

NIGHTCAPS AND VIGNETTES: REFLECTIONS
THROUGH POETRY

An Honors Thesis
Presented to the Honors Program of
Angelo State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Highest University Honors
BACHELOR OF ARTS

by
Jennifer Rose deBie
May 2015
Major: English

NIGHTCAPS AND VIGNETTES: REFLECTIONS THROUGH POETRY

by

JENNIFER ROSE deBIE

APPROVED:

Dr. Chris Ellery, Chair
Professor of English

Dr. Terry Dalrymple
Professor of English

May 7, 2015
Date Successfully Defended and
Approved by Advisory Committee

APPROVED:

Dr. Shirley M. Eoff May 15, 2015
Director of the Honors Program

For Mary.

sister, friend, inspiration

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not be possible without the love of my family, the support of my friends, and the tolerance of my professors. It took many sleepless nights, but we made it, and I am forever grateful to everyone who helped me through this process. A special thanks to Dr. Shirley Eoff of the Angelo State University Honors Program for encouraging me to pursue a creative thesis. I am also grateful to Dr. Chris Ellery for agreeing to be my primary thesis advisor and for his infinite patience with my poetry both in and outside of his classes. Thank you to Dr. Terry Dalrymple for also serving on my thesis committee and for being a mentor with my prose writing.

Thanks must also be given to Alvin and Patricia New, without whom I would never have been able to travel with the Honors Program. My travels and the resulting poetry were only possible thanks to their generosity.

ABSTRACT

Through the Honors Program at Angelo State University I have traveled and been given opportunities beyond those generally available to undergraduates. Throughout these experiences I wrote poetry and other creative works and now, as a senior, have compiled them as a record of my growth as both writer and scholar. This selections presented here reflect the range of opportunities from special courses to conferences and independent travel that characterize an Honors education. They also reflect the friendships forged in an interdisciplinary learning community.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Before.....	1
Great Basin National Park	6
• Great Basin.....	13
• Bristlecone	14
• Seeing Stars.....	15
• Ponder	16
• Fear	17
Conferences: NOLA & Nowhere.....	18
• Time in an airport.....	25
• Fortune	26
• Honors Conference	27
• Realize.....	28
• Time Fish	29
Poets in Florence.....	30
• Listen.....	41
• Frog Song.....	42
• Legs.....	43
• You look much smaller.....	44
• Sybil?	46
• Wisdom with Globe and Scroll.....	47
• To a God	48
• To a Girl.....	48
• Croc.....	49
• Crystal.....	50
• The way.....	51
• Spine Dust.....	52
• Galapagos.....	53
• Eden	54
• Baby	55
• Honey.....	56
• Fiddler.....	57
• Kinfolk	58
• Content.....	59

• Villa la Pietra	60
• She.....	65
Conferences: A Mile Up & Beachin'	72
• Selene.....	79
• There's an Impressionist on My Windshield.....	80
• Apple Sky.....	81
• Interstellar	82
• Believe	83
• Padre	84
• Mother Alligators.....	85
• Summer Lover	86
• Puddle Jump.....	87
Vietnam Veteran Interviews	88
• The Roses Won.....	102
• Good Stories.....	103
• They Sent us Back	105
• <i>Who?</i>	107
• (17, 107) DMZ.....	108
• "Do you believe in God?"	109
After	110
Bibliography:	113
VITA.....	115

Before

Spring 2015

Jennifer deBie, Angelo State
University Honors Program

Writing is an act of
faith, not a trick of
grammar.

- E. B. White

Before I grew to be a poet I intended to be a novelist. I could not understand the importance of poetry beyond its use in song lyrics and word games, and therefore had no use for it as a writer. This thesis is a retrospective documentation of my realization that poetry is much more than ornamentation and word games. The poems and experiences described in the pages of this document begin the summer after my sophomore year of college and continue until the end of my senior year.

Every poem in this collection was written during or after an experience provided through the Honors Program at Angelo State University. This does not include the poems written for my classes at ASU but instead follows my experiences outside those of a typical university student. By collecting only those poems I wrote while traveling or learning with the Honors Program I have documented not only my development as a poet over time but also my growth as an Honors Student and a scholar.

The collection was amassed at the end of my final year as an undergraduate student as my thesis and a documentation of my maturation through the Honors Program. The process of documenting my Honors experience and growth through poetry has been introspective and humbling. Early poems show an appreciation for nature and a rigid, childish rhyme scheme. As I became more practiced, and studied under actual poets rather than relying on my own small preconceptions of poetry, my poems develop technical subtlety and show a greater understanding of art, science, geology, philosophy, human tragedy, and human triumph. This

is not only because of the professors I have had but also because of the other students from all branches of learning that I have met along my journey.

Through Honors I was exposed to more interdisciplinary learning. In Honors seminars I was challenged to view topics from multiple perspectives and to recognize the ways in which subjects like science and history and art can be woven together. Long discussions with my friends and professors in the Honors Lounge, airports, busses, hotel rooms, and conference lobbies, mountainsides, museums, sea turtle rescue centers and hundreds of other odd places where discussions happen, helped shape me and my perceptions of our interconnected world and thus my poetry.

The first set of poems was written while traveling to Great Basin National Park through the National Collegiate Honors Council with their Partners in the Parks program in the Summer of 2013. On these Partners trips, Honors students from all over the country gather to spend a week in a National Park learning about the biology, ecology, and importance of these Parks to our nation and our future by seeing and working in the environment we are learning about.

The next poems were written while traveling to New Orleans, Louisiana, and Fort Smith, Arkansas, for national and regional Honors Conferences with my fellow ASU Honors students in the Fall of 2013 and Spring of 2014. These conferences serve as venues for students to showcase their research and opportunities to see how they compare to Honors students across the country. At conference we are encouraged to attend sessions outside our direct field of study and thus see the ways in which other majors can tie into our own.

The middle, and largest, group of poems was written during my month in Florence, Italy, studying with New York University's Poets in Florence program in the Summer of 2014. In Florence I studied and wrote intensively and explored styles and movements in poetry that I had not previously studied. I was surrounded by a community of writers just as passionate about writing as I was and from more diverse backgrounds than any group of people I encountered previously. During my time there I wrote poems both for class and on my own as the inspiration struck—a selection of that poetry is presented in this section.

The fourth section was written while in Denver, Colorado, and South Padre Island, Texas, while again traveling for national and regional Honors Conferences. These were written during my senior year in the Fall of 2014 and the Spring of 2015. These poems are reflective on time passing but also display a nostalgic return to playful rhymes of my early poetry.

The final section of poems was written in the Spring of 2015 for the Texas Oral History Association Conference in Commerce, Texas. They were written out of my experiences the previous spring and fall collecting interviews of Vietnam Veterans for the West Texas Collection of Angelo State University through an Honors independent study course to archive personal recollections of the Vietnam War. These poems were written amidst the process of researching background information, interviewing these veterans, transcribing those interviews, and processing what we heard in the interview room. Included in this section is the paper I presented at the TOHA Conference and excerpts from the interviews conducted to create the Vietnam archives at ASU.

The poems included in this thesis span almost three years and thousands of miles. They document my experiences, from camping under the Nevada stars to listening to war stories in interview rooms. Writing these poems was the way I relaxed before bedding down in a foreign country and the way I recorded a sunburn souvenir from the Texas coast. They are my impressions of the world I have seen, both its beauty and its horror. This thesis contains my evening indulgences and my daylight reflections, my nightcaps and vignettes.

Imbibe responsibly.

Great Basin National Park

Summer 2013

National Collegiate Honors
Council

We do not inherit
the earth from our
ancestors; we
borrow it from our
children.

- **Wendell Berry**

When I packed my bag for Great Basin National Park late in the Summer of 2013, I expected to sweat. I expected a week in the Nevada heat practicing my camping skills. I expected to drink lots of water and bathe minimally. I expected to sleep wrapped in the comfortable rest that only comes after spending a day experiencing the world with every muscle and bone. I expected to journal every night.

No amount of packing, planning, or anticipating could have prepared me for what I experienced that week.

Great Basin National Park is home to some of the darkest nights in the continental United States. Light pollution within the Park is almost nonexistent with not so much as an EXIT sign lit outside the Visitors' Center. This darkness means that on clear nights, "thousands of stars, five of our solar system's eight planets, star clusters, meteors, man-made satellites, the Andromeda Galaxy, and the Milky Way can be seen with the naked eye" ("Great Basin Nat'l Park: Astronomy" n. pag.). Great Basin hosts weekly astronomy programs and annual astronomy festivals for guests from around the country and across the world. In short, lots of people who can speak about stars at length travel great distances to see this comparatively small National Park.

None of us were astronomers, so we could not talk at length about the stars. We were instead a Physical Education professor from Southern Utah University, an army-brat History major from Virginia, a conservationist student from Baltimore, an International Business student studying in Baltimore and myself. Our team leader might have been a well versed outdoorswoman, but the most any of the students in our group could do was lean back at night, in the quiet that falls when the fire is low and supper finished, and watch. It was in

those empty minutes that were not empty that we, a handful of students thrown together in a place totally foreign to us all, melded into a team. We talked about our childhoods, our futures, who we were back home, who we would be one day. We told stories. We bragged. We self-deprecated. We wondered at our place in the universe and our places in our universities. Some of us signed up for Partners in the Parks because of a desire to work for non-profits as conservationists after we graduated; others were there to get away from civilization for a week. All of us students were a little lost the way all students seem to be a little lost when we are comfortable enough to admit it out loud. There, under the stars, we would ask our team leader what we would do the next day.

Our time in Great Basin National Park was a dozen different experiential learning fragments thrust together into one week. Learning through doing and across disciplines is one of the hallmarks of an Honors education and by traveling to a place like Great Basin National Park we had the opportunity to learn in ways that can never be replicated in a classroom. Because we came from such different majors and a variety of places we all approached learning in a National Park differently. I fell into old Girl Scout habits of being prepared for anything while my friend studying conservation looked at our gear in terms of using the least possible and leaving little impact on the environment.

We electro-fished with the rangers in charge of wildlife management to take a census of the Bonneville Cutthroat Trout, an endangered species found only in Great Basin within Nevada state lines. We tagged rattlesnakes with a local graduate student conducting conservation research on nesting females. We hiked with our team leaders and learned the history of the National Parks Service. We went to astronomy programs and listened to people

who knew the stars talk about the heavens. We attended an evening bat program. We spent hours listening to the bat detector, a machine that turns bats' echolocation into sounds audible to human ears, in a circle around a park ranger with a guitar and a silly song about bats making tequila.

That was the first poetry I heard in Great Basin, a song about bats pollinating agave plants and thus making tequila. It was one ditty written by a ranger with a few chords and some spare minutes, but it sparked something inside me. It made my fingers twitch and rhymes roll through my head. The day after, I wrote my first poem in Great Basin National Park, a repetitive little poem about the land surrounding one green mountain and the peace that could be found on its slopes ("Great Basin").

I had experimented with little rhymes and small poems for years but never practiced them, never dreamed poetry was something I might need to work at beyond casual scribbles. Poetry was meant to highlight prose, entertain children, or accompany music. It was not something to be deliberately planned out beyond the next couplet and the way those lines dovetailed with the rhymes preceding them. I was under the impression that only rhyming poetry was true poetry. My rhymes were simplistic and exact. I had no use for slant rhymes or complicated rhyme schemes.

What I wrote was meant to be pleasant to the reader as well as the listener, the sort of poetry that bounces like the poems found in my books as a child. Dr. Seuss books, snatches of poetry from school like the "Miss Suzy" hand clapping game, or joke songs meant to tease the other team at football games or heckle the pitcher at baseball games were my early exposure to poetry. Rap songs from the early 2000s like Eminem's "Cleanin out my Closet"

and Gibbs' "Chain Hang Low" also helped to shape my perception of modern poetry, and the modern poet as a rhymer only. To me all of these seemed like simple poems coming from simple inspirations. Later I would find the depth in the music I loved growing up but that would not come until after I learned how to read and understand poetry critically. It would take practice and respect for poetry as an art rather than a game before I learned nuance in my writing.

Later I would learn to write poetry that did not rely on telling rather than showing my readers what I wanted them to know or learn, but in Great Basin I was not yet practiced in the art of inflection. My poems each contain a central theme individually and collectively contain a theme of awe at the grandeur of nature. These themes would eventually develop depth as I took poetry classes and studied poetry critically in my course work at ASU. As I grew, I would find a voice in my poetry beyond rhyme and awe, but in Great Basin I was not thinking about the future and how I would grow. I was thinking about the past and exactly how old the land I walked on was.

The Bristlecone Pines in Great Basin fascinated me. Bristlecones are among the oldest living things on earth. In 1964 a student researcher was taking a core sample of one of the pines, named Prometheus by a group of naturalists, at the foot of Wheeler Peak to determine approximate age, when his corer became stuck. A helpful ranger assisted him by cutting the twisted, sickly looking little tree down and freeing the instrument. Later, that researcher counted the rings on a segment of the felled tree. There were over 4,900 distinctly countable year rings. To date Prometheus is considered the oldest living thing recorded, dead or alive, and the presence of the Bristlecone forest beneath Wheeler Peak was a driving force

behind the creation of Great Basin National Park. All known Bristlecones are now protected on federal lands, standing on top of their mountains in naked spirals toward the sky (“Great Basin National Park: The Prometheus Story” n. pag.).

