

## **Forward and Acknowledgments**

For roughly nine years, I've maintained a particularly lopsided balance between my two most governing passions: teaching and writing. Foolishly, my inability to embrace both equally and simultaneously was due to my stubborn refusal to recognize both the ways in which the two can coexist and the near identical impetus that inspired each of them. At our hearts, each of us are both fundamentally united with every living entity with whom we share this world and deeply isolated from them. Every choice we make stems from this duality. It is in this way that the need to communicate through written word and the need to communicate through sharing knowledge and experience in classrooms, the isolations of thinking differently, or walking differently, of speaking differently, often appear more separate than they truly are.

Most of the poems in this collection were written over approximately the last two years of my time as a special educator, but they stem as equally from my thirty five years of being a human. They intended to reach those drawn to this work due to a love of poetry every bit as much as those who drawn to it due to its themes of challenge, love and learning. My hope is that every piece in this book speaks to and celebrates the bravery, anguish, hope and triumph involved in existing fully as ourselves in a world that is still developing its context for that. This is all to say that this book is for every single student I have been fortunate enough to have taught in any capacity.

Like everything in my life, I must first and foremost dedicate this to my mother, Joann August. She was the first and remains the strongest template for how to be a teacher, an artist and a human. For Donald August, Shannon Parsram and Dave Parsram, I thank you endlessly for creating a support system beyond anything I may ever be able to believe I deserve.

I would not have the sense of myself as poet without the constant guidance of my poetic mentors and family. From Chris Wilson, I have learned to trust my voice and my ideals, and have been given a friendship whose depth and value constantly floors me. From Sonya Renee Taylor, I've been given a true sense of the capacity of art to change the world. Thank you for always allowing me to be illuminating by your immense heart. From Joanna Hoffman, I have been given a gift of consummate love and humanity. You truly represent everything that art and friendship should be. My thanks also extend to Twain Dooley, Natalie Illum, Regie Cabico, Gail Danley, Liz Bowen and countless other members of the national poetry scene who have made my life so much more complete with their support and love.

And, as this is a collection whose heart lives firmly in my work, I must give credit to my educational mentors. In many ways, this book could not have existed without the guidance and deep humanity of Kadie Miller and Liz Wohlberg. You represent so much of what teaching and healing means to me.

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**Response to every person who's told me, *You must be so patient.***

Exes have called me impossible, and my Catholic mother  
often apologizes for not understanding me enough.

Every morning my disgruntled feet  
navigate the stairs that the rest of my body curses.

I roll my eyes at my roommate's greetings  
and fill my thermos with the coffee he's made.

My drive to work is punctuated by fists on the dashboard  
and vocal conjecture on the size of other drivers' penises.

The fifteen minutes before the bell rings find me gossiping  
about coworkers and committing a hate crime on a photo copier.

I'm at Corinne's desk before she is  
to help her write in cursive and I've  
already drawn pictures above the big  
words on Darryl's dittos in case I'm  
not there when he gets to them.

I remind Ashley that she doesn't  
need to apologize for how long it takes  
to wheel herself to the lunchroom;

it's why we are all here. My sixth  
period English class is not allowed to  
giggle at wrong answers because we  
are all just the same enough.

My thermos is in my right hand most of the day.

This is not patience. It is a love  
I haven't learned to use anywhere else.

## **How to call her mother**

Propelling herself backward  
on a rolling stool,  
both hands on her daughter's walker  
eyes and fingers never letting her go  
as they completes their fourth lap  
around the children's ward  
on their third visit this week—  
call her tireless.

Call her single mother  
since the first doctor's visit.  
Call her rewriter of expectations,  
cheering that tight fist of throat that released  
first words at age three, and the steel beams  
and suture scars that conjured  
first steps at five.

Singing about the weather or the colors  
on the nurses' scrubs, call her  
Mahalia Jackson or Patsy Cline,  
as ceaselessly strong  
as any two voices combined,  
call her unsung.

Call her down from every ledge

she won't tell you she teeters on.

Call her perpetually late on rent,

hopeful that one day tired will be enough

to replace lonely. But call her

redeemed when she sees her girl smile,

hears her sing her own words

to those songs. She knows this circuit

around a children's hospital

waiting room is the most certainty

this life has for her because

her baby girl will be in front of her.

Call her everything to the daughter

who calls her the world—

call her the world.

## However

Day one of James' standardized assessments  
Finds us in the room that my students have nicknamed  
“the testing closet.” In its close confines I can smell  
that James hasn’t bathed in at least four days and I can see  
the distinctly unmedicated darting of his eyes.

I am not expected to include any of this in the report  
that I will write for James’ last education plan.  
For that, I am to focus on how James responds  
to writing prompts like the one with the picture  
of the boy with two robots. Students are asked  
to compare the robots using the word *however*.

