

Reverie

Midwest African American Literature



In This Issue:

Alan King
Felecia Studstill
Eddie Bell
Brian Gilmore
Dike Okoro
Debraha Watson
Gerri Stone
Cheresse Thornhill
Qiana Towns
Juanita Torrence-Thompson
Clarence Young

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Special!
French translation of
“Michael’s Mother”
by Eddie Bell

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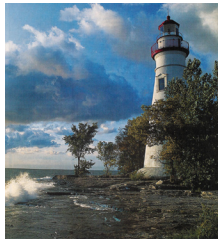
The English version of "La Mere de Michael," "Michael's Mother," first appeared in Capt's Dreaming Chair published by CRS Outloudbooks in September 2000. The translation was accomplished by French university students, Lucie Chretien and Charlotte Valdaut, both studying in Clermont-Ferrand, France. It was read publicly in a joint English/French reading performance held in the "Old City" of Clermont-Ferrand by Regine Panot. The poem is reprinted from www.eddiebell.com

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Alan King

Grand Central

the women at a table behind us
are consoling a friend who liked
a guy that's pursuing someone else

Derrick's venting about being
led on by a girl he found out was
dating one of her guy friends

I watch him hunched over
as this romantic setback
bullies his ego

that was me the year before
when I fell for a woman
still sore from her ex
splitting for his old flame

I recall the conga lines
in the cruise commercials
I saw as a younger: the
human-boxcars linked into
a train of dancing bodies

that's how desire drives most
of us—linked by the possibility
of getting what we go after

two sistas check the brother
on the couch, probably wishing

he was keeping them company
instead of their male friend
lying limp beside them

I can only imagine what
the guy's thinking, watching
his lady friends wishing he was
so much more to one of them
than just tonight's escort

or wishing the right words
were an express he could
catch out of the friend zone

they rise and leave, he
trails them a caboose amongst
the other sad locomotives
drifting through

Round the Way

Carisia, Dawn, and Keith
shrill over the music, tagging
each other with super-soakers,
whipping through a street
littered with empty bottles
and candy wrappers

where blaring speakers are
piled like totems above sweaty
bodies riding backbeats
a DJ unleashes from his booth

among the warped wooden
porches of old men shuffling
cards and scattering dominoes

like the uncles at Ashli's
cook-out my boy Jerry
and I crashed refusing to leave
'til we were chased by her
brothers and some classmates

we barely escaped the ice
water hurled at us, shrieking
like the kids at this jam

Template

Green line, a man sits next
to a woman, says *hello*
his intent as obvious as
Anacostia's "Big Chair"

so, you go to school he says
when she looks out her window
I thought of going back myself
he continues and her jaw tenses

she's a Venus-flytrap ready
to snap him for flying too close

she sinks in the seat, looks up at
the woman standing next to me, who
reads the S.O.S. in her eyes

you look familiar
the one standing says

and the other, catching
the hint, responds *you know,*
I thought you looked familiar, too
did you go to [add random
school name here]?

oh yeah!

both of them back and forth, despite
the interference between them

did you know [add random name here]?

yeah girl, how they doing?

my face contorts around
its 'oh' shaped mouth, knowing
rejection's painful blow

when I remember
the template women have used
to ward off my advances

Felecia Studstill

March Madness

Until the phone rang, she'd mistakenly thought she was done crying, or had at least gotten better at it. But her eyes stung with tears at the sound of his voice. It had been two weeks. Of course she wanted to see him. She ached with missing him, still was unsure how to go about her day without him, without thinking of him. Distracted, she turned the television louder listening to the sounds of college basketball.

She remembered with clarity everything about him: *the mole on his back, the hair on his chest, the way he snored, that horrible sound of blowing allergies from his slightly too-large nose in the morning, his hands on her skin, his protectiveness of her, the way he talked about his grandparents, the way he smelled, the way he always reached for her hand when they were sitting across from each other at dinner or watching television, his need for unconditional acceptance and adoration, their first date, his near clinical bouts of depression, their long-standing Super Bowl and playoff rituals, his brilliance and talent, his habit of avoiding difficult topics, decisions, environments, his tendency to run away from battles as intensely as she ran to them, his almost malicious withdrawal and silence.*

When she'd first said the words, she hated them and wanted to reach in the air and snatch them back one by one: "I-want-out-I-can't-do-this-anymore." But stronger still was the fear that things would stay as they were. He struggled in their hometown, which was reeling from the economic downturn. Unable to find work, he took a new job in another state. He hadn't discussed the move with her, and she resented

the upheaval. At the same time her career was taking off, her career wasn't an option where he lived and she couldn't see herself leaving to start over. They were over 1,000 miles away from compromise.

They'd lived apart for more than a year, but the visits grew less frequent and the fighting grew more intense. He could not bear her disapproval and she could not tolerate his silence. Neither was satisfied with the current arrangement and she knew that they would slowly grow bitter and vindictive, further apart every day. She imagined some venom eating her from the inside out until she was like one of those dolls she'd seen when they vacationed in the islands. Hollow and filled with smaller meaner versions of herself, each one a little smaller, a little meaner.

