

CONTAINING MULTITUDES

by

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ABSTRACT

CONTAINING MULTITUDES

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The title refers to a line from Whitman's poem "Song of Myself." As all America was Whitman's truth, so the people this writer has encountered on the open road were her own truths. The poems are arrayed in divisions ranging from the familiar to the strange: acquaintances and friends, family, loves, coworkers, and strangers. Personalities of people are represented in the poems by images, actions, and feelings. Scenarios that embody the essence of each poem's persona are created and commented upon by the writer. Her reactions to people illustrate her internalization of the psyches of other individuals and a merger of that knowledge into the writer's own idea of self.

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Prelude

The experiences of one person include multitudes of others. Whitman heard America's indomitable spirit singing. I hear voices, see faces and images poised. The people I know and the things I have learned while trying to understand people, enter and live very closely within me, wholly true to who I am. This sober certainty, this revelation of alternative worlds within my own, this reshaping of self is the product of my growth as a poet.

My poetic journey, its first substantial product originating from the murder of a family member I did not know well, my Uncle Jerry, led to questions about his life; questions that I found applicable to my own. As I helped with the affairs of my uncle's estate, we became acquainted for the first time. He had been a writer, an intellect, yet never allowed this aspect of him to be common knowledge. He wandered deeper and deeper into his self until others were no longer visible. Wound tightly in his own world, he was alone and now is gone. His disconnection alerted me to my own, and connecting is crucial to being a poet. Interacting with experience, which is the most credible authority, is facilitated by conjunctive ideas. With this revelation I wondered about my own experiences. People, experiences, and poetry merged in my mind. Instead of plunging deeper into self, I looked to others radiating around my existence. Different and conflicting realities linked to my past, present, and future progressed to poems.

In this awakening, I began to reflect on people. In my poetry, I marveled and celebrated diversity of characters from many areas of my life. People I remember, who have adhered to and intensified my soul with their unique lives, began to reveal themselves. Random, sporadic phrases and images appeared in my mind and were transferred into notebooks where they inspired reflection and rediscovery, becoming catalysts for poems. People are complicated: to uncover and analyze this idea required a development, an enhancement of my craft. Looking into the lives of others and finding an image to represent their worth, their beauty, required browsing through photo albums, mementoes, and talking to people about unique individuals from their own lives. Talking about experiences, genealogy, lineage, ideas, patterns, and people's intimacies gave perspective and definition to the faces that made me who I am.

After an image was defined in my mind, word selection, connotations of words, and associations of those words to other works that I have read, were assembled in a jumbled list. Comparisons and correlations, phrases whose sound or image complemented one another, were shaped into a poem. Once formed, they were to be perfected. The revision process always consisted of reading my poem aloud to as many people as would listen. The views of others, their own connections and questions, gave me a depth of perspective unattainable on my own. Often, my answers to their questions created new words, phrases, and images to add to my poetry. When offering a poem about someone whose soul seems familiar to me because of my value for him or her, I found that there were simple qualities that I took for granted and did not address in

preliminary versions of poems. Reading my poetry to other poets helped fill gaps left by careless assumptions and has become an integral part of the maturation of my craft.

When a considerable collective body of poems was developed, the many areas of my life became a natural division. Thoughts about people seemed to create new realities for me. Gradations of my reality extended, and my own mortality ripened. I began to wonder what might lay beyond the familiar faces in my life. Voices of lives, words of wisdom and honesty of spirit became my new celebrants. Peculiar imperfections caught my attention and arrested me. Now I struggle and yearn for new souls to be poems. The scope of this project extends from the familiar to the strange. My interaction with diverse people, their dimensions and depths, unifies my being and trains my voice. I sit and sing—as one of the poems collected here shows me—at the center of a mandala.

Scores of Humanity

I can
measure.
I can
straddle the timeline,
(in limbo)
count my years by the people
who've marked me.
I wander among them
—the years, the people
dormant,
suspended,
trying to fit words—
a *raison d'être*.
Sinews
(hangers on)
break/bend
my very self.

