Parallel Courses: Poetry and essays

Nicole Anne Freim
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds

Repository Citation
https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds/904

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Scholarship@UNLV. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Retrospective Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6” x 9” black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
PARALLEL COURSES:

POETRY AND ESSAYS

by

Nicole Anne Freim

Bachelor of Arts
Theatre
Northern Illinois University
1994

Bachelor of Arts
English
Northern Illinois University
1994

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Department of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 1998
The Thesis prepared by

Nicole Anne Freim

Entitled

Parallel Courses: Poetry and Essays

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

Parallel Courses: Poetry and Essays

by

Nicole Anne Freim

Dr. Claudia Keelan, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Parallel Courses is a creative work consisting of poetry and personal essays. The writing examines the ontology of the self, discovering and explaining the reality of the self through time and change. The major themes explored include how past experiences enhance and inhibit present relationships, both with the self and with others, and the struggle for identity in both the singular and plural sense within our relationships and lives. The writing searches to find a balance between the ties to one’s history and the desires of one’s present.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT........................................................................................................................................ iii

PREFACE........................................................................................................................................ v

SECTION ONE -- A STONE INTO WATER.................................................................................. 1
  Recurring Nightly Forever................................................................. 2
  Ariadne On Naxos........................................................................... 3
  Sleepwalking ............................................................................... 4
  Letters from Nightflyer ................................................................ 5
  Dust.............................................................................................. 6
  Portrait of a Psyche ..................................................................... 7
  After Dinner ............................................................................... 9
  Bellerophon in Flight .................................................................. 10
  A June Bride .............................................................................. 11
  The End of April ....................................................................... 12
  Le Vin Rouge............................................................................ 13
  Preparing the Nursery ............................................................... 14
  Communion ............................................................................. 15

SECTION TWO -- THE INK OF AN EYE .............................................................................. 16
  The Meeting.............................................................................. 17
  My Apologies to Dali ............................................................... 18

SECTION THREE -- THE GRAMMAR OF MY FEARS ......................................................... 20
  Urbandale............................................................................... 21
  Paper Weights ........................................................................ 24
  Feeding Prisoners ................................................................. 42

SECTION FOUR -- THE LIMINAL STATE .......................................................................... 43
  Edison's Axiom: Understanding the Equation ......................... 44
  The Measure of Life: Coffee Spoons or Tea Bags ................. 53
  Cookie Cutters of One's Own.................................................... 62

WORKS CITED .................................................................................................................... 71

VITA........................................................................................................................................... 72
PREFACE

Relationships have always fascinated me. Men and women strike a delicate balance between understanding and confusion while dealing with each other; the scales can tip either way at any moment. Topics like relations between men and women can be written about repeatedly because there are so many levels to the interactions. As human beings are a bit narcissistic, our own motivations interest us endlessly. Whatever I write, I eventually return to themes of human interaction, especially the longing, conflict, and mystery involved in relationships as well as the question of love's endurance. I use these relationships as material for two kinds of temporal negotiations. To locate myself in time, I look at the friction between past and present relationships. To establish a place, I examine the singular and plural aspects of a person in a relationship. Both these actions serve to bring me closer to the truth of my experience by allowing me to look at all the interconnections.

My first poems were strictly rhymed and metered. In high school, a friend convinced me that everything need not rhyme. Writing poetry became much easier as I would pour out page after page of free verse poems.
I realize now that this new style had loosened my tongue but not necessarily increased the worth of my words. As my stack of poems grew and my audience did not, I realized that I was writing mostly for myself. This lasted until I added an English major and declared that I wanted to be a writer. I could no longer write just for my own amusement.

Writing for a class actually curtailed much of my writing because I often dreaded the writing workshops I would attend. I cringed over every misinterpretation of my work, alternately mentally berating the reader and vowing to make “the message” clearer next time. Why was the reader’s opinion so important to me? Because I was no longer writing for myself. I wanted the reader to understand, empathize. My writing became almost nonexistent as I felt the weight of my goal: to have the writing speak for me and to all readers.

I thought the poem should perfectly resonate all my emotions and intentions, be beautifully and deftly phrased, and communicate a deep wealth of emotion to all readers. Quite obviously this work was difficult to do. Can writing ever be all things to the author and all readers? At the time I felt that it should be. Who could read Auden’s “Musee des Beaux Arts” and not find it disturbingly accurate? Didn’t everyone feel a shiver reading the opening line of Ginsberg’s “Howl”? This feeling of obligation as a poet — I am a poet and therefore must be profound — was only sand in the gears.
Even then, I knew that. And I resented it. Harold Bloom described the feeling in *The Anxiety of Influence*, saying that each generation of poets struggles for an identity under the “threat” of greatness of its predecessors (Barry 105). Bloom considers it an enactment of the Oedipal complex; I wouldn’t call it that, but there is definitely a shadow.

When I read Jeanette Winterson, my focus narrowed. I no longer wanted to affect the world; I now wanted my work to connect with an individual. I had read Winterson and felt her words. Her thoughts were my thoughts, just never before crystallized into language. I wanted to have that effect on my reader. The crux of this was that how would I know if I had achieved this? My young writer’s brain thought, perhaps absurdly, that I would know when I had created a poem that could speak to my audience. I thought that I would easily recognize a profoundly moving work, just as I could see the worth of Shakespeare or Keats. This assumption, however, still judged the poem on my criteria, not the reader’s own experience.

So I have come back to writing for myself, in the hopes that something in the truth of my experience will resonate with another person. After all, what spoke to me? Winterson’s words were of love and passion, ideas that are important to me. Certainly if I can be true to myself and my feelings, there will be one who can appreciate it. If not, at least I have that I am being genuine, that I am struggling to realize my own truths. This is what poetry is about -- not setting out purposely to generate a profound
work. The value of the work shows through its honesty; value does not come simply because the author wishes the work to be worthy.

The act of writing is a controlling and constructive one. Writers perhaps seek to understand themselves better through their writing, but what is that except a method to control their lives? When we write about the past, are we clarifying or constructing? As I write “Urbandale,” am I reminiscing about being eight years old or am I shaping my memories into the past I want to have? It is inescapable that I am doing both.

We write about the past to order it in our minds. Because the past and present are interconnected, we want to control how the past affects the present. The person I am now results from the sum of all my past experiences. Perhaps my frequent moves as a child resulted in my fixation with relationships. But the place where I am now affects how I remember the past. My interpretation of any given event in my past is partially constructed by what I am experiencing at that moment. I live in a constant state of temporality; my current success at work re-invents my failure in a past job and my marriage casts new light on an old stormy relationship. My concerns over finishing laundry and running errands gives a particular tone to my husband’s parting words this morning.

I used to deal with the past from a modernist perspective — the past was a source of nostalgia, when all was right and good. But as the
uncomfortable present turned into the past, I saw that I choose which memories to claim and by choosing only sweet memories, I was denying part of my life. Acknowledging the past does not mean being controlled by it. I realize that I constantly re-construct the past because it in turn constructs the present and the future. Who we were affects who we can become.

“Portrait of a Psyche” is based on an informal psychology quiz, a sort of verbal Rorschach test. The answers to the prompts are supposed to reveal a particular attitude of the subject. The cup equals the subject’s opinion on religion and so on. To me, the source of the answers is the more revealing part. Certainly specific trees spring to mind, but why those trees? Why that combination of trees? Which memories or associations take precedence in our minds without conscious thought?

This is how the past is irrevocably locked in the present because it is the constant base of operations for our thoughts. Which memories will defeat the others to stay uppermost in our minds?

With all this in mind, is writing purely for the writer’s benefit? If I write to create myself, my past and my present, where does the reader fit in? Here I should give some credit to Shakespeare: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” All writers have some amount of desire to be made permanent by their work, to leave
the "fixed mark" for the rest of the world to see. But the reader must be
doing something more than merely witnessing the work. I'm not always
happy, however, if the reader re-interprets the work. So what purpose does
the reader serve?

I recall my experience with Winterson. That is what I want my reader
to experience. By trying to deal as honestly as possible with aspects of my
own experiences, I hope that a reader may recognize an element of her own
life in the work. Often we find it easier to examine another person's truth
than our own. We can acknowledge to ourselves the kinship we feel
without putting our experience on display, and we can feel comfort knowing
there is another with similar feelings.

Shakespeare’s ideas of immortalizing the beloved in time probably
affect me the most in my choice of subject. This is why I write frequently
about love and relationships -- to give them permanence and importance.
"Paper Weights" also searches for meaning in the writings of the narrator
and the lover. The narrator feels that if these emotions are so profound, she
must be obliged to use them in her work. Why else would she call herself a
poet? After other failed relationships, she is searching for a way to make
this love endure. Shakespeare’s sonnets touch that part of my consciousness
that wants to be important, that wants to be part of something larger than
myself. I want poetry and love to be immortal so that, in turn, some part of
me will be immortal. In a poem like "Communion," no names or causes

x
are ascribed to either person; it is merely an intimate picture of two people. It tries to immortalize the idea of love, just wanting love itself to be grand and solid.

