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## Defending the Rorschach Blot

Mary Reagan Lightsey

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DEFENDING THE RORSCHACH BLOT

by  
Mary Reagan Lightsey

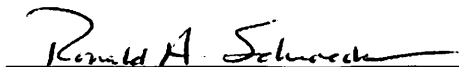
A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonald Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2009

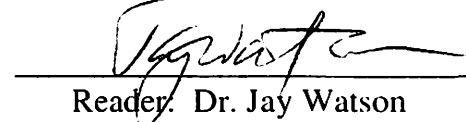
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## Acknowledgments

A resounding thank you to Mama, Daddy and Brooklee. You all have made this possible though your endless support and, let's face it, sheer inspiration. Mom, thank you for instilling in me the "over-do it" attitude and always reminding me to do everything to the best of my ability. You have molded me more than anyone else. While I sometimes *do* wonder if we need a little "chlorine in the gene pool," I love you all more than you know.

Dr. Fisher-Wirth, thank you for your unbelievable patience and guidance throughout this process. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate you "hanging in there" even when you wondered if I was still doing a thesis at all! You have been so supportive while keeping me on my toes. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

To Dr. Sullivan-Gonzalas, Dr. Samonds and Dr. Young, thank you for all you do for us in the Sally McDonald Barksdale Honors College. You have always been there for every one of us throughout the duration of our college experience. Ole Miss would not have been what it was for me without the SMBC.

To friends and family—especially Zac and Brooklee who have endured listening to these poems ten million times apiece—I sincerely appreciate you. Thank you for reminding me who I am at times when I need reminding , and thank you for always, always believing in me. I love you.

## **Abstract**

Like paint thrown on a page, folded and smooshed, DEFENDING THE RORSCHACH BLOT is a different image of my life every time I look at it. It was my goal to present a portrait of myself that is a raw portrayal. While we fight the idea of being malleable, there is something to be said for realizing that no one is made of steel; we are all molded by people, circumstances and experiences.

DEFENDING THE RORSCHACH BLOT embodies themes of ambition, perfectionism and moderation while exploring many encounters with failure, imperfection and excess.

It is conglomeration of color blotted out into pieces of life.

## Defending the Rorschach Blot

Reagan. Say. Say Something about yourself. Save, Saved. Saving and Spending. Spending time. Sleep! So much Sleep and i can't Sleep it all off. Too much chlorine in the baptistry. Tough. Tough love. Turnip greens cooked hours with chunks of ham or maybe greasy with bacon fat. Temper. Temperate—or not. 21. Tip-toeing—Tip of the iceberg...Underwater. Undecided when i thought i was. Undone. Versatility is great charm. use that charm. Vicious (best friend found out you're competition) Vicious cycle. Virulent, like the rattle snake we ran over in the bronco. Vocal nodules. Vigilant. Watch me, mama. Willing—Will—iron Will. Waiting, Waiting, Waiting. X-rays revealing...Yoyos stringing plans. Yosemite—add that to the list of places to go. Yesterday is over. Yonder—down South. Yell. Yellow and white striped wallpaper. Zero, size 0 and getting thinner. Zeroing in. Zone, in the...Zoned out because that's how her body deals with these things. Zipped, my lips are not quite Zipped enough. Zealous. Always. Accommodating, Accent: on the table, on the wrong syllable... "you don't sound like you're from the south." Appetizers for six course meals i don't eat. Appearance, be proud of your Appearance. Appeal, Appeal the judgment...over and over and over. Brace yourself. Backhandsprings. Balancing act: that is my life. Bulimia, Big Bowls of food that i can pick at until i die. Bow, Bow down to the elliptical machine. Big deal. Closer, Closure. C'est la vie. Daddy. Definitive. Decisive—quickly, quickly Decisive. Extra step Every time. Efficiency—all about Efficiency. Evolving. Fervor. Five and ½ years is a damn long time. "Gallivanting," she called it. Give, Give, Google: God's honest truth. Hassle, Hustle. Hill of beans. Ignore it and pretend it never happened. Independence. Invitation: to school, to the party, to demented perceptions of me. It. It. It. Ice cream after sex. I'm not ready to tell you about "It" yet. Justice? Just forget it happened. Kids. Kamper park. Kisses in an open field that's gone now. Lightsey. Like, you say, "Light" and add "see." Memorize. Mary. Mama named Me Mary after her Mama's Mama. Miss you, Miss you, Miss you... Nectarines. "Nearness of you." Never let it go, can you? Open door. One forty-three dove hollow, Petal, ms. Pretend—Playing Pretend. still Pretending. Quiet down, now. Quail. dead Quail. Quail on the dinner table. "Quitter never wins." Quill. Quiet. Reality; Really, Really Real, you got to seem more Real. Ripped in two. Really, this is me, all the time. Regulating. Rorschach blot. Rea. Rea Rea. Reagan.