The idea of a tree that outdates civilization as we know it dug at me. A tree that was old when Christianity was young. A tree that witnessed the arrival of new cultures, ideas, diseases and cures to the shores it stood on for thousands of years. A tree that was felled for no other reason than human error. I wrote a poem. A poem about a twisted ancient pine that watched and did not judge humanity (“Bristlecone”). This poem was my reflection on the incredible hubris of mankind and the insignificance of a human lifespan when compared to these ancient trees.

We backpacked in the back country for the final two days of our week in Great Basin and I wrote a poem about the stars (“Seeing Stars”) and another about the proper role of a poet in society (“Ponder”). I wrote and rhymed and rhymed and wrote and in the end came up with a handful of poems that made me smile every time I read them. On the flight home I wrote one last little poem about the nerves that came with flying by myself, the first of several poems I would write in airports about airports and planes and travel and the potential for change (“Fear”).

My Great Basin poems were reflective. They mirrored my sense of insignificance against the age and beauty of the landscape I was surrounded by while writing. They display an early, clumsy attempt to incorporate natural science and history into my work. Later I would learn to weave subjects like science, history, and art into my poetry with more aplomb as my understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of learning deepened and my skill with

writing poetry became honed, but this would not be for some time. Sentences did not always make sense but the rhymes were fun and I considered these poems the pinnacle of my poetic ability. I was going to write fiction anyway, poetry was superfluous. Fluff. The forced rhyme schemes and vague imagery I created were meant as games for personal enjoyment. I thought they were good but because I had no intention of being a serious poet, I felt no need to look, or attempt, to create something deeper.

I learned many things that week about myself and ecology and my fellow Honors students across the country. I learned to properly load a backpack, how to preserve animal tracks in plaster of Paris, how to treat boot-blisters, how to guesstimate elevation by vegetation. I learned that people have incredible capacity to defend our environment and great potential to destroy it, both purposefully and by accident. I learned that history majors from Virginia can sometimes take the most beautiful pictures and that the concept of dry shampoo is not as counterintuitive as it sounds. I discovered how to apply my talent with words to what I learned from naturalists and scientists surrounding me in order to create poetry. I learned that just because a team leader had silver hair and stood less than five feet in her hiking boots did not mean that she could not walk the socks off a teenager with a runner's background and a chip on her shoulder.

I learned that I liked the idea of using poetry to teach science or history. I did not learn that poetry, like all other crafts, must be practiced and honed.

It would take time, but I would discover otherwise.

Great Basin

There is a mountain in the desert
An island in the sage
A mountain in the desert
An island in its age
A mountain in the desert
A home to many things
A mountain in the desert
A place to give hope wings

There is an island in the brushland
A mountain green and old
An island in the brushland
With beauty to the soul
An island in the brushland
A place with grip and hold
An island in the brushland
Where distance takes its toll

This mountain in the desert
This island on the brush
This place it drowns my senses
And bids the world to hush
May it be forever lonely
May it stay forever wild
This island in the desert
Half ancient and half child

Bristlecone

I saw a twisted pine tree,
the oldest on the earth.
It made me feel my youngness.
It made me see my birth
as not a bright occasion,
the greatest of them all.
But just another mewling ant:
naked, wet, and small.
This tree it could remember
the birth of many kings,
and empires and armies
so why remember me?
Me who's so important.
Me who is so great.
Me who climbed the mountain
to stare down my small fate.
That I will pass unnoticed
by this denizen of time.
That days will dawn and empires fall
unnoticed by the pine.
That humanity is infant
when taken to compare
to those who stood before us
and those who still are there.
It is our youth and folly
that has us thinking thus:
we have a right to conquest,
our triumph in our "us".
The pine tree stood alone
even among its kind,
a spiraled, naked ancient.
A lord above all time.
It showed its scars and beatings,
it looked near to its age.
The twisted, ancient pine tree,
a lord above the sage.

Seeing Stars

For I have seen
with my human eyes
many suns rise
in many strange skies.

For I have seen
the stars at night
that shine o'er the highlands,
that gleam near and bright.
But ne'er have I seen
skies quite like this;
where the whole world is still,
the birds and the fish.

And the streams where they run
are merry and sweet,
this is a place
unlike any to meet.

A place set aside
from the rest of the earth.

A place that is old
and full of new birth.

This is a place
few would call home,
for this is a place
to come be alone.

I've seen many places.

I've watched many skies.

I've wandered through spaces
with wide child's eyes.

But ne'er have I seen
a sky quite like here,
where the stars, they are brighter
And all soul is near.

Ponder

What is a poet thinking
in the dim and distant hush,
in the whisper of the aspen,
in the lilting river's rush?

Where does a poet wander
when alone in all the wild,
when surrounded by an earth
that makes the ancient child?

What is a poet doing
when alone and soft,
when all that lives around her
is moving, droning off?

Are poets always lost ones
or are they often found?
Is a poet just a person
when no one is around?

Is a poet just a wordsmith,
a human flesh and bone,
an infant in an adult's mind,
a soul left too long lone?

A poet is a compass,
a lighthouse and a map.
A human with a conscience
and the talent all in wraps

to give the human story
as it is for all.
A poet is a beacon
with words to fly or fall.

Fear

Fear is our weakness
Fear makes us strong
Fear keeps us safe
Fear guides us wrong

Fear leaves us pinioned
Low to the ground
Our wings they are useless
They wait to be found

Fear is a demon
That lives deep inside
It tightens our guts
It shuts our eyes

But fear brings us courage
Or so I've been told
Strength comes from burning
When fear leaves you cold

Conferences: NOLA & Nowhere

Fall 2013/Spring 2014

National Collegiate Honors
Conference/Great Plains Honors
Conference

He who would
learn to fly one day
must first learn to
stand and walk and
run and dance; one
cannot fly into
flying.

**-Friedrich
Nietzsche**

Part of academic life that I did not anticipate when I came to college was the “conference culture” of the Angelo State University Honors Program. What little I knew of conferences coming into college life was that they were restricted to a minority of students, and were considered academically prestigious. I did not consider that as a member of my Honors Program, I might be one of that small number of students to participate in this “conference culture”.

Prior to my first conference I had only heard about the research aspects of conference presentation. I thought of conference in terms of lab research and mathematical proofs, in other words the hard sciences. Because I did not study a science of any sort, I did not think I was eligible to go to conference. I did not know what a Master Class was, or the possibility that I might have the opportunity to go to conference for poetry. Master Classes are one of the more unique aspects of Honors Conference in particular and an Honors education in general. They give students the opportunity to showcase their unique skills, talents, and perspectives outside the confines of traditional research presentations. By opening Master Classes to students from all disciplines they encourage more of the interdisciplinary learning and communication that makes Honors special.

N.O.L.A.

My first conference was the National Collegiate Honors Council Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the Fall of 2013 where I participated in the Poetry Master Class and Showcase. The Master Class involved discussing our work with fellow student poets, whose work we discussed in turn, while being moderated by a poetry professor from a different university than any of the students. This impartiality was a boon to us students as poets, even

young poets still learning their craft, can become heated and defensive when discussing their work.

New Orleans is an amazing city, but to me it is much more than a tourist destination. My father's family has lived in and around New Orleans for centuries. When he was seventeen, his parents shipped him from their home in Beaumont, Texas, to his aunt's home in Lakeview, a suburb of the Big Easy. In the summer of 2006 my father, my sister, and I spent a week and a half working on that same aunt's home in the wake of the August and September 2005 hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

New Orleans is at once fascinating and utterly familiar. While in the city for conference, I ate with my aunt and uncle in local restaurants where they knew the owners because the owners were storm survivors and early returners too. The people who came back first after the water receded formed the kind of close-knit community that only comes with surviving devastation. Being with my Aunt Rita and Uncle Jean made me a part of that community, if for a little while.

My writing in New Orleans was sparse. At the time I did not think a creative thesis was possible or that writing a poetry collection would have any practical use, so any writing was for personal entertainment. My first poem was written while waiting at our gate in D/FW Airport to fly to New Orleans and is a continuation of the airport poetry I started with "Fear" ("Time in an Airport"). Rather than showing trepidation at change, this poem was written as a reflection of the fluidity of time zone, nationality, and purpose that can be found in a large international airport.

The other poem written in New Orleans came to me late one night after having my future predicted by a tarot reader who set up her table alongside St. Louis Cathedral and shows my attempt at writing in vernacular (“Fortune”). This was also one of my early experiments with what the great poet John Keats called *negative capability*, or a writer’s ability to write from the point of view of another person. In writing from the view of this fortune teller, using her language and the history of the city her story is grounded in I began early attempts at writing the way people talk, using voices other than my own. This skill would be used again, and with more aplomb, in my Vietnam poetry later in this thesis.

There is a juvenile quality to the two poems I wrote while in the Big Easy because I was still a beginner poet. At this point in my writing I had only been in a poetry class for a few weeks and had yet to relinquish the idea that only rhyming poetry is true poetry. My professor and I would continue to butt heads on that, and the role of grammar in poetry, for most of the semester. He would eventually win both arguments but only after I matured enough to admit I was wrong and might not know *everything* just yet. Admitting that I was wrong was difficult for me as a writer because until college my first drafts had almost always been my only drafts. The concept that I might not instinctively know everything I needed to know about poetry was difficult to grasp, and something that took some humbling on my part before it sank in.

My exposure to poetry in the classroom before college was brief at best and I generally considered poems a nuisance interlude between the novels, short stories, and standardized test preparation that filled most of our class time. Before my first college poetry class, my preferred poetry was rollicking meters like those at the beginning of chapters

throughout Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books* and the songs and riddles written by Brian Jacques for his much loved *Redwall* series. In both of these poetry becomes secondary, an earring on the side of the face of the story rather than an integral part. The rhymes are easy and the characters almost always speak in vernacular.

These are the rhymes and books of my childhood. My mother read Kipling's "Letting in the Jungle" to me when I was little more than wide eyes and small hands, sitting curled against her before bed. She has the most beautiful reading voice, one that bounces through the cadences of iamb and anapest in a lilting poetry in singsong. Because of these warm memories, rhyming poetry is what I wrote. It was safety, familiarity, and childhood. Whimsy was my only objective with my early poetry.

With practice my poetry would develop depth beyond a solid rhyme scheme, but in New Orleans I was not writing for depth. I was writing for joy in language and the beautiful puzzle that words fit into. I was big-eyed and young and idealistic in many ways, absolutely certain in my concept of the world. The poems I wrote were playful, whimsical; they showed exactly who I thought I was and would always be as a poet because I was certain that a whimsical rhymers was the mold I would always fit. There would be time enough for growth later; in New Orleans I was autonomous.

MiddleofNowhereArkansas: Fort Smith

My second conference was the regional Honors Conference in Fort Smith, Arkansas, the Spring of 2014. As a native northeast Texan, Fort Smith was a bit of a disappointment to me because I *know* Arkansas. I know that Magnolia or Hot Springs or Little Rock would all be excellent places to hold the Great Plains Honors Council (GPHC) Conference, places with

more to do and see than a town essentially the same size and vintage as San Angelo, only with a less interesting downtown. I grated under the knowledge that this trip was only serving to confirm some of my west Texan friends' long held suspicions about and stereotypes of Arkansas.

There was little to do as entertainment at the actual conference, so instead we worked, and that was what struck me about GPHC 2014 (“Honors Conference”). I was not travelling with poetry for this conference but instead presented a research paper on the implications and potential applications of Victorian science fiction to modern medical ethics. It was because of this kind of cross-disciplinary research, and the frequency with which discussions about things like this came up between myself and my friends, that I realized how stunning my friends are and can be. I realized that our conference attendance, our internships, our casual conversations about history and bioethics and literature, and our research were not typical. I realized that it was the incredible intelligence of my friends and their diligence under pressure that made them, made *us* stand out among our peers. They became the subjects of my poems.

I did not think there was much interesting in the city to write about, or lore to pull a story from, so I instead took it upon myself to write about Honors students as I perceived them. By now I was much more practiced than I had been in New Orleans or Great Basin, but there is still a childlike wonder to my writing. I was only just beginning to experiment with using whitespace as a part of the poem, and rhyming was still a familiar habit (“Realize”). My poetry about my friends and the work they put into their research was both a relaxing pastime for me and a reflection of the respect I hold for them and their work ethics.

Rhyming, however, was becoming more problematic for me. By the Spring of 2014 I was beginning to realize that rhyming can be trite. I could lay out a delicious few verses in perfect formula but would have difficulty closing, as can be seen in some of my Fort Smith poetry (“Time Fish”). The last few lines would not match earlier verses because I sacrificed meaning in an effort to continue my perfect rhyme. Or they would match the opening verses almost exactly in an attempt to write a poem in a circle. I was not yet entirely easy in the skin of a poet who can break rhyme scheme, and it shows in the poetry I created at this time. Later I would become more comfortable breaking conventions, a la T.S. Eliot “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, but at this time I was still more comfortable patterning my poetry after those from Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*.

In Fort Smith I was still feeling my way around as a poet. A semester and a half of poetry workshop classes had made me more conscious of craft, but I had yet to master the art of writing without fear. I had created poems worth being proud of in my poetry classes but still did not consider myself much of a poet and was not confident in poetry that would not be graded. Poetry in my classes was given a grade and grades were a reassurance that my work was worth reading. I was not yet comfortable with poems whose quality I would never know, would never be *told*, in a classroom setting. Later, that summer, my perception would change when I was forced to abandon my safety nets, but in Fort Smith I was still learning and still preferred to have a professor telling me what was and was not good work.

