



What
Loss
Taught
Me

Stephen Furlong

What Loss Taught Me

Stephen Furlong

Nostrovia! Press

2018 © Stephen Furlong

Twitter: @StephenJFurlong

Email: j.stephen.furlong@gmail.com

<https://www.facebook.com/stephen.furlong.7>

Cover, *Moonage Daydream*, by Jennifer Walton
Oil on canvas, 40" × 40," 2015

Jennifer's Website:

<http://www.jenniferwalton.com>

Editing + Design by Christopher Morgan

Twitter: @AndLoHeSpoke

Editing by Bob Sykora

Twitter: @Bob_Sykora_

Printing by *Bottlecap Press*

All Social Media: @BottlecapPress

Huge thanks to CA Mullins for his expertise <3

Twitter: @NostroviaPoetry

FB: Nostrovia Press

2018 Nostrovia! Chapbook Contest

Free Online PDF Release!

Table of Contents

Definition of Home Part I	1
Father to Son	2
For Those Who Imagine Coherency	3
When It Rains,	4
Soliloquy Part I	6
Into the Blur and the Worry	7
The Basement	9
The Game.....	10
“Victims in demand for public show...”	12
Everlast.....	13
Nostalgia	15
Anaphora, or a Poem about Courage	17
After I Told	18
The After Years, or Learning to Love	
My Own Voice	20
Acceptance	22
Soliloquy Part II	23
Introduction to Creative Writing	24
These Words Will Make Sense to Someone or No One.....	26
<i>Notes</i>	31
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	33

This book is dedicated to the memory of Julia
“Judy” Corrine Barry Spadaro (1943-2018), to
my family—I hope this makes sense to you and
sheds some light—and for my forever love
Caitlin Logan Cobb. Thank you for your
unwavering faith in me.

“I want to trace the lines and wrinkles,
I want to mend
The scars while we have time and care
Enough to break the rope, the
selfishness
That binds. Long
May this light blast down on us.”

–Bruce Weigl, from “Sun”

“There’s a big, a big hard sun
Beating on the big people
In the big hard world.”

–Eddie Vedder, from “Hard Sun”

Definition of Home Part I

Beside the broken piano
 whose keys chipped
off like bark,

 next to the filing cabinet
 whose documents grow
 with the years,
hangs an Everlast punching bag.

 Serves to release anger—

 the sound of chains
 dangling rings,
 an old radio tune, an answering

 machine: *Hello, we are not*

home, the rest trails off
like a sentence with no end—

Father to Son

To seek is to look for—
ward off defenses, roaming
safety like Pat Terrell,
in the right spot unless
you are Steve Walsh
in 1988.

This is
what I know:

*There is no truth in
forgiving and forgetting.*

The two-point conversion
will always be
incomplete.

For Those Who Imagine Coherency

*When I was a child I thought
First came the feelings
then came the words that told us what
the feelings meant.*
Steve Orlen "The Acrobat"

My father once told me
I get my sensitivity
from my mother.
Thinking it was insult,
I harbored it like a ship.
Only revealing it when I told
people I survived the ocean
all by myself. My hand waved,
crashing into waves—people thought

I was saying hello because
we look for reasons
not to say good bye.

"I'll see you soon,
you take care now."

"Keep in touch,
I'll miss you,"

I can't help, but
hear *misuse*.

When It Rains,

poetry gives me roadmaps.
The sense of direction comes
from unfolding myself
like my father's rain jacket.

A sign of love I didn't understand
until I did. I told myself *years ago*
I forgave you—the one who touched me.
You felt around my body, looking
for your own personal map,
for something possibly to give you
direction—you said

you didn't know who you were
and acted out of pain and hurt.
You said all the right words.
Maybe that's why my mother made
us hug. You're still lurking at family
get-togethers, reminding me I need
to get it together because
I have to continue to grow.
But it hurts. Growing pains,

like flowers along my branches, I used
to want to be an oak tree. Standing
strong and sturdy. Even in storms.
Or maybe I could be wheat.
Wavering in the wind.
Glistening gold to reveal potential,
a word which has always scared me.