They'd always said they were truly joined by God, that theirs was a precious gift, an act of faith. The thought of not growing old in tandem seemed blasphemous. They had lived and loved together for 10 years, weathered trials and infidelity, lost two children together. Only one other man had touched her in over 10 years and that seemed now some sort of vapor. Off rhythm, and out of cycle, she started bleeding, heavily, profusely as if his heart was hidden deep inside and pierced by that one breach of trust.

"You didn't answer? Do you want to see me?" His voice sounded emotional, slightly choked.

She squeezed the receiver in her hand and took a breath to compose herself. "Yes, of course, I want to see you. I love you. I want us to always be friends," she said with much less control than she felt. "Why don't you come by my hotel? There's an Asian restaurant across the street. We'll get a drink, something to eat, we'll talk."

"What room are you in? I'll pick you up."

It was just a short while until she heard the knock at her door. She paused for just a moment before opening it. "Hi, just let me grab a jacket. You never quite know about the

weather this time of year.”

He looked at her almost shyly as they sat at the table. “You cut off all your hair.”

“It’s cut some.” She runs her hands over it defensively.

“You go from one extreme to the other. From twists to straight and now short and red.”

“It’s already growing back. My bangs were much shorter.”

“Is this some sort of mid-life crisis?”

“It’s not a mid-life crisis. It’s my hair.”

“Whatever. I’m just saying...nothing to pull... How’s work? Did you ever get that raise?”

“Yeah I did. It’s been going great... busy, but it’s good to be trusted with some more responsibility.”

“You deserved it. You’re good, you work hard. It’s about time. I’m glad they saw that.” He had always been supportive and protective of her in that way.

The waiter brought the seaweed salad appetizer she’d ordered. She quickly picked up the chopsticks and tasted it. “When did you stop praying?” He asked.

“I quit praying over food. The fact that there is food is the answer to the prayer. I pray all the time about many things. I prayed before I opened the door upstairs.”

He chuckled. “Point taken.” He looked skeptically at the salad, but picked up the chopsticks and tried it.

“How’s your work?” She asked.

Small talk continued in that vein until they had exhausted work, family, the fact that they both gave up alcohol for Lent, and the state of the 2008 election over a good spicy duck and ginger dish. Between the innocuous conversations of strangers talking about almost everything except the one thing, the words that still hung between them, the two weeks of silence and separation that followed. No conversation about the void they’d made in each other’s lives.

“Who do like to finish?” He asked. “You know I want North Carolina.”

“Memphis all the way. I am so sure, I turned in my bracket on Monday. They will beat Carolina in the finals.”

“You’re smoking crack,” he threw back. “They won’t make it through the next round, if this one. Memphis? Please! You know we ball in the N.C.”

She knew for a fact that he hadn’t “balled” in 5 years, due to an Achilles injury and the following “I’m getting old” laments. His sports preference was track and field and tennis for playing and football or boxing for watching. But this time of year, everyone was a basketball fan, so she forgave him. Her own preference was for football, but it was March. “Memphis is playing tonight as a matter of fact.”

He motioned the waiter for a box and the check. They were early for the Memphis game and were just in time for the beginning of Arkansas and Indiana.

“I kinda want Indiana to win this one,” he said as he fell backward onto the red sofa in front of the television. He looked at her for a moment, then added, “They lost their coach halfway through the season and just sort of fell apart after that. I feel for them.”

She was sure he wasn’t just referring to Indiana basketball. She wanted to tell him that they were already down by eight, that she’d picked Arkansas by five, that it wouldn’t work, that it was over for them and Clemson and Vanderbilt and Drake and that this was just another of the year’s upset losses. Instead she sat next to him on the couch and let him take her hand. “Let’s see what happens,” she offered as she rested her head on his shoulder.

“There’s nobody else,” he said as they sat. “With you?”

“No, there’s no one else,” she said. “I’m in love with you, I still cry sometimes. I’m probably crying now, I’m just good at it.”

“There will be,” he said quietly, looking down at her,

their faces close. “There’s going to be someone else, I know you. And you’re quite a catch.”

Indiana lost, and as they lay spooned and drifting in and out on the end of the bed by the end, she heard him sobbing softly in her ear. She lay listening not turning, absorbing the moment until the sound of crying melted into soft snores. Men were so silly, she thought. All that they’d been together lay perishing in his arms offering only the glow from televised madness, and he felt more comfortable having a cry over basketball, when he wasn’t even playing, when he had no connection to the school. She knew she would miss him. She would miss “them.” “You’ll find someone else,” she said softly. Her own weeping was dry and silent; she’d gotten so much better at it.