“Defending the Rorschach Blot” has grown to be the mother poem of this collection, and as such, it has become the title poem of my thesis. It is truly a splash of color that splatters me all over the page. Beginning with my name and working through twenty-six letters in order to end there, this Rorschach blot of who I am offers snippets of my life—“the big picture,” if you will. An overview, it could nearly serve as a title page.

This piece is perhaps my favorite of the collection; no other offers such a conglomeration of thought...and no other has required such on-going editing and revision. The mass of this work is so dense that even I, in all of my mad editing, find words that surprise me with their presence. Yet, every single word, sound and statement was carefully and thoughtfully selected—more so than any other poem I have written to date. Of that, I am proud.



## We Used to Joke, “It’s Not Done till It’s Overdone”

### I

...Like that time we made the model  
of the solar system, planets strung  
all in order on black yarn, glowing neon colors  
in the big black box lit up by a black light.

We carried it into the fourth grade hall,  
the two of us, Mama walking evenly,  
planets swinging, her heels clicking across the tile.  
Us paying no mind to the other projects we passed

hanging on the walls—Mercury, Venus, Earth, construction  
paper Mars—glued onto two-and-a-half-foot posters,  
perched on cinderblocks lined up down the hallway, and my  
four-by-four foot box standing triumphantly mid-room.

### II

After months of searching we found the silhouette  
we wanted and completely remade that white dress;  
glued on an extra three hundred dollars of imported  
rhinestones to make me shine.

I passed that evening gown and the talent costume  
and the fitness wear one hundred times a day  
from my kitchen to my room and back  
again, hanging on a rolling rack in the middle

of our dining room, by the china cabinet  
looking glamorous as a year’s worth  
of plotting,  
shrine to a title I never received.

### III

When I tried on my twelve-year-old sister’s pants,  
zipping them with ease and buttoning the size zero waist,  
I realized the power of hunger.

I’ll have a French Vanilla coffee smoothie with Splenda  
instead of turbinado, and take out the protein mix, please.

I’ll have a house salad, no cheese, no bacon, no croutons,  
and fat-free vinaigrette on the side, thank you.

And they'd ask me, those girls whose legs I spent  
childhood longing for—skinny, jean perfect—  
to teach them how to stay so thin, to divulge  
my secrets so they could look like me.

My friends always called me the “over-achiever” when they wanted to get under my skin... but they didn’t know it made my mother proud, which made me happy. “It’s not done till it’s overdone” is still something we say around my house, no matter the project or event. It is the theme of my family. Really.

This piece was one of my favorites to write; it was difficult and involved a lot of memory jogging and brainstorming, but when it came together, it spoke almost exactly as I wanted it to from the beginning. Just as “Defending the Rorschach Blot” was a break through for me in terms of the language usage, “It’s Not Done Till its Overdone” was a breakthrough in use of imagery. The three situations set up throughout the poem work to create three completely different pictures in order to stress that *everything* about the author’s actions tend to be over the top.

In its original form, the closing stanza likened my/our (my mother and I) relentless need to be the standout exhibition to living inside the black box, constantly seeing the neon colors as upcoming projects and due dates. Though I liked the metaphorical image it left behind, the stanza was eventually replaced with longer, more detailed pieces to the poem in an effort to give a more vivid picture to the reader, but also to break my need to always sum my work up for the audience as if they can’t do it themselves. This habit is one that I have battled more than any other over the course of this venture. What I am slowly learning is that feeling as though my work needs to be spelled out is a disservice to it; instead, I am now concentrating my efforts toward including details that allow the poems to portray what they mean to portray in the manner I wish them to do it—without needing assistance from their all-knowing author.

## After Eliminating All the Sound in My Bedroom

I wonder if dying  
feels like a blank stare.  
I watch the corner,  
not thinking about

the corner's collection  
of dust and hair, still  
unnoticed, balled up,  
and transparent grey

where it meets the scarred wooden  
floor covered with little bits  
of dirt that you can't see,  
only feel when you're barefoot;

I just watch this corner,  
not thinking about anything,  
just drifting, as though I am  
not coming back.