Time in an airport

Time in an airport
Moves like a sieve
Catching and sifting
All take and give
It doesn't flow linear
It doesn't walk straight
Cause time in an airport
Isn't hour or date
It's time zone and twilight
And the gray in between
Where countries are fluid
And lives move in dream

So sit near your terminal
Wait on your plane
While time out of airport
Moves on much the same
The same as it has
And the same as it will
Whether you're here or not
To see it stand still

The time that you're born in
The time when you die
They'll pass you and keep you
They'll wait while you fly
Over times that are different
And times much the same
From the time in the airport
Where you lose or gain
Hours and minutes
Days in the past
Because time in an airport
Is time that won't last

Fortune

They look for me past nightfall
beneath the sharpened spires.
They murmur over my candles,
their faces soft by fire.
They look across my table,
they cannot see me clear,
the tourists, half believing
what I tell them here.

Behind us lies the hang-ground
where hundreds went to die;
above the castle church
sharp fractures 'gainst the sky.

But these they do not ask of,
and these I will not tell.
They come to have their palms read,
to listen as I spell
their lives by printed card-deck
their futures from a game
these tourists with their eyes
wide by candle's flame.

I whisper them their secrets
I keep my voice soft-low
these tourists they believe it,
the things I say I know.

I give them general answers
they give me details back,
a woman's give and take
when she learns the trade of black
cards and books and hair dolls
candles, spheres, and palms
and plies them under street lamp
for bills and given alms.

So watch me when you pass me
side of Jackson Square,
I'm the reader at the table
I keep my answers there.

Honors Conference

Tucked into corners
of space not their own,
they cluck and they mutter
in groups all alone.
They peck at their keyboards
and parse out their words
writing the essays
they'll present to the herd
of those who will listen
to what these will say
after flight, night and torrent,
on into dawn-gray.
Their cards and their lasers
for pinpointing spots
are all prepped and ready
for students to rock
out on the research
they've compiled thus far
for conference and program,
these fast rising stars.
They burn with their futures
and glow from their pasts
the next generation
to wear the white hats
of law-learned greatness
and hard fought-for trips
the honorable Rams
with the world at their lips.

Realize

They are so *clever*.

My friends, my wonderful, darling,

Brilliant

Friends.

They research and write and sit at conferences

Waiting to present and they don't even

Realize

How incredible they are.

They win awards and earn internships and *travel*

Travel the world,

And they don't think themselves

Abnormal.

They don't think they're

Atypical

Or understand how

Exceptional

They are.

They are my friends, and my friends are wonderful

And they don't ever realize.

Time Fish

If time is a river
and I am a fish
swimming and jumping
however I wish,
then where will I go
when the river runs out?
Will I swim back upstream,
or pass through the mouth
and into the ocean
where bigger fish swim?
Where I am quite small
when compared to them.

There I will drown
or there I will grow,
but there's only one way
that I'll ever know.
That is a junction
I've yet to pass,
I've still got some time
but it's coming up fast.

That pivotal place
where I'll make my fate,
where I will swim out
or return to the state
in which I have been
for my short, fishy life.
My destiny's coming,
it's almost my time.
I see it approaching,
I know where it lands.
Here I go, wish me luck.
Let go of my hands!

Poets in Florence

Summer 2014

New York University
Writers in Florence

We cannot teach
people anything;
we can only help
them discover it
within
themselves.

-Galileo Galilei

Sir Harold Acton of Florence, Italy, was a writer. He was a poet, art collector, heir to the Acton Estate of Villa La Pietra, the surrounding gardens, and guest villas. He was a brother, before his brother died in WWII leaving him to return to their parents alone to the big house over the olive groves (“Villa la Pietra: The Florentine Home of the Late Sir Harold Acton” n. pag). I could not meet Lord Acton, for he died in the 1990s, but through New York University’s Poets in Florence Program I spent a month in the Summer of 2014 in his home training to be a writer. This was a relatively exclusive program, only accepting about ten students a summer, and one that I likely would not have been accepted for had I not been in the Honors Program at Angelo State. My travel was funded through the Alvin and Patricia New Honors Enhancement Fund, which took the financial burden of the flight and tuition of a university like NYU off my parents.

To understand a student writing in Florence, one must understand something of the city itself. Florence is an ancient city steeped in art. Artists like Donatello were born in Florence. Masters like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci studied there (“Born in Florence, Italy” n. pag.). The Uffizi, one of the greatest art collections in Europe, is in Florence between the Arno River and Piazza della Signoria. The city is not just the home of great creations and creators from the artistic community; it was also the site of the greatest art preservation attempt, and success, of the past fifty years (“History of the Uffizi Gallery” n. pag.).

By 1966 Florence had long established its love of the art kept in the city and had protected it for centuries. In November of that year one city’s love would not be enough; it would take the actions of the entire world to rescue masterpieces from the mire. In November

of 1966 the Arno River, a body that splits the city of Florence in half, overran its banks. Estimates put the water at almost forty feet above the banks in some places, more than high enough to overrun the Uffizi and its priceless contents. By January of 1967 the art historians of the world had descended on the city and begun a restoration project of historic proportions (Hooper, “Remembering the ‘mud angels’ of the 1966 floods”).

Up until this time there was no world-recognized, universal method of art restoration and preservation. According to John Hooper of *The Guardian*, until the Arno flooded “restoration and conservation were quite secretive crafts. Techniques and recipes were passed down from master to pupil with the sort of caginess once characteristic of artists themselves” (Hooper, “Remembering the ‘mud angels’ of the 1966 floods”). Like medical advances forced by wartime improvisation, art restoration was forced into the modern age by the sudden presence of hundreds of volunteer art students from across Europe, the US, and Asia. The volunteers, called “mud angels” by Florentines, became innovators in a race against time. Thousands of books, hundreds of frescos, paintings, statues, religious texts, and other works of art were saved by the mud angels. Together students and masters and a city that has held art at its heart for centuries protected the inheritance of generations, beauty.

It might be strange to tell a decade’s old story about a flood in a reflection on poetry, but the flood is not what matters in this story. What matters is human collaboration. Centuries ago artists studied and practiced and became the masters they would be remembered as in Florence. Decades ago the world came together to save the works of the old masters and in the process preserved many priceless works of art. In the summer of 2014,

we continued the artistic traditions of Florence through our words and became poets in our own right.

There were only a few of us in the poetry classes, but together we studied and created more than anything we could have created without each other. Some of us were more practiced than others; some of us had more definite ideas of what poetry was to us. One student wrote poetry to rebel against her parents back in China, parents who wanted her to become a doctor or study some other practical field. A student from England made every other word he spoke a double entendre but wrote in the same vein as Langston Hughes. Another wrote poems to her father, a former Black Panther, and a crazy old aunt who thought the poet's beautiful café au lait skin was too pale to be black. I wrote poetry that I would later be told was *inherently American* because being a Texan made me intrinsically more linked to my country than some of my cohorts and when assigned to write a "nationality poem" I was told to write in my normal style because the result would be an effortless example of Americana ("Listen"). I am not sure if that is true but the poem I wrote was intimate and felt, to me, inherently regional to my corner of Texas when I wrote it in contemplation of the stars and memory.

Our professors, Eileen Myles and Dottie Lasky, were working poets and tenured NYU professors with unique approaches to teaching and studying their craft. On our first class meeting with Dottie we were told to leave the villa where we held class and spend twenty minutes finding and writing a poem about three red things we found and another we remembered ("Frog Song"). In the other class Eileen read a chapter aloud to us with instructions for us to write any words or phrases that struck us as interesting. Our homework

that night was to take what we wrote and carve a poem using only the words, phrases, and punctuation we scribbled down from the reading (“My Legs Feel Cold”).

Both of these exercises were designed to teach us about poetry and the ways it can seem fragmented but comes together into a whole. By linking objects through color we drew connections in our writing that might have never been unearthed otherwise. By writing snatches of phrases without knowing initially what they would be used for we were forced to stretch our creative abilities and our convictions about the conventions of poetry. For me, finally convinced from hours in an ASU classroom that, unless a statement is being made by its absence, poetry should adhere to the rules of grammar, I was again challenged in my beliefs about poetry. For this assignment we could not use anything we had not written in class, including punctuation or pronouns or any of the other little parts of sentence structure that make strings of words make sense. I adapted. I wrote a poem with unconventional line breaks meant to mirror the unconventional sentence structure being used. I learned once and for all that the only hard and fast rule of poetry is that the rules can change.

Classes continued that way. We visited museums and wrote ekphrastic poems to and from the perspective of the art we found (“You look much smaller”; “Sybil?”; “Wisdom with Globe and Scroll”; “To a God”; “To a Girl”). We visited La Specola, a science museum that has not changed since the 1800s, and wrote poems sitting on the floor between the scuffed glass eyes of a tiger with his paw still crushed from a trap long rusted away and the cracked skin of Nile crocodiles (“Croc.”; “Crystal”). We watched an hour of Tim Burton’s 1990 film *Edward Scissorhands*, scrawling images in words all the while. Those images were crafted into poems the same way our cherry-picked phrases from the first day were (“The way”).

We practiced weaving what we knew and what we learned into our poetry. One of my favorite poems to come out of my time in Florence was inspired by one of my Honors friends back at ASU, a biology student I lived with for a year before she graduated. She told me one night that one of her professors would tell his classes that if people are made of the atoms released in a super nova then when people contemplate the universe, the universe contemplates itself. The beauty of that concept became one of my first poems written in Italy and one of my favorite examples of the way science and art and philosophy can come together (“Spine Dust”).

Unlike my early attempts at using poetry to tell my readers *something* about science or nature or the like, I began using my poems to tell specifics. Instead of a rambling poem about the beauty of the stars, I wrote the previously mentioned poem, “Spine Dust”, about stars creating man and man in turn proving himself worthy of the legacy of the universe through his power to name. I used specific examples, like the hunting of ancient tortoises to near extinction (“Galapagos”), rather than a general reflection on what it meant to be an old tree on an old mountain. My use of whitespace became more meaningful to the form of the poem and less an arbitrary experiment for experimentation’s sake. I wrote about stones I saw on display and compared them to caves I toured as a child. I developed a sense of specific imagery and began using specific historic and biblical allusions in my poems. I tried my hand at a Garden of Eden poem (“Eden”) and attempted prose poetry (“Baby”). I wrote a poem to a bee that landed on my hand in the garden one afternoon (“Honey”). None of these were written for class, they were written for me. I no longer felt the pressure to write poetry that would achieve good grades, instead I could return to writing for the joy of writing, secure in my own self-assurance.

One of our later assignments was to write a poem and bring copies for the entire class without signing our names. The name of the game was to write something totally different than what we had shown the class previously, so I returned to the whimsical rhymes of my early poetry. However, instead of general reflections on nature and rhymes without specific imagery, I took lines from Sir Edwin Arnold's epic poem-biography of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, and lines from the country songs I was raised on and melded them into a short poem about music and dancing and those who do both ("Fiddler"). It was a fun puzzle. I sifted through the music I love and a poem on the middle path to enlightenment and relinquished the grammar in my poetry to write one small piece for a game between myself and my classmates. Originally this poem was meant to be almost nonsense with more care placed on rhyme than meaning; however, as it developed I saw a common theme inside the nonsense. Eileen and Dottie's insistence that more modern styles of poetry like erasures or found poetry could hold just as much meaning as that of the Victorian and Romantic British poets that I had held so dear for so long. I also realized that writing a found poem was not nearly as simple as it first seemed it would be.

We became practiced at writing from daily prompts and practice became habit. I carried notebooks with me everywhere, jotted words and phrases in the odd seconds I snatched for myself. I wrote in my journal on the bus and wrote in my notebooks on benches in the piazzas. I sketched out the stories we heard about the city: the antics of the long-ruling Medici family, the way basilica crypts would flood and families need to go collect the bones of their loved ones after monsoon season, the way art students would be sent into the churches to sketch the great frescos and learn their craft through imitation. Every story we heard, every scene we witnessed on the Ponte Vecchio or along the Arno or in the shade of

the Duomo, every kiss of gelato on my lips was poetry in motion (“Kinfolk”; “Content”). It became my job and my joy to document those little moments that were big moments.

One weekend all of the participants in the Writers in Florence program (both poem and fiction writing students) visited one of several castles that played host to Dante Alighieri after the writer was exiled from Florence for his political views. Together the combined thirty of us listened to sections of Dante’s *Divina Comedia* in the original Italian at different levels of the castle, starting in the dungeon with *Inferno*. As the poem progressed we moved from the dungeon, winding up to a room in the castle where a section of *Purgatorio* was performed. Our last stop was the top of the castle tower. A place where dirt was carried up the stairs and sod planted some indeterminate century before. In that high garden, pressed against the ceiling of the sky and the Tuscan sun, our Italian performer recited from *Paradiso*, the last section of the *Divine Comedy*. As young poets we connected to the ancient through the translations provided in our books; as writers we could hear the music of a language we did not speak. It felt sacramental.

We were given two final assignments, one from each professor, before our coursework in Italy could be considered complete. The first was to tour the Acton home-turned-museum, Villa la Pietra, and write ten poems about the house and its contents. The Acton family lived and collected art in that old manor for almost a century. Their library was catalogued at over a thousand books strong, original editions in English and German, Italian and French. Paintings, statuary, rugs and all the clutter any family collects when it lives in one place any great length of time were brought to the house from all over the world. Shells from family vacations on the Mediterranean, a silver coffee service that was a wedding gift to

Sir Harold Acton's parents when they wed in Chicago, a stack of bone mahjong tiles from China—they were all there for us to marvel over and write about.

