Writing Samples for Marjorie L. Skelly

In this file, you will be able to read short stories, poetry, and one essay. These writing samples

may have been slightly revised since they were published. To read business related articles,

please see the second file.

Short Stories from *The Unpublished Poet: On Not Giving up On Your Dream*, a collection of

short stories, essays, and poetry, In Extenso Press, 2015. The book was endorsed by former

Poet Laureate of Indiana, Norbert Krapf. Sample Number One: Surrealism

\*\*\*

“Standing in the Dark with my Family” was given finalist status three times for writing contests with *Glimmer Train*. One of those three times it made it to the final cut, the top five percent of over 1,000 submissions. The story evolved over its span of time of being submitted, so each submission usually represented a revision, and hopefully an improvement over, the former submission. Eventually it was published in *The Unpublished Poet*.

Standing in the Dark with my Family

The Dream

Twilight invades my house despite the early hour, through window panes etched with frost, through angled slats in half-closed blinds and the thread-thin cracks between the door and its frame. I have to go. Maggie will be fine. She’s napping in her crib. She will be fine. I lock the door behind me, burying this nagging sense that I should stay. Well, I have no choice.

I run the first block, then the next. After a minute, an hour, a year, I am where I am going, my heartbeat a drum-beat in my ears, a thrum-beat, a metronome keeping time to the clock I know is ticking. Any second Maggie will wake, climb out of bed, tumble to the floor and…I run faster.

Once I finally push through the spotlessly clean glass doors of a bland office building, I see my fast-moving reflection in the glass. I’m a wreck-- my cheeks ruddy and blotched, my long red hair emitting something akin to a corona, my psyche filtering through my abnormally erect body which now postures itself in preparation for a coronary.

No matter. I’m here to interview a babysitter for my daughter, a woman with excellent references. I talk to a man first who greets me at the glass doors. He says he will direct me to this woman. I see her in her small cubicle and note that she has a short black bob so unlike the chaos of my bright hair now dripping with sweat.

The man walks back to his cubicle, and I walk over to the woman's cubicle and sit across from her as if I will interview her. Another woman, as faceless as I sense I have become, sits next to the woman with the short black hair. Is she this woman’s sidekick, or is she too striving to get a babysitter? Each clicking second of time cries out to me to grasp its elusive nature with both of my hands.

I try to talk with the woman with the short black hair, but she is busy. I force myself to take notes, but I don’t know why. In the process of jotting things down, I decide to write an article about this organization, one for which I used to do freelance writing. While taking notes, I discover my favorable impressions of the place, my good memories of the past.

Still, I cannot get information about the black-haired woman. She’s too distracted, enmeshed in her work. I walk to the man's cubicle and ask him to check out her personnel file for me. He proceeds with my wishes, and every second feels like a minute, every minute an hour.

File doors open and close. The black-haired woman looks so efficient that she could be at a business meeting with one person, herself. My hope is that if I can get her attention, she will be as present for me as I would be for her. The man returns with a folder holding documentation that the black-haired woman has excellent credentials.

I continue taking notes and realize I have the makings of a good article that I did not plan on writing. I came here for one purpose, now slowly morphing into another. The black-haired woman smiles at me with forced patience in her eyes. Our eye contact feels as brief as the kiss my husband gives me at 6:00 a.m., the workday already on his lips, one hand opening the door to a world he does not want to enter.

I keep looking at the woman frantically, then avert my eyes and see that business is as usual here: fast-paced, focused, oblivious to anything that does not appear on a computer screen. I try to swallow my agenda but choke on it instead.

My eyes turn to the black-haired woman again. Never have I seen such precision. Flawless black hair, not a strand of gray. Her red lipstick is smooth, moist, and shows no sign of disappearing. Each one of her eyelashes is distinctly separated from the others, and none of her mascara is caked. In fact, it looks as though it was put on five minutes ago. Her eye shadow is deep lavender, in perfect harmony with the white of her face. Plucked eyebrows. No freckles, no age spots. Just costume skin she must have applied to her face right before she did her eyes.

My eyes move to the perfect angles of her face that end in a square jaw line. Then, the white neck adorned by the elegance of a motion-less silver necklace hanging over the symmetrical beginnings of cleavage. Large breasts, but not excessively large. I am stilled, motionless in my gaze.

I can’t bear to let my eyes rest on her breasts and surely not her small waist. Instead, I find myself looking at one of her wrists where a silver watch gleams so intensely that I want to shut my eyes. Her watch has no second hand, not even a minute hand--no concern for time gone by in small doses.

