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Foreign Fists and Foreign Words

Erin Johnson

At times I wished my father were a drunk
so later he could give me an excuse
for kicks that made me quake beneath my bunk
until I fell asleep among the shoes...

Gennefa Jonker

“Love thine enemy”, the old proverb says, but there’s quite a difference between loving your enemy and the enemy being someone you love. When such a person is doing terrible things, we want a reason for what is happening, an explanation for the pain caused. The beginning lines of “A Daughter’s Lament” by Geneffa Jonker are already telling us that the voice of the poet doesn’t have a solution for the problem it poses, and that immediately grips the reader. The abuse of a child by a parental figure and its far reaching affects, as well as the issues of familial relations, culture, love, hate, grief and racism, are all topics dealt with lyrically and deftly in this deceptively simple poem. Even when abuse is verbal or mental, the damage remains like a canker to war with guilt and anger for the rest of the victim’s days.

It is a common problem found the world over, whether a family is dealing with abuse issues or because of changing times: parents must watch their offspring grow up with new values, ambitions, and even morals. Each generation grows up into a world the parents may not understand, and in some cases never will. Jonker herself relates that her poem reflects her own experience growing up in England where hers was the only Indian family in the neighborhood. Abuse issues, especially for immigrants who come to a new place with a different culture, pose their own set of special problems. Indeed, statistics state that immigrant women and their children are often the most trapped in abusive situations. Jonker’s father himself was the son of an immigrant, and was also abused, causing him to run away to England. Why the pattern repeats is a terrible mystery that can often be broken only with great difficulty. Immigrant families can even become isolated by cultural dynamics that accept abuse (dcdadv.org). In many households, abuse can become a form of power play, a grasp for power in a world where the perpetrator has no other sense of control.

This poem is specifically written in the style of a sonnet, a meter that has an almost nursery rhyme-like rhythm, and is also, interestingly enough, a rigidly controlled form. It draws the reader in even as it prepares to hurl images at his or her head, much like the situation it speaks of. In my research I found that many poems about child abuse follow a very structured meter and a predilection for simple and repetitive rhythm. Most of them deal with themes of confusion and anger, leading to a sense of burden later in life. For example, in Jonker’s middle section, she writes

And other times I wished he were in jail
in some forsaken dungeon dank and cold
alone and crazy, there his fists would fail,

This seems to be a perfectly normal thing for an abused child to wish or think,

however the next few lines are so unexpected, they make the reader take pause; for why would a victim grieve for their aggressor's decline?

but in reality he just grew old
too fast.

Eventually, abused children will grow up; eventually their parents will age and decline. How does one meet the terror of her childhood when the aggressors are old and weak and their towering rage has become a cantankerous wheeze that, though less fearful, still has the power to cut? In an anonymous poem "What Do You Do When Your Mother Is Crazy?" found on a site for abuse victims (poemsforfree.com), one author poses what seems to be a common conundrum:

What do you do when you find her repulsive
And the best of your memories are tinted with pain?
And now she is old, and she needs to be near you,
And you cannot stand to be near her again?

It seems that the familial relationship becomes even more of a burden when the abused child finds him or herself confronted with a parent who, at the end of their days, needs their child's care, and even more painfully, an often unvoiced plea for forgiveness. How can a person meet such a request? With recrimination? With patience? Or with pity? The answer Jonker gives us is: with perspective, or at least a bit of understanding. Though the last lines of her poem do talk about pity, they don't lose their anger or triumph. Growing up or older and finally being able to realize some of the struggles her father went through, doesn't make the deeds disappear, but it adds another burden: that of understanding. Jonker, in the end, is able to pass out of the shadow of that world and into one where he, and what he represents, cannot follow, but the matter is far from resolved. It seems the only weapon that can be used, finally, is to remind the abuser of his powerlessness.

For though he thought to subjugate his young,
We learned to curse him in a foreign tongue.

The last lines are triumphant, but they have a bite, and the marks of it remain with the reader much longer than you'd think. Their anger, and the sorrow of the hopeless chasm they represent, lingers like a bruise that doesn't fade, just like the father's past actions and the dark history they express. Not all marks of wounding can be seen, and some can't be healed, but as Jonker's voice so eloquently tells us, they can be expressed and conquered by words.

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Alexander's Legacy: The Heart of Life

Judy Ryan

*Read not to contradict...nor to believe,
...but to weigh and consider*
Francis Bacon: Essays, 'Of Studies'

Books, in some form, trace back over five thousand years into antiquity. Babylonians wrote on clay tablets, Egyptians penned codices on papyrus, the Jews prayed their *Torah* from inscribed holy scrolls while the Greeks wrote plays, treatises, and poetry on parchment book-rolls. After Alexander the Great, who considered himself a God, snatched Egypt from the Persians, he founded a great city and named it, Alexandria. It was built as his magnificent seaport capital on the Mediterranean. From here, Alexander of Macedonia, conqueror of the Greek city-states, and the Persian Empire from Asia Minor to India, planned to rule his empire. He meant Alexandria to become the center-the heart-of all the world's learning and culture. Nine years later, Alexander died. He was thirty-three years old (Hornblower 30).

In her poem, *The Library at Alexandria*, Debra Spencer vividly describes how Alexander's ambitious heirs, the Ptolemaic dynasty, aspired, and for a time, fulfilled his impossible dream.

We know what lies at the heart of life
and have built our city around it...
where we keep the world in books...
no city so unique, no people
so favored by fortune.
...Our marble walls, the Nile,
our tiled roofs and stone canals surround these books.

They were so confident that 'books' with ideas and stories had to be savored, reread and shared as the essence of life. So they set about fortifying their city to house and protect these great treasures. They were convinced that the Gods had favored them, chosen them, above all others, to collect and house all the world's knowledge inside marble walls beside the Nile at Alexandria.

The original reason to have a library was to be for, "the purpose of aiding the maintenance of Greek civilization"(Bolling 1). However, early success fed the Pharaoh's growing appetite for power. A universal library at Alexandria containing, 'the books of all the peoples of the world' was envisioned. "Ptolemy composed a letter 'to all the sovereigns and governors on earth' imploring them 'not to hesitate to send works by authors of every kind: poets and prose-writers, rhetoricians and sophists, doctors and soothsayers, historians, and all the others too'"(Canfora 20). Ships visiting Alexandria were forced to relinquish their scrolls and accept copies. To keep his rivals from competing with 'his' universal library, Ptolemy even prohibited the export of papyrus, the most popular material used for writing(Bolling 1). "The Ptolemies and their librarians set out not only to collect every book in the world, but to translate them all into Greek" (Canfora 24). They wanted it all.

Their ambitious efforts produced the fabled Library at Alexandria. A century-and-a-half later, the library's collection was estimated at 700,000 book-rolls(Bolling

1). In the poem we are given a tempting glimpse at some of the scrolls;
 Babylonians speak of *zero*...
 Enkidu quarrels with Gilgamesh, Odysseus sails for home,
 Abraham abandons Ishmael to hold the knife
 above Isaac's heart. Here Atlas
 shoulders the world our city gives him, here
 Krishna holds the lotus where the world sleeps.