So we did. We wrote bookends and letter openers and the scorpion preserved in a glass paperweight on one of the desks. We wrote books and icons and the way statues were arranged to continue scenes depicted in the tapestries behind them. We wrote the things those old walls had seen ("Villa La Pietra"). My ten poems actually became a coherent whole, a country house poem like Ben Jonson's *To Penshurst*. I studied country house poems in my Renaissance Literature course at ASU the semester before this trip and had discussed them and the art patronage system with my history major friends the spring before my trip to Italy. Writing something at once new and historic was an interesting mingling to me and made me feel I was continuing a long tradition of poets honoring their hosts in verse.

It was humbling to write a poem like that, in the tradition of poets and patrons. Sir Harold Acton was my patron. I will never meet him, nor will he ever read my work, but without him and his donation of the villas and grounds that became the NYU Florence campus I would never have studied in Italy as I did in the Summer of 2014. It was an honor to write to him and to his beautiful home that became my home for a short time.

The final assignment for my other professor was to write a biography of the poet, the poet being myself. This assignment was difficult for me and for the other young poets in my class, because it was not a poem and it was not pure fiction. This was intended to be a work of introspective prose between five and ten pages, yet it did not need to be about ourselves as the children of our parents and recorded by whatever country we were born in. We could define "ourselves" by whatever parameters we chose, to either write in first person as the

skin we inhabit or to call someone else's skin ours, or to create a character separated entirely from our minds to use as a mouthpiece.

This process was complicated by the fact that none of us wrote our biographies or poems to the Acton home ahead of time. We all procrastinated until the last night before they were due and as a result all of us spent that night camped out in the common room of the villa serving as our dorm. There were seven poets in my class, all of us hunkered over keyboards and scribbling in notebooks from warm dusk to cool dawn together. We got it done. In the gray before dawn turns to true blue, we saved our work and printed our copies and stumbled away. None of us had spoken in full sentences for hours.

When dawn broke and we all stumbled away to sleep for two hours before breakfast we were different poets than those who watched the stars come out the night before. We had learned what it was to burn the midnight oil with our fellows and what it meant to survive the night. We had created works to be proud of. I had recorded my biography ("She").

A different poet crossed the ocean and landed in Dallas than the one that left a month earlier. I turned twenty-one in Florence, Italy. I learned to love red wine sitting in piazza cafes with the stars falling into my glass. I wrote dozens of poems in notebooks and filled two journals in Florence. I practiced weaving art and history and science into the poetry inside those journals. I claimed a favorite gelato shop, a favorite bar, a favorite World Cup team, and a favorite piazza in the city. I claimed a favorite desk in our classroom. A desk where I could catch the breeze rattling the olive grove through the open window and could read the poetry of my friends, peers, and predecessors in the afternoon sunlight. I learned how to navigate the alleys without maps. I memorized the route to the library in an oldtown

palace where we held guest readings and lectures. I learned to walk so confidently that tourists came up to me with travel phrasebooks and maps to ask me for directions in broken Italian. I learned to savor their surprise when I replied in English. I learned. I played. I breathed. I worked. I wrote.

I lived.

Listen

When I was small
my mother took me
to hear the stars.
She walked me to the center
of the meadow
and told me to close my eyes—
Listen.

Listen to the sounds
horses make when they dream,
and to the whistle *chk*
of whippoorwills
in fencerows.

Listen to coyotes singing far off
answers to trains further off.

Listen to the sound stars make
when they hang so low
they bump into
one another.

Listen to the music of
midnight apologies
for hanging too near the earth—
for crowding the sky.

She did not tell me to open my eyes,
to look at the sky.
We stood together long after the moon
crested the treeline—
Listening.

Frog Song

There are poppies blooming out
in the garden.
Poppies, tied up in cultural memory
and battles long since abandoned,
that will bloom and die and grow
long after
we abandon these walls.

There is tape somewhere out there too,
red on white on red
warning,
Tied up by the man with the
red dragonfly taillights.
A warning to those who would listen
with their eyes.

But they would not listen,
for the red on white on red is torn
in knots that cling
to boxwood left untended
by the man with the red dragonfly taillights.

Red that glows soft
on my mother's face as she hovers near the glass,
inches from wondrous, tiny
death.
She marvels at the thumbnail amphibian
with a jam-jelly name, bathed in the
blush of light
we use to watch him sing.
Sing
for flowers that bloom,
and gardens untended,
and warnings that fall on deaf eyes.

Legs

My legs feel cold,
 seated
on a stool in Toronto,
staring at his hands wrapped around
a cup of coffee
 beneath
a woundless sky.

My legs feel cold,
 depleted,
wrapped around the only entity
on the walkway
with six to eight strangers
 staring
at my egregious faux pas.

My legs feel cold,
 cheated.
Clicking *Send* on a long email,
maybe ten seconds after impact;
staring into the distance at the
 rubies
wrapped around my hands.

You look much smaller

You look much smaller
when we meet like this.
From your books I look up, up
and you look down—
that we might see each other eye to eye.
Now I look down, down
and you look up—
one who is small,
when I am not.

We are not alone
when we meet here,
as we were when you flipped through books of
captured masterpieces
from your father's shelves
when you were even smaller
than now.

We are not lying on the floor
surrounded by dust and cat hair
while you wrap your lips around the
improbable names
of our creators.
Botticelli Bosch Raphael Caravaggio da Vinci
Michelangelo.
They taste like another place,
another time,
when you roll them between your teeth
and tongue.

Here they are not foreign.
Here their names are comfortable
in the mouths of the people.
Here, yours is the alien name,
the name that tastes
unfamiliar.

So look up, up,
small poet,
little art lover,
and I will look down—
to your eyes.

Until next we meet
and you are no longer
small.

Sybil?

I see you, with your
sphere and scroll.
Holding them against you as I clasp my
journal and pen.
Who were you?
Woman of books with the question mark name.
Who are you now?

We know each other.
You in the draped and pinned dress of your station,
me in the clothes my parents bought...
we each know the other girl with the
book.

Were you wise,
or only painted that way?
Which am I?

Wisdom with Globe and Scroll

Remember me, *girl*,
when you stand with pen and book
and eyes almost clever.
Remember who came before,
who struggled that you might
find your mind.
Remember, girl,
that wisdom is
Woman.

To a God

Lord of the Sea
and lover of mine
I see how you stand,
covered in brine.
I know you can't hear,
I know you can't say
all that you want
'til I look away.
So I'll write you a letter
and leave it right here:
I love you, I miss you,
come back, Neptune dear.
Come back to the arms of the lass called your own.
Come back, my sweet darling; lover, come home.

To a Girl

My sweetling, my human
my fair mortal frail:
I miss you, I want you
I hear how you wail.
I watch you come nightfall
when your bed grows cold,
my lovely, I'm coming—
but don't you get old.
May the years pass you over
nor wrinkle at all,
because my sweet child
I come when you call.
But I loathe to come to an aged old lady
So sweets, my dear human, stay always my baby!

Croc.

I was a dragon—
do you hear me, human?
When your Saint George
did battle in Silene, he slew my
Brother.
When you read of the terrible teeth
and fiery breath he faced,
remember these glass eyes your
Fathers
pushed through my skull.
Know they mark you,
beware.
My bones may be gone,
and my skin empty,
but I was a dragon once.
My memory is
Long.

Crystal

They're all dead.
Every rock, ore,
atom
in these cases—
Dead.
Do not show me these cold things
and expect me to clap my hands
or sing praises to these still crystals.

If you want my pleasure
show me a cave.
Show me a pillar with a hand
that will not touch lest it kill
living stone.
Play me a love song in cave music
on a wall when stalactites stretch to kiss
stalagmites
and create a xylophone, alive and ever changing.

They are beautiful, these taxidermied specimens.
A thousand tasteless candies that
cannot
be eaten by any tongue.
But a cave,
cool and drip and echo and song,
can be drunk through the lungs,
and carried away in the bones.
Alive.

The way

Dedicated to Edward Scissorhands

Hands that aren't shaped the way

Human

hands are shaped.

Hands that can't touch or tie or button or pull the way

Human

hands button or tie or pull or touch.

Hands that can't graze across a shoulder

or smear away tears

or feed a cold stomach the way

Human

hands are built to.

Two hundred thousand hands,

under one hundred thousand lamps,

folded in prayer for collective

Humanity.

Two hands unable to hold another the way

Human

hands hold.

Spine Dust

This is the way in which Man was made:

Of dust,
gathered in the soul of a star
at its death
by some force great enough
to grant that collected dust the wisdom
to name its parts
in such a way
that the universe turns
to contemplate
itself.

This is the way in which Man proved that wisdom:

First He made a god to hold up the earth
and named him Atlas,
then He named the point around which the earth wrapped
Axis,
last He named the calcium stones
inside the skin of His neck
Atlas
beneath His skull to hold the world
and just below it,
Axis
to make the world turn.

This is the way in which the universe contemplates itself:

Through Man
who is the collected dust
of dying stars shaped
in such a way
that the god built to carry the earth and heavens
rests in His spine
on the point around which
the world
pivots.

Galapagos

I think I read,
 once upon a time,
 that pirates almost rendered you extinct some few hundred
years ago. That they landed on your shores,
 your island,
 and butchered you for soup because you were big and slow and
came in your own cooking pot. That they did not know,
 or care
 to know, about the centuries it took your brethren to grow to be big
and slow with your own cooking pot house on your back.
And for that,
 for them, for humans,
I apologize.

Eden

I killed a snake in the garden today.
Diced him like a cucumber,
or carrot, or squash
with the machete
my Father gave me
for scything away weeds.

I did not damn it to death
for the sin of living:
sentence carried out immediately
between the iris plot and tomato trellis
by me— judge, jury, and executioner.

No.

It was killed for the sin
of living *near*
me.

Baby

You were young when you were born. So *very* young and open-eyed and the skies were within your reach and the sun lay in your grasp—when you were born with stars in your smile and the moon in your hair.

Then you grew. Your hands tightened to empty fists until the skies and sun were no longer within your reach. Until you spoke in such a way that the stars and moon no longer played around your lips or hung at the ends of your hair.

You grew old before you owned many years and you bent under the weight of age your bones did not carry.

Tell me, child, when did it stop?

Honey

A bee landed on me today,
testing my skin for nectar.
I let him rest,
searching for nourishment
where there wasn't any,
while I sat still,
the way I was told
long ago.
Still so he would think me a flower,
and not sting.

Halfway through his visit I realized
that
if he stung me
the pain would be nothing
I could not brush away,
and that the only loss
would be his life.

So I sat still
to keep the poor, hungry creature,
from accidentally committing
suicide.

Fiddler

Tune us the sitar
Against your soul
The day the music died
Bet a fiddle of gold
Neither high nor low
To a Dixie lullaby

So gimme the beat boys
And get down your bow
Simple kind of man
And we will dance
Down copperhead road
Cause you've gotta have a fiddle in the band

Won't you play me some old Alabama
Breathe and count to ten
Cause the Devil's down in Georgia
Away the hearts of men

Kinfolk

I had no father to give me away,
to walk me down the aisle.
You had no mother to sit at the front,
the very first pew, and smile.

We said our vows in the church alone,
and took ourselves out to the square
to stand with our camera in front of the world
and invite the world with us to share.

We shouted aloud for all who would listen:
to come and join in our glee,
to stand with us under the sun;
to witness our love, you and me.

We called to the world as our brothers,
we named the tourists our kin.
For a pair with no living family
we decided that all should join in.

We asked for the mothers and children,
and the vendors who walk with their wares
to help us make that piazza
ring with the sound of our prayers.

Our prayers for a life lived together
With all of the kin that we claimed.
The entire world was our family,
we would not be shamed.

With every photo we posed for
more and more strangers leaped in,
the entire world now our family
our hearth, our home, and our kin.

I had no fatherly arm that day
to give me away to you,
and you had no mother to witness
her son stand and tell me *I do*.

Content

...And I will sit in the sun
with my hair hot
from the rays that will kill me
one day.

But not this day.
Because this day I will weight my papers
with the wine glass I drained
too fast to be the lady
I pretend
I am.

I will listen to poetry
in a language I do not speak.
I will smell lemon blossom
and grass.
I will taste Chianti
and chocolate.
I will feel hair, hot,
on my skull.
I will sit,
and absorb.

Villa la Pietra

This was a home.

Here are the steps
to the threshold
through which thousands of guests
passed over centuries.
Here is the passage, just beyond,
that opens to the big room
that leads straight to the back garden
to allow those guests to step in
and walk
from front to back of the house
for the hospitality of the family.

This was a home.

Here are the seats still impressed
with the weight of the family
who ate at this table
under the eyes of these old masters.
Who drank their wine
and ate their bread
in the company of
centuries.

This was a home.

Here is the silver coffee service
wedding present—
Coffee not tea because it was an American wedding.
And because American lips
sat at this table, beneath these old masters
to sip their breakfast
from a silver service that was not tarnished
while the family lived.

This was a home.

There are the statues
centuries old, or decades...
Bound in timeless servitude
with trays on hands
or lamps in their fists.
They wear carnival smiles,
white,
in their black skin and court jester clothes—
Acting at the king's pleasure,
for the man of the house

is a king in his castle,
is he not?

This was a home.

These were the windows little boy noses
pressed to watch the rain
fall in fast summer squalls
rolling through the gardens
while the sun still shone.

This was a home.

