The Mind's Eye:
A Collection of Correlating Poems and Short Stories

Honors Thesis (499)
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Purpose of Thesis

This collection of poems and short stories is a sampling of the creative writing that I have done within the past three semesters as a student at Ball State University. I have attempted to organize the collection so that each poem is followed by a short story which is similar in either subject or theme. Generally, my writing revolves around the individual’s development, namely his or her quest for identity and meaning in life. My writing also often touches upon broader, societal issues which sometimes ask larger questions.

All of the poems, with the exception of "Love Poem" and "Letdown," were written during Fall Semester of 1991 while I was enrolled in a poetry workshop, English 408. "Love Poem" was written the following semester while I was reflecting on the nameless people who walk by me everyday on campus. "Letdown" was written in October of 1990.

My short stories have a more varied background. Two stories, "Fingerpainting," and "Painted Roses and Wasted Dreams," emerged in their initial stages while I was enrolled Spring Semester of 1992 in a fiction workshop, English 407. Both were presented to the entire class for their suggestions and comments. Additionally, "Painted Roses and Wasted Dreams," is a short story in progress, as it is not yet tightly woven. It continues to metamorphize in form, as I have recently experimented with the stylistic technique of writing a story as journal entries. Also having its roots in the fiction workshop is "Split Decision" which began as a simple conflict scene, and has recently emerged as a short story.

Written during the past semester were "Writers Are People, Too," "At Block’s End, the Writer Begins," "Hunger," "Small Wonder," and "Because." I fully expect all of these stories--especially "Hunger"--to continue to evolve as I take them through further revisions.

"Green Ivory," a poem, and "Writers Are People, Too," a short story, open my thesis; they are both about a little girl. "Green Ivory" portrays a little girl whom no one understands, but who holds much wisdom all the same. Similarly, "Writers Are People, Too," is about a little girl who is ridiculed because of her unusual hobby--writing. This story is autobiographical, as it actually--more or less--happened in my own life (hence the little girl’s name: Becky Miller).

Continuing to set the stage, the next two works focus on writing. The first, "Paper Power," was written while I was working in one of the University Computer Labs, and it deals specifically with the menial task of writing, especially the writing of class assignments. The following story, "At Block’s End," attempts to portray "writer’s block" in a humorous manner.

The next three works revolve around the individual’s search for identity and meaning in life, often in the midst of pain and confusion. "You Are" is a poem about an individual’s found faith in God. "Pieces of My Heart," a poem, brings to mind the reality of pain in life, even for the individual who knows God. Finally,
"Fingerpainting" is a short story which presents a woman who has found true freedom to be herself, apart from legalistic religion and from a demanding husband who wishes to form her identity for her.

The next four works bring to the surface less individualistic, more societal issues and questions. "Bum Rap" is a poem which comments on many people's perception of the underprivileged, namely, the poor and homeless. The short story "Hunger" paints a picture of a young girl who finds herself homeless. Confronted with the often harsh realities of life, she wrestles with unfairness and pain, hypocrisy, and faith. Underlying all of her struggles is hunger--physical, emotional, and spiritual hunger. "Carelessness" comments on the selfishness of "men" (generic term for all of humankind), while "Small Wonder" is one girl's reflection on selfishness, and, specifically, on abortion.

The remaining works deal with priorities, decisions, and maturity. "Love Poem" and "Split Decision" bring up yet again the issue of faith, as well the desire to share that faith with others. "Split Decision" centers on decisions and maturity, as a young woman goes against her father's wishes and becomes a minister. Also related to maturity is the poem "Rock-a-bye Baby," as the poem speaks of coming face to face with reality as one "grows up."

Perhaps the most unique work in the collection is "Painted Roses and Wasted Dreams," a short story written as the journal entries of a mentally unstable man who is in a hospital. The man is insecure and tends to idolize women characters, also searching for a second mother.

Finally, "Letdown" is a poem about letting go of youthful securities, namely parents, and is written with a rather bittersweet tone. "Because" is also about moving on in life, and also shows the occasional tendency for individuals to embrace former securities.
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Green Ivory

Sitting Indian-style on the green leather chair,
The baby-faced girl with the tinsel hair
Pointed toward heaven and looked to the East
And began babbling about some kind of beast.

Her youthfulness smothered in open fear,
She looked around for one who wouldn't jeer.
Instead she found all scorn, no sympathy,
As everyone sighed and undid the mystery.

The infant wise-girl cried and fell to the floor,
Pounding and pounding till her fists hurt no more.
Soon her dearest and nearest began to exclaim
About how the child had gone completely insane.

Wondering shy she was so unlike the rest
Who saw mere monsters and shadows at best,
Her superiors in wrinkles and foolishness
Worried at her ill health and lack of progress.

Nothing she said made any sense
To those that spit words with brains so dense;
For they knew little of the truth that she beheld,
Their minds trained to think only thoughts which meld.

Oh, Faithful Child! Shining in the dark.
Let no one sway your view that's on the mark.
For what you see is real and what you feel is right;
You see through the shadows and perceive the fight.

