.
The prostitute used to love me, salute
me, as though I were the President.

Come on. Come on.
You're not common.
Come on back to me.

We'll sleep under Newton's tree.
Gravity will make us an infantry of lovers.
Under cover of my shawl, we'll smoke
opium in the den of a canvas tent I stole.

Lawns were made for Kings and we have
grass beneath our feet. You can't take her
money to the grave, but we could lie side
by side, in life, in death, in heaven.

Her penthouse has famous paintings;
my tent has faded graffiti.
You will be perfect, till I come.
She looks at you and comes.

We'll be despised poor, whores,
prisoners of poverty.
We're the soul of the earth.
She's the devil's soul.

Come on. Come on.
You're not common.
Come on back to me.

We'll sleep under Newton's tree.
Gravity will make us an infantry of lovers.
Under cover of my shawl, we'll smoke
opium in the den of a canvas tent I stole.

You come and go.

You've mentioned Two Lovers Point
where doomed lovers tied their hair
together into a knot, then took a leap
from a steep cliff into deep waters.

Here in the Bradenton Beach Bay the water is
shallow at the only jumping points: its bridges.
Lovers leap not. We're both afraid of heights, so
the Sunshine Skyway Bridge in Tampa Bay (once
rammed into by a freighter during a storm where cars
and a Greyhound bus unsuspectingly drove off the broken
bridge and thirty-five people plunged to their deaths without
their hair tied in knots) is out of the question. Lovers leap not.

And we're both afraid of heights, except
you'll still climb up any palm tree barefoot
and I won't climb to the top of any ladder
with my shoes on. Lovers leap not.

The Boat People

We snuck into the shower at the Bell Fish House.
Once finished, we met the owner waiting
on the other side of the door. He grunted,
“Making ourselves at home, aren’t we?”

We slept in the back of your blue, broken-down
Ram pick-up truck in the parking lot of The Mermaid’s.
We jumped out the back at sunrise for coffee
at the Circle Eleven. We tried to remain unseen.

People called us crazy, because we were,
or at least Uncle Sam agreed.
The minister at the church food bank yelled
at us because we visited two months in a row.

The Mermaid towed your truck away. We moved
onto an abandoned, derelict boat on the bay.
I slept in my pea coat, huddled next to you,
under layers of raggedy blankets.

We were followed around in stores because
our few meager possessions were in our backpacks.
Sometimes you’d throw yours up in a tree
just to free yourself of it for a while.

They called us lazy, irresponsible, trash, but somehow,
we still managed to remain invisible.

I bought this old Navy pea coat from a student half my age at USF for a dollar fifty.

There was a label sewn outside the inside pocket.

It read:

U. S. Navy
100% Wool
Name _____
Service No. _____
Contract No. DSA-1-1172-63-C
Size: 38R

with the name HIGGINS
hand written in permanent marker
across the Name and Service No. lines.

When I wore the Navy pea coat from the sailboat to the Circle Eleven to get my morning coffee the manager said to me she hadn't seen a pea coat since the sixties when her husband was in the Navy.

Dry cleaner labels were attached by plastic tags to the outside of the inside pocket.

One long yellow paper label read:

PITTSBURGH	}	3A DEFECTIVE CONDITION
TAG CO		
SERVICE FLAG		
PRINTED IN U.S.A.		

And there was a lavender label labeled:

11
253
also attached by the plastic tags.

Its wearer outwore the coat.

I wonder if this sailor is alive today as I re-sew a popped off, anchor-engraved button onto this defective cloak of mystery.

I sit on the white bench outside the Circle Eleven
watching the Gulf, what's left of the view,
in between the new condos and the old Moose lodge.

A group of older, arrogant, affluent, white men
have taken over our (The Boat People's) seats.
I sit far off by the bar-b-q propane tanks
and involuntarily overhear their profane language.

They are degrading "hillbillies" and "blondes."
I rise and walk away saying,
"Have a good day, gentlemen."

These are the new folks moving in taking
over this town I used to call mine that calls itself a city.
Then I remember on a much grander scale,
Manhattan started out as a simple, swindled island too.

Went on a derelict sailboat to get away,
but all I got was a boat opera. Boat opera
on the bay. A small sailboat; its tag inside
called it a pleasure boat.

