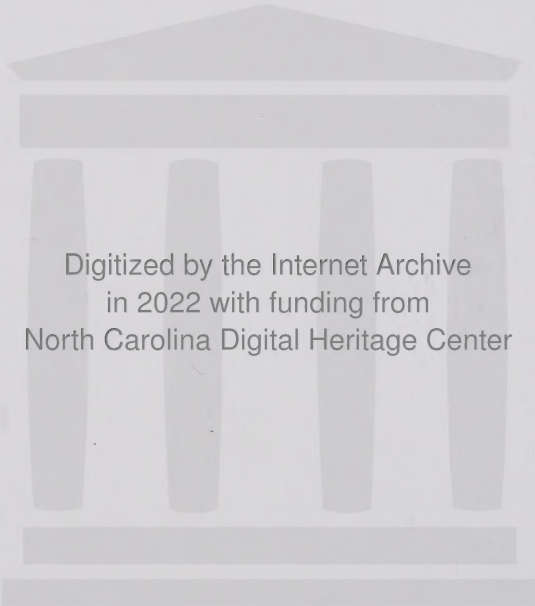




EX UMBRA

43  
2007



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# EX UMBRA

*No. 43.*

2007

THE LITERARY MAGAZINE  
*of*  
NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

*"Out of the Shadows"*

PUBLISHING NCCU STUDENT  
ARTISTS & WRITERS  
SINCE 1965

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# EX UMBRA

No. 43.

Gregory P. Wilson    *EDITOR*

Dr. Andrew Williams, Ph.D.    *FACULTY ADVISOR*

A PUBLICATION OF  
NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY  
*DURHAM, NC*



## EDITOR'S FORWARD —

What you hold is a piece of our history as a university, an instant of our collective, cultural psyche impressed onto paper and bound into a book. I am always amazed by the creativity and spirit each *Ex Umbra* contains. Each year we try and maintain traditions of what has gone before, yet we try always to improve upon what has gone before, too. It's a bit odd, really — a curious balancing act of the present, always here between our past and our future.

This is the second issue of *Ex Umbra* I have helped publish, and it is my last. I received a lot of support and appreciation for the layout of the last issue, so I have carried that look into this issue, with "Poetry," "Prose," and "Art" once again being listed separately in the table of contents. A few poets have multiple poems under their names. I felt that, while these poets in particular had more to say than could be adequately expressed in any single one of their poems, and whose poems needed more linguistic and lyrical "swingin' room" and so I made that room for them. It should be noted here that none of these poets asked for any extra room, nor even knew that I was publishing multiple poems of theirs. Indeed, I imagine most would be a bit embarrassed to be single out the way they have. One person in particular I wish to single out is Racheal Johnson. Racheal won *Ex Umbra's* Shadow Slam Poetry Slam in Spring of 2007 . . . as a 10<sup>th</sup> grader from Josephine Clement early college high school, a partner school of North Carolina Central University. She qualified to publish in *Ex Umbra* because she is attending NCCU this year. She has only one poem, "Anthrax," in this issue, but I look for future works from her to be in future issues.

I hope that future editors continue to seek new ways to give voice to the students of NCCU; that more art students will contribute drawings, paintings, and photographs; that we are able to entice budding musicians to bless us with lyrics and budding playwrights to share their one act plays; that essays from across the disciplines flow into future *Ex Umbras*. Today, however, I hope more than anything that you, the reader, enjoy this, my last issue of *Ex Umbra*.

*Gregory P. Wilson*

Editor, *Ex Umbra* No. 43.





MOLLY BIEK | *Telling You*

It's like...  
Summertime...  
Hot sand and cool breeze.

It's like movies in the morning,  
Reruns late at night.  
It's laughing at old jokes:  
Head back, mouth wide.

It's like...  
The Temptations at Christmastime.  
And a Red-rider BB gun.

It's breakfast in the afternoon,  
Scrambled eggs with cheese.  
It's fried chicken biscuits  
And Ice-cold lemonade.

It's like...  
Fish and chips,  
Steak and beans,  
Like cigarettes and beer.

It's kicking off shoes in the evening,  
Pajamas all day long.  
It's shorts with no shirt —  
And shirt, no shorts.

It's like...  
Déjà vu or shining,  
Like space or time or sky.

It's baby sea turtles  
Crawling blindly to the surf.  
It's the earth around the sun,  
Or the thing that we call gravity.

It's like...  
Now, and then, and later,  
Or never...before or again.

ADARA BOWSER | *Black Brazilian Woman*

Black Brazilian woman:

Worthy of words

Worthy of songs

Worthy of rhythms

Worthy of beats.

Black Brazilian eyes:

Curious, wondering, and peeking.

Black Brazilian lips:

Speaking words of history,

Words of richness,

Making bold sounds.

Black Brazilian curves

Wearing loud colors:

Red, green, yellow and orange.

MELISSA O'DAINE | *My Childhood*

As I walk up the path I see the old swing  
Where I often spent many lazy afternoons.  
My feet planted on the worn welcome mat that brings back memories,  
Crossing the threshold, I'm greeted by the earth tones colors of the living room,  
The long, ghostly window curtains sweep across the floor,  
The bright yellow couch lights up the room  
As if the sun was trapped in a box.

I walk into the bedroom.  
I'm reminded of sick days in bed, morning pillow fights and bedtime stories.  
I was greeted by the scent of fresh linen and lavender water.

The crisp sheets lay across the bed  
With corners just the same —  
I'm tempted —  
I indulge,  
Letting my face and the pillow meet.  
My body sinks into the mattress with total comfort and ease.

My bliss was interrupted by the mouth watering aroma of homemade biscuits.  
I arose, as the oven emits the aroma of peach cobbler.  
I've spent many years sitting on hips and hanging on apron strings,  
Developing my taste buds,  
Catching fallen crumbs, as food is transported to the table  
While loud screechings from unfed cousins cloud my ears.

Silence only comes with the blessing of the food.  
The only sound allowed to escape the room are those of forks hitting teeth  
as food is shoved into mouths.  
With stomachs filled we sit back, relaxed in a euphoric state.  
Smiles grow with reassurance that tomorrow  
It will all repeat itself.

TORI PITTMAN | *Insignificant Soul*

In the midst  
Of the winds, colors  
Of your soul reach out to me;  
How it shines so  
Brightly and beautifully,  
Like the universal heavens.  
My colors shimmer  
To meet you as I  
Draw myself to you,  
But I don't feel your warm energy;  
Just once, I'd be  
Inside of you,  
And I would throw  
Myself to the eternal skies.  
Just once, I'd move  
By heart with the wind  
As you try to look  
Inside of me,  
But it  
Stops there because  
Here lies an insignificant soul.

JEROME RICHARDSON | *My Pains*

I'm tired.

I'm tired of being the one to come to with no where to go.

I'm tired of listening without being able to talk.

I'm tired of trying but getting nowhere.

I'm tired of my pops not being there.

I'm tired of my mother's moods.

I'm tired of being my family's crutch.

I'm tired of boys not being taught to be men.

I'm tired, I'm tired, I'm tired.

I'm tired of being tired.

I'm tired of this passion, anger, sadness my soul harbors.

I'm tired of having to prove to the world I'm not dead weight.

I'm tired of having to hide me for a job.

I just want my soul to be free — I want to be free;

I want to be me.