Eddie Bell

Michael's Mother

The pain crawls through your gut
when you lose a man-child,
when he dies like a sudden March wind,
come and gone in a gust,
then stillness.

It corrupts your mind,
'till all you can do is cry. . .

Ooh Lordy!

Ooh Lordy!

Ooh Lordy!

Seems like a momma shouldn't
have to bury her child.
Ain't natural.

Ain't expected!

Seems like
he should live to be old,
be here when you're gone.
Seems like he should
answer when his name is called,
like before—

Michael!

“Yes Momma”

Come here chile and let

Momma make it better. . .

Come here chile, let

Momma comb that nappy hair.

Taint fair Lord.
He was my only boy!
 My only boy!
Ooh Lordy!
My only boy!
I never did no man no harm.
Why this evil come on me?

It can't be Lord,
can't be this burden is real.
It hurts so bad.
I wanna die!
Ooh Lordy!
He was my only boy,
now he's gone.
He don't answer no more
when I call him.
Michael. . .

Ooh no.
He was my world Lord,
now he's gone!
Ooh my Father.
He was a good boy,
Now he's gone.
You took him from me Lord.

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La mère de Michael

(French translation)

La douleur vous tord les tripes
Quand vous perdez un homme-enfant,
Quand il meurt comme une bourrasque de mars,
Passe dans une rafale,
Puis le calme.
Elle vous pourrit l'esprit,
Jusqu'à ce que vous ne puissiez que pleurer
Oh, Seigneur!
Oh, Seigneur!
Oh, Seigneur!

Il semble qu'une mère ne devrait pas
Avoir à enterrer son enfant.
Ce n'est pas naturel.
La Ce n'est pas prévu!
Il semble qu'
Il devrait vivre et vieillir,
Etre là quand on part.
Il semble qu'il devrait
répondre quand on appelle son nom;
comme avant—
Michael!
Oui Maman
Viens ici mon petit et laisse
Maman arranger ça
Viens ici mon petit, laisse
Maman peigner ces cheveux crépus.
C'est pas juste Seigneur.
Il était mon seul enfant!
La Mon seul enfant!
Oh, Seigneur!

La Mon seul enfant!
J'ai jamais fait de tort à personne.
Pourquoi ce mal m'est tombé dessus?

Ce n'est pas possible Seigneur,
Pas possible que ce fardeau soit réel.
ça fait si mal.

Je me sens vieille Seigneur.
Je veux mourir!

Oh Seigneur!

Il était mon seul enfant,
et maintenant il est parti.

Il ne répond plus
Quand je l'appelle

Michael...

Oh non.

Il était mon monde Seigneur,
Et maintenant il est parti.

Oh Seigneur.

Il était un bon fils,
Et maintenant il est parti.

Tu me l'as pris Seigneur.

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Brian Gilmore

The Last Stand of Adolphus “Doc” Cheatham

Friday night. June 1, 1997. A frail old black man sat at a table in the dark just off the side of the stage at the legendary Blues Alley jazz club in the heart of Georgetown in Washington D.C. Right in the midst of smoke and chatter of the crowd that sat in anticipation of another important night of “jass”. Amongst the sipping of cold beer, whiskey, red wine, easy dining on chicken tenders, french fries, salmon, gumbo, catfish, he, this majestic old man, unassuming and dapper in an old dark blue suit, sat beside the tiny stage inside this tiny club and smiled.

Poet Cornelius Eady, a lover of jazz himself, probably would have called the old man that night an “old bag of bones” if he had laid eyes upon him. It would have been appropriate too though this man was full of life and laughter.

The old man was ready. He had been ready for decades. His trumpet was in the case at his feet and everyone who came up to him spoke politely and quietly. It was yet another jam session on the long lonesome trail of the jazz trumpeter, the ruler, the most dominant and most important instrumentalist in the history of jazz.

Minutes later as the old man sat still smiling just below the stage, New Orleans based trumpeter, Nicholas Payton and his band blew into a elevating set of energetic jazz numbers that the crowd swallowed like red wine. Payton, another fine trumpet player from the “Big Easy” in the tradition of those legendary cornet players of yesteryear like King Buddy Bolden, Freddie Keppard, Buddy Petit, Joe “King” Oliver, Lee Collins, Louis Armstrong and Henry “Red” Allen, did not disappoint the tradition either as the old man sat and

watched the future of the music he help to popularize. You would think the power and discipline of the “young lion,” Payton, and his band moving almost athletically through its set would have scared the old man out the club. But not this man; this man was that much more.

Of course, though the crowd at Blues Alley came to hear Payton, the forecast of jazz; on this special night we, all of us, I suspected, came to devour the passion of jazz’s essence, its genesis that we all want to know. All of it which sat at the edge of the stage inside the body of that old man who just smiled in his dark blue suit and his old bag of bones. With his trumpet case resting at his feet, Doc Cheatham, or should I say, Adolphus “Doc” Cheatham, was ready to play.

