

Upper Grade Poems

by Sara Holbrook and Michael Salinger

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Could it Happen Here?

by Sara Holbrook (Scholastic, Scope Magazine 2000)

Written in blood,

sealed with tears.

The hateful rush

of hit-list fears.

A snake dragon of smoke

from a distant school

seeps under our doors.

A murderous ghoul hissing arsenic breath

through a scalding sneer

that blisters hearts,

a cold-blooded viper

that boa-constricts our vital parts

like whimsy,

freedom,

trust and

fun

with suspicious whispers –

Who's got the gun?

Could it happen here?

Who's on the list?

Did you see? Did you know?

Did you hear?

Did you hear?

Devouring rumors, the reptile's fed

till it spews distortions;

we all see

red.

Strangled, choked by

this putrid stench

invading our space,

we're casualties of a beastly foe,

a slithering slime,

without a face.

Democracy

by Sara Holbrook (Practical Poetry, Heinemann 2005)

Not a flagpole, pointing heavenward
with shining surety.

Not
any one set of colors
jerked cleanly up and down.
Not golden crusted apple pie.

Not
a grey pin-striped uniform.
Not
anybody's mom.

No.

If there is a metaphor
for democracy
it is a mud wrestling match,
grit in the eyes
feet a flying—
your ear in my teeth.

And the future?
The future belongs the muckers
still willing to get their hands
dirty,
who roll up their sleeves
to show their colors.

Naked by Sara Holbrook, (*Chicks Up Front*, Cleveland State University Press 1998)

The first time I saw a man naked, it was not my brother.
I was born without a brother,
which everyone knows is like being born without green hair,
or a wart on the tip of your nose
or the skin of a reptile.

Being born with no brother was a definite asset,
or so I thought until fifth grade, when I started to wonder.
I wondered why every time I would say the word "it,"
the boys would laugh and they'd fall on the ground.
Likewise, if I would say the word "them,"
in any context, the boys would laugh and they'd fall on the ground.
It was as if we were tuned into two different programs,
like they were tuned into cartoons and I was watching a mystery.
I wondered. And I wondered with the sense of urgency
of 4:30 in the afternoon and Mom says, "No more snacks before dinner,"
and you're starving. I wanted what I wanted and I wanted it now.
Prevailing neighborhood trade policies provided for such things,
a look for a look, even up. Worth considering until
a permission slip came home. There was to be a film about growing up,
which even I knew was teacherspeak for "naked."
My wonder swelled within me -- I had swallowed a balloon.
I couldn't breathe. Breathless, until they showed us diagrams.
Diagrams? Bones without the meat.
It looked like a direction sheet on how to assemble a bicycle,
absolutely no help at all. I deflated gradually.
A couple weeks later, another film. No permission slip this time.
Just a film about the war of our fathers, World War II.
Germany. Hitler youth. Wind up soldiers. Waving train cars.
Pits of white, white limbs. Ovens, not for cakes.

Three men standing against a fence, shaved heads.
Their collar bones poking out like coat hangers without the clothes.
The picture cut off at the hollow places where their bellies belonged.
Except for one man, standing in the background, who stepped deliberately to the side.
Stripped of any sense of wonder or urgency, he made no attempt to cover himself.
He faced the camera because he wanted me to see.
I dragged my feet on the way home from school that day,
kicking aimlessly at the fallen leaves. Not so much
in a hurry. After all, I had seen. For the first time,
I had seen a man, naked.

"There are no people in the world suffering as much as the people of Darfur." Al-Tayyib Khamis

Recipe for Genocide

by Sara Holbrook (High Impact Writing Clinics, Corwin 2013)

In a caldron of instability
add a hurricane of hatred
decades of prejudice
and a tsunami of intolerance.

Cover and allow to simmer
over low heat until mixture
bubbles and sickens.

Chop and dice innocent children
mothers' hearts and churn with
the heads of unarmed men.

Soak in a rancid river of blood
the homes, shops and stray dogs
of a ravaged community
for months (or years)
until humiliation rises to the top
and spirits dissolve.