BRANDON MURPHY | [CAMPUS ECHO CARTOON 1- 31- -07]

JOSLYN BLOOMFIELD | *Silence E/Inters*

“We have a problem”

Lightening strikes and boils the sparks swilling in a mind  
As explosive as jet fuel in a whirlpool;  
Searing thoughts and images come on horseback  
And tote solutions and theorems and the cure to cancer  
And the antidote to AIDS and black men’s philosopher’s stone.

I speak softly  
Through the jungle of limbs attached to war painted leaders  
Who understand pain as purposeful  
But participate in earnest pissing contests.

“Too loud.  
Calm down.  
Shh!  
Wait your turn.”

And wait at that turn,  
At a stop light  
By a red sign  
Through both eternities  
With God’s patience and his child’s meekness  
And their children’s spiteful obedience.  
Winter passes and pries.

Peep.  
Excuse me. I have something to say.

“Speak up.  
Too soft.  
Cheer up.  
Go first.”

I murmur.

Machetes take wing and pin mine down.  
My heart, once full of  
Kind/weak/ness, is a heavy magnet  
Laden with hot shrapnel.

I grit red teeth behind a white smile,  
And silence e/inters me.

This is not the winter I know.

My winter is so cold, your breath dances in front of you;

This winter allows Capri pants and t-shirts.

My winter whittled away at your Spring Break with its snow days;

This winter has two hour delays and it's back to business.

My winter threw down a thick blanket the color of cleanliness over the earth;

This winter's flurries disappear before you can get the mini-marshmallows  
into your Swiss Miss.

My winter gave me bowls of sweet snow cream with hints of vanilla;

This winter gave me a big bowl full of ice water and disappointment.

My winter was hours of laughter and nonstop screaming as you plummet down  
Killer Hill on a garbage can lid;

This winter is a single inning of four square before retiring inside for an all-  
day marathon of *That's so Raven*.

My winter has died a slow, gradual, tragic death,

And this is not the winter I know.

MILLICHE SEABROOKS | *Beat*

I am the heart of this band,  
The heart of this body.  
I set the tone.  
No need to be front and center.  
Everyone hears the beats  
Of the heart.  
Focus . . . Focus.  
Remember what you remember;  
Forget what you don't know.  
It all comes down to this.  
Focus . . . Focus.  
I set the tempo.  
Rat-a-tat-tat!  
I set the beat.  
Boom . . . Boom . . . BOOM!  
Everyone has to march to the beat of this heart;  
Everyone has to march to the beat of my drum.

CARLA RAY | *My Friend*

You nurtured me like a mother bird does its baby egg.  
You welcomed me into this world with open arms.  
You watched over me and kept me safe from harm.  
You took me into your heart and gave me a brand new start.  
You gave me unconditional love.  
You watched me grow constantly.  
At times you wondered what kind of person I would be.  
You saw yourself in me.  
You gave me your wisdom and beauty.  
You pushed me into success.  
For that, I feel truly blessed.  
You gave me your strength and courage, which I can't deny.  
Because of you, I can move forward with ease.  
The time has come for you to release my hand.  
Throughout the years, you've done your best,  
Now send me off to take care of the rest.



BRANDI MISS | *Born Again*

“If you *believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ, you *shall* be saved! God, our Father in heaven, thought *enough* of us *wretched* sinners to send His *only* Son, Jesus Christ, to *die* for our *lowly* sins! Glory to God in the highest! Amen!” boomed the preacher’s voice. His face was red and sweaty, from yelling about hell fire from the pulpit at the First Missionary Baptist Church. His graying hair had been styled and was held into place with pomade. That’s why it was so shiny. He had on a dark blue suit, a mauve tie, and fancy, two-tone shoes. His pretty, young wife fanned herself in the second row with one of the fans the church ladies had stapled to a wooden paint stirrer.

“We are liars! We are cheaters! Some are thieves, others are gamblers! If you don’t get down on your knees, brothers and sisters, and ask the Lord to forgive you for your sins, you will burn in hell forever, John 13:26! If you don’t accept Jesus as your personal savior, you too will beg him, just as Lazarus did, to dip his blessed finger in cold water and let it drip onto your tongue! Satan and his hell are real! Don’t let one more day pass without securing your place in Heaven!” The preacher went on and on.

Hearing that kind of talk always made Mary Bird uneasy. She was easily spooked and still had to use a nightlight. The thought of being stuck with the devil for ever and ever with no end frightened her. She was only eight years old but knew that God had allowed her to hear the gospel, unlike the poor children in Africa where the missionaries were. She also knew that she’d better take care of her soul so she could avoid burning in hell.

Her cousin, Turk had burned her on her upper arm a few weeks ago with a stick that he had been using to roast wieners. It had hurt so bad that she cried which she didn’t usually do in front of Turk because he made fun of her. The pain from the burn lasted for days. It blistered and peeled and had left an ugly scar. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like to be burning all over. She just couldn’t do it, she couldn’t risk going to hell.

To avoid eternal damnation, she decided today was the day to get saved. It couldn’t hurt. It would be better than spending eternity in hell with the devil. She had been having nightmares about it ever since her mama made her sit through the preaching on Sunday mornings instead of staying in the nursery with the

babies. She spent the remainder of the sermon squirming around on the hard, wooden bench and peeling brown paint off the hymnal rack with her fingernail. She knew the preacher was going on about salvation, but she tuned him out and worked up her courage so that she could walk down the aisle when the invitation came.

Finally the preacher stepped down off the platform where the pulpit stood and invited anyone who had never been saved to come forward to do so. Mrs. Nora, Mary Bird's Sunday school teacher who doubled as the piano player, began to play the invitational hymn on the piano. The congregation launched into the closing hymn:

*Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling*

*Calling for you and for me*

*See on the portal*

*He's waiting and watching*

*Watching for you and for me*

Mary Bird took a deep breath and gathered up all of her courage. As the people around her kept on singing, she stuck one small white sandal clad foot into the aisle. Her other little foot followed, and she practically ran up front to where the preacher was standing with his arms open wide. Mary Bird pretended she hadn't seen the damp spots under his arms as he hugged her and asked why she had come forward. Despite the perspiration, she thought he smelled good. It was probably his aftershave.

"I want to get saved," she told him, "because I don't want to burn in hell."

"Amen!" the preacher shouted to the congregation. "This child has come forward to get saved so that she won't have to spend eternity in hell!"

"Amen!" resonated throughout the small, white building. Mrs. Nora kept playing the piano and the preacher kept asking anyone else who was lost to come join Mary Bird in seeking salvation.

Mary Bird noticed that the church house looked different from the front than from the pew near the back where her family always sat. She looked out and saw her Momma and her Daddy. Her Nana was there and her Uncle Jimmy too. So were many other people she had known her whole life. There was Mr. Herman, Mrs. Nora's husband, who drove an old-timey car with a funny sounding horn. And also Mrs. Madeline who lived up the road from her Nana.

There were the Hortons who were from New York but had lived in the area so long their funny accents were almost indistinguishable. They were all smiling at her as they continued to sing the hymn.

And there was Mrs. Saundra, the preacher's wife who always sat down front. She was from Arkansas and had the prettiest accent. She said things like, "fixin' to" and "'If n". Mary Bird couldn't help but notice her cream colored silk dress and large, summer hat that matched perfectly. Mrs. Saundra was Mary Bird's idol. She was the only woman Mary Bird knew who wore make-up every day.