Time runs out. My eyes drop to her feet at home in a five-hundred dollar pair of shoes that match her lavender suit with business like precision. My heart races: where is my clarity?

Now, I remember Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, her fatalism as she looks at the last few grains of sand slipping through the hour glass, knowing that she will die once the last grain of sand slips through unless she is rescued. I give up on time, give up on getting the information I need.

Shortly, after I dash out the glass door, I pretend that my harsh departure rattled the glass enough to break it into tiny pieces. This provides a measure of comfort when all the notes I have taken dissolve into thin dripping black ink that becomes a small river that trickles through my shoulder bag and begins to seep onto my unshaven legs. Everything adds up to the accuracy of a bank statement: I should not have left Maggie. I am a bad mother.

Now I must go through an obstacle course to get home to Maggie. I am agile. I race through hills and valleys and deal with bramble bleeding the life out of my legs, my sanity temporarily saved by the pungent pleasures emanating from raspberries and roses in a garden I don't have the time to enter.

I start climbing a hill when I spot a band of Eastern European people sometimes moving as slowly as molasses poured from jar to baking dish. They look like caricatures of ethnicity the closer I get to them. The women wear long black and red skirts and white blouses with puffed up sleeves and dance in a single row, their bodies stick-straight, polished black heels adorning their invariably small feet. Their necks and wrists are almost impossible to see through the silver and gold necklaces and shimmering ruby bracelets. The men look as stiff as starched shirts from the waist up and wear perfectly ironed black pants and shiny black shoes. All of them are playing violins and occasionally exchange tentative flirtatious smiles and eye contact with the women.

Once the women stop dancing and the men playing the violin, they become lethargic and stand in two rows—one for women, the other for men. Unblinking eyes stare at me from faces still as mannequins. I cannot get past their uniformity, their solid stance on the hill. I keep running, almost stepping on their heels, breathing on their backs. I want to shove them out of my way, but instead politely discharge them from my presence with a flick of my hand. Soon, the sand will be stilled in the hour glass. I must get home.

I run uphill, downhill; next I catapult myself across a river. I should not have left Maggie, plain and simple. My running becomes frantic, insane, super human, and yet I still cannot run fast enough. I am also a robot, partially programmed to slow down but incapable of doing so. Zombie-like, I reach out for protection amidst ill-marked paths---no left, no right; no north, no south--just a continuous aimless circle. Silent children stand near me, and only some of them have faces. Seeing how stationery they remain, I run with magic and terror in my feet over a landscape I am seeing for the first time.

Finally, I sense my house appearing as if through a fog. I squint my eyes in the hope that I will see something familiar and safe. No more than an hour has passed since I left, so I try to comfort myself, knowing that Maggie almost always naps for two hours. A new, more debilitating terror lodges itself in my un-waking body: I have been running for miles, for years.

Apprehension, sweat, conviction. Jailed for involuntary child abuse. I cannot recognize my own house. Everything is white and bland. Before I can see the evidence, I know that someone broke in. I see hallways with all the doors open, their hastily discarded locks on the floor.

My house has been turned upside down and me with it, and I know someone is standing in the hallway before I see him. A man’s head is sticking to the ceiling, dark eyes that invade my hazel ones, both of our legs dangling uselessly as if we had been hung.

Shadow. Judgment. My father. When he comes into better focus--“standing” next to an open door, not quite blocking it--I see he wears a wrist watch with thick human black hair glued to the places where his watch ends and his skin begins. Motionless in his business suit, he looks more like an artifact than a human.

“It doesn’t look good,” his monotone voice and strict face announce.

“What is it?” I ask.

“There’s a baby in there,” he presses on with an edge of despair. He could be referring to Maggie although she is a toddler and not a baby. “She is covered with blood.” His voice flattens to that of a newspaper reporter, a small glimpse of necessary sympathy in his eyes.

My father then fades away from me, returning to the fog I tried to see through in

order to get home. The moment he fully disappears, I am struck with the desire to give my

husband dark red roses, but then I see my father replaced with three Secret Service men,

all of them seven feet tall with Nazi smiles pasted on to their white lips. Puppet eyeballs

begin to extend from their faces as I fix my gaze on them. They stand in front of a gate far

shorter than they are. Once I look down to their combined six feet, I see they have all been

stuffed into one large shining black patent leather boot. They are both dead and alive to me as

they wink at me from the dangling sockets of doll eyes. I close my own eyes for a second.