I first laid eyes on Doc Cheatham when I watched a documentary on jazz years ago called “*The Story of Jazz*”. During that program, Doc was captured sitting on a couch looking regal and elegant like an old relative passing down short tales of times long since past. I thought of my grandfather telling stories to me when I was a kid on his sun porch. Each time Doc spoke, his soft creaky voice brought up jazz’s epic beauty. The richness, the placidness, the essential part of the American experience that became the world’s first “world music” according to the late avant garde Lester Bowie, another great jazz trumpeter of note.

Doc had all the answers in that film, all the best anecdotes, and knew everyone who was anyone in jazz throughout its history. He was a trumpet player and a singer and from that day forth I knew I wanted to hear him, see him, find out why he was so important and why everyone always brought up his name.

So in the late spring 1997, I traveled to the legendary Jazz and Heritage Festival in New Orleans, Louisiana to absorb the festival of festivals in the city that seems to be always in the midst of some ritual.

Back in 1997, I knew that Doc Cheatham and Nicolas Payton were set to play a set during the festival and I made a point to try to catch their show. There were so many celebrated and emerging jazz players in New Orleans that week in New Orleans (McCoy Tyner, James Moody, Herbie Hancock, Fred Foss, Terrence Blanchard come to mind), I got the schedule mixed up so I missed Doc. I was heartbroken.

But then a month later I saw that Cheatham and Payton were coming to Blues Alley in my Washington, D.C. for one of those Blues Alley weekends full of solos and cold beer and catfish. I knew I was going to be there. No mix-ups this time. I would know his sound.

Adolphus “Doc” Cheatham was born in 1905 in Nashville, Tennessee and was one of the last remaining links to jazz’s initial explosion into the world as “world music” out of New Orleans up the Mississippi River to Chicago. Doc was right there learning how to blow as King Oliver first took over the world with his cornet only to give it away to a young ambitious cornet genius named Louis Armstrong who he invited to play in his band in the Windy City. This is where Doc takes you. One story has Doc sitting in for Louis Armstrong one night in Chi-town. That must have been a chore. Well, Doc surely isn’t Louis Armstrong (who is for God’s sake), but he is, well, Doc; if he did sit in, I know he probably did the music well.

So nearly 92 years after he climbed into this world in Nashville, after countless gigs, one night stands, bad cafes, unfriendly crowds, recording sessions, rides on buses and trains to strange packed sweaty lounges all over the world, swing bands, Latin troupes, his own quartet, trumpeter-singer Adolphus “Doc” Cheatham climbed onto the last earthly stage he would ever grace in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., in a little smoky jazz joint in an alley, sit in the last chair he would ever sit in, and enjoyed the last weekend stand of his

earthly visit with a young up-and-coming band of musicians who would soon be mesmerized by what the old man could do with his voice and his heart.

For 25 minutes, he led the Nicholas Payton Band and the crowd at Blues Alley that night through a poignant set of essential classic jazz tunes. Doc both sang and soloed and not for a minute did it all seem as if he was 91 and holding on like a prizefighter that had stayed too long in the ring. Doc was up to the task. A soloist at 91, imagine, and a fine one at that. Sitting in a chair and never wavering as his notes blessed the smoke of Blues Alley and seemed to take us all back and remind us why jazz was so beautiful and “black and blue”.

Doc was superb right through yet another timeless version of “Struttin’ Some Barbeque”, then Crescent City clarinet legend, Jimmy Noone’s “Sweet Lorraine” followed by the beautiful and breathtaking, “Do You Believe In Love At Sight” from the album he recorded with Payton that had the crowd at Blues Alley gasping for air at how pure Doc played trumpet and sang. How could this old man who could not even walk onto the stage without a cane and some assistance play like this? Sing like this. Never miss a beat. Never out of tune.

Doc mixed the short set with references to his long and illustrious career in the center of jazz too. He talked about lost love, some of his jazz comrades from the early years, and the joys of continuing to play into his 90’s. Doc, strong and sweet, from the beginning through the swing era, up to yet another re- birth as a brilliant soloist in his 90’s, right until now where Doc’s tone was clever and strong. Doc chose his notes carefully that night as always and made sure the notes stayed fresh with each breath.

Midway through the set as it he was reciting history, Doc pulled out a slightly dented mute given to him by King Oliver. That is—Joe “King” Oliver. Joe Oliver’s mute from

New Orleans in the club. Doc played it like it was 1922 and King Joe was right at that moment whispering in Doc's ear telling him how to use it. One felt like they were truly learning what jazz was once and for all. Feel the moment. Do what you can sense in your soul right now. Create. Just like Buddy Bolden playing in some parade in New Orleans creating jazz. Diz turning his horn up into the air. Duke mixing the clarinet, trombone and trumpet a different way to create "Mood Indigo". That's what Doc was doing. Making a space again for King Oliver and the Creole Orchestra. Capture the moment, the feeling.