Set aside hugs and holding hands,
laughter,
trips to the movies,
weddings and birthday celebrations.

Pepper mixture with machetes
and machine guns,
hand grenades, rocket launchers
land mines and
muddle with the political agendas
of outside forces.

Beat and set on fire
until charred but still raw.

Affects thousands,
serves few.

One, Taken to Heart . . .

for Wendy

by Sara Holbrook (*Chicks Up Front*, Cleveland State University Press 1998)

A book,
so much a part of our lives,
seems lost.

Fallen,
somewhere,
out of place.

We drag about the house in heavy shoes,
examining the empty room.

We open the blinds, wash our eyes,
and search the shelf for answers.

Thinking . . . what could we have done with that book ?

Where did we see it last?

Could a book just wander off like that?

Questions to throw at the moon,
while standing, rooted in the shadows,
remembering the story.

The story.

Remember the time?

the page?

the chapter?

Remember?

Remember the smile?

A book can get lost, disappear,
or simply fall to pieces,
but a story plays forever once we've taken it to heart.

And for the rest of what each of us will know
of eternity,
even when, barehanded,
we drag about the house
in heavy shoes,
wash our eyes
and search the shelf for answers,
the story will survive
to coax us from the empty room,
back into the moonlight,

a sister, teaching us to dance.

(*One Taken to Heart* was written for the funeral of my daughter's friend who committed suicide. I wrote the poem *Lament* years later after 5 students committed suicide at our local high school in a period of 2 years.)

Lament

by Sara Holbrook (unpublished)

When I was alive,
the window looked back at me
as I walked through the door of the school.
I played wassup catch now and then,
returning each toss with my own twist.
And even when I was cruising under the radar
of conversation,
my slammed lockers, flipped pages
and foot falls were
the noises of my own choosing.
No one spoke for me but me.
Now that I am dead, I am left to lie in the hall.
In the morning kids kick me
into the air, batting me about
and I can't protest or disagree.
I become only what they want me to be.
By afternoon, I'm kicked aside like fliers from last week's prom,
scuffed and wedged between the trash can
and the wall.

Now, no power in the universe
can bring strength back to my legs
so I can stand up for myself
or puff air into my lungs to give me voice.
My reflection is fading in the window,
my cries for recognition overpowered by
tomorrow's announcements.
I am but a fractured memory trampled to dust.

Peace?

by Sara Holbrook (*Outspoken*, Heinemann, 2008)

"I deplore *racism*. I don't even know what the word means. I know what pain is, what death is, what a beating is at the hands of goon squads with lead-filled batons whacking bones, but the word racism is almost a joke these days." *C-Train and Thirteen Mexicans* by Jimmy Santiago Baca, Grove Press, NY, NY 2002

I adore *peace*.

I don't even know what the word means.

I know what a smile is, what a warm sunspot is.

What a laugh is on my grandmother's porch while we're sipping iced tea,
but the word *peace* is just a Miss America joke these days.

Millions of Americans survive in heated homes with plenty of fresh water and flush toilets.

Armed with a controller, I punch reset if I lose.

My electricity flows from a flick of a finger.

I've grown up playing on mowed fields,
hanging out with friends on the street,
walking to the corner for a soda.

No bombs dropping.

No landmines.

My school is open every weekday.

I'm chased into a bed at night.

I live in time to the music on my IPod . . .

I don't know what *peace* is.

Ode to the Mosquito

by Sara Holbrook (Published at saraholbrook.blogspot.com)

Oh lone mosquito
your translucent wings have

born you here
by some mistake.
By whose warm but
misguided invitation have you
come to visit my bedroom on
this northern January night?
Poised as you are beneath my light,
I ponder your presence
knowing not where you are ought to be
in dead of winter.
Is it winter?
The temperature today stretched its
mercurial arms to sixty-six.
Were you fooled by the
compromised climate's gymnastics
just this once
or are you now become a new
accomplice to winter,
replacing frost and chap stick?
Silent, you appear as stunned as I
to find yourself beside my bed.
Mosquito were you but illusion
I could more easily find sleep tonight.