No one ever uses *however* correctly.  
When he sees the picture, James asks me,  
“Mr. August, are we allowed to, like, name ‘em and shit?”  
I am tempted to include this in the report, alongside  
the discordant symphony created by James’  
rumbling stomach and muttering mouth because

no one at the shelter where he’s been staying is required  
to feed him or administer his schizophrenia meds.  
When I ask him if he needs to stop, he tells me,  
“Nah, it’s cool. I think I got this.” I don’t know  
how to teach the mechanical resolve required to compel  
a barely literate young man to write sentences in a tiny room  
just days after the police removed him from his new foster home,  
because something in the stability there must have flared up  
those old episodes and he started stealing shit again,  
started pissing on floors and mattresses again. Day two  
finds me without James.

Day three finds James just twelve hours  
after being released from the hospital  
‘cause the guys at the shelter don’t see the unmedicated schizophrenic,  
they don’t see the 21 year high school student who won’t get a diploma,  
they just see the motherfucker who stole their shoes.

And from across the testing closet table, I can distinctly  
make out the three inch, unstitched gash on James’ scalp  
from where they dragged him into the street by a fistful of his tracks.

It is gaping like the most cynical of mouths, issuing a reminder  
that black and retarded are the only strikes you need to be out  
in this world that I am supposed to be preparing him for.

But I will not include any of that in the report, but I will write that  
James has given the only response to the robot prompt in seven years  
that has made me cry. He wrote, “The boy has two robots, however  
he loves them both.”

Who taught James love?  
Not the birth mother who could never  
choose the miracle in her stomach or the boy in her arms  
over the hell she let march through her veins until her death,  
and if I’m being honest, it wasn’t me either.  
Because despite the close confines  
he occupies in my heart, the rest of me is  
bound to a system that just wants a report. And I will write it  
with a prayer, because sometimes a prayer is the closest thing  
that a teacher has to control. I will write it desperate to believe  
that something in my time with James has built him a shield,  
That for all of my students I am balm to bruised skin,

A lullaby sung inside beaten hearts. I will write it  
stealing a line from James, it will read:  
“In seven years, I have taught over a hundred students,  
however

I love them all.”

## **Flight plans**

*“When you’re going to have a baby, it’s like planning a fabulous vacation trip—to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans..”.*

*-From Emily Perl Kingsley’s Welcome to Holland*

When she was young,  
your mother was a traveler.

Before diaper bags and neatly folded  
onesies punctuated her weekend getaways,  
she held castles in her eyes,  
let the winds blow against  
the back of her knees and lead her.

Your mother was a traveler,  
like she would one day touch  
down squarely inside her calling,  
as though her destiny were  
scattered throughout the world  
to be collected  
one plane ticket at a time.

Her friends from the travel club,  
all young, newly married and expectant of experience,  
pointed to the part of the globe labeled *Italy*.

They spent headphoned mornings repeating, “*Ola, Signor.*”  
and their husbands’ paychecks on sandals and sun hats.

Her friends were sunshine-bound visitors, but  
your mother was a traveler.

She taught herself the tarantella  
from old movies on tv,  
tried her hand at puttanesca  
and gnocchi, interviewed friends for anecdotes  
and studied Modigliani.

Your mother was a traveler  
who knew what was important.

There are still stories of the complications before her trip  
that made your mother go alone: the way the plane door closed  
like a lower jaw before her, the too late stomach sink  
when the pilot announced this plane was bound for Holland. Suddenly  
your mother was a traveler  
stripped of fellow tourists,  
staring at the stoic irrelevance of her guidebooks.

Looking back, she is ashamed at how long  
she spent cursing her unchosen itinerary,  
stumbling over an unfamiliar language that had no  
translation for her pleas, but your mother was a traveler  
in love with travel. She remembered that,  
in the best of trips, the destination  
is the beginning of the journey.

You are your mother's favorite country now.  
The cartography of your existence is a reminder that  
your mother was a traveler  
unwilling to trade gentle hills for Tyrrhenian beaches,  
who can no longer recall the name of any Mediterranean resort  
because she sees windmills in your eyes  
and can name no other place she would rather stay.

**One haiku for each student who named me in the *Favorite Teacher* video for Teacher Appreciation Week**

He's my favorite

'cause he likes shiny things almost

as much as I do.

He's the first white man

I've ever trusted. Think I'll quit

while I'm ahead.

He talks over my head,

but he lifts me up so

I can reach the words.

When he writes with me,

I forget how many people

said I'd never read.

He's living proof that

you don't have to be able

to sit still to learn.

He gets me. Maybe

because he's spent so much of

his life being me.

## **Jerry at the amusement park: advice**

Let him ride everything.

Every other day of life,  
your son's mind is a  
folded map for no where  
you have visited, cotton  
candy fingerprints blocking  
the key. But today, he is allowed  
to make sense. The rushing pulse  
of the Scrambler sounds just  
like the voice that constantly moves  
his hands to flutter in front of his  
face, his mouth to curl into a smile  
when nothing is funny.

When your side smacks against  
his on the Tilt-a-Whirl, let it be  
the closest bond you know; let  
his squeals in response be  
all the conversation you need.

Let him hug the mascots.

All of them.

This is place of magic, designed  
to never house the mantra of,  
“No touching. No touching.” that  
paves all of the other family  
outings. And besides, they’re soft.  
And fuzzy. And if you pass them  
on their lunch breaks, their anonymity  
won’t afford you the opportunity  
to apologize.