Appropriately, Doc closed with a Eubie Blake tune as the young Nicholas Payton just stared at his mentor and smiled. Doc didn't say the name of the tune, he just said it was a tune by Eubie Blake. Blake, an extraordinary ragtime pianist from Baltimore, and of course, a key link in the jazz pantheon once jazz comes north to New York, was seemingly doing the whispering now. Taking over for King Oliver. Yet another lesson for us from Doc Cheatham: Don't forget about Eubie Blake.

That Monday, after his weekend stand at Blues Alley, June 3, 1997, Doc Cheatham had a stroke in his Washington D.C. hotel room. He passed from this place at a hospital in the city of Washington D.C. His weekend stand at Blues Alley was the last of his storied life.

In my city, Doc Cheatham decided enough was enough. He was gone on to see the great trumpeter Gabriel now just before the beginning of end of his 92nd year on earth. I read about it in the local papers.

That Friday night, Doc Cheatham had taken me back to the 1920's and jazz's beginnings and on that Monday, Doc was gone. He left jazz in good hands to young star trumpeters like Payton and Roy Hargrove and other superstars like Leroy Jones of New Orleans. His music is now forever etched in my mind. His appreciation of the simplicity of jazz, yet his

way of seizing the moment, of creating what you feel out of what's before you. Take in your heart all that you are and can offer and give it to the people in your own way. That's what Doc Cheatham did that night at Blues Alley during his last stand. All the way to the last notes he would ever play on earth. Just one long black song.

Dike Okoro

night

the warm earth parades its pregnancy,
stirring silence in the vast womb of

the universe. feeble groves pulsate
with labor

as the crickets quicken in chorus turning
into directions for the grassless air

until they sleep easy with the drizzle
to prepare a bed of frenetic struggle

for the precious soil thirsty for footprints
that do not leave names.

Debraha Watson

Writing through the Pain

My love of writing began when I was given a 3 x 5 white diary with a gold lock and key for my eleventh birthday. My foster mother gave it to me along with a lopsided chocolate covered cupcake with one used unlit birthday candle. I was fascinated with what I called my *secret book*. I grew up during the 50's when the belief was that children should be seen and not heard, yet by the age of eleven I had lived through, neglect, sexual abuse, the death of a parent, and three foster homes. I had experienced these painful and traumatic events with no positive outlet to release feelings that I was too young to fully understand. I was a child with an emotional cancer growing inside. The pastel multi-colored sheets of paper within my *secret book* allowed me to record my deepest thoughts. I discovered I could write what I dared not speak.

I would rush home daily and retrieve my secret book which I kept behind the radiator in my bedroom wrapped in a dingy white face cloth. I'd find a corner in my bedroom and sit Indian style while I painstakingly wrote in small print to save space. I would write about my remembrances of my mother, whose face was fading from my memory, the boy who teased me at school, and the bad things that happen in the dark. I kept my diary for almost a year. Unfortunately my foster mother found it while cleaning up my room, and read the passage where I wrote, *Uncle George showed me his thing*. Uncle George was her brother. She ripped out the pages, tore them in small pieces and burned them in the trash barrel in the back yard. She then and whipped me naked with

a wet peach tree switch, all the while calling me a “lying fast little heifer.” The next day, almost like magic, I found a notebook on the way home from school on the playground. Its light blue cover was muddy but the pages were intact. I wiped it dry with the sleeve of my coat, ran home found a different hiding place and continued to write. This is when and where I learned to write through pain.

During my chaotic and painful route to maturity I have learned other ways of dealing with emotional distress. I have utilized counseling, meditation and natural- holistic therapy but I always return to writing as a coping mechanism. I am the first to admit that most of my work reflects real life experiences. I develop characters based on people I’ve known and scenes around places that I have been. However, in honing my writing skills, I have learned not to just capture the emotion, but to analyze the events and give voice and personality to the characters. I also have learned to not only capture horrible events but all worthwhile experiences that make up this journey called life.

Writing through pain involves delving into the sensitive parts of our souls. It takes courage to expose ones self to readers. Leaving our selves “buck-naked” to the world can cause embarrassment and additional stress. I am currently working on a memoir and on one occasion when writing a scene I found myself returning to a moment of intense fear and miserable adolescent humiliation. I found that after forty plus years I was dredging up old memories and emotions. I had reverting back to a scared little girl. For several nights I experienced nightmares and insomnia but I kept writing because I knew I had to be willing to go back to scary places and excruciating experiences. Out of those few sleepless nights grew intensive writing. This is termed “energizing fear.” Writing while distressed can be raw and fresh. Strong unadorned words have power.