Who wouldn't like to awaken and read in wonder at the world of books in the heart of life? Books showing mathematical equations, books relating the fantastic deeds of superhero Gilgamesh and his servant/friend Enkidu or Odysseus's many adventures returning from the Trojan Wars or ancient religious readings?

Legend says this fabulous library and all the books were destroyed by fire, burned to ashes. History doesn't agree. It is true that in 47 B.C. when Caesar conquered Alexandria there was a fire that destroyed some of the priceless scrolls. In 41 B.C. about half of them were replaced. What gems were lost forever is something we'll never know, they are the ashes of history.

The poem does mention invaders,
 When conquerors with vast armies come,
 ...Caesar in shining armor...
 Young men more beautiful than our city
 die defending it...
 If young men die, more will come, more books
 to tell the stories of their lives.

In Alexandria, more invaders did come and come again. By 642, when the Arab conquest of Egypt was completed, the Great Library of Alexandria was only a misty memory. Young men surely did die but as the poem tells us, "more will come, more books to tell the stories of their lives." The buildings and books may be long gone but written words have an everlasting voice. They have a life that cannot be burned or conquered by the arrogant, the ignorant, or the profane. Debra Spencer has conjured up for us a mystical mirage we can read today either in hardcover or at today's universal library, the internet cyber-space. The concept that idea and stories should be savored, reread and shared is no longer an impossible dream. Thanks to *The Library in Alexandria*,

 'We know what lies at the heart of life'.

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Climbing Trees: A Metaphor For Life

Melissa Camburn

He hears everything you say; His ears pick up on the different inflections in your voice. Your words have great weight. He reads your face; He looks into your eyes; He processes what you look like when you talk to him. Your every move registers into his brain. He smells your jasmine-scented perfume and creates a memory. He knows all he takes in. "About Climbing a Tree" is not simply about climbing trees, nor is it singly about the child's mother's past. It goes deeper. It is about regret and being held back. It is about growing up and changing. It is about a mother being busy and spending more time getting things done than actually spending time with and investing in her kids. It is about freedom. It is about the ability to play and relax, be carefree, and just be yourself. It's about learning what you really know about the people who mean the most and then realizing you don't really know that much after all.

Regrets--we all have them. A life filled with regrets can hold one back more than he or she knows. *"I loved to climb trees in the summer, I climbed them every day, it's hard to be adventurous when you have four kids to lug around"* (12-14). At the end of this poem, when the mom says this, one has to imagine what is going through her child's head. The way a child hears something is usually different from the way an adult hears something. A number of emotions and feelings could be present in his or head at this time. Does my mom regret having me apart of her life? Does she miss being able to run and play free and climb trees? Am I holding her back from being who she could be? Is this my fault? Does the structure show any of this? It is very simple. There is not much to the spacing either. We do not find that either structure or spacing are given much apparent thought in this poem. In fact, that is why this poem may not seem like anything special at first.

One always hears that growing up is hard to do. When a child grows up, he or she learns things and forms opinions and changes his or her mind. For this child to see this part of his mom's past, this part he knows nothing about and to see her now must be heart-wrenching. She does not have fun like that anymore. She does not like to sweat and she trips over tree branches instead of climbing them. She does not share this part of her life with her child until asked about the photograph. She refrains from sharing with her child and then does not see the child's concern. It appears she just tells him and then figures the discussion is over. However, this child is replaying this discussion over and over weeks and months later trying to understand his mother, trying to understand where (s)he fits in and whether or not (s)he is very important. The mother seems to miss something and does not communicate well with her child.

Moms have hard jobs. Moms have to take care and feed their children. However, moms should not miss the chances they have to invest in and spend time with their kids each and every day. They help keep a roof over their children's heads. They work out their schedules, make sure they get to school, soccer practice, ballet recitals, and swim meets. They clean up their kids' messes, their projects and their puke. They spend endless hours working with them on their homework and school proj-

ects and numerous times worrying or praying over their children. That is only the beginning. And yet, the one thing so many moms forget to do is spend quality time with their children. Many moms spend so much time getting completed the things that need to be done around the house or at an outside work source that they miss out on the fun times with their children. It's not just about the support; it's about living the day-to-day life with them and investing in them each and every single day.

It is all a metaphor really. Climbing a tree is such a beautiful metaphor and represents various ideas. Freedom is one of the most clear ideas presented in this poem. A child is free when he or she is climbing a tree. The task of climbing a tree can take a few minutes or a few hours but however long it takes, it is always an accomplishment and it is always a good thing because it allows him or her to be free and experience life where they are not under the constant supervision of some parent or guardian (or so they think). The child does it on their own usually. When a child is free like this, everything else in the world disappears and they just live in the moment. In this poem, the mom stops climbing the tree, both literally and metaphorically. Life is so serious now. There are so many responsibilities and things that need to get done and be taken care of. She does not like to sweat. She is busy. Her child interprets this as an offense on his or her part, something (s)he did wrong. Somehow (s)he held mom back. Whether or not this is really the case, the child perceives it this way and there is no indication that the mother notices this or corrects herself. The lines of communication may not be as clear as she may think.

We also see that this poem is about playing and relaxing, to be carefree and to just be oneself and enjoy the ride. Mom needs to relax a little. Mom needs to spend time with her child, talk to her child, invest in him or her, and be apart of the family, not just work in it. She needs to help instill values in her child and help him or her to know what is right and wrong and not send mixed or confusing messages out to him or her. When mom stops worrying about what she is missing out on and when mom starts really investing in the little boy or girl that really matters she can have more clarity and a much better relationship with her child and know that she is doing her best to instill good values and habits into the child she bore years before.

It is not enough to simply say this poem is beautiful and that it is about a tree, a mom, and her child. The more one reads this, the more one grasps its meaning and understands what the author is saying to us. Only when we let go of the tension and take time to relax, enjoy ourselves, and invest in others, especially those in our immediate circle will we ever really be able to climb the tree again. And why not? It is not just about having fun, it is about the legacy each one of us leaves for those we leave behind on this earth--family members, friends and those who simply observed us from a far.

Every little kid at one point or another observes their parent(s). They hear words and see actions and come up with conclusions based on the very little they view and/or know. What they don't always realize is how much they miss. In this essay, the mother talks about the past and how she used to climb trees. The child seems to react inside to the implication that she is not as happy as she used to be and that maybe Mom is not who (s)he thought she was. For all we know, the child thinks she maybe doesn't like having kids around and that she misses those time she was free. For all of the looks and words in the world, a child only knows what you let them. And freedom is about letting go but it is also about being able to say and do and not hide. It isn't just about the child understanding as it is about the mother helping him

or her understand.

And every time I climb a tree
Where have you been?
They say to me
But don't they know that I am free
Every time I climb a tree?