I have little explanation for the origin of this poem except to say that I wanted to write about the feeling of “coming to” and not quite knowing how long you have been spaced out. After letting the stress of an outstanding “to-do” list and a rather hectic work schedule get to me, I sat down to organize myself. Before I knew it, I realized I went from thinking about everything to nothing all at once. I truly wonder if dying feels like a blank stare. Does the world just simply fade away and leave you to utter numbness? It’s a thought—maybe even a hypothesis.

The experience of coming back is also one deserving of commentary—especially if dying *is* like a blank stare and the dying don’t have the luxury of slowly regaining their sense of space and realizing what actually happened in the first place. Drifting from thought to reality seems to occur after realizing your surroundings and then coming to grips with the utter stream of consciousness that has led you there. That said, it has come to me that I do not think well simply sitting in solitude; my mind races at such a speed that my thoughts blur like the fan spinning on my ceiling—five individual thoughts quickly become one large mass of undistinguished nothingness. The important thoughts become unimportant, and as the fan slows and the blurred wheel becomes twenty prongs, then fifteen and ten, and finally five—five totally different considerations, like the dust bunny hanging in the corner of the room. It just leaves me to wonder: what happens if the fan never gets turned off? What happens if the mass never slows, never evolves and never brings the blank stare back to reality?

## If Only Spilt Milk

I poured my clear, glass bowl  
to the brim with Cornflakes,  
Raisin Brand granola and then  
topped it off with Fruit Loops  
and Lucky Charms—just to shake  
it up and watch the pinks, greens,  
yellows and oranges swim over  
loosely packed shapes dotted  
with deflated, pastel marshmallows,  
looking like seat cushion flotation  
devices in this plane wreck  
of a cereal bowl.

It sat on my counter a colorful,  
milkless mess, with chunks of raisins  
sticking to one another as if they believe  
that there is safety in numbers.

I have been told time and time again that it is dangerous to write about writing; it is more dangerous to write about the inability to write. However, that is exactly what this poem stems from: writer's block. Writing has always come somewhat easily to me...until I *have* to do it. One morning I found myself completely incapable of putting anything worthwhile on paper. So I didn't. The colors of a strange concoction of cereal caught my eye and thus, my attention and somehow grew to be the subject of my poem.

In its original form, this poem actually tackled a variety of issues and became a political statement concerning America's gross need for excess. However, like the subject it took on, the poem itself was simply too much. After comparing marshmallows to obesity and Fruit Loops to the foreign perception of Americans, I finally realized I crossed the line. I made a few cuts (about three fourths of the poem) and learned "less is more."

## Winterized

Sometimes I am so fucking cold  
that my skin burns your body  
when we're naked  
and you're holding me—  
back to stomach—  
on sweat-drenched sheets,  
like a wasp nestled in the crook  
of your arm, tired from flight,  
my whole body stinging yours.



I struggled with the use of the expletive in the first line of this poem. It received a series of drafts in which I took it out just to put it back in and then, take it out again. The “shock value” of the word achieved what I was initially aiming for; I was looking for something that would be unlike me—that would surprise me. Then, the more I wrestled with it, the more I thought, this is not the type of surprise I’m going for. So, in some lights it seemed unnecessary, but then in the end, I finally decided that it is, indeed, required to convey the utter frustration of the subject.

I played with the idea of hot and cold in a couple of the poems in this collection, here in “Winterized” and also in “Ice on Fire.” It occurred to me that we use temperature to gauge so many things; firstly, the obvious: literally warm and cold. Then, how good something is, or how smooth something may be. But also, we frequently use it to gauge the attitude or actions of people. Here in “Winterized,” I wanted to juxtapose the literal heat and the metaphorical frigidity of the situation. I thought of dry ice and how it is so severely cold that it “burns” immediately on contact. I wanted to create a character so chilly that she also “burns” on contact. However, I think the tone is such that the reader almost believes that the speaker can’t help it; she compares herself to a “wasp” as if to say that it is by her very nature that she acts as she does. Thus, through this resentment of what seems to be innately part of who she is, she finds the utmost frustration.

The 'It' in the *Rorschach Blot*

I try not to remember much  
after you sat down beside me,  
but I think you might have kissed me.