I remember talking with my sister Lois, as I began my memoir. First, let me say that Lois is a child of the 40's. Having been adopted at birth we had very different childhoods. She grew up in a sleepy southern town; I grew up for the most part, in Detroit's Black Bottom and Eastside living in five different foster homes. Though our mothers' blood flows through our veins, we have very different worldviews. I gave her the first twenty of so pages of the manuscript to read and in those pages I describe in graphic detail the sexual abuse I experienced. A few days later I received a telephone call from Lois. She was totally exasperated. She asked me why I would want to "put my business in the street like that, it just brings shame to the family." I explained to her that by sharing this experience I am acknowledging that it was not my fault, it does happen in "our" community and that one can heal from such a horrible event. I found that by making my experiences public I could defy fear and pain. I also knew from her response that I had touched a nerve, which was exactly the response I wanted from my readers.

As a writer I have to make decisions about how much I want to share. Heart wrenching moments can be described tactfully, without exploiting or bringing embarrassment to family members. I struggle to write with integrity, fairness and respect. Nevertheless, everyone remembers things differently. There is never going to be the same view of a shared past. The bottom line was for me to write about things that were important to me and to be honest with myself and my audience. Writing though pain does not mean that I write for revenge or to be self-serving. I write for redemption, understanding of others and to restore my sense of self.

I am not the only writer who has uses pain to fuel their work. In one of the many books that I have read on the process of writing, Ralph Keyes, author of *The Courage to Write*, makes a distinction between toxic and nutritious anxiety. He

states that “one blocks, the other arouses.” Examples of this can be seen in the works of several authors who I admire. Alice Walker and Maya Angelou have displayed similarities in their lives and their work. Both have written about their personal experiences with intense physical and emotional pain during childhood. Alice Walker in the essay *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* writes about the loss of her sight in one eye at the age of eight. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Maya Angelou recounts the experiences of her childhood rape. Both of these courageous writers take the reader on a roller coaster ride of emotions yet they recount their traumas without malice. They touch our hearts and raise our awareness. At the end of the ride both challenge the reader to find hope and forgiveness.

Another electrifying example of this is Sapphires’ *PUSH*. Though fictional this story follows the tradition of Walker and Angelou in that she takes her reader inside the life of the protagonist, Precious Jones an illiterate sixteen year old who has suffered through two incestuous pregnancies and contracts HIV. The story frays our nerve endings but at the end Sapphire transforms the knots of pain found in the story into strength of community and self-empowerment.

I have often been asked do you have to have lived through traumatic events to be a good writer. My response is of course not; but I truly believe that we all experience universal problems either directly or indirectly such as poverty, illness and death. Looking at life’s challenges in terms of how why and what it means to you is a healthy way to write through recovery. I am not advocating that everyone share his or her most intimate painful experiences through writing. I do suggest that the reader be allowed to see you the writer at those moments when you are most open and vulnerable. I try to write in the framework of spiritual principles. I write to affirm. Though a story may start off painfully, I want to have

a constructive end; to bear witness to both the joys and pain of life. Writing about painful experiences is like cleaning out that junk drawer in the kitchen. If we continue living it will fill up again. We must use our pain and anxiety as an energy source and have courage to keep on writing

Gerri Stone

You, Answer to a Prayer

Somewhere long ago
someone knelt near a
fire and with
sincerity
 seriousness
 and urgency

prayed for a being to
be born into this world
that would embody
creativity, soul freedom,
unblinking courage
fierce tenderness.

Do you realize, dear one,
that you, with your
unexplained longings,
unfulfilled dreams,
may be the answer to that
prayer uttered all those years ago?

Sideline

Played the sideline
quite a few times
believed for a while
that's all I could find
#2 on the team
the backup rookie
always hearing if or maybe
now that they're gone
we could maybe be
love you, but they're right for me

Played the sideline
quite a few times
sat on the bench trying to get in the game
held the ball a couple times
but never really played.

Played the sideline though
got good at that
maybe in the next lifetime
I'll be in the game.

Qiana Towns

The Behest of a Fading Diva

—*for Uncle Vincent*

Don't let nobody fuck with the guppies
or the lavender girls at drama club. Lonnie and Teeka
need dresses for ball, and somebody go with November
to get her test results when they come back.

Clear up the rumors behind me. Let them bitches
know I ain't gone crazy and I ain't on Jenny Crank.
I ain't killed no weenie dog, wrapped the bible in silk
with a hot glue gun or swallowed globs Vaseline.
I was shining my face, protecting my skin
from the wind.

This wheelchair is just cause I'm tired, you know.
I been stomping the catwalk with these feets
for longer than these kids been alive. A bitch needs
rest and relaxation at the end of the day.

Don't let them hurt over me, lingering and snotting
like school girls recollecting old love.
It's like my big sister Carolyn used to say:
Pain is real but it don't mean we need to feel it
everywhere we breathe.

And tell them bitches I ain't dead,
I'm just looking for another place to live.

Extrapolation

Winter, 1998

There is snow white innocence
in the center of a mitten quiet
college town adjacent to the reservation.
The university has welcomed me,
neophyte blessed with an unfamiliar face.

