The University of Iowa
School of Social Work

National Poetry Contest for Social Workers

2017 Fifth Edition
clas.uiowa.edu/socialwork
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About The University of Iowa and the School of Social Work

The University of Iowa School of Social Work in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, is the oldest and largest school of social work in Iowa. The school is noted for providing programs that serve the entire state through distance education, part-time programs to facilitate the education of employed social workers, the professionalization of undergraduate social work education, and the origination of in-home family preservation services.

Our MSW program has been continuously accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) since 1951. The undergraduate major in social work became available in 1962, was recognized in 1970 when CSWE began regulating undergraduate social work curriculum and received full accreditation in 1974. The UI PhD program is the only social work doctoral program in the state of Iowa. It admitted the first cohort of students in 1998 and graduated its first PhD in 2004. Fifty-two percent of our 6,000+ alumni live and work in Iowa.

After 21 years of hosting the Creative Writing Seminar for Helping Professionals, in 2012 the School expanded its efforts to reach social workers and showcase their creativity through a national poetry competition. For more information about creative writing at Iowa, please go to our website http://clas.uiowa.edu/socialwork

About the National Poetry Contest for Social Workers

Iowa City is the home of the world-renowned Iowa Writer’s Workshop, the International Writing Program, the annual Iowa Summer Writing Festival, The Patient Voice Project, the Iowa City Book Festival and the Iowa Youth Writing Project. On November 20, 2009, UNESCO designated Iowa City, Iowa, the world’s third City of Literature, making the community part of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network.

Our annual Creative Writing Seminar for Helping Professionals began in the early ninety’s when then director Tom Walz, hired a Writers Workshop graduate to teach creative writing to social workers. Today, the seminar teaches both writing skills and applications of writing for healing and social change.

The National Poetry Contest for Social Workers was started in 2013 by Development Coordinator Jefri Palermo, and faculty member Mercedes Bern-Klug, with support from Ed Saunders, then Director of the School of Social Work.

Questions about the contest or creative writing at the School of Social Work can be made by calling 319-335-3750 or by email at jefri-palermo@uiowa.edu.

For those interested in participating in the next Poetry Contest, online
submissions can be made at https://clas.uiowa.edu/socialwork/resources/creative-writing-social-workers

The first, second, and third place winning poems are published in The New Social Worker. This magazine is available free, on-line at: http://www.socialworker.com

If you would like to make a donation to the School to provide scholarships for Creative Writing Seminar students or to support the poetry contest, you can do so online at http://www.givetoiowa.org/socialwork
1st Place Winner

*Christopher Joseph, University of Michigan Ann Arbor, 2008*

Gracious Relief

After his wife of forty years is taken, his death
he often imagines, longing for gracious relief. But, he is left
paralyzed – unable to lift himself from the bathroom floor
staring for hours at water stains in brown circles on the ceiling –
a merciless demise.

Scrubbing his blood from the grout of the tile,
soap suds become nauseating, cotton-candy pink. I cringe
at the sound of his mobile phone ringing in the other room,
the sudden realization that he must have heard our worried calls,
the reverberating beep-and-buzz-of-help tauntingly out-of-reach.

As I sleep, his final moments in sepia replay inside my eyelids –
to cauterize the recurring bleed, his epilogue revised:
He rests on tile, gazes at the ceiling, those water stains now
crop circles; an aerial view of Stonehenge; a solar system;
her brown eyes.
2nd Place Winner

_Brittany Humphrey, Arizona State University, (2018)_

Appalachian Anguish

It seeps through the sheet-covered windows.

Inhale. Mildew and misery.

Shame smothered sheets.

Tainted tables. Stimulants and soup beans.

Numb. Fleas gnawing on flesh.

Spirits hollowed out like a gourd’s innards.

Tarnished spoons scrape ribs.

Exhale. Carefully carve the miserably forlorn.
3rd Place Winner

*Angela Chaney, Indiana University, 2012*

**The Shoes**
The Holocaust Museum, Washington DC

Gray walls embrace the soles stacked beneath
Dust covers the once bound leather and strings
The musk of age and sadness creep over the shallow glass barrier
I cannot match a face to the solid ashes below
These silent ghosts follow me home
Always Hopeful

There she sits, watchful, guarded,
Suspicion is her constant companion.
What did you say? I should follow you?
Where am I? I don’t know who I am anymore.
I don’t know who you are.
I don’t know where we’re going.
I hope tomorrow will be better.