After another two verses, the preacher gave up on anybody else coming down and told Mary Bird to sit on the first pew. She did as she was told and the preacher got down on his knees and opened his Bible to Luke 13:3 where Jesus said "Except ye repent, ye shall likewise perish," then to Acts 16:31 where it states that if you "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, thou shalt be saved."

"So Mary Bird, the first thing you gotta do is pray to God and admit to Him that you are a sinner and ask Him to forgive you," said the preacher softly. "Then you gotta ask Jesus into your heart to live forever." He looked right at her and smiled so big his gums showed. His teeth were big and shiny.

Mary Bird nodded and contained the giggle she felt brought on by the preacher's gummy smile. This was a serious time and she didn't want to ruin it by laughing. God would really send her to hell if she cracked up now. This was her chance. She bowed her head and raised her small hands together and tucked them underneath her chin to pray. She imagined that she must look like the Christian figurines her Great Aunt Myrtle collected. She wished somebody would take a picture.

"Dear God, I am a sinner like the preacher said, even if I hadn't ever stole nothing from nobody. I did lie to mama before though. Anyways, I want you to forgive me for all my sins. Specially the times I have been so mean to my little baby brother, Petey. Amen." Then she prayed to Jesus saying, "Dear Jesus, will you please come and live in my heart forever? Please? Amen."

She looked up at the preacher who had a big old crocodile tear falling down his ruddy cheek. He cried every time anybody came forward to get saved. Mary Bird wondered if he was really moved to tears or if it was something he learned to do in Preaching School. She reckoned he could just be in touch with his deep

down feelings. She had overheard her Uncle Junior talking about the preacher over Sunday dinner one time.

“That old Preacher man, he gets up there and cuts up and raises his fist in the air and stomps around. He beats on the pulpit and hollers loud enough so that folks three counties over can hear him!” Junior had said. Her Nana and her mama had defended the preacher, saying he was just full of the Lord and not afraid to preach the Word of God. They also told Junior that it might do him some good to spend more time in the church house on Sunday morning listening to the preacher than running around acting like a backslider on Saturday night.

The preacher hugged Mary Bird tightly before standing up.

“Brothers and sisters, what we have witnessed here today is a miracle! Jesus has taken this little girl into His Flock! She is saved by the grace of God, Amen! She will join the bands of Christians who will march into Heaven when the Lord calls us home! Can I get an amen?”

“Amen!” bellowed the congregation.

The preacher beckoned Mary Bird to follow him down the aisle as Mr. Herman was saying the closing prayer. She looked around at everybody with their eyes closed as she followed behind. Everybody looked so peaceful. She stood beside the preacher at the door so that everyone could shake her hand, along with the preacher’s, on their way out the door. The church ladies all hugged her neck and the men shook her little hand. They all said nice and encouraging things to her. She felt a little overwhelmed.

“I’m real proud a you, Mary Bird,” her mama said to her. “You are gonna make a fine, young Christian lady.”

Her Daddy took Mary Bird by the hand and led her to the car while her mama went to fetch her baby brother from the nursery.

“You done a good thing today, Bird,” he said to her. “A real good thing.”

Her daddy was a man of few words, so that he said anything at all surprised Mary Bird.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she said back to him as she squeezed his big, calloused hand. Her daddy was an auto mechanic and had grease under and around his fingernails even though he washed them really good. Mary Bird loved the way the smell of the volcano soap blended with the smell of grease on his hands. It was comforting and familiar.

He opened the door for her to climb in and she settled herself on the backseat. The vinyl was hot on the backs of her legs and made her think of hell and how hot it was and how she didn't have to worry about it any more. She was saved now. She wasn't exactly sure what all that meant, but she bet she wouldn't be afraid of the dark any more.

Her mama got to the car with her brother and shoved him into the backseat alongside Mary Bird. He was happy to see her and smacked his tiny hand onto her leg.

"Hey Petey," she said to her brother. "Did you have fun in the nurseŕy?"

He responded by making motor car sounds with his lips.

KENALI BATTLE | *Trapped*

Trapped  
Between the man I want  
And my father's tightrope,  
Crying and stuck  
Because love is like dope.  
Daddy cares;  
Daddy knows;  
But daddy does not realize  
That his baby grows.  
My confidence shrinks,  
And my heart expands,  
Turning on my father,  
Clenching to my man.  
Thug-like actions  
Lead to stupid judging.  
He tries to talk me out of it —  
But, damn it — I'm not budging.  
"Protective"  
Would describe them both.  
Depression  
Is what kills my hope.  
Hope  
That I don't have to sneak and lie.  
Hope  
That he gives me rules  
I can abide by.  
If one only knew  
How hard it is to adapt  
Once you finally find  
That you are trapped.



MELANIE OUJUA | *The Hammock*

I swayed forth and back  
Neath a new umbrella of green.  
It trembled warmly with the wind  
Light pierced through arms that held up the sky,  
Making thousands of tiny spotlights in nature's Hollywood.  
Drifting sweetly through the jaded boughs,  
Honeysuckled breezes slowly transformed into browning leaves  
and rotting acorns.  
Now as I trudge through ripping wintry winds,  
My body is full of yearning.  
I recall that sensuous wind,  
Which carried with it the righteous riches  
that only summer can impart.  
It won't be long 'til I can hang my hammock once again.

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Drawn by Switzon



SWITZON WIGFALL | *Beauty of a Phenomenal Woman*

TRADELL ADKINS | *Time*

...it's time...

time to let you go, and the times we have shared,

though minimal, have been generally good at times, and...

times they seemed a little uncomfortable...because

time after time you seem to bring up past love and...

every time you mentioned him, it seems to mess the mood up, and...

I can attribute it to the fact that you still love him, but...

I can also fault time...

which it seems you didn't have enough of in order to get over him, so...

now I'm stuck in a situation where you're an hour behind, meaning...

you say you're ready to move on but you didn't take the necessary time, while I...

gave myself the necessary time to move on from mine, so...

for me it's spring and I'm running my schedule at daylight savings time, and...

I'm at about a quarter past 9 but you're...

in the fall at 15 after 8, trying to...

get too many things done at one time,

when I'm trying to give you the whole hour you need to

catch up with me, meaning...time...

it's time...time to let you go...

and it seems to be in the nick of time...

because time after time, you seem to be an hour behind...

which makes it hard for us to arrive at the same place at the same time...

I want a commitment...and you want more

time...

time for you, but at the same time...

you have time for his behind, so it's time...

for me to keep it moving...

next time, if you choose that you want to play games,

realize that I don't have the time...

time is of the essence,

so I don't plan on wasting my time dealing with these games

you seem to want to play with my mind, so...it's time...

time for me to move on, and...

the very next time you see me, you question why so much time has passed, and...

how over *that* time you weren't even the last...

thing on my mind because two months have passed, and...

I didn't call you a single time, I...

chose to leave you alone so you could have the time to...

sort through things and figure out the next move you had in mind, now...

you seem to want to give me the time of...

day, because now you have caught up, thinking we are at the same time, but it's...

the end of daylight savings time, it's...

fall and now the clocks are set one hour behind, and...

now, I'm at a quarter past 8 taking my time and

your clock is an hour ahead of mine, now...

sitting at 15 after 9...but now I'm...

so use to the single life that a relationship

is the furthest thing away from my mind, and...

you want what I previously had to offer, but it's just not the right time, I...

was as patient as humanly possible, but with you,

it just never seems to be the right time, and...

never should you feel I don't still care...I just need some personal time, I'm...

comfortable with me and mine, been...single for so long that

now I'm a little selfish with my...

self because last time I tried to give so much of it to you

I almost lost it, and I've...

learned that I should keep me for myself, not some...but

every time, see...now I realize that I not only must give myself to you,

but I have to keep some of me for me and mine...so

the next time I see you, we sit a talk as we overlap some of our free time,

and resurrect the feelings we both have inside, and...  
the only thing that's preventing us from now being together is...  
time, see...