*David McCord from "Every Time I Climb a Tree"

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Cancer Helped Me

Kyle Adney

A woman lies in a hospital bed with her little boy lying next to her. She is bald, and weak and wishes that this could all be over. She wonders why this happened and how. The look on her sons face is the only thing that keeps her going. This is the story of a mother who went through cancer, entitled, "The War of My Domestic Soil." The writer explains how she fought the disease, but not alone. With the help of her family she was able to defeat the disease and go on with life. She knows that her little boy is the reason that she is still alive, and realizes how much her family loves her, and would do anything to keep her alive.

The way that the writer talks about cancer using war terminology creates a very real feeling when you read it, she puts a visceral description in the readers head. She explains with her opening statement, "I have fought in a war. I have assembled an army. I have studied maps of unknown territory; I have learned the newest technological warfare. I have taught myself techniques and tactics and military maneuvers; I learned to guide my troops through dangerous, unrelenting turf." The sensation of being in a war and guiding troops would be very dramatic, but the writer is asking the reader to imagine, what if instead of being inside a war, the war was inside of you. There would be constant battles, your insides would be taking a beating from the cancer and it is totally in Gods hands. The writer says, "I consider myself brave. I emerged from this war victorious, and I emerged with myself intact. I fought with every tool that I had, and when that was not enough I created what I needed to survive." I like how she explains how hard she had to reach down within herself and give all of her strength so she could overcome this cancer.

Another way that she overcomes the cancer is to talk about it, and saying how she felt not letting it bottle up inside of her. Another thing that I like about this story is how the writer is so visual. She tells the story using compelling words to draw you in. She does an incredible job of capturing the moment and saying exactly how she felt. The war that she talks about is mysterious because of how it is inside of her body; therefore no one can see or tell what is happening or what will happen.

Susan Vetsch of Cour'd'lene, Idaho is a cancer survivor with 9 kids and says, "the reason that I am here today is because of my family. They were always there for me and I love them so much."

Mother of 4 kids, Karen Adney is also a survivor of cancer and she stated, "I was initially scared of the realization of having cancer. As the realization sunk in, I was devastated by the thought of leaving my husband and my children. After the treatments and radiation was all over I felt completely alone and felt that my life had no meaning. But I realized that God was in control and he would help me."

In this story I like the way that the writer talks about her little boy comforting her and laying next to her in the bed. She elaborates, "the morning of my last treatment, when the needles were removed and I was sent to my own bed to suffer the nauseous agony, that baby used all of his strength to climb into bed beside me. His sturdy health cuddled against my emaciated frame, he looked into my eyeballs, my soul, and told me, and 'everything is going to be good mama.'" Looking into the boys face she knows that everything will be alright, and this little angel- what she

calls him- has been born to help her through this time of pain and anguish, this time that she most desperately needs encouragement and motivation. I like the special connection between her and her son. She talks about how other family members were always there and would do anything for her, but the baby that could barely even speak is the one who helped her through it the most.

Another thing that I like about this story is how she realized why she was fighting to stay alive. She explained, "There was nothing to do but learn myself, learn my values and morals and what is important to me. What I was willing to sacrifice and what I would never give up." She knows that it will not be easy but also knows that what she is fighting for is the people who care for her and the people who were there for her at anytime, to help her in anyway that they could. Her family was a constant encouragement to her by just being there beside her when she needed to be told that everything would be alright. Just like her little boy did, he didn't even say that many words, he just gently comforted her when she was in a time of doubt.

She says, "How do you tell your child that your greatest fear is leaving him an orphan? The answer is; you don't. You search your soul for an army to prevent that from ever occurring. You drag up every little bit of yourself, even those parts you might have liked to leave behind." Imagine being so incredibly tired that you don't want to get out of bed, you don't want to eat, all you want is to rest and for you to have your life back, the way it was before this catastrophe happened. You just want to be able to pick up your son and hold him with your arms that haven't been week-end by keemo-therapy and radiation, which is exactly how this "daughter, mother, sister, lover" felt when lying in a hospital bed. She puts a mental picture in her head of her son so she can think of him all the time. She loves her family so much that she knows that they will pull her through it.

The war of cancer as the writer calls it is brutal and tough, but not as tough as strong people, family, friends, and other success stories like this one that keeps people fighting, giving people encouragement. I think that is one of the main reasons that the writer wrote this story, to encourage other individuals that are going through or have gone through cancer. People that need encouragement and need to feel like they're not the only person who has gone through this. The writer of this story knows that people go through cancer all the time and some wish that they had a family just like hers that would keep them fighting and not let them give up. She went through the war of cancer, survived, and is probably sitting with her family right now, enjoying life, thinking about how much she loves them and how she would do anything to keep them alive. Which is exactly what they did for her.

Quote from Karen E. Adney, 4-20-05

Quote from Susan Vetch, 4-20-05

Annie: Demonstrating the Bittersweet Complexity of Parent-Child Relationships

Amberly K. Rumrill

Annie is much more than a story about a girl who is rescued from her mother's abuse by her father and lives happily ever after. On my first read, I was horrified at the Oscar-winning-esque life Annie's mother put her through, and felt like cheering and crying when fifteen-year-old Annie arrives at her father's door. The "happy ending" – because it seems so rare in modern literature – was a relief to me, and I immediately felt a warmth toward Annie's father that colored my view of what happened after the story ends. Upon my second reading, however, I gained the impression that there was more depth to this story than I had originally understood. Instead of a happily-ever-after fairytale, *Annie* became for me a study in parental relationships, and how the ways in which mothers and fathers interact with their children affect them as human beings.

We are tempted to feel warm and fuzzy at the end of the story when Annie finds her father and is at last united with him, but whether they will truly find happiness together is cleverly left unstated. Indeed, we are not given much information about Annie's father at all – not even his name! We are given only what Annie's impressions of him are: a "kind-faced man in khaki who'd promised to buy [a baby doll and a doll pram] if she would go with him" (3). There is nothing to go on about this man's character except for Annie's initial distrust of him when she first meets him at three years old, and her sudden longing and wishful memories of him when she is fifteen and suddenly finds his address, which brings back the memory of the day when he almost took her away. Jeanne Johnson, author of *Annie*, comments, "we don't know what's actually inside the door" at the end of the story. "There might be a partner [and/or] other children that Annie has to deal with."

Still, as Annie's life unfolds, and we see the abuse that Annie suffers at the hands of her mother, we have to wonder with Annie as she puts on her coat to find her dad "how different her life might have been had she not resisted this simple act when her father had come for her so many years before" (4). Perhaps any life would be better than the one she experienced with her mother. In no part of the story do we see any indication that Vera is affectionate toward Annie. Instead, the story reveals Vera as an alcoholic prostitute who does her work in front of Annie, and potentially places her in a dangerous situation when one of Vera's clients approaches Annie after Vera is too drunk to do the job herself. We have to wonder what kind of a mother would strike her child for refusing to have sex with a man for money. Obviously an unfit one.