Sitting Indian-style on the green leather chair,
The baby-faced girl with the tinsel hair
Pointed toward heaven and looked to the East
And simply smiled as she thought of the feast.
Sitting on the cold, hard cement block, the little girl chewed on the end of her pencil thoughtfully.

"Hey, Becky! Come and play kickball with us. Don't just sit there!"

"Wanna play freeze tag? It'd be more fun than sitting there."

"Becky, you are so boring!"

The young voices called out to her once again this morning. Urging, questioning, sometimes mocking--the voices never went unnoticed, although the little girl sometimes appeared oblivious to them.

Deep in thought and often furiously scribbling, she had been sitting on the cement block for the past several recesses. Her peers did not understand why she spent recess writing, instead of running and playing and laughing. But freedom came to little Becky Miller in a different manner. In her writing she could go to a thousand places, she could do a thousand different things, she could meet a thousand different people. She could even talk to animals if she wanted to. Her writing opened up the world to her, the world of the real and the imaginary.

Her writing had began in the second grade, when she had written a story for her teacher about being chased by a monster on her way home for school. Her teacher had patted Becky on the shoulder, telling her how much she liked her story. Ever since
that day, Becky had been writing in her spare time.

After recess was over, Becky made her way to her desk inside the third-grade classroom. A small boy with a cowlick stuck his foot out when she walked by and she stumbled over it.

"Becky is a nerd...Becky is a nerd...Hey, Becky, can't you walk? No wonder you sit down all through recess--you can't walk!"

Laughter.

Another boy with bright red hair and freckles tried to grab her notebook away from her.

"Let me see, let me see! What do you write? 'I am a nerd' over and over again?"

More laughter. Always laughter.

Holding her notebook close to her body, and holding in the tears which threatened to spill out of her big, brown eyes, Becky sat down in her seat at the front of the classroom.

The boy sitting behind her pulled her hair.

"Jason, stop that!" The teacher gave Jason a hard look then began the lesson, "Okay, everyone. Get out your math books, some paper, and a pencil."

School days seemed to drone on for Becky in much the same way. Day after day, recess after recess, the comments, the laughter, the loneliness. Then one day everything changed.

Sitting on the cold, cement block by the school building, Becky was writing during recess once again. She was working on a story about astronauts who went to visit the planet Mars. The
astronauts were her classmates. She had written the whole story using her classmates as characters.

Making her way towards Becky was her classroom teacher. She sat down beside the young girl. Surveying the playground, the older woman stated matter-of-factly, "Writing again, I see."

Becky nodded her head shyly. Adults made her nervous. And she was afraid that the woman was going to criticize or ridicule her like her young classmates.

"May I read your story?" The woman’s voice sounded genuinely interested.

Becky looked at her intently for a few moments, before slowly nodding her head once again. She handed the woman her notebook. Watching for reaction, Becky watched her teacher read the story. As the woman began to smile, Becky began to feel warm and tingly. Then, when the woman laughed, Becky thought that she might explode with excitement. But she stayed still and silent.

"This is really good. And funny. You know, I think your classmates would like to hear this. Would you mind reading it out loud first thing tomorrow morning?"

Fear began to crowd out Becky’s recent excitement. She shook her head furiously. No, no, no.

"Honey, I know your classmates would love your story. You portray them all so wonderfully and cleverly. Please?"

Becky did not want to read the story out loud to her classmates. She feared their jeers and taunts. It was one thing to hear them each day after recess. It would be quite another to
stand in front of them, a willing victim.

But her teacher was an adult. And adults were supposed to be obeyed. Fearing worse trouble for not doing what her teacher wanted, Becky reluctantly agreed to read the story.

That night Becky didn’t sleep well. She tossed and turned. Tears rolled down her face, soaking her pillow. She cried herself to sleep.

The next morning, Becky almost told her mother she was sick and couldn’t go to school. But Becky did not want to lie.

Once inside her classroom, Becky sunk into her desk. Shoulders slumped, head hanging, she sat, waiting for the impending doom.

After her teacher had taken attendance, Becky heard the woman’s voice as if from a distance. All of her words seemed far off and incomprehensible, until the young girl heard her say, "Becky, would you please come up front and read your story to us now?"

Her head still hanging low, Becky shuffled slowly to the front of the room. The few short steps suddenly seemed more like miles. She thought she heard a few snickers from the class, but she did not dare to look at any of them. Instead she stared at the paper in her hands. And she read.

After she finished reading the story, eyes staring at the floor, she started back to her desk. Prepared for teasing and malicious laughter, Becky was shocked to hear what her classmates were saying.
"Wow, that was neat!"

"Did you hear how she made Chad look? That was funny. Hey, Chad, you're a goober, in real life and in imaginary life!"

"Write another one, Becky. Write us another story!"

"Yeah, write another one. We want to hear another one."

"Please?!"

Sitting on the cold, hard cement block, the little girl chewed thoughtfully on the end of her pencil. Oblivious to the activity around her, she sat deep in thought. Occasionally, she would hear one of her classmates run by and yell something at her.

"Hey, Becky! What's your story about? When do you think you'll be done with it?"
Paper Power

They wander in with
darkened eyes sometimes
   tinged with red.
They slowly, mechanically
mumble their groan and
then begin their grim
   and meaningless toil.