Don’t apologize.

Not to the teenage attendant  
he stumbles into on his way  
to the swings, not to the other  
mothers whose children are nervous  
in line with him. Smile at them.

Not the smile that dispenses  
apologies for having the wrong life,  
but a smile that says, *You may not know,*  
*but this is our world. You are welcome*  
*to visit, but you better act right.*

This is not the cold stare of  
the grocery store. The dozen shattered

pickle jars from last week, the way  
he kisses the woman inside the self checkout  
machine, they are not the stuff of  
poorly hushed whispers and children clung  
tightly to protective thighs. Not here.

Not today.

Give him everything he wants.

This is not every therapist's visit  
or teacher conference that has told you  
that you couldn't. The snowball stand  
is the best doctor's office the world could  
offer either of you. So let your lips be  
stained just as red and blue as his are.

Let your face carry the sweetness  
you both know. Laugh just like he does  
on every ride.

This is the way you will be marked today.

## **How we become someone's favorite**

Effortlessly.

By letting them be our favorite first.

With trust that our fingertips

whisper love letters in a language

we were willing to let someone teach us.

Mercilessly.

And with boundless mercy,

palm made equal parts for

praying and for bearing down,

giving out condolences by the handful

and consequence one cracked knuckle at a time.

Unabashedly.

We become unafraid of strangers

and fall in love with janitors,

the source of clean sinks,

the vortex for which every errant paper ball,

every eyelash turned dust speck

is bound.

Clearly.

We shake hands with the arbitrary nature  
of offices and surnames,  
kindly asking them to step aside  
so we can see who matters.

We will know who matters.

We will know they know the same about us  
no matter how wooden their throats,  
how flaccid their gaze.

We will hear the made-up song they hum  
and we will sing the words.

## **Instructions in empathy**

### **Find a pair of goggles.**

Make sure they reach  
across your whole face, from the  
arch of your eyebrows to the  
tops of your cheeks.

### **Now fingerpaint them.**

Something dark like  
red tempura, forest green acrylic  
or leftover gravy will work,  
as long as it's opaque. Only leave  
a few spots transparent.

### **Wear them.**

All day.  
Another day, try putting an oven mitt  
on your dominant hand.  
Wrap the other one in duct tape.  
If you have it in you, cover your left ear  
with a headphone from one walkman,  
stick an ear bud from an iPod  
in the other—Led Zepplin in one,  
maybe a Gregorian chant in the other—

conduct conversations with the volume  
set on high.

**Each time you try one of these, go out.**

Shake hands with your oven mitt extended,  
make eye contact through your  
gravy goggles, always declaring, *Hello.*

*I am exactly like you, and completely different.*

*There are a million things  
that separate me from you;  
please be aware of all of them  
but treat me like they aren't there.*

**Return home.**

Clean the goggles, place the headphones  
and oven mitt back in their drawers,  
equal parts grateful and aware that  
you still don't truly understand.

## Raising Alaska

When the US officially promoted Alaska  
from territory to state,  
we entered a world unlike any we'd ever encountered:  
hundreds of miles up the western coast,  
completely removed,  
closer to Russia than to America.  
It altered our every preconception.  
In one handshake,  
Maine sank south,  
California cowered east,  
and Texas was dwarfed by a beast  
over two times its size.

When the school where I used to work  
took in a program for at-risk boys,  
we were launched headlong into a world  
unlike any we'd ever wanted to believe existed:  
two blocks from our own homes,  
but closer to homelessness than to middle class.  
These kids wrought havoc on our every standard:  
dirty more after than not,  
in the same clothes three days in a row,  
These kids were sent to school by parents  
who got by on the free lunch program;  
they came hungry and ready to be fed.

Alaska was immediately dubbed  
*Seward's Folly* after its purchaser,  
but I'd like to think that, on some level, Seward knew  
that beneath those stripped trees and barren landscapes  
there was oil,  
coursing beneath the surface like potential  
begging to be tapped.

Our at-risk project was to cover  
the blacktop just outside the playground  
with a map of the United States—  
we'd found that kids  
don't know geography.  
And it was time for these boys,  
who'd never set foot neat the honor roll  
or extracurricular activities,  
to teach them.  
If you listened closely to that classroom floor,

you would hear it tremble  
as the potential started to gush.

The trouble with Alaska  
was that it's too damn big.  
Our standard maps were already packed from border to border;  
no one knew how to contain anything so huge and so high.  
So we moved it:  
sank it south down the coast,  
tucked it neatly under the Gulf of California.  
We shrank it:  
two hundred-plus percent of Texas,  
now roughly the size of Idaho.  
We contained it:  
three hundred sixty million acres of potential  
shoved inside a white box  
just above the compass rose.

The kits that came with the map were nice:  
six different colors,  
all five Great Lakes,  
and then we got to Alaska.  
Four of them could have fit inside Texas.