Wilbur rammed
his rowboat into it with us inside and laughed.
His son said he likes playing boat bump cars.
The next evening Wilbur came charging
at us again, this time with his motor boat.
I told To-To (AKA Akoni), I thought Wilbur
was semi-retarded: he's slower than me.
So To-To told me, the next day he asked,
"Wilbur, are you retarded?"
Wilbur asked "What?"
To-to repeated, "Are you retarded?"
Wilbur replied "No."
"Are you sure?" Tony demanded.
"Yes," Wilbur insisted.
"Then never fucking ram
your boat into my boat again.
Understand?"
Boat opera on the bay.

We are "The Boat People," "Derelicts,"
"Trash," me specifically, "Riff Raff."
Sometimes I sleep on the floor
of the trailer at Captain Horne's.
Other times, I share space
on the small sailboat with To-To.
We sleep feet first in the v-berth
front of the sailboat.

Mindi and Jimmie split apart
onto separate boats.
She has the baby dog who yelps
all day long for her mamma dog,
while mamma dog barks back for
baby from Jimmie's boat.

Narco received constant death
threats via cell phone from Jimmie
for Narco's deciding to protect Mindi.
Mindi's since moved on to another man.
Boat opera on the bay.

Someone stole Cole's cell
phone and tools from his boat.
Rave, the bayground playground
bully takes everyone's toys
and brings them to his boat.

Rave took To-To's canoe
and someone else's oar,
rowed to his big boat
and tried to keep both.
We got a hard knock
and loud call on our boat
in the middle of the night
from Lion with the missing
oar asking To-To to
rowboat him to his boat.
I've never had less privacy
and more piracy.
Boat opera on the bay.

Claudia beats up some
of the disorderly drunken men.
She wants to be Dock Master
when the City finally has its way
with our moorings.

The newly-elected-by-the-Commissioners,
Project Manager walked up to me
and called me "Riff Raff."
She gets overpaid \$45,000 a year
to do that.

Welcome to Bradenton Beach
where everyone is a crack head,
or so some say.
You're a crack head.
No, you're a crack head
Your mother's a crack head.
Here a crack head.
There a crack head.
Everywhere a crack, crack head.

Men stand on their boats
and threaten to kill each other,
or at least to rip their heads off.
Akoni calls it “boy talk.”
Boat opera on the bay.

Pirate Knife Mike, I am told,
used to stand naked outside his boat
and proclaim “I’m King of the Bay!”

Captain Bill is the only smart one.
He speaks to no one.

Melissa the Cat
turned into a boat rat,
but is not yet too happy
on the vessel.
Akoni covered up her cubby hiding holes,
so in case of emergency, we can find cat.
She’ll get used to it.
We’ve had more homes or no homes
than we can remember before in our lives.
Melissa found her way through an overlooked crevice.
Akoni chased her out with a vacuum cleaner
hooked up to a borrowed generator.
Me-roooowwwwwwwww!
Me-roooowwwwwwwww!
Boat opera on the bay.

Yippie Yap, the Dog gets carried on and off
Simon’s catamaran, like a brief case
with an orange life vest with a black fabric handle
on top of his back.

Don Fidel (Infidel, he shouts) Castro
asked for a tow.
No one wants him
too close to them.
Someone left a paperback
on the white park bench
near the dock where
The Boat People come ashore.
It’s title facing the bay
read “Basket Case.”
Castro borrowed it.
Boat opera on the bay.

Today I bought a hobo
cutlery set.
I don't know if it's a good thing,
a bad thing, a good time, or a bad time.
But when someone offers you a free
dirty old blanket,
you know you've hit rock bottom.

To-To says once we get settled,
we'll move the boat to desolate
federal Florida wetlands.
We'll live off the water and land.
He showed me the tree hut he built
years back, before he made the mistake
of returning to civilization.
Now I'm going back with him.
We'll be primitive, private pirates,
away from the
Boat opera on the bay.

Far, far away from the
Boat opera on the bay.

I watch the clock tower and dock,
as the sun rises on the bay.
I've always loved the natural beauty
of this island: its plants, manatees,
dolphins, fish and birds.

They used to let poor people
live and work here, but the
eleven years I've been back
and forth, all that's changed.
Boat opera on the bay.

With its higher taxes,
some of the original
fisher people and locals
still cling to their land
if they can.

But this land is no longer our land.
It belongs to the rich who can be so vicious.
The wealthy who tore down the quaint bungalows
and built monstrous, after monstrous
businesses and condos.

The rich who forced the poorest of the poor
onto the street, onto the bay, the
Boat opera on the bay.

They can't find workers
like they used to,
because hourly-waged people
can no longer afford to live and work
on the island.

Just as the original American Settlers
took over and slaughtered the Native Americans,
these New Settlers are now financially slaughtering
the long-time locals of any land they want to overtake,
creating constant displacement of the vulnerable.