There he sits, looking down at the floor,
Puzzlement is his constant companion.
What did you say? I should come over there?
Where am I? I don’t know who I am anymore.
I don’t know who you are.
I don’t know where I fit in.
I hope tomorrow will be better.
Ignorant Bliss

Too many broken hearts, too many bruises left unseen
Too many heavy words left to fall crushing innocent dreams
Too many silent witnesses, too busy to care or mourn
Too many eyes staring forward, not seeing the tragedies born

Too many souls grown black and hardened to the core
Too many hands grasping higher rungs ever seeking more
Too many voices grown sweet with manipulation and deceit
Too many minds grown dull witted from rewards of defeat

Too many battles lost, too many wounds not allowed to heal
Too many cries of outrage silenced by applause for the made deal
Too many champions unarmed by the selfish desires of the board
Too many children left crying to feed the angry hordes
Becoming a Social Worker

I had to own the task at hand-\textit{challenge}
I had to manage my time wisely-\textit{book chapter}
I had to balance school, work, husband, children, and self-\textit{life}
I had to borrow the books I could not buy-\textit{resourcefulness}
I had to find a practicum site that fit my schedule-\textit{grit}
I had to endure mockery from cohort members-\textit{go high}
I had to find examples to follow-\textit{discernment}
I had to stand on Culminating Day when I lost my voice-\textit{moxie}
I had to walk through Honor’s Day and Graduation-\textit{bittersweet}
I had to write and publish social work articles-\textit{success}
I had to pass the CSW exam-\textit{consummation}
I had to volunteer-\textit{service}
I had to find a job-\textit{hunting}
I had to pursue my calling-\textit{forthcoming}
I had to...for Me, my Family, the World, the critics-\textit{YES}
A Bleeding Heart

Why does my heart feel so heavy?
It is cut into a million pieces but never ceases.
A bleeding heart that does not stop,
A bleeding heart that is ready to hop,
A bleeding heart that is so fragile yet so brave!
A bleeding heart that cries for those above,
A bleeding heart that loves so much!
However, why? Am I really bleeding? What is this feeling of uncertainty...?
My social worker heart.
Not One More Woman

Please stop hitting my queens,
Your destructive masculinity temporarily breaks the outer layer of who she is.

Not one more slap:
Your painful grip around her neck,
The pound of your fists on her chest.

Please stop hitting my goddess,
For she is both soft and strong.
She looked to you for safety,
Not realizing that she needed protection against you.

Not one more unexpected jab.
Not one harsh push or pull.
-Not One More Woman
I crossed a stone bridge without thinking.
No more lives discovered, only stones and your bones.

I swam in the Mississippi River without thinking.
I was lost; was drowning and sinking.
The light was the only hope; I swore I didn’t do DOPE.

I flew in the sky without thinking.
My feathers were falling.
No more survivals found, only your sword and your soul.
Open Skies

'Fly away, Fly away' he would often say, but with a broken wing I could not do a thing without him. Though he might have caused me to no longer happily sing, I am grateful he is here and everything. Though I dream of the open sky, and not this cold lifeless cage, how could I leave the man who helped me assuage my pain? he would be outraged. Through all of my might and anger, I will fly again one day, I will, no longer a puppet on display
Invisibility

Have you ever just stepped over a penny?

You ever stopped to recognize its unique composition, form or coppered color?

Have you ever thought about the monetary value or worth of the penny?

Who and what decides the value of the foreign exchange us Americans call the cent?

That cent that you just stepped over, is a representation of what I’ve thought and been taught of myself my entire life

Based on my black HERstory, I am not worth more than 1/100 of a basic unit

I have felt and yearned to find a sense of self-worth, but how can I when you and others continue to step over me.... or even worse choose to not see ME?
Walking Alongside You

Life dealt a blow
No siren, no warning
Left reeling, standing but weakened
Unsure where to turn,
    what to do,
        how to be?

Alone, so it seems
Took a risk, asked for help
And here I am
    Present
        Able
            Willing

And walking alongside you
What is it that we do?

Advocate, eliminate, never discriminate
Voice for change, rearrange
The minds of the small, the weak, us all
Give a voice to the voiceless
Put an emphasis on prejudice
And hope that modification results in elimination
Of hate and we recreate understanding
We give wings to those suffering,
And shields to protect vulnerability
Hero’s in our own light
We are the social, intrigued by the emotional and forever hopeful
CAN YOU HELP ME?

You showed up with trash bags, ripped and overflowing with your life’s story.
Dreams stuffed in large manila envelopes with certificates of incompletion.
Face and body worn down from years of placement changes, Worker changes,
School changes and permanency changing to temporary.
Praying to contain your rage for being asked your name and date of birth,
Hoping that somebody, anybody will see you...hear you...know your worth.
Clutching your bags, clinching your fists and pursing your lips,
You share details of your journey “normally” reserved for close friends,
But you have long ago accepted that “normal” is rarely a part of your world.
You weave a disjointed, heart wrenching tale as though it were a tv drama.
When the story fades to black, you finally notice the social worker, and slowly ask,
“Can you help me”? And look away, expecting nothing, but hoping for everything.
Who I Am

In the beginning...I know not who I am.
In the middle...I know not who I am.
You gave me life, you say you see me, but I am not really here.
You gave me life, you do not see me, but I am really here.
You gave me life, you say you hear me, but I am not speaking.
You gave me life, you say you cannot hear me, but I am screaming.