I never felt like I lived
up to the mountains of expectations,
their shadows would leave

me in the dark. And when exposed
to something like light, I cover myself,
feeling unworthy of such a gift.
I had to re-learn my core,
definitions learned early on.
Like *love*, *hope*, and *forgiveness*.
To recognize I'm not a bother
—but the doubts. The doubts. The doubts.
They come in waves, overtaking
me in the tides. I don't like to drive
at night when it rains. I fear
loss of control. I fear
I may not make it home.

Soliloquy Part I

I want to know
if your wife knows.

I want to know
how you keep
your family
safe
from people like you.

The fact is
you are not rare.

Into the Blur and the Worry

Headlights in front of me &
followed by ghosts, my mother sits
in the passenger seat—
she says she only wants
what's best for me.

What she means:
she wishes I'd come
home more.

Truth is
those streets I haunted as a kid
haunt me. The double
yellows merge into the off-
ramp, the roads turn into roads,
the lines blur.

It's hard to separate
myself from what I hear
& what I tell myself.

The exhaust pipe burns
white smoke black depending
on what you put into the engine.

In this chest, under the hood,
the beating heart
of the problem,
making sure
the chassis, this skeleton
of a man, holds everything together.

To get her
to understand, I have
to get my hands dirty—
blood and oil tend
not to mix.

The Basement

Immersing myself
as a spilled can
of paint

I cover the cold concrete
floor, reaching corners.
The shadows begin having their way—

Twelve steps down, entering
this labyrinth of memory:

a place that exists both in reality
 and my nightmares

now, a door slam I've become hinged
 locked in place

Carefully closed blinds
as to not reveal
they're eyelids.
The key, jagged
like a predator's tooth—

it grips onto pain, leaving
teeth marks on my shoulder, still
fresh. Rubbing my hand over

these markings now, I begin to breathe
heavier, more carefully,
as to avoid being stuck.

The Game

I.

Trust comes together as family for a meal. A shared smile. Eyes that focus on you, only. A hand brushes your hair back. Hairs on your neck stand up at attention. *These hands nurture you*, or so he told you, *so he can sleep at night*. His hands reach dirty parts of you. They reach into your head, still above water. Yet you're drowning. His hand reaches for your mouth.

II.

He calls you his "special friend." Takes pride in making you grin. The curve of your smile contorts upwards, like the mountain in his pants. He tells you the bigger it gets, the more you're winning. This game is to keep you at bay, in this ocean, *water, water, everywhere*. In eternal limbo, you drown, you struggle, you—(do not pass go)—the ice will always break on your turn, falling further into the cold water of isolation. You will be forced to return to these moments. You will be forced to return. You will be forced.

III.

He watches you in the water. Says there's something organic in it. He asks you to shower and play. Now his excitement has turned into impatience. His eyes. They begin to shift again. He blames you for getting him *bothered*. Still his hand over you, a snake with venom, masks what he calls love. His eyes change. You change out of your clothes. He gives you options, lets you believe you have some remote control. There is no pause or fast forward.

IV.

Still. Your head rewinds, replays. Always on high volume.

“Victims in demand for public
show...”

From isolated towns,
we turned ourselves into homes,
became a family.

Stories cradle—*Someday
it will be you inheriting
stories that belong.*

You once told me love
was the greatest gift—
radiance that provided comfort.

All you ever gave me
was shadow.

I used to call, filled
with this odd thing
called Loss—that terrible
sound, that unhuman cry.

You never get over it.

But, once, I asked,
Who contaminated me?

People don't always understand.

Everlast

I have to remind myself
you are not a monster.
I have to remind myself
people like you exist.

Invisibility: I read one of its attributes
was to see but not to be seen.
Most people think they don't know
any victims. We don't like to reveal
ourselves. Camouflage comes from our roots,
our families, our self-protection. "Skin is my
shield, but who's to help me from inside?"

What happens when the defender
becomes oppressor?
You and me, a tree,
with roots grown tangled
and somewhere, someone
is being choked.

Nearly three quarters of child victims
tell no one for at least a year—

The explanation is rooted fear. The tree
becomes a shadow of you and me.

Thirty-five percent of oppressors
threaten with violence
in attempts to silence; it works,
because abuse robs innocence.

There is no immunity
because it could be you.

It was me.

I blamed myself.
Still do, some days.
If that's the case, seeing your face
means you're still winning,
stripping me from within.
My heart is a baseball
—stitches hold it together.