I can see it in their eyes
I can tell it in their step
I can hear it in their breath

As they go click click click
   with an occasional shrill
note of something
   wrong,

As they stare at blurred
nothingness and little
think on
   their creation,
and little think
but only blink when the words
   move off the line,

As they go,
   I always know,
the deed being done
for now, they will only wait
   until the next,
and then they’ll wander in
again. I know, yes,
I know. For we all, we all
   want to graduate.
Kristin leaned back in her chair until the front legs of the chair were a few inches off the floor and her own legs were dangling freely as well. Chewing on the end of a rather stubby pencil, Kristin, eyes closed and nose crinkled, appeared to be deep in serious thought. The paper strewn across the old oak desk in front of her was blank—totally blank. Some of it was rumpled and obviously rejected, but if one were to smooth it out, one would find only pieces of totally blank paper.

Kristin’s chair, legs, and fist quickly came slamming down. "Peanut butter!" Not taken to blatant cursing, Kristin spat vehemently the two words which she normally reserved for times of great frustration or anger.

After sucking the side of her throbbing, injured hand for a few moments, Kristin began to crumple up more pieces of blank paper and throw them wildly around the fairly neat study. While throwing the paper around the room, the young woman of twenty-five who looked no more than eighteen, began to laugh. Increasing in volume and intensity from a quiet giggle to an unashamed braying, to the kind of insane hysterics one only expects to hear from the troublesome young, the recklessly drunk, or the mentally unstable, Kristin’s laughter flooded the room as crumpled balls of blank paper bounced off the walls like pinballs. Within a few minutes, Kristin began to literally bounce off the walls herself, until one fatal bounce brought her to her knees.
As a crumpled Kristin sat in a heap on the floor among crumpled paper, the crumpled Kristin began to cry quietly. But she didn’t cry long, for when the phone rang, she hurriedly wiped her wet eyes and cheeks, summoning up enough cheer to answer the phone with a lilting, "Hello." She even smiled when she said it.

"The writing? Oh, Bill, it’s coming wonderfully. I’ve really been quite productive these past few days. You wouldn’t believe the stuff that’s been rolling out of my fingers and onto the paper."

"You want to read some of it? Bill, you know you can’t do that. Not yet. I’m a writer—my work is a part of me. If I have to show it to you now—well, I just can’t do it. Forget it."

"Yes, I know you’re my editor. Yes, I know we have deadlines. Don’t worry, we’ll make them. I told you I’ve gotten a lot done, so believe me, okay? Trust me, Bill. I won’t let you, or the publication, down."

With that, Kristin slammed the phone down on the desk with great force. Her forehead lined with determination, she gritted her teeth, gathered together some uncrumpled blank paper, grabbed her stubby pencil, and put herself in writing position in front of her big oak desk. Within moments, Kristin was furiously scribbling on the paper in front of her. The paper lost its blankness, Kristin’s face lost its blankness, and as time passed, both paper and writer began to look quite full.

When Kristin finally stopped, she leaned back in her chair
until the legs of the chair and her own legs were suspended in the air. Chewing on her pencil which had grown even stubbier, Kristin, eyes closed and with a smirk on her face, appeared to be in deep, gratuitous thought. The paper in front of her was unrumpled and filled with word-shaped lead.

As chair, feet, and fist came slamming down once again, Kristin cried a gleeful "Peanut butter," sucked her fist momentarily, then began to read the creation before her. Half way through the reading, she began to laugh uncontrollably. Dancing around the study, jumping mercilessly on the crumpled pieces of blank paper that still lay on the floor, Kristin began to sing.

"I am a writer, a writer, a writer...I'm a writer, oh yeah. I am a writer, I am a writer...a writer I am, oh sam I am, I am a writer, yes a writer...I am--"

Suddenly stopping her joyous song and dance, Kristin stood silently in the middle of the room. Her serious look returned, and she stood for several minutes. Then mumbling to herself, she shrugged her shoulders, walked over to her desk, grabbed her pencil and a crumpled piece of blank paper and wrote:

Dear Bill,

I quit!

Sincerely,
Kristin
Folding the paper over three times, she placed it in an envelope, sealed it, addressed it, and then sat it down on the desk next to the paper which was far from blank. Resuming her song and dance, a far from blank Kristin could be heard for hours.

"A writer I am, oh sam, I am. I am a writer, a writer, a writer, oh yeah...I am a writer, uh huh. I'm a writer, I'm a writer, a wr--"
You Are

In the bleakest moment of my day
When my heart grieved and groaned
Wringing in pain
Wishing to be stone
When deep from within my desperate soul
Came cries of torment and of deadly despair

When I turned and found my life a lie

It was then,
In that dark and enlightening
Moment of eternity,
It was then that I found you.

Some say you do not exist,
Yet you took my hand in your own
Grasping the fingers of my heart
With a gentle and guiding grip.
Yes, you exist.
Yes, you are real.

Some say you do not care,
Yet you reached down deep to the pit inside,
Down to the depths and you filled me
With yourself.
Love, joy, peace—such sentimental
And surprisingly detested qualities—
All are mine,
Serenely sustaining, thunderously thrilling.