I am not what you want me to be; Yet, I am not what I want to be.
I cannot live up to your expectations; Yet, I do not know what my own expectations are.
Am I a child, am I an adult? I believe, I am nothing.

I am lost on this life’s journey of becoming until...
I learn to help others who know not who they are.
I find my way in life as I connect with the hurting, and I become.
Now, you may not see or hear me, but I am here, and I no longer scream.
Finally, quietly, purposefully I know, through helping others, I know... who I am.
Radiance

So, there must be a reason for the madness I seek
Occasional satisfaction to the success I heed
Could it be for me or for the those in need
Is my experience mines or theirs to have?
Are my fears theirs or something in my past?
Lost in a cause because I enjoy the pleasures
When someone is successful based on my endeavors
Out of the madness and into the light
Recognizing that the goals were always in sight
Keeping with the goals of moving wrongs to rights, and
Entering an opportunity of answering my call, while
Rationalizing that the madness is not madness at all
F.O.B. (an excerpt)

i’m sorry we lied to you and told you that life was better here when it really wasn’t
i’m sorry the American dream is really just the American nightmare - if you’re brown

your accent is as rich as your story
your life is just as valuable as the white man who told you it wasn’t
your laugh is deep, like the ocean
your heart is giving, like a tree

i am because you are
i walk because you walked - miles, miles, and miles
teach me your native tongue
let me walk a day in your shoes

i will remind you that you are worth listening to
i will tell your stories when you’re gone
teach me how to do your story justice

you are welcome here
at least in my home
Dawn Rene Lotti, University of Southern California, (2018)

Therapy Haiku

Met you ere self-known
Flow and ebb of pain erodes
You tacitly found
Social Work Creed

I fight all forms of oppression, and moderate aggression,

Just need another session with a client with depression.

I do crisis intervention to relieve my client’s tension;

I fight for an extension of TANF or a pension.

I get users off of dope and boozing, rescue kids from abusing,

Assure treatments of one’s choosing, and interpret what’s confusing.

Help the shaky to be stable, Bring stakeholders to the table,

Help the agencies enable, wear the NASW label.

I advocate for what is fair; I don’t preach; I present and share,

Empower folks, make them aware, ‘cause at my core, I really care.

I treat, refer, and advocate And wow! Do I collaborate.

With research, I can calibrate, get programs to accommodate,

‘cause I do Social Work, social work, social work!
And who are you, she asks, reaching for my hand with hers
Her thin skin is cold yet soft, bones sharp underneath
Oh, never mind, I know, she says, once I held hands, too
Small, grubby hands, with sand beneath their fingernails
Hungry for attention, to watch them make castles in the sand
They reached for me, scared of the world outside the sandbox,
uncertain where life might lead
Do you feel the hands?
Warm, cold, clingy, limp, chubby, frail, calloused, smooth
I feel yours, they are strong yet kind, firm yet soft
Is that a scar? Oh but that is where you are strongest
You are flawed but that makes you human
Hold their hands, teach them to walk beside you
Give them someone to hold onto
And with that, she let go
Monday at 3

“It’s hot” she said, to no one in particular.

Her eyeliner ran down her face,
melted and
clownlike,
one could hardly look.

Her hair too, was wild.
There was nothing still about her,
or the space surrounding her.
The movement was audible,
fierce and constant.

“Really, it’s so hot” she said to anyone that would listen.

If only someone would listen, she thought, as she stood there on fire,
burning to death.
Survivor Advocate

This pathway has been walked before, worn down by the reluctant feet
Leaving footprints on the lonely journey for someone to see
That they are not alone in the dark.
I have walked down this path before, without a light to guide me.
Familiar with the stigma that feeds the loneliness, guilt, and shame,
Or when you become your own worst enemy
When your own thoughts suffocate any light that may seep through
And drag you back to the darkness, back to the beginning of this path.
But I am a survivor of my own trauma; living, breathing proof of adversity.
And now, this is what drives me to fight, fight for someone like me.
To extend a hand in the midst of the darkness of their mind
And hear their faint voice recalling an event they would rather forget
And I will listen, and be there. Every step of the way.
A survivor of my own trauma, but I am still fighting.
I am an advocate
A Social Worker’s Promise

You opened your heart to a stranger,
You accepted my words as consolement,
But, I could not change your past.
Instead, I listened and empathized.
I cannot always see where you are going,
But, you know where to find me.

An advocate must learn to move on just as easily,
As taking in all the emotions that come with being
That person: the listener, the responder.
It means not losing hope in progress, yet not forgetting one’s own past,
It means not giving up on humanity.