When I open them, their eyes return to their sockets as their barbaric smiles grow larger, showing

huge polished white teeth.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Bells from beautiful ancient clocks with ornate carvings of dragons meshed into cherry wood begin their sonorous announcement of a new hour of the day. I slither with the efficiency of a long black snake out of the clock and onto the comforter on my bed.

Finally awakening to the shadow of the house I call my own, I gently rock my husband Jack's shoulders back and forth but cannot hide the urgency in my voice. Soon after he wakes up, I learn that he too had a startling dream. We talk. In his dream, we are spiders though our bodies have human forms. We are at his parents’ house having sex when his father lifts up the blanket we are underneath to make sure that his son is not having sex with me in *his* house, in *his* bedroom. It makes no difference that we are married.

I am the male spider, Jack the female spider. I am aggressive. Jack likes this and wants to have sex with me but can’t. I am replaced by another sexless male spider, a good spider that does not have sex. Jack warns his father that I can easily crawl back as spiders can slip underneath locked doors.

We crawl back into the net of each other’s arms and laugh at the absurdity of

spiders, at the slow band of Eastern Europeans blocking my way. We laugh at the danger

of the large numerals 4:15 a.m. on the face of the alarm clock. Danger in my nightgown that I pulled above my waist before I fell asleep.

I walk with unfounded trepidation into Maggie’s room and listen to her quiet, steady breathing, the un-fitful dream sleep of a child lost in timelessness. She does not yet toss in and out of terror as I stand there in the dark, looking at her, envying her safety in the twilight of my own crossing over between dreaming and wakefulness.

Perhaps I appear as a shadow in her dreams as I walk barefoot in and out of her bedroom, a guest in my own home still looking for something as precise as the woman with the black bob; for an hour glass holding precious time, not permitting the sand to slip through it.

I run my hand across Maggie’s forehead, check for a fever, kiss her unblemished skin. She stirs briefly as I close her bedroom door behind me. I feel the whisper of her breath as I stand silently for an unhurried moment, alert as a sentinel, before I return to bed, still eyeing the closed door. Surely, it might swing open before dawn takes its time to grace my family with another day.

\*\*\*

Sample Number 2: Realism—“White Stars, Black Night” is a study in racism set in Chicago in the early 1990’s and is also published in *The Unpublished Poet*.

White Stars, Black Night

Alex and I are not paying Martin Luther King, Jr. his due today on his birthday. The accumulated exhaustion from our teaching jobs feels like a lame excuse. This is not the day to become lost in comfortable silence inside a cozy Chicago bar.

Knowing I should be elsewhere--a rally, a museum, or reading a book about King’s life

--I now remember my senior year in high school in 1969 when I worked at Maryhaven, a nursing home in Glenview, a suburb north of Chicago. One of my co-workers, a pale blond teenager, was walking down the street with one of the Maryhaven cooks, a black man. She later told me that people were gaping at them-- revealing, not hiding, their surprise that pale and black went side by side. Now, over two decades later, I contemplate how long it has taken most of us to advance from gaping to anything approximating color blindness.

“So how was your day?” My voice startles me as it breaks through my private reverie.

“The usual. If the Chicago Board of Education makes one more mistake with my paycheck, I’ll scream! Working in a class filled with behavior development students isn’t hard enough. I also have to deal with Central Office bureaucrats just to get a paycheck. God, Annie, did I tell you about my most recent payroll nightmare? I tried calling Central first and let the phone ring 103 times. Can you believe I actually counted?”

“Yes, I’ve done that before.”

“Then I was put on hold for 20 minutes only to be told that the secretary was on

break. I was so pissed off that I drove down to Central to straighten the mess out.

There’s nothing like a face-to-face confrontation with a bureaucrat who cannot hide

behind a ringing phone. If you ask me, these people are on break all day!”

“See why I no longer work for the Chicago Board?”

“Yeah, but now your salary has been cut almost in half,” Alex reminds me.

“So has my psychiatry bill.”

I think of King again, remembering that he was only 39 when he died. What was it like

on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, when King was born? Had his parents suffered from

the Depression? Did they stare down at their newborn in a crib and have the faintest idea that he

was destined to win the Nobel Peace Prize? Or did they simply hold him in their arms?

I return to the present. Will I have children with Alex? Will they grow up suffering from

being raised in an interracial family? How much has really changed since 1968 when James Earl

Ray assassinated King?