The News from Iraq

by Sara Holbrook (*Texts and Lessons for Literature* by Harvey Daniels, Heinemann 2013)

The helicopter burst into flames immediately on impact.
Secondary explosions from all the rockets, missiles, and 30mm rounds.
All four radios going off all at once,
F16s over head, 1 BCT Commander, our team internal frequencies,
and flight flowing.
I could only tell them what I saw.

ABC News: *The AH-64 Apache went down north of Baghdad, killing its two crew members and becoming the third US helicopter to be shot down in 10 days.*

There were 250 ft power lines in the vicinity of the crash site
so we couldn't get very low,
but we did see.
It was a bad situation
We had to come off of what we were doing
to provide security for the downed aircraft.
I knew the two pilots of the aircraft,
but not very well
Really bad situation.

>**Email Subject: Notification**

>ALL CAPS THIS IS A NEGATIVE NOTIFICATION
>AFTER NOTIFICATION HAS BEEN MADE
>Our Combat Aviation Brigade, 4ID lost an aircraft
>two pilots
>Monday 16 January. The immediate family members have been
>notified. This is an official negative notification
>the death did not occur in your unit

<**Reply:** Once again, I personally thank
<on behalf of all of the 4th Infantry Division families.
<your personal touch
<the phone call to our home in Cleveland
<Apache lost
<more than words can express.
<Once again, terribly relieved
<Our son not lost.
<Relief. Heartache. Sorrow for the other families.
<Continue to pray for the safe return. . .

Dear Dad,

If you saw the news, you saw two Apaches flying over the crash site,
one of them was me.

We provided overwatch
as a bunch of Iraqi civilians were trying to get to the crash site,
you don't know if they are curious or trying to steal pieces of the
helicopter for propaganda.

Ground guys coming to secure the site,
F16s trying to relay what they saw.

All this leads to a bad situation

Tense. Very tense.

In the air.

Turned into sadness when we finally got back
When we landed.

MSNBC: *Apache down, north of Baghdad*

We are still flying, I generally fly 3 days a week.

Everything is good.

We couldn't get very low, but we did see.

flames immediately on impact

secondary explosions.

I could only tell them what I saw.

It was a bad situation.

>THIS IS A NEGATIVE NOTIFICATION

Dad, I would like some bedding.

Sheets for my single bed.

I have been sleeping on a mattress and a sleeping bag.

CNN: *A Russian-made surface-to-air missile launched by anti-American Insurgents brought down a US military helicopter that crashed in Iraq on Monday. . .*

If mom could please send me some sheets for the bed that would be great.

I already got her other package of socks and boxers. Thank you.

CBS: *The shootdown represented "a troubling new development," there are hundreds and possibly thousands of SA-7 missiles that remain unaccounted for in Iraq.*

Troubling new development.

30mm rounds.

Flames upon impact.

A very bad situation.

We pray for the safe return

ANOTHER NEGATIVE NOTIFICATION

Please.

Thank you.

Acknowledgement: Thanks to Captain Thad Weist and his father, Sargent Dan Weist (retired) for letting me read their mail. This type of poem is called a "cut up" and was cut from the sources indicated in the poem.

Oblivious?

by Sara Holbrook (unpublished)

The charred remains of one more bombed out bus.
A swat team storms, a hostage sits alone.
Another hidden camera shot of thugs.
Amber Alert! A child's been snatched from home.

Some loner kid went postal up in Maine.
Explosive vests? Is everyone extreme?
Death threat! A woman's clinic up in flames.
More bad news from the flat screen fear machine.

How many died from that last IED?
I can't take more. I mean it. I am done.
The information age is killing me.
I leave to take a shower of pure sun.
Oblivious, some bird with open throat
starts up a symphony of joy and hope.