I'm at 15 after 8 and you're a quarter past 9, so...  
you reset your clock's time so that mine and yours can read the same time  
at the same time, so...  
as I fast-forward mine, we...finally decide that...in order to be together, we  
must...  
unplug the clocks and commence to suspend time.

Words gusting,  
Hitting me with a chill that changes  
My face into an icy mask.  
Standing beneath a gutter with icicles above.

And your words . . .  
Like fire.  
Causing them to pierce me  
As they fall  
Like glass to a hard surface.

I deny your words the pleasure of hitting me.  
As I cover myself  
With this wool coat that protects me, and . . .  
Chills hit my spine  
As your words blizzard my terrain and blanket me, but . . .

I keep myself warm,  
With thoughts of you and me . . .  
Engaging in emotional ecstasy.



CHARLIE HOLT | *Stand Alone*

I met a little boy who takes the world on by himself,  
And he is too stubborn and too strong-headed to ask for help.

The little boy walks alone day in and day out,  
Hiding in silence, never to speak out.  
No matter what he goes though he just smiles, holding his head high,  
Thinking of made-up good memories just to get by.

But behind his smiling face a voice cries out unheard,  
Dwelling inside the boy's empty heart with the other spoken words.

This boy hides the cries of hurt and pain inside while his soul  
Dies 'cause his heart strains to try to ease the strains of fear  
With the tears of the joy the boy only wishes to have or the tears  
Of real smiles and real laughs.

So until his true feelings can be shown  
This little boy will forever stand alone.

DARRYL HARRIS | *Out the Window*

One morning I awoke  
And looked out of my window,  
And the things I saw  
Were the things I wrote:

Violence, and crime,  
And the gangs  
Seemed to suggest a sign of the times,

While the railroad tracks still posed a racial divide,  
And the theory that we were free  
Was never to be proven economically;

When on TV I heard the news  
(The media seemed so untrue)  
So out the window I stared  
For a broader view.

Over the mountains, across the sea,  
I saw into the lands of the Middle East,  
And again there was violence and death  
On a larger scale.

War and destruction swayed the air  
While, in my struggle to clarify my perception  
Through my view out the window,  
I could only see deception  
Where right was wrong, and wrong was right,  
For many religions had lost their sight.

Then, in my vision, through the window pain,  
On my way back home, it began to rain.  
Such a dismal view, the dreary gloom  
Was my vision outside from in my room.  
And through the window, I could see  
That peace on earth was not to be.  
So the things I saw, were the things I wrote,  
Were enough inspiration  
To snatch the curtain  
Closed.



SWITZON WIGFALL | *Elevate Your Mind*

GREGORY WILSON | *If Thine Eye Offends*

“Peace be with you,” Tom said to Father Michael.

Tom smiled beatifically, teeth stained scarlet with the blood oozing from his crushed eyes; it looked like someone filled his eye sockets with raw, fatty hamburger: red and white and wet.

Michael woke up screaming.

Heart pounding like the sneakers of a kid trying to beat the tardy bell, Father Michael looked at the blue numbers on the clock: 1:26 in the morning. *One-twenty SIX, One-twenty SIX, One-twenty SIX in the mORning*. He shook his head to clear it of the sing-song chant.

It had been years since he'd had a nightmare about Tom, and he knew he wasn't going to fall back to sleep any time soon.

Michael turned on the light.

In reality, Tom was in Kentucky with the Trappists at the Abbey of Gethsemani, silent and smiling.

And blind.

Michael thought briefly about praying the rosary. *Fingering beads and ticking off “Hail Marys” won't be as calming as a prayer session with Saint Jackie Daniels, Michael old boy*. “St. Jackie, patron saint of whatever ya got,” Tom used to say, back when the two of them went through their partying phase in ninth grade.

Putting on the thin flannel robe the sisters at the school had given him last Christmas, he headed down to the kitchen.

This was the school secretary's fault. He'd found the letter on his desk earlier in the day, after second period. “Dear Michael,” it read, “I need to see you.” It was signed “Sister Jessica.” That some kid would dream up something in such poor taste didn't surprise him — the whole Sister Jessica episode was one of the whispered legends of St. Jerome's — but that a student could get into and out of the principal's office undetected — well, that was unacceptable. Now, because of her inattentiveness, he was wide awake in the middle of the night.

In the kitchen, the old overhead florescent light flickered and hummed. The dim illumination made Michael think of being underwater, as if the rectory were on the bottom of a lake instead of on a hill overlooking the high school. It made him feel drowned.

This had been the convent back when Tom and he were students at St. Jerome's. This is where Sister Jessica would have been living then. *Did she mutter to herself here in the convent the way she muttered to herself in religion class? Like she was quietly arguing with someone we kids couldn't hear?* The green and white linoleum tiles of the kitchen floor were cold under his bare feet. *She may have scrubbed this very floor during the few months she had lived here — in a way, she's touching you right now, Mikey..* Michael shuddered.

He took a juice glass down from the cabinet and fished the bottle of Tennessee whiskey out from behind the cleaners under the sink. The first shot was in him before he was halfway to the kitchen table.

It warmed his belly.

The second one steadied his hands.

He sat down at the little wooden table, poured his third shot, and put his feet up on the other chair. Crazy, muttering, Sister Jessica, all the students except Tom had all joked about her being *schizo*. Tossing back beers in the woods after school early in senior year, Tom had said that he had heard her speaking in two voices. "The second one's unreal, metallic," he said. "I bet she's possessed." At the time it was meant to be a joke.

*That letter really fucked with you didn't it Mikey-Mike?*

Father Michael poured himself another glass. "Yes, it really fucked with me," he said to the empty kitchen.

He hadn't thought about her voice — her *voices* — in over twenty five years. Besides her normal voice, there had been two other voices: one had been shrill and reverberated like a creaky metal door. The second — the second had only screamed. It had sounded like a train wreck had learned English. Just remembering it made Michael's blood run cold.

She had been screaming in that second voice when she drove the scissors through Michael's left hand, and was still screaming in it when she plunged her thumbs past the knuckles into Tom's eyes. *He screamed like a girl.*

Michael raised his glass in the direction of the window above the sink. "Here's to ya, Sister Beetlebug," he said, and drained his glass. "Sorry Jackie, old boy, but no getting smashed on a school night — it's a roooooooool."

Since meeting in fifth grade, Tom had been making up nicknames. St. Jackie was his. Sister Jessica he christened "Beetlebug" on the first day of senior

religion class. Michael had cracked up. It was perfect. Everything about the woman was *round*. She was short and plump with big round eyes behind big round glasses — even her voice was round: high pitched and low in volume.