The other temporal negotiation in my poetry lies in the conflict between the singular and the plural. While struggling with the past and present locates me in time, the singular or plural locates my voice in a place. Sometimes I am the poet but also assume the voice in the poem. I can be outside the poem observing or I can be inside speaking — or I am at once both voices and neither. I work from a postmodernist view, enjoying the fragmented experience of multiple views. This is emblematic of the poet's role in society. As a poet I both experience the same feelings as others but in choosing to write, I acknowledge the experience in a different way. This is not privileging my experience, claiming my poetic experience is unique; rather my communication of it is the unique part.

This singular and plural conflict ties in directly to my fascination with relationships. Involving myself with another person is a direct struggle for balance between the singular aspect of myself as an individual and the plural of myself and my partner as a couple. I often begin to question the validity of either role and my identity in each role. Is either one a more clear definition of who I am? Now that I am married, can I ever be whole without the plural definition? Even if the plural is not with a partner but a
friend, how much of the singular is made more valuable by virtue of having a plural experience?

"Sleepwalking" ponders how many years will pass before partners learn to sleep through the other's restlessness, "Paper Weights" how to share a space with another person. This step in a relationship of learning to live together requires some degree of yielding individuality, or at least freedom. I believe this mirrors my experience as a poet of claiming my work but also learning to give over the work to the reader's experience.

I use persona for similar yielding experiences; I like to explore perspectives of a relationship. In "Ariadne on Naxos," the character's plight calls to mind betrayal and the disbelief we all feel when a loved one fails us. She finds herself with a god, but the pain of being abandoned does not disappear. In "The End of April," the narrator is the male of the couple. I don't know this side of the experience, but I imagine it to try to share the situation more fully. Though our partner's perspective is often not what we think it is, using a persona to look from the other side is an attempt to further understanding. I think of Robert Browning and his dramatic monologues; the voices were at once him and not him. He insists that the characters were not all him, but his choices do show the multiplicity of selves that reside in one person.
With the grounding in the past and the use of multiple perspectives, my writing may be a method to move from modernism to postmodernism. Modernists long for a return to the fullness of purpose of the past, something that has been lost in society today. They tend to remember the past with nostalgia and think of it as a time when faith was still intact. For postmodernists, the fragmentation of society is "symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of beliefs" (Barry 84). The breakdown of truths and values results in a sort of freedom for the postmodernist.

In revisiting the past repeatedly, I am trying to find some way out of its grip. In "Paper Weights," the narrator is trying to let go of the past but feels anchored to it because it is important. The feeling is one of being overshadowed and controlled by the past. In writing out the past, I seek to control it so that I can release my feeling of debt to the past and enjoy both who I was and who I am now without any guilt. This may be moving beyond postmodernism to chaos theory where I can see and use all the interconnections of my life.

The title of this work, "Parallel Courses," represents a starting place. At this stage of my work, I tend to keep elements on parallel courses. The past relates to the present. The singular relates to the plural. I do not want to merge the separate paths as I feel them each have their own importance. But I hope to find a bridge between them, allowing me to use more easily
the full scope of my faculties. And there are connections. And only I can
discover my own.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the following people,
without whom this work would not have been possible:

Professor John Bradley, Dana Boam, Dr. Christopher Hudgins, Dr.
Claudia Keelan, Dr. Corina Mathieu, Anne and Thomas Smith, Dr. Susan
Taylor, Ann Yohe,

and Jason Tondro for his tireless support.
SECTION ONE

A STONE INTO WATER
Recurring Nightly Forever

A boy and two girls
   a log raft a gray sail
the river through mountains
European densely green mountains
   in search of golden pearls
river flowing into a tunnel
   dark hallway
onto the beach
   with no ocean
dead jellyfish across the dunes
   behind them a theatre
open air period costumes
struggling to reach something on the stage
   to reach the prop
the other actors have theirs
   a fan, an umbrella, an envelope, a shoe,
   my hand grasps air
I bring a book from my pocket
   I am sitting by a river
reading a log raft a gray sail
   two girls and a boy go by
Ariadne On Naxos

When I awoke
the coarse grass pricking
through my cloak
urged me to believe.

The departing sails
cannot be true.
I saved his life
and condemned myself
with the same thread.

The trees bow gently to me
and dangle clusters of grapes,
firm and rich.
You — golden hair,
face to make rocks weep,
offer me a cup of wine,
offer me a throne beside you.

I dream.
The departing sails
can not be true.
Sleepwalking

I cough in short smothered bursts,
into my pillow.
The fan is still and the heat
kicked off and the room sleeps.

The dishes are all over the kitchen,
lasagna remnants hardening among crusts of bread,
the table with mismatched napkins
next to dessert plates
sticky with ice cream and caramel,
wine glasses pink at the bottom
and the bottle still open.

I lean up on an elbow for water.
He half rubs my back.
"Don't die, okay?"
When will he not be awakened?
A year or ten or fifty?

I get up for a cup of tea.
He lifts his head.
I kneel over him;
we kiss and nuzzle.
"I'll be back."
We breathe love you's between kisses.

The halogen lamp vibrates quietly.
I read about cake decorating techniques
and force myself not to do the dishes.
These are a scab
or a nail that's split.
I tried not to -
I tried to gather them up
like socks to be folded,
heels lined up
and put in a drawer -
couldn't.

Wanted to pull at it,
pick at it,
lance the memory.
Now, before my new
lover moves in.

A car on the street
is playing Led Zeppelin.
This glass door isn't thick.

And why these trite tears
Staining my pajamas?
He could give me
no answer but ignorance.
Dust

Most dust
inside the house
is composed of dead
skin cells.
We lose skin
almost every minute.
Like breath escaping.

Pieces of me cover the books -
he covers the table -
parts of us both
rubbed into the carpet
when we made love.

I fall on to the paper
as I write.
I mark each glass and door knob.
Hold his computer
and I hold part of him.
A layer of him
coats my skin.

When we get too deep,
I wade into the shower
and slough us off.
Soak up myself
with blue cloth.
Erase our presence
from the picture frames
and the night stand,
leaving a trail of cells
to find my way
back to me.
Portrait of a Psyche

The Path
packed brown dirt
  (iowa the path around the pond over in the part of the
subdivision not yet developed where the children played by the big tree
named red rover)
two feet wide
snaking forward

The Trees
magnolias
  (pink blossoms the backyard on poplar lane where i played in
the dogs water dishes watched sunny and caesar leap for the branches still
small enough to be afraid of them)
weeping willows
brushing the ground
shelter
  (northern the ones by the east lagoon for observing ducks
incognito torn down for blue lights and call boxes rape hazards you know)
mixed together thickly
hard to see through
comforting

The Cup
half on the path
silver goblet
engraved, tarnished
  (on my shelf half a pair teenage love that thinks it will always
be use this to toast the wedding elvish names with an infinity sign)
I take it —
it is beautiful

The Key
in the middle of the path
iron skeleton
to hang from a ribbon
in the hollow of the breasts
  (i imagined one in urbandale for the secret cave the boys
hollowed in the ground covered with plywood dirt on the plywood the door
i named after the three investigators)
I take it
to open doors

**The Water**
- stream river
- both directions
- six big steps wide
- right across the path

(norway renee and i climbed through the stream posing on rocks my red plaid pants too short and her pale blond eyelashes she had not yet discovered mascara dad said the river was mine i could name it)

I stop
feet in the water
toes feeling slick stones
it is peaceful

**The Obstruction**
- wrought iron gate
- red brick wall
- endless in both directions

**The Path Beyond**
- still dirt
- still worn
- curves sharply to the left

**Passing**
- through the gate
easily
unaafraid
with my key
After Dinner

Water drips into the soup pan.
My hand is cold from holding an apple.
The phone breathes steadily.

The second hand clicks loudly
   on every other second.
None of the clocks match.

The whole day has been out of sync.
Running along the edges.

I ignore the phone.
Open the ice cream
   myself.
Plan to be asleep early.

The microwave reads zero.
I speak to the walls.
None of our clocks match.
Once I had a name.
A name man or god would welcome.

Now, it is but a toy,
grasping and sliding
away from my fingers

Now, hated of the gods,
two children dead,
I avoid the paths of men.
I could descend with coin
for the ferryman,
or strive upwards,

Immovable Olympus --
still beyond my fingertips.
His wings beat faster,
shredding clouds into mist,
neck arched towards his home.

I will stride through the halls.
I will regain my name.