It is apparent, even when Annie is a toddler, that she distrusts her mother. After refusing to go with her father, the text says "Annie waited instinctively for her mother's wrath to fall upon her" -- after having been struck for defying her – and that she "watched warily as her mother began to relax" (2). Why, then, would she choose to stay with her mother? Quite simply, as she says, "it was her home. Here

in these familiar, dingy basement rooms. Here with her mother" (2). The familiar is powerful, and the bond of mothers and daughters is even more so. According to Christiane Northrup, MD, author of *Mother-Daughter Wisdom*,

The mother-daughter relationship is very powerful, in that our mothers' bodies literally wire our immune function, our central nervous system function, and our hormonal function -- starting in utero and into childhood. It is estimated that our core beliefs about ourselves, about life, about health and about what's possible with our lives are in place by the age of 10. Our mothers or caregivers who perform the mothering function are our most potent role models as women. Their beliefs and behavior are a more powerful influence on our thoughts and beliefs than any other factor in our lives.

At three years old, Annie was still very connected with her mother – however horribly she may have been treated by Vera – and at the time, saw her father only as a man “like most of the men who’d visited her mother” (1). But as time passes, we see Annie constantly being rejected by Vera, usually physically. Vera hits Annie when she refuses to leave her, then when she tries, in innocence, to protect her mother from the man – with whom her mother is having sex – whom she sees as attacking her mother, and then when she tells her mother (as a pre-teen) that one of her clients propositioned her. We discover that Annie has had to learn how to prepare her own meals, and can assume that she has had to survive practically on her own.

I discovered in my interview with Ms. Johnson that the character of Annie is based on a real-life friend of the author. Johnson said that even well into adulthood, this friend felt tied to her mother and struggled with wanting her mother’s approval because she felt responsible for her mother’s choices.

One of my favorite aspects of this story is the use of bittersweet chocolate as Annie’s connection to men. I see it as a metaphor: Annie’s relationships with men – and with parental figures in general – are mixed, the “bittersweet taste ... lingering in her mouth” (3) like the chocolate the men who come to “call on” her mother give her. It is indicated that Annie appreciates the chocolate the men give her, considering it a “kindness”, yet it is also connected with the fear of her mother and of the men having sex with her, because the men usually give her a piece of chocolate after the job is done (2-3). This half-and-half relationship with men makes me wonder what her relationship with her father – and other men that will come into her life – will be. What will be her reaction to young men who find her attractive, who ask her on a date? Will she distrust them, as she first distrusted her father? What will her reaction to sex be, as she has only ever seen it as a way to make money?

In one part of the story, Annie is sitting at the kitchen table, eating a piece of chocolate. She is trying to make it last, holding out for as long as she can, but suddenly makes the decision to stuff it in her mouth – to fill her mouth and being with it (3). If we look at this as a metaphor for how she deals with her longing for her father, we see a survivalist who has, for many years, lived with the very least of everything – food, comfort, love, human interaction – to get by. But suddenly, her craving for everything she’s lacked in her life with her mother washes over her in an irresistible urge, and she makes the decision to put her father back in her life, to

same satisfaction that the chocolate gives her – the nourishment she needs.

This is interesting when we look at the impact fathers make on the lives of their daughters. According to Dr. Linda Nielsen, author of *Embracing Your Father: Building the Relationship You Want with Your Dad*:

Fathers generally have as much or more impact as mothers do in the following areas of their daughters' lives: (1) achieving academic and career success – especially in math and science (2) creating a loving, trusting relationship with a man (3) dealing well with people in authority – especially men (4) Being self-confident and self-reliant (5) Being willing to try new things and to accept challenges (6) Maintaining good mental health (no clinical depression, eating disorders, or chronic anxiety) (7) Expressing anger comfortably and appropriately – especially with men.

So it would seem that some part of Annie – even subconsciously – knew that she needed her father to help her in her development into a functioning, healthy, productive human being. What is interesting to me is that Annie already has several of the aspects that Nielsen credits fathers as helping give their daughters: Number four on Nielsen's list, "being self-confident and self-reliant" is demonstrated in Annie's ability to take care of herself, by standing up for herself with Vera's client, and by being brave enough to confront the man whom she thinks is hurting her mother. Number five, "being willing to try new things and to accept challenges" is obvious in Annie's decision to go and find her father, even though she doesn't know where Notting Hill is, and has no idea what to expect if and when she does find her father ... or doesn't. So the irony is that, in searching for her father and craving his affection, she's demonstrating those very qualities that make her a healthy, strong individual. I believe this is because humans are able to consciously make different decisions than our parents'. Although we are tied genetically to our parents, and deeply depend on them for our well-being and self-and world-outlooks as children (and even as adults), we are capable of overcoming the limited mindsets, cruelty, and harsh conditions they may have presented to us, through our own choices. This sense of hope in being able to change for the better is ultimately what endeared me to the story of Annie.

This was why I was both saddened and heartened by Jeanne Johnson's telling me that the real-life Annie was involved in an abusive relationship herself that required her to leave with her own two children. It saddened me because Annie's choices reflected the choices of those who impacted her most – her parents – yet I was encouraged that in the end, she was able to do the same as she had done when she was a teenager: leave dysfunction in hopes of finding function. We are capable of much growth as a human race, but we see how strongly parental relationships can greatly affect how we react in the world.

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Mail Call for the Dead: The Sad, the Strange and the Absurd

Ben Corman

At first glance Mail Call seems to be an absurd poem. That her mother's mail is being delivered to her house is indicative of nothing but how bureaucracy works and that places like the post office need policies in place when someone dies. It certainly is not indicative of someone "playing God". The post office has certain policies and forwarding mail to the next of kin is almost certainly better than just throwing it out, or returning it to sender. The author posits the question "My house, my mother's heaven?" (Mail Call) as if her mother had somehow had a hand in where he mail would go after passing away. As if the idea of heavens or hells or afterlife's could be so simple that even the post office can keep one's mail coming once they die. It's an absurd idea that things are so simple when we die, but it is the absurdity that makes the poem work. By showing us her mother's beliefs on heaven and death, the author gives a clear picture of how absurd and strange our ideas of death really are. It is also a comment on religion and how it sometimes is far from a universal belief.

Through the mother's death, the reader also gets a sense of how difficult it can be to face the differences between yourself and your parents. The author writes

*And now I'm part of the problem
because the Mormons want me
to say its alright to do "temple work"
on my father so he can pass muster
with the pale blond Jesus.*

From the tone of the stanza, it is clear that the author didn't agree with her mother's religious beliefs. Calling him "the pale blond Jesus" helps us understand the generation gap between the author and her mother. The mother believing in the very Eurocentric white, blond, blue eyed, stereotypical vision of Jesus while the author doesn't necessarily see god in this way. Even with her mother's death, the author can't get away from these religious beliefs, the Mormon's wishing to do "temple work" so her father can make it into heaven.

It's a weird request, as if the Mormons could do something in death that would change the weight of her father's heart that's not already between her father and god. While the request comes towards the end of the poem, it is a good example of the general feel of the poem. Its also interesting in its ambiguity, the reader gets no idea what "temple work" entails. Is it a baptism? A new burial? The amorphous nature of the request, when everything else is so laid out in the poem is strange. We know that heaven has "several neighborhoods" for different socioeconomic classes, and we know that heaven has "*baby blue skies dappled / with cute puffy clouds*" (Mail Call).