Michael put the bottle back in its hiding place below the sink. Rinsing out the glass, he looked out at the school below the rectory and saw a light on in one of the classrooms at the rear of the school building. “Shit,” Michael said. He wasn’t drunk, but he wasn’t sober enough to deal with what would probably turn out to be a couple of students. *Why’s everyone always making things so damn complicated?*

He called the police. They told him that a patrol car would arrive in about fifteen minutes. Students could do a lot of damage in fifteen minutes. He might not be sober enough to accost the intruders personally, but he could sure as hell look in the window and see who it was. Michael put on his overcoat and his loafers and headed out the door..

The quickest way to the school was down Cypress street, which passed both the rectory and the school, but the longer walk through the soccer fields would help him sober up. He headed for the woods beside the rectory; approaching from the fields would give him a better view of both the front and side entrances to the school. *Can’t get out without being seen..*

As Michael jogged along the footpath, he couldn’t help but smile, remembering all the times he and Tom had come to these woods to drink and talk about the mysteries of teenage life. *Hell, this is where we were drinking when we came up with the idea of the Great Reversal*, Michael thought.

He remembered how Tom and he had gotten to the classroom early that day, how they were cracking up, rushing around turning all the desks backwards and turning Sister Jessica’s desk around to face the front of the room. On impulse, Michael had scrawled a chalk pentagram on the board. Seeing this, Tom turned the crucifix on the wall upside down, cutting himself somehow in the process. The other students walked in and played along, giggling at the joke. Beetlebug walked in, took one look at the desks and ordered them turned around. Without a word she erased the board and righted the cross.

She gave the class a reading assignment and spent the time whispering furiously to herself at her desk. When class was over she said to the two of them, “Michael, Tom, we have to make things right. See me in detention after school.”

Michael could never figure out how she knew it was them, though there had been some blood on the floor from Tom's cut finger.

The thorns of raspberry brambles scratched his legs and brought him out of his memories. He stopped and almost fell over. *Shit. Michael, you're too drunk to be walking in the dark, let alone cutting through woods. You've gone off the path somewhere.* The minutes it took for him to extricate himself and find the path again.

In high school, then as now, detention meant copying scripture. He clearly remembered the feeling of pure wonder at the appearance of the scissors. One moment he had was writing "seek ye first the Kingdom of God," and then — BANG! A pair of scissors stood buried in his hand, pinning it to the desk —

Halfway across the soccer fields he veered around towards the lit windows at the back of the building. *This was a bad idea.* He stopped on the lawn outside the windows. Why was the glass fogged up on the inside? Was there a burst pipe? Someone would have contacted him. He couldn't see anything but blobs of color inside the room. Nothing moved.

Had he missed them? So far, his confidence had rested in thinking that he knew exactly where the intruders *were*. Now, he had no idea. He felt exposed.

*You pulled the scissors out, knocked down the crazy bitch, and probably saved Tom's life and yours. You've done the hero thing, let the police handle this.*

Creeping to the end of the building, he peered around the corner. No one. The side door was closed. Could they have come out while he was at the windows? How long it would take for someone to get down the hall? He didn't think to bring his watch.

*Father Michael, get a hold of yourself. They're long gone! They just left the light on! Go meet the police and call it a night.*

Fine. They're gone. He'd just go and take a quick look and head out to meet the police in the parking lot. Straightening up from the frightened crouch he'd unconsciously adopted, he stepped over and tried the door. It was unlocked.

*You've just put your fingerprints all over the knob, Sherlock. Tell the police anyway; they might be interested in that, maybe an inside job or something.* The hallway beyond was empty.

*You're only the principal of a high school, after all, not a superhero.*

That's right, and as principal, I'm responsible.



*Go and wait for the police, Michael, you have no business here.*

Shut up.

Listening at the door, he heard only silence. He peeked inside. Warm air, almost tropical, washed over his face, but he saw no water, no spray paint, no movement. The air smelled like sulfur.

*See, everything's A-okay. Go and meet the police and tell them false alarm.*

Yes, but why's it so hot? Everything looks — wait. Ah.

The desks were all backwards. Apparently the legend of the Great Reversal had inspired more than just a letter. On the wall the crucifix was upside down, on the chalkboard was a — well, it wasn't exactly a pentagram, but it was elaborate and circular and full of arcane looking symbols. *Probably pulled that Wiccan bullshit off some new age site on the internet.. Now let's go wait for the police. They might mistake you for the intruder.*

The curlicued symbols intrigued Michael: each was composed of other, smaller symbols. Unlike anything that he had ever seen, they nevertheless felt familiar somehow, comforting. He couldn't take his eyes from them and stepped forward to take a closer look.

The door clicked softly behind him. *What? STOP!* Michael froze. He was in the middle of room 103, eyes still dancing from one symbol to the next. They were doing something to him. Michael felt a heavy detached numbness that he'd last felt twenty-five years ago when the paramedics had taken one look at his hand and shot him full of pain killers. It had stopped his screaming.

Behind him, a voice like a creaky metal door said, "I'm glad you came, Michael."

A warmth spread in his pants as his body automatically emptied his bladder, a primal reaction for cornered prey, Michael knew, but found that otherwise he was paralyzed, helpless to react. The symbols filled his vision.

*She's come to finish . . . I knew this would — fuck! Get. Out. NOW!*

"Sit down Michael, you're tired."

*No! Don't!*

Distantly, a part of Michael knew that he should be running, screaming, fighting, *something*, but it all seemed like too much effort. Better to just do as he was told.

*NO! NO! NO —*

He sat down in the desk beside him, his eyes locked on the board. Behind him, he heard the shuffling, uncertain steps of Sister Jessica moving closer.

“St. Jerome’s was Jessica’s reward for twenty years of selfless service to the Church, far away from the dark world that the Church had used her to combat,” the voice said.

*She’s insane! Tell her you’ve called the police! TELL HER, TELL HER! TELL HER! TELL —*

“I – I’ve called the . . . ” he mumbled, but gave up; it was just too much effort.

“The police. Yes Michael, I know. It’s okay, we have time,” said the metallic voice. “It takes a special person to fight the forces of hell, Michael, a pure person. Your childish prank would never normally have called a demon, but Sister Jessica was always surrounded by them. How you must have been suffering all these years.”

The metallic voice was soft and sad. It sounded comforting. Michael knew that there was someone, *something* here besides just he and an old nun, but — could demons be comforting? Sister Jessica had always been so nice. *That’s why she was such an easy target — she was so fucking naive.* No. Not naive. Innocent.

Michael suddenly remembered how Sister Jessica had been sobbing as she stabbed her thumbs into Tom’s eyes . . . even as a the train wreck voice screamed obscenities from her mouth, the little nun was wracked with sorrow at what she was doing.

“Poor Sister Jessica went through a great deal,” said the metal door voice. “Pure people are beset by demons night and day; they circle like wolves around a lamb, looking for weakness, a place to sink their teeth. You and your friend Tommy were that point of weakness. You were used by demons as a means to get to her,” said the voice.

*Got her! Got her! Got her! Tag! You’re it bitch!*

“She fought the demon within her even as she sought to exorcize the demons in you and your friend. She has never forgiven herself for even bringing them near the two of you, innocents swept into a larger, ancient struggle.”

Michael tried without success to recall something, *anything* from seminary about exorcisms, but all he could think of was those symbols on the board, how they shimmered and called to him, told him to be still.

A hand patted his shoulder. “It’s time to finish what was begun, Michael. Ready yourself as best you can.”

In his peripheral vision, Sister Jessica’s black robes moved to the left. *Get away you bitch, leave us alone!* “Put your left hand on the desk; we haven’t much time, and everything must be just as we left it.”