It is carrying a wound that is someone else’s,
And remembering that you helped them through it.
A social worker will accept the pain and hurt,
but not lose sight of a brighter future.
The Fighter

I am from grace
I am from mercy
I am from courage
I am from passion
But I am broken and
I am beaten
I am unstable
I am unworthy
But I am determined
I am powerful
I am majestic
I am enough and
I will rise
I will win
I am me
Life

I’m hoping to make the world a better place day by day
But every night I just find myself up can’t sleeping praying
Praying on a better day, and time, for people that look just like me
Hoping and praying that one day we will be
Be in a better place to achieve all our dreams
Through hope, dedication and integrity it seems
It seems that’s the way, life is supposed to be
But it’s not
There are trials and tribulations we all must conquer
But without the help of others we will always wonder
Are we all where we supposed to be? Reaching our full potential and destiny
Irony of the work

This wounded heart oozing with equitous passion and sometimes chained
To trauma of my youth, slimy trail behind me that I can’t clean. Stained.
How does it feel to suffer the same ills as our clients?
When I need to help people as I; vulnerable, suffering in private
The avoided ones, forgotten, because their pain can’t turn a profit
The fire in my belly embracing social work social change and innovation
But, I wonder, how can I catalyze change
When I, too, am knocked out by the same systemic issues as our clients?
With these two hands, this brain, this fighting heart
I have come to know the grand challenge of homelessness all too well
From micro to macro, I know what causes this social ill
Now, this social sickness has infected me as well
I’m a graduate student, I’m a social worker, I’m an advocate, I’m homeless
And I wonder, how can this heavy heart serve
When the suffering becomes insufferable, and I become the client
Street Magic

Shadows ripple and puddle on the asphalt
Dissipating like dreams when approached.
Impossible to touch
Existing only in perception
In front of me
Behind me
And I am trapped in between.
However I move, whichever way I travel
Reality will come with me
And change to extraordinary
Into a plain path
And I will be the only magic
Left in the middle of the street.
Forget-Me-Not

I feel so lost and left behind
A trampled flower so hard to find
In a field amongst the tall
The smallest one of them all
Dull compared to their vibrant light
A stark contrast like day and night
So very different, yet still never seen
Closer to the ground I began to lean
The ground looms closer just inches away
So easily defeated, but not today
The sun has brought with it another chance
To make sure others take a second glance
Right at me when I take my shot
To make sure you forget me not
Resistance

The mask You wear as You sit in the chair seems so empty, so bare.
You are very small to have been through this all.
Each week we belabor. Please do me the favor of sharing all that is in your heart.
Each time, we search again from the start.
“Tell me, tell me,” I plead. For if you disclose, this chapter can finally close.
For me? What will I gain? Nothing but knowing that you accomplished why you came:
To confess your innermost angst in this room, but your pain will not end soon.
They say if I nudge then you will divulge, for what purpose, who knows?
I have seen it happen before; someone small like you comes in the door.
She waits waits, and finally speaks true. I want that sense of relief for You.
My patience wanes as I wait for you to say, all you’ve been holding since the very first day.
Each time I mention that one hidden thing;
You squirm, giggle, and strive for approval. You draw love notes that beg for your removal.
My patience wears thin as the session ends.
I'll see you next week and we'll try again.
Never too late

My life was spiraling and turned upside down. I knew I had to find a way to turn it around. I was forty with a newborn needing much guidance; to a new career and family that needed to balance. After much research, phone calls and footwork; it was clear that I couldn’t provide as a clerk. Exploration led to college as the way it should be; So I reached for the stars grabbing a master’s degree. A career in Social Work gives me a sense of Ethics, Values & Worth. I truly believe that there is no better job suited for me on this Earth. Now it’s my mission to assist people in their time of need; providing resources and options to allow them to succeed. The profession of Social Work is not glamorous nor given its due; not everyone has the calling so it’s left for the chosen passionate few. I’m so grateful that my past pushed me to wake up and get on track as I use my life’s journey and lessons learned to be able to give back.
Advance Care Planning: a poem of woe

Advance Care Plan?? Who wants to think about that?

Oh my! Is my Doctor trying to tell me something I don’t know?

What are my wishes? Do I dare write that down? Will I be jinxing myself?

Filling out this Honoring Your Wishes form takes a long time! A lot of thought and feeling goes into answering these questions! Will I ever get this done?

Who can I trust to follow my wishes? Certainly not .......?

Who should I pick as my agents?

What will my agents do if this happens to me? Should I pick someone else?

Do I want CPR? Well of course I do!!!

Iowa Donor Network! Yes please sign me up! Tell Sue I am ready

Body donation? What happens with my body? Wow that sounds cool!

Now to get it notarized, I will be making an appointment to see Kusum as she has a stamp just for me

When it is all done and ready I will be giving it to everyone I know, even some I don’t know ;)

Adriene Lynn Gragg, University of Northern Iowa, 1990
the weight of caring

As women, we hold so much. Bearing the burden of our mothers, and their mothers and the mothers before them.

The lines on our foreheads tell the story as does the shedding of our wombs each month. We bleed the blood of life carrying within us whole worlds- every transformation of the moon- every salt crystal from the sea- making meaning out of suffering.