Remembering important historical dates is not enough. I should do something to foster

racial equality. I wouldn’t worry about the future so much in my own quiet private world

if there still was not so much racial disparity in the loud public one.

In an ongoing lovely silence between Alex and me, I drift in and out of the past.

Looking around, I notice that all but a few bar stools are occupied by white men wearing drunk,

bored, and indifferent faces. Still, I catch myself. Who am I to judge white men in a bar?

Maybe they need to escape reality as much as I do. One of the few women, the most animated of

the group, looks hostile one moment and breaks into loud laughter the next as she drinks whiskey

and chain smokes. Asians, Whites, and Blacks sit at wooden tables, rarely appearing at the same

table. Thinking of King again, I ask Alex where he was on the day of his assassination.

“Is that question of the same ilk as where were you when Kennedy was killed?”

“I suppose so. But, hey, I’m giving you a break on your test of total recall since

1968 is more recent than 1963, and we both suffer from a little memory loss.”

“Hey, babe, don’t give me any of that memory loss stuff*. I’m* 39, and *you’re* 41.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, unable to hide my smile. Anyway, where *were* you, Mr. Memory

Recall?”

“You know I just can’t remember. No, seriously now, I was a sophomore in high

school in Memphis, Tennessee…”

“I didn’t know you lived in Memphis.”

“I did. Anyway, I was at home really sick in bed with a very high fever, watching

television because I was too sick to read. My mother offered me freshly squeezed orange

juice, her antidote for illness. I was watching *Leave it to Beaver*, and I remember that day as if it

were yesterday. I craved a piece of cake my mother offered me, but my throat hurt so badly that

I couldn't eat it.”

“C’mon now, Alex. You’re telling me you can remember craving cake on one particular

day 25 years ago?”

“I can because my mom's cake was always so delicious, so smooth, just the

right texture. Also, my mom only baked one kind of cake, chocolate with white frosting.

She had baked one that very day. I wanted that cake so badly, but my throat just would not

tolerate anything but juice.”

“I apologize. Go on.”

“Well, *Beaver* was interrupted by a news bulletin. I knew deep inside me that

something bad was coming since I had those same horrible jitters I had at track meets the

moment my feet flew from the starting line. I remember Walter Cronkite, his voice so somber.”

Now, I recall Cronkite, but on the day of President Kennedy’s assassination when he

removed his glasses, the one small tear in the corner of his eye.

“I remember the moment I saw Cronkite, I didn’t want to see him. Within seconds,

I knew King had been shot. My mother tripped over a chair and spilled all of the orange

juice on my lap. I remember the sticky, sweet smell. I remember my fever going up.

I remember…

Alex stops talking. The chain smoking woman at the bar is now facing him and has been

listening to him without his knowing it. I catch her face for a moment, trying to ensure that she

does not pick up on my observing her. She has lost the highs and lows of too much booze,

replacing them with something like compassion in her eyes. The jukebox is now playing

Kansas: **“**All we are is dust in the wind**.”**

Then, I see tears falling down her face—long fluid streaks turning black from her

mascara. She orders another whiskey to deal with her compassion. I see one tear on the

left cheekbone of Alex’s face and know that he would not choose to let it fall.

New jukebox lyrics distract us with Percy Sledge**: “**When a man loves a woman….**”**

This great Black voice drowns out bar talk, lingers as effortlessly as the moon

slipping behind a cloud in the sky, shining and fading in the great expanse of the cloud.

I respectfully turn my eyes away from Alex as he lowers his into his drink. I look

at the wooden bar again; it strikes me as substantial with its smooth mahogany shine.

Lemon dust polish mingles with scents of stale beer, secondary smoke, great French

fries, and barbecued chicken wings.

I order white wine for myself and notice a man at the bar who is significantly drunker

than the rest. He loudly orders the bartender to get him another Black Russian. When that

comes, he notes that the bartender has made him a White Russian.

“Take that silly-ass girl drink and throw it out,” he says to the thin Hispanic

bartender who wears his necessary poker-face as he correctly makes him a Black Russian.

I watch the man down the drink in about twenty seconds flat at which point he shouts

still louder, “Get it right this time, jackass! Give me a White Russian.”

The bartender returns to the drunk, the beginning of fear in his eyes, and hands him a

Black Russian. The drunk takes one look at it and yells, “Don’t you listen, you stupid Spic!

This time I wanted a White Russian.” Several White Russians are promptly served up.

Some barflies break out into nervous laughter while others take up floor watching.

We table sitters soon resume our table talk, secure in our distance from the bar.