The developers backed the Mayor's campaign
with his photo and name posted everywhere
saying to vote for him,
Then he sold the island's soul
to the developers.

Some have been driven
off land to water.
Now the city is going to start
regulating and charging
for that water privilege.

Somehow, I suspect us poor folks
will not be able to afford
their mooring and docking fees
reserved for their rich friends.

But we can't go next door
to Sarasota, that's for sure.
Sarasota's been rated the meanest city
to homeless people in the entire United States of Money.
Not that I care to associate with them
any way (the meanies, I mean).

Perhaps we should just round up
all the physically, mentally and emotionally disabled,
the drug and alcohol addicted and any and all other
unproductive members of society and exterminate them all.
Boat opera on the bay.

Rather than worrying
what the politicians are luxurizing, spending
their tax dollars on, point at the poor instead.
When sometimes we're fortunate
enough just to have a loaf of bread.
The poor cleverly pitted against the poorer.
The middle class is just a delusion of those in denial.

To-To talks of prophecies,
of man destroying man,
and nature destroying man,
and says, man the time
is happening now.
Boat opera on the bay.

At starlight, the boat rocks me
like a baby.
There's no luxuries here,
but I have To-To to protect me,
and Melissa the Cat
to curse me for life.
Boat opera on the bay.

My dearly departed mother always
told me I'd never have a pot.
Akoni and I have one now, on our boat.

Fishers say there's sharks out in the bay,
but I've only seen them on the land.
They call themselves realtors.

At night, I lie in bed and open the hatch
above my head to watch the stars.

If I sit up, I see the island,
the land that is no longer our land.

Wishful Thinking

We found these punks in the swamps of Georgia.
Hadn't seen punks since I was a kid in New Jersey.
We rode around with them in the back window
of the rental car all the way to Louisville, Kentucky.

The heat in the back seat made them bloom.
Oh, how pretty, I exclaimed, till we drove around
with the windows down with exploding punks
circulating throughout the car like snow
in a shaken toy snow globe (in the old days
when they really put a lot of fake snow in them).

We pulled over and blew and threw the punk snow
out of the car as best we could, laughing beyond wildly.
All the money in the world could never buy our stupid,
simple, fun times.

I want to spend the rest of my life on Raccoon Mountain.
Live and die with you on Raccoon Mountain.
I don't care if there's no raccoons on Raccoon Mountain.
I care only that you are there with me.

We'll sleep shivering in our small tent, clinging and chattering
next to each other as big RVs with big generators roar beside us.

Maybe black bear will visit us one night on Raccoon Mountain.
We'll spend the rest of our days on Raccoon Mountain.
We'll wish we were dead, though we can't live without each other.
Maybe someday black bear will find us, do us a favor and kill us instead.

But till then, I want to spend the rest of my life on Raccoon Mountain.
Live and die with you on Raccoon Mountain.
Live and die with you on Raccoon Mountain.

The sink
in the van don't work.

We sink
into the pull-out couch.

You are not
a robot.

I feel human.
It's humid.

Our fluids stick
to each other.

The sink don't work.
We brought no water.

We decide
to stick together

no matter what.

We lie together in bed, the first time like this in two years.
The dog feels displaced. I'm relaxed, limp, confident.
Hundreds of skulls from my home-made curtains stare at me
through empty eye sockets, some with snakes, peeking through.
You begin talking about how you believe your father escaped
his marriage by poisoning your mother and getting away with it.
We are no longer touching. You talk about how your father says
you can't accomplish anything, that you're crazy and that I'm
a crazy witch. Every conversation, every action leads
to your father. We can't even keep him out of my bedroom.

The alligator blends in perfectly with the swampy waters.
Her midsection stuck, like me, on a log, she stares
with her bulging, blackish-brown eyes at the lost-in-time,
run-down trailer park, you and I live in.

We've known each other for five years.
We've lived in a boat, apartments, and apart.
We are now here at Morgan's Fish Camp
where I've never seen a fish camping.

At my friends' trailer, she asked why you broke
your word to her to marry me. You explained
you were only a guest in my life. A week later,
the non-paying guest of five-years checked-out.

I walked along
the swamp, after you left
and saw a hollow turtle.

American Values

At the plastination museum, the exhibit reflected,
for what else is a dead man to do? "I remember
the knock of my father's knuckles against
my mother's numbness. I hear it every time
a patron drops an item on these hard wood floors, buffed
beyond nakedness. I once had a family: a wife,
daughter and son, until I became my father's clone.
They ran away from me. Now I stand posed, running
at the science museum. No one claimed me.
A spectacle. Made in China."