Belay Off

by Michael Salinger (High Impact Writing Clinics, Corwin 2013)

Belay off

They tell you to never look down
The average climbing rope is 50 meters long
and rated by the number of falls
it can withstand
because
it is expected that you are going to lose your grip
And these ropes are designed to stretch
up to 6.5% of their length
thus
absorbing your body's weight
as it accelerates
thirty two point one eight feet
per second per second
spring-backing you to a stop
rather than snapping you in half

But with a carabineer click
you've unhooked yourself
Belay off
And up you scale
chalk absorbs hand sweat
but not your fingertip pain
Trigger loaded cams
sway at your waist
like a cluster of colored pendulums
picked one by one
inserted into fissures and cracks
then left behind
as if they were antique keys
poking from an attic's trunk
And you look up

because you've been warned to never look down
feeling for imperfections in the rock
facilitating enough friction
that you may cling to its face
as you surmount this obstacle
One hand

One foot

At a time

Simply
Because

It is there

And once you've reached the summit
before you spy your next climb
go ahead
look down
See how far you've come

Belay off

For Emily

by Michael Salinger (A Bear in the Kitchen, Red Giant Press 2013)

A wild bird in the house portends bad luck
even death
So said my grandmother
she of Slovenian descent
This superstition though, transcends nationality
migrating across imaginary boundaries demarcating countries
Italians, Greek, Scandinavian, Irish, Chinese
all warn against harboring
undomesticated things with feathers

The cats wake us at sunrise
howling and chasing through the front of the house
and I assume they are fighting
over another imaginary feline slight
Then I recognize
the flutter of wings in distress
so I put on my slippers

The mourning dove shivers
wedged behind the grandfather clock
cat tails twitching with pendulum precision
Feathers littering the room
betray the mayhem that had only just subsided

I eye the bird's beak
thin, pointed, needlelike
weigh the chances of disease
I cup its warm, weightless and hollow boned body
in my hands
pinning its wings with my palms to its side
I open the door with my elbow

I toss the bird into the air

Neon

by Michael Salinger (A Bear in the Kitchen, Red Giant Press 2013)

A poem is a 1957 Greyhound bus
front tires balloon push wedged up against the curb
diesel engine idle vibrating the rear view mirrors
so that the images within them blur
pneumatically, mnemonically opening the door to individual interpretation
A poem can be a pair of wingtips
exhausted leather shoes,
or an angel's feathers
either image will do (it's just a transit token coin flip)
But, take these wingtips
and like a sacrificial pawn
center them on a square of scuffed linoleum tile
part of a pattern chess boarding across the floor
of some Podunk town's art deco bus terminal
cruciform-cracked plaster arching overhead
the whole effigy
bustin' up the sunsank horizon of your experiences
with the blue
transformational hum of phosphorescent neon

A poem can be the outdated pack of Twizzlers
in the silver pull knobbed candy machine
that you contemplate trading your last two quarters for
when you are starving to death
Or a poem can be that stale cup of coffee
on Formica counter at 3am
in front of the only occupied stool
at the end of a chrome and red vinyl mushroom line
when your dreams make you afraid
to close your eyes and go to sleep

A poem could be warp and woof weaved
inside the gray cotton ball puffs
exhaling from a black tail pipe into subzero air
as internal combustion revs in response
to the depression of an accelerator
lurching away from a Plexiglas shelter
accordion doors playing a traveling tune
as they fold closed

Or
a poem can smell
like burning rubber
When the accumulated slush
that has built up within the wheel well of your mind
has solidified into ice
grasping your spinning tires
in expanding frigid vice

'til you can't go any further

You just can't go any further
'til you risk your life
pulling off to the side of the road
kicking the obstruction to the median
the rest of the world becoming the breeze of
semi-trucks roaring by
then you pull away
dissolving into the arterial rush of traffic
leaving the clump behind
to become a reflection that is closer than it appears
which will melt with the next thaw
depositing salt bleached bits of gravel
in an indecipherable
I Ching formation
That nonetheless confirms
you were there

A poem can just as easily
take you
to
or away
from home

Stingray

by Michael Salinger (A Bear in the Kitchen, Red Giant Press 2013)