“Maybe we should go home,” I suggest.

“I’ll finish my drink, and we’ll leave.”

I listen to the Beatles sing **“**Yesterday.” Then, Alex resumes his recollections: “When King died, a part of me died. I almost did die, physically that is. My fever shot up to 105 degrees, and I went to the hospital. So, where were you on that day?”

I hold Alex’s hand tightly in mine. “I was a junior in high school.” I pause a moment to listen to the Moody Blues sing “Once upon a time, in your wildest dreams.” Then, I start to speak but notice that the man drinking the White Russians is getting both louder and sicker looking. “I was watching television too,” I continue with one eye on the drunk. “I knew Chicago would be up for grabs now. On a personal level, I had been thinking about suicide long before King’s death.”

“You never told me that you were suicidal!” Alex cannot hide the alarm and love on his

face. “Why did you want to kill yourself?”

“I had acne, an inferiority complex, an indifferent father, a depressed mother,

hideous menstrual cramps…”

“A case of teenageritis?”

“Yeah. I also hated my red hair and warts.”

“Full of self-love, huh?”

I nod. “I won’t continue with the litany of my adolescent angst. Anyway, when I

heard the news, I was mad. I was furious. I wanted to live.” I suddenly become

frantically aware of my loud voice and the drunk, now standing near enough to hear me

talking. He eyes Alex and me as though we are a couple who would do well to live on

Pluto.

“Hey, bith,” he says, but I know he means bitch. “Hey,” he shouts, nearly falling

on top of me. “What time is it?”

“Time for you to go home,” I say with total sobriety. Why didn’t I just give the

man clock time?

“Hey, bitch,” he says, enunciating “bitch” with enormous effort. “Fuck you;

that’s not what I axed for.”

Alex stands up and puts his coat on. “It’s almost seven. My God, it’s late!”

“Hey, nigger, I’m talking to this girl, not you!”

Alex turns toward the exit sign, takes a few steps in that direction, then hesitates.

“Did I hear you right?” I shout at the man, knowing that I had.

“Ya’ betcha did, girlie! In case you didn’t, let me iterate it again. I don want no

nigger interruptin’ my conversation wit you!”

Sweat drips down my armpits as I rise to put on my coat. I imagine the drunk

seeing the sweat, delighting in it. Knowing I will choke on my own silence, I raise

my arm quickly, almost involuntarily, at the drunk. “Nobody calls my man a nigger.

Nobody. Nobody calls *any* man a nigger!” This voice of mine, where was it coming

from? I did not premeditate these words; they seemed to rise up from my own sweat.

The drunk sways back and forth for a few moments, looking to hold on to something, anything. Then, he cups one hand in his ear and says, “S’cuse me, Missy. I do believe I heard something you could not possibly be sayin’.”

“You heard me right!” I shout so loudly that the bartender turns his head and

glares at us. A couple of customers look up from their drinks, clearly interested in this

diversion from their own conversations.

I make my hand into a tight fist, my fingers digging into my palm. An inch from the

man’s nose, I hear one man cry out, “Go get him! He deserves it!” Then, I feel Alex’s hand

pushing my fist back to a near miss with my chin.

We both throw money on the table and run outside, catching a quick glimpse of the man falling to the floor without a single blow delivered to him. Little pools of saliva congregate on his lips and his wrinkled chin. I run forward and look backward simultaneously, still catching brief visual flashes of the inside of the bar.

The bartender looks understandably annoyed at what this scene might do for

business. A few people, scared like us, have left the premises. The woman at the bar looks as

though she will help the drunk to his feet but then walks away from him. Mainly the

conversations continue, and the drinks keep on coming.

Shocked by the cold, we run hand in hand, our grasp certain, ice and snow

underneath our feet. I am amazed by the sky and startled by how, even now, I can, in

the midst of terrible fear, conjure up imagery, knowing the origin of this imagery no

better than where my final words to the drunk came from.

Thick black velvet stitched together with needle points of vibrant white stars, an

immense black garment sheltering us all. Without this sky, the stars would refuse to

shine. Were it not for stars, the sky would live in eternity as only a testament to darkness.

We wait for a bus, any bus. Alex retreats into the safety of his head phones. Before he

abruptly turns away from me, I note his closed eyes. A seductive woman’s voice on the radio

repeatedly whispers tohim **“**Big boys don’t cry.**”** He turns down the volume, sensing I heard the

lyrics.