The mechanic prays to Jesus
for vehicles to break down.
There's more crucifixes in his office
than in a Roman Catholic church.
Some guy waiting next to me,
dressed in linen and wearing
designer sandals, is picking his toes
like a gorilla. I step outside
to get some un-fresh air where
customers are inhaling, stunting
their growth. Back inside, I say
to the mechanic, "You're so busy
today". He says, "Thank God,"
and makes the Sign of the Cross.
He tells me he found three things
wrong with my car. Must be:
One for The Father,
One for The Son,
One for The Holy Ghost:
The Spirit of Truth.

I'm not prejudiced, but
words of hate spew from my mouth
like lava erupting from a volcano.

I'm not prejudiced, but
when your black babies die in a fire,
I feel less sympathy than if they were white.

I'm not prejudiced, but
when I see you, I see food stamps, welfare,
guns, knives, violence, rats, roaches, crack,
vials, foil, heroin, syringes, sawed-off, rusted
metal poles that used to be swings, broken bottles
scattered around broken tar, a little girl lamenting,
"This used to be our playground but they took it away."

I'm not prejudiced, but
when I see you I see a beat up old car, a laborer,
if you work at all, a purse snatcher, a rapist
an illiterate

I'm not prejudiced, but
I am

the Caucasian who avoided the African American neighborhoods
and stuck with my own while the local town paper informed us
that all the crimes were being committed by all the black folks
and all the white folks could do no wrong.

Is Tinky Winky Gay, as Jerry Falwell stated, or is he a gender-bender “gender queer individual” in a tutu as Transsexual.org insists? Perhaps he is a prostitute and he’ll be whoever you want him to be. By the way, what’s in that red purse magic bag of his anyway? Is it a vibrator, ladies’ lingerie or perhaps a crack pipe?

Given that some thought, what was Jack’s beanstalk really all about? And what was with those three little pigs: a manage-a-trois? What did those bears really do to Goldilocks? What about Puss in Boots and Mother Goose?

Congratulations!

I'm an official American. I've been
fired, bankrupt and divorced. I've
consumed,
consumed,
consumed,
myself into a vacuum,
with visions of QVC
dancing in my head.

What do you know about work?"
the man with the commercial van
asked me as he spat near my feet.

"Here. Here's a quarter towards
your next quart." He flung the coin
on the ground near my sneakers.

My rental foreclosed without notice.
My landlord left not a clue.
I was out on the streets, my mattress too.

I've got these clothes in my backpack.
Not much time to make much choices
with the Sheriff standing there like overlord.

My wide-brimmed hat keeps my skin
from frying like plantains on the pavement.
My clothes need to be cleaned by the ocean tide.

I know a lot about work. I've done it thirty years.
Lost my job, husband, house, car, clothing.
I lost it all but kept finding more work.

Built myself up into an apartment until
the Sheriff said "Foreclosed.
You've got fifteen minutes to get out."

That's what I know about work.

Sandy wants an instant man
to pull out of her purse or pocket
whenever she needs or wants him.

(He'll hardly be spending
much time in her purse or pocket.)

She says she'll call him Cabana Boy.
I call him Instant Man.

I remind her she had an Instant man
for twenty-one years
and she was lucky to have him.

He's dead now
and the odds are slim
she'll find another.

She says "I'm going to find me one,"
as she puts on her best dress and goes
stepping out to the lonely, local bars.

Cicada
Cicadas
Cicadas
Cicadas
Cicadas
Cicadas
Cicadas
Cicadas
Cicadas
Cicadas

Enough
of the
cicadas
already.

To marry, or not to marry: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
the slings and arrows of an outrageous husband,
or to take arms against a sea of infidelities,
and by opposing, to end ourselves? To die: to sleep;
no more; and by a sleep to say we end,
we divorce, we kill ourselves, or they us.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of marriage,
the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's insensitivity,
the pangs of despised love, the law's delay in
issuing a restraining order, until we are murdered.
We sleep. Hopefully we do not dream.

Flattened like a belt,
an albino python in the gutter.
Her freedom brought her death.

Squirrels, lizards, frogs
scuttle across the tar,
make it to the other side.

Turtles take their time.
Empty beer bottle placed
beside roadkill racoon's mouth.

Toxic mobile vehicle takes me
past where trees and natural
foliage used to be wildlife.

I pull into Wal-Mart to buy a scarf
made by a little girl in a sweat shop
in Guatamala for five cents a week.