A Tableau of my Youth

**A congregation,
from a time out of my mind,
assembles
before me.**

**Memories pose themselves,
their stillness
alters me.**

**People,
perfect imperfections
from my early years—
mementoes
that know.**

Of Motorcycle Men and Raggedy Ann Dolls

Through a knot hole in our wooden fence
 with my ten year old eye
 I spy
 Michael the Motorcycle Man next door.
 Splinters jut
 into my view,
 encircle,
 pierce the image
 of this man with his godly bod.

He's standing armed,
 takes aim,
 bow string drawn tight.
 The arrow's tip,
 a speck,
 points
 at the bull's eye on the fence.
 I watch
 stooped, squinting,
 dreamy at the sight.

"Whatcha lookin' at ?!" my brother screeches.

Embarrassed
 I jerk erect—
Pluckthrong.
 Losing my balance
 I fall,
 sprawl,
 and watch my brother run at me.
 He points at my leg.
 "Get it out!" I scream.
 Instinctively
 he yanks
 my skin rips
 blood gates open
 lights go out.

I awaken
 in the arms of Michael the Motorcycle Man.
 Hippie-hair

tangled in blood
brushes my cheek
as he carries me.

Later,
after the stitches,
both of us still covered in blood,
he nestles a Raggedy Ann doll next to me
and shows
the doll's heart reads
"I love you."

Lawn Chairs on a Tar Top Roof

Below them—
a business.
“Buy, Sell, Trade—
Papa Joe’s Pawn Shop”
Rifles and revolvers,
diamonds and gold encased in glass and velvet
racks of stereos, speakers, and TVs.
Splendor in the layers.
Push the buttons,
turn the knobs,
see it all.

In front—
a parade.
Seamless masses march
for the Strawberry Festival.
Queens,
clowns in cars,
and high school bands—
a pyramid of pageantry.
From the green of the earth
to the very pink of courtesy
toe to heel.

A Closet Full of Grace

I walk in
decide
to dress in you.
Pink boxes marked with lacy writing
line my top shelf.
Inside them
dresses, blouses, skirts
in white tissue
waiting to be worn.
Your clothes,
the skin of another age,
alter stance, posture, face.
Everything
stretches the threads of me
into another kind of woman.

to have something rest in it.
 Its weight makes his arm
 hang
 static
 an obstruction to his gait.
 They say he says
 "I sinned and God took it."

iii.

Sunday Services

He's herded us
 at sunrise
 under a canopy of pine and oak.
 Our choral voices
 accompany
 the warble of water
 created by twisted roots
 of water tupelo, willows, river birches.
 The Big Thicket his church,
 its fallen trees our seats—
 he preaches.
 His hand
 covered by a black glove,
 inert
 on a lightning cut stump.
 Leaves dance,
 shadow his face.
 His deep voice
 hums in the air
 —almost a whisper.
 We hush to hear
 —listen
 his message
 nestles in my soul.

The Rock Tumbler

Walk the curb,
eye the gravel
cast off from the center of the road.
A shape, a size
Draws me to investigate.
My toes shuffle amongst the gravel,
search the rough stones.
Pebbles, shards, pick them up,
stuff my pockets with the rubble
and take it to the old couple down the road.

The Miller's house,
rich in strangeness.
Artifacts
from exotic places:
animal horns, clay pots, and primitive instruments
line the walls of my path.
I deposit my jagged debris in their machine.
Feeling green
beneath their translucent rippled roof,
I sit on the patio floor,
cross my legs,
run my hands through the buckets of cool, smooth rocks.
All things counter
break, shift, morph.

I listen to the stories of the stones.

Donnie

Death rocks your crib
in the first weeks of your life.
Rock a bye, bye baby.
Death takes your world.
Your heart-broken mommy
falls to her knees
cries and prays.
God counts her tears
and saves you.

But death has already stolen parts of you.

The broken baby
lives—
lost but found.
Shaken by the hand of Death.
Touched by the hand of God.
Alive—without
sight, sound, mobility.

Your fingers and toes clenched
white tight
like a turtle on its back
dying in the sun.
Some people pity you

Others—
who step past pity
and move close enough to touch,
may hear laughter erupt
and be pulled
from their world into yours,
where life is Donnie
touching and being touched.