You might have climbed on top of me  
on the outside edge of my bed  
and maybe I can hear your voice

telling me to relax  
saying,  
“you like it”

while I might have pushed at you with wilted  
arms, elbows convulsing in front of my body.

One thing I have learned through this process is that I don't have to tell *all* to tell all. What I wanted from the very beginning was a collection that was very raw and almost explicit, and with Sharon Olds's style in mind, I set out to shock myself...what I ended up doing was shocking other people and writing poems that didn't read as I wanted them to read.

Dr. Fisher-Wirth was instrumental in helping me learn to pull back in order to achieve the feeling that the subject is trying to forget or push the event out of her mind. That said, in original drafts, the poem was much longer and overt. What I really needed was a vagueness that the clear, precise language I was using would not allow me to achieve. By inserting a few words like "might," and "maybe" I was able to convey the mind-numbing effect this event has on the victim while watching her sort through the incident.

## TRUE GRIT

“Watch this part.”  
he says, and takes a long slurp  
on a Budweiser whose froth  
is still stuck to the frozen mug.  
“This part’s important.”

John Wayne dismounts  
and tromps, arms  
swinging slightly, hands in fists,  
toward a group of men  
also bearing cowboy hats.

“Daddy, didn’t you watch  
this one yesterday?”  
Or was it another, I wonder.

“Ohhh. No. But they replay  
the same damn westerns  
on this channel.”

“Em hmm,” I say.  
He uncrosses his ankles  
at the end of his bed and rubs  
the dog, curled up  
and happy on his feet.  
“I’d watch Turner Classic Movies  
but the commercials get-ta-where  
they’re longer than the show.”

And they are.  
We flip to TCM and count  
the minutes as they morph.  
He’s right. We flip it back.

“By God,” Daddy chews  
his words, speaking  
along with Rooster Cogburn,  
“She reminds me of me.”

I read somewhere once that all men have a cave that they retreat to. I thought the idea funny at first, but seems true. And, it seems the older they get, the more they stay there. My father, for instance, is an incredibly ritualistic human being. As a child I would watch him walk in from work and make his through the kitchen where he would stop to grab a Budweiser from the refrigerator and pour it into a frosted mug. Then, he would continue on to his bedroom where he would undress in his closet and hang up every item just so: sports coat on the top rack, dress pants clipped into the pants hanger on the bottom rack, tie on tie rack and dress shirt tossed in a pile to go to the cleaners. After that, he would find the pair of pajama pants and t-shirt he laid over his gun cabinet that morning and put them on. He would lie down on his side of the bed, cross his ankles and turn on the Western channel, Bud in the cold mug on his night stand. Fifteen years later, he still does this. I give you: The Cave.

While I don't have a cave (I also read that it is not in the nature of women to retreat to a hole), and I hate Budweiser, I am also a very ritualistic person. My freshman year of college my "pot-luck" roommate wanted to kill me every night for six months because, as she said, I would do the "same damn thing every night!" It's true, but I didn't have to realize this to know that I am my father's child. Same temper, same rationale, same iron will. In fact, I chose the John Wayne film *True Grit* because of the temperament and determination of the female lead (Mattie Ross played by fourteen year old Kim Darby), of whom Rooster Cogburn (Wayne) says, "she reminds me of me." And while I originally wanted to highlight our similarities, I decided it was more important to generate a piece in which I could capture my father in true form...so I entered the cave.

## My Mother Travels with Pruning Shears

I keep a stash of cash  
in my underwear drawer  
to bail my mother, the caterer,  
out of jail the next time she pulls  
the car over next to someone  
else's yard and swipes  
their magnolia blooms  
or their bamboo stalks

or their banana leaves.  
My sister and I have learned,  
after years of shrinking down  
into the passenger seat,  
how to flatten ourselves  
almost completely  
so that my mother looks  
as if she has no accomplice,

but then we help her stuff  
the stuff we snatch  
into huge vases with glads  
and hydrangeas and strips  
of green that burn your fingers  
when you run your hands  
the wrong way against them.  
And she finishes her project—

usually standing on someone  
else's table or at a banquet—  
a magnificent monument—  
and my sister and I forget  
that we balled ourselves  
in the floorboard of the car  
pretending that we were invisible  
while she clipped away  
at a stranger's tree...