Here are the terracotta pots
glazed orange and yellow
with something almost authentic,
something painted on after
the pots were decommissioned.
Pots displayed
as if they served a function
within the household.
Pots that have not held anything more useful
than dust in decades.
Pots bought for aesthetic appeal,
and the proud crest still
pressed into the skin of their curve.

This was a home.

This is the room where the family sat,
under art that was old
when their country was young.
Here are the saints backed by gold,
with one hand raised to bless
the little boy noses
that sniffled and ran and were bumped or punched and fell against
all of the things that little boys' noses fall against.

This was a home.

Here is the statue,
the only statue,
to follow one of those little boy noses home
from a far-far place
long after his nose ceased to belong
to a little boy.

This was a home.

These are the liondogs
that sat on the table

to guard the papers
that needed guards
in the library where millions of words
are bound in leather
and gold
and languages that not all visitors
could read.

This was a home.

These are the little boy souvenirs
gathered on family vacations.
the chunks of coral
and unbroken shells—
Both so much brighter the sunny day
they were first pulled, alive,
from blue waters.
Now they sit in trays and on shelves,
tucked into a dish of glass fruit,
or perched like a frame to a ceramic bowl,
bone pale memories of little boy days
spent on some beach
in the sun soaked past.
Now they sit quietly, dead,
tangible ghosts
of some warm memory
forgotten.

This was a home.

These are the chairs,
too big, too tall, too stiff of arm
and straight of back
to be hospitable to little boy bones.
These are the chairs
that would require pillows
and blankets and practice
to make comfortable.

This was a home,

and these were the books.
Shelf upon shelf with piles between
of books, now old.
But when the little boy hands
held them they were not old.
Then they were books to be held,
and thumbed, and dog-eared
and read late at night

long after little boys
were supposed to be asleep.
These are the stories, the words
that were read to those little boys,
and by those little boys.
These are the books,
now not meant to be handled— even with white gloves—
only looked at
on the shelf.
Not read in piles on the floor,
or slumped against pillows.
But once,
when there were little boys in this house,
this library,
was not so stuffy.

This was a home.

These are the bone,
not ivory,
mahjong tiles that the little boy hands
played with.
This was the game,
taught by the mother
who read them the stories
from the books
that could be touched, then.
These were the smooth, *are* the smooth, tiles
that would rattle and clack
under little boy fingers
and little boy palms—
cool and tangible
even in memory.
Even long after those little boys
grew to be men
with grown men's hands
that made the tiles as small
as they really were.

This was a home.

A home where little boys were told
to stand up, sit down, sit up straight,
to speak up, be quiet, listen and not bother the grownups.
Eat up, wash up, take more, don't be greedy,
dress clean, go out and play, come in for supper,
leave Father alone, don't speak to your Mother in that tone.
Why do you never write to us anymore?

Just come home safe.
A home where little boys grew to be men
who became gentlemen
and soldiers,
even when only one of them returned.
This was their home.

She

She was born when she was very young in the town that dreaded sundown, but she aged quickly. Her parents named her for a queen and thronebreaker, a flower with teeth, and a patriarch none of them could escape. They took her home to a house where iron flowed so thick through the soil that the rivers ran blood and the trees grew so densely that the stories about the lumbermen would not be believed by anyone but a native.

But they were true, all of the stories she was told when she was still small enough to be young and clever enough to seem old. The legends of the woodsmen and iron diggers and railsplitters and how living in that small corner of a big world made the people grow up a special kind of tough—like the iron they drank with the water from their taps.

She would chase that specialness all her life. She chased it barefoot through horse pastures and climbed after it to the tops of hickory trees. She splashed after it in the cool of the streams where snakes and snapping turtles learned to fear her step and the pack of dogs she ran feral with.

Her parents learned early in her youth and age that no human would be able to follow their smallest offspring, so they gave her caretakers who could. Her pack never ran with fewer than four; all selected for their protective temperament, their patience, and their ability to lead their tiny mistress home every evening at dusk in time for dinner. They waited in the shade of the trees she climbed, they waded through the streams she swam in, they followed her step and kept her safe from the time she left her property until she returned to it every day of their time together.

All of her animals were like that. Her chickens learned to be caught without fuss. Her cats learned not to scratch the little one unless she truly deserved it. She was never the horsemistress, but the herd learned quickly enough that the youngest daughter of the horsemistress was to be borne with the same patience and care as the horsemistress herself. They stood still when the feral sprite climbed onto their backs; they waited when she fell off again. They did not step on her when she sat under them to brush their bellies, nor did they spook when she walked beneath their throats rather than around their noses the way she was told. They learned that hers was the bark to silence the pack, just as she slowly learned to make her hands gentle.

She learned how to clean an animal's wound before she was old enough to be revolted by innards. Learned that maggots in flesh were not always bad, as long as they were flushed with iodine periodically. She learned that blood does not always an emergency make, and that a nail in the soft of a horse's hoof is not the end of the world, merely an inconvenience. She learned that the hard of a horse's foot on the soft of hers was the same thing.

Her family taught her the plants. Taught her what was for pretty and what could be eaten and what should never be eaten unless you wanted to hurt yourself or someone else very badly on the insides. Her mother taught her how to bury her fingers into the red dirt and pull life out by the roots. Her father taught her how to find the trees that burn the hottest for her fires. Her sister taught her how to pinch a honeysuckle blossom and bite the stem so that the most nectar could be sucked from the flower.

She drank deep.

She learned early the power of words. The first time she was washed and clothed and placed in a classroom like a feral thing tamed her reading level was above that of her classmates—still struggling to write their names. By the end of the next year she was in a program for the “gifted” children with students who did not understand her. Feral encyclopedias with scabbed knees and mean streaks left students their age edgy and made adults wary.

Her parents were forced to redouble their efforts to make her do more than resemble tame—they trained her well. She learned to smile and laugh at the appropriate intervals, and that to speak about dead things dragged into her yard by her pack was not conversation to share. She learned that not all grown-ups were as clever as her parents and not all older children as sharp as her sister. She learned not to say things that made the elders feel stupid.

She was taught to use every fork in a six course meal because any meal with more than six courses was held in bad taste. That more than six courses was ostentatious rather than fine, and that the grandiose was not to be tolerated if at all possible.

It was during the etiquette classes at the hands of her mother that she began to learn the family stories. That her mother’s grandfather died with a snapped neck breaking a yearling colt at 83. That his wife, like all the women in her family, died of a broken heart rather than a broken body. That her grandmother would have been a geologist if women could be geologists when she was in college. That her own mother was in the first class of lady foresters to graduate from her university, Ladyjacks class of ‘77.

She learned that her father never graduated from university. That he was a Vietnam era veteran with an IQ higher than most. That he had a complicated relationship with the

government he served because of what it put his generation of soldiers and sailors through but that the skills he learned on his boat would feed his family for the next thirty years. That he was one of the nation's leading experts on ground-based missile defense systems and nuclear weapons. She was an early teen when she figured out this meant she and her family had been under some form of government surveillance since before she was born.

In high school she realized that her family was more than a little different from the families of her classmates. That she could march with the band at football games and she could medal in district cross country races and be an FFA officer and her parents could both be active in the band boosters and catch her at the finish line of her races like all the other parents did—but that that did not mean they were like the other parents.

She did not realize it was weird that there were no political bumper stickers on their cars until someone mentioned it. “The political candidate of my choice” her father told her once, when she asked who he voted for. He told her to trust her own judgment when deciding who she would follow into hell—to never ask someone else. That their ideal and hers were likely not the same.

It did not occur to her that the families of her classmates did not travel as much as hers until after she was in high school. It was normal to her for her parents and thirty of her mother's kin to rent out an offseason ski lodge for a weekend every summer in the mountains of New Mexico. It was normal to expect the summer family trip to be at least out of state, preferably out of the country. It was normal to celebrate her June birthday away from home. At sixteen she had spent at least ten of those birthdays out of town and some of them outside US borders. It never occurred to her that normal parents did not travel with their children as

much as hers did. Or encourage their oldest daughters to go to college halfway across the state and then halfway around the world, the way hers did. That other families took out loans when they went to buy their sixteen-year-olds their first car, that they did not pay cash up front.

It took several books with strong heroines and a long talk with her father one night about the validity of normality before she figured out that normal was not her endgame. Normalcy would be graduating from college and becoming a high school English teacher with some coach for a husband and nothing more exciting in her life than football the next Friday night and teaching the dirty jokes in Shakespeare to uninterested teens in the hopes of sparking interest in literature. Normal would not have been bad, necessarily, it just was not a habit she currently kept and not one she intended to make.

During her senior year of high school her father was transferred. It was not unexpected; they had known his job with a government defense contractor would take him to either Connecticut or Alabama. They thanked god it was Alabama and unearthed an old set of dishes for him to take when he went. Her sister was living overseas for graduate school, her father was living overstates in some loft off Redstone Arsenal, so at seventeen she became the temporary man of the house. In between cross country and track and band and FFA and NHS and Girl Scouts and applying to colleges and going to church, she mended fences and figured out the underside of a sink. She worried, when her father left the house, how she and her mother would stop themselves from tearing each other to shreds. She worried how they would fare without their mediator.

She need not have. They survived each other, she and her mother. They survived each other in that house built for four that held two in the middle of all that land and all those dogs and all those horses and chickens and cats and the one random chinchilla they picked up somewhere along the way. They did better than survive each other—her mother became the best friend she could ever ask for. The greatest companion she would ever have. They went to stock shows and horse sales and movies together, spent weekends crossing the state to tour universities.

And then she graduated. Thirteen years in one school, forty of her fifty-seven classmates had been in the same place since the day they started kindergarten together back when she was a feral encyclopedia and not much else. It was a bittersweet goodbye, most of her class would never leave their hometown, would never look to marry or move or educate themselves beyond the boundaries of their small corner of a big world. She turned her eyes elsewhere.

She entered an Honors Program over half a large state away from the only home she had ever known, and built for herself a new nest. She found friends that became her family and an apartment that became her home. She filled her home with music and books and friends that she would feed on the weekends when she had so much homework piled up that she needed to cook all day to decompress. She learned to write poetry like the dead Brits she admired and learned to read antique forms of her mother tongue. She discovered a love for good Greek translations and a fondness for doughnuts and PowerAde on the mornings when she woke with hangovers.

She learned how to spin her tongue in such a way that it tasted foreign in the mouths of those who read it.

She learned that her parents were waiting for her to prove a practical application for all her learning and reading and poetry writing.

She has yet to find it, but she's getting closer.

Conferences: A Mile Up & Beachin'

Fall 2014/Spring 2015

National Collegiate Honors
Conference/Great Plains Honors
Conference

What makes a
child gifted and
talented may not
always be good
grades in school,
but a different
way of looking at
the world and
learning.

-Chuck Grassley

Conferences my senior year were a different experience from my early conferences. After traveling to conference the fall and spring before and then crossing an ocean for the sake of my poetry in the summer, I was confident enough that I could travel and present anywhere without worry. If I could survive Italy without knowing anyone there then I could survive a few days in a few cities presenting the poetry and research I spent weeks completing. Gone were whatever nerves I had when I was a junior traveling for the first time with more experienced students to conferences where we had a reputation to uphold.

Now I was a poet, and a scholar, and a soul that sat comfortably against the bones carrying it. There was no need for qualms.

A Mile Up: Denver

After a summer spent practicing poetry intensively in a place where art is as essential as food or wine, returning to the realities of school was difficult. If Italy was the world in focus, then school became a dream from which there was no waking or clarity. Re-becoming a hard academic was a transition I was unwilling to make, until Denver snapped me back. Going to Denver for the 2014 National Collegiate Honors Council Conference reminded me of exactly how much I love being a scholar as well as a poet.

Our plenary speaker in Denver was Erik Weihenmayer, to date the only blind man to reach the peak of Everest but also the tallest peak on every other continent as well in a feat known as conquering the Seven Summits (“About Erik” n. pag). Weihenmayer spoke to us about living without fear and surrounding ourselves with people who would support us in our studies or on mountain peaks. He talked about our rope teams, the people we were clipped to on the mountain face of life. He reminded me that my rope team was not only surrounding

me in that conference hall, but that they are wonderful. That the people I have surrounded myself with are smart and kind and thoughtful and thought-provoking and that to ever surround myself with anyone less than that was a disservice to me.

This jolt back to reality, and the sessions I attended on the programs being implemented in other Honors Programs and Colleges across the country, reminded me of the pride I held for my Honors Program and the scholars we produce. This reminder of a love of learning in addition to writing helped me produce a wide variety of poetry during my time in the Mile High City. Some of the poems written in Denver were to tangible objects, art, architecture, a film, similar to the ekphrastic poetry I wrote in Florence. Other pieces were more abstract: a letter to my godchild (“Selene”), a painter on my windshield when the rain fell (“There’s an Impressionist on My Windshield”), an ode to the light crossing through apple juice (“Apple Sky”). Writing was a reflective process at the end of my days in the Mile High City, not the pastime it had become while I was in Fort Smith. It was my evening breather before I slid into sleep surrounded by my peers. In my little leather journal, I was allowed to be at once alone and connected to those I love.