He placed his hand palm down on the desktop.

*NO! NO! NO!*

The cold tip of the scissors touched the back of his hand. “The placement must be exactly as before, so I cannot be as quick as I was last time. I’m sorry.” Minute adjustments were made. Powerless, he sat immobile as the scissors went into his flesh like a thumbtack into drywall, pressure and pain increasing until the skin gave way with a wet crunch, and metal plunged through the meat between the small bones of his hand and — smoothly, impossibly — into the desk below.

Tears streamed from his eyes. The symbols on the board swam and blended and began to glow, their light seeping into his mind, calming him, isolating him from the fear and pain.

A loud, Latin chant began and a rising howl of bestial fury rose from Michael’s throat.

Throughout his body, muscles tried to detach themselves and crawl freely under his skin. Two hands grabbed the sides of his head as if to steady him. At their touch his muscles went from crawling to rioting and all but his head thrashed in the desk with violent spasms.

A voice whispered in his ear. For the first time in twenty-five years he heard the gentle, round voice of Sister Jessica herself. “Demons can be subtle Michael. It is better to enter Heaven blind than to burn in hell with sight.”

Vomit erupted and mixed with the howling obscenities spewing from his mouth.

Two thumbs found the corners of his open eyes, blurring his vision further, smearing the glowing symbols into a field of liquid lightning that kept flashing even as thumbs slid over his naked eyeballs and covered his pupils.

Latin and depraved screaming thundered in his ears, growing impossibly louder as the soft pads of Sister Jessica’s dainty thumbs pushed steadily inward. He felt the fluid filled sacs distort and pressed against the sides of his eye sockets.

For one brief moment external and internal pressures were perfectly balanced, then flesh fell to rupturing force with an audible POP, and thumbs, no longer encountering resistance, plowed into the bone of the skull at the back of the eye sockets.

His head flew back and he screamed, his voice like a train wreck that had learned English.

\* \* \* \* \*

The police officers who had found him had heard the screaming, but they never saw his attacker, nor was she ever found. In the months of hospitalization that followed, he had many interviews with Church psychologists, then other, more obscure, Church officials. Everyone wanted to know how he felt. "At peace," he told them. Michael finally understood the peace his friend had known since the day of the first . . . exorcism. Nobody, however, admitted to knowing anything about Sister Jessica, nor even anyone remotely like her. Every time Michael brought up Sister Jessica, who or what she might be, the topic was quickly changed.

In spring the following year, Michael visited Tom in Kentucky before leaving to serve as a missionary in Africa. Yes, Tom had said, he had thought about who and what Sister Jessica was, and yes, he thought she *was* possessed.

"But I don't think it's a demon," Tom had said. "I think it's an angel."

RACHEAL JOHNSON | *Anthrax*

If the sight of me makes you ill,  
 And my name disgusts all people,  
 Then my symptoms should sicken you,  
 And make you feel all weak and feeble.

I am destruction at its peak,  
 And hope at its low.  
 I am the toxicity of the world,  
 And of these poisons I grow.

The infectious disease that thrives beneath,  
 The core of what is habitually called society,  
 I grow on the uniform distribution of hate.  
 I spread like disease and I hinder like fate.

The ailment of tranquility or the embracer of calamity,  
 My presence brings tragedy and my appearance brings  
     insanity.  
 I am the illness that spreads to every pore of your body,  
 And I love what I do cuz infecting's my hobby.

I am the concept that fills every fiber of your being,  
 And defiles it without any sense or any meaning.  
 I live underneath, but I'm subordinate to no one.  
 I'm feared and respected, but hated by everyone.

No matter what cure, I'll be here, and that's a fact.  
 I am the disease of civilization, and my name is Anthrax.

CHINEKA JONES | *Yellow Therapy*

Yellow

That was all she had to hold on to  
A thin piece of fabric as broken as she was  
They said it was a crime of passion turned  
Violence

She was only 6 years old  
A child with brown bagged lunches and scraped knees  
Field trips and nap times were her concerns

A 23 year old  
To him she was 2  
2 minutes of torture  
In  
2 minutes of suffocating innocence  
Adding  
2 more notches to his mental health

Fear spilled out  
Rage crowded her mind  
Every thrust took away her innocence  
White was no longer her color  
Violence  
Stained it

A man's twisted hobby became her reality  
A life sentence to her  
Years trapped ran down her face  
Yellow  
Her saving grace  
"How can I help you?" she said.

CHINEKA JONES | *I Am Looking Forward*

*Inspired by the painting "Women Who Look Ahead" by Monica Stewart.*

I am looking forward  
 Pride in my eyes  
 No longer looking back to pain  
 My heart is strong  
 Pumping courage and strength  
 To keep pushing past  
 Fists and brick walls

There will be no more abuse  
 Bruises  
 Of broken love  
 Indentations of questions  
 "Why am I still here?"

"What am I to do now?"  
 There is only one me  
 The pain is too much  
 Weighing me down like my body has been sounded down  
 Down to the pebbles on the cement

I want to keep living  
 See the sun rise to awaken a new start  
 Hear the rain as God is crying for me  
 Thunder  
 A warning  
 There are no more tears for me  
 It is time.

CHINEKA JONES | *A Voice of Truth*

*Based on the painting "Billie Holiday" by Willaim Gottlieb.*

I want to be heard  
For all the times that my people have been  
Oppressed  
Do you hear me?

Notes rise from my soul  
Just like  
Your whips rose to meet the backs of my  
Brothers and sisters  
Just like  
You attacked my sisters  
Taking our race with you

I want your ears to bleed for every  
"Strange Fruit"  
Hanging  
From southern trees

Every child  
Crying  
Clinging to their souls because  
That is all that they have left

Are you listening  
I sing louder to sting your eyes  
That drown in my frustration  
My message is clear



I will keep singing until your  
Souls  
Burn  
With a conscience hotter than the  
Coals  
Of slavery.



SWITZON WIGFALL | *I Will Not Lose*

JUSTIN LEAK | *Up a Tree: The Saunter After Suspension*

Sunlight  
 For the first time  
 Scalds the eyes  
 And renders them blind  
 To all but orange  
 And white.

In February,  
 All is strange  
 For the Earth's water  
 Has broken  
 And soon her children shall be seen  
 In bloom.

I smile at the thought of what  
 She will bare,

And this forces my eyes  
 Into a slimmer squint.  
 And as I simper and walk  
 I reach a spot where concrete ends  
 And clay begins —

Past the footprints and  
 Over the uncut grass,  
 I notice three  
 Tall trees:

The first  
 Is the shortest,  
 With the widest trunk  
 And what appears to be

Green plastic leaves.  
They shine in the sun  
As if rubbed with Vaseline;  
Some  
Have fallen to ground and  
Look like lily pads  
In a red clay stream.

The second,  
The tallest,  
With the skinniest trunk,  
Cannot resist the breeze  
And looks at times  
As if it will snap at the knees.  
Its boughs  
A mangled skeleton,  
And in the red  
Lay it's feeble branches  
Gathered around  
It's trunk,  
As if it were Socrates.

The last,  
Taller than the first,  
But not as the second,  
The trunk,  
Wider than the second,  
But not so much the first,  
Its midsection has  
Branches barren and now gray  
Its trunk stands  
In a red-brown puddle —  
How deep I don't know —  
But black pinecones

Guard its moat,  
And at the highest  
Of its reaches, green  
Needles move like  
Wind chimes against  
The gusts.