I saw Olympus draw nearer --
just a ripple in the sky --
I saw, I saw it
in the palm of my hand --
before Pegasus threw me.
A June Bride

The tree behind me looks like a pine
but I'm in the desert. This town
precludes logic -- for some reason

I sit with my journal, scratching
in the slanted light from both
ends of the pool -- in shadows

He is upstairs in bed already,
with the fan running
at a slow speed -- stuck there

I try to guess the time. My watch
is on the kitchen table
with my ring -- for practical reasons

He wants resolution. His answers
come between sprinkler cycles.
It takes me longer -- to understand

I need breath.
The End of April

The light through the curtainless
north window becomes enough to wake her.
I watch her through lowered lids
as she stretches. She is still here.

Her hair slides off her face
as she turns, rolling on top of me.
She brushes her long brown hair
across my chest. I reach for it.

This space is too open, her gaze
too dark. I pull her down, kissing her
to shut our eyes. She knows.
This is not her. She says she never
sleeps naked.

My apartment is behind the theatre.
I watch her in the bathroom mirror,
trimming my beard as she rifles
through my closet. The semester
will end soon.

The shirt she chooses has a hole in the chest,
right beneath her left breast, and a tear in the sleeve.
I haven't worn it since I left Florida.
I don't think it fits me any more.

She brushes her hair in front of the window
and I see strands falling from her hands.
She is too rough with her hair;
the ends have split.

By next week there will be brown hair
on all of the pillows, stuck in the drain,
curled up beneath my refrigerator.

I leave a pair of shoes outside the door
with the key in one of them. For today
she comes as she pleases. Maybe she'll return
later to shower, without me here.
Le Vin Rouge

She sits across the table
tempting me.
My thumb and middle finger
trace the curve
where the neck joins the body.
She is solid,
a willing crutch.
Over and over
I feel her smoothness,
soft coolness sweeping over me.
Leaning closer
I can smell her
like a dry summer wind.
I give in
and embrace her.
But after so many long hours
she begins to smell
like a magazine flap of perfume,
clinging yet unfaithful.
Preparing the Nursery

Years ago,
you lay naked beside me
stroking my body.
You said I would be beautiful
carrying your baby.
You caressed the stomach
that would someday
bear our child.

Yesterday,
I sat caressing my stomach.
I imagined I could feel your hands,
warm and rough beneath mine,
feeling the baby move.
I used to believe you.
I believed
I would be beautiful.

But today,
I cried.
My husband lies next to me,
hands soft on my stomach,
feeling the baby move,
and calls me beautiful.
You are not my husband
and I do not believe it anymore.
Communion

Your right arm
beneath my shoulders
the hand tracing my ribs

My left arm
pressed up between us
like a folded wing

Our legs layered together
at the curve above the knee

The weight of your hand
on my hip
your thumb stroking
where thigh becomes abdomen

My middle finger
circling the hollow
at the bottom of the throat

The scent of you
in my veins

I sink
as a stone into water
rippling the dark soul rivers
SECTION TWO

THE INK OF AN EYE
The Meeting

"We are too high!" the rabbit cried.
"We will be forgotten!"

The elephant trumpeted.
"Would you care to trade places?
You could see better from the edge."

"I am a bear of little brain," the yellow one began,
"but surely--"

"What's the use?" the donkey sighed.
"I knew it would come to this."

"Don't complain. You have your friends.
We, however, are all alone," the walrus rasped.

"It's better this way," the dragon decided.
"Do you remember the boys who used to beat us?
At least they are gone."

"They are very loud," the pig whispered
as it leaned against the yellow bear.

The lion said nothing.
His coat was a bit shabby,
his mane a little matted.
He remembered the day
she opened the refrigerator door
and found him,
perched on the salad bowl.
She named him immediately
and held him quite close.
She would not forget them.
My Apologies to Dali

Sea flat and shiny —
    the side of a bluegill
my tower wind~ow
I saw
    your candy-cane island
    perched on fin
    ravenous I pieced a raft
bottle caps fishing line old clothes
wart hogs gave me —
    push off the beach
tossed a roll of toilet/paper/life/preserver

    I went gill to gill
riding the ocean’s hiccups
    hiccups myself
flagged down a flounder to fetch
    a spoon~ful of sugar
brought a bowl
    nononononono
    spoon
sent back for the Chinese
    restaurant sugar packets with pro~verbs
Easier to swallow —
    convenient size doses

    reading pearls
    the backbone got stranded on a rib
I treaded sand
    bartender offer~ed a fuzzy navel —
or a Cape Cod
one of each
    a little extra kick
    made it your candy cane

I had crawl out —
    your shore lick
    the red stripe
wish for apple
    nonononono
tomato — I hate tomato
    whit~e stripe sour cream

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
hate sour cream —
except on a baked chive

back into the greedy surf
hitch a ride with dolphins
to the sandbar
passed my to~taled raft
they wondered what
I said
nonononono

it wouldn't float again

at the bar I rinsed my mouth
with Experience and Friendship

Now to swim for my to~wer
my flounder friend told me
check / out / islands / along / the / backbone / on / my / way
I could
ought
might

as well sin~ce
already in water and tired on the way home
made the flounder promised
bring more sugar

if islands taste bad
SECTION THREE

THE GRAMMAR OF MY FEARS
1. Red Rover

I learned early how to manipulate the boys. They let me join their secret club, and I, in turn, demanded to re-name all the hideouts. I pretended brilliance and used pirated code names from *Three Investigators* books.

The lookout point - the tree by the pond - became Red Rover. I was never good at climbing trees but I didn’t let them boost me up. I said the ground was better in case we needed to warn the others.

Nicky Bryant once chased me around the yard on a dare from his sister. He had to kiss me and he chose my elbow. The bus ran late on some days.

The boys would listen to the stories I told. I repeated *Five-Minute Mysteries* and they thought I was smart. My ideas came from books and they didn’t know I was borrowing. They never revealed their sources either.
2. Tunnel Two

The boys showed me the secret secret place—a hollow dug more hollow and covered with plywood. The plywood cleverly covered with dirt. A small space, maybe eight by eight. We crawled in through a short tunnel.

They let me go in first. There were enough of us to fill the space. Not much room to move. I thought I was as smart as Jupiter. Smarter than the boys. I stayed in the corner.

I wanted to name it Headquarters, but they told me they were building a bigger place to be their h.q. I called this place Tunnel Two. Though the real one was much longer.

I didn’t really know most of them. Nicky and Ben - he had an Airedale. The others were in middle school. They always sat in the back of the bus. Invitations had to be earned.
3. Door Four

I inspired them. They decided to connect the headquarters to this secret place by a tunnel and this would become the outpost.

I told them a door should conceal the tunnel, a secret entry headquarters. Door Four would need to be manned and passwords given. I think we all had spy fantasies.

They told me I could be second in command. I pinched my lip, to look thoughtful like Jupiter, but it’s different for a girl.

My hands hovered near my open mouth. Several boys watched me closely. I don’t think they knew why. I didn’t either, but I understood it somehow.

In the secret place, the earth smelled like sour chocolate and we had no lights. We felt each other breathe. In darkness among the boys, I knew I was powerful and I never returned.
The poem I just read about the letters of poets—speaking on the charming cadences that reappear later in poems or essays. The poets know, the poets craft, even without thought. The inspiration is simply, magically, there.

The author also said poets who use their letters seem to violate rules of privacy or generic boundaries. Yet it is honored in a Keatsian way.

Letters inspire us, anchor us in the past, and do not release us.
2.

No walk-through
we just sign the papers
in the beige and mauve office
and the keys fall into our hands.

Friends help carry boxes.
Two sets of stairs --
a rhythm begins.
He keeps trying to get me
to stay upstairs and direct placement.
don’t lift anything heavy

The beige carpet
slowly recedes under boxes
and suitcases
   a dresser and two desks
After a round of beverages,
our sweaty compatriots depart.
Leaving us alone
in the apartment.

I can see he’s tired.
The long drive up yesterday --
   an all night packing session --
   more work to do now.
We only have the weekend.
His contract isn’t up yet
and he must work on Monday.
In a few weeks,
we’ll do this again
   his bookcases and futon and clothes.
Then it will be
our apartment.

We walk up the street
to the oh-so convenient casino
for 75¢ hot dogs
   real Vienna beef.
The elderly couples at the slots
tired change girls pushing carts
   flags bobbing above the crowds
dealers distracted by sight of their replacements
a line at the twin movie theatres
Our apartment.

Do I look any different?
My erratic pulse --
   my churning stomach --
The hot dog sticks in the craw.
Smoke makes me sick
so we walk back.
I unpack bit by bit,
determined to throw out
   clean out
   weed out the junk.
I sift slowly through my collected letters —
neat, rubber banded piles of keepers,
a mess on the tile floor of discards.
I tell myself that I'm being strong,
lightening the load,
putting the past behind me.