Solitary reflection can be difficult to find at conferences. There are always people—some of them familiar, many of them not—surrounding a presenter at conference. As students we are stuffed four to a room and told to share beds and a bathroom. As presenters we go to our master classes or stand beside our posters or read our papers and become show pieces to be gawked at and commented on. We leave ourselves and the work we do open to all the vitriol, envy, and criticism in the world. We are picked apart by our panels, our judges, and our peers. We act as display pieces and encyclopedias meant to produce satisfactory

answers for anyone who asks. We practice defending our research, or art, or processes in an academic environment to a variety of interrogators, practice that is difficult to replicate at a single university. There is vulnerability in standing alone in front of a crowd with your research and strength that comes from traveling and presenting together as fellow Honors scholars from ASU. There is praise and support and acceptance of our views and presentations by both those we travel with and those we meet at conference. This is a heady and confusing environment and the poetry that comes out of it can be potent in turn.

By this time it was not just my writing that had matured. My tastes for reading poetry had also matured. At this time I enjoyed reading Thomas Hardy's "Channel Firing", Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" and Shakespeare's great soliloquies (particularly those from *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*): a great deal of what I read was existential, dark, fighting against the crush. While in Denver a group of us went to watch the movie *Interstellar*, a film produced by Wilson Jones, a great friend of our Honors Program. One of the reoccurring lines in the film came from Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," a beautiful poem and film that inspired one of my own poems ("Interstellar").

The conference hotel sat in the center of downtown Denver, so every night after presentations were done and conference clothes had been exchanged for civvies we walked. We walked to see the lights and find the bars and visit the ice cream shops open late enough for us to grab cones and eat in shivering huddles on their patios. We walked to breathe in the cold that had not yet come to our state. On those nightly rambles we saw a different city than the one exposed to daylight. It was a quieter city, an emptier city. We passed a church that became the inspiration for my last poem in the city against the mountains ("Believe").

The Mile High City colored my poetry in a way that New Orleans did not. Where New Orleans was a brief exploration of the familiar through rhyme, Denver was continued growth carrying over from my summer in Italy. I wrote poetry that did not need to be graded for me to be proud of it. I was practiced at the art of writing poetry. I was again presenting my work in a Master Class in front of fellow student poets and professors from across the country. I was surrounded by the cleverest people I had ever known. I was self assured and the poetry I wrote shows those convictions.

Beachin': South Padre Island

South Padre Island played host to the 2015 Great Plains Honors Council Conference, my last conference with the Honors Program. Padre was fascinating because of the way cultures meet on the island; it is inescapably Texas, but Texas becomes Tejas and the fluidity of the border creates a culture only found in a tiny section of the Texas coast. Our speaker the first night presented on this mixture of cultures and the way it affected and continues to affect traditional mariachi music. That night I wrote a poem to the little spit of land we were on and the way it serves as a mini melting pot ("Padre"). The mingling of cultures and the bittersweet sting of the knowledge that my friends and I would never be together like that again stirred together in my poetry.

Regional conferences are less formal than national ones and regional conferences on the beach even less so. Most conferences have annual themes; many of us were unsure what theme a resort town could offer beyond sun and surf. Sun and surf were themes but not in the vacation sense. We were given the opportunity to tour a sea turtle rescue operation and see first-hand the impact humans have on our environment. We craned over tanks to watch

turtles ranging from the size of turkey platters to the length of coffee tables swim with only three flippers. We walked next door to the wildlife sanctuary to lean against the railings of wooden walkways and look at the American Alligators sunbathing in the marsh grass. We found a baby alligator, maybe a foot long, on a bank directly under our pier. We found his mother watching us suspiciously from the pool beside him. I wrote a poem on her protective instinct (“Mother Alligators”).

A glorious sunburn and summer songs like Brett Eldridge’s “Beat of the Music” and Kenny Chesney’s “American Kids” made my Padre poetry much lighter than the poems I wrote a few months before in Denver. We presented our work and listened to presentations and then took an afternoon for ourselves, playing in the waves for hours without worrying about sunscreen or skin cancer. My back was raw for days after but that afternoon, those memories, and the poem I wrote as a result are worth more than a few days’ pain and funny looks (“Summer Lover”). The sweet and salt and pound of bass through our ribs when we visited clubs at night and the pride we had in the work we presented before our peers all twisted together deliciously into our time on the island. It was a place where we could be at once frantic and lazy and luxuriate in our youth.

Padre was a short trip. The poetry I wrote there was nostalgic, playful at times, silly at others. I was writing my joy in the camaraderie I felt with my friends and with the melancholy that our time together would not last. By the end of the long-weekend we were all burnt by the sun and raw from the sea and tired of each other’s forced proximity and whatever research we presented but at the same time we would not trade it. No conference ends with Honors students well rested, or eager to spend more time crammed four to a room

in a hotel, but none of that means it was a bad trip. None of us would want a conference, our last undergraduate Honors Conference, to end any other way.

Together is how we travel to and from conference. Together is how we research. Together is how we survive and argue and eventually graduate. We get sick of each other and fall in love with each other's company in the odd hours after midnight when we all trickle back into the library to work on assignments and study for tests and prepare for the next conference.

Ending Padre sunburnt and exhausted and desiring to not speak to anyone for twenty four hours and a poem about flying home as fast as possible ("Puddle Jump") might sound like a terrible way to end a conference but it was not. It was perfect.

Selene

And may you chase the sun,
my child,
may you follow the sun
until it rises
and sets
and rises again for your eyes alone.

And may you chase the sun,
my darling,
may you wonder always at the beauty
of what lies beneath
and beyond
and because of our burning star.

And may you chase the sun,
my sweet,
may you travel the world
where I could not
and cherish
and hold what my arms would not carry.

And may you chase the sun,
my love,
may you have the things,
both sweet
and good
and otherwise because you deserve all things,
little one,
all things under the sun.

There's an Impressionist on My Windshield

There's an impressionist on my windshield.

A Monet or a Manet,
or maybe a Degas—
someone.

There's a someone on my windshield.

Someone with a brush
and an eye for the way colors
run together in the rain
is on my windshield.

He's not painting lilies,
or ballet dancers,
or boxes at the opera.

Only a college campus.

a few trees,
a water-dark sidewalk,
scattered students hunched against
the mourning sky.

There's an impressionist on my windshield—
a living painting
all for me.

Apple Sky

Tonight I observed the color of my apple juice—
The golden tint that fell through
when I left the plastic cup
alone,
or the deeper tones it took
when I wrapped my
hands
around that airline plastic.
I observed my drink and realized
it was the color of the
sky
when the sun sinks below
the clouds
and the atmosphere glows—
burns.
In this, my juice is
fire when it is unfolded
across the horizon
by the fingers I see
through the bottom of my glass.
The bent light
when I carry the cup of refraction
to my mouth
and sip,
I drain the sweet sky fire
away, until
empty ice
is held in my fingers wrapped by
cold plastic.

Interstellar

Shall we be burnt to dust
by the stars
that gave birth to the
foundation of our bones?
Shall we starve for air,
or hunger for water,
and gasp for food,
on the rock where we first scraped
ourselves into being?
Or shall we venture *beyond*?

Past our knowledge,
our experience,
what our hands may see
and our eyes may touch...

Shall we pass
through, *above* what has been known?
Shall we turn into the storm
and greet the stars while they burn?
Shall we see the universe
with poetry in our guts
and iron in our bones,
our faces lifted against the
skies to breathe the ashes
of a star that won't render us
dust.

Believe

A city by night becomes a cathedral
to they who would
worship.

Lights in colors
and filters,
densities and textures,
fall

from open walls to lay
across cold flags
where many will walk
but few will kneel.

It creates unto itself
a house of worship,
dark and wide and welcoming the world but
empty.

Because the world is uneager to be welcomed
into the night church.

Padre

Marsh bird, water fowl
Mariachi band
Alligator alley
Where water bleeds to land
No tie ordinance
Spanish at la boca
Soft sandy beaches
Marley and coca
Little island city
Nation of its own
Breeze on the salt
Foreigner's home
Tres leches cake
Tennis court palms
Poolside service
Margarita moms
Resort town travelers
Tortugas in nets
Children with horns
And long song sets
Heard the devil's cattle
Kiss the gulf air
Dig in the sand
Tie up your hair
Research and posters
Students in lines
Wade through the dunes
Up to the climb
Devils got to Georgia
Students go to school
Scholars become Drs.
Who lounge out by the pool

Mother Alligators

Mother alligators protect their young.
No heat runs through their veins,
their teeth are not for smiling,
and their hands do not hold,
but still their young are loved.

Are well loved.

Are carried, defended, and fed
by a mother who hasn't evolved beyond the cretaceous.
A mother with small, cruel eyes
and no soft places to which her
young may cleave.
Yet she has more warmth
curled inside her cold heart
than some of us.

How?

Summer Lover

When summer kisses skin,
it leaves lovemarks.
It leaves crescent bites
and strawberry spots
and other dermis deep reminders
of the affair engaged with a heavenly body.

The sun leaves sweet bruises,
like good sex
where bodies don't just melt,
they *work*
together.

Where sweat and grit become inconsequential
because the act
is worth more than any
little nuisance—
because the sun is a *good* lover.

With a bad lover sweat and sand
and salt become annoying.
They become enough *friction* to
augment incompatibility.

But the sun?
The sun knows where to peel
hot skin against hot skin—
how to make you *sing*
out at the peak.

The sun knows how to
make pain,
make soreness
make funny looks
and side-said comments
worth it.
All day long.

Puddle Jump

Fly, wing me home
small, silver bird.
Take me back safe,
over the world.
Dash through the skies
as I run on land,
wing us away,
fast as you can.
Set me down safely,
back where I go
and leave me there, patient,
until next you know,
of my need to travel
to raise and take flight
then, silver bird,
be my steed and my knight.
And send me to battle
thus, bravely steeled,
ready to face
what won't make me yield.
But that will be then
in the future haze,
for now ride the wind
to home don't delay.

Vietnam Veteran Interviews

Spring—Fall
2014/Spring 2015

Angelo State University
Honors 4391

War isn't Hell. War
is war and Hell is
Hell, and of the two,
war is a lot worse.

There are no
innocent bystanders
in Hell.

-M*A*S*H

The process of interviewing local Vietnam Veterans for my Honors 4391 Research Course in conjunction with the West Texas Collection Archive was an humbling experience. Hearing these men and women, my father included, speak about their experiences both in and outside the service in the 50s, 60s, and 70s was enough to render me and the other students conducting interviews dumb. The best way I could process the horror, and humor, of what we heard was to write poetry.

In May 2015 I traveled to Commerce, Texas, to present my poetry and a reflective essay about my experience at the annual Texas Oral History Association Conference. That essay, “True Stories: Reflections on a War I Never Knew”, and the poems I wrote and presented with it were difficult for me. Writing an oral history paper to be presented at a conference attended by historians who were better versed in the genre than I was daunting at best, and writing war poetry took my dabbling in negative capability to another level. Where once I played with the vernacular and imagined a narrator’s words as a game, now I forced myself to see through the eyes of the soldiers we interviewed and record their stories in poetry as best I could.

I enjoy war poetry. From Kipling’s roustabout collection *Barrack-room Ballads*, to Wilfred Owen’s unflattering “Strange Meeting” to the marching songs I heard on occasion out my dorm room window when the ROTC detachment at ASU sings on their rare pre-dawn runs, war and military poetry is a genre I am fond of. I like the mixture of blatant lies that come with military boasts and the brutal honesty that comes with the revelation of war as lacking glory. I enjoy Scottish ballads about the Battle of Culloden and medieval boast poems about the Battle of Maldon. I find all of it fascinating and beautiful the way any terrible thing can be made beautiful if examined from an alternate angle with a steeled gut.

Yet no matter how mesmerizing or beautiful or powerful I found war poetry as a child and in my studies as an adult, I never imagined I would write it.

In my understanding war poetry could only be written by those who had gone to war. I would never go to war; therefore, anything I wrote about war was liable to be fraudulent at best and downright insulting at worst. So when I took up my pen and began writing poetry as a way to comprehend, to *deal with*, the horror and humor and dull bits in between of what we heard in the interview room, I did not expect to write true war poetry. I expected my work to be a mockery of the war poets of the World Wars. I expected myself to be incapable of using negative capability to put boots on the ground in my mind's eye and write poetry that rang true to a war that ended long before I was born.

It took time. I worked at this poetry. I listened to and transcribed the interviews we conducted. I spent time looking up the slang used by the Vietnam era soldiers. I found out that a pineapple was a grenade and almost as edible as the C-rations that were carried by soldiers on long marches. I learned that SEALs were the Men with Green Faces and helicopters performed dust-offs when they medivac'd the wounded to safety from the battlefield. All of this language helped to color my writing. The soldiers I and my fellow Honors students interviewed served as the inspiration I needed to lose my compunctions about writing war poetry without ever going to war.

True Stories: Reflections on a War I Never Knew

My grandmother told me once that WWI was not taught while she was in school because it was not yet fifty years past while she was a child and therefore was not considered history. As a proud product of the Texas public education system, I found this incredibly sad,

especially since my own history classes included weeks of study on both World Wars. I could not imagine such a historical gap continuing to exist in the enlightened educational age I grew up in.

You learn how to survive. So it was more or less a little bit easier for me to pick up on what was going on – not that I enjoyed it, but I knew it was 365 days of doing things. Don't look at your watch, don't look at your calendar, just follow your nose get on the map before you know you will be home. So that was the deal.

-Domingo Luna, Interview, 6/13/2014

I was wrong.