Historically, change comes about  
when somebody can't keep his mouth shut.  
So, when I went to the principal  
to complain about the size of Alaska,  
I was told that this was about the *experience*,  
that what these kids didn't get at school  
they could ask their parents when they home.  
But I don't see how a sense of accomplishment is derived  
from a job done incorrectly.  
And I know that *at risk*  
is a nice way of saying,  
*raised by one parent*  
*who works two jobs*  
*and might not host a round table*  
*discussion on U.S. geography*  
*when she gets home from them.*"

There was extra paint in the kits.  
And, upon closer surveillance,  
we discovered more blacktop  
just to the northwest of our map.  
For one week

we watched Alaska ascend—  
and this  
is why I teach  
and this  
is how we learn:  
always with the knowledge that there is more paint, extra blacktop,  
another three hundred sixty million acres of potential  
ready to rise up, burst forth and claim its rightful place  
as the last,  
the first,  
the only Frontier.

## If life were a standardized test

When you asked the cashier at Subway  
how much your six-inch Veggie Delight  
would cost after tax,  
she'd tell you to use your resources  
and then stare at you silently  
from her side of the counter.

All of your friendly emails  
would be returned  
with several options for how  
to best phrase your interest  
in that craigslist ad about free lizards  
or punctuate your frustration  
with your mom's new boyfriend.

Your boss's face would be  
a blank scantron sheet,  
empty bubbles to be filled  
with the limp graphite of educated guesses,  
your lover's body an essay question  
to be examined for clues about  
intent, form and purpose.

And you would be forced  
to call upon the vacuum of instruction,  
would know that one wrong answer,  
a single overlooked reference,  
would leave you on the platform,  
watching a train head west  
at sixty miles an hour  
with your future on board.

### **Boys' Bathroom Triolet: a reminder for students with short term memory issues**

Your pants should not be on the floor.

Do not eat the urinal cake.

Your eyes should not be on anyone else, nor  
should your pants be on the floor.

Your eyes should not be on your neighbor or  
the ever-tempting urinal cake, and for Yaweh, Allah and Baby Jesus' sake,  
keep your pants off of the floor  
and your lips off of the urinal cake.

## **Person First**

I was trained in “person first” vocabulary.

It ensures that I constantly indicate to others  
that I see their humanity before their differences,  
no matter how untrue that actually is.

For instance, my autistic student  
is really my student with autism,  
and his wheelchair-bound fifth period math teacher  
ought to be his fifth period math teacher,  
who is in a wheelchair.

One day I took my class to the post office  
during a trip for our Community Based Instruction class.

Or, were we to extend the lingo to objects that are not animate,  
*to the office of services involving postage*  
*for our class on instruction that is community based*

The purpose of this trip was to teach  
Danny, my student with a brain injury,  
and Lisa, my student with Asperger’s,  
to make appropriate conversation  
with workers who are postal.  
And they were getting it.

Brandy, a girl with orthopedic challenges,

found the accessible entrances.

My students on the autism spectrum

made eye contact while purchasing stamps.

Everything was going swimmingly.

And then a hot Asian midget walked through the door.

Let me clarify: *midget* as in his head just cleared the counter,

*Asian* as in distinctly brownish, despite my inability to discern nationalities

due to my sensibilities, which are white,

and *hot* as in I was panting. In front of my students. In a post office.

I couldn't even think of what to encourage the class to call him:

*A hot midget who is Asian?*

*A person who is hot, height disinclined and of Eastern descent?*

*An individual whose comparatively low stature is eclipsed by his vaguely honey-turmeric*

*complexion, yielding an inappropriate degree of attractiveness?*

Probably not that one.

My brain was so frantic to address the person in words

I almost missed the amazing thing

that was happening to the person in real life.

That thing was nothing.

Lisa and her autism said hello,

never thinking about where his eyes were.

Brandy and Danny stumbled over their own injuries  
to open the door for him when he left.

Nobody called him anything.

As for me, the closest I came to seeing his humanity first  
was calling him hot before acknowledging  
the reality of his heritage or body.

I am not like my students. There is not much of me  
that sees the person first. So my mind and mouth  
work overtime to make up the difference.

## **Eddie comes of age**

**Sweettkidd95:** yah, im experenced

*Current mood: grateful for webspeak*

**Sweettkidd95:** ben told im good 4 my age tho, lol

*@talldarkanddesperate No one gets me but u.*

**Sweettkidd95:** just a guy or 2 at my school

why?

*hey, online with whatshisname text u back in a few*

**Sweettkidd95:** nah it's a private school thats why u aint heard of it

<http://jeffersontransitionalschool.edu>

**Sweettkidd95:** dag, u almost as old as my dad ☺

*Current mood: nervous*

**Sweettkidd95:** im into whatever u r

*Google image search: submissive*

**Sweetkidd95:** that's cool

c u soon

*User status: idle*

## List of commonly used sight words: special edition

<b>Grade 1</b>	promise
sad	apology
silly	<b>Grade 4</b>
friend	party
please	whisper
hold	carpool
stay	favor
try	ignore
no	secret
sorry	pretend
<b>Grade 2</b>	brave
slow	alone
broken	<b>Grade 5</b>
upset	anxious
mother	apologize
mystery	nervous
impossible	apologizing
<b>Grade 3</b>	believe
skinned	apologetic
shame	trust
accident	<b>Middle School</b>
explain	knuckles
bandage	someone

anyone	ignore
hopeful	scrutiny
something	god
anything	possible
just	remains.