Some say you are a mere force,
A power possessed by all creation,
Yet your presence shines forth uniquely,
The sole source for all of life.
You are everywhere, yet everywhere is not you.

Some say much.
Some say nothing.
Someday all will know you
And all will believe.
My heart grieves for those who
Cannot see
And feel
And perceive
Your personality.

Daddy,
Savior,
Spirit,
In the quiet of night you have stilled my soul.
In the morning light I play in the pasture of plenty.
Your watchful eye and guiding gaze give me life.

Beside restful waters my soul lies down.
Pieces of My Heart

I

Pain, Pain
Go away
Come again
Some other day

(I'm tired of this feeling)

III

I want to scream
I want to cry
I want to know
the reason why

Thrashing thoughts
Fill my mind,
Wrestle with my soul.

(Order is only skin deep today)

V

Broken heart
Feel the pain
If you try to love again.

Wounded inner core
Shut your door and
Bleed no more.

(Please--no more, no more!)

VII

I dash myself upon a Rock--
I lie in a heap
My nose against
Beautiful feet.

A cloud breaks over head
And water washes my
Heart and Soul--
I am made whole.

VIII

Still even in the midst
Of such a cloud of
Awesome presence,
I cannot deny,
No, I cannot lie:
I am real
And so is pain.
It will come again.
Though I am set
On a mountain peak,
I will also dig ditches;
I will eat out of
The troughs of pigs;
What goes up must
Come down.

IX

I look forward to the day
When I will look back and say:
My lowly life,
Though peppered with strife
And salted with joy,
Was worth the fight.

(Oh what an eternal high--
The ultimate soul rush)

XI

Yet I must also
Live in the present,
Wingless and waiting
Knowing and unknowing
Feeling and unfeeling
Trapped inside of my mind
As scabs drop off my heart
And leave as signs, scars.

XII

Broken heart
Feel the pain
When you try
To love again.

XIII

Pain, pain
Go away
Come again
Some other day.
"You never take care of yourself."

She looked guiltily down at her broken fingernails and her fingers smudged with fingerpaint. Strange the voice should still sound so familiar in her head. After six months, she still found herself hearing its deep, provocative sounds.

The quiet accusation pulsing somewhere from within her breast, she tapped her fingers against the cold windowpane where she found herself standing. Her eyes looked out into the cold of winter, seeming to perceive the wooded world of reality taken captive by icy fingers. Dead, yet bursting with life within.

Turning away from the window, her face almost overcome by shadows, yet partially illuminated with the sly, flickering light of a homemade candle, she twisted her fingers in thick cords of burnished red.

"I love your hair. Have you ever thought of having it styled?"

Her fingers leapt from their captor as if just burned, hesitated as if frozen in midair for a moment, then fell, as if dead, against her denim-clad thigh. But death lasted for only a moment. Still alive with nervous energy, her hand searched for a hiding place, finally working itself into the security and warmth of denim. Yet, even the pocket could not still the nervous movement, as her fingers found something to wrap themselves around.
"Your face would look quite becoming if you wore large earrings."

Dropping the shiny hoop to the ground, she fidgeted again, this time pulling anxiously on her soft, virgin ear-lobes. Even though the earring had never been worn—or perhaps because it had never been worn—it seemed to possess a certain unsettling power.

She cupped her cowering hands over her ears to keep the voice from whispering its loud suggestions. She knew the voice, knew it well, but where did it come from? Not from the outside wind, nor from the heavy mountain air inside the cabin.

Thoughts, voices, and feelings raced, shaved, and flickered against and within her shapely body. Even with her now damp palms over her ears, she did not find silence or comfort.

"You would look good with some more color in your cheeks...you'd look lovely with a lively, green scarf around your face...I love you...how about some wine...would you like to dance...it's perfectly harmless...I won't bite...please wear this necklace—it was my mother's...I love...your figure...it's perfect for the latest fashions...you could wear a skirt like that...would you dare...I...for me...you are the most wonderful woman...don't ever change...love....how about this hat...your bonnet is at the cleaner's...such lovely hair...why hide it...a nice cut would bring even more life to your hair...love...love...for me...love...for me...I...would you...please...love...love...me--"

She found herself on her knees with her head hanging low.
After a few full moments, she instinctively began raising her eyes and her chin, until she found herself looking intently at framed strangers on the wall.

Two people stood close by each other, looking worlds apart. The man, tall and slender and athletic, smiled openly and with great confidence. He was dressed casually, yet his clothes hung with the grace of wealth and fastidiousness. A bright gold watch sparkled on his wrist even in the darkness of the candle-lit room. The woman wore a colorless cotton dress which hung loosely down to her ankles. Her mouth was turned up in a polite manner, but her eyes, almost shyly, seemed to avoid the camera. A colorless bonnet adorned her head, hiding her hair and overshadowing her complexion. No jewelry lit up her dull figure; however, something inexplicable did seem to emanate from within her motionless figure.

