

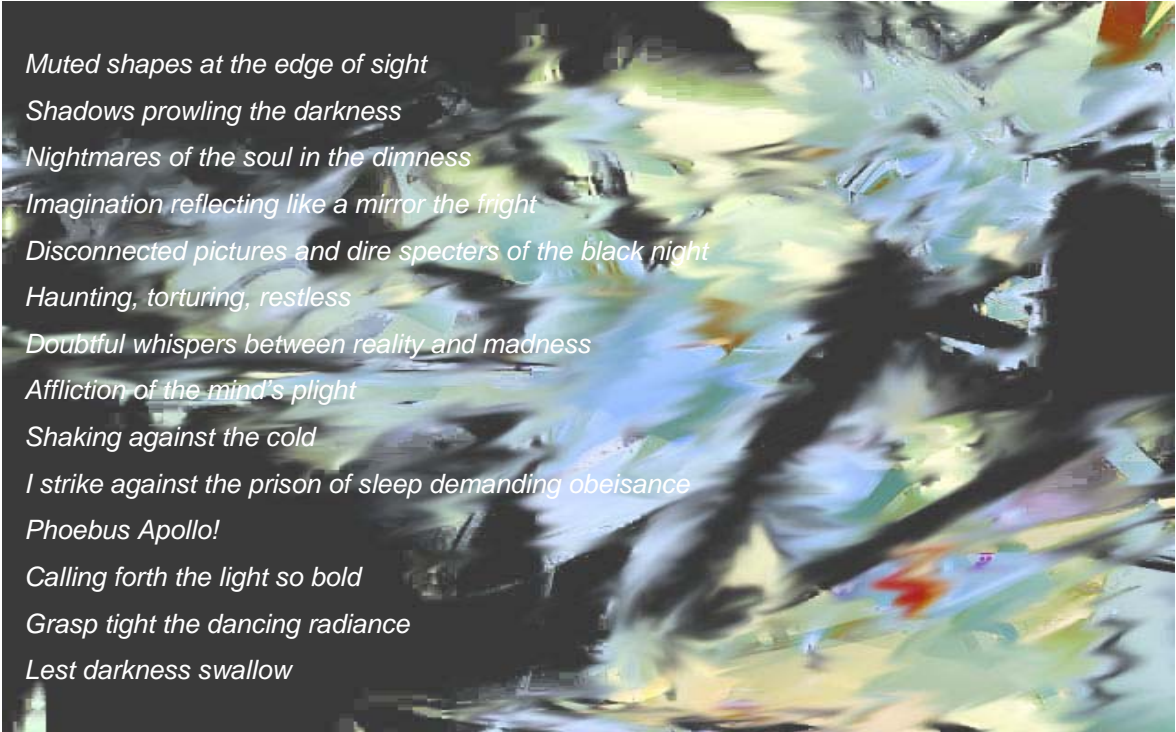
Looking Past the Dirty Window

By Gay Stahr

It was the year of the Olympics in Atlanta. The year of the unimaginable Olympic park bomber terror. The Macarena was popular, Charles and Di divorced, and Dolly the sheep was cloned. I had forgotten these things even happened until now, looking back into the past. This was a time I felt disconnected from the world and from myself...through the fog of my clouded mind I faintly heard one of my children ask me "Are you OK Mom?" "Yes", I replied as I struggled to come out of my stupor. Was I really? No. But I had to appear to be. What caused me to be like this you ask? It was the year my mother passed.

I remember standing at her graveside, the drone of the minister's eulogy vaguely humming in the back of my mind as I looked on the surrealistic scene. It seemed like only moments ago that I had ridden horseback through this very place as a kid, growing up on a farm just down the way. Here the black tarred road twists dangerously sharp in an s-curve around the cemetery, cutting blindly through the hill. It was safer to ride down the center of the graveyard on the dirt and gravel path than attempt to travel the road. The great, sentinel-like oak trees are old here, they remember much. They have seen much. There are many aged and sun-bleached headstones so old that the engravings have long been worn away by the elements. This is a small community cemetery far out in the countryside surrounded by rolling hills and farms. A peaceful place. A nice place to rest. My focus comes back to the scene before me as the minister's closing coincides with my thoughts "May she rest in peace."