Mrs. Costello slowly slips up the blind blade.
She gazes as her neighbor is grenaded.
Relived, she lets the blade drop down
and returns to watching reruns on TV.
“At least it wasn’t me.”
This time.

I applied for this government job titled Poor People Purger. Good benefits, I was told. Sweep the poor off the street, like trash. They gave me this big garbage truck with a poor people smasher in the back. Twice a week, the driver would ride us up and down the downtown streets. I'd shoot a tranquilizer dart into the black, brown and white trash and throw them into the back of the truck. We used to round up at least 500 a week: poor, welfare, disabled, alcohol or drug-addicted vermin and rid the streets of them. Then they cut back our benefits. We grew lax and only rounded up perhaps 250 a week, some weeks only 100. One day, I accidentally picked up the Code Enforcement Officer. The City fired me. I've been hiding from that truck driver ever since.

Bogus Saint Valentine.
Created by commercialism.
Perpetuated by sentiment.
Courtshipped by loneliness or argument.
Worshipped by consumerism.
Valentine, you are a fraud.
Your promises, if any, only last a day.
Your chocolates melt and your roses fade.
So many you've ignored.
Creator of contests for women to play.
Who got the most costly gift on your day?
Who got nothing but tears?
Valentine, you are a hallmark of shame
to those who don't get to say your name
on your day of dears.

You can afford a two-day stay at the Peter Pan Motel eating cheap can chili while watching TV. Drapes torn and faded. Vibrating bed unmade. Outside, cars arrive and depart every hour. No maid service in-between. Yellowed lampshade. Kellogg's corn flakes and milk your only other food. Pabst Blue Ribbon in the small fridge. Tarnished memories in your head.

Crack or meth is best in a place like this: cheap can chili in a cheap motel efficiency. Time to call the dealer.

Did Virgil the cage cleaner really dissect live animals in pharmaceutical labs after the researchers were through torturing them? Did you really watch him?

What do you see when you're so stoned that you see nothing?
Time to call the drug dealer. Would you like some opium?

Remember Bim's Bar? He'd keep his door wide open to let the regulars in? Jim would sit in his boxers late at night with the lights on right across the street for us to see. Not a pretty sight.

Bim OD'd. You plan on staying with us for a while?

Green and brown, slimy, scaly, stinky BP
monster emerges from the Gulf of Mexico.

She finds a twenty dollar bill on the sand
and blows her nose with it.

Horribly ugly, fearsome, loathsome
red-tide, BP monster finds a lottery ticket.

She walks to the Circle Eleven to validate
the ticket, only to find she's a millionaire.

Now everyone loves the monster,
loves the monster.

Man standing in front of the dollar store
asking for quarters, hoping for more.

People look at him as though he was born from
a snake, as though he was God's worst mistake.

No one wants him near their person or property
for fear they might catch his poverty.

Once he's collected a dollar's sum, he heads
across the street to buy a lottery ticket

from the shop owner who speaks money
in every language.

Lone cabbage palm stood on a mound of Florida sand.
Above the tree, the squared-concrete streetlight pole rose.
Its neighbor, a green-capped, yellow fire hydrant
protected by three hollow-metal, chipped-painted poles.

Crushed, empty cans of Natural Ice Beer and Mountain Dew strewn
amongst the fallen, dead palm leaves scattered among the heap.
Wrigley Orbit gum wrappers and a fuchsia-pink thong tossed along
Subway and Wendy's empty soda cups and used Trojan condoms.

An empty brown glass Budweiser bottle label carefully removed,
red Marlboro and Blue Pall Mall empty boxes of cigarettes,
floor tile, roof tile, dog poop of various sizes and freshness
black snake curled up and rested in an empty pizza box.

They came with shovels like grave-diggers
to remove the tree feral.
They hurled the cans, bottles, wrappers and rubbers
to free its pearl.

The tree people removed its glorious afro, root ball at the CrimeLine
sign and transplanted it to Disney World.

I'm walking my dog.
She's black and white.
So is my neighborhood.

A boy rides by
on a bicycle
pointing a lonely,
shiny, silver gun
straight ahead
towards the future.

I say, "Hi."
He says, "Hi."

One would think
this neighborhood
were surrounded
by barbed-wire fence
to keep outsiders out.

Yet flowers blossom here
just like anywhere else.

Two geese

making
silly goose
noises

in a
backyard

unaware
they live
in a slum.

