

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 peeing 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,

palms 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 Zeppelin 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.

You 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 experienced

Current mood: grateful for webspeak

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

@talldarkandesperate 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

Sweettkidd95: that's cool

c u soon

User status: idle

List of commonly used sight words: special edition

Grade 1

sad

silly

friend

please

hold

stay

try

no

sorry

Grade 2

slow

broken

upset

mother

mystery

impossible

Grade 3

skinned

shame

accident

explain

bandage

promise

apology

Grade 4

party

whisper

carpool

favor

ignore

secret

pretend

brave

alone

Grade 5

anxious

apologize

nervous

apologizing

believe

apologetic

trust

Middle School

knuckles

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?

ThecarradioplaysaKanyeWestsongupgoesthevolume

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 burst from the passenger seat, Claire's nurse 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.

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

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

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

crooked girls defy

gravity, their parents' fears

and the unforgiving floor,

spines sturdy as ballet slippers,

relearning a forgotten dance

hardfooted boys and

their steady spotters,

in the face of impossibility,

learn the movement of recovery,

fists molded by their walker handles, pumping,

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 bifida 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 feel 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,

tormented 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

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 at 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 the 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](http://www.facebook.com/Chris-August) and www.chrisaugustpoetry.com.