### **High School**

everyone

effortless

move

contact

hallway

effort

fire

escape

Silence

identity

college

### **The rest**

distance

imagine

plaster

shadow

stone

cast

disappear

## **The calling**

Anyone who knows me  
knows I have a calling.  
It makes me noble  
and gives me things to talk about at parties.  
Sometimes it is the most  
tangible part of my identity.

Today I am pissed at my calling.  
Fought with him all last night  
and went to bed angry.

This morning, I am still cursing him,  
almost as much as the unrisen sun  
that won't even look me in the eyes  
until halfway through my drive to work.

*Why can't I have a job I can go to stoned?*  
*Or in my pajamas?* I ask my calling.  
He doesn't answer.  
He just rocks gently in the passenger seat,  
staring straight ahead.

He knows that we are heading toward  
eight hours' worth of answers to those questions,  
that these answer will fill me,  
be the liquid that flushes out the indignant froth  
of weary feet and nominal paychecks  
long enough to sustain me  
‘til the day ends and my return from teacher to human  
starts this fight all over again.

## **Attendance**

Dennis is absent today.

The silence in the classroom mourns  
the artificial breath of his oxygen tank,  
his splintered throat exhuming requests  
for help reading the bigger words.

When he is not here, Dennis attends funerals.

These are absences that are only excused  
when the student knows the deceased.

Months ago, the truancy officer gave up  
on searching the obituaries for services  
at the local Baptist church in the hopes  
of bringing him back.

Yesterday, his teachers and therapists  
congregated around a board room table  
to make a plan to address this behavior.

Nowhere in the meeting did  
anyone mention the hole in his  
throat, a souvenir from the  
casket of incubator that held him  
when the womb no longer could.

Never in our vigil of paperwork  
was mentioned the crumpled  
memorial cards in his pocket, signed  
by strangers, the only people outside of  
a board room who can translate an unformed  
voice, veiled by trach tube, and hear  
through a language of grief.

## **ADHD runs the field trip, a collision of villanelle, pantoum and haiku**

*the car radio plays a kanye west song up goes the volume now in the windshield suddenly is appearing a blue subaru trumpets and tissue burst from the passenger seat claire's nurse blows her nose all of the students sit safely buckled behind they are each my job*

Mr. August uses the steadiest hands he has to steer,  
channeling whatever semblance of order this van offers, knowing  
with focus, with love, with vigilance, we are here.

*Mr. August, you know where I went last night?*

*Mr. August, can you turn the up radio?*

*Mr. August, we need to turn left at the light.*

*Mr. August, what's the name of the place we're going to?*

*The car radio plays a Kanye West song up goes the volume*

The squeak of brakes and voices unify into a singular cheer.

Conversation cadence, like this van, speeding and slowing,

Mr. August uses the steadiest hands he has to steer.

“*Mr. August, can you turn the up radio?*”

“*Gotcha, Maya. Done and done.*”

“*Mr. August, what's the name of the place we're going to?*”

“*Same as the Subaru in front of us, Evan: Putt Putt Fun*”

*now in the windshield suddenly is appearing a blue Subaru*

Over the music, the students are near impossible to hear,  
but the road and the passengers remind me where we are going,  
with focus, with love, with vigilance. We are here.

*“Gotcha, Maya. Done and done.”*

*From my mouth, all of the answers disperse*

*“Same as the Subaru in front of us, Evan: Putt Putt Fun”*

*I hand to the student behind me, just as I do a tissue to the nurse.*

*trumpets and tissue bursts from the passenger seat claire 'snurse blows her nose*

In the face of every force that interferes,  
the traffic, outside and inside this van, both ongoing,  
Mr. August uses the steadiest hands he has to steer.

*From my mouth, all of the answers disperse.*

*The pace of this trip clicks in place like the metal of the seat belt*

*I hand to the student behind me, just as I do a tissue to the nurse,  
then return my hand to the wheel, wearing the chaos like a pelt.*

*allofthestudentssitsafelybuckledbehindtheyareeachmyjob*

And now, the shiny destination signs all appear,  
as distracting as every other part of today, but like all of them, showing  
with focus, with love, with vigilance, we are here.

*The pace of this trip clicks in place like the metal of the seat belt  
that will soon release each of us, allow me to spend the next hours free,  
then return my hand to the wheel, wearing the chaos like a pelt,  
in the center of the stimulus, aware of no place it makes more sense to be.*

*the car radio*

<i>plays a kanye west song</i>	<i>now in the windshield</i>	
<i>up goes the volume</i>	<i>suddenly is appearing</i>	<i>trumpets and tissues</i>
	<i>a blue Subaru</i>	<i>burst from the passenger seat</i>
		<i>claire's nurse blows her nose</i>

When the class returns to the van, it is like watching my purpose reappear.

We are jittery with experience, but steady in knowing

*all of the students*  
*sit safely buckled behind*  
*they are each my job*

Mr. August uses the steadiest hands he has to steer  
with focus, with love, with vigilance.

We are here.