Finally, we board an empty bus, not knowing or caring where we are headed. After an hour or so, an elderly Black woman boards the bus and immediately collapses into the seat closest to the driver. She seems to instantly fall asleep though I note how carefully her hands cover the latch of her purse. Then, there is a long quiet of no boarding or exiting. Mainly the night becomes darker and darker while fresh snowflakes alight on the bus driver’s window. The gentle swishing back and forth of the windshield wipers sounds as effortless to me as a ticking clock. It may not matter where we go or the hour of the night.

Alex looks out the window, senses the menace and beauty of the full moon set like a diamond in the black sky. Finally, when his head falls gently on my shoulder, a tear drop drifts down his face and onto my neck before sleep envelops him so deeply that the sound of his head phones hitting the floor does not awaken him.

I sit up straighter and straighter each time the bus comes to a jerking halt, and I refuse to close my eyes. Rosa Parks didn’t. Like her, I never know when the hour will come.

In Memory of Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Listening to Mozart.” Creative Non-Fiction Essay. *The Village Rambler.* 2005, Chapel Hill, N.C. Also published in *The Unpublished Poet.*

Listening to Mozart

I get off the crowded Chicago bus and run through the snow, the exhaust fumes from the bus making it harder for me to breathe. Sweat drips down my back as I have on too many layers of winter clothing to be running in the cold. My pace quickens; my heart beats faster. I pump my way through city traffic and falling snow, wondering why I am so terrified of being five minutes late to your memorial service.

When I arrive, I discover I haven’t missed a thing. I gasp for breath while I remove layers of clothing and wipe snow off my hat and hair. I catch my reflection in a mirror; my face is dark red.

I immediately discover the wisdom in my concern about missing even a minute of the service. Because you were cremated, your body isn’t here. Instead, a huge bouquet of flowers reminds us of your life and death. There are no speeches, poems, canned organ music, or a minister who barely knew you, testifying to what a great person you were. Instead, we all humbly sit in hard-backed chairs to listen to Mozart for a half hour. “Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis.” (1) The Latin takes me out of the present, out of myself, into some shining perpetual light. No one seems ashamed to cry or wail, or not to. You are with us and without us in the Mozart.

I return a book you lent me to your sixteen-year-old daughter, Heather, and both of us laugh at the awkwardness of my gesture. She looks remarkably pretty in her wool dress and eye makeup. Perhaps composure is her way of responding to death.

“Recordare Jesu pie, quod sum causa tuae viae, ne me perdas illa die.” Remember, blessed Jesus, that I am the cause of thy pilgrimage; do not forsake me on that day. (1)

\* \* \*

Ovarian cancer. Dead at forty-six, eleven years older than I am. I remember the first time I met you: I was fourteen and you were my freshman English teacher. Students made fun of you because you left an entire set of our papers at the grocery store, failing to return them to us on time. One boy said that you wore a stupid gray dress with a red racing stripe down the middle of it. You heard all of this and more and were gracious enough to remain considerate of all students’ feelings. We complained about late papers and jeered at your red racing stripe, never bothering to see that you graduated from Harvard, that you were brilliant, that you were preparing us very well for college.

Twenty years passed with no contact between us. Then, by coincidence, we both ended up teaching English at the same college. When I called you, you eventually remembered me and said you felt like a dinosaur once you recalled when you had me in class. We saw each other occasionally and entered that gray area between acquaintances and friends. You were someone I wanted to know better.

\* \* \*

When I first heard of your cancer, I responded with phone calls, kindness, gifts, sensitivity. I tried to keep my own terror private and conjured up all sorts of “reasons” for your disease. You were teaching six classes at four colleges because you needed the money for you and Heather after your divorce. Therefore, you didn’t get enough sleep. You didn’t have a Pap smear for ten years. I heard my critical thoughts as if they came from the medical police.

Your former husband told you he would leave if you didn’t quit your full-time teaching job. You believed him, at least long enough to quit a job you really liked. I remember that by the time you quit, you were comfortable enough with your students to go out for coffee with them. I’ve pegged your ex-husband as a total jerk who thinks women shouldn’t have careers. If it weren’t for him, you might have had one full-time, not four part-time jobs. Am I mad at you for quitting? What if he really would have left you? Maybe his absence, at least then, would have been more painful than losing your job. Who am I to say? The horrible irony is that eventually you were without a husband *and* a full-time job.

Like a lot of other people, I’m taking a cause and effect approach to disease. By eliminating the cause, we can eliminate the effect. If I put each piece of the puzzle of the origins of cancer in the right place, I’ll get the complete picture, the answer to why you had cancer and I have health. I really cared about what happened to you and I think you knew this, but in hindsight I wonder if you somehow heard my thoughts.