The woman on her knees gazed unwaveringly at the oddness of the woman on the wall. Locked into the picture, she forced herself to blink, pulling her vision downward. As she stared at the dull, brown carpet, she attempted to make sense of her perceptions. Deciding the oddness was only an illusion caused by the weakly flickering candle-light, she rose to her feet, consciously avoiding the picture on the wall.

Clasping and unclasping her hands together, she turned away from the dark, corner of the room towards the warmth of a wood-burning stove. Opening the stove’s steel door, she noticed that only a few sparks were alive in the piece of singed wood. Her
hands eagerly grasped the metal rod and began stirring up a stronger flame. Then, as she turned to get some more wood, she felt her eyes caught by other eyes--eyes which did not avoid, but which stared searchingly, unashamedly. Reeled in by the image, she stood riveted before the mirror on the wall opposite the picture.

Lifting her hands, she touched with ten fingers the cold, smooth face in the mirror. She slid her fingers slowly off the glass and dropped them limply to her side, only to have them return, moments later, to wipe hot tears from a warm face. Burying her face in her hands, she stood silently in the darkness.

Sometime later, she slowly lowered her hands to her sides, and stooped to blow out the candle. Pausing outside a small, dark room, she heard only the steady rising and falling of her young daughter's breath. Murmuring a prayer of thanks, she thought of freedom and its sweetness. Twice bound, once and for all free, she bathed in the peace of her eternal lover who sustained her with His truth. Then, wrapping a blanket around herself, she quietly stretched out on the old, springless couch which had only been hers, and fell asleep.
Bum Rap

The humdrum bum
with the wornout boots
and rundown brooms
hears the drone
of the lives of those
that pass him slowly by.

Some look and see
only shag and shab
never gazing past
his tattered bag.

Others glance with pitiful
eyes tinged with tears;
they give him a dime
bid him good cheer,
good riddance, and goodbye,
and trip away with a lighter
step and conscience cleared.

It is the rare one
who sees beyond the
dirt and grime,
who spies into his mind
which thinks, his spirit
which breathes, hearing
his heart which beats
and marches on
with pounding feet
to the beat of
a love song.

The heart of his song is
a story of what once was.
Its tune will tell,
indeed it will compel,
a vision of loss.
The phone rang and Lisa jumped gleefully up.

"I'll get it!" Her voice carried throughout the two-story home which appeared warm and inviting. It was decorated with warm tones--rich reds, greens, and browns--and was lit by the brilliant sun shining through the windows. The many pictures of a smiling family of three dispersed about added to the home's cheerful atmosphere.

Lisa herself fit nicely into the atmosphere as her warm brown eyes sparkled while her young face seemed to shine with the glow of youthful enthusiasm. She answered the phone cheerful and expectant.

"Hello. Robin?"

As the sun outside disappeared momentarily behind a cloud, Lisa's face lost its glow. Dark and somber shadows fell across Lisa's now grim face. The voice on the other line was not her young friend Robin, and the day was no longer carefree.

Her mother was dead.

The call was not entirely unforeshadowed, as her mother had been in the hospital for nearly two weeks. The cardiac arrest had been a particularly bad one, yet the doctor had given the family much hope. In fact, she had only yesterday told Lisa and her father that they could expect the missing part of their complete family home within the week.

Now, with the knowledge that her mother would never come home again, Lisa felt numb.
Life no longer seemed fair. Her mother had been the most loving and giving mother, wife, and friend. Hot, steamy tears coursed down Lisa's smooth face as she remembered the words her mother had uttered only one day earlier.

"Lisi, you've grown so beautiful. I'm so proud to have you as a daughter." Squeezing her daughter's hand tightly, she smiled a warm smile which belied the fact that she had recently undergone heart surgery. "God will get us through this, honey. God will always get us through hard times. Remember that, Lisi, no matter what happens in your life." She paused momentarily, then rushed on, "Well enough talk like that. I am certain that you're going to turn out to be a beautiful young woman. Your future is so bright."

Lisa had simply smiled at her mother. Everything had, only a short time earlier, seemed optimistic to her. She had wonderful, caring parents. She was one of the top students in her high school class. And she was popular with the boys who admired her long dark hair and slender form, as well as with the girls who found her "fun" to be around. Nothing had ever happened to sour her youthful vigor and hope. Nothing until her mother's death.

***

As Lisa's faith teetered in the balance, she turned to her father. But he had changed, and changed quickly at that. After
the funeral, his tears had miraculously dried up. Too quickly, it seemed to Lisa, and, even more disconcerting to her, he did not return to his former loving, fatherly demeanor. Instead, he grew more and more distant. He started coming home later and later from work each day, leaving Lisa to eat supper alone in her own brooding silence. Eventually, Lisa grew to expect him not to arrive home until early morning, if even then. The only time Lisa was certain to see him was each Sunday morning. He still insisted that they both go to church. So they went, as father and daughter, masquerading as happy and intimate father and daughter. In the car the father was quiet and foreboding, turning on the radio whenever Lisa would try to talk. But once in church, he smiled and laughed and squeezed Lisa's shoulder and bragged about what a wonderful daughter she was.