## **Terzanelle before telling your class that a student has died**

Ask them the question,  
after you hold your breath,  
*Who knew him?*

As if your lungs contain death;  
The spray that leaves your lips  
after you hold your breath.

But the news is an unforgiving shadow, words that will eclipse  
all that they describe, leaving them only  
the spray that leaves your lips.

Your students will add to their attributes *mortal* and *lonely*,  
words that will lay a callous havoc to all-  
all that they describe, leaving them only.

But it is your job. Line them up in the hall,  
ask them the question,  
words that will lay a callous havoc to all  
who knew him.

## **Reasons not to use *retarded* as an insult**

There are a million worlds in which  
*retarded* is not the casual annoyance  
of a C minus in chemistry class,  
even if none of those worlds are yours.

To some it is the only name to call  
the boy under that helmet, it is the bony  
finger exposing the stitched up  
knees that betray him in shorts weather.

There is one vastly expansive universe  
full of better words to use.  
Every so often, the words you speak  
will be received by ears unaware  
of nuance. They will not discern  
between meaning it your way and meaning  
it “that way.”

Life will have long since stripped  
those ears of the filter that strains  
the thick pulp of effortless hate from  
each utterance and spit shines  
its benign intentions.

There is endless, unnamed privilege  
in a brain that holds myriad better words to use  
so I will know that the cop  
who ticketed your illegally parked car  
was not located firmly on the autism spectrum  
so much as he cramped your style.

There are ears that hear *retarded* as  
all they will ever be. They share  
space with mouths that will never  
learn to say, “No. This is not  
who I am.” And yes, you are responsible  
for knowing this.

In every world in which your voice  
has been allowed to resonate,  
there sprawls a veritable cornucopia  
of better words to use  
and not everyone has the access to them  
that you do.

## **Seizure disorder: a garland cinquain**

Stillness

is the default

unrecognized—a cloth

that coats the table of motion and

*routine*

before

the wood tremors,

*until the low rumbling*

makes the brain's legs give way into

collapse.

This is

not your body.

Its ears obey a voice

*from inside that mandates that it*

go deaf.

What once

*sustained and thrived*

now only moves to a beat

unlike any pulse it should know.

When the

*crumbles*  
of consciousness  
settle into their spots—  
either old, new or unintended.

Again

*routine*  
*sustains and thrives*  
*until the low rumbling*  
*from inside mandates that it*  
*crumbles.*

## You are not special

The four words  
that are about to appear  
before your eager little eyes  
are words that I write  
out of love. I write them  
'cause they are important,  
I write them, 'cause  
You need to remember this shit.  
Ready? Here goes:  
You.Are.Not.Special.

It's true. And you should be glad,  
because people who are special  
are usually fucking insufferable.  
And the only people more insufferable  
than people who *are* special  
are people who *think* they are special.

And I know—  
this flies in the face of all that lovey shit  
your mamas taught you growing up:  
*Oh Baby, you so special—*  
*ain't nobody else like you.*  
And this would be fine  
If we knew how to handle that.  
But we, as it turns out,  
are humans, and not very good  
at knowing when to stop.

*So I'm special*  
usually turns into  
*I'm special, give me shit for free,*  
*I'm special, I should get to park real, real close*  
*to whatever the hell I want,*  
*I'm special, Ima make substitutions*  
*even when the sign at the restaurant*  
*clearly reads, "Thank you for not making substitutions,*  
*Dickbag."*

There is a nearly non-existent line  
that separates special  
from entitled. And the average American  
is pretty sure he's special enough  
to piss all over that line,

so we become drenched in urine-soaked entitlement.  
And I've got issues with this.  
Because entitlement, that sweet, steadfast  
misguided notion that anybody  
owes us anything  
is what keeps us lazy,  
keeps us convinced that we  
are above honest work, genuine effort  
and the desire to earn anything.

So, my prayer/blessing/wish/dream/hope  
/curse is this:  
At every second of your life:  
while you are arguing your way out of a ticket  
that you got for clearly breaking the law,  
while you are sure that you  
should not have to take a class  
that is required for everybody else,  
while you just know that *you*  
do not have to turn off *your* cell phone  
during a movie, or poetry reading  
or funeral, at every second  
may somewhere in the back  
of your entitled little brain there repeat  
this incessant mantra:

*IamnotspecialIamnotspecial,Iamnotspecial*

Because you ain't.  
And I know.  
Because five days a week,  
I work at a high school  
for students whose needs are,  
by law, defined  
as special. And not 'cause their mamas told them so.  
And not 'cause they think I  
owe them anything,  
but because life dealt them shit  
that they can't control  
and they will never be able to change that. So,  
if you desperately need to consider yourself special,  
then you'd better be ready  
to be stared at daily,  
better be ready to be fed  
through a tube, you better be ready  
to wear a helmet even when your ass ain't roller blading.

You'd better be ready to travel  
To Sub-Saharan Africa, the gutters of Calcutta  
and the cardboard boxes home  
to veterans in America,  
look their occupants directly in the face  
and tell them why anybody  
owes you anything,  
or you'd better be ready to shut up,  
work for what you want  
and be goddamned glad you can.