You see, not only do we hold our own pain- but we also hold yours-as a baby in our arms, as a toddler on our hips.

So, if my shoulders hunch over in tiredness know that it is from holding the hearts of my loved ones on my back. But now, my arms are growing tired and I can’t do it alone - I can’t do it alone anymore.

I’m asking then- will you make room for the world in your kitchen? And can you make space to hold suffering?

Not doing but being. Not solving but seeing. Not fixing but listening. Are you listening now?
Connection Matters

“What I think I hear everyone saying
Is that it all comes down to connection?”
Words that tumble out, like a grand finale
To a conference room full of us
And as the truth triumphantly dances its jig around the buzzing space
Overworked professionals boldly step out of a tepid pool of stagnancy
Clamoring over one another to agree and validate
The climactic certainty of this brings a type of analgesic relief
The way the pale moonlight will pour balance into our rest.
Yet sometimes the things we know to be true
We simply cannot make true enough and so, on days when
‘Notes to the School Counselor’ curl up like treasures or trash
Recycled scraps of paper yielding pain that graphite refuses contain
Words so badly misspelled atop situations so horribly conceived:
We will see it, we will name it, we will hold it, and we will heal it.
What’s Social Work Like?

As much of an art as it is a science,
I embrace the challenge of working with “defiance.”

“You are your own best tool,”
So I’ve learned to know myself, to not look a fool.

Seeing that I’m in the business of change,
Black and white doesn’t always cut it, Gray is usually within range.

While trying to fill the holes of their heart,
I break off a piece of my own and give them a part.

Knocking down barriers, and bursting through walls,
The important thing is getting up from each one of those falls.

From being up all night with your mind wondering all around,
To sleeping much better, knowing a child is safe and sound.

Being a social worker can definitely feel like a wild roller coaster ride,
But it’s about enjoying the journey, side by side.
A Vulnerability

I’ve been sick for quite some time
A chronic neurodegenerative periodically paralyzing illness
It is a gentle reminder of the precious nature of living
The nudge of a cat’s head I do not own is more promising than feeling well sometimes
And yet there are so many simple moments of joy that
Aches and pains and worry are at times forgotten
I am a therapist caring for people who are ill just like me
It is either my biggest strength or fear.
In moments of countertransference
I find myself wanting to share, "I too have an illness"
In the past I’ve laid out weakness like a gun, waiting to be shot
Proving my schema’s low self worth
This time I hope to keep it locked in
A vulnerability is not worth sharing unless it can hold another up
Presence

Even in the presence of dying there can be love also. And in the presence of love, how can there not also Be joy?
Ink still wet on paper. My fresh face flaunts a new suffix.
Going to change the world one cliché at a time.
Close those books and open up this life to learn the real tricks.
Waving the wand of healing, patience, hope. Houdini on a dime.

Sucked into warped realities and making sense out of the madness.
Misconceptions and harsh criticisms reign on my parade.
Sleepy, clumsy fingers spill the Venti coffee on my dress.
Papers shuffle, clock ticks, phone rings, email dings, client tirade.

Solving life’s problems like social mathematicians.
People learning, growing, changing, and coping with an unfair hand.
Communities rising up against divisions.
Against the whirlwind of injustices, we take our place on the stand.

Adjusting the cracked lens to never lose focus
Symptoms of tragedy, triumph, pain, and joy
Social Worker is my diagnosis.
I Saw Someone Die Today

I saw someone die today and
Then I went on with work.
I stayed in the room while
The daughter talked and
Then I got up and left.
I had lunch in the car,
Stopped by the office, and
Laughed at a silly joke.
Time kept going and so did I.
The next person I saw
Was awake, but barely.
She was staring up at the ceiling.
“What’s there?” I said,
“What do you see?”
But I never did get an answer.
Wounds

Heaviness in the center of my chest
Tear ducts primed for dams to lift
Thoughts of people I see and hear aching
Falling through cracks, sinking beneath the earth
Bystanders pulling out cellphones, instinctively recording
I sip my coffee, mending my wounded soul
Making sense of my fragmented thoughts
Free associating, unsure of deeper meaning
I breathe deeply, air circulating through my chest
Up and down through my body
The dam gets blown down
Yet only one tear forms
Easily mistaken for an eyelash in my eye
Nobody knows, except for the others with wounds
That few know exist
Hate in the Wind

Like a giant oak waiting to grow
I'm in need of a nurturing mind
Beneath my soul a seed is planted
Each day I work this earth with my hands
Rains bring freedom to nourish my spirit
A creation story I plan to tell
To past, present, and future folk
I stand with roots you cannot see
Only they provide my courage and strength
Needed to bear the hate in the wind
Boy you’re too young

Lily’s friend left her apartment.
The bullets that killed him, penetrated her living room walls.
Five minutes before he asked her aunty for a cigarette.
She said, Boy you’re too young to smoke.

Boy you’re too young to die.