At first she resisted going along with the performance. Disgusted and disdainful, she would simply walk away from her father and sit somewhere else. But, after a while, she found herself so void of emotion, or at least so used to suppressing emotion, that she simply withstood the act, mechanically smiling and laughing as if on cue.

And so it came to be with Lisa and her father. At first, Lisa made attempts to connect, to relate, to save their once seemingly healthy father-daughter relationship. She had tried to talk, tried to understand and sympathize, even tried to empathize with her father. But he had shut himself off completely from her, and, with no logical reason, or so it seemed to Lisa. Every
time she would talk, he would make no sign that he had heard her, but he would simply turn and leave the room, or sometimes, the house. Never did he smile, yell, cry. He would just simply leave—leaving Lisa to contend, alone, with her emotions, her confusion. And to Lisa, life had become no longer real or exciting or hopeful, but instead had grown disillusioning and unfair and dismal. And it seemed only to get worse with each passing day.

About six weeks after her mother’s death, once Lisa had given up trying to talk to her father and had given up resisting his church "performances," she began her silent pleas. She began by occasionally missing curfew by an hour or two, then, when her father seemed not to notice or care, she started staying out all night from time to time. Eventually, she herself would be gone for two days or maybe even three. She knew he had to know, had to be aware—though he was coming home late, he still generally did come home, if even just to shower before work. And, a few times, Lisa, when staying away herself, had passed by the outside of the house late at night just to see if he was there. Usually, he was. Yet he never said a word to Lisa.

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The day Lisa brought home her first report card after her mother’s death perhaps resulted in the most fatal blow. Lisa, who had been an active ‘A’ student all of her school days, placed
on the kitchen table the grade card which boasted of two D's and three F's. It was in full view for her father to see when he would come home, if he came home, late that night.

Lisa was wide-awake in bed that night, waiting, when her father did, in fact, come home. She didn't know exactly what she was waiting for, but did so with a sense of expectation. Yet, she heard only her father as he fixed himself a cup of coffee, lingered downstairs for a while, then traversed softly up the stairs to go to sleep. She waited several moments, then cautiously crept down the oak steps. With each creak, she expected to hear her father's voice bellowing admonishment at her. But she heard only silence. Empty silence.

"Maybe he didn't even see it." She spoke the words softly into the air, not quite believing herself.

When she walked into the kitchen, the grade card was nowhere in sight. He had seen it. Looking for signs of anger or at least emotion of some sort, she scanned the kitchen several times over, seeing nothing. Nothing until by chance she averted her gaze to look in the kitchen trash can. There, tossed idly in with a used coffee filter, was her report card. Leaving the report card in the trash can, Lisa turned and went to bed.

Lisa began cutting classes and staying away from the house even more. She began purposefully staying away on Sundays. Yet her father never said a word to her, not about anything. They were living two separate lives, as strangers, never speaking, not seeming to care, just existing in the same house, under the same
It was after one of the many times that Lisa had not been in the house for several days when she discovered the locks changed and some of her burlap bag which contained only the meagerest of her possessions. Her father had taken the final action of his abandonment. And Lisa was not surprised. When she finally turned to leave, there was only a new finality about her departure. A finality and the familiar emptiness.

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The pervading emptiness was maddening. Her stomach was crying out for food, but she had no money. Before, she had always eaten at home or she had stolen money from her father in order to eat when she planned to be away from the house for a few days. And, of course, there were her friends. But she had already decided that she would not visit again visit any of her friends. She was homeless, and she didn’t want pity or "handouts" from any of them. The void she felt left her without any sense of love or affection. She knew no one wanted her.

She began to walk down the street much more briskly, trying to outrun her hunger, but more importantly, trying to conceal the fact that she had nowhere to go. She strode into every record shop she came across, diligently checking through the bins of albums for a certain one which, it appeared, she could not find.

"May I help you?" the clerk asked.
albums for a certain one which, it appeared, she could not find.

"May I help you?" the clerk asked.

"I'm looking for 'Ride the Lightning,' a Metallica album."

The clerk briefly searched the racks and then said, "We can order it for you, if you'd like."

"No thanks. I need it today." Lisa turned and walked away.

She repeated a similar process at least five times that afternoon, always searching for an album that she knew was not in stock. Later in the day, she began searching for a rare poster of Eric Clapton.

"I've seen it before. I know I have. He's looking up into a purple sky and pointing at a blood-red sun."

Freshly exiled from her father's house, she needed a purpose. A mission. She needed to keep herself busy to stay off the emptiness of hunger and loneliness that threatened to engulf her at every turn, if she slowed down, if she started to think.

Evening came and with it a chilling wind. Driven inside by the cold, she sat in a rundown pizza joint and pretended to wait for someone. Every time the young man behind the counter would look at her, Lisa would pretend to be goodnaturedly upset.

"I can't believe they stood me up. What friends! Well, I'll give them fifteen more minutes."

Two hours later, still sitting alone, the young man offered her a pizza. "It doesn't look like they're coming, eh? Well, you must be hungry--how about eating anyway?"

"No, I'm really not all that hungry. I guess I'll just take
asked her to wait. "Hey, why don't you just eat this pizza? It's a small one and--"
  "No, I can't--"
  "Please do. It's a mistake and if my boss comes in and sees it, he'll kick my butt for sure. Please."