Because special is fine,  
but worthy is better.

So go earn something:  
a degree, a parking space  
or your mama's love,  
'cause you  
are not special,  
but your accomplishments will be.

### **Three poems for the hallway outside the physical therapy office**

this is how the

hardfooted boys and

crooked girls defy

their steady spotters,

gravity, their parents' fears

in the face of impossibility,

and the unforgiving floor,

learn the movement of recovery,

spines sturdy as ballet slippers,

fists molded by their walker handles, pumping,

relearning a forgotten dance

one footstep at a time

## Sports fan

I am not a sports fan,  
but the last basketball game I was dragged to  
found me glued to my bleacher,  
eyes fixed on the visiting team's star player.  
After his third consecutive basket,  
I finally saw through the mass of motion surrounding him  
and around the mane of hair comet-tailing behind,  
and managed to make out a yellow 27 on his chest.  
I decided I'd be watching him for the rest of the game.

And I did.

I watched as he tore past defenders to the basket  
readied the layup, set up the shot,  
then reminded himself that there were people on the team  
other than him,  
and passed the ball.  
I watched as he left the other team so far behind him  
there was no chance of him getting caught,  
but switched up his approach each time anyway,  
just to keep it interesting.

True grace is knowing  
how much better you are than everyone  
and only choosing to show it a little.

And 27 had it.

When he zipped past the foul line I was sitting nearest  
he was pursued more closely than he had been before  
and he turned,  
faster, wider, more out of control than he expected  
and left the floor completely;  
flew,  
a pendulum untethered,  
half spiraling through the air.

The crowd fell silent just in time to be enveloped  
by the metal cacophony  
of his wheelchair hitting the floor.

Number 27 was born without legs  
and I guess that's what qualified him to be his team's leader;  
while all the other kids had only had a few years  
to adjust to moving with their arms,  
27's entire life had taught him to vault back up and play.

And he did:

elbows against gymnasium floor in two huge strides,  
hand pressed firmly against seat  
he was up and ready to go.

I happened to be sharing a bleacher with 27's grandmother,  
she travels from Raleigh, North Carolina  
to every one of his games;  
when she heard me gasp she assured me, her grandson  
is really good at falling.

He does it about three times a season.

Once, when he was eight,  
in his first game ever, he was launched out of his chair  
and the ref, when he tried to help him up,  
was reamed out so thoroughly  
that by the time he was twelve  
every referee in the state of North Carolina knew better  
than to touch number 27.

And so he learned to rebound.

And so he became the voice of fate for his team,  
Saying, *Keep up;*  
*the fact that I am and will always be faster than you*  
*is no less fair than any of the circumstances*  
*that put us in this game in the first place, keep up,*  
*and if you're lucky maybe I'll pass you the ball.*

And he does

and they do,  
cause this is not a group of kids operating under false pretenses,  
it is an assembly of athletes who've learned  
that if spina biffida can put you in a chair at sixteen,  
if a car crash can end your senior year,  
if a pair of stumps can be the only thing  
to sit beneath your waist,  
then there will be things in life you can't control  
so you better be sure your arms are strong enough  
to seize the reigns on everything else.

I am not a sports fan  
but you'll find me in the front row for a spectacle  
that reminds me you don't have to be ashamed  
of those stumps below your waist  
when you know no one's looking at your legs.

I am not a sports fan  
but I'll pay anything for a ticket that tells me  
you never have to fell weak when you know your arms  
are the two strongest things in the world.

I am not a sports fan  
but I'll rise to my feet to cheer for any sign  
that you never have to fear hitting the floor  
when your entire life has taught you  
to vault back up and play.

## **Matthew's sestina**

Every day there is a schedule,  
every single day a schedule,  
every item must be done just so,  
every chore, game, assignment, just so  
everything is peaceful, he won't get stuck.

Every bit of order preventing him from being stuck.

Before they understood him, Matthew's family stuck  
him in a public school; no schedule  
on the front boards, no pictures stuck  
to the top and sides of his schedule  
to make sense of the classes and teachers, so  
he repeated words to drown out the uncertainty that terrorized him so,

tortured him so, made him panic and pace, so  
he was homeschooled, spent his days stuck  
inside bedroom, kitchen dining room, so  
much life passing by, so hard to schedule  
learning and desperate routines around the schedule  
in which the lives of his parents, sisters and brother were all stuck.

So when he came to us, Matthew was stuck,  
stuck in the patterns of movement, stuck in repeated words, stuck in just so.  
So the job of every teacher was to love him with equal parts heart and schedule,  
Schedule every movement, class and interaction ‘til it stuck.  
Stuck gentle bits of unpredictability into the cracks of his schedule,  
Scheduled repetition and recklessness into the school day he learned to love so.

But new routines come slowly, so  
*autism* took no time to squirm from the parentheses it had been stuck  
inside, unleashed the panic that only an unfollowed schedule  
can bring to a student so  
stuck, so unwaveringly stuck, so deeply stuck,  
but miraculously flexible when loved with heart and schedule

in equal parts. Matthew, now four years, sixteen schedules,  
seven hundred twenty school days (at least as many laughs and smiles also)  
into living how new patterns can stick,  
make small changes in even the most rigid of schedules  
or formulas, even moreso  
in the company of those in the business of keeping him unstuck,

understands that life has its own schedule,  
more insistent than any arbitrary impulse or rule, and a so  
much more comfortable place to be stuck.