His Chuck Martin black high tops left crimson foot prints on the cement.
She used to walk on this pavement, now marked with her friend’s blood
to get home. Now, nowhere is home.
Now, nowhere is safe because bullets breach walls.
Lily left no stains of blood, but like her friend, she died that day.

Boy you’re too young to smoke.

Boy and girl, you’re too young to die.
Imposter Syndrome

First client assessment, my anxiety creeping up.
My confidence is fading, half empty is my cup.

She’s been through so much trauma, abused and left discarded.
Fearful thoughts enter my head. How will I help when she’s so guarded?

Can I really do this? What if she’s to regress? I feel like a fraud I will confess.

Non-verbal cues, motivational interviews, so many intrusive thoughts.
Graduate school jargon overwhelms me. What again was it they taught?

I wonder if they made a mistake when they passed me in graduate school.
I don’t even know where to begin. I feel like such a fool.

Then I recalled what my education taught me, and applied it to myself.
Is there evidence I’m going to fail her? Is there a chance it may go well?

A little mindfulness and CBT, helped me overcome my fears.
I took a deep breath, and called her in, for an hour I was all ears.

By the time our session ended, I saw hope, where before she had none.
Imposter syndrome: 0. Social Worker: 1.
On Being a Minority

YOU, you focus on the cover, and I, I beg you to open the book.
I beg you to read.
Read my pages, cg choose only to read the first,
because the first will tell you far more than the cover.
The cover has seen better days, and to tell you the truth...
The cover isn't really me at all.
The cover is better defined as a picture of what the WORLD has done TO me.
In order to find ME, you have to look past that.

I don't understand why I have to prove myself to you.
I don't understand why you think you can tell me what I can and cannot do,
what I'm capable of, and what I'm too weak to accomplish.
You don't know me.
Why do you think you can define me when you haven't even read the first page?
It looks like you've got a long way to go... --because honey, there's thousands.
We Are Social Workers

What a crazy yet beautiful world we live in
Where in some parts flowers bloom, with others so full of sin
So much hurt yet so much happiness; all this love with so much bliss
No matter the darkness, the sun will always rise
A new life born each time another dies
Why is it then that we can’t all just get along?
What about those who feel they just don’t belong
To whom must one look to heal the wounds of the wounded
Or those after war who have to pick up all of their dead
No matter race, sexual orientation, gender, or whatever difference
The world doesn’t need to divide itself with any fence; it makes no sense
If equality is so important and necessary
Then it shouldn’t be that hard for people to be themselves and be free
If your wounds are too much to handle on your own and you just aren’t sure
Don’t be afraid; we are here world; our power is we are social workers
The Children Cry Out (Excerpt)

The children cry out from the hood to the burbs.  
Is anyone listening because it is so unheard?  
Mom and pop are cracked out no one’s saying a word.  
So these children grow up in a jacked up world.  
Child sees daddy beat mommy then mommy beats child.  
The cycle of abuse is straight up wild.  
The children cry out from the east to the west.  
Why is this child a victim of abuse and sex?  
Daddy abuses child while mommy looks away.  
Child is so scared they don’t even know what to say.  
The cycle of abuse can stop today cuz what daddy did to child is not okay.  
The children cry out from the block to the streets.  
Screaming it is thug life baby that is the life for me!  
So they slang and they use all their life abandoned and abused.  
Child grows up watching what mommy and daddy do.
Music Therapy

Jackie and I walked from Rehab to the steel bench in the baseball field. I asked Jackie, whose track marks were like tattooed roses down her arm, to tell me her favorite song.

“It's Been Awhile” by Staind. Her face shifted long, Better times.

Then I remembered social work school, where I sat, timidly rapt, as Professor Lin said, Look for the similarities.

Me too.
And I was 16 again, driving at night with the headlights off, music loud, laughing, crazed with youth, in the beat down ’86 Chevy Nova.

I love that song.

Jackie’s mouth unfolded. A glow appeared in the grey rings of her eyes. I played the song for her off my phone, and we tapped our fingers loose, voices sharp, as pink grew in the horizon. The sun settled on our backs, the wind slowed, and

I knew hope, like the clearest sound, for the very first time.
i keep seeing headlines: “mother of all bombs”
bombs do not have mothers
my mother - whether she be earth, spirit or flesh, does not destroy
she creates, carries, cycles, composes songs of life itself;
births it into existence - watches it take its first breaths of innocence
she then tends to the needs of life
food, shelter, nurturing, family
all the while - hoping, protecting, teaching, loving
there are no bombs in Motherhood
she is the sacred
she does not mother 59 tomahawk missiles
sent to destroy life, without recourse, without refuge
she looks for headlines
of love, of peace
I was brand new, but still older than you.
The room smelled like rosemary and clementines,
Soaked in iodoform and yeast.
The first thing I saw was the confetti
of glue remnants from the duct tape.
It ran in slices across your arms, your neck, and your legs.
The bruising was beginning to darken from red to purple,
An index page of trauma for the next person to reference.
You looked brazenly at my clipped-on badge and said,
“I was certain I was going to die there.”
Your retelling took only a few minutes,
No tears, no trembling, no break in your voice.
The woman you were yesterday
lives there now.
Survivors like you walk forward: steady, steady.
Elizabeth Horrigan, Temple University, 2011