The Love Boys

Ours was a
 Brady Bunch.
 No Marsha, Jan, or Cindy.
 Just me, my two brothers,
 and four boys next door.
 Too many—nice.
 Girrl heaven

Lost among the boys
 I make their business mine,
 follow,
 jump their fences,
 Wear their clothes—
 A make-believe boy

At puberty I had to reinvent them
 The Boss,
 Summer's Dream,
 Book Boy,
 and The Baby.

Their pal
 unravels,
 splits apart,
 re-enters
 as me.

Ma Famille

**They make in-roads on me.
Their bare truth
a flagrant questioning
lingers thick at the edges
of proximity.
My family
glares
ne plus ultra.
They tell me
there's no more
beyond us.**

Pépère

Eyes closed

I search my mind for you. . .

I waft across fields
 of *petits pois*,
 follow rows of houses,
 to walk the path
 through your Alice-in-Wonderland garden,
 touch bushes
 cut
 tied
 into shapes grown
 wishing well
 rabbit
 arch
 umbrella

—and reach you.

Every day
 your worn sandals shuffle
 the one-lane country road.
 Spade and shears in one hand
 a cane in the other,
 you tend the *jardin des morts*.
 Patiently
 you bear this work of heaven
 in the cemetery, the place
 that awaits you.

Mémère

She's perched
 on a stool
 beneath the sun's rays
vis a vis her garden.
 Beauty chased by years
 lingers
 in a hand-held mirror.
 She hunts gray face hairs
 and tweezes them.

At noon
 she crosses *La Place*.
 The sun cuts a flash from a coin
 spent on the earth.
 It glints,
 winces in her eye.

Lipping the coin
 she clutches her shawl in one hand
 the other a railing.
 —the steps measure her age.
 Her caution makes assurance double sure,
 and she eases beneath *le baraquement*.

(Long ago,
 when she was a young wife
 after the war,
 her family fashioned their home
 out of one of these barracks.
 Under it
 dirt hewn to
 a cellar—*la cave*.)

Within the shaded alcove
 cool, damp, dirt-sweet air
 swirls slowly.
 You can taste the years.
 She throws her weight
 with both hands against the wooden door.
 Its swing grates,
 and she fingers the coin from her mouth.
 Amid myriads

vegetables, cider, wine
she preserves the coin
in the hiding place
of her family's inheritance.

Bottled, jarred bills and coins,
safe sustenance
for their future.

D-Day: Behind the Beaches

Panic
unfurls an immense fear.
The Nazis
a convoy of evil
devour life
deaden the streets.

Father and son stand stoic,
protect their home
bathed in sweat
trying to still the anguish
of a mother and wife caged
who listen but cannot look
as wheels whine to a halt
and the final screams of war issue.
Boots scrunch gravel.
Men laugh in a pack
at the powerless sentinels.
A warning whistle splits the air—
a blitz-moment
obscures their shouts, the shots.

Uneasiness
spurs the hidden family
to the breaking point
a breach into bitterness and terror
a look upon the threshold of death—

The women shriek
at the sight of
father lying upon son
a shield of sacrifice.
As soldiers
disappear into the distance
the son moves

lives

a legacy.

**The Remembrance of Things Past
La Recherche du Temps Perdu**

**Mother, Father
you're lost in the years;
you brood. And brood.
Passions deferred
in the land of the free.
Daily deeds,
trials,
vices,
imprint themselves
suspend
wife from man
husband from woman.**

**Remnants of you
survive
in another place,
ground you to one another—
an ocean away
from what once was.**

**I walk behind
watching you two walk the halls
of the St. Michelle Clinic.
Past pleasures rediscovered
hand-in-hand
man and woman—narrate
fragments from lost days.
Resilience learned.
Memories teach the heart,
newly grown to love.**

**At a window
your finger squeaks
from edge to edge
summoning a desperate change.**

Bernadette Raymonde Juliette Rosa Gerfaux Hulme

Known also by a similar term
chirped by a neighborhood child
whose mouth
could not yet form
so many syllables
from "Bernadette"
—and "Bird" became her name.

My mother began a daycare in our home
to keep us near.
These children, too,
began to call her momma.
Somehow the two words made sense
jammed together.
This "Mommabird"
who fed them healthy meals,
taught them right from wrong,
sang, read, cleaned, played, stitched
yes, loved
her young flock,
molding them who molded her
forming the uniqueness—my mother
Mommabird.
What else?