Statistically speaking, I am just a number.
Seven years I waited.
Nine years towards recovery.
Four years of counseling.
I am. One.

Nostalgia

When I was a child, I remembered
the chase of fireflies.
I'd run until my face glowed red,
like August on the Mississippi —my clearest
memory. Celebrating history,
the anniversary of a house that stood
one hundred years.
Was it a home for that long? I asked myself
then and now separated

by years, distance. *But isn't that why I write?*
To remember. Like trees in the fall,
I want to trust myself and let go completely.
I want to believe I might come back new.

I've been to towns where they remember
the shape of hands the color of eyes
birthdays my mother's maiden name

And cities where I went to forget
my relationship with God anger
You night terrors open water
the smell of wet cement answering machines

forgetting is so long—
I concern myself with taking

too much time
(knowing recovery has no deadlines,
just endless questions, especially
around the holidays);

too much paper
(voices telling me to just get over it,
like it's that simple. Like anyone could
do it).

Anaphora, or a Poem about Courage

Eventually, we'll be able to go home.
Eventually, we'll be able to—
Eventually, we'll be able.
Eventually, we'll be.
Eventually, we'll—
Eventually.

Eventually, I'll be able to love myself.
Eventually, I'll be able to love.
Eventually, I'll be able to—
Eventually, I'll be able.
Eventually, I'll be.
Eventually, I'll—
Eventually.

Eventually, my words will lose meaning.
Eventually, my words will lose.
Eventually, my words will.
Eventually, my words—
Eventually, my—
Eventually.

Eventually, love will finally conquer doubt.
Eventually, love will finally conquer.
Eventually, love will finally—
Eventually, love will.
Eventually, love.
Eventually.

After I Told

After I told, I still felt fingerprints
when I showered.

These days, I lift off your fingerprints
as evidence of my survival.

After I told, I still debated my life,
feeling the razor blade
eyes watching every step I took afterwards.

After I told, the first person I told
called me a *monster*.
A girl from my Confirmation class
confirming my fears.

After I told, I had to tell again.
My father was in the family room,
watching aimless T.V.
until he heard the sound of cries.

After I told, I finally understood
the word *genuine* & the word for leaving
without saying good-bye.

After I told, the look on my father's face
was the same
as when we buried my Nana, his mother.
Defenseless.

After I told, I still couldn't sleep
—afraid I might see
him haunting my nightmares. Silent.
Preying over me.

After I told, I tried to write about it.
Taking time, fixing the gears and cogs
until they congealed enough.

After I told, I found myself lost
in the words I said.
Confession doesn't always grant
road maps.

The destinations included forgiveness,
within pain and understanding.
I had to swim there.

The After Years, or Learning to Love My Own Voice

Faceless, it's all the same, it's all a shame.
I cover my ears. Overtaken by silence

I've lost my ability
to speak I wonder who'd listen
and so I hide. I speak gently
because I'm ashamed. Of my voice,

it cracks *Am I the only one?* I think,
I ask but it echoes
lonely one.

The threats revealed themselves
like he did, slowly, at first. Then,
all at once. He gripped my wrist.
Presently scarred from my life or death debates.

Like waves crashing into—
I hold onto words, I let them come over me,
like cold air,
hurting my chest. I live in a place where
it hurts to breathe.

Searching for breath of new life.
I cover my ears.

Echo. *My fears.*
Presenting them as a
punching bag from a ceiling,
existing as chained reality.

Shorelines, and I am the sea
the strength inside
unmeasurable. These words will
escape from me,

They have to move on.

Trust me I am trying.

This pain exists. A reminder of
where I came from.

A place of shadow.

Acceptance

I've wondered how to begin these lines,
concerned they may come out wrong,
or it'd be in a language that wasn't mine.
I carried these mountains to show I'm strong.

I have to remind myself I don't need approval,
I give you this poem knowing it's not the last.
Without anger, I must say, your removal
resembled a dislocated arm, its cut off cast—

an attempt to combine things was my mistake
—I own that now. My destiny can transform,
now spacious field, no longer slithering snake,
exposing my wings, no more swallowing swarm.

I end this poem with a lesson from what I lost:
I no longer will carry your splintered cross.

Soliloquy Part II

The fact is:
you're not rare.

I've had to train myself
to say that.

I've spoken it in my head
over and over again.