The young man believed
he had hooked an angel
shark
line ripping from his bait casting reel
drag click whizzing away like
a New Year's Eve noisemaker
attached to an electric drill
the rest of the anglers
at his end of the pier
grabbing their gear
clearing way
to watch this fight
big fish
big fish

big fish on
passes
tide steady
down 600 foot fishing pier
as tackle lay abandoned
on weather cured planks
so that the owners
could catch this show

50 pound test line
stretching tight
guttural cat howling
like an out of tune violin
while the young man
repels down a mountainside
back leaning with all his weight
gaining three feet
giving up
two
towed from one roughhewn railing
to the other
for three tortuous quarters of an hour
before we even see
the fish

rolling near the surface
like a king sized sheet
flashing by
in a washing machine
filled with dark green ink
the white underside
of a 150 lb. sting ray
slicing by for a fraction of eternity

then diving as if sucked down a drain
fiberglass composite rod
broomstick thick
arches downward
toward the moon's reflected
static scribbled across the waves
twenty feet below the pier
a catapult
the instant before sword
slices rope
and our guy is hanging tight
and time stops
 and solidifies
like the briny residue of sea spray
crystallizing in the corner of one's mouth
while we wait
seconds tick tick ticking away
each of us expecting
the line to snap

but he's hanging tight
when most would have cut it loose by now
a sting ray is a garbage fish after all
not fit for food
too expensive for taxidermist's bench
but it's become a matter of principle
to the kid
and finally
the rod slowly unbends
like an arching dinosaur's neck
the fish breaks the surface
and surrenders

a giant three pronged gaffing hook
attached to tire swing thick rope
pulls the fish up
dripping
like a Volkswagen being lifted
from a farm pond by crane
three men haul it over the railing
drop it on the deck
slick white belly up
blood spatter illuminated by mercury vapor
softball size mouth full of pointed teeth
gasping in the terrible air

and

the first baby was a surprise
like a black dinner plate
gliding out from under a rug
but four more followed

each
mindful of the stinger
gingerly
tossed back into the sea
by astonished fishermen
then the mother is heaved over
smacking the water spread eagle flat
with the sound of
tree split by lightening cracking
predator attracting blood
billowing wake trailing her escape
her offspring
fish born out of water
fly in formation
oblivious to the sacrifice

Vespula Vulgaris
by Michael Salinger (A Bear in the Kitchen, Red Giant Press 2013)

The boy paid no particular attention
to the pear tree that he hid behind
sprawling branches
twisted above his head
or the legion of
yellow jacket wasps
buzzing in drunken circles
around fallen
fermenting summertime fruit
turning brown on the ground
nor did he bother to contemplate
the rough reptilian bark slipping beneath
tufts of grass becoming root
nerve tendril clutching the earth like
wooden shocks of lightening
frozen in time
the fact that he had
his father's chin, his grandfather's wit
his mother's almond eyes
his brother's Swiss army knife
illicitly in his pocket
and the family posture
shoulders sloped as if by weight
never crossed his mind
the boy did not notice the curl of dust
kicked from behind automobile
headed to horizon
the driver in yellow sundress
determined to escape
and never come back this time
or the whistle of the gopher
startled by the car's passing
a full moon
cut from translucent tissue
still visible in the daytime sky
went equally ignored
the flash of slick tanned skin
of black haired
neighbor girl
skinny-dipping
had become the entire universe
to him

Under Cover

by Michael Salinger

(A Bear in the Kitchen, Red Giant Press 2013)

I have forgotten all of my best ideas
this I know for certain
I've watched them escape
expire into the distance
dressed in a radiant splendor
the color of ignorance burning
never turning back to wave goodbye
nor acknowledge that I
had any part in their origin
the instant before I fall asleep
I promise myself not to forget
yet away my bright ideas glide
silent, scentless, utterly unnoticed
by the excitable black and white dog
beatifully snoring at my side
down the hall my notion tiptoes
hanging a right past the kitchen
lacing on a pair of my running shoes
tying a double knot that will require a fork to undo
gently turning the knob of my front door
with the care of a safecracker
escaping into the incessant night
like an embarrassed lover
all because I would rather remain
undercover
than leave the comfort of my bed to take a note

