

POEMS INCLUDED:

- *DOMINOES*
- *ICE CUBES AND PAPER CIPS*
- *ALL DEATHS ARE EQUAL*
- *5/42*
- *BETWEEN ME AND THE LINES*

DOMINOES

Fascinating
 And so rewarding
Painstakingly
 Setting them up
One at a time, close,
 But not too close
Then,
Tapping one
And watching them fall...
 One, into the next
Until they
All...
 Fall...
 Down.
So cool.
A mesmerizing
 figure eight formation
 Or a circle
 Or a train
 Up and down little bumps
Until you see
Events in real time
 In real life
So symbolic...
Metaphorically collapsing
 Like that childhood toy
Cars crashing
 When one stops short
Kids running into each other
 When the front of their line
 Stops short
Until
One day
A person's life
 Stops short
Ending too soon
Of her own volition
And,

Like dominoes,
Others around her
 Collapse as well.
Teachers,
Parents,
Counselors,
Friends
One by one
 They fall;
Some simply cry
Others, for complicated reasons
 Very few would understand,
Never cry at all

Holding it in, they start to fall
 In different directions
 In different ways
Derailing like a train
Diverging from the domino line
Forking off from the rest
Turning to drugs
 Or knives
 Razors or ropes
Endless cycle of dominoes
Dominoes of
 Sadness...
 Depression...
 Helplessness...
Hopelessness...
 Blame...
 Guilt...
 Fear...

Anxiety...
 Anticipation...
 Relief.

One falls,
Then another
Click-Fall
 Click-Fall
 Click-Fall
Like those mesmerizing
 Hypnotizing
 Dominoes
But real...
 Life-sized lives

Ceasing,
 Stopping short
Cause = Effect
As a domino tilts,
 Slants,
 Wavers,
 Falls.
Down
 Down
 Down
We all
 Soon
 Fall down.

5-22-16

ICE CUBES AND PAPERCLIPS

I hate that every morning
 When I grab a handful
 Of ice cubes
There's always ONE
 That slips away
 And slides across the floor
 Melting along the way...
I hate that every time
I grab a paperclip
 There's always another
 Looped into it...
 Hanging on...
 Entangled.
I hate that some people
 Are more like paper clips
And others...
 Are ice cubes
I hate the feeling of
 Holding onto someone
Who's trying to slip away
 And melt out of existence...

5-29-2017

ALL DEATHS ARE EQUAL

I don't remember
 The first **big death**
Except that it may
 Have been my aunt
What I do remember most
 Is my mom's reaction
 To this death
 The death of her
 Identical twin sister
Such a violent reaction
To the feeling of helplessness
 And betrayal
What I remember
 Is how scared I was
Seeing my mom
 A pillar of strength
Shattered
 Destroyed
 Devastated
Hiding in the laundry room
 Sobbing her loss
Her only refuge
From prying
 Inquisitive eyes
 Of so many children
Only three of whom
 Were her own kin
It was then that I realized
 Our family foundation
 Was dying
My strong pillar
 Crumbling before my eyes...

I do remember
 The first **little death**
When cancer took Spanky
 A little life
 With a huge soul
Given one year to live
 After that terminal diagnosis
But staying with us
 For more than eight years
I do remember
 The **almost death**

Of our poisoned cat Bear
After he encountered
 Through his outdoor adventures
A mothball property barricade
A passive-aggressive
 'keep your cats out of my yard'
From our heartless neighbor Wes...
 (wouldn't a fence have
sufficed?)
I remember
 The **little death**
 I experienced that day
When our poor cat
 Came hobbling home
 Foaming at the mouth
Paw stuck in collar
 Barely alive
Part of my innocence
 My childlike trust and faith
 In my fellow humans
Died that day
I recall the still fresh
 Scabbed and scarred
 Memory
Of the first student of mine
 I lost to a **big death**
 -suicide-
And the **little death** in me
 The death of hope that
 I help
The scab reopening
 Torn off my scarred soul
 Dripping bloody tears
When the **almost death**
 Of another student
 Happened
A death that happened
 But through some miracle
 Retracted
Unbeknownst to her
 It just wasn't her time...

Her life
 Did not help the little death
I experienced
 When I stopped believing
 Her lies
As she promised
 She'd never try again
 RIP, my dear gullibility...

The fragile shell of our soul
Does not differentiate
 Big deaths from
 Little deaths from
 Almost deaths
It feels every death
 Equally
An emotional earthquake
 Creating another fissure
 An invisible hairline fracture
That will one day
 Shatter our soul
 Irreparably
Leaving only dust...
 Maybe that is the real reason
We can't live forever
Not because our bodies give out
 Give up
 Grow weary
 But because our souls do
How many deaths can one life handle?