The next week is spent sorting through our mother's things. I vaguely remember doing this. Mom had set out pretty well how she wanted things split but it was the little things that caused the most pain..."Who gets the old crock set?" "Who gets the pea salad bowl?" "Who gets the potato salad bowl?" Seemingly inconsequential items but they hold many memories of family holidays and get-to-togethers. Memories of mom's cooking. Memories of happy segments in time. Memories before leukemia. Such an exotic word, isn't it? Sounds innocuous, charming even. But it's a dark word. It holds an icy grip of dread in the night, haunting the mind, disturbing my sleep.



*Muted shapes at the edge of sight
Shadows prowling the darkness
Nightmares of the soul in the dimness
Imagination reflecting like a mirror the fright
Disconnected pictures and dire specters of the black night
Haunting, torturing, restless
Doubtful whispers between reality and madness
Affliction of the mind's plight
Shaking against the cold
I strike against the prison of sleep demanding obeisance
Phoebus Apollo!
Calling forth the light so bold
Grasp tight the dancing radiance
Lest darkness swallow*

And so the days go on, the calendar relentless in its march toward the future. I return to work after the allotted bereavement leave only to find out that the company is downsizing and I no longer have a job. "Hope you had a good time during your time off." They said. "What the fuck? My mind screams. "Don't they realize what I what I just went through?!" "Are they insane!?" But I look at them through bewildered glazed eyes and force a pseudo smile to my tightly drawn lips and nod mechanically while I numbly listen to their inane list of reasons the company must do this and that it's actually a good thing for the public and their service to them. Without sensation in my mind or my body, I sign their non-disclosure forms and agree to leave quietly. In a fog I drive home and collapse on the couch. "What next!?" A question you really shouldn't ask if you truly don't want an answer.

Not knowing what to do with myself I took a temporary job through a staffing agency. Mindlessly plodding through day after day, just doing my tasks with no passion or feeling like a good little automaton. One day I get a call from my twin sister. "Hey! Want to come to Georgia?" "Georgia?" I ask. "Why?" My sister doesn't have any family down there to help her through the grief and I didn't have a job. Sounds like a good idea! In this reflection of the past, I realize now it was just a good excuse to escape. Rationalizing it to myself and to my fiancé John, we agreed it would be a good thing to do. Lying to ourselves, we even considered making a real move to Georgia. "I'll check out the housing and job markets while I'm down there honey. Maybe things will be better than here. Sounded good too. [shrug]"

Georgia. The peach state. Hoping to find the sweet nectar of change to be the catalyst that would amend my life, I went down to become a Georgia peach. The plan of course was to stay with my sister so we could "help each other heal from our loss." Did this work? Of course not! In the beginning though, the prospects looked good in Atlanta and I had located several good areas to buy a house so I put my Illinois house up for sale. BUT, and you knew there had to be one, my sister couldn't get along with my fiancé and we argued heatedly for days because she wouldn't even let him in the house when he came to visit me. I moved out.

My house finally sold so I was expecting John to join me in Georgia. Remember? We wanted to start a new, better life? Only this didn't happen. He found a much younger girl with red hair, he liked red hair, that he wanted to start his *better* life with. "I want children" he said. His own children that is. My son and daughter are from a previous marriage and I no longer can have more. He knew this seven years ago when we became a couple! "What the hell!?" I packed up my things *again* and went back home to Illinois to try and start over. Alone.

I lost my mother, I lost my job, I lost my relationship with my twin sister, and I lost the man I had been with for the last seven years. Believe me, I didn't ask "What next?!" this time! No wonder my mind put this year behind such blurriness so I couldn't see it clearly, looking at it like a stranger through a dirty glass window from the outside. Nothing really standing out. Shadows of a time best forgotten.

Now, forcing myself to travel back through this period I see there was much more on the other side of the glass than I realized. I also see now how this time has so greatly affected who I am, why I became reclusive, not letting anyone in to become too close, too involved. However, I have reconciled with my sister and I value the relationship even more. Writing all this down, putting it out there in the light of day, helps me to reconnect with my past and recognize the only way to continue moving forward is to know where I've been so I'm not traveling the road that cuts blindly through the hill.