I feel as if this piece needs no explanation; my mother really does keep pruning shears in the console of her Explorer. I believe years of snatching and stashing has callused us all to the fact that this *is* actually considered petty theft, so *shhhhhh*...lets just say this is a metaphor for the sacrifices we Lightseys make to create art.

This poem actually originated from a short-short I composed in a fiction workshop. While the poem is an accurate description of my experience with my mother's greenery clepto issues, the fiction is comical (I hope) in its overly dramatized portrayal of a much feared run-in with the law. For the sake of proving these classes (Fiction and Poetry Workshops) were, in fact, research, I am including the short character sketch here.

### **“My Mother Travels with Clipping Shears”**

“Ma’am, are you aware that this is trespassing and defamation of private property?”

My mother stopped short, clipping shears in one hand and a bundle of budding twigs in the other. She turned and grinned sheepishly at a man in a blue uniform and dropped her handful of magnolias.

“Officer, I just saw this tree and needed to borrow one or two leaves...surely its not a serious offense. I’m sure if we talk to the owners they won’t mind sharing a few little pieces of greenery.”

“Ma’am, are you acquainted with the owners?”

“Well, no sir, but...”

“Yeah, we got a 10-84 at 62 Chestnut Drive.” He pressed his mouth to his shoulder and mumbled.

I *knew* we should have stuck to the place we normally yank greenery. Should have gone to that spot where trees hide the car—right there in the middle of town on the one acre plot with the road that crescents the corner. She can pull her white Expedition right up in the loop and snip until she has to fold down all of the seats to fit in the magnolia branches.

Yet, here we were, my mother standing in the yard of—well, who knows who—with a police officer who not only radioed in her tag but who found it necessary to switch on the lights. Now swirling violently, they were casting a blue sheen on the dew-covered grass surrounding the tree of good and trespassing. People slowed—some waved, undoubtedly realizing who she was as they passed the yard. And now, my mother was faced with task of explaining why she was yanking magnolia leaves from private property, her SUV pulled off to the side of the road, the back hatch stuffed with stolen buds.

I slumped low in the passenger side seat and wondered if I should crawl out and explain that sometimes my mother's creativity crowds out her sensibility. She never meant to break the law in order to throw a good party or decorate our front door. But, given the circumstances, I suppose it would be no use telling this twenty-something year old officer the inner-workings of my mother's mind. She had undoubtedly rationalized that the home owners would not even notice the missing branches. The explanation probably wouldn't help our cause any more than my telling him how she was going to decorate the front door with a wreath composed of garland and magnolia leaves.

So I sat where I was, watching my mother gesture wildly; I could only assume she was taking this opportunity to explain at length her intentions with the large, emerald



green leaves that lay scattered where she dropped them. At this point, she was probably inquiring as to what his favorite meal might be and when she could send over a covered dish. She was smiling widely, trying to assure him that no harm had been done.

I peeked up over the window and wondered how many of my friends had already heard the news. By this time, the story was probably out that my mother had been “cuffed and stuffed” for grand theft magnolia. All I could think was how I wished this was the one and only time she snatched the car over to the side of the road and jumped out to clip someone else’s leaves. At least we could honestly have said, “We really never do this.” But as it was, I had known this incident would be inevitable...after all, my mother *travels* with clipping shears.

## Old Love

I had a dream  
I was in love  
with you again.

And then I woke up  
and I was in love  
with you. Again.

There you were,  
the room framed  
with pictures

of her—pictures  
of her where maybe  
I should have been—

by a tall French door where  
I could see my house—  
my bedroom window

and burnt orange curtains  
like the satin strips of fabric  
you once hung for me.

And I stood wondering  
at them, like I knew  
who and where and what

had brought me here,  
to an office building—  
big cherry desk

and dark spacious shelves  
spanning cream walls  
I have never seen

but seem to know  
the contents of well  
enough to believe

you are still mine.  
But the truth is,  
I wandered around

until suddenly,  
here I am and there  
you are, wrapped

around me, in bed, asleep,  
and I feel strange,  
entangled in the wrong

fit—the arms were longer  
than your arms—body  
lengthened, it was not you.

So I awoke again and had  
to remind myself that I am  
no longer in love with you.