The Vietnam War has been massively, tragically lost on a great number of my generation. In my experience American history was taught chronologically from the Revolution, and Vietnam became a footnote against the backdrop of the Civil Rights

Movement at the end of a semester. I was taught to memorize a beginning and ending date; I heard Vietnam called a civil war, a mess, a tragedy, and then the subject was abandoned by instructors who were just as eager for a break as their pupils. This was an efficient way to abbreviate a war that cost more than \$150 billion USD, over 58,000 American lives, and lasted two and a half decades (Herring xiii). Drawing a line at the 17th parallel and calling it the divider in a civil war makes separation of friend and foe easy. “Mess” is a small word to describe the tangle of history, politics, technologies, ideologies, lies, compromises, truths, promises, men, women, and children that was Vietnam. Calling any war a tragedy is a simple way to lose the humanity that comes with human conflict. I spent a year gaining an inkling of exactly how oversimplified my education was.

From spring to winter of 2014 Honors students from Angelo State University interviewed dozens of Vietnam veterans from across the Concho Valley through an Honors

4391 Research Course. The students, adults, and veterans who worked on this project did so for a variety of reasons. For some it was a chance to learn about a war we were never taught; for others it was an opportunity to expand the West Texas Collection, the on campus archives at ASU. For veterans it was a relief, an obligation, an amusement, a step forward, a trip back. Everyone who went into this project did so expecting to gain something: a grade, experience collecting primary sources, knowledge about a war that still does not seem to be well explained in our high schools. What I walked away with was much more than any of those things. I walked away from this project with stories.

As a young writer and poet, I process the world in words and stories. The words of these men and women, veterans all, hit me in the gut. Hearing my father say he was spit on, hearing others say they marched for peace, hearing more still weep for children that were saved or not saved depending—it became poetry. Some of my poems are experiences, images spun directly from the mouths of those we interviewed. Others are my own impressions of a no-win situation. Each one is a piece of truth as I see it, truth founded somewhere between the facts of what happened and the words of those it happened to.

Through the interviewing process we collected hours and hours of footage and audio recordings. More hours were spent transcribing those interviews and filing them in the archives. We scanned letters, photos, journals, certificates of service, documented medals, helmets, C-rations, tapes, cards, all of the little things from either side of the ocean that are collected when a son or daughter is away at war. We collected the physical, archived it, and listened to the stories. The stories that made this war more than two dates and a few taglines.

Stories of nurses buying flowers and planting gardens outside the hooches where they slept—the flowers never survived. I wrote a poem about that, about the ways that roses can be bought and tended with as much care as any patient in an OR, and still would die (“The Roses Won”). Later it would be released that Agent Orange was sprayed downwind. Stories of surgeons who spent days in their ORs and only lost a fraction of their patients. Stories of medivac pilots performing dust-offs at night by the light of muzzle flares. Stories of the jungle by night and the rain by day and the endless slog that was infantry life.

I was working post-op critical care at the time and the first night that we got hit so desperately I filled up and emptied a 20 bed Quonset hut 4 times and called for help; we woke up the whole compound to get an expansion.

Working in the kinda hospital I worked in, which was called an evac hospital, we ran about 400 beds. During an expansion necessity we could increase to a thousand beds. That did not necessarily mean you had the personnel to cover 1000 patients; however, you could accommodate them if you needed to. And certainly during the Tet Offensive that, was needed.

-Linda Knightstep, Interview, 4/21/2014

My first interview was with a nurse, Linda Knightstep, who was stationed at a base between Cambodia and Saigon during the Tet Offensive. She is an old friend of the West Texas Collection, a veteran who could speak candidly about her experiences. She told us, my camera operator and I, amazing stories. Stories that belong on movie screens, or in books. I grew up expecting war stories to come from the mouths of men in uniforms with scars and eye patches and the sort of growl that only comes from a steady diet of smoke and life-experience. Hearing them pour from the lips of a well-dressed woman barely older than my father was not what I expected.

I took one of her stories and some of the others I heard and wrote a poem. I wrote one happy poem in the middle of all the terrible things I heard. One poem about the boredom and excitement and dark humor that comes out of being surrounded by a battlefield (“Good Stories”). In this poem each verse tells a different snippet from a different person and in a different voice. I changed the syntax and sentence structure of the different verses to reflect the different speakers and in doing so created a piece totally outside anything I had written before. The art of losing myself almost entirely to bring this one poem out and make the voices distinct was a challenge and one I enjoyed once I lost my trepidation at intruding my work where it might not be welcome.

Linda told me she spent time with a leper colony on the coast of Vietnam on her days off. She said that while in country she decided that if she were ever injured, or disfigured, she would live with them rather than returning to the States after her tour.

She told me about relationships with the men on her base. How everyone loved with the knowledge that love would not last in a place like Vietnam.

She told me about straddling a boy in post-op with her fist in his groin, hand clamped

I was walking with a young lady and a car backfired and I hit the ground and I said “Yep, that’s a crack in the ground. Okay, let’s go.”

She said “What happened.”

I said “I was looking at a crack in the ground, let’s go.”

-William Karmany, Interview, 9/12/214

on his femoral artery after his stitches popped and his blood hit the ceiling. She told us that was how he went to the OR, with her still sitting on him and his artery pinched between her fingers. He survived. (Linda Knightstep, Interview, 4/21/2014)

So many survived, some happily. Some less so. Linda returned to the States at the end of her service and could not work in a hospital. The idea of going from a warzone where she was respected by every patient dragged into her ward bleeding on a gurney, to a hospital where she would be asked to water flowers and fetch ice chips and adjust pillows was more than she could handle. She returned to nursing eventually, but not immediately. Very few vets we interviewed could return to their lives immediately.

What we now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was, during and in the aftermath of Vietnam, not entirely understood. To this day doctors continue to struggle with the human mind and its capacity to recall or repress

I was taking night classes at the time and one evening, when I got to my car and started it up I had the most horrible smell. Someone, when they found out where I had been, had put fecal matter in the intake on the hood...

Took me the longest time to get that cleaned up.

-Karl Kujawa, Interview, 9/17/2014

atrocities. Vietnam veterans did not have the luxury of returning to a nation that supported their war, or an understanding of the mental repercussions of what had taken place. “Younger on the average by seven years than their World War II counterparts, having endured a war far more complex and confusing, Vietnam veterans by the miracles of the jet age were whisked

This was last year, last May, Memorial Day, in San Diego, and we hadn't seen each other in forty-five years. We hadn't seen each other, none of us, since 1968. We got together because we are all old now, and it was like we had just seen each other. We just started talking, and it was like we were kids again over in Vietnam.

-William McKinney, Interview, 4/21/2014

home virtually overnight to a nation hostile to the war and indifferent to their plight”

(Herring, 347-48). They returned changed.

They returned to a nation that did not understand the conflict overseas, nor want it. They returned with scars in their minds

that largely went untreated to parents, friends, and lovers who could not comprehend the toll conflict had taken and would continue to take for decades to come.

Writing poetry about PTSD was a challenge because it required fragmentation. PTSD and the ripples it causes in society are not always coherent so to reflect that I wrote a poem that, while coherent syntactically, seems to be spaced disjointedly on the page (“They Sent us Back”). Initially the poem was one long verse with indentation on every line beginning in “they sent.” To further the physical fragmentation of the poem I spaced the lines so that every sentence stood alone as a verse. The end result looks disjointed on the page but reads as a fairly coherent narrative, just as PTSD can seem fragmented but come from a fairly straightforward place or vice versa.

Some of the veterans we interviewed continued to serve their country; others completed their service and returned to civilian life. Many spoke of the isolation they felt after returning to their homes, isolation from their brothers and sisters in arms. Without people surrounding them who intimately understood the horrors these veterans had seen, many fell into depression. With the world against them, their families uncomprehending, and those they served with scattered back across the country, many found solace in the memorials, both local and national (though the national memorial in Washington DC was not completed until 1982 and even then did not include the women who served), both stationary and traveling. Some traveled with the Wall, serving as an honor guard. Others simply traveled.

We interviewed my father as a Vietnam era veteran rather than a veteran of the Vietnam War and I wrote a poem to him (“*Who?*”). A poem to the young man I never knew

beyond sly remarks passed between my parents or between my dad and his sister when they thought no one was listening close by enough to notice. I know father spent months on a motorcycle, crossing the nation staying with a combination of family and service buddies depending on where he was. I know little else about his time during or after the service, so I titled my poem with a question. A question that I may never see answered but a question nonetheless.

While veterans who served together directly were often split after their service by simple geography the camaraderie continued whether vets had served together or not. Some opposed the war. Some opposed the government. Some would have gone back in a heartbeat if they were physically able to. None of the men and women we interviewed were hostile about their fellow veterans. That being said, there were two prevailing schools of thought among brother soldiers in our interviews about friends made in-country. There were those who would never forget every detail of those they served with, and those who worked hard during their service not to learn anyone's last name (Karmany). By not learning last names, or even going so far as to not remember first names as was the case with some of our medical veterans, the men and women we interviewed protected themselves mentally from the tragedy surrounding them (Knightstep). In a war where so many thousands died in service and many more hundred committed suicide in the years after their return, emotional isolation became a refuge for many veterans. By not learning, or sharing,

You knew each other and you respected each other. You trusted the man who was on either side of you, behind you, and you were like a brother to him... but I didn't wanna know about your family, or your last name... and we protected each other.

-William Karmany

backgrounds with each other while in country the men and women serving together not only protected themselves, but each other.

I wrote a poem about the terrors of war and the way stories spread and the way humanity continues even under conditions that seem impossible (“17, 107 DMZ”). A poem about children and soldiers and the complicated relationship between the two in a war zone. A poem about the fear children can instill by their simple presence and the hope they can represent to a nation. It is not a happy poem, my elegy welcoming the children of war, but it is a poem about a time and a place and a people that survived decades of war and invaders

I had wished we [as a country] had gotten more out of it than we, you know, with all the money and all the people and all the anguish and the blood that we, we, it would have worked out that we would have accomplished more. Since the same thing happened in Korea, at least they got a thriving country, whereas Vietnam really's sorta gone down a different track. I would've hoped that the outcome would have been a little more positive. But, that's all, I don't know, it'd – that whole situation is so complex.

-Joe Cornelison, Interview, 4/29/2014

and liberators and all others who come to a foreign land with guns and flags and speeches.

Our soldiers in Vietnam defended each other's bodies and took vengeance when they could not. We interviewed a sailor who crewed one of the smaller gunboats barely off the coast of Vietnam, a gunboat with an ice-cream machine in the mess. Soldiers on shore would beg, steal, borrow, or commandeer any

vessel they could to sail out to the boat in downtime for ice-cream. One afternoon our interviewee was leaning over the side to help a few soldiers cast off after one such visit, and rapid fire from the treeline ripped a boy in half. Tore a young soldier to pieces in front of his brothers while he returned from something as mundane as an afternoon ice-cream run. That

sailor and his gunboat wheeled around and poured white phosphorous shells into the trees. Shelled the hell out of the undergrowth until anyone left moving on that shore would spend their last minutes in pain, breathing the burnt poison that would kill them quickly; traumatic injury did not. This was told matter-of-factly to a pair of incredulous college students sandwiched between an anecdote about SEALs playing hot-potato with hand grenades and a plane called “Puff the Magic Dragon” that would lay cover fire at night (Robert Jordan, Interview, 9/19/2014). Puff the Magic Dragons were “C-47 transports converted into terrifying gunships...that could fire 18,000 rounds a minute” (Herring 183). Navy SEAL units were newly created at the start of the Vietnam War, being established in January of 1962. By the end of the war the Men with Green Faces were considered fearsome by fellow soldiers and enemies alike.

The most nihilistic of my Vietnam poems, in my opinion, was written after re-listening to the shortest interview I conducted. Some interviews took tiny amounts of time, in

I gave a talk to a Vietnam Veterans thing one time. The leader of it was sort of telling about how bad things were and how the enlisted men were just cannon fodder for the officers. I never did really see that, so I went back to find out where and what he was in Vietnam. He was a finance clerk at the headquarters for the Green Berets in Vietnam

-Robert Grant, Interview, 5/7/2015

this case just over twenty minutes. This happened for many reasons, the most common seemed to be an inability to talk about an experience in Vietnam. Our interviewees would shake their heads or begin to say something and stop halfway through. Sometimes they seemed worried about offending or scaring us, the student interviewers. Other times they seemed ashamed or angry or

struggling not to cry. I wrote a poem about it (“Do you believe in God”). About the short fragments of sentences used to describe Vietnam, and the way that people back in the states

did not, or could not understand what our soldiers had been through. The result still tastes bitter to me every time I read it, but it needed to be written.

The concept of being impressed by a plane that could swoop from the sky and breathe lead, not fire, on an enemy that still fought with pit traps, the idea of joking about men who played games with grenades, the notion of burning a forest and everything in it with white phosphorous—all of these were foreign to my fellow interviewer and me. Here we were, children in front of a man who killed

people and never saw their faces, who fought when his government called, in a war his country did not want. Who were we to pass judgment? We could not. Our preliminary reading, our preconceptions, our schooling in dates and statistics were all infinitesimal against what we heard again and again in interviews. This was not

I didn't like what I saw in the Pentagon, I didn't like having a bunch of civilians for my bosses and they had no idea the impact of what they were doing on the field troops. There was a lot of bitterness within the service, who believed we fought the war with our hands tied behind our back and that we couldn't use weapons that we had available to us.

-Burt Terrill, Interview, 4/14/2014

a numbers war, it was a human war. A war fought by men for the sake of governments. Wars fought by governments become calculated things, numbers and logistics reported on invoices to men in offices a world away.