Tonton Nanard
Uncle Bernard

He teeters on his toes
back to the wind
hunched
as if pressed in a doorway.
The rest of him resists—
his belly breaches the border,
but hilarity saves him.

His humor/his heart-darkness
makes a margin
between
who he is
—and who he is.

Nanard le Canard
our duck
our funny trickster
jeu d'esprit, jeu de mots.
Tables set with jocular
the cream of the jest.

Bernard in the dark,
out of humor,
a melting mood,
withdrawn
flat, unprofitable
woe weighted.

A doorway, dilemma
with a self hinged
unhinged.

Houses of Style

Vanessa Duroux
 weaves into a room
 men quiver
 their eyes sex up
 ferment in her exotic essence
 her shapely *haute couture*.
 Following her
 a trail of men
 (and me mumbling
 about the transformation
 of my clothes on her body.)

We sit
 until I tire
 of counting the number of eyes on her,
 and I remove myself to a doorway.

From the fringes
 I watch
 envious
 ripe in the darkness.
 Women of style
 (anointed draped in dresses:
 Doña Karen, Versace. . .)
 congregate in their houses of worship
 and invoke reverence with their gestures.
 Libations pour from their mouths
 into her:
 the glass of fashion and the mold of form.

Uncle Jerry

Your death eats me
I grieve—
stand, stare
 silent, sick.

Make-up heals the thirty-dollar death-hole
that confined your mind
shrouded your stories
killed your book
leaving it cold
unfinished
untitled.

Daddy's troubled younger brother
the red-headed dreamer
the magically real writer
pirated
preyed upon
for thirty dollars
lying too early
gravely taken.

Closing my eyes
I breathe—
and flicker back to the Sandpiper Motel.
The manager reenacts our closet writer's murder,
but I can't see the scenario for the blood
crusted on the wall
rotted in the rug
tainting the motel registration card.
Our bond was buried
until your forced slumber awoke the writer in me.
A hereditary revelation consumes
wakes
dead words.

Big Brother

**Your spirit hardens
among rigors.
You guard convicts
all of you locked down
restrained
to brutal limits.**

**I remember the real you.
Silly
whimsical antics:
strumming your guitar
backward on your belt buckle
smiling and smiling—
You had dreams
pilot, architect, mechanic. . .
Manhood and marriage
responsibility, money.
I watched you
withdraw from others and yourself.
Your dreams were beaten down
by your own hand
holding correctional keys.**

**Today, though,
baby on the way
you're quickening.
Life from life
signs of silliness and smiles.
You're true key
unlocks itself.**

Beyond a Little Brother's Uniform

Certainty compels
uniform motion.

Back to back
you don costumes
Boy scout

ROTC

Aggie

Marine.

Seamless insignias
rig your world
until distant journeys confront you with self-comparisons.

You uncover,
point against point
deploy/diverge
throw off
your standard issued wardrobe,
unsteady the security,
and sacrifice the gains of forces
for the promise of something different.

You crave
every cloak not uniform.
Fatigued by the craze,
dressed in blue,
you waiver at God's plenty,
and rest beneath a laurel tree.
Amazed, renewed—

swearing a self-allegiance.

Love

Trying to define
variations
on it,
I look to
the tangible reaches,
innocence—experience
maidenhood—marriage.
The line of love
changes, splinters
to new directions
that lead
—everywhere. . .

One Day

The friends sail all morning— while
away December's first real cold day,
alone in a two-seat Sunfish in the bay.
Alert, they stare across waters, a mile.
In youth, when blood and curiosity rile,
weather, world don't matter. They
lean closer to each other, lavished with ocean spray
and tempt and tease the day away—in style.

Smiling in the swells, they drift and rock.
Morning, afternoon, evening flit by
miles out, caught between wind currents—still...
Young love, the setting sun, and the early moon—hearts thrill.
Their first kiss: cold, nervous, unbalanced, and shy
drops them in frigid waters—love shocked.

The Beginning

Our field's been plowed
houses built
lives begun.

But our memories cling, root—
beneath the roofs,
 bricks,
 foundations.