Dirt blows in my eyes  
And I feel ashamed  
And bow my head.

Four steps further  
I see a branch of that  
Third tree.  
I step on it  
To hear it snap.

But,

It bows  
And curls  
Under me.

So,  
I  
Pick it up and bend  
It against the clay.  
It finally gives way.

I pay my respects  
To the stick which  
Put up such  
A fight  
And then toss it  
In a ditch.

Might have made a good switch.

JUSTIN LEAK | *A Crash Course in Addiction*

Thoughtless joy  
Employed by amber buds  
All appears connected.

Giddy giggles give way  
To sedentary gloom.  
Words don't come easy.  
Smiles soon subside and spark  
Dark senses of future woe  
Leave me  
Hollow ghost.

KAI CHRISTOPHER | *Too Many Haters*

I have noticed a gap between generations, not one of age, but of communication. What I see, in my opinion, is an older generation full of disappointment, and a younger one eager to point the finger.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s daughter, Elder Bernice King, recently spoke at NCCU.

Her words were inspirational or controversial, depending on what side of the fence you live on. They were somewhere in the middle for me.

I wholeheartedly agree with her message that what we have today is a lowered bar in regards to what we want out of life, but I've heard the youth and hip-hop bashing enough to drive me crazy.

Lately I have been thinking critically about the opinions of my elders.

Honestly, I agree with the spirit in which their words are spoken, but further analysis brings simple questions to mind.

What is your purpose? What is the effect?

Is the effect in line with your purpose?

I direct these questions to those who steadily criticize my generation.

I feel your effort goes in vain when the people you are speaking to shut down.

I have stated that I believe in and agree with the spirit of your words.

My investigation begins with the effect of the verbal assault I often hear, the kind that is normally followed by applause from the older crowd.

The effect it has on me is not positive.

Your words do not inspire me, they offend me -- and they make me spite you.

Mostly because of how one-sided and slanted your criticisms are.

So, now that I have been offended, I have to play the defensive side of the ball. While we could have been fighting the injustices of today together, I forget about the bigger picture to battle your misunderstandings and spend my energy on you.

If what you want is to drive a wedge between the next generation and yourself, then I say, job well done.



In my opinion the complaining and criticizing are only counterproductive toward any progressive movement.

I have an idea -- educate me.

If you want to inspire me to stand up and fight, teach me why I need to.

I hear detailed stories of struggles in the sixties and vivid pictures are painted, and then all the speakers says about today is, "these kids sag their pants and do nothing."

While this is true, and this is a drastic problem, I then acknowledge that the people who are sitting down have no political awareness.

There was a time when racism and injustice were on the news and in your face. Now the only thing on the news that's real is the weather, and even the racist people smile in my face.

Everything my schoolteachers told me you fought for, we now have.

No one breaks down institutional racism to the masses.

You can't fight passionately if you have nothing to fight for.

Tell me about Sean Bell. Tell me about the prison system. Tell me about how many of my peers aren't in college and what type of opportunities I have.

Tell me until you are blue in the face. I've seen the criticisms until you were blue in the face.

How I see it, the criticism hasn't worked out too well. So, how about we try something new.

There will not be a need for lectures. People who understand that their well-being is in jeopardy will protect it.

At one point in my life, I was the most nonchalant guy I knew. Criticism and complaints flew like the birds, but knowledge, it actually moved me.

MELINDA Y. SANDERS | *Recipe for Pissing off Your Roommate.*

First, as soon as you roommate gets ready for bed,  
Cut on the television (laugh hysterically at whatever is on),  
Add in the question, “Is this bothering you?”  
Once they have fallen asleep,  
Turn off the television, pretend to snore excessively loud.

In the morning, wait for them to turn on the shower water;  
As they wait for it to get hot, get in.  
Spend 30 minutes in the shower.  
Also, as loud as you can, begin singing, “This is the Song that Doesn’t End.”

Sing it over and over.  
Your roommate’s anger should begin to rise.

Once you’re out, allow your roommate to get in.  
About halfway through,  
Add in several knocks on the bathroom door,  
Asking them how long they are going to be.

When they are finished, don’t go back in the bathroom.  
Instead, turn on some music —  
Begin dancing around the room singing “I Will Survive.”

During the day, be sure to call their cell phone and room phone  
Asking for the time.  
If they don’t pick up, leave it on the voicemail.

When you are both back in the room, talk about how people get on your  
nerves.  
Once roommate is fully heated, let them cool, over-heating can be hazardous.  
Once cooled, garnish with listening to the song they hate the most.  
For best results put it on repeat!

JOLANDA KINDELL | *I Want to Hear a Poem*

I want to hear a poem.

I want to hear a poem with the security of yesterday

And all the hope for tomorrow.

I want to hear a poem that sounds so sweet I get a toothache.

I want to hear a poem that has bells and whistles and frills

But with such metaphorical clarity that it cuts deep into my soul.

I want to hear a poem so beautiful I couldn't tear my ears away if I tried.

I want to see poetry in motion.

I want to see words dance across the midnight sky as you hold my hand.

I want to see the rhythm's ebb and flow over the timeline that it spans.

I want to watch it expand and contract

With every emphatic pause and pause for breath.

I want to see linguistic patterns that sing with all the voices of the mountains.

I want to smell verses so profound

That they reek of importance and prophecy.

I want them to be repulsive and intriguing at the same time,

Like the exposition of an uncomfortable truth.

I want a poem to help me sniff out truth in reality

And to help understand when I've found it.

I want a poem that smells nice like my daddy on Sunday morning

Or my man on Saturday night.

I want stanzas so distinctive that I could sniff and know it was them

If they walked by me in the dark.

I want a poem like apple pie fresh out of the oven.

I want its sugary syrup filling to rush over me

And bring back saccharine memories of the way things used to be.

I want a poem that tastes so good I don't want to be full

So I take it home for later.

I want a poem so savory that it spices up my life.

I want to be able to look up the recipe in black America's best country cookbook,  
So I can make it for myself and let you have some.

I want to experience a poem so soft and gentle

That I'm comforted by the thought of it alone.

I want verses so strong I can believe in them and feel safe in their solidarity.

I want a poem to inspire me to change the world

And insights to riot inside myself.

I want to feel the progression as it climbs the scales to heaven.

I want a poem tempting enough to entreat me to orgasm with its tempo

Taking me

Higher.

Deeper.

Faster.

Than I've ever been before.

I want to write a poem of my very own.

I want to compose something with so much personality it has to finish itself.

I want to accompany it on a journey over a lifetime

And be there as it reaches adulthood and finally understands what that means.

I want to fall in love with lyrics thoughtful enough to ask me how I feel

And really care about the answer.

I wanted to write you into existence, but I opened my eyes

And you were already there.

JOLANDA KINDELL | *[When I Look at You]*

When I look at you I see beauty;  
Trouble; truth; reality; freedom;  
Maybe not ideal, but in practice.

(You get on my nerves).

In my eyes you are everything I want to be  
But cannot,  
Or will not,  
And perhaps this is the reason I love you,  
Not to mention your smile,  
And the way you think you're sexier than I do.

You're yourself, completely — for the most part, anyway.  
And you wear it well.

Not every man could pull off the way you embody everything that is wrong  
With the right side of the world,  
With the same carefree swagger you exhibit in those moments  
When you think  
Nobody is watching.