Researching into what temple work consists of, the lds-mormon.com website writes that temple work is the dead receive the same ordinances as the living via proxy. "This means that he must be baptized, by proxy, and also be ordained to the Priesthood and receive his endowments and temple marriage" (LDS). Clearly the absurdity shines through. What the person elected not to do in life will be performed on them by proxy in death. It's religion without consent, further giving depth to this idea of absurdity that the author is exploring, but really no stranger than a blond

blue eyed Jesus, or separate neighborhoods in Heaven.
Another example of this absurd feel is the stanza which reads
*From what she told me,
there are several neighborhoods
in heaven – low rent
for skeptics and non-tithers,
up to gated mansions for goody
two-shoes with deep pockets.*

The idea that there are different levels of heaven, for how religious one is, again, is a strange idea. The author clearly feels this way with her use of “goody two-shoes” to describe those who would live in the mansions. She is scornful also. Describing them as having “deep pockets” tells the reader that she knows where the Mormon Church has its priorities. Her grouping skeptics with non-tithers reinforce this. For the author, money is tied to being a good person within her mother’s church. While this may be a very accepted belief in America with our Puritan work ethics that tie business success to being god’s chosen, it is a strange idea for the rest of the 1 billion Christians in the world who don’t see capitalism as the end goal.

Her mother felt an irreverence towards her religion also. The author writes that her mother probably “*linked up with my father / the non-believer*” (Mail Call). The religious beliefs, for her mother, were able to compromise around love, even though her mother “*bought the whole Mormon package*” (Mail Call). Even though the author irreverently writes about her mother being in a “*tacky trailer park heaven*” (Mail Call) because her father was an agnostic, the fact that they linked up, and that her father is there with her mother shows that there was love in that relationship.

There was love between the author and her mother also. The author makes a point to mention her “*sassing back / to my second husband all the time*” (Mail Call). It is one of the reasons why her mother would never find heaven in her house, despite what the post office feels. Clearly the author loved her mother, we know this from the feel of the poem and there is no reason to suspect that her mother didn’t love her back. Her mother was able to put aside the Mormon values of a women’s obedience in marriage as well as the fact that the author is remarried. She writes “*second husband*” for precisely this reason, to show the reader that she is not living with the same religion as her mother. This lowers the universal, unbending quality of religious beliefs to be superposed by love. It is an important point and one that isn’t immediately available to the casual reader. Marriage is one of the central tenets of the Mormon Church. I lived in Boise, Idaho and my roommate’s parents were Mormon. Theirs is a second marriage and both felt guilt that their first marriages didn’t work out. It was a strange experience to watch two people, who are supposed to be in love and moving on with their lives, still constrained by artificial guilt imposed by their church. For the rest of us it isn’t something easily understood, but as religioustolerance.org writes “*he Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) greatly values marriage and abhors divorce ... Mormon couples experience a very strong social pressure to stay married*” (Divorce). This shows how much love there was between the author and her mother, when the importance of marriage to her mother is fully understood, and knowing that her mother looked passed her divorce.

But perhaps the most powerful stanza of the poem is the one that reads
If I’m right about this

*My mother making life
just plain hell for my father
the agnostic who is the reason
they don't qualify for a better address
in old Joe Smith's version of heaven.*

The irony contained there makes the poem shine. The author isn't the first one to explore the absurdity of death. They are following in a long tradition. When John Donne is speaking to death and says "Death be not proud" (Death) he is exploring an absurd idea, that he would speak directly to death, and mock death as the one who waits for us. The author does the same thing, dividing heaven in socio-economic neighborhoods. But the author also explores the contradictions is death. Most notably that this low-rent, "tacky trailer park heaven" could be heaven at all for her mother, but at the same time that her mother is making into a hell for her father. It shows that the author really isn't talking about heaven at all, but that she sees her parents living together in, whatever the afterlife is, much the same way as they lived together in life.

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Caution: HOT Flames Represent Relationship Trouble

Kristin Nybank

When someone yells “FIRE!” we all have a built in panic reaction. Our eyes shift back and forth looking for potential signs of danger. We can easily picture the curling red and sometimes even blue flames that can engulf our lives, homes, and memories. We learn at a very young age that fire is dangerous and we’re punished for playing with it. These are some of the reactions and feelings we deal with after reading the poem “Pyromania” by Carol Housner. On the surface, the poem seems to be simply about a woman telling a story of her ex-husband who is obsessed with fire and the science of combustion. She’s looking back over an old relationship and feels like she’s finally free after captivity. After closely examining the poem through the author’s word choice and our own knowledge of a blazing flame, we can relate the fire imagery to a complex theme of self-degradation in relationships and looking out for yourself.

When the speaker talks about her ex-husband it’s obvious that his character was the downfall in their relationship. The ex-husband that is described throughout the poem seems to have had a troubled childhood and lets out his frustration with the art of combustion. The man supposedly set the field behind his house into flames causing his mother to “beat him with the pointy heel of her pump all the way home” (Housner 6). This man probably had family troubles as a child and as a result didn’t get much attention. It’s obvious that the man is obsessed with fire because its consequences cause people to notice him and give him the attention he demands. I think the man loves fire even more than his wife/family because fire inevitably needs him. One psychologist strengthens this point by stating about dependency and degrading relationships, “If there’s too much dependency, a natural resentment brews. One person is likely to feel burdened, the other frightened by their neediness” (Gould). Ironically what the man loves is what is ruining his relationship. No matter what he does fire will never turn its back on him because it burns for constant attention. A fire can’t live and burn without someone constantly feeding it--it depends upon another for survival--as explained by the man “feeding the only thing left/ still greedy for his attention” (Housner 10-11). As a result of his current wife and previous family constantly ignoring him the man has turned to depending upon fire for attention.

In contrast, the speaker of the poem views the fire’s overwhelming desire for attention as a negative thing. She speaks about the man and fire in the same context and talks about them both as though they were choking her. When the speaker talks about times without her ex-husband, she talks about taking deep breaths and breathing freely. “I stand at the flung open door/ swallowing up darkness in cold giant, gulps/ the crackle of night rushing into me” (Housner 16-18). The author chooses words such as “wolf,” “swallowing,” and “giant gulps” which we normally use to describe how we inhale something we enjoy. This shows us that the speaker is relieved to be free from the man and his fire. The author also uses the words “dip” and “curl” to describe flames, two simple words that we can commonly connect with--and enhances our image of--curling flames. It’s interesting that in the last line of the poem, in the midst of the author talking about being free, they use the word “crackle,” which immediately brings our mind back to the fire concept. The author does a fantastic job of intertwining the fire idea in both obvious and subtle ways.