But here it is,
on the page,
entering these stanzas,
these rooms.

Introduction to Creative Writing

The first time I read James Wright's
"Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's..."
the last line was cut off—a machine-made
mistake. The chicken hawk *looking for home*
instead of *I have wasted my life*.
You requested amnesty, yet class called uproar.
Sounded barbaric yawps.

*Words change, worlds change, and
words change again.*

Still, two pines surrounded the poem's frame,
cornered by words tinged with nostalgia,
carefree. A couple of years have passed
and I'm thumbing through my notebook
from that class. I've noticed my words
reaching out, under influence
of these same forces. Creating
heaviness, bounded notebooks should have
unbounded ideas.

You taught me words could help me love
—again, I had doubts. Like shadows, they
crept, finding the corners of walls.
Where two ends meet: *Collisions*.
That's what Ron Carlson calls ideas—*collisions*.
Words combine, fuse, link—fences, not walls.

I'd rather see where I could go than trust
where I might go. I'll tell my secrets to the river,

reveal myself like a wound-up wrist, watch
the colors of the bridge begin to blend into sky,
and read these words to passersby.
Explain to them before troubled lights and
vanishing avenues, William Olsen wrote
the past must have loved me though.

I try to arrange those words
to arrange my feelings.
Though the past must have loved me.
The past, though, must have loved me.
The words ring, a refrain I refrain from hearing.
I will let the call go to voicemail. I will hit
save. I will hear those words
over and over again.
The past must have loved me though.

And one day when you and I go for a walk
in this city along the river,
next to the wall with the faces,
we'll be above the river at last.

These Words Will Make Sense to Someone or No One

Doubts reach into your pocket
and expect change.
A quarter of the time, your hands
will reach into this oblivion.

In my hometown, a man on the streets
carries a double-sided sign:
Love Him and *Fear Him*
marked on each side—pull
the trigger, your mind tells you.

I mean lever, pull the lever.

These signs, exits and merging, cross at the
railroads. This train takes you towards
the Mississippi. Muddied, it roars, a current
fascination. I once read memory is such
a cheat, but it always goes back
to its husband: the father of time.

These words will echo off the walls you built.
The soundwave erodes the ground below.

I had a conversation with God the other day.
We talked about how there are more razed
buildings than raised children in this town.
I laughed until I started to cry.

I waited in the water.

Notes

“Sun” by Bruce Weigl appears in *The Monkey Wars* (University of Georgia Press, 1985).

“Hard Sun” by Eddie Vedder appears on the soundtrack for the 2007 film *Into the Wild*.

“For those who imagine coherency,” is after a line from Mary Jo Bang. It’s not from a poem, but was uttered during a reading of hers when asked about *the perfect writing day*, if there were such a thing.

“Into the blur and the worry” is after a line from Stephen Dunn’s poem “The Observer.”

“Victims in demand for public show...” is after a line from “Immortality” by Pearl Jam.

In “Everlast,” the line “Skin is my shield, who’s to help me from inside?” is taken from “Walk the Sky” by Fuel from the soundtrack to the 1998 film *Godzilla*.

In “Nostalgia,” the line “forgetting is so long” is from Pablo Neruda’s “Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines.” Also, the poem is dedicated to my mother.

“After I Told” is inspired by Afaa Michael Weaver’s “If You Tell” which was published in *The Government of Nature* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

“Introduction to Creative Writing” is for Jamie D’Agostino. James Wright’s ghost wanders through this poem. I also stole the title of his posthumous book, *Above the River* (Reprint Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1992), in a pinch near the end of the poem. The Ron Carlson bit comes from *Ron Carlson Writes a Story* (Graywolf Press, 2007), which was part of that creative writing class’s syllabus. Was that really eight years ago, already? Additionally, *Trouble Lights* and *Avenue of Vanishing* (Northwestern Press 2002 and 2007, respectively) are books by William Olsen, who currently teaches at Western Michigan University, and served as a mentor to Jamie, so I feel indebted to him. “...In this city along the river, next to the wall with the faces,” refers to the Mississippi River, and specifically a spot in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, where there is actually Missouri Wall of Fame, ranging from baseball stars Yogi Berra and Stan Musial to poets like T.S. Eliot and Langston Hughes, who’s in a ghastly green color; that doesn’t appear in the poem, but feels important enough to share.