When white, coconut-covered chocolate donuts lose their allure.
When butter-cream-filled powdered donuts don't do it anymore.
When life becomes little plastic containers with child-proof lids
for the child you never had, full of blue, white and cream-colored pills.
Birds, trees, ocean waves, bay, river, raccoons, snakes, sea gulls
and Geckos become invisible, except for the Government Employees
Insurance Company Logo. Sunrises are Good Morning America.
Sunsets become reality programs. And donuts just don't matter anymore.

Elegy to Satan's Angels.
Born without sin and land
in Devil's Land
where every Devil's Angel
is terrible. No heart.

The old lover hears
voices, voices,
runs to Satan's alter,
gives his blood and soul
in exchange for a life
from the cold, a warm bed.

Sleeping, dying,
once loved,
now hated.

Monstrous Satanic Angels
make all the calls.

Every hidden murderer
will be uncovered.

Vagrants transitory
by circumstance,
die by circumstance.

Heroes of self-hatred
and loathing of all life.

Troubled things,
it's a splendid day to die,
to be among the heated,
blasted hell's fire of
the stars.

Pyramids and graves,
the animals and beast Satan
are free.

Destiny is to be
face to face
with Lucifer.

Holy transient finds God.
Others trust the Devil
for their rescue
with his invisible,
bloodless heart.

Invisible,
like the victims
of war.

Son of Satan
and his grim
misunderstanding.

His affirmative
Angles kneeling.
Nights of grieving.
They are alive
in tent camp
cities of pain.

Satan's Angels
trample, leave
no trace of life.

Church closed
on Monday.
Priest rubs his crotch
as he counts the till.

No lament.

We used to be poor
scars of the stars.

Princes of extermination.

New stars.
New hells
of sorrows.

Mother lovers
live in the mountains
of evil reign.

The Devil's Angels
rising emotionless.

Devil's ring calls.

I break accidentally like fine china
in a specialty store by an ashamed
customer trying to hide her mistake,
kicking the pieces under the counter
and walking away as though it never
happened.

Sometimes, I am earthenware, where
I cannot hold my water and cry.

Other times, I am stoneware
and do not shed a tear.

Sometimes, I am glass and snap
and shatter all over the place.

Other times, I am paper,
discarded like trash.

But oftentimes, I retrieve myself
and stay together like a lid stuck in
suction on a steaming pot

till the next time I come apart.

I have the eyes of a snake
always staring straight forward.
I have the eyes of a snake
always seeing, never closing.

I have the heart of a snake
cold, cold, cold.
I have the heart of a snake,
dragging along on a dirt road.

I have the scales of a snake
shedding the old.
I have the jaws of a snake
unlatch and take hold
swallow you whole,
my fangs releasing
their venom.

I have the eyes of a snake
they never cry.
I have the eyes of a snake
my s-shaped body
moving forward today
never looking back.

Sunday noon at the VFW Hall,
black blasting Harleys fall in line
in the dry dusty dirt parking lot.
Men and women in their sixties
leathered-up for Biker Bingo.

Back then, bombed them back Into the Stone Age in
North Viet Nam: napalm, guerillas, civilians and US
Soldiers exposed to Agent Orange by Ranch Hands.

Female Nurses cleaned up bodies, tossed the debris.
Dead limbs, stray dogs ate. Children burned.

Sunday 1:00 pm at the VFW, Harley Hell.
Choppers loud as copters.

Parking lot dirt-cloud haze creates flash
backs

BINGO!

The \$100 pot goes to the man
with the Jolly Roger bandana.

Used to cost Caesar five bucks
for a nickel of pot.

Now the \$100 will pay for five
crack rocks.

Cindi nurses part-time at the VA Hospital.
She's stayed with Caesar all these years.

He collects horrific memories and disability
from his distant Uncle Sam.

When they were kids, they played tree fort,
rode bicycles, read Bazooka Joe comics
trying to figure out what was so funny.

In Nam, they stayed sane on LSD and occasional
letters from home.

Home on an oak tree they carved
with a knife:
Caesar and Cindi
True Love Forever.

In Nam, Cindi sliced open
Caesar's and other's flesh
to removed metals, shrapnel.

Cindi was the first girl on the block
to ride a Harley, to get a tattoo
of a broken black heart after
Caesar fucked Carole.

Cindi flushed Carole's head
in the high school toilet bowl.
Now they're older and laugh
in between Carole's coughing
from smoking while she still
bartends at the VFW Hall.

If it's not BINGO, it's reruns of war
in Caesar's head.

Time does not forget nor forgive,
but a helmetless ride on a Harley
is a sure bet to free the mind
from land mines.