It’s a known fact that fire uses up oxygen when it burns. In fact, fire needs

oxygen to burn and when it runs out the fire immediately dies and without warning. "To have a fire, you must have a combination of three things: fuel, oxygen and heat" (for.gov). In the poem's context, fuel is the man's dependency, oxygen is what the two need to survive and heat is the friction between the couple. "The basic principal of firefighting, therefore, is to remove one or more of these elements in the quickest and most effective way. There is no other way to suppress fire" (for.gov). When the woman leaves her husband she eliminates the heat between them and the relationship/fire die. The reason the woman steps out of her house and finally breaths deeply is because the fire of her ex-husband being around has caused there to be no oxygen in the house. She was literally suffocating. When the man finally leaves, the house is left able to fill up once again with oxygen and life. This concept is carried through when the author describes the man's new lover, "who fans his flame" (Housner 14). Fanning a flame would add oxygen to it and cause it to flare up and grow. This image also gives a sense of fiery lust. That flame flaring up will quickly die out along with the man's new relationship. To survive the man obviously needs a companion like his new transitory lover who will help his flame temporarily grow. Through this imagery it's obvious that the man himself represents fire and all the danger that comes with it.

When we read back through the poem for a second time we can easily see the ex-husband representing a burning fire and a degrading relationship. The author ends the poem with the speaker very calm and peaceful. Her ex-husband is gone and she's finally on her own. She's glad her life has changed to another direction and is looking forward to the future as she "stand[s] at the flung open door" (Housner 16). The main message of the poem is that there's a changing point in everyone's life. If you're in a situation where you feel unhappy or suffocating then do something for the good of yourself. The author reaffirms this by advising us, "anything's possible, there's always a chance for change you just have to go for it. I guess that's what I would want people to take away from [the poem]" (Housner). From this poem we learn to breath on our own and always keep that bucket of water close by in case we need to dowse that potential unwanted fire that starts blazing.

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Click... Bang! Reset... Click! Bang!! Reset...

Philip Lima

When selecting poems for the PGR 2005 edition I was amazed at the surprisingly broad subjects covered in the poems submitted. The piece I am going to review is a poem on a very rarely poeticized subject: Computer gaming. "Urban Warfare", a poem by Gretchen Thesman, a former member of the PGR editorial board, presents a situation with many strong images of war in an almost nightmarish sense. "The street was dark and desolate. / A light rain had started to fall / Sirens could be heard throughout the city." This scene, a dark, lonely setting, depicts the extreme negativity of war with very few words. With great use of vivid imagery, you are left mentally wandering through an urban war-zone. The last line, the surprise to all who read this poem says, "I got up and pressed the reset button". The author is obviously depicting a scene that occurs on a minute-by-minute basis in homes everywhere. The piece is well written, creates many vivid scenes of war, and ends in an unexpected way. As someone who has pressed the reset button thousands of times, I am like the poem's speaker, but I can only begin to understand the consequences that killing and getting killed in a virtual world has on someone.

A helicopter flew overhead,
Searchlights shining through the buildings.
The soldier lay in the street,
Out of breath and wounded badly.

The scene of a tragic possible loss of life keeps the reader in a sorrowful mood until the end. This is the reason I love this poem. After reading it once and catching the ending, I went back to read it over again. As someone who has spent endless hours playing video and computer games called FPS (First Person Shooters), I imagined the helicopters flying overhead and having to dodge the searchlights as they pass over your hiding spots. Quick! Hold down the shift key when you walk, then you can go faster so the bad guys don't see you! The games are based on reality, yet so far from it. You can dodge, jump, shoot at anything without consequence and, most importantly, rise from the dead. Where does the reality come into "play"?

Computer games create stereotypical situation of war and combat that are not realistic. The fact is, many children learn everything they know about violence from video games. If everything they know is false, how does that affect their outlook upon reality and the truth that a gun really does kill someone. This may be taking an unsupported leap, but I believe school shootings, and the rise of teenage violence all has a direct relation to the explosive expansion of violent video games being sold.

I believe the author is using the strong and vivid war images through the language to get your mind somewhere entirely separate from video games. The first time I read this piece, I thought, "oh joy, another anti-war, there-is-a-better-way poem". The last line, which comes as more than a surprise to the first-time reader leaves the reader's mind begging for a second read. The second time I read the poem, I realized, every image used was taken directly from a scene in a video game. As video games continue to become more realistic and violent, how is it going to affect the children, and even the adults that spend hours playing them?

The psychological impact this has on anyone who plays could be huge. Looking into studies, I found that children often "emulate" their "leaders" or heroes. If their

leader is the man in a computer game that kills off the enemies in a showy, vulgar fashion, this child is going to have a better chance at acting violently towards another child in the future. I think we have not given enough consideration to the dangers that can be caused through showing and even allowing or encouraging children to be violent.

“The two most preferred categories (of games for children in the eighth grade) were games that involved fantasy violence, preferred by almost 32% of subjects; and sports games, some of which contained violent sub-themes, which were preferred by more than 29%”(childdevelopmentinfo.com). It seems like as a society we are drifting more and more towards making violence just another click away. If we continue to raise children that have “got up and pressed the reset button” how is that going to affect their lives?

The ability to just “re-live” an experience or battle until you do win is entirely unrealistic. The sad fact is, children in this generation have grown up on an “entertainment trip”, everywhere they turn something else is given to entertain them. As gaming becomes more realistic, as it already has over the last few years, children are going to become more desensitized to violence. Which, no doubt, will increase the amount of violence in schools or involving children at that age. What needs to be emphasized is that in life, you really can’t just get up and push the reset button.

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The Tenth Circle of Hell: Suburbia

Sydni Indman

Welcome to the realm of the soul-shrunken, fondly referred to by *Sunset Magazine* as Suburbia, where every manicured lawn looks like the fake grass in a Safeway sushi package and moderately attractive housewives pop out their quota of two point six babies per household. In this satellite office of hell you pray for anything to crack through the oh-so-present crust of plastic monotony. But for a handful of dissident souls, this dilution of life leads to the search for truth. Out of the depths of an All-American terrarium comes one such soul, the deeply tormented worker bee and arsonist, Kaleb Monaghan who clawed his way out of childhood tragedies which gave him a taste of one *real* facet of the human condition, thus he sees through the sterile façade of Suburbia. In his bitter yet touching “How to Destroy the Perfect Family in Five Easy Steps,” Neale Jones writes five separate chronicles in the life of a bitter suburbanite. In these five conspicuously connected tales, Jones explores the role of anti-heroes, vulnerability, and the pursuit for truth in a contrived setting.

Through getting the reader to root for a less than charismatic hero, Jones showcases his narrative brilliance. A far cry from the ideal roll model, Kaleb lives alone in squalor, has no friends or social interaction that we see, nor does he outwardly attempt to change his situation in any way. Yet right off the bat we can empathize. We know what it’s like to work at a job that we hate and question exactly what we get up for each the morning. However, Kaleb retains his wit that allows him to keep his sanity. The opening scene of the dead dog on the freeway gives the first insight into Kaleb’s relationship with life through the author’s masterful conviction of persona through language. Inspired by steam-of-consciousness writing, his voice rings poignant, dark, and yet oddly amusing. Upon seeing the splattered canine corpse Kaleb tells us that:

can’t say he didn’t like it when their dog got ran over. I did feel sorry for the dog, don’t get me wrong. I’m no psycho who likes seeing dog lying out on the freeway with their bubbly brains leaking out of their eye sockets, some beautiful blonde woman dragging it by the hind legs onto the gravel median (1).