Sometimes dreams are so vivid that the dreamer awakes utterly disoriented. In “Old Love” I wanted to capture the whimsical nature of a dream, piecing together fiction and reality in a way that it made sense but still maintained its aspects of confusion. For example, the speaker says she seemed to know the contents of the shelves spanning the walls but not the shelves themselves. Likewise, she recognizes the curtains in her bedroom across the street, but not really the inside of the building she is looking from. All of these things come together in a way that she still cannot understand she is merely dreaming until she is *fully* awake and comes to recognize the person sleeping next to her as someone other than the man in her dream. It takes a few moments for the grogginess of sleep to wear off, and as it does, she begins her journey back to reality one aspect at a time: “the arms were longer / than your arms—body lengthened, / it was not you.”

Like “After Eliminating All of the Sound in My Bedroom,” “Old Love” deals with the purgatory between two states of consciousness. As the speaker awakes, she believes that she still loves this person that she previously separated herself from. It is the moment of drifting that becomes the real point of interest. The few seconds of thinking about the pictures on the wall of the office pointing to the end of their time together do not even phase her until she has come back from sleep entirely and the facts begin to make sense. In a way, it *is* much like a blank stare in that dreams are uncontrollably stream-of-[un]consciousness. The speaker must “remind [her]self” of the task at hand: no longer being in love the subject of her dream in order to regain her sense of place and ultimately, her reality.

## Senior Math

½ cup Fiber One cereal	60 calories
¼ cup of skim milk	22 calories
1 large green apple	80 calories
diet Barq's Root beer	0 calories
40 oz French Vanilla coffee smoothie with splenda instead of turnbinado	200 calories
1 slice of lean ham	30 calories
1 slice of lean turkey	30 calories
1 slice of fat free cheese	40 calories
1 hour 20 minute on elliptical	-800 calories
45 minutes light weight lifting	-100 calories
10 minutes running at speed 6.0	-100 calories
Day's Total:	-1000
	<u>+ 462</u>
	- 538

Like many of the other works in this collection, “Senior Math” finds its poetic origin in the mother poem “Defending the Rorschach Blot.” I have taken on a lot of long-standing issues in this portfolio, and it would be incomplete if I did not include my personal battle with an eating disorder. My obsession with working out is referenced in “Defending the Rorschach Blot,” but it is not as explicitly defined as it is in “Senior Math,” a literal spreadsheet of my Monday through Friday life as a high school senior. Looking at the final total it’s hard for even me to imagine a constant life at this pattern, but survival was made possible by a vicious pattern of binge eating on the weekends, during which I would consume thousands of calories just to burn them off via the elliptical machine and treadmill. Such is bulimia. It has taken me nearly six years to overcome the pattern of “binge and purge,” but I know that one never fully recovers; what I work toward is moderation.

As I looked closely at the evolution of my life, it became impossible for me to leave this aspect of who I am out of the equation. Though I don’t want to leave my readers with the impression that nothing is ever good enough, I do not think that I can better convey my desire to be the best version of myself in every manner. “Senior Math” is a direct transcription of my perfectionism—especially at that point in my life. I confess that I still live my life from one project to another, but I think I take more breaks and enjoy a few more French fries along the way. However, it’s taken me a full four years of college life, receiving my first “B” EVER the second semester of my junior year (in creative writing!), a bad case of mono and the stress of making my own decisions for me to finally chill out. Though I vowed to those who spoke to me from experience that

college would never change my pattern of being utterly overkill, I suppose I am, indeed, gaining some moderation in my life. And I really do eat more French fries...

## Ice on Fire

Loving you was like  
thrusting my hand into ice  
to see if it was on fire  
or not. But I couldn't tell;  
a thousand needles stabbed  
and pricked at me until I felt  
nothing but blunt blows  
numbing nerves from nails  
to knuckles. And it came  
at once that I felt nothing at all.



Much like “Winterized,” “Ice on Fire” deals with the concepts of hot and cold and the instant in which freezing seems to be scalding and boiling feels like ice. However, what “Ice on Fire” ultimately suggests is that anything in the extreme is eventually numbing. Whether the ice “was on fire / or not” is not the issue; what becomes the question is whether the speaker feels anything at all for this person he or she used to be so passionate about. The speaker admits to being “pricked” to the point of feeling “nothing but blunt blows” eventually leaving him or her feeling “nothing at all.”

While the notion of temperature being numbing in a literal sense is important in this piece, (as it was the definitive interest and inspiration), my favorite aspect is the roll of the language. The line “numbing nerves from nails / to knuckles” uses driving alliteration that serves to speed the poem and really *display* the suddenness of the realization that there is simply nothing to feel. What was originally “stab[bing] and prick[ing]” becomes “blunt blows” over time—ultimately wearing away at the speaker.