I've never burnt a letter.
I always saved the sweet
   and bittersweet notes
   to flog myself with during recovery.
The invitation to the wedding
   two years ago
is my guinea pig.

I sit on an empty box
broken flat and tossed on the balcony,
with the pot I use for spaghetti.
I light each piece individually,
   even the tissue paper,
and I drink my tea.
The flames are higher than I expected
and sharp against the dark January sky.
Smoke flavors my tea with acid --
   just a sprinkling --
to eat my bones inside my flesh
and leave me limp.
Still.

I glance at the street,
People park cars
and enter apartments.
No one looks at my balcony
with enough interest to notice.

There's a pile of letters inside
for the recycling bin.
That poem nags at me.
Am I abandoning my inspiration?
Wind tosses bits of ash
on my legs.
The pot is too hot to move.

Is it just the weight of
imagined responsibility on my part?
"I should save these because I am a poet"

But I never wrote anything real until now --
until this flurry of parchment paper
between two states.
My dearest love -

It has been a few days since I have written to you, but in that time you have not been idle. No, indeed, you have sent me several letters which make me so very happy, proud to call you my lover, flattered and inspired by the affection you bear me.

I read your letter walking to my car (you can’t expect restraint from me now, when I miss you so acutely). And with every word, I grew more and more aware of how fortunate I am to have a woman such as you. There are a hundred million men in this country, and a hundred million women, and how many of them love their man as much as you love me? With such faith, such constancy, what could a man not accomplish? No chains nor fetters can restrain him. The days cannot make him weary, nor the nights drive him to fear. How wonderfully fortunate I am. I have always known this, but it is wonderful to have it thus set down.

And this, all of this joy, does not even touch on the beautiful picture you paint of our future. And although a part of me chides our plans for the world, the young optimism and naivety (as John Lennon said, “Life’s what happens while you’re making other plans.”), nevertheless I know that if the scenery changes, the meaning will be the same. The emotional contentment, the mutual enjoyment, is blind to environment (well, perhaps not completely. Let’s say that “Love is very near-sighted with cataracts” rather than completely blind). If our plans should be dashed to the winds, it will not much matter, for wherever we are we will be in love, and I will be, forever.

Yours,
A real bed —  
an actual grown-up bed.  
I roll from one mattress  
to the next,  
trying to guess  
which one is  
the one.  
He is still in California.  
Soon the apartment  
will have bookcases.  

My mom is here for company  
and advice.  
We giggle and lie back,  
feet scraping the plastic  
that protects the unsuspecting mattress.  
She obligingly turns over  
must check to see  
not too much give in the springs  
don’t want to spend years  
being awakened when he turns over  
“How does it feel?”

The furniture showroom --  
couples and parents and children --  
an elderly man and a middle aged man  
test a twin bed for comfort  
an olive complected couple  
speaks with a saleslady wearing gold bangles  
while a young girl bounces on a king size  
my mother and I  
stretch out on a queen  
a bed that should last me  
for at least ten or fifteen years  
“How does it feel?”
6.

He said he wanted to frame my last letter.
Would anyone else
Believe we could possibly be
this romantic,
this drowning-man-thrashingly in love?

It's barely worthy of a sound bite.
It's not shocking enough --
not a one-legged veteran
selling puppies on a ragged blanket
in front of the Magical Empire --
not real-live drama --
as uniformed men shine
flashlights in broken windows
and throw punks against cars.
Not real.

These stacks of ivory parchment
covered with spidery thin up-strokes
and heavy curves

No guilt involved in saving these --
no way to lighten this load.

But to transform these testimonies into poems?
speak of
leaving love letters with silver wax seals in desk drawers
afternoons reading on the couch feet pressed together
a red plaid blanket spread on bright bladed grass
books spilled in our laps and forgotten as we kiss and kiss
my hands at his neck and his side and his hands both in my hair
mouths wet and lips working greedily to kiss and
pledge and love all together and pausing to stare
blue eye to blue eye and sigh

The truth of it
   -- so tenuous a claim --
I believe.

These letters push me.
These musty letters --
   with twenty-five cent stamps
and crumbling return address labels
under yellow tape --
command me.

Old tales,
rattling around in my
gumball machine of memory.

They demand my allegiance.
Letters of a poet.

The hollow doors in this place
will not take my pounding
so I must howl on the porch
over my pot of ashes.
Why not send all of it this way?
Burn it out of my mind --
cauterize my sensibilities --
to live here,
discover the present,

Save nothing but
the ivory parchment
with stamps of roses.
7.

I sit on the floor
to read his letter
   no couch yet —

"How eloquent your letters are, how sweet, how wonderful. I can read them over
and over, each time discovering a new letter within the frame of the old. Read fast,
your words make me breathless, as I am now. Read slow, they are a long,
warning comfort."

a couch will fill the space I sit in
a t.v. will be next to my stereo
a body will be next to me
   in the bed

Everything
   in plural
every thing
   each moment
   plural

"A true poet, I know, would tell me that this letter is raw, undignified, poetic
nonsense. But I know that these truths (and they are true) will not bother you.
For this poetic nonsense is my heartfelt testament to my undying affection. And as
such I know that you will welcome it. As, thank the stars, you will welcome me in
more days. I remain, yours, . . . ."

He prefers a certain type of pen
black ink
not a roller ball
or ball point
   I think it is
   a thin felt tip
   or a plastic nib

The ink smears a little
if I hold it too long.
My hands are too warm
He has a lock of my hair
sent to accompany a period piece
Victorian style

"My dear sir, please accept this token as in some small way demonstrating my
regard for you. Pray, keep it with you always, perhaps tucked in a vest pocket to
remind you of my constancy."

A little braid
bound at both ends by
black satin ribbon
scented with perfume.
He says he threads it through his fingers
as he writes to me.
    Thumb coaxing the braid
    across his knuckles
    index finger stroking
    the splayed end against his palm
    faint vanilla and musk
    when he kisses it
He can trace every wave
of every lock
    smooth on his skin
    smell the vanilla on my skin
    and the apples in my hair

"I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and
the truth of Imagination -- What the imagination seizes as Beauty must
be truth -- whether it existed before or not"

Did I really exist before?
Before these ivory letters,
before I wanted to labor over the sink
with sewing scissors
clipping daintily at the bottom layer of my hair.
Before I could find the voice
for blue parchment
    the voice that leads me now --
    my gauze covered eyes --

All the missives I have saved --
I wanted them
to make me real
    to construct me
into wholeness
into holiness.
They were my identity,
defining myself in relation to --
in comparison to --
    by association --

But Keats says a poet
must have no identity

"I begin to suspect myself and the genuineness of my feelings at other
times -- thinking them a few barren Tragedy-tears"

The old letters are weak now.
    tragedy-tears
    left to stain the thoughts
    of once-upon-a-time
    true loves
My comparisons are in relation to nothing.

I must believe
his letters will last longer --
be more durable --
until I can transfer all the electricity
into a different medium.

As if Oprah will care
Letterman will be so touched
    by our sentimental tripe
    period pieces
    Victorian letters and knight-to-his-lady letters
We’ll do the circuit --
    the sappy happy couple.
That sells as much as poetry.

Give us angst!
    I shall stab him after
    a jesus whale tells me
    he was cavorting with a fifty-year-old
    formerly gay woman
    who once was abducted
    by miniature Elvises
    and now we have both discovered
we wear each other's underwear
Then we'll do the circuit
preaching non-proliferation
and low cholesterol.

"I scarcely remember counting upon any happiness -- I look not for it if
it be not in the present hour -- nothing startles me beyond the Moment"

the masses want the startlement of
the Moment
shock us thrill us revolt us defile us

Could I turn the taste?
   to passion on the page
   written by two lovers
   without a codependency problem
Two lovers
   straining fingers, we search for words
   to testify again and again
   happiness and faith and joy

I believe there is a magic number
of letters turned poems
that will prove... 

my identity
if only to myself

the worth of my tragedy-tears
Interlude

For fifteen seconds everything
is perfect. We could be casual acquaintances,
lovers,
total strangers. That moment
silent eye contact
no words
yet between us,
anything seems possible.
He ruins everything,
speaks to me.
Not strangers.
What we were,
what we may be.
If only there were no words.
We spit pleasantries
our lives condensed
on index cards for easy reference
- - what a coincidence - -
- - the job is - -
- - to see you again - -
- - remember the park - -
- - remember where we would - -
- - remember, remember, remember - -

Past or future.
Never present.
His present – merely a state of transition
from is
to what could be.
To watch life appear and recede
with no part
Is it comforting?
- - how long are you here - -
- - only staying a few - -

the broom on the boardwalk as
the stock boy sweeps the landing in front of the bakery
the waves from a fishing boat hitting the breakwater
kids hopping up the wooden pier painfully warm from the sun
teenage girls wearing too much makeup going
to flirt at the Dairy Queen with the worker of the day
men in striped shirts in the fudge shop window
mixing chocolate on the marble counter with odd silver blades

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
swift strokes don't let any errant fudge over the edge

Nothing is enough to avoid the thought
of how he left me.
His hands turn his fedora in a circle
he was wearing it the first time
on Navy Pier by the mural,
Lake Michigan charcoal dark
- - Dinner some night - -

To prove we didn't part on rotten terms
that we still care
in an old warm blanket sort of way,
we hug
one arm goes
just around one shoulder
while holding most of the body back.