Immediately we get a sense of the narrator: articulate, cynical, bitter, and morbid. He doesn’t just describe the concrete grave-site, he offers visceral imagery of bubbly brains leaking out of eye sockets in the way only a pained soul can convey, and yet employs only a generic adjective of the female toting it: “beautiful.” Here and throughout the story the balance of describing positives and negatives is grossly lopsided, as though he can only see images reflecting his own misery. When addressing the dog he might as well be describing himself, run over on the freeway of life with his vulnerable insides splayed about to be hit over and over again. From the death of his sister on a roller coaster (based on an actual story) to his broken and dysfunctional childhood home burning down, Kaleb’s heart has certainly been run over by many a metaphoric Mac truck. Hence when he refers to the dog, though not completely emotionless, his callous disregard for the death of an animal that he simply sees as an annoyance illustrates his outlook on life: somewhere to linger between popping out of the uterus and croaking. The description also reinforces intrigue

of death and suffering, perhaps for no other reason than it is the most *genuine and interesting* event he witnessed in Suburbia for some time. With his pointed tongue coupled with his soft human underbelly, the pro/antagonist has our support by the end of the first tale.

Moving beyond the images of Kaleb's less than Zolof-induced paradigm, Jones satirizes American suburban life through the "perfectly hateable" neighborino, the Ned-Flanders-like Jim and his "Jimfamily" (equivalents to Maude, Rod, and Todd). Further expressing his contempt and isolation from standardized life is his disgust the ritualistic all-American rehearsed exchanges intended more to substitute small talk for substance than engage in any meaningful communication. When illustrating Jim's meaningless banter, the author omits punctuation; instead he stings together the "Hi, I'm Jim We're neighbors Just moved in over here How long you been living here? We just love it Like my old neighborhood" (2) demonstrating the complete lack of meaning in each phrase. Not quite stream of consciousness, Jim's words read as Kaleb hears them: driveling off and blending together. Think about the last time you had a similar exchange with your neighbor/minor acquaintance— did you really care where they're from or where they grew up, or were you more likely just trying to fill an awkward silence? Though comical, the dialogue beautifully and bluntly shows the superficiality of interaction in America. In our culture the phrase, "How are you," is a greeting meant to be supplemented with "Fine, thanks for asking" as opposed to a genuine inquiry into someone's emotional state. When I traveled through Ireland I learned the phrase "have a nice day" is never spoken because it is considered to be a phony American saying. A clerk saying, "have a nice day" may actually mean, "I hope you trip and fall and have a concussion and a flock of jackals feasts on your oozing brain you rude bastard," but is forced to cough up the pseudo-politeness as mandated by cultural vernacular. By contrast, in Eire, you'll hear "cheers" because the word means exactly what it says. Jim's prescribed words read like an irritating radio commercial much like they sound to Kaleb who has nothing to contribute to an irrelevant one-sided conversation. The "wholesome" Jim and Jimfamily can't possibly relate to their neighbor who lives alone with only his thoughts to keep him company, nor could they begin to understand how Kaleb could surround himself in a mote of his own pain and bitterness instead of fake smiles.

Though Jones focuses much of his subject matter on the shallowness of American life, he alludes to a hint of depth in the individual through the plight of Jim. In an email interview, Jones told me that:

The idea for the Jimfamily's break-up came from a radio program that I heard which was about corporate whistle-blowers. [Whistle-blowers often receive death threats, are almost guaranteed to lose their jobs, and often face financial ruin (Wiscombe).] From that I found out that they have a high rate of divorce and suicide resulting from the strain. That seemed like an interesting dynamic to me: the people who are trying to do good in the world end up having their lives basically ruined (Interview).

Despite his banal life, Jim ultimately stands up for what's morally right and even wins Kaleb's sympathy along the way. The entire sequence offers a glimmer of bittersweet hope— beneath the crust of shallow culture humans are still capable of defending their ethics even when they know their endeavor will turn their lives upside down. In the metaphor of Jim and Jimfamily, "Family" addresses the dilemma universally experienced: forfeit ethics for security or stand up for what's right and face personal ruin.

In the dilapidation of the Jimfamily, Jones sheds light on Kaleb's otherwise unseen depth

of character— that he possesses the capability for fondness. When Kaleb first introduces his neighborinos, he labels them “the most perfectly hateable family in the world” (2). Though he initially loathed and pushed away the Jimfamily out of judgment rooted in envy, beneath the layers of pessimism he develops an attachment to “the most perfect family in the entirety of the world” (5) showing a hundred and eighty degree shift in his feelings. His initial ill will is understandable— the Jimfamily embodied everything he never had when growing up with abusive alcoholics: love, wholesomeness, and an overall functional unit. The dysfunctional family taking over the house like a herd of hyenas desecrates the one sacred space Kaleb knows— thus he must purify the home in honor of the Jimfamily.. Though he deliberately leaves the question of the arsonist’s identity ambiguous, Jones confirmed my suspicion in the interview: Kaleb ignites the tomb once home to the only sliver of hope he’s seen since emancipation from his broken family. In a climactic act of catharsis and vengeance, he sets fire to the house, “fur balls and all.” Yet this time the fire in Kaleb’s life does not rescue him from a wretched life, rather the flames destroy a home that was once “perfect.” The fire seals his fate of loneliness— once separating him from his wretched family, and finally burning every trace of the glint of good once residing next to him.

Through the roller coaster of Kaleb’s life we can’t help but notice in what ways his inner turmoil mirrors our own. Beneath our privileged lives, are we absolutely miserable? Are we guided by fear or our own values? How do we deal with tragedy? Kaleb dealt with his loss of his sister through hitting himself and the loss of the Jimfamily through setting fire to the house when the next family moved in, though most would likely not go to such extremes. Jones doesn’t just tell five tales, he ingeniously paints a picture of suffering in a superficial culture, but through the trials and tribulations of the antihero, he brings the suffering to the point of illumination. And through the illumination we see truth of experience.

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Kaleb Monaghan: A Troubled Soul

Tristan Morrow

“How To Ruin The Perfect Family In Five Easy Steps” by Neale Jones is a tapestry of scenarios that tie together the depth and mystery of a man who has been molded, perhaps twisted, by his life’s events. The author skillfully builds a picture, of a man who on the outside is seemingly normal. As the stories build and reveal the true nature of Kaleb, you begin to want to search for clues that you may have missed previously in order to have a better understanding of him. The careful reader will tie these clues together to a conclusion that Kaleb is a sociopath and is responsible for more than what we initially think.