In Some Parking Lot in Downtown Memphis, TN

I shrink down on cold concrete against a brick wall beside wadded paper bag and a broken Heineken bottle, my voice breaking into sobs. "Mama I can't do that."

"Then there is no more money; you have to choose: him or us."

And I think of him, somewhere on the other side of the brick wall, waiting as I sit, phone sopping wet against my ear. I wonder if he knows how much my parents despise him for not wanting to be a doctor or a lawyer; for not understanding I am perpetually sixteen at home with an eleven p.m. curfew; for being tall and thin, not man enough and "just weird," my mother says, no explanation at all.

"I love him." I say, as I wipe a streak of makeup across my face. "I love him. You can't do this to me." But I know they can, and they are, after I have been fighting for him for nearly eight months.

So when I can't talk for crying I hang up and stand, pressing my back to brick and snagging my sweater on mortar, and try to walk inside. I forget about the Heineken bottle and kick it. It clanks across the blacktop and a man in a bright green jacket turns to look at me and my splotchy red face, black lines dripping down my cheeks.

He sees me through a window and walks outside, utter confusion on his face when I tell him it's over.

While this was one of the first poems begun for this collection, it was the very last one finished. I suppose I severely underestimated the difficulty of talking about being at odds with my parents. I realized toward the end of my work that throughout this thesis, I discuss bulimia, sex, touch on alcoholism, and rape, yet the most difficult piece by far was “In Some Parking Lot in Downtown Memphis, TN.”

This was also the most shape-shifting of the works gathered here. It began as short, snippy quatrains of dialogue, was bulked up to a conglomerate of stanzas vastly overwritten and bursting at the seams with detail. It shrunk back down to clips of dialogue in tercets, and finally, found its home as a somewhat abbreviated version of a prose poem.

I struggled with the development of “him” in the poem, but after many versions of trying my hand at conveying the problem, I decided I was doing a poor job and that it really wasn’t necessary to depict what I was after in the first place: the conflict with my parents. What I really wanted to create was a picture of this specific experience, but I realized I had to include enough back information to generate tension and emotion. Herein lies the greatest struggle. However, I am at last at peace with what I could say and the way in which this specific poetic style allowed me to do so.

## On an Express Bus Trek from Hattiesburg, MS to Chicago, IL

Someone told me that ice storms bent and broke the limbs of trees standing indignantly along North I-57. And I must suppose he is right, because I don't know why else only the tops would splinter and hang, like broken arms on lanky giants.

I sit here with a computer in my lap, the last pages of my thesis glowing against the broken window shade. My sister snores softly, face flush to her pillow, and I try to find something to say about her. She twitches in her sleep; she just won't fit on my page.

We change drivers in Memphis, TN and I ask the new guy—probably early twenties, with two teeth capped in gold—if he would possibly drive faster than the last man. He chuckles just a little and says, “Yeh...I drive fast.”

Trying to figure how the Choir's trip coordinator thought we could drive over seven hundred miles in twelve hours, I give up on the thesis, whose blinking screen disappeared with my laptop's battery life. I pop a Dramamine and go to sleep.

I awake to a sign that says, CHICAGO 371 miles. Relief of the halfway mark is met with the voices of high school sophomores; they are oblivious to the fact that no one else wants to listen to them harmonize Madonna's “Four Minutes to Save the World.”

Four seats up on the left my mother is passing out homemade pecan toffee and oatmeal cookies. She thrust the Cool Whip container to one person, then another, until everyone near her has accepted either toffee or cookie. Good. Less to be left in our hotel room.

I try not to think too much about my ex-boyfriend's father who is seated less than fifteen yards behind me. We said hello and almost talked like I was still dating his son for a sixth year. I want to ask if he hates his new fiancé as much as I do. But I don't.

A kid four seats up is playing the bottom of a gleaming orange Pringles can with the capped end of his mother's pen. I feel a little like the fabric of these carpeted seats: a whirlwind of blue and speckled grey, stained, scratchy and utterly uncomfortable.