Our field grows wild
remembers
repeats
relives. . .

My finger crooks his belt loop,
knuckles the small of his back,
he leads, clears a path
his hand
 cupping mine.
Reaching the center of the field
he sits down
grabs *my* hands
pulls me
into him
 kisses me.

There amidst the cockleburs and mosquitoes
breath swirls
fingers read each face
tickle eyelashes
straighten eyebrows
trace lips
the direction this is taking
unfurls—

Hair Love

Erotic elasticity
we tangle between the sheets
bodies curl into one another
we caress
comb
liberate the kinks
our
hands, feet
arms, legs
our entireties
flip
fade
twist
twirl
pin—pull
limbs stroke
we groom
we grow
a love

Love's Extremities

Balanced
centered
love is perfected
boundless too.
It builds up
grows
to fruition
at its extremes.

In need—you
take and take.
Selfishness
heals
mends
makes amends.
In the taking
you and your lover cured.

Content—you
give and give
Selflessness
beckons
selfless pleasure.
You and your lover revel,
in the rush.

Love binds,
genuine, strong,
even at its farthest reaches.
In balance
changes and chances
give
take
completely known
all forgiven.

Teachers and Students, the Knowing

**Realizations
reciprocal erudition
(deeper than just learning.)
Knowledge
of the system
of parentage,
 or the lack,
of the kids' and teachers'
—potent truths
a hint of society's future.**

Miguel's Mandala

**"an instrument of contemplation. . . a central point within the psyche,
to which everything is related. . . the squaring of a circle"**

—Jung

New Kid

**The class quiets
to watch you enter.
Assured,
you offer your hand without hesitation.
Eye to eye
you introduce yourself.
I add you to my roll,
show you to your desk,
and continue.**

My Assignment

**My personal Mandala
held just beneath my chin
covers my torso.
I explain the colors, designs, and objects
and their connection to me
my character,
my life,
my beliefs.
"Everything in this circle shows something about who I am.
I want you to show me who you are."**

His Creation

**I see your brain
working
behind your eyes.
Pencil in hand
you begin
hunched,
deliberate,
chewing your tongue in conscious reflection.
No questions
No distractions;
you impress me with your certainty.
Class ends.
As you leave, I note—again
that rarity—the Confident Freshman.**

**You return,
Mandala held proudly.
Shocked, I stare.**

**Your art's well shaded, true to form—
the barrel of a gun
points at me,
the buttocks of a woman
in a thong.**

My eyes question.

You explain—

"Nothin's more peaceful than a piece of ass. I believe in peace.

You said I was confident.

You can't get more confident than having a gun on your side."

Jacquellin

**According to you
despite your report card
you're failing,
despite your ambition
you take no chances.
You claim to be bad at everything,
worry dominates,
self-doubt discourages.**

**Don't you see it?
Can't you hear it?
Your brain
kinetic
already in motion.
Grades drive you
instead of your mind—
that is why you starve.**

Elsie Posern,
or
Dear You:

Years
and not a word between us.
Not your doing—
I know.
That time was hard,
and the memories have not softened.

Yet there is much to be said.
Were it not for you,
your spontaneity,
strength—
the self I am now
would not be.

You spoke so well of me
when others saw no potential.
when others said, "reconsider,"
you saw beyond.
It was then
that part of you became me.

I'm still uncertain,
tentative.
Pain lingers—
then something strong takes over
beats down my insecurity,
and your wonderfulness
breaks through.

The One to Watch

**You parade in at the bell;
you step, stand on the seat of a desk.
Every inch of your five-foot stature
proudly
spouts Shakespeare.
Bubbling up the air with your words
you teach.
Hands up, out, all about
bracelets dangle at your forearms,
earrings sway
from your closely cropped coif.
Your ensemble today
is a leopard print dress
draped over your plump form
to clash dazzlingly
with your purple leg warmers and slippers
(your winter wardrobe).
You're a feast for the senses.**

**Your students and I
 (the simple intern)
have no choice but to stare
to smile.**

A Chicana's Plumada

Unabashed,
 she lives in excess.
 Sweet gall,
dulce for the soul.
 Pen ready,
 she strikes.
 Brazen defiance
 lingers long
 in the flourish of her penstroke.
Hija de la Raza,
 Dramatics
 (the discipline)
 make a woman of many words.
 She gains skewed courage
 alone—
 single mother, teacher,
 the only college educated member of her family.
 Expectations and responsibilities
 with no knowledge, no model
 of how to cope.
 Personal, professional, mental:
 her lives overwhelm her.
 Overstressed, overplayed
 she leaves
 boundaries broken.