Success

Knocking and knocking
No answer
He must be in there

Lying there with pills everywhere
He’s gasping for air
Months in the hospital
Angry that he was found

Knocking and knocking
He lets me in
Every week for a year

It’s been a year?
He says with surprise
I’ve been busy enjoying life
My eyes fill with tears
Silence and Song

Silence as power, speaks
Silence resists evil
Silence abused, promulgates hegemonies
For many, OUR silent choice
Becomes THEIR death sentence
Is it inextricable – the undercurrent of our interconnectedness?
Interconnectedness without accountability is lethal
Do I begin where you end or rather, do we overlap?
Pushing and pulling, we dance, stumbling about in life’s mess
Creating, in our wake, a chaotic dissonance
Yet, when the clanging and clashing of our voices arise with purpose
We combat silence’s torturous consent
And sometimes the clashing vibrations, once spoken
Grasp hold of one another – and unite
Singing HONOR as restoration to our spirits.
I poured out my heart’s love,
Believing it would fill me.
And when I found myself dry,
With nothing left to give,
I wept and hoped I could be empty
Of a pain that was never mine.

I am making my pilgrimage thru the desert.
I drink water now.
The moon is beautiful and the stars are clear.
When I come back, I’ll smile at you,
My heart’s love pouring out,
And that will be enough,
Hopefully for the both of us
And certainly for me.
When a child hears gunshots, she will say Mom is beating the pots
and pans. She will say it sounds like home. Let’s keep it this way;
our children misinterpreting the sound of dying as a crude percussion.
When they kneel at their beds and ask God where he was
when their best friend stopped being alive he will say I was at the drive-thru,
I was so hungry I thought the gunshots were my stomach begging for food.
He will say I know nothing until strangers tell me about it first, I could have
bullet wounds in my hands and I’d know nothing about what hurts and doesn’t
hurt. What a God; making the world out of variations of madness, refusing
to hold its face in his hands and saying You, you are mine. It is not ours: the young
blood, the unfinished drawings, the last blurry thoughts before a world goes black.
When God is busy wiping grease from his mouth, we can stand in a line with the dead
in our backpacks, next to our pencils and our snacks; he won’t notice when
we give the whole damned world back.
I remember it like it was yesterday, the time self was introduced to the field. It was like I was playing a new card game with no rules and only one player. No rules and only one player, but the dealer was not me. The dealer was some external force, pushing me to truly become free. I thought to myself, this is stupid, this is not fair. I showed up dressed in my proper attire. You know, I had the entire thing planned out, cape ironed, crown not bowed. I was proud! I had the answers. I’m a clinical social worker and I am here to save you, and you, and you. But when the dealer laid my cards out on the table, my “save the world” garments fell faster than my next breath. How dare you show me myself? I didn’t come here for that. But for once, I couldn’t believe, I could breathe. I was in the opportunity to learn myself so that I don’t bleed out on those who I serve.

Broken people don’t need more broken pieces. Whether grief, trauma, mental health, or addiction, the truth is, it is never about us. I remember it like it was yesterday, the time self was introduced to the field. A gut punch from heaven’s highest point, stating “it ain’t about you honey”. And I’ve been playing cards ever since. Talk about calling a spade a spade.
When you hear the words “social worker,” what do you think?
Child welfare, abused children and how it all stinks.
No, social work is broader than that, too many fields to name.
People of all races, classes and ages, and we help them all the same.
We give our all when we hear the call.
Yes, there’s a lot of heartache in the world, pain that runs deep.
Images of despair that make it difficult to sleep
The stories stay with you as they open up their soul.
You actively listen and play the compassionate role.
Our work is valuable and nothing else can compare.
The more you dive in, the more you see the playing field is not fair.
But, you still get up each morning to start a new day.
Knowing that you’ll help someone in the moment in your own way.
We have our different approaches in how we tackle issues.
Our goal remains the same to bring about smiles from tissues.
A Historical Moment

It rained on that day
as history’s course was changed.
Still—we won’t lose hope.
Social Work in a Nutshell

Who sees the value in social interaction?
When things go awry, swing into action.
Hope is lost and all you see is the problem.
Social work, the bridge between
the client’s solution and problem.
Social work is a noble profession
that strives each day to reach perfection.
Competency the watchword in every strand.
NASW code of ethics, the bedrock on which it stands.
Social work embarks on different aspects.
Making the profession a human asset.
From advocacy, policy making to mediator,
Social workers stand for human rights as gladiators.
Social work as a profession is here to stay,
If society never goes away.
Wilted Youth

Why has the child developed thorns? To ward of the man with horns? 
Why do these children not grow? 
They are all twisted up together and tied down low 
with the fear of being yanked from their homes 
Like a cold wind wilting budding blossoms brown 
What lies beneath these children's frowns? 
Has the money dried up stressing, cracking, and faulting once solid ground? 
Or perhaps addiction has poisoned the well? 
Well, well, well...the children must blossom and grow 
Us social workers will dig down low 
Unearth the reasons so that we may know 
What has changed youthful summer hearts into seasons of snow
My Ode to Kindness

Kindness is a universal glue that can bind us.
When combined with our great minds, when expressed, should define us
As a people – as a country. Corruption is a temporary blindness
And the cure is that outstretched hand full of promise and guidance...