It is safe to say that you don't really know someone until you have ridden over seven hundred miles with them on a bus. In fact, I might have discovered the very best marriage counseling: a road trip. If a couple can make it through that, they can make it through anything. But then again, there is quite a difference between a road trip in the comfort of one's own vehicle and a road trip with seventy near-strangers, over half of them high school students. Call it a tribute to my own four years of showchoir competitions, but *this* is the experience I chose for the final spring break of my life. I chose to make the voyage from Petal, Mississippi to Chicago to watch my younger sister compete in her last Showchoir competition. My mother four seats up and Brooklee already snoring beside me, we took off at 5:30 a.m.

Four hours into the "trek" to Chicago from south (deep south!) Mississippi, it was already evident that I was going to accomplish little in the way of my thesis...so I decided to make the most of it. These people—the ones who were snoring louder than even my father can, the ones that were harmonizing hip-hop songs, the ones that were *blocking the aisle to the bathroom* (a cardinal sin on a fourteen hour trip!)—would become the subject of my work.

I had only written two prose poems up to this point ("In Some Parking Lot in Downtown Memphis, TN" and "Defending the Rorschach Blot"), so this piece was an exercise in patience (much like the bus ride itself). However, the poem would not have any other form. Unlike "Some Parking Lot," I did not circle through numerous forms, but knew based on the content that prose was simply the best choice.

## Sorting

When I was three I could locate  
the hole for the octagon, the circle,  
square, pentagon, the oval and hex-  
agon. And then I would reload

the hand-sawed blocks. The slightly  
irregular shapes would slip through  
holes in a plywood table and clop  
into a bucket on the floor.

Nineteen years and counting, I keep  
pushing blocks into cutouts, trying to find  
a home for figures I've never seen—shapes  
that are bigger, more awkward, whose edges

are no longer sanded for me. A red, dyed  
nonagon leaving pink splinters in my index  
finger will not fit the octagon or heptagon  
slot; I am stuck.

I wouldn't mind—in fact  
I'd relish—circle-sawing a big hole  
in the middle of the table and wiping  
the whole damn thing clean.

I have this mental image of a table in the pre-school department of Jones County Jr. College where I, along with other three and four year olds, would sort shapes and fit them into their rightful slots. It occurred to me one day that my life has become a lot like that table: one project after another needing to be poked into some hole—some time slot. Or if it does not always feel like a balancing act of *just* time-management, then certainly it becomes one of balancing priorities, people and ambitions.

I still hurry time along, I think. I always want to move forward: graduation, job, life. I have said already that it has taken me four years to learn to be a “college kid” and I had to teach myself to procrastinate...and for a solid semester, I learned to procrastinate by ignoring my thesis.

For the better part of my schooling, my work has been praised, and creative writing is no exception. And while I have never shied from the criticism of teachers and peers (rather, I welcome it because I always want to get better), I found myself incredibly discouraged when Dr. Fisher-Wirth told me at the beginning of August that the work I had prepared thus far was not ready for a thesis. Woosh. It went straight through me. While nothing hurtful or directly critical was said at all, I began to question my ambition entirely. I questioned so much that I could not *make* myself turn in work for the thesis. I wrote and journaled and wrote and journaled, but I became too afraid that my work was just not up to par. Perfectionist that I am, I refused to turn in poetry just to realize it’s not that good. Call it ambition, call it perfectionism, call it self-pity (yes, it got pretty bad). I suppose up to that point, I had really never fallen short of anyone’s (much less my own) expectations of myself. It took a pretty pointed email first from Dr. Fisher-Wirth and then Dr. Samonds to remind me that I *was* going to get a grade for my work (or in this

case, the lack there-of) in Eng 499 (thesis advising and research) to get me cracking once more. So, I got it together and “circle saw[ed] a big hole / in the middle of the table wiping / the whole damn thing clean.” Now, I am mending the hole.



## **Biography**

A native of Petal, MS, Reagan Lightsey graduated as Salutatorian from Petal High School in 2005. She is a member of the Sally McDonald Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi where she studies English and Political Science. She is currently involved in Phi Kappa Phi Honors Society, Gamma Beta Phi Honors Society, Mortar Board and Delta Gamma Fraternity. While at the University of Mississippi, she has received the Alton Bryant Writing Award and the Evans-Harrington Award for Creative Writing.

Reagan will graduate from the University of Mississippi in May of 2009 with her Bachelors of Liberal Arts. She has been selected for Mississippi Teacher Corps and will pursue her Masters in Education and Curriculum while teaching English in Holly Springs, Mississippi.