Sunday 5 pm at the VFW Bingo Hall.
Flash mob. Ten Florida non-member
teenagers rush Veterans' Hall. Big
mistake. Twenty veterans, ten teens,
all packing heat. Massacre at
the VFW Biker Bingo Hall.

Death. Just like the old days.
Veterans dead from gunfire.
Veterans in domestic war.

Cindi and Caesar saw men, women,
children suffer in Nam. Now men,
women, children suffer at home.

No jobs. No love. No hope.
So enlist in a mob or a gang instead.
Apartment buildings, houses foreclosing
People living in their vehicles, the streets,
the woods, then arrested for “camping”

Cindi gave Caesar CPR. Looked
into his torn-open chest and saw
his purple heart.

Placed her leather motorcycle jacket
across his head and chest.

Shot the boy who killed her man.
Shot at all of them. Shot them down.

As she fell, she kept shooting
till the end.

The man with the Marine backpack
rarely spoke, except of Mozart.
He received free cups of cherry
freezies, along with rubbery
hot dogs from the Circle Eleven
next to his home: the tree.

The local lady hated
him living next to her trailer
and had the cops evict him.
He took his backpack and walked
away wearing earphones
while conducting his symphony.

She rides past Joyland, the country-music dance hall that used to be her Mamma's barn. She peers through the window to see the dance floor where bales of hay used to lay and Dwayne first kissed her.

Rain rolls off her cracker cowgirl hat, onto her poncho. No longer cotton, her black bandanna is made of silk. The gator she wrestled years ago became the boots she still wears to protect her from the snakes.

She sold The Double D Ranch. It's now downtown. She gallops into Pruitt's Drug Store on her steel horse, the wheelchair, with her bullwhip and service doggie to rustle up some Vicodin.

*“Why?” Anthony Blakely, Victim
Jacksonville.com, May 7 2010*

Star light, star bright, the last star I will see
tonight. Jacksonville will still always be
my home. I was the DJ at the Starlite Café.
I played rock, reggae and requests. I looked at
everyone. I loved to get them dancing and see
them hugging. I made friends with Leon,
a popular guy. One night, outside, he argued
with me, said I looked at his girlfriend, wouldn't
play her request: a contradiction to me. He beat
me that night. I crawled a few blocks away
and passed out. When I woke up, my eyeballs
were sitting on my cheeks, my right ear sliced off.
A good Samaritan found me and phoned 911.
Leon received two life sentences:
one for each eye sliced out.

While stopped at a traffic light, a gang of boys slowly crosses the street and circles the car. One boy sticks his head inside the driver window and shouts to Marnie, "Guess what? I fucked your mother last night." The rest of the boys laugh and continue across the street. Marnie and Margo, her passenger, stunned, turn to look at each other, then burst into hysterics. They drive off when the light turns green. There's stand-still traffic on Myrtle Avenue. Margo sings "I Wanna Be Sedated" along with a Ramones CD. A young man on a cell phone stands on the sidewalk, next to their stopped 1970 Nova. He yells into the phone, "How about I stick my dick in the phone and cum in your ear. Will you hear me then?" Marnie and Margo desperately try to keep straight faces, but begin laughing again. "I can't believe you ate eight eggs for breakfast," Marnie says as the traffic moves. "Oh, so the horse is on the other foot now," Margo replies, "I can't believe you bought an eight ball." "If the shoe fits, snort it," Marnie laughed. She pulls the car into their apartment driveway. Marnie and Margo walked past the multi-colored graffiti on the building's walls. "God, I love this town," Marnie says as she stomps on an empty Budweiser beer can and kicks it, making believe it was one of the boy's heads.

Babies born in factories are laid out onto conveyor belts, microchipped in their skulls and branded on their right forearms with their government-assigned numbers for life. Their Country is their parent and will always be their owner. Love has become a lost art. It does not even have to be banned or outlawed, because now desire is lost. TV's, computers, and cell phones numb their brains and emotions. America's citizens do not complain. We've lost our hearts.

I warned you Auntie Freeze and Uncle Warm
couldn't get along, but still you broke
my purple heart. I thought I was so tough
and strong, but still you broke
my bold, cold heart.

I want to be rich and famous
so everyone can kiss my ass
I want to live in a trailer-
shaped mansion next door
to Paris Hilton I want to
be white trash with no
class and a thousand
genuine Don Featherstone
pink flamingoes on my lawn
and a fake Louis Vuitton
vinyl handbag jam-packed-
stuffed with brand new
thousand-dollar bills that smell
like dead soldiers, oil-coated
marine life, the sweat of laborers,
alcohol-torn livers,
nicotine-infested lungs,
stale, abandoned foreclosed
houses formerly known as homes,
landfills of rotted leftovers
and yesterday's discarded fads.