**Daniel Said for Daniel Thompson – street poet of Cleveland Ohio
In Memorial
by Michael Salinger (A Bear in the Kitchen, Red Giant Press 2013)**

daniel said
a poet dies
every two years in cleveland
ohio
whether they need to or not
some are
double wicked candles
flames meeting in center
coalescing into the blinding glint
of hypodermic needle
to be extinguished and buried on hill
overlooking
bankrupt steel mill
some manufacture
22 caliber chakra escape hatches
blown open for cosmic
ejection seats arcing
over the Detroit Superior Bridge
others merely appear deceased
eyes shut behind horn rims
straitjacketed in academic tweed
riding red radio flyer wagon
rubber removed from tires
so rims sync unerringly
with tenure track
the younger become fodder
shot in the back
by canons
before they learn to run
others succumb to crustaceous parasites
side winding in bloodstream
claws snip ticking at time
as if it were decaying chicken
on fishing line
and right now
somewhere at this very instant
a soul with empty stomach
curls fetal in recessed loading dock
face to wall back
to passersby's in silent apology
While inside
soft shell crab appetizer is served
on cobalt blue triangle china
to corporate suit and trophy wife

while another poet dies
right now somewhere
a man with the mental capacity
of a six year old
hums to himself
on rough wool blanketed cot
Nietzsche staring
at whitewashed cinder blockhouse wall
of another death row
at the exact same second
a wing tipped Brooks Brother's button down
auto executive
crunches numbers trying to decide
whether recall would be more expensive
than surviving families' lawsuit
and another poet dies
right now at this very instant
somewhere a child is being beaten
with an orange extension cord
by a parent that doesn't know
any better
right now
someone is giving up hope
someone does not turn the other cheek
someone doesn't consider
the least of his brothers
someone loses the ability
to believe in anything
and another poet dies
right now somewhere
someone fills grocery bag
with day old donuts
to feed the homeless
passes angelic
through the junkyard debris
ranting elegies to compassion
pisses on the bronze castings
of capitalists that cast away
all humanity's good for nothing

right now
a poet
still famous in the neighborhood
still dear to our hearts
shines his shoes
and prepares to walk
across the sky

Ducks

by Michael Salinger (High Impact Writing Clinics, Corwin, 2013)

White cloth strips
dangle waving at the tip of bamboo rods
fifteen joint knuckled feet long
One grasped in each sinewy hand
of the Vietnamese duck man
as he steers his flock
from one rice paddy to the next
quacking foul and boisterous as
a Hanoi traffic roundabout
eating the insects that would wish
to snack on
fresh green shoots

The face of a clock
reading quarter to three
his arms soaring forward
as outstretched wings
The birds nested in the center
of the walking flock are of little concern
to the leather weathered skinned duck man
It is the outliers that he eyes
from beneath his straw non la
Those few who snap at the muslin scraps
ignoring their task at hand
spying pastures not within the constrictions
of this day's curriculum

And every good tender of livestock knows
one never plays favorites
although
how can he help but admire
the ones who push at the edges
the ones who make him work
the hardest?

The Domestique

by Michael Salinger (High Impact Writing Clinics, Corwin 2013)

Muscle fatigue is instigated
(according to the latest scientific hypothesis)
by tiny leaks of calcium on a cellular level
stimulating enzymes to assault muscle fibers
endeavoring to shut down whatever business is afoot
but,
you already knew this

It is your nature to ignore this chemistry

Legs pumping with the precision of locomotive pistons
transferring energy to chain, sprocket and wheels
cutting through space
incited salmon-like forward
while every fiber below your neck screams
for you to stop
calves sinews braiding into knots
thighs threatening to split as if baking bread
the peloton follows in your wake
a brightly colored migration of spandex butterflies
and you come out of your saddle
to dance on your pedals
as if Bix Beiderbecke was blowing a solo in your skull
and then it comes