“These words will make sense to someone or no one” was inspired by myriad of things, but specific inspiration stems from Mark Doty’s *My Alexandria* (University of Illinois Press, 1993) and Patricia Hampl’s *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (W.W. Norton, 1999).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the editors of literary journals and anthology responsible for the previous publications of selected poems from this chapbook. Poems may have changed since first publication.

Chariton Review – “Father to Son,” “For those who imagine coherency,” and “These words will make sense to someone or no one”

Glass: A Journal of Poetry (Mom’s Respond Special Issue) – “Nostalgia”

Open Minds Quarterly – “Everlast”

Penstrike Publishing – “Into the Blur and the Worry”

Rhythm & Bones – “The Basement” and “The After Years, Or Learning to Love My Own Voice”

A Shadow Map: An Anthology by Survivors of Sexual Assault – “The Game”

Yes, Poetry – “After I Told”

Note: “After I Told” also reappeared in the e-book *The Voices of #MeToo*, released in September 2018 by *Yes, Poetry*.

First off, without their love and support of poetry, this book would be nothing without Christopher Morgan and Bob Sykora at *Nostrovial Press* who helped make this book a reality. Thank you beyond words for this opportunity. To my fellow chapbook contest winners, it is an honor to be published aside you. To the finalists and honorable mentions, keep doing wonderful things.

To my family and friends. These words weren't easy to write, and I hope, with time and effort and some gauze pads, we'll be able to talk about this maturely with love and understanding. We're in this together.

To Devin Kelly and Sue William Silverman. You're both beacons of light and I am thankful. To Jennifer Walton, thank you, thank you, I am beyond thankful for your artwork.

Dearest reader, thank you. I cannot thank you enough for taking the time to read this book.

To the corner of the world that is my Twitterverse, I can't even begin to list all of you because I know that the list will be as long the book itself. But, thank you, for your love and support. Thank you for loving pictures of my cat, fudge grahams, bad dad jokes, and all.

To those who supported my work along the way, who saw light in these poems: To Arthur Farrington (1955-2016), Richard Hughto, and Joseph Slichko. To Joe Benevento, Jamie D'Agostino, Brad Smith, TruSlam. To Daniel Nester. To Susan Swartwout and Jenny Yang Cropp, my dear graduate school friends whom I love and miss, and the Topless Poets Salon

(inspired, of course, by the classic Emily Dickinson line, “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?”).

Sundress Publications, and the humans who graced my presence therein, deserve love and thankfulness here because of the support I received during a weekend retreat I attended.

To the people over at *Five:2:One* who took a chance on me to write reviews, thank you for the opportunity to do something I love dearly over and over again.

For those dear humans whose presences I’ve been introduced to because of *A Shadow Map*; I am forever grateful to be in the anthology with you. It’s no exaggeration to say the book changed my life. I carry you forever in my heart: Joanna C. and Stephanie Valente, Isobel O’Hare, Lauren Milici, Jessica Lynn Suchon, Nicole McCarthy, and again, Christopher Morgan.

For those who walk the path described in these poems, please let this be light to you.

Let this offer hope.

Let this offer love.

Let this be hope.

Let this be love.



Stephen Furlong received his M.A. in Professional Writing from Southeast Missouri State University. His poems, interviews, and book reviews have appeared in *Yes, Poetry*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, and *Pine Hills Review*, among others. He currently serves as a Staff Reviewer for *LitStyle*, a subset of the literary journal *Five:2:One*. He can be found on Twitter @StephenJFurlong where he tweets his adoration for poets and fudge grahams, among other things.



I want to believe I might come back new

These are brave poems that have a remarkable immediacy of voice. They mourn; they bear witness; they warn. While about abuse, they transcend their topic. In the end they do what all compelling poems must – speak to what it means to be human in all its facets, both good and bad.

–Sue William Silverman, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (University of Georgia Press)

These poems take the hard risk of being honest, and vulnerable, of making out of deep, impossible hurt a kind of home. Stephen's work is a work of grace in that way. "Eventually, love," he writes, and I say yes. But also: the love is here. In the aftermath of cruelty, violence, and fear, Stephen has brought it out.

–Devin Kelly, *In This Quiet Church of Night I Say Amen* (CCM Press)

NIP