So Lisa filled her empty stomach with the pizza, then reluctantly stepped out into the outside world once again. The chill was not nearly as biting for her with a full stomach, yet she was tired and had no idea where she could sleep. She had never before seriously thought about where people who had no homes slept. She had seen people curled up on sidewalks, in alleys, but had never considered the possibility that someday she might be one of them. Fear and loneliness began to wrap cold fingers around her heart.

She wandered through the dimly lit streets feeling more alone than ever. Every now and then, she'd see a drunk man or woman toddle out into the street from one of the many rundown taverns. One man caught sight of her and addressed her.

"Hey, missy. How about it? I got the money, if you've got the time. Turn some tricks for me, will ya?"

He had gotten close enough to her so that she could smell his alcohol-ridden breath. She wanted to vomit at the smell and at the thought of spending the night anywhere near the wildly grinning man.

He sensed her disgust and grabbed her wrist. "Come on now, sweetie. I just want to have a little fun. You're not going to
"turn me down now, are ya?" His voice had grown imperative and his hand tightened around her wrist. He leaned towards her, as if to kiss her, but she spat in his face. Taken by surprise, he stepped backwards a few steps. She jerked her arm away from him and began to run, leaving him behind as he violently cursed obscenities at her.

Lisa ran blindly as if the old man were following her. The business buildings became apartment complexes, and the complexes became rundown houses. The threat of the man was gone, yet Lisa didn't stop until she stumbled on a piece of broken sidewalk. Falling forward on her knees, she stopped her fall with her outstretched arms. Kneeling on the ground, Lisa hung her head in scratched and bleeding hands. After a few long moments, she got up and she wandered into a nearby park, where she curled up on a cold, hard bench and fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

She awoke with the first sign of morning light, her stomach clenching in mutiny and her muscles sore and tired. Lisa figured that she had probably sprinted three or four miles to get to the park where she now lay. Frightened by the realization of having slept outside all night in a wide open and dark park, she began to plan what she would do during the day. She had to do something, she knew. She couldn't go on as she was--it was too dangerous.

She decided she would get a job. Maybe she could make enough money to buy food and rent a small apartment. Clinging to the first thread of hope that she'd felt in days, she set out
with a meaningful purpose.

The walk back to the business area of town was a long one, but Lisa really didn’t mind. The air was warm and the soft breeze was comforting. Her hunger forgotten at least temporarily, Lisa’s hope grew, replacing despair.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the "help wanted" sign hanging in the window of a crude building. She forced a smile as she opened the door of the rundown laundromat and walked in. A middle-aged, balding man was busy cleaning the lint out of a washing machine. When he heard the door open, he glanced over at her and continued cleaning.

Still smiling, she cleared her throat loudly. "Sir?"

He turned a stony face at her, looking at her with pensive eyes.

Lisa’s courage started to falter as she found herself speaking brokenly. "Uh...I’d like to...um...uh...I saw your help wanted sign...and I...uh.."

Without warning the man seemed to explode with fury. "I wish you damned street kids would just leave me alone! Help wanted! Yeah, I need help, but I sure as hell don’t want the likes of you around here. If I were to hire you, I’d have a dozen or more street punks hanging around here selling dope and tearing things up. I want help all right, but I don’t want you!" With that, he turned abruptly and stalked towards the pay phone hanging on the wall near the door. Not looking at her, with his back turned, he threatened her with quiet yet forceful words.
"If you don’t get off my property, I’m going to call the police and have them haul you off to some juvenile detention center, where you belong."

Lisa was outside in the cool air before he finished his last sentence. Tears threatening to spill out of her eyes, she caught a glance of herself in a window and saw how disheveled and dirty she must have looked to the man.

"No wonder," she thought, "I look hideous." Yet the more she thought about the man’s cutting words, the angrier she became. "He had no right to say those things." But as she walked and brooded over his words, she found that deep down she believed every word to be gospel truth.

She decided to clean herself up. In the uninviting bathroom of a gas station, she rinsed her face with cold water and then decided to brush her hair. Reaching into her bag for the hairbrush, her hand felt the leather texture of the Bible. She pulled it out and stared at it for a few moments. Opening it with shaking hands, she saw the familiar writing of her father and mother.

To Lisa May, our pride and joy,
May God richly bless you.
Love,
Mom and Dad

Hot tears spilled out onto her face. She dropped the Bible to the floor. As she stood motionless in the dull bathroom,
emotion began to rise up within her. Shaking with fury, she rammed her hand into the cement wall. Oblivious to the pain spreading warmly throughout her hand, she kicked the Bible against the wall, then picked it up and began ripping pages out of it. Minutes later, her fury subsided and she simply cried, her head leaning against the cold, hard wall. She didn’t know how long she stood there, but she didn’t move until someone began pounding on the door.

"Hey, come on! I’ve been waiting for almost ten minutes! This is ridiculous!"

Leaving the Bible and its ripped pages on the floor, Lisa opened the door to find a short, stocky woman glaring at her and muttering something like "It’s about time."