I want to pull him to me
complete contact
fingers digging into the space between vertebrae
breasts pierced by buttons
thighs kissing
I'm glad for my sunglasses.

He heads towards the lake in his uneven gait.
He broke his left leg when he was ten,
it's a little bit shorter than the right.
he walks on the balls of his feet,
almost bouncing.
I stare in a window at the copper cauldrons of boiling fudge
surprised at my own calm.
How civil we were,
how we've grown.
The children on the shore grow louder,
sensing my lie
or anticipating lunch.

The shade has left my car.
I handle the steering wheel gently,
trying not to touch it much.
Driving through the woods
the flickering sunlight hurts my eyes
I fixate on the road
willing the places we'd gone
to disappear.
the Circle M Corral
  trail rides and a spotted colt we fed apples
Bosaki’s
  fresh trout and candlelight
the Boardwalk Shops
  iron benches and Italian ices

Dinner
Prove I’m fine
  hurt but
better off
  see how great my life is!
Here, have a bite of my trout.
Why not say I’m angry
and hurt and confused?
  you flayed my heart open --
     and now I don’t trust --
I have a wonderful guy
  and I wait for him to leave.
Opposite ends of the table
blond wood with curved edges
separating us as we work.
Now
it all must happen.
now there is little room
for turns.

I could pull out screeching
the asshole in a blinding teal sport coupe
whipping a bitch in the middle
of three lanes of traffic
honking at the pleasant gentleman
in the sensible four-door corolla
who only wanted to turn right.

what now what now what now what now what now what now

mantras across my ivory worry stone
shaped like half a heart
my eyes ache in the sockets
oh to pluck it out
the source of my discontent
wishing answers would drop out of the sky
and crack apart on my skull
leaving me at least a fragment at my feet.

lost lost lost lost

I wanted this.
I fought and clawed and therapied
in order to have this
this sureness
this solidity this terrifyingly unshakable solidity.
I filled a hundred sheets of blue parchment
asking and promising and needing.
I thought I knew.
I thought I thought.
Spent a fruit fly's eternity
over and over again
agonizing late into the night
I pause to kiss him — a simple kiss — his hand on my shoulder — smiling down at me — he wears the carpet between living room and study

into a strange geography
with unfamiliar customs
and I without a phrase book.

There is a magic number
telling me how many stacks
of ivory envelopes would convince me.
There is a magic number
somewhere I know
of how many declarations would be enough
to drown the sound of my past.

boxes marked books
programs from every play
an eighty dollar surplus sale computer
a stuffed polar bear from the Brookfield Zoo
coins from Norway
an emerald ring
letters banded into neat stacks
      punched and put in binders
in corsages boxes
letters in a bag awaiting the recycling bin

    notes in a secret code
    sheets of name-that-tune tucked into lockers
    a five-subject notebook passed between desks half full of letters
    promises on yellow legal paper
    promises on computer-fed paper
    promises on dead letters

A pile of stones marking my travel.
"The weeds give up suddenly after a small struggle."

-- Gerald Stern

The weeds want to be king of the garden
plot to overrun those luscious tomatoes
climb up the carrot stalks storm the cucumbers
at night take the potatoes anytime
they won't see it coming But once the weeds knock over the turnip stand they see the fence Being king is impressive but not of a prison So the weeds light out for greener pastures open spaces Let the vegetables rot in their jail Weeds run free
SECTION FOUR

THE LIMINAL STATE
Edison's Axiom: Understanding the Equation

"I suppose every old scholar has had the experience of reading something in a book which was significant to him, but which he could never find again. Sure he is that he read it there; but no one else ever read it, nor can he find it again, though he buy the book, and ransack every page."

Ralph Waldo Emerson,
Journal entry, July 2, 1867 (1169)

Nearly a century and a half later, this sentiment still echoes the thoughts of many writers. Indeed, it is a fairly apt description of the elusive specter called inspiration. We write and we create, always looking for greater force that moves us to our moments of epiphany. The idea of the muse who guides us is as old as man, but do we really know what inspires us? Some impulses can be traced to certain works or people or events. Inspiration, however, comes in many forms and we limit ourselves if we close our eyes to it in any of its shapes.

My composition students mirror some of my thoughts from college days. The amount of inspiration is directly proportionate to the amount of time left for the assignment. Or, as it's more popularly known, procrastination is what yields inspiration. In this situation, the hapless
writer can usually easily meet the ninety-nine percent requirement of Edison’s equation for genius.

I have occasionally subscribed to this belief myself. There is something undeniable about the crush of time running out that creates a flurry of creativity, much like air escaping from a vacuum sealed jar of peanuts. As we watch the minutes slip by on the clock, we write because we must produce. Procrastination is the artist’s way of inducing the creative equivalent of “fight or flight” response. Well, artists and students.

But those who choose to create as their livelihood can’t afford the therapy bills that would come from living in that continual state of panic. Writers must find a way to inspire themselves to work every day. They must realize that true inspiration doesn’t always strike when needed; the procrastination induced frenzy has as much potential to be horrible as brilliant.

So in this daily push to create, where does the writer find her inspiration? In A Natural History of the Senses, Diane Ackerman discusses the difficulty of finding inspiration. She refers to writers as “a strange lot,” who know that any idea might turn into something bigger if only it receives the proper incentive (292). Ackerman describes the unusual habits of many writers, everything from smelling apples and drinking tea to writing in the nude and lying in a coffin (293-4).
The stimulation of one sense stimulates another; this is called synesthesia and is what writers look for in their lives. The beautiful sunset that drives them home to write or the perfect concerto that harmonizes with their body's rhythm inspires them even if they do not write about it directly. Synesthesia pushes emotions and ideas to the surface of our consciousness where they clamor for release.

The difficulty writers have is tapping into this well of ideas. Ackerman mentions that Picasso would walk through the forests of Fontainebleau to spur himself to paint. A walk in the forest sounds lovely; of course it would inspire someone. Ackerman points the difficulty in knowing "where and when and for how long and precisely in what way to walk, and then the will to go out and walk [the paths] as often as possible, even when one is tired . . . or has only just walked it to no avail" (293). Writers search endlessly for a certain path to creativity, but there are no signs or mile markers inside their heads.

Perhaps the elusiveness of inspiration explains why so many writers turn to other writers for ideas. Most writers can easily tell you which authors were influential in the formation of their world view and the central message in their work. We turn to other writers because they have conquered the challenge of finding something to say and also finding a meaningful way to say it. Young writers often model themselves on a favorite author to give themselves a sense of direction.
But this mentor figure is sometimes hard to find. I have always read a great deal and enjoyed all the works I read. I met Shakespeare in eighth grade and have admired him since. In fact, I spent the summer before I started high school trying to work my way through his comedies and tragedies. I have read them again since then; I read most books more than once. I have probably gone through C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* at least five times. Any book on Greek mythology I'll read more than that. Poetry, plays, fiction, non-fiction -- I'll read anything. I don't think I have ever found a work to be without some value, even if I didn't like it.

But for years, despite my ransacking of the library and bookstore shelves, I never experienced the moment that so many writers speak of, the moment that they know why they want to write. I had been moved by many books, but I don't think I had been (in a phrase of my favorite novelist) picked up and thrown across the room by a book.

Perhaps I had not had this moment because I was not yet ready for it. During the summer between my third and fourth years in college, I was buried in personal difficulties and unable to claim a goal for myself. As a theatre major, I had written a few one-acts and some monologues, but did I want to do that? As an English major, I had written short stories and teen angst poetry, but did I want to do that? I was the stereotypical young writer, unsure of my direction and of whether I had the courage to write. Was I any good at any form? Would I ever get published? Could I keep going through
all the rejection slips? Or should I pick a safer career? I didn’t have much confidence in my writing. I loved good books; I didn’t know if I could write them.

Enter Jeanette Winterson. *The Passion.*

I read this book and knew what I wanted to do. Her style is a bit unusual, almost seeming to be rambling but gradually displaying an overarching design. The story is fantastical, requiring some suspension of disbelief on the reader’s part. But her words— I felt her words. Of all the books I had read, I could not remember a book that produced a shiver that wasn’t from suspense. I would return to a line to read it slowly and let it sink into my consciousness. I held my breath as I looked up from the pages and thought about what she wrote. It was a different kind of reading experience than I had ever had. Even now as I write and I think of the first time I read that book, my eyes are growing blurry.