You struggled with the discipline of maintaining a macrobiotic diet that was, at least, giving you more time and reducing your suffering. I ran into you at an ice cream shop and couldn’t hide my alarm when you ordered ice cream, a big no-no in a macrobiotic diet. What was I thinking? One scoop of ice cream and it would be the end of you? I also didn’t hide my relief when you told me you were eating ice cream because you lost too much weight on the macrobiotic diet; you were therefore eating it for the “right” reasons.

\* \* \*

We walked to your apartment in summer sunshine, your head wrapped in a scarf to cover the loss of your hair from chemotherapy. You struggled up three flights of stairs to your apartment with a cane because you only had one lung.

Once inside your apartment made spotlessly clean through the kindness of others, we talked about my upcoming wedding. You were concerned that you hadn’t bought me a shower gift, and I, of course, wondered how you could even think of a gift at “a time like this.” As if having cancer should mean you suddenly have no interest in others.

You talked about going to Athens and Rome, saying that this might be the last summer of your life. Our voices seesawed between humor and the recognition of impending death. You went to Athens and Rome; it was the last summer of your life.

You then told me of a man you adore, how recently you made love with him and your wig fell off. You had panicked and covered your head with your hands. He removed your hands and caressed your baldness. Tears stood out in my eyes despite my efforts to control them.

When I left, I hugged you and was surprised by what I felt. Had I studied my medical textbooks well enough? Could I catch cancer from you? I was being ridiculous, so I didn’t let my thoughts out in body language or words. Once in your arms, there was a part of me that didn’t care if I “caught” cancer. I stood there idiotically paranoid and ashamed, but I’m at least glad that we touched each other.

We pass briefly in and out of each other’s lives, the way people do when they know each other better than superficially but less than well. I know that you had been in and out of hospitals, that you were an atheist and that you once tried to believe in God. You gave up when you realized you were just faking yourself out. I wonder if there is any difference in the way an atheist and a believer enter death. I have no answers and not enough comfort, just the knowledge that belief in God is a necessity for me. I’m glad I’m not worried about the fate of your soul the way some believers would be. If I am wrong and there is no God, then maybe there is no soul. If I’m right and there is a God, then you’re in heaven or at least a place of peace.

You once told me that you thought death was just like going to sleep but never waking up. If that’s the way that you wanted it to be, I hope that’s what it was for you.

\* \* \*

In mid-December, I was untimely and unfairly fired from a job. I hysterically smashed glass all over my kitchen floor. I gave myself one day to recover, and then I called you. I don’t know if I called for the right reasons. Perhaps I felt that misery loved company or that I tried to put my pain in perspective by realizing that yes, I was jobless, but no, I was not lifeless.

I didn’t have the opportunity to listen to your fears, your regrets, your hopes. Maybe you would have cared that I had been fired from a job as you cared about the shower present. I don’t really know what dying people care about. I try to single them out as the special people they are, but how do I know whether listening to other people’s problems makes them feel connected to life, less concerned about and fearful of death? How do I know if I’ve talked too much about my own problems? Did I dump on a person who does not deserve to be dumped on? Do people still want to give of themselves, still listen, even when they are close to death?

\* \* \*

When I called with all of my questions still unanswered, Heather answered the phone. I asked for you, and she said that you had passed away. My voice trembled in response. Heather’s young yet mature voice held no tremor when she informed me that death was a part of life. The repeated sharing of the news of her mother’s death had probably taken all of the cracks out of her voice.

My misery increased when I hung up the phone. If I hadn’t called, I wouldn’t have had to deal with both a lost job and life. I also would never have had the opportunity to say good-bye to you at such a touching memorial service.

I entered Christmas as though I suffered from a sort of spiritual cancer. I exchanged gifts, went to parties, didn’t look for jobs, and let people take holiday snapshots of me. My mother-in-law said that I didn’t look like myself in these pictures.

Losing a job and a friend don’t go over well at Christmas. Some people act as though they expect a ridiculous kind of forced cheer. When I told a distant relative that I was fired from a job one day and learned the next that a friend had died, she informed me that the job didn’t mean that much to me anyway. I responded to her amateur psychology by remaining politely and furiously silent.

\* \* \*

After your memorial service, I walk slowly this time to catch the bus. The snow continues to quietly fall, and the moon is barely visible. I once again smell exhaust fumes and my own sweat as I board the bus. It becomes darker and colder, but a few stars promise to light up the sky as the Mozart bells peal in my ears, telling me to remember, remember...