## **God kept making birds**

Even if the first one was a falcon  
or a phoenix, proudly fashioned of flame,  
one or two was not enough, and someone  
understood the sky, watched as it became  
made for filling. Just like each window ledge  
and tree branch begged for reprieve from the same  
bony feet and beaks tapping at their edge.

So God kept making birds, broke hard the frame  
That tethered each creature to the knowledge  
of *beautiful*. Because the pigeon knows  
the truth in bone hollow and cartilage,  
and the soot-soaked majesty of his toes:  
one kind of anything, no matter its station,  
gives only disservice to creation.

## **Snapshots: Kaitlyn in four letters**

4/28/09

Hi, Mr. August!

Please check Kaitlyn's backpack for a picture. It is of her at her old school, right before when her prom would have been. Kaitlyn always liked having her hair and nails done, and all the other typical "girly" things. Since your school's prom is probably Kaitlyn's last chance to attend a dance, I'd like for her to get her eyebrows done and a few other things.

She has been refusing. You know how she is now.

I was wondering if you could put the picture of her from her old school on her desk. Maybe it will make her remember how she used to look.

Thanks!

-Brenda Shaw

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10/22/08

Dear Kaitlyn and Mrs. Shaw,

Thank you so much for sending us pictures of Kaitlyn at her new school. It's always so nice to see our patients as they recover! It was nice to see that pretty smile that all the nurses loved so much! Please stay in touch and come back and visit our floor any time you come in for appointments.

-Nurse Ginny and all the nurses in Ward B

\*\*\*

May 1, 2008

Ms. Shaw:

It is with great excitement that we accept your application for acceptance into our college. Your outstanding academic transcripts set you aside from most of our other applicants, and your portfolio was among the strongest we have received in this or any other year. You obviously have an eye for beauty in both expected and unexpected areas. We would be honored to name you among our photography department's students.

Attached is information regarding housing and orientation. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns.

Again, we offer our congratulations and look forward to speaking with you further.

Regards,

Laverne Jacobs

Dean of Students

\*\*\*

July 1, 2009

Dear Mr. August,

Thank you for being my teacher. This is a picture that I took. It is of my dog. I hope your summer is good. Thank you again.

Your student,

Kaityln

## **Commencement**

You were born soft,

but life is not soft.

You will spend much of it

collecting metal. It will try to

hold you, to help you.

Lose it quickly. Let it be no more

than a conveyance, a necessity

in a life no one else will own.

There is a difference between

what helps you and what owns you,

what carries you and what defines you.

The second you learn this difference,

melt it down and spread it on your skin

until it seeps in and hardens

enough to shield whatever you contain.

Carry no more worries with you

than you can fit into your lunchbox.

They will sound like ball bearings,

rattling hard, heavy maraca songs

against the metal that holds them.

When you've kept them too long,  
when you amass enough to fill  
a backpack, a duffle bag or suitcase,  
unload them by the thermos-full.  
  
On the best of days, you'll find that  
unscrewing the lid will yield not  
the dull and useless spheres you deposited,  
but a cloudburst of fireflies  
illuminating the night sky.

This is the alchemy of your insides.  
  
It is the lifelong process of burning wings  
from the metal that circumstance assigned you.  
  
It is how the girl with braces  
will one day own a mouthful of magpies—  
she will smile like flight,  
like weightlessness. It is how the bands  
on your wrists, the rods in your legs  
and spine will learn that they are dragonflies  
and teach you the meaning of iridescent.  
  
You will be the meaning of iridescent.

It is the thing that metal becomes  
when it is spread thin enough to fly,

when it creates a cicada rhythm  
of burial and rebirth  
measured by the year:  
*seventeen, thirty four, fifty one, infinity.*

One day you will turn infinity.

There is a difference between  
the things that carry you and the  
things that hold you;  
the difference is that everything  
can carry you if you let it,  
but nothing can hold you—  
you are flying too high  
to be held.

## About the Author

Chris August began his involvement in special needs education in 1995 as an aide for a young man with deaf-blindness and other disabilities. Since then he has taught at a variety of public and private schools throughout Maryland, working with young people of all ages.

As a writer, he has self-published multiple volumes of poetry and had work featured in such publications as Wordsmith Press's *From Page to Stage and Back Again* and such websites as Hyperlexia.com, an online journal of poetry related to the autism spectrum.

He has toured much of the United States and Canada as a performance poet, and has represented Baltimore and Washington, DC at both the National Poetry Slam and the Individual World Poetry Slam. In 2011, he was named the number one ranked performance poet at the Individual World Poetry Slam held in Cleveland, Ohio.

He currently lives in Baltimore, Maryland with two of his favorite humans and two of his favorite dogs.

Find him online at <http://www.facebook.com/Chris-August> and [www.chrisaugustpoetry.com](http://www.chrisaugustpoetry.com).