Your world is squeezed through a pinhole
and there is nothing
but the sound of wheels spinning
the hum of ceramic ball bearings
your heartbeat muffled in your ears
your body separates from your mind
and for an instant you are just
a projectile
sighting the finish line

Then it all explodes
shouts from the crowd first
followed by all-encompassing pain
your will cannot maintain the pace
the universe has thrown a net over you
like Moses pointing to Canaan
you signal with your elbow the sprinter
who has been riding your wheel
for one hundred and twenty six kilometers
basking in your slipstream
like a dandelion seed behind a semi-truck
and he slingshots by
to stand on the podium

to be kissed on both cheeks twice
by a duet of lovely French girls
while you look forward to Epson Salts and a whirlpool.

Cleanup

by Michael Salinger (A Bear in the Kitchen, Red Giant Press 2013)

Time contracts
the instant glass breaks
flash freezing
for a splinter of silence
within which
all that was
that would and could be
converges into a sliver prick
of electricity

try it
throw a bottle against the wall
circus knife cart wheeling
whistle cutting through the air
flashbulb exploding and
everyone within earshot
will hold their breath
everyone
because at that moment
all bets are off

every opaque secret is laid out
like the diamond dust
of shattered windshield
across automobile hood or
the shards from
stack of diner white china
domino falling
to tile floor
behind speckled Formica counter
stopping the heart for a beat and a half
shocking bystanders
into sharp edged awareness

the everyday static

snatched away as if magician's
red checkered table cloth
bared souls teetering
long stem crystal goblets
oscillating to an upright standstill
on naked table top
when glass breaks
we reflex look inside
sans luxury of rose tinting

or UV protection
the lies we tell ourselves
that encapsulates us
in the protective vacuum
of frosted incandescent globes
become instantaneously transparent
our regrets magnified
in the blinding flare of light
before the bulb blows
our bodies paralyzed
as we stare into the cracked
mirror reflection
of our every inadequacy
for that split second
when glass breaks
but then
someone grabs a dustpan
and conversations begin again
and we live our lives
as if nothing ever happened

Insomnia

by Michael Salinger and Sara Holbrook (*Outspoken*, Heinemann 2009)

When it's Sunday, and it's midnight,
the weekend put back in its chest.
The toys of recreation, party times
and needed rest.

Generally you'll sleep through it.
But on occasions of anticipation, heartache
or too much caffeine
you may find yourself lying awake

When I lie in wait for Monday

At three-twenty-five AM and the world is silent,
perfectly still, longing for sleep.
You may hear your heart beat

Lie in wait. Lie in wait. Lie in . . .

like the pendulum of a grandfather clock
in the next room.
Ear pressed against pillow, turned back in
to your own blood flow

When I lie in wait for Monday
to grab me by the ear, throw me at the shower,
off to school, and when I hear

Its echo the sound of the ocean
in a seashell.
Then in the distance

I hear

Tympani drums, hundreds of them,
muffled mallets bouncing off skin
like a heavy rain on canvas
marching closer and closer

And when I hear the train at midnight

their rhythms resonating in the pit of your stomach
from so many miles away
giving way to the metallic clack and clatter

When it's Sunday, and it's Midnight,
The metallic clack and clatter,

the train
steel wheel on rail.
And then for an instant
the sky is full of train sounds,
and you're awake

The train in passing brays and boasts;
it's steel track straight, on schedule

On this occasion of anticipation, heartache
or too much caffeine

Arrival times to keep.
Arrival times to keep.

then the wheels surrender
to the rain and the rain bows to the tympanis.
And the tympanis march away,

And I meander to its rhythm, flopping like a fish.

Leaving you with the sound of the ocean in a sea shell.

Why can't I get to sleep? Why can't I get to sleep?

But generally, you'll sleep through it.

Why can't I get to sleep?

Note: When Sara and Michael met, they discovered that they each had a poem about insomnia and trains. It only seemed natural to combine them, riff on a few of the lines, and make a poem for two voices.