She spoke to me. I felt constantly as though I would have said the exact same if I had only been able to put it into words. “Passion is not so much an emotion as a destiny” (62). “What you risk reveals what you value” (91). She describes falling in love as if “without warning you find the solid floor is a trapdoor and you are now in another place whose geography is uncertain and whose customs are strange” (68).

I know these ideas but I also had to be shown them. I could not have said them, but I feel them. They are true to me. I have felt the uncertainty, the thrill and fear of being wrapping myself in a new love. I have had to
choose whether to risk what I value and in risking, seen what my values were. I have felt passion as a controlling force, one I pretend I have sway over and yet I am helpless before it. Her words put names and descriptions to my secret and yet universal desires and fears.

And I knew if I could ever write such a novel, and if one person ever felt the same as I had, as moved as I had been, then I would be complete. I wanted to give coherence to one person who was as mute as I had been, give courage to one as paralyzed with fear as I had been. If I could give voice to another person's feelings, if one person could say that I named her feelings, I could not, and still can not, imagine a greater accomplishment. Winterson comforted me; I need to pass that on to another.

I met *The Passion* through my first intense love. The night we first realized our feelings and struggled to deal with them (in light of his current relationship), we sat in the dark and he read a passage to me and I was breathless. It fit so absolutely, describing longing and the incapability of having the object of that longing. Neither of us would feel comfortable together until he had dissolved his other commitment.

He asked me to read one of his books and I took it, not knowing it was the one from which he had read to me. I was reading it at work when I came across the passage and I was once again breathless. I felt every word, every agony of the narrator. That night we talked about the book, different quotes and sections. It seemed I had been searching for this man, this book,
and this feeling and had not known it. This book became so much more for us than just a book.

One of the fantastical elements of the story happens when one of the narrators loses her heart, literally, to her lover. She has no heart beat in her chest. What an amazing idea, I thought, if love and souls were that tangible, though it did not make relationships any easier.

One night, my lover presented me with a black cloth package wrapped with a red velvet bow. It was a polished mahogany box lined with black velvet. Inside, lay a white clay heart with his name on it. Shaped by him and baked in his oven. Given to me for safe keeping.

I wept.

So now I had found my mentor, my inspiration. Winterson moved me as no one had before and I thought I saw my dreams and my goals clearly through her lens. If this is what writers need, I was prepared.

The problem arose when I came to expect this feeling from whatever I read. If a work was good, it should produce this feeling in me. If the work could not speak that strongly, surely it must not be what I need. I became a casual reader. If the work did not move me at a surface glance, I would breeze through it but not really try to understand it or feel it. I had set a standard and felt myself justified.

I suppose I can say that I was young. I had found an inspiration and used it to set a standard. But this standard was what was hurting my
writing. I was cutting myself off to other possibilities. And I didn’t really think about the way I had read The Passion. I realized this while reading a section from The Tao of Pooh.

"When you wake up in the morning, Pooh," said Piglet at last, "what’s the first thing you say to yourself?"

"What’s for breakfast?" said Pooh. "What do you say, Piglet?"

"I say, I wonder what’s going to happen exciting today?" said Piglet.

Pooh nodded thoughtfully.

"It’s the same thing," he said. (xi)

And it is the same thing if I let it be. Even Pooh with his little brain knew to embrace his life wherever it took him. The willingness is the key. When I read The Passion, I read it actively. I made notes about lines that I liked. When I discussed it with my boyfriend, we talked about specific lines and uses of language. When I found the passage he had read to me, the book meant more to me. I worked harder at it. That is how I opened myself to the book; I let it affect me. I was willing to give myself over to the book.

When I expected that inspiration to come to me immediately, I misunderstood what inspiration was. I thought that the one percent I had found would now multiply and decrease the level of effort I needed to write. Surely the inspiration would find me.
But Edison was not wrong in setting up the ratio of effort required. There is more inspiration in the world than the kind that shakes our souls. If we do not try, we will miss the other forms of inspiration. Anything that speaks to us, moves us in any way, is valuable. We must keep working and keep ourselves open to inspiration in any form. A moment on the beach, watching waves with your lover, can have just as much impact as the day you marry. The little moments are as important as life-changing ones. And a book cannot speak to you if you are not listening.

This is what Emerson speaks of when he talks about the mystery of reading. The thing that was so significant at one reading disappears because when you return to the book, the next reading is not the same. Or you took what you read and transformed it into another idea. But when you read the book again, some new stray line may speak to you in a subtle way. This previously unnoticed line may be what you find yourself trying to recall as you take up your pen. We must allow ourselves to experience every line, every word each time we come to a book. The inspiration can only come from putting ourselves into the effort of looking for inspiration. The effort is continual and difficult, but we cannot expect that a book or a meaning will come to us. We must look for it actively. Inspiration is not a gift that comes unasked; it is a goal we must struggle to reach.
In my undergraduate days, my friend Scott and I would talk often about pretty much everything. One afternoon, we were discussing his questionable relationship with his girlfriend and his attraction to someone else. He was upset and distracted. He told me he needed to make a pot of tea. Once the kettle was on the burner, he turned to me.

"You know what I like about tea?" he asked. "You can't rush tea."

Stopping to make tea served as an oasis for him. All the concerns on his mind could wait while he heated his teapot and got out the sugar bowl.

In the electronic age, we seem to have lost the idea that some things take time; some things are worth waiting for. Our mail is electronic. Beepers and cell phones make us available at any time. Our dinners are microwaveable or ready when we drive through the lane. Here in Las Vegas, there is even a drive-through wedding chapel. The pace is furious and we are expected to keep up with everyone else.

Perhaps this is why something as simple as the art of a cup of tea has been buried under a string of coffee shop chains. Coffee has become the standard drink. It's easy to get; most places have coffee ready to go. Just what you need on your coffee break -- it has to be ready because we don't have time to wait.
But why can’t we wait? What has changed in us, in our ideals? Coffee’s popularity over tea in the “America Century” is perhaps symbolic of the dominance of American values over the gentrified values of the last dominant culture, Victorian England. As it draws to a close, the twentieth century is picking up speed. Tea is just too leisurely to keep pace. By abandoning tea time, what else are we losing?

From our modern perspective, the connotations of tea are not very favorable. Some people get flashes of being eight years old, squirming on the couch while grandmother sipped her tea and wishing they were outside playing. Tea seemed to take too long. And it was something old people drank.

Or young people drank it. Namely little girls who would drag the closest person to a make-believe tea party with their stuffed animals. The victim would sip air while the little girls held the plastic cups up to yarn mouths and made the bears drink. Tea is too childish.

Most importantly, tea is too British. We get images of the rigid Victorians and their stuffy formality. We think of period movies where the ladies sit stiffly and stir with their pinkies in the air. Setting aside a certain time of day to have a beverage is frivolous to Americans. Tea is something shared by characters in a Jane Austen novel, not a drink for the real world.

Perhaps the tea reminds us that the British had time to enjoy their tea. The gentry did not have to toil in the fields or spend the day serving.
others just to make a few dollars. The upper class British usually inherited
their wealth or, after proper schooling, their fathers found them
appointments in the government or churches. With four or five thousand
pounds to draw on each year, they could afford not to work and allow
themselves the luxury of relaxing with a pot of tea. If Americans had that
much money, we could spend the afternoon drinking tea, too.

Most of us, however, don't have much money or leisure time. But
what if we allowed ourselves that time? Imagine what tea breaks would be
like. As my friend said, tea is not rushed. Tea breaks would be calming
affairs. Tea requires a few minutes of time and attention. The water needs
to be boiled; the tea selected and then steeped. I think the most appealing
part of tea may be this process. Tea doesn't have to be ready this second; you
have time to wait for it. That is why I champion tea. Precisely because it lags
behind, because it takes time.

I like to make tea in (considering the age of microwaves) an old-
fashioned way. I put on the kettle. When the water just starts to boil, I pour
a bit of it into the teapot to warm it up. Then I empty the water and put the
tea bags in the pot. I add fresh hot water from the kettle and let the tea steep.

Since the tea can get a bitter tang if it steeps too much, I have to pay
close attention to the color of the liquid, if I am familiar with the tea, or the
scent, if I am trying a new tea. I like a rich color and scent but not overly
dark or cloying. I prefer tea to taste subtle, not like a liquid Mack truck.
I add the sugar to the cup first and then add tea. Just a little sugar at first. I don't want to overpower the tea. The sugar should enhance the flavor, not replace it. Cinnamon Apple should taste like cinnamon and apple, not sugar water.

Overall, the tea and the very process seems dignified, like a slow, measured walk. The purpose is to slow down and savor the parts. So much in life feels rushed; work due yesterday, sixteen stops to make before I can get home and breathe. Tea, however, needs to be sipped. Small sips in the beginning when the tea is still boiling hot, moments holding the tea under my nose to enjoy the aroma, larger sips when it's just cool enough to drink, moments enjoying the trail of warmth flowing through my body. Tea helps me slow down.