Wars fought by men are not cold. They are hot and close, intimate as a child's first gasp of air and just as raw. They do not become linear things, and this certainly has not been a linear reflection. Our interviews were not conducted linearly, nor were they organized by geography, branch, or rank of the interviewee. Because of this, the story I heard did not flow

in one straight line. We heard from men who fought at the end of the war, and women who served in the beginning, and everywhere in between. My understanding of the war became as tangled as the conflict itself. Some veterans focused on their time in country, others would rather talk about their training before leaving for Vietnam, more still would rather talk about their time afterwards and the ways they reacted to what they had seen. Some were angry, some protested, others continued to be proud of their service, more still prepared to forget what happened. As for me, I will never forget.

The stories I heard while interviewing Vietnam veterans were incredible. The poems I wrote as a result of those interviews stretched my limits in ways I could never have anticipated. Through the process of writing my Vietnam poetry I deepened my understanding of negative capability beyond anything I had previously experienced and gained further understanding of the ways in which line breaks and indentation can be used to convey the essence of a poem. As an exercise in poetic form and practice, this was invaluable.

As an experience in Honors and the ways in which history and personal narratives weave together, it defied description.

The Roses Won

The roses won't grow.
We buy them
and plant them
and water,
and prune,
and worry,
over their stems
and blooms
and thorns—
when we make time
to inspect the ranks,
but the roses won't grow.

We can clamp a man's arteries
and sew him closed
and thread IVs
and change dressings
while the world ends
in fire not flood,
but the roses won't grow.

We can go to the villages
to look at the children
and the mama-sans
and the disease
that eats them all
when war leaves them hungry,
but the roses won't grow.

We can see our boys,
the ones not hurt,
or torn
or bleeding,
the ones scarred not scathed,
we can talk
and laugh
and dance
and drink
like there won't be fire
again tonight,
still the roses won't grow.

Not here.

Good Stories

“You’ve only asked for the bad,
don’t you wanna hear the
good?”

We were at this village in nowhere, same
as every other village
we ever crossed
every direction
we ever went. Same
confused villagers, same
talks ‘tween the COs and elders, same
waiting for orders.
Then we saw it: one them three wheeled motor cart things
waiting, *perfect*.
That thing could carry six grunts at one time
right up until it couldn’t cause
nothing
fits in a cart
on its side
in a ditch
Funny what we’d get into when—

The SEALs were *bored*
on board.
Terrible guys to have on a boat, the Green Faces,
when they’re bored.
They’d make their own fun.
They’d sit down aft,
outta our way,
and play hot potato with a live grenade,
laughing at the *chicken* who finally
chunked the pineapple in the water before it
went off.
Grenades, of *all* the *crazy* things—

We saw the craziest things-guys-*things*
in the med tents.
Course lots’a things are crazy
when you’re runnin around on
catnaps and OJ,
but these *guys*, well they were something else.
Joe,
only patient name I remember
came to me *twice*.

And that second time I just looked at him cause he looked *fine*
I mean *healthy* fine, not *fine* fine—
Lord knows they were all wormy enough
'at none of 'em looked *fine*,
but I said to him, I said: "Now Joe don't you go an tell me you're here *again* for—"
And he just said "Yes ma'am" looked all embarrassed,
silly man got himself shot in the *ass*
not once but *twice*.
I mean how many times before—

It took a long time before
a guy in my detachment flipped
at the apes.
We called them rock apes
cause they'd throw rocks at us and the enemy and each other and all
and finally he went *nuts*.
I mean screamin, pulled pin and
threw
at the damn things.
Y'know what?
That damn ape threw that damn grenade back.
I never duck and covered
so fast in my *life*—

Fastest I ever ran for my life
was in Japan on R&R.
See we were in this little place in Nagasaki
where the waitress just kept bringing us... *stuff*
and I took one bite of that... *stuff*
and spent the rest of my leave
squatting in some—

My wife loved squatting in the surf
with our son. I got to see them
in Hawaii while I was there for R&R
halfway through my tour and that was—
That was good.

That was a good time.

They Sent us Back

They sent us back
without warning.

Pulled us like ticks
from our hostile host
and told us to forget
to be free; after
they sent us into
dust and rain on the pitted
skin of a moon we made
with poison and fire.

Into jungles burned bare
by toxins,
a purgatory populated
by critters and crawlers and pit-traps
from another century.

Into hospital tents
where a hundred men died
while a dozen nurses scrambled
to save what they could.

They sent our
tired skins to beaches, cities, countries,
away from what we'd seen.

A week where whims were met,
dinners bought and paid for
by our favorite Uncle.

They sent us home
to a country battling herself.

To peace marches, hate crimes
and the disapproval
of those who never saw
our bedlam.

They sent us back into our homes
injured in ways doctors would not diagnose.

They told us to be proud,
stay strong,

to believe in the difference we'd made
in the lives of people
who had no desire for our
difference.

They told us there was nothing wrong
while they made us sick.

Who?

I never met the men
my father went to sea with.
Never saw their faces,
learned their names,
knew them beyond blurs
at the back of stories
he wouldn't tell.

Mom told me a story once,
a joke,
about his sailor buddies.
A quip, wry in the way
only she could make it—
something about reasons
why he might not remember
the Boat's ten year reunion party.

The only joke she ever made
about excesses.

I wish I'd known them,
him,
my daddy in the service.
A little young, a little reckless,
with a Jim Morrison disregard
for a strange situation
and a Skynard ability
to slip through anything.
I would like to have known him
when he was my age
and just as uncertain of his future
as I am.

Who was he, in the still seconds
that weren't quiet
when he lay in his bunk
and wondered?
What made him a man
who'd let his daughter do *anything*,
but run off to the military.
What company did he keep?

(17, 107) DMZ

There are children in a place
like this?
Children who laugh in
language universal,
who cry as all children do,
who hunger and thirst and play and learn *here*,
of all places.
Children orphaned, children ill,
or hurt,
or exploited because they are orphaned, ill, or hurt—
or none of these.
Only exploited.

Children being saved,
pulled from rubble to breathe free air.
Children we find; children we help.
We read those stories.

Children we shy away from.
Children shot in the streets for reasons
we can't enunciate.
Children who become the stuff of
grown men's fear.
We hear those stories.

Yet still, they are *born*.
Every day, every morning
more children under this sun:
"Good morning all you children!"
Brought into the world to be given
what love there is
given the times and
 circumstances.
Children to break our hearts
again and again, day out and night in
Welcome to the world
all you children
of war.

“Do you believe in God?”

“Do you believe in God?”

They asked
before.

I told them.

I called fire down
through brush and paddies
brother
across my back
the box that made skies roar
death in my hands
heavy, so *heavy*
sulfur falling through my teeth
bit my tongue bleeding
and spat on the cheek
of a land
cracked.

Gave me a token,
royal colors on a ribbon and pin,
in that antiseptic room
where they told me
I could not
walk.

“Do you believe in God?”

I believe in a god who created Hell
before the Fall.

After

Spring 2015

Jennifer deBie, Angelo State
University Honors Program

If you want a
happy ending, that
depends, of course,
on where you stop
your story.

- Orson Wells

After all is said and done I am still learning. Poetry has been learning for me. Learning to respect the craft. Learning to practice the craft. Learning to turn the verse and cut the line and let the words fall where they belong. Learning the ways in which science and history can be woven into words and the ways that those who wrote before me continue to influence my writing. Poetry, for me, has meant learning to see and hear and taste and touch the world anew.

Over the course of my travels and my studies I have gained subtlety in my poems. I learned to use concrete images and to show my readers what I want them to see rather than telling them. I have learned to trust that some poems rhyme and some do not and that the difference in one from the other is not one is true poetry and the other an imitation. I have learned to respect, and write, both.

I have spent hours in writing exercises. I have penned erasures and found poems, ekphrastic poetry, sonnets, war poems, nature poems, elegies, letters poems, and war poems. I have filled journals and notebooks and flash drives with draft upon draft upon draft of my work. I have come to realize that the drafting process is just as difficult and far more time consuming than the initial writing of any poem. I have become a stronger poet because of this realization.

I have learned from professors and friends and parents and peers and strangers on the street. I have learned to always listen and that anything, from philosophy on the workings of the universe to the warm sting of a sunburn to war stories that really aren't about war and are about people, can become a poem. I learned that language is beautiful and infinite and intimate in the ways it can be spun or broken for the sake of a poem. I have learned in

classrooms and museums and on the sides of mountains with a pack on my back. I learned and have been taught and practiced in all of these places and still want to learn more.

After all is said and done, I hope never to finish learning. I hope to continue weaving fact and verse and truth and story into poetry for years to come. I hope to continue learning from the amazing people and the staggering world that surrounds me. I will continue to write in the evenings as a relief at the end of a day and in the mornings as a reflection on the night and under the noonday sun as a celebration of what I see around me.

The poems in this thesis are a sample of my work and a demonstration of the ways in which I have changed as a poet. Included are the word-game rhymes of my early poems and examples of my progression from there. I have grown and I have learned and have met the most incredible people along the way. My thesis represents a physical journey and my maturing as a poet through these past years. It represents my little snatches of life and my reflections before bed. It is my nightcaps and vignettes.

Thank you for partaking.

Works Cited

- “About Erik.” *Touchthetop.com*. Erik Weihenmayer, 2015. Web. 20 May 2015.
<<http://touchthetop.com/about-erik>>.
- Arnold, Edwin. *The Light of Asia*. London: 1879. Print
- “Born in Florence, Italy.” *Florence.ala.it*. Florence by Net. 2014. Web. 25 April, 2015.
<<http://www.florence.ala.it/Born%20in%20Florence.htm>>.
- Cornelison, Joe. Interview, 29 April 2014.
- Dell’Amore, Christine. “Biggest Crocodile Found—Fossil Species Ate Humans Whole?”
NationalGeographicNews. National Geographic Society., 9 May, 2012. Web. 24
April, 2015.
- “Galapagos Tortoise.” *Nationalgeographic.com*. National Geographic Society. 2015. Web.
20 May 2015. <<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/reptiles/galapagos-tortoise/>>.
- Grant, Robert. Interview, 7 May 2014.
- “Great Basin National Park: Astronomy.” *Nps.gov*. US Department of the Interior. 4/28/15.
Web. 26 April, 2015 <<http://www.nps.gov/grba/planyourvisit/great-basin-night-sky.htm>>.
- “Great Basin National Park: The Prometheus Story.” *Nps.gov*. US Department of the Interior.
4/28/15. Web. 26 April 2015. <<http://www.nps.gov/grba/learn/historyculture/the-prometheus-story.htm>>.
- Herring, George. *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. New
York City: McGraw-Hill, 2001, Print.
- “History of the Uffizi Gallery.” *Uffizi.org*. Uffizi Gallery Museum. 2014. Web. 25 April,
2015 <<http://www.uffizi.org/museum/history/>>.
- Hooper, John. “Remembering the ‘Mud Angels’ of the 1966 Floods.” *The Guardian.com*.
The Guardian News and Media Ltd. 10 November, 2006. Web. 25 April 2015.
- Jordan, Robert. Interview, 19 September 2014.
- Karmany, William. Interview, 12 September 2014.
- Knightstep, Linda. Interview, 21 April 2014.

Kujawa, Carl. Interview, 17 September 2014.

Luna, Domingo. Interview, 13 June 2014.

“Struggle to Save Italian Art During WWII is Documented in New Book.” *NOLA.com*.

NOLA Media Group. 2015. Web. 25 April, 2015.

<http://www.nola.com/books/index.ssf/2013/05/new_book_documents_the_struggl.html>.

Terril, Burt. Interview, 14 April 2014.

United States. Great Basin National Park. *Listing Sensitive and Extirpated Species*. Great Basin Nevada. 2006. Print.

“Vietnam—The Men with Green Faces.” *NavySEALMuseum.org*. National Navy UTD-SEAL Museum. 2014. Web. 22 April 2015.

<<https://www.navysealmuseum.org/about-navy-seals/seal-history-the-naval-special-warfare-story/seal-history-vietnam-the-men-with-green-faces>>.

“Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund: Memorial.” *Vvmf.org*. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. 2013. Web. 22 April. 2015. <<http://www.vvmf.org/memorial>>.

“Villa La Pietra: About.” *Nyu.edu*. New York University, n.d. Web. 20 May 2015. <<http://www.nyu.edu/lapietra/>>.

“Villa La Pietra: The Florentine Home of Sir Harold Acton.” *Villas-of-Tuscany.net*. Infotech, 2015. Web. 20 May 2015. <http://www.villas-of-tuscany.net/villa_la_pietra.htm#.VV4ZcfIViko>.

Wynalda, Steve. “10 Priceless Work of Art Rescued by the Monuments Men.” *Listverse*. Listverse Ltd. 15 November 2014. Web. 24 April 2015.

VITA

Jennifer R. deBie was born on June 9, 1993 in Texarkana, Texas, to Rick and Carolyn deBie. She was raised in Redwater, Texas, and graduated tenth in her class from Redwater ISD in the spring of 2011. She entered the Honors Program at Angelo State University in the fall of 2011 where she served two years on the officer team as Intramural Liaison and one year as a Mentor to freshmen entering the program. She traveled to numerous conferences and traveled on two summer enrichment sessions funded through the Alvin and Patricia New Honors Enhancement Fund. Jennifer will graduate magna cum laude with Highest University Honors and a degree in English with creative writing concentration and a minor in Spanish in the spring of 2015. In the fall she will pursue a Masters in creative writing at University College Cork in Cork, Ireland. Any questions about her thesis or other work can be emailed to jenni.debie@gmail.com.