Mexico—
 a Chicana's premier trip.
 Her makeshift Texas *barrio*
 (a city block filled with family)
 left behind
 she drives and drives
 anticipates release
 expects
 as never before
 revelations,
 connections,
 a floating world as yet unvisited.

Aqui

she feels vivacious.

Alla

she feels voracious:

an extravagant education

a fatherless child

wastefulness when others have nothing.

Blind pride

gouged,

she takes a new view.

Guilt.

Guilt.

Home to Texas.

Beyond—the Others

**The sun circles me.
I watch the day, the night
outside.
I wander beyond,
leave the security of my world
to question another.
Growth of mind from sights
uncanny:
is it worth going further?**

Morning People

**The whispering begins with the wind;
I hear you and am drawn
to the tree at one end of the cemetery.
Beneath branches and leaves
their shadows move
mark, mottle me:
light, dark.
Broken headstones
piled
an illegible mass of lost lives
ring the trunk of the tree
marking the years.
Puzzled
I try to fit the pieces.
Bit by bit forms take shape in the grass
and names and dates reveal themselves.
I greet you
the unknown

—mourning people.**

Natural Piety?

Earthbound
 beneath Him—I look to the sky,
 smile at wisps of clouds
 made taut by His nether parts.
 I see Him as if I'm under His chair.
 My impish thought makes me grin.
 It's a glorious morning
 but my smile sobers.
 He's turned His back to the world
 —tired.
 It leads me to question our failure:
 of Him, ourselves, earth. . .

Images of eternity warp

We enter the millennium
 glory gone
 and I mourn
 earth's,
 God's childhood.
 We've molded our landscape to suit us
 Dressed it in concrete
 Tied it with wires and pipes.
With time
We're
splendor
less.

Noon Sunday

**Sunbright colors stream through windows,
a darkly vaulted ceiling under a steep-pitched roof
inspires.**

Reverently we file out of the fellowship hall.

**A congregation
dressed in Sunday best
to celebrate in the religious monolith
its own benevolent endeavor.**

Suddenly

I see the damnedest form.

**A mohawk centered down his head
eyebrows shaved
but imitated further up tattooed at his hair line
presenting a constant look
of surprise.**

**Wild-looks,
a pretty mocking,
civilized
by soul and spirit.**

Cadeaux

**You'll get back what you've given her.
Give your own legacy.
Ready yourself.
White labels hang throughout her house,
tagging objects with names
she anticipates her departure.
She honors your choice,
suspends your bounty
as she waits**

—for an end.

**It's not that she's ungrateful
or that she doesn't need your gifts
It's her age-won wisdom.
She knows
sacrifice.**

Dreamtime

**Deep sundown.
Moon and stars,
white shadows in the nocturnal sky.**

**Breathe the silence,
outside.
Come sit
on the cold cement steps.
No need to close your eyes to find darkness;
it surrounds.**

Darkness breeds mirrors.

**In the stillness and the quiet
self cannot be denied.
You
alone with you
content in knowing.
Drain your brain
of the day
by counting wishes in the sky.**

Voilà!

**People,
I breathe your lives
into mind.**

Family

Friends

Strangers

**(my teachers)
shades in my memory.**

Your happiness

your struggles

your idiosyncrasies

your lessons

become mine

**always finding the perfect time to resurface,
to awaken me with your words.**

I worry that one day you'll be silenced,

so I hold you sacred,

near,

arms around all of you.

I hug my mortality;

reality is not just self.

In your trials, your battles

I learn to go beyond me

—and you.

In you,

pleasure, knowledge of everything.

You ensure my growth.

You keep and keep and keep.

I await others.

This is neither the beginning nor the end

but idle dignity

a reckoning

—*il y a de plus en plus*