Slow, however is not the American pace. The American way of life emphasizes hard work. Ever since settlers had to build a life in the wilderness, we've been pushing ourselves to be better than the rest, and faster than the rest. Sons might inherit a farm or a family business, but work usually came right along with it. We expect people to pull their weight, impress us with their dedication and drive to succeed. It is a capitalist society and you must produce to earn; the quicker, the better. We want results, and now. Product and efficiency.

What better drink for this than coffee? It's available wherever you go. If you need to keep up, coffee will give you a jolt -- a violent one, if it's
espresso. Stop in at "Jitters" and rev yourself up for the day. When you have to get as much done as you can as quickly as you can, plunk your quarter in the machine and it spits out an cup of liquid energy. The caffeine in coffee makes it a power drink; it will keep you alert and stimulate those brain cells to frenetic levels of activity. Coffee makes you peppy; tea will put you to sleep.

Coffee fits in well with our fast pace. Stop by any restaurant and there’s a full pot of coffee on the burner all day long. Coffee is easy to make and doesn’t require any attention. Dump the grounds in a filter, push a button and come back whenever you like. Half the time you don’t even have to do that much; a co-worker does it for you. Just bring your mug to the machine and grab the pot. No fuss, no hassle. You can be back at your desk in seconds. Program your machine and you can have the coffee ready in the morning when you finish your shower. Or just fill up your portable plastic mug at the gas station while you pump. One chain of gas stations is now advertising that the coffee is always no more than half an hour old or they’ll make you a fresh pot.

The quickness of coffee, both in its preparation and content, casts a pall on the pleasures of tea drinking. This whole process of tea, the waiting has become too self-indulgent for the modern world. We must always be doing something, producing something. Waiting has become a dirty word. Technology makes us accessible and we in turn expect that everything will
be accessible for us. There is no place to go where we cannot be reached. A few months ago I was sitting in a movie theatre and I was amazed when one of the other customers chose to answer his cell phone. He got up and stood at the back of the theatre and took the call. “Yeah, I’m at a movie. What do you want?”

This is the kind of mentality that would feel guilty sitting down to drink a cup of tea for no other reason than to enjoy it.

In an essay for The New Yorker, Noelle Oxenhandler refers to waiting as “a desperate act.” She talks about the idea of convenience and the way it has trapped us. She gives an example of a business man riding the train into the city with his office inside his briefcase in the form of a laptop, a fax modem, and a phone. He could be “watching the slowly emerging sun break the dark river into moving strokes of gold and pink light. But all the while he is clicking, tapping, speaking to people who are somewhere else” (66). He has not a moment to spare for the sun, the ride, or himself.

Do we work like this because we enjoy it? Or is it because we think it is expected? We don’t want to be left behind. Waiting gives us a feeling of helplessness. If we are doing nothing, someone else must be taking care of things. And we worry that they are not up to the responsibility. Even though that man might rather stare out the window and take a few deep breaths, in that space of time, his competitors could snatch a big deal out from under him or a co-worker could put a mediocre finish on one of their joint projects. Our fear of inactivity, or the repercussions of inactivity, forces
us to keep pace with the others despite the fact that we may not like it.

This translates to many aspects of our lives, even to our drinks. I know coffee drinkers who don’t really like coffee. A fellow teacher drinks coffee — but only with four creams and eight sugars. The coffee looks beige when he’s done mixing. Is there much of a coffee taste left? Why drink it if it needs that much assistance to be palatable? A jolt of caffeine? An undocumented addiction to non-dairy creamer? A loathing of the ozone layer and the urge to destroy as many Styrofoam cups as possible? Or are the swizzle sticks just more fun to play with after the beverage is gone than tea bags are?

He admits he drinks it for the caffeine, not really for the taste. It’s the perfect companion when he has to grade a stack of papers. He calls the taste “all right, I guess.” So why does he drink it? “I don’t know. Just a habit I picked up in college.”

College — the great preparation for the “real” world. Several people told me that when I went away to college, I would develop a taste for coffee. “But if I already drink tea, why would I drink coffee? I don’t like it.” “Best way to stay awake. Everybody drinks it.”

Apparently coffee is the mark of the college student. Having little money, college students need to study at diners whose main recommendation is the free refills on coffee. Well, they don’t really study; they hold theoretical discussions on Sartre and Hemingway and feel
intellectual. They build towers on the table with the plastic tubs of nondairy creamer. It's some sort of adult-izing ritual that eighteen-year-olds are eager to experience. Actually, I think these days thirteen-year-olds guzzle coffee regulars in between cigarettes.

Is this why coffee is the beverage of importance? Because it seems to be such an "adult" drink? And because "everyone" drinks it. When we get our corporate jobs, we have to be ready to take coffee breaks with the rest of the grown-ups. We have to be at the same pace as they are. We have to be efficient and fast if we want to get anything done and if we want to move ahead. Time is crucial.

I would agree that time is crucial, but we have lost the most essential part -- time for ourselves. We feel guilty if we are not being productive. The time of afternoon tea parties is past. The modern world will speed right by you if you glance away.

When I lived in Illinois, I used to move the papasan chair in front of my picture window on rainy afternoons. I would pull out a book and make a cup of tea, preferably a homey flavor like Lemon Soother or Cinnamon Spice. I would end up with the book in my lap as I cradled my tea and watched the lightning and the rain on the window. I would watch and sip for hours.

Living in Las Vegas and going to graduate school, I've fallen into the same line as everyone else. If I sit and relax, I become convinced that I
should be studying Browning or grading papers or thinking of great ideas for a conference presentation. The last thing I should be doing is sitting around watching the sky. Which is why I need to do it.

We get so caught up in what needs to be done today or what was supposed to be done yesterday that we forget what we want to do. As I finish graduate school, I feel like I don’t know myself any more. I have books that I bought two years ago that I haven’t read and a new teapot I got for Christmas that I haven’t used yet. I constantly worry about my list of things to do. I cry because I’m so worried about my responsibilities. I can feel the pressure to work harder and achieve more. And I don’t like it. I now have to make a conscious effort to slow down.

We need to step back from our modern rush. Tea is just a small example of what we will deny ourselves in our quest for productivity and efficiency. Instead of drowning life in great gulps of coffee, we would do very well to look at how the Victorians paced themselves. What good is being faster and better if we can’t take the time to enjoy it?
Cookie Cutters of One's Own

One of my family's Christmas traditions is cutting and decorating molasses cookies. This project usually takes place on Christmas Eve, or sometimes the 23rd; we all have horrible sweet tooths and if we made the cookies earlier, there would be none left by Christmas.

The cookie making is a special process. My mother or grandmother rolls out the dough and the children descend with flour covered cookie cutters. After baking and cooling, we sit at the table and wait for the iced cookies to be passed to us. Colored sugars and sprinkles accompany our stories explaining the unusual hue of the lion or Santa's blue outfit. The only rule is not to lick our fingers. If my grandmother catches us, we get sent to wash our hands and consequently fall behind in the decorating.

Thanks to this tradition, our mother used to get cookie cutters for gifts every Christmas, sometimes on birthdays if we were stuck for ideas. We thought we had covered everything. Luckily for us, she moved to Las Vegas a few years ago and we could now delve into desert themed cookie cutters. After all, the batch of cookies wouldn't be complete without the traditional Christmas gecko and the ever festive Christmas cactus.

Mom's collection of cookie cutters now fills up a plastic bag from The Gap. We have a rule that we have to use each cutter at least once so it won't feel left out. Last Christmas, we were halfway through the double batch of dough before we'd used every cutter. All of them from the elephant with...
the sensitive trunk to the football helmet were covered with flour and spread out on the counter in front of us.

"Mom," I said as I watched her roll out the dough again, "someday I'm going to have a Gap bag full of cookie cutters. Then I'll know I've arrived."

I've been living on my own for about six years now. My parents helped me out with money during college, but I made sure the bills were paid and went grocery shopping and re-arranged furniture. Does this make me an adult? At least, in my parents' eyes? I never really thought much about it; I just figured children always seem like children to their parents.

Two Christmases ago, I was preparing to move into an apartment with my boyfriend, Jason. I'd never lived with a boyfriend before; it didn't even seem that casual because we were planning to get engaged after he moved up here. My parents knew this. Mom had even helped me find the apartment. They thought Jason and I were a wonderful match.

Christmas was kind of hectic because we were trying to do the rounds of relatives. I flew to California and we did a quick tour: dinner with his father, drinks with some friends, Christmas Eve with aunts, uncles, and a grandfather. Christmas morning we got up early to drive to Vegas to be with my parents. After that, we made a visit to Salt Lake City for New Year's to see his mother and more grandparents. All this negotiating of relatives made me feel worn out and as good as married— but adult and responsible.
I got cookie cutters in my stocking that year. It was a small packaged set of four, a snowman, a bell, a star, and a holly leaf. This made me feel more grown-up than all the visiting and apartment hunting did.