Knock. Knock.
Who's there?
Oh no! It's To-To.

The End

Works Cited

- ACLU.org. "Domestic Violence and Homelessness." 17 April 2011 <<http://www.aclu.org/pdfs/dvhomelessness032106.pdf>>.
- Anonymous. Friedler, Sorelle. "World War II Poetry." 9 April 2011 <<http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/04/sorelle/poetry/wwii/poetry.html>>.
- Aristotle. The Internet Classics Archive. "Poetics by Aristotle." Trans. S. H. Butcher. 18 April 2011 <<http://classics.mit.edu//Aristotle/poetics.html>>.
- Babus, Antal. "Radnóti Miklós". Trans. Tamás Sajó. Chronology. Exhibition of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. 5 May – 5 June 2009. 1 May 2011. <<http://radnoti.mtak.hu/en/01.htm>>.
- Celan, Paul. "Death Fugue." Trans. Jerome Rothenberg. Poets.org. 9 April 2011 <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16961>>.
- Celan, Paul. Poets.org. 9 April 2011 <<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/316>>.
- Doubiago, Sharon. "Poems by Sharon Doubiago." 17 April 2011 <<http://www.bigbridge.org/BW-DOU.HTM>>.
- Gyôzô. "Radnóti Miklós." Trans. Tamás Sajó. Biography. Exhibition of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. 5 May – 5 June 2009. 1 May 2011. <<http://radnoti.mtak.hu/en/02.htm>>.
- Hughes, Langston. "Let America Be America Again." Poets.org. 18 April 2011 <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15609>>.
- Ives, Burle. "We Saw The Sea." Navy Song Book, NAVPERS 15047-A. United States Government, Bureau of Naval Personnel Special Services Division Music Branch, 1958.
- Johnson, Dave. "Budget Cuts Kill The Middle Class." The Huffington Post. 4 April 11. 18 April 2011 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dave-johnson/budget-cuts-kill-the-middle-class_844807.html>.
- Levine, Philip. What Work Is. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.
- Metraux PhD, Stephen, Caterina G. Roman PhD, Richard S. Cho PhD. "Incaration and Homelessness." Toward Understanding Homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research. 19 April 2011 <<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/metraux/index.htm>>.
- Montoya, Andrés. the iceworker sings and other poems. Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 1999.
- National Coalition for the Homeless. "How Many People Experience Homelessness?" 17 April 2011 <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/How_Many.html>.
- National Coalition for the Homeless. "Who is Homeless?" 17 April 2011 <<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/who.html>>.
- Plath, Sylvia. Ariel. New York. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2004.

- Plath, Sylvia. "Mary's Song." Famous Poets and Poems . com. 9 April 2011 <http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/sylvia_plath/poems/18934.html>.
- Poets.org. "A Brief Guide to Confessional Poetry." 17 April 2011 <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5650>>.
- Poets.org. "Poems about Work and Money." 10 May 2010 <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5881>>.
- Radnóti, Miklós. "Razglednica. (4)" Bor Notebook. Trans. Emery George. Exhibition of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. 5 May – 5 June 2009. 1 May 2011 <<http://radnoti.mtak.hu/en/04-16.htm>>.
- Roberts, Brandon, Deborah Povich, Mark Mather. "Great Recession Hit Hard at America's Working Poor: Nearly 1 in 3 Working Families in United States are Low-Income." The Working Poor Families Project. Winter 2010-2011. 17 April 2011 <<http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/pdfs/policybrief-winter2011.pdf>>.
- Sherman, Richard M. and Robert B. "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." allmusicals.com. Musical: Mary Poppins / Song: Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." 18 April 2011 <<http://www.allmusicals.com/lyrics/marypoppins/supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.htm>>.
- Szyborska, Wislawa. Trans. Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak. "Photograph from September 11." Poetry Foundation. 2 May 2011 <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/178603>>.
- TheSeaShanty.net. work songs of the sea. 11 May 2011 <<http://theseashanty.net/>>.
- Williams, Wiliam Carlos. "The Red Wheelbarrow". Poets.org. 19 April 2011 <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15537>>.

Vita

Stephanie (Stevie) Cenko received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of South Florida in 2002. She is about to graduate and receive her Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing from the University of El Paso's online program. She's resided in Florida for about the past fifteen years.

Permanent address: 4059 Picciola Road, Lot 15
Fruitland Park, FL 34732

This thesis was typed by Stephanie Cenko.