When my jalopy becomes stymied
near a gas station on a dark road, I am
grateful for the police officer
who appears before the gas station patron,
dirty blonde and scruffy, can offer assistance.
His voyeuristic stare, like iced wind,

trails the policeman to my window.
The officer's smile chills at the sight of my hue.
He pantomimes words, pulls his flashlight
from his waist, rolls the light
over my back seat and into my eyes,
connotations of history.

He flashes light over the steering wheel,
an order to try the ignition When the car starts
his face says save your breath; light
over door handle says get out. Before
he can uncover a line for me to walk
the gas station patron arrival brings the officer's
face back to life. The small man pulls
at his skull cap he recalls watching my jalopy
roll into the lane and lose power.

I make circles in the snow with my heel,
brace for another round with Michigan's wind.

Juanita Torrence-Thompson

B.B. King Still Singing the Blues

Snatches of B.B. King have wafted
From white cottages near the Bayou
And Western surf to clapboard Cape Cods.
Quarters were pumped into old juke boxes
From small towns to racy cities
Fathers sped by in Dodge Darts in sultry summers
Heads nodding, fingers popping
While teens hung out of the window
Hoping to sop up a breeze.

B.B. King was pushing 79 when we saw him
He sat in a chair and said, I've got diabetes,
My knees are bad, my back hurts
And I can't remember some things
Then he tore up the stage
Singing and playing the blues like no one else alive.

Big-Time Gamblers

(Dedicated to Gwen)

We play slot machines;
I out of curiosity.
I win, lose, break even.

Gwen wins 1 South African rand.
We are big-time gamblers.

We give Sumi, our driver, rand,
but he plays longer than we expect.
We are tired and ready to leave.

Sumi tears up the road
from Sun City to Bafokeng
singing all the way home.

Traveling on the Road

She traveled alone
On the road and met
The spirit of Martin Luther King.
He walked beside her smiling
His Nobel noble
Smile. Why are you here

My child, he asked. I'm here
Looking for peace all alone.
That is a noble
Task, Little One. Have you met
My wife, Coretta, smiling
Charmed she was dedicated to peace. We Kings

Did not live like kings
And we did not live here
But on a higher road. Please smile
Child. Do not be afraid alone
Now that we have met
I hope you continue your noble

Cause. Maybe your noble
Deeds will earn you a King's
Prize. Since we have met
Perhaps your friends will come here
So you do not travel alone.
Many days you will smile

But some days a smile
Will be hard for a noble
Child like you when you walk alone.
But do not fear, you will walk with Kings

And be honored by all who come here.
Your glorious acts will meet

With naysayers until you meet
Those who help and admire your style and smile.
Your truth as you know it. Here
Are my humble words. Remain peaceful and noble
Be true to yourself like Coretta Scott King
And me and you will never be alone.

But when you are alone, remember we met
On a glorious day for us Kings. Coretta and I smile
Because we saw the noblest child here.

Clarence Young

Expletive Deleted

I had no idea what to do when a man surrendered. David seemed to though; he never lost his focus. I chanced a glance at Edric; he wasn't freaking. We were in a war, my country f***ing with their country, they whoever they are. It's not as if we know. It was hot, it was cold, it rained every day, we were plagued by locusts, there was strange s**t everywhere, and we were not men. The plants didn't look like our plants and the air smelled. We knew not to think beyond the day.

Myers was telling us the best way to f**k the president. That's when they tried to ambush us with amateur guerilla tactics straight off a half-assed newscast. We immediately flanked them and decided they were dead. Dead the way that's more than dead, like most folks won't die. It got quiet once the reports died. A man jumped out with his hands beating his head like he couldn't catch hold of it. Big dark hands like mine. He screamed something because our guns were pointed at him, and two people shot him. Two more like him jumped forward, arms raised toward some high god, crying and swallowing and putting their hands on their heads. They were saying clearly, suddenly and insisently in a language everyone on the planet recognizes that it doesn't matter. This is not real. The fact that they were trying to kill us, trying very hard—because we were killing them too, very hard—was not as important as we thought. Everything was all right. Anything you could get a time out on had to be all right.

Hands on heads.

Bodies, bits and whole, lay scattered on uneven ground,

interred later by wild dogs.

Our medic muttered something religious but I don't think he meant it. The two standing were in panic-blink mode and they breathed so hard I stopped breathing. They trembled. Somebody almost lowered his weapon but Myers screamed one word at him and it raised right up. Those two with dirty hands were the most dangerous people alive because they were alive. Eight bodies around, between and under our feet. I knew I was standing on a finger but couldn't move. You didn't shift.

I needed very much to shoot something, something that would create a memory in me and I'd remember till I was old or crazed, that would scab over my life except this one memory. The toy soldiers had died so quickly I couldn't recall a single one of them. I tried to imagine them getting on a bus but couldn't recall a single one of them. Couldn't know how many my random bullets had gotten. There are no marksmen in war. If they're standing over there and you're standing over here, you point in their direction and pull the trigger. You try to pull it faster than the speed of light but the gun makes the rules. That's physics.