Lisa looked past the woman and walked away, but not without saying flatly, "God bless."

Lisa did not again try to find a job. Believing no "help wanted" sign could apply to her, she instead resolved herself to being what the furious man in the laundromat had accused her of being—a "street punk."

When she walked into the well-know hangout for street kids, she felt nervous and afraid. Looking at the floor, she stumbled over to an empty table and sat alone. When she finally allowed herself to look around, she watched with curiosity and in fear, as street kids came and went. She sat for hours, alone, just staring, trying to fight off the icy panic that threatened to make her legs immobile and to frost her sides—the panic was
caused by her realization that she was now indeed one of them.

In the chiseled young faces around her, she saw a hard-core, cool stance that seemed to boast, "I can survive in this messed up, ugly world." The more she stared at them, the more she was drawn to them. She wanted to believe--needed to believe--that she, too, could walk these streets without terror, without confusion. She didn’t ponder the possibility that perhaps underneath their masks they were feeling exactly what she felt now.

"Hey, Foolman," one long-haired boy said, while greeting the other with a handshake that looked more like an airborne arm wrestle. They all had street names: Angel, Coon, Lucky, Hamlet, King, Jailbird.

She liked the anonymity which suggested to her freedom from the past, control over the future. As she stared more and more openly, she allowed herself to become noticeable, and a pretty young girl with long blonde hair which hung in her eyes walked up to her and asked, "New here? Where you from? I’m Shadow."

"San Francisco," Lisa said quietly, shyly. Then, "I’m Reality." She was only from the local suburbs, but the lie and the name gave her the illusion of protection and power.

Several weeks passed and Lisa became hard-core herself. Her own cool mask served her so well that she rarely felt safe enough to take it off. It didn’t take long for Lisa to lose touch with the parts of herself that the mask was designed to protect. The parts of her that might still trust, love, hope. She became even
more entrenched in loneliness and despair behind the cool and unconcerned mask.

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Lisa was cold underneath the thin jean jacket that allowed the brisk wind to chill her bones. And she was hungry. Very hungry. Usually, the burning hunger in the pit of her stomach lasted only for a short time, a dull ache, leaving her feeling empty until she could find some scraps of food in the trash cans she would scavage through, or until someone would give her a handout which she would reluctantly accept. Lisa had only prostituted herself twice for money for food, as she had found prostitution repulsive and demeaning. Feeling as unwanted by others as she did, she still had respect for herself. She was also able to stay out of the drug scene, buying or selling. Somehow drugs seemed like a coward's escape, so she learned to cope with the hunger.

Yet today she was hungrier than usual. And the hunger would not dull. It continued with its sharp pangs that knifed through her stomach, through what seemed her whole being.

Growing desperate, she approached the rundown building located down the street from the hangout. She had never wanted to go there. She knew others who had gone, but she had vowed to stay away. Now, driven by an overwhelming hunger, she contemplated breaking the vow.
"I'll just eat something and get the hell out," she told herself. "I won't stay long enough for anything else."

The mission looked as pitiful as all the other buildings on the street, paint chipping, boards cracking—the signs of poverty were evident. Yet as Lisa walked inside the doorway, and pulled shut the door which didn't shut all the way, she felt warm. The warmth didn’t seem to come from the heat, but seemed to have a different source. Somewhat taken back, Lisa contemplated leaving, but before she could turn, a short, grey-headed woman had spotted her and was approaching her quickly, a smile spread across her wrinkled face.

"Hi there, honey. I bet you’re hungry. Come right this way and we’ll get plenty of good, hot food in that thin body of yours. Goodness, I remember when I was that thin—well, almost that thin—but I’m sure not thin anymore." She chuckled and patted her rotund abdomen.

Lisa followed the woman who continued to chatter on. No questions were asked of Lisa as she ate the most filling and appetizing meal that she'd had for months, since before her mother had died. After the meal, Lisa quickly got up to leave. The woman merely smiled and squeezed Lisa’s limp hand.

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After that visit, Lisa made several visits to the mission, always receiving food and warmth as the winter winds became
bitter at night and food became more difficult to find. She did not become a regular as some of the others did, mainly because she was proud. She also feared becoming soft. In her world, survival only came to the strongest and most tenacious. Eating handouts, to Lisa, was not a sign of strength. Yet sometimes intense hunger drove her to humble herself, and, on several occasions, she did visit the mission. And always, there were no questions asked besides a simple "Hungry?" to which Lisa never answered. She would simply nod her head and follow the woman to the food.

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One cold, February day, Lisa found herself, for the first time, tempted to hope, tempted to trust. She was eating at the mission and the same grey-haired lady that always ushered her in was there, chatting away as usual, smiling with her eyes and mouth, gesturing frantically as she spoke. Lisa finished the last of the hot coffee and allowed herself to look at the woman—to look directly at her—for the first time.

The woman noticed the stare and seemed rather surprised. Ceasing her chatter, she simply stared back. "Still hungry?"

Lisa couldn't help but notice the spark in the woman's soft eyes, the life with seemed to ebb from within her. So unlike the deadness, the emptiness which she saw in the eyes of her street friends, in the eyes which looked back at her each time she gazed