What had changed? Why was I now getting cookie cutters even though I had been on my own, cooking and baking for myself, for four years? Perhaps my mother had not thought of it before then. Maybe she was out Christmas shopping and happened to see some cookie cutters. Maybe my sister asked for some and Mom thought, "I'll get some for Nicole, too." Or maybe it was because I would be getting married soon.

Marriage is one of the few rites of passage left in this country. Actually, definite rite of passage is probably more correct. Americans have stretched out the transition to adulthood over nearly a decade. Confirmation can be around thirteen. Driver's license at sixteen. Voting at eighteen. Drinking at twenty-one. Responsibility has been broken down into pieces, rationed out like Halloween candy so the children don't make themselves sick. Is it any wonder that children are confused? What message is being sent by this process?

Some people celebrate their twenty-first birthday with abandon, but does society really consider them adults at this age? Even at twenty-one, many people have not graduated from college, do not have a "real job" or cannot support themselves. Once the college graduates find jobs to pay for their own rent, do the families treat them as adults? Often this time is
regarded as time to “play the field” or “live the bachelor life,” a time to get rid of immaturity before “settling down” and passing the rite of marriage.

Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep coined the phrase “rite de passage” after studying African tribes and their practices for turning children into adults. The traditional rites of passage as described by van Gennep involve a separation of the individual from the society. This period of time while removed from society is called the limin, meaning the threshold. During the liminal state, the individuals undergo some sort of education to prepare them for passage to the next level. They also experience some freedom because the normal rules of behavior are suspended. The liminal period is followed by a reunification with society, often accompanied by a celebration to mark the individual’s passage over the threshold.

There are still tribes in Africa that follow these strict rituals for making their boys into men. When the boys are around thirteen, they are taken from their homes one night and brought to a building outside the village made especially for them. There they are instructed daily on how an adult acts. The elders of the village spend about a week drilling the code of conduct into the boys’ minds: as a man, you will do thus. The boys must sneak into the village and steal food without being seen (an example of a reversal of normal rules). At the end of the training, the boys are circumcised and led back to the village where everyone waits to celebrate with them. There is a festival to welcome the boys into the tribe as adults.
In America, however, we do not have that definite step from puberty into adulthood. Our path to adulthood is drawn out, so that puberty is an ongoing circumstance, followed by something called “young adulthood.” College would seem to be a four year cycle of the rite of passage, with the separation, freedom, and reunification; it fails, however, because often the children are not treated as adults when they return home for the summer. Usually they revert directly back to high school status: they sleep in the same bed, do the same chores and follow the same rules as before they went away to college.

For some reason, even after a college graduation we seem to have trouble accepting an individual as an adult until he or she is married. Single men and women in their mid-thirties with strong careers and homes of their own still hear from their relatives the litany of “When are you going to get married?” As if marriage is an essential validation needed in one’s life.

Hundreds of years ago, the rite of passage to adulthood was more certain and closer to puberty, although often still tied to marriage. When a girl began menstruating, she was an adult, ready to be married off and begin her duties as a woman, namely producing children. At puberty, boys became squires and trained to become knights, and thereby men.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the ages for marriage were slowly receding. Girls had to be “brought out” (an interesting link to
the separation part of the rite), usually around seventeen or eighteen. The social season served the purpose of introducing the young folk to each other so that a girl could find a husband. The poor girls only had a short time, though; if several seasons went past without an offer of marriage, people would begin to suspect there was something wrong with the girl. Should she reach her mid-twenties and still be single, she would be considered quite on the shelf. The men were being given more latitude in the age for marrying. They could wait until late twenties to marry, but most could not tarry too long. The young men were expected to marry so they could to produce heirs to insure the family line.

Jane Austen summed the situation up nicely in the opening of Pride and Prejudice: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (1). Mrs. Bennet simply hears of Bingley renting Netherfield Park and plans to marry one of her daughters to him, sight unseen. What better business can there be than getting two young people married? Especially if the gentleman is wealthy; he must use his fortune to take care of a family or else he might squander it on gaming and whiskey.

As society progresses into the twentieth century, the age for marriage continues to slip backwards. More people begin to go to college and some view this as the opportunity to find a spouse. Girls often joked about getting their M.R.S. degree. Most men no longer inherited fortunes (but
occasionally the family business) and felt the need to build a career for financial support before committing to marriage.

Now women are feeling the same impulses for security. As divorce became more widespread, daughters who watched their mothers struggle in the secretarial pool throw themselves into careers so that they do not have to be dependent on their husbands, either financially or for their self-worth. Women are using careers to build their self-esteem and establish identities for themselves rather than being known as the wife of a successful husband. Men and women are both taking more time for themselves, to be on their own before they commit to spending their lives with another person. (Or get a divorce.)

So why does this time of our own, building a single life, not qualify as adulthood? Why do we need marriage as the threshold?

Humanity fears its own mortality. Traditions and order give us a sense of stability and purpose. In A Natural History of Love, Diane Ackerman discusses love's customs and rituals in relation to this need for tradition. "Without a pattern, we feel helpless... We rely on patterns, and we also cherish and admire them" (260). Men and women marry. They have children and the children marry. So it goes on, for generations. The custom of becoming an adult when one marries and leaves her parents' home is deeply embedded in our subconscious, perhaps even our world view. The ritual gives the world order and design. It supports the feeling that there is some higher pattern, some path that we are all destined to take.
As the age for marriage crept back, so did our perception of adulthood. We filled in the gap with these markers of a driver’s license and a legal drinking age because we need a progression; we needed something to fill the time. Steps for the children to take until they reach the step that resonates with our instincts.

Was this why my mother gave me cookie cutters for Christmas? The fact of setting up a home rather than an apartment I share with a roommate sparked an impulse in her. A subconscious need to prepare me for my own home. For adulthood.

This past Christmas I had a few friends over to decorate cookies at my apartment. I helped Mom cut the cookies at her house and she gave me some to take with me. Now I was the one frosting the cookies and telling my friends not to lick their hands. On Christmas Eve, I joined my family in the usual decoration ceremony. That was more fun for me. When I was busy icing, I didn’t get to decorate much. Maybe I’m not ready to be the one frosting the cookies.

I received more cookie cutters in my stocking this year: a tree, a reindeer, a candle, a gingerbread man and woman, a santa, and another bell. I had a holiday tin left over from sending out packages of candy to relatives -- just perfect for storing the cutters.

At the post-Christmas sales, I picked up a few more cookie cutters. At half price, how could I resist?
After Valentine's Day, I picked up some heart shaped cookie cutters, also at fifty percent off. Cute bite size ones.

Next, the home store where we'd registered for wedding gifts announced it would be closing. Since the store was being liquidated of course everything was on sale. So even though I came to buy a comforter, I picked up a few more cookie cutters. After peeling off price tags, I pulled down my tin to store the cutters.

The tin will no longer hold all of them. Did I mean to fill it up so quickly? Did I need to? Was this what I meant when I said I'd know I had arrived?

No. It feels a little silly now to have so many cutters. I was trying too hard to accumulate a collection. The reason my mother's collection is so wonderful is that each cutter has a history. The elephant has a sensitive trunk and we have to push just right on it to get it to cut correctly. Because of this, my sister would always grab it and say she should do it. So I would take the Scottie and refuse to share it. The santa has a green wood handle and is at least twenty years old. The camel cutter is the one that always inspires the most creative decorating stories for me. I remember some of these cutters from the days when I decorated cookies especially for Santa.

I guess my idea of adulthood is my mother's bag of cookie cutters. A history with a family. My cookie cutters won't mean much to me until my husband and I make up stories to go with them.
WORKS CITED


VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Nicole Anne Freim

Home Address:
4250 South Arville #280
Las Vegas, NV 89103

Degrees:
Bachelor of Arts, English, 1994
Northern Illinois University

Bachelor of Arts, Theatre, 1994
Northern Illinois University

Special Honors:
Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society, 1998
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

University Honors and English Departmental Honors on Degree, 1994
Northern Illinois University

Mortar Board Senior Honor Society, 1993-94
Northern Illinois University

Golden Key National Honor Society, 1991-94
Northern Illinois University

Papers Presented:
Poetry Reading, selections from "Parallel Courses," Far West Popular
Culture Conference, February 1998

Poetry Reading, selections from "Paper Weights," April 1997

Thesis Title: Parallel Courses: Poetry and Essays

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Dr. Claudia Keelan, M.F.A.
Committee Member, Dr. Christopher Hudgins, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Susan Taylor, Ph.D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Corina Mathieu, Ph.D.