No mathematicians in war. Just metallurgy students.

I squeezed inside. My trigger. Squeezed it at these men confusing me. The metal pointed the right way, away from us and toward them. Anthony squeezed. Harkness squeezed. David squeezed. Those two, by rights, should not have been standing, because everybody squeezed at them. They were gibbering away, telling us their life story with words that didn't mean anything at all.

Corporal Myers said, "Down!" with his gun leveled and he squeezed but forgot to use his inside voice.

The one on the left tottered a step back; arms flailed before he went down like a wrecked kite. His backpack kept him suspended off the ground. It would have been funny on TV.

From eleven toy soldiers only one alive now, which made it weirder watching him standing pissing himself, arms akimbo. M*****r had just been trying to murder us.

We were just supposed to stop?

Corporal Myers turned away and dropped to his knees. Some part of him knew there was no future. He had been here forever. He would fight here forever.

Nobody wanted to keep squeezing inside. Myers jumped to his feet, ran a step toward the surrendering man and whipped dirt in his face but the guy was too scared to flinch. Brains never save a man, fear does. “F**k y’all!” Myers shouted at him. He looked at each of us in turn. We were his. His men. And men know. We know more than people think we do. We know when things are over.

So we squeezed.

Contributors

Alan King is a Cave Canem fellow and Vona Alum. His fiction and poems have appeared in the *Arabesques Review*, *Warpland*, *The Amistad*, and *Fingernails Across the Chalkboard: Poetry and Prose on HIV/AIDS*, among others.

Felecia Studstill graduated from Florida A&M University's School of Business and currently works as a portfolio manager for a pension fund advisor in Detroit. She is also active in various charity and church-related activities. In addition to winning the Award of Honor in Poetry in the Wayne County Council for Arts, History & Humanities Artists Among Us competition, Felecia is a member of MENSA. Her first published collection of poetry, *Speaking No Evil* (AQUARIUS PRESS) will be released in May 2008.

Eddie Bell has nationally recognized accomplishments in education, photography, minority affairs, writing and poetry. During his twenty-eight year career in higher education he ascended to the highest level of administration as Assistant Vice-Chancellor at the State University of New York (SUNY), the country's largest public institution of higher education. Eddie has written two well-received volumes of poetry and a history of one of Kingston, NY's oldest black churches. He has written numerous feature stories and opinion articles for the *Times Herald-Record*, Middletown, NY. He teaches writing and poetry seminars.

Brian Gilmore is a poet, writer and lawyer. He is the author of two collections of poetry, *elvis presley is alive and well and living in harlem* (Third World Press of Chicago, 1993) and *Jungle Nights and Soda Fountain Rags: Poem for Duke*

Ellington (Karibu Books, 2000). He is a columnist with the Progressive Media Project, a contributing writer with *Ebony Jet* (online), and a regular contributor to *The Progressive Magazine*. His poetry, essays, reviews, and other writings have appeared in *The Washington Review*, *The Apple Valley Review*, *The Red Brick Review*, *The Washington Post*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Detroit Free Press*, *The Charlotte Observer*, *The Buffalo News*, *The Rochester Democrat*, *The Nation*, *The Utne Reader*, *Jazz Times*, *Jazz and Blues*, and many other national and local publications. Born and raised in Washington, D.C., and a graduate of Archbishop Carroll High School, he currently resides in Takoma Park, Maryland, with his family.

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Gerri Stone has been published in *Seeds*, *Patterson Literary Review*, and *Wayne Literary Review*, and the anthology *At the Edge of Mirror Lake*. Last year she won first place in the *Dancing Poetry Contest* for her poem on Charlie Parker, *This Bird*. In 2004, she was a Writer in Residence in the Interdisciplinary Studies Program at Wayne State.

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Juanita Torrence-Thompson is a poet, speaker, columnist, instructor and editor of the 25 year-old *MOBIUS, THE POETRY MAGAZINE*. Her award-winning work has been published in hundreds of U.S. newspapers and literary journals including *Paterson Literary Review*, *Phantasmagoria*, *New Laurel Review*, *Black Enterprise* and literary magazines in Canada, Europe and Australia. Juanita has read her poetry and prose on TV and the radio in Singapore, Switzerland and the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

Clarence Young has one philosophy about writing: if you're not presenting a gift, don't bother. He's published several short stories and two novels are available for consideration. He is a lifelong resident of Detroit and writes blogs and rants for the community.

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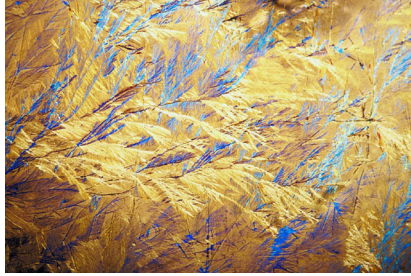
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