The story begins with the seemingly disconnected scenario of Kaleb happening upon the scene of a blonde who has just run over a dog. This first impression of the narrator Kaleb is a superficial one. The reader initially thinks that the first story is about the blonde, but on closer look it’s really about the “Jimfamily” The last paragraph portrays his joy over thinking the newly killed dog is that of a neighboring family, “...an insidious enjoyment started to seep into my throat..” and offers us a clue about what Kaleb is really like. The author is teasing you with a glimpse into Kaleb’s true nature.

The author’s style of writing the story is an additional way to portray the lead character as off-the-wall, adding dimension and depth. With artful dialogue and run-on sentences, the author attempts to make us feel the way Kaleb feels about his neighbor, which is that he’s listening to a bunch of meaningless words jumbled together,

Hi I’m Jim We’re neighbors Just moved in over here How long you been living here? We just love it Like my old neighborhood when I was a kid We just keep on remarking Katie and I how similar it is Great for kids Quiet The kind of place you could let them trick or treat without giving it a second thought You know Well maybe not I don’t suppose you have any kids Dashing bachelor that you look to be Well I shouldn’t be so quick to judge Did I say my name’s Jim? What’s yours? (Jones, Five...Tales)

The author mercilessly pulls you into Kaleb’s confused and twisted world by continuing the run-on sentence style with the after-dinner scene. The door closes,

...blam behind me, and I stood on the step in the dark, with nothing in front of me but the empty street and the blank vacant eyes of my first edition house with a patchy lawn and no lights on because no one else lives there and the dry leaves scratching over the asphalt like they were being dragged against their will and the hollowness I’d feel rolling up in my cold cotton sheets later in my bare-walled room, and I thought that I knew that the Jim-family was the most perfect and perfectly hateable family in the entirety of the known world. (Jones, Five...Tales)

The author’s third story is the most revealing about Kaleb, and begins with remembrance of his childhood home as being a castle. The author paints a dark and foreboding visceral image of Kaleb’s young life as we picture him in a dark and dreary castle. Kaleb goes on to recount his awful existence in a broken home with parents who had become bitter and angry after a tragic roller coaster ride accident

that killed his young sister. Kaleb is abused by his mother, picked on by classmates and even belittled by a teacher. Kaleb's life, pitiful as it was, goes up in smoke as he comes home from school one day to find his castle burned down. When I first read the third story I thought it was one the author may have done well to leave out. We really didn't need the details to know that the young Kaleb had experienced a tragic life. Maybe it would have added to his mystique to not learn so much about Kaleb's early years. But in retrospect, I see that we needed to know this part of Kaleb's life to understand the final story.

In the fourth story, as the Jimfamily falls apart, Kaleb's character is contrasted against Jim's. This is the story where the author more clearly defines Kaleb as spineless and amoral as he depicts Jim as the person of values and standards who calls his company on their despicable practices. Jim eventually loses his family as he drowns in a legal quagmire while Kaleb is portrayed as somewhat relieved that the "perfect" Jimfamily has ceased to exist.

...and secretly I was wishing for rain to fall heavily upon their parade and wipe the smiles off their perfect rosy-cheeked faces, if only so that I wouldn't feel as though I had been spending time thinking that there were people who lived much better lives right across the street, even though I did keep going over there. (Jones, Five...Tales)

It's interesting that Kaleb kept going over to the Jimfamily's home when they invited him even though we're led to believe that he hated and despised their perfect life. Was he a desperate and lonely man who really envied the Jimfamily and resented them for achieving what he never could and having what he never had when he was young? The final paragraph in this fourth story shows that Kaleb attempts to compare his life with the life of Jim "...Yet when it was all said and done all he got for his trouble was bankruptcy and a divorce and a for sale sign he pounded angrily into the frozen lawn and a life which had become particularly lonely and conspicuously like my own." This quote expresses Kaleb's underlying happiness that Jim's life has fallen apart and ended up like his own.

The fifth and final story gives the reader much to think about. A new family moved into the Jimfamily home and Kaleb sees them as being unsavory they "didn't seem to have any nice bones in their barrel-like bodies at all." They had "...about a dozen cats" and Kaleb was certain they "...didn't eat organic wheatless noodles in their tuna casserole and they screamed at each other constantly right from the get go..." Even though the Jimfamily is broken and gone Kaleb compared the new family to it. He reflects on the fate of the Jimfamily and appears to have a moment of sadness about their fate when he says, "...I hadn't expected quite so much to befall them and actually kind of missed them somewhat."

Questions start to be raised as Kaleb continues to call this the "Jimfamily home" even though a new family now inhabits it. Again, the author offers us the opportunity to play detective and look for clues about the demise of the new family's home. Kaleb tells us "that it really shouldn't have surprised anyone that their house burned down by the end of April." How is it that Kaleb knows so much about the inside of the new family's home? Why did he mention specifically that "...the smoke looked like a burning toaster"? Why did the author use this same phrase that was used in telling the story of young Kaleb's life? These are questions that make the reader more interested in tying the stories together. More questions are raised as to why Kaleb appears to feel so guilty about his death wish upon the Jimfamily. Think

back to the story of Kaleb's young life and when he came home to see his "castle" burned down. He remembered getting in trouble when he caught the toaster on fire. Black smoke came out of the toaster and for some reason this image keeps coming back to him, when his "castle" burned down and when the new family's home burned down, as if he is somehow responsible.

The final paragraph has Kaleb again referring to the burned down home of the new family as the "Jimfamily home". We see that the connection between Kaleb and the Jimfamily is the basis for all of the stories and although there are many questions, the main question that we are left to grapple with is why is Kaleb so obsessed with the Jimfamily? His connection with the "Jim family" is the parallel between his life and theirs. He thought he had the perfect family, calling his home a "castle", and he referred to the "Jimfamily" as being perfect; they both fell apart.

Neale Jones previous submission in The Porter Gulch review, 2004 "The Stories I'm Not Supposed To Tell" is another psychological thriller dealing with angst and inner turmoil. Though the two stories seem far apart the author succeeds in stirring up in the reader the sense that you are a detective uncovering a twisted plot. These stories make you dig deep and wonder if he's revealing something about himself. The impression he left with "The Stories I'm Not Supposed To Tell", is one that this story is told from his perspective about his own son. The impression with the story of Kaleb, "How To Ruin The Perfect Family In Five Easy Steps", is one that maybe Mr. Jones has embellished on events that happened in his life.

The author has constructed an overall theme in "How To Ruin The Perfect Family In Five Easy Steps" and intricately tied together all of the five connected stories. The author involves us in the story with the clever style of writing; giving us a glimpse into Kaleb's twisted mind, and then peaks our interest by raising questions that we can ponder and answer. Our minds are exercised by searching for clues that are embedded throughout the stories and we have to face the grim facts about Kaleb, who we can deduce is a dangerous sociopath. We are forced to the conclusion that Kaleb is responsible for the wrath that befell his parents and neighbors.

Works Cited

Jones, Neale. Five Conspicuously Connected Tales. Cabrillo College: Porter Gulch Review, 2005

Jones, Neale. The Stories I'm Not Supposed To Tell. Cabrillo College: Porter Gulch Review, 2004