6-28-17

5 / 42

School halls
 Are scary places.
Five minutes of hell
After every forty-two-minute class
Hallways full of critical
 Inquisitive
 Downright mean faces
 With fiery eyes
Always judging
 Browsing for
 The weakest
 Most vulnerable targets.
To look down
 Is as bad as
 Shining a spotlight on yourself;
A self-imposed arrow with a sign that
says
 'direct all hate mail here...
 HERE
 HERE!!!
To look straight ahead
 At all those peers
Is to invite a connection
 Direct eye contact
With any number of enemies;
To look up
Is to reflexively BEG
For the acknowledgment
 From a friendly face
 Without appearing desperate
Such a fine line between
 Desperate and Defiant
Getting jostled
In a crowded hallway
Always evokes
 A special kind of paranoia...
Was it intentional or accidental?
Did I hold on tight
 Or lose something vital?
And then...
 You hear your name.

Was it you
 They were calling?
Is your name common enough?

If you turn
 And they weren't calling you
 Everyone will laugh
If you don't turn
 And they were calling you
 Everyone will think
 You're a snob
How is it possible to lose either way?!
Only in the world of teens
 does this game exist...
Only in the world of teens
 Do you have to play,
 Whether or not you want
to
It's a sick kind of social roulette...
You self-soothe
With your familiar hallway mantra...
 Just one more hallway
 Just one more intersection
 Three more classrooms away
 Two more...
 One more...
Until you finally arrive
At your next temporary
 Safe zone
 Your next class
Only to anticipate that dread
 Your anxiety driving
Those next forty minutes
 Of missed instruction
Hoping that your teacher
 Can keep the class
Busy enough
 To not become bored
Knowing that boredom
 Always leads to

Silent but deadly bouts of
 Harassment
 And ridicule
 And endless intimidation
So silently done
 Expertly manipulated
Usually on that stupid

Deadly little invention
That ubiquitous gadget...
 The lightbox
The ultimate communication tool
 The weapon of choice
 In today's cruel world
 For cowards who want to unite
 Against a common victim du jour
Knowing you'll need to do this
 All over again
Every forty-two minutes
 For the rest of today
 And tomorrow
 And the school year
How many days left?
 That countdown begins
 On that dreaded
 First day of school
And never really ends...

4-5-2017

BETWEEN ME AND THE LINES

Every time I read...
About John Proctor
Thinking himself a fraud
 Who shouldn't be respected
 Because he knows of his
 Well-hidden flaws
I believe that I, too
 Am over-rated;
 Receiving undeserved appreciation
Every time I read...
 About how much Holden Caulfield
Hates the word 'grand,'
 Finding it pretentious and
 Only used by phony snobs,
I become hyper-aware
 That I too use that word,
 When people ask how my day is
Every time I read...
Esperanza Cordero
Describing Ruthie,
 The only grown-up
 Who likes to play,
I think of how much
 I also like to play;
I think of how amused my students are
 When they discover
 The contents of my classroom
 Closet
Not stashes of textbooks
 And teacher manuals
 Nope, not me.
What my closet holds
 Are varieties of balls,
 Coloring books,
 And stuffed animals.
I refer to my classroom closet
 As an entrance to Narnia!
No gravity in my closed closet doors,
 Only levity, because the world
 Needs more of that.
When I read...
Esperanza's description of diseases,
 How they choose people at random
 With a dizzy finger,
I recall people in my life
 Those closest to me...
The one who survived his cancer
 And made it his life mission
To become an everyday superhero

By devoting his life
 To saving the lives of others
 Who fall victim to this awful
 Disease
Hoping to develop cures
 Or at least treatments
 So that others might survive;
The one who dodged
 The fatal cancer bullet
 Only to be struck down
 By a more subtle,
 Slower-moving,
 Longer term
 Brain-eating disease
 That will slowly kill her essence
 Before it eventually takes her life;
And another
 A fierce-spirited
 Former student
Whose only aspiration
 Is to one day become
 A therapist
 For others in need
A strong-willed girl
 Who's fought with tenacity
 The uphill battle
 With multiple cancers
 Riddling her body
A stubborn, precocious woman
 Who refuses to give up
 Refuses to give in
 And let this beast take her
 Without one hell of a fight,
As she channels the strength
 of her spirit-animal horse
Haunting words from Esperanza
 Keep me in check when I read them
 And think of this student:
She was dying for so long, we forgot.
That line stings
 When I think of how many times
 This fierce-spirited child
 Was close to death
 But pulled through
 Because I fear for a day she may not
This is why I love literature
For the many isolated and profound lines;
 New lines emerging
 Each time I read and teach
 Books, stories, poems...

When students ask me
 Why I don't get bored
Teaching the same thing
 So often,
I smile a wise and knowing smile
 And I keep it a secret
Between me
 And the lines
Because most people
 Just wouldn't understand...