For M.D.

1. From Mozart’s *Requiem Mass* in D minor, K626

Three poems follow:

Penciled-in-Places, First Place Award, Free Verse Category. Poets and Patrons. Downers Grove, IL, October, 2012. Finalist status for the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Contest through the Guild at the Chopin Theater, Chicago, IL, June, 2011. This poem also appears in *The Unpublished Poet*.

Penciled-in Places

He heard the voices after Christmas,

pronouncement of the end of angels.

January a forever thing, February

a blister on his soul never breaking,

March not even coming in with a candle’s light,

only wars and soldiers in his head,

first a whisper, then a conspiracy

of winking eyes, then a shout.

April came uninvited

as he waited furiously for showers,

for the redemption of May,

thought he saw a flower one day,

some sort of red white blue illusion

that disappeared with no warning

into June, and one day he thought he saw sunlight

in his night dreams, but it was no dream at all

of night or day, or hope.

Still, the earth had turned these six months,

and he felt a tilting of himself,

then entered July’s slow return to darkness.

October, school in full force,

August and September only an afterthought,

a sneering report card about to arrive in November,

some sort of mid-semester warning sign

that it had been winter all along,

that December was nothing more

than the end of unnoticed years,

jungles of seconds, minutes, quartered hours

breaking out of the glass of old Grandfather clocks.

And the wind blew upside down,

and the sun crashed into the unfailing stars.

The moon suddenly jumped in the sky,

began to rotate, revolve, reverse,

and dawn arose as an accident of night,

and the kitchen calendar went backward,

and nobody ate in the scheduled penciled-in places

of December, November, October.

The sun skipped over months,

as if they were pebbles,

then slew both lion and lamb.

February, a hint of whisper,

January, the silence of snow

on starlight nights in forests

of unseen animals.

Then, he stood above city traffic

five or ten flights up or down,

and gave his last salute.

Knowing his body would

turn with the unstoppable earth,

he let go of unsure feet and flew

briefly with wonder, no hesitation,

landing like a beautiful animal, seen.

*For Scott Shaeffer, 25*

Encomium for a Sestina, First Place, Adult Category Division. The Thirty-first Annual Jo-Anne Hirshfield Memorial Poetry Awards. Evanston Public Library, Evanston, IL. April, 2009. This poem also appears in *The Unpublished Poet*.

Encomium for a Sestina

I looked hard for you today in the “all new” fourth edition of

*The American Heritage Dictionary*, a twenty-first century reference

with over seventy thousand entries and one thousand new words and meanings.

I held my breath between “sestet” and “set,” but you were not to be found.

I checked again, knowing the frailty of the middle-aged eye,

but you were gone to a quiet place where the wordless live.

Sestet and sonnet both made the grade,

but what oversight or intention led you to an early grave?

Where have you gone with your six verses, each with six lines?

Your closing triplet? Your lovely two-syllable end words?

Water, city, sorrow, season, lovers, passage--

words that know each other so well, they welcome, not fear,

their constant exchange of places, as if to say to each other,

*I know this spot well*, *and you should too!*

You were complex but ego-less, no first or last words.

All six words in the triplet linger in the reader’s mind:

There is no passage to the jeweled city,

No right of way for lovers shedding sorrow,

I am always out of season, without water.

Now, with the passage of time, the light of your jewels dims

in the twilight celestial city, and while I don’t mind my free verse,

I loved the cost of choosing six, and only six, words, your season,

its watering of my mind, the garden of my sorrow now,

for having lost you, if only for a moment, in the “all new” dictionary.

Hope after 2017, First Place Award from Palatine Public Library, Palatine, IL, 2017

Hope after 2017

Oh, earth, you are an ill-tempered child!

It’s not your fault though

with millions of parents like us.

When you were a newborn, nothing lived

beyond your smooth darkness,

but a little light, all possibility.

If I could go back to see you then, I’d be an astronaut

in my time-travel suit flying through space,

knowing that like you, I could soon be orphaned.

I’d wonder at the havoc I see through my starship window:

first glaciers melting, the polar bear’s paws stiff

and extended, a remnant of animal prayer.

Flooded plains, tsunamis, Noah

looking on, palpable despair in his eyes.

*What ark will save the animals?*

I am not yet blind. My eyes moisten

when the view of Northern Lights

emerges, grows larger, like a future.