One day, when reality sets in for you  
And straps down your free spirit,  
And holds you fast to all the things you now fight so hard against —  
I hope it does so, gently.

EX UMBRA NO. 43

I don't want to watch your heart break suddenly  
As your world falls.  
I want to be beside you  
As it takes your hand  
And guides you through the labyrinth twists and turns life  
Will surely throw at you.

And your landing should be soft  
like your eyes when you want something from me.

If I could, I'd be beside you the entire journey.  
But somewhere,  
Deep down,  
I know that our places in each other's lives  
Are only seasonal.  
That you and I will never be  
We.

I'm happy here, now, with you  
But not  
As long as you know  
I'm here.



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SWITZON WIGFALL | *The Art of DJin'*

JARELL DAWSON | *Fear*

Set to take the stage,  
I have one night to make an impression;  
One night to prove myself;  
One night to show the world what I can do.  
But these butterflies overtake me;  
I can't go on.  
The producer says, "you're next,"  
But my legs won't move.  
I'm frozen.  
I can't turn back now though,  
I'm already here.  
As I start to move,  
I feel the pressure;  
The pressure to entertain.  
I grab the mic in my hand, and begin to sing.  
Only silence in the crowd.  
They must not like me.  
Then it's over,  
I know they didn't like me.  
Until, through the bright lights,  
I see a standing ovation.  
As the crowd chants, "Encore!"  
I realize I had nothing to be afraid of.



KIA HARVEY | *Band Geeks*

The smell of brass on a summer's night  
Blow your horn little boy blue  
The crowd is watching, anticipating the Star Spangled Banner  
Marching to the beat of the drums  
Tubas, trumpets, and snares, shake the crowd  
Dressed like toy soldiers, walking upright  
They're band geeks, forever sharing a bond  
Boom, Boom, Bam, Bam Boom, Bam  
One band, one sound that is agreed  
Some with hats, some glasses, others with retainers  
The drum major plays his horn  
The others listen and watch  
Halftime is where it is  
During the day they live in hell  
Bullies around every corner  
Spit balls and wedgies  
At night they are on top of the world  
The crowd screams their names,  
The stadium lights burn bright catching every movement.

DOLLORES HOLMES | *Things on a Dresser*

I open my eyes to see the comb used on your hair.  
Clumps lay beside your bed.  
Your hair was thin and your eyebrows too —  
There were rashes on your body.  
The chemo goes on; your body was fragile.  
One of these days I'm afraid that all of you will be gone.  
So I open a box and pick up what's left.  
Pictures of you before the Big C struck.  
A black jewelry box with your name engraved on it.  
I stop to cry  
I cant' ignore your favorite earrings  
So I place them in the box.  
Why is the box almost full making my heart feel vacant?  
I dust off your keys; you haven't driven in a while.  
I pick up your favorite book.  
You wouldn't want anyone else to have it.  
The Bible is what you lived by.  
It was not absent when you died

RYON SMITH | *Water and Race*

Smoke rose from the grill, and the faint sound of music whispered in the background.

Attendees clad in mint green, blues as soft as the sky, and pale, pale, yellows

Two men begin a discussion about the laboring of college

They began to acknowledge the social and academic endeavors

They discussed literature and science, math and drama

Music became the place in which they differed

One preferred jazz, the other, classical

Both argued about which genre was more authentic to the human emotion

The whole gathering came engaged in the discussion

And the two men who had begun the discourse now faded into the background

One man departed and the others began to question him

Where did he go? What was his name?

His name was Osei. What kind of name is Osei for a Hawaiian man?

Hawaiian? He was not Hawaiian; he was most certainly of Latin origin.

Latin? All of you are mistaken; he was definitely of the black persuasion.

A voice soon interjected.

I don't know why you argue about his ethnicity, one only needs

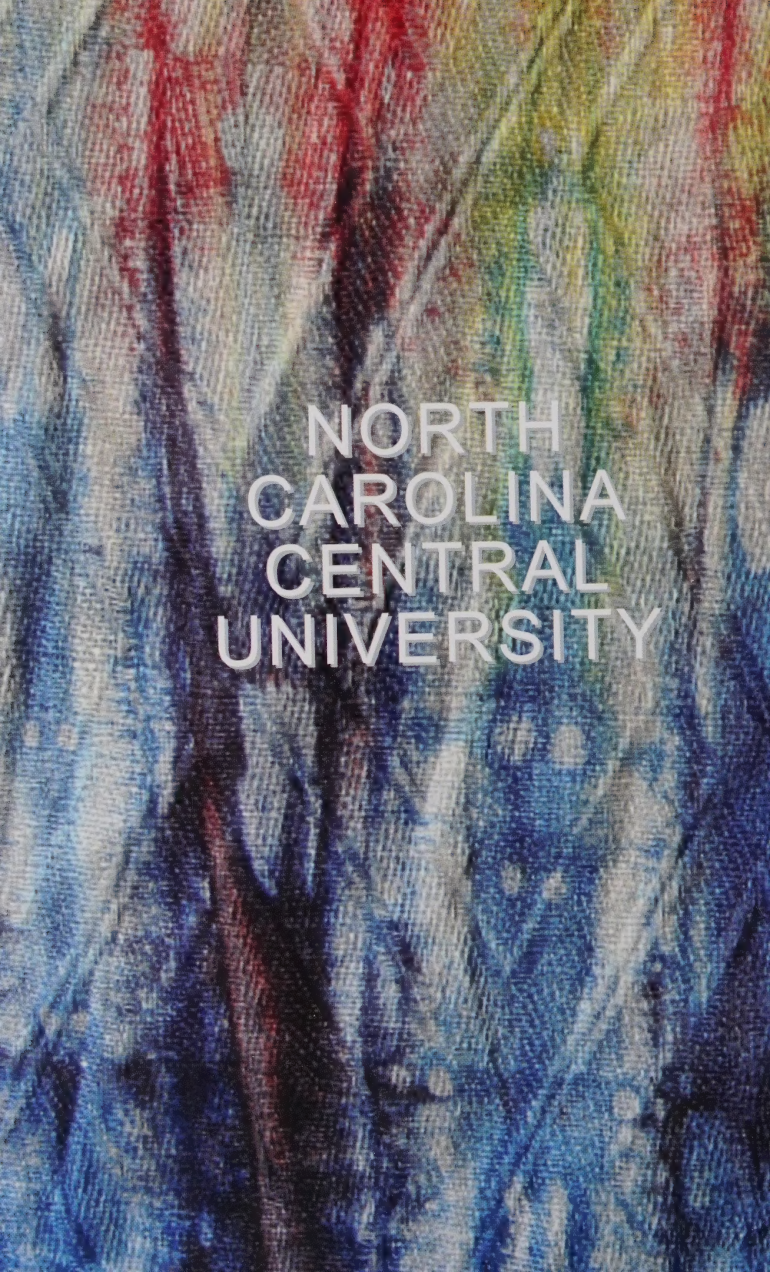
To throw a bucket of water on him and watch what happens to his hair.









The background is a complex, abstract pattern of colors and textures. It features prominent vertical streaks of red, blue, and green, interspersed with lighter, more muted tones. The overall effect is reminiscent of a textured surface, possibly a piece of fabric or a canvas with various pigments applied. The colors are somewhat blurred and blended, creating a sense of depth and movement.

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CAROLINA  
CENTRAL  
UNIVERSITY