Towards kindness.

Kindness is not reserved for only those in crisis
Nor should its recipients be based on one’s bias.
Everyone has their struggles. We all have our vices.
So be kind to each other, one and all. I urge you to try this -

To try kindness.

Figuratively, a contagion that can spread like a virus.
Literally, a virtue of benevolence, altruism, and overall niceness.
When we feel down or low on hope, a single act can revive us.
Personify kindness and model yourself according to its likeness.

When the time arises, I pray we can rely on kindness.
Story Listener

I am a story listener
At times a story sharer
Some stories are comedies
A lot are tragedies
Too many are horrors
Even though some may feel like fiction
I will listen as they are real
As those that are non-fiction
Aren’t always completely true
Some stories are whispered
While others are screamed
My place is not to tell my story
It is to help others release theirs
I am a story listener
I am a social worker
Who am I?

Who am I? I sat in a room with doubled sided mirrors, as social workers pondered my fate... The pain and agony of seeing my parents get high was way too much for me to take. I felt like my parents did not love me, they loved their drugs more than me!

One may question how can this be, oh but you must see, her parents were addicted to crack-cocaine, they sold her bicycle just to get high, told her it was stolen so she would not cry!

Holidays and Birthdays were only a blur, no money for clothes, shoes, toys, or anything fun. Hand me downs, and freebies was what I considered the Norm! We must all realize that some of us are not ostracized and victimized by the nature of our environment. Just like the air we breathe you cannot see it, but you know it exist... Who am I?

I am a social worker who is determined to implement Social Change! that your background does not determine your FUTURE!
Certain Doubt

Who am I to speak to you on this platform?
What have I accomplished worthy of captivating your ear?
Enough to impart relevant wisdom?
Or is it hidden?
Hidden behind the fact that I know I freeze #metoo
Hidden behind my white privilege,
Hidden behind a diagnosis.
How can I value my contribution in a field where
others have had it worse?
In a field where others do experience pain,
In a field where others will experience the unimaginable.
I Am A Social Worker

He wore a wristband that said “John Doe”, soiled clothes in a bag
World War II Veteran, a hero, widower, retired engineer, totally alone
“Come with me” I said, “we have a home for you, we will take care of you”

She was scared to talk about the bruises, she was shaking all over
“You are safe here” I said, “and you will have a plan to keep you safe”
We got her to the hospital just in time, her skull cracked

The drug dealer yelled through the window “get back here”
I held her hand and said “please don’t go”
“You don’t have to live this life anymore” I said
“You are better than this”
We got her to rehab just in time
The baby was born healthy, 3 months later

“What did you do today?” my kids asked me
“I met some very nice people today” I said
“And they let me help them”
Drowning in a sea of hands and you can’t help them all,
While the world spins in chaos and you feel so small,
Can one voice make a difference?
The violence, the terror, the blood, and the tears,
You want to speak but you don’t know if they will hear,
Can one voice make a difference?
A mother cries over her son, the ache of depression,
Humans are one race and love is our connection,
Can one voice make a difference?
Nelson Mandela, Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr.,
What would happen if they had not asked sooner,
“Can one voice make a difference?”
And no matter how heavy the burden may weigh,
We find strength in our communities and we say,
Yes, one voice can make a difference.
Truth

Truth can be a weapon,
    or the truth can be a tool.
Depending on its purpose,
    the word will always rule.

The spoken word received,
    Agenda then fulfilled.
However thus received,
    can hurt or it can build.

The simple truth is clear,
    that if we are to grow,
the words we use to build,
    will be the seeds we sow.
Ending Homelessness

Have you witnessed someone sleeping on the street, while you were driving home to your warm sheets?
Has someone ever asked you for a dime; but you thought it best not to give your time?
Have you ever seen someone hold a sign; and you turned your head and pretended to be blind?
Or have you exhibited nonjudgmental kindness to a stranger, when you knew your life was not in danger?
Yes, there are some tricks and cons, beyond, but be discerning and know that most are only holding on!
Holding on to what looks bleak,
and praying for a knight that is shining deep.
Take the moment to listen to a person’s story,
while social workers work to end homelessness for God’s glory.
The Orienteer

Merely a compass to guide the way, when most of the time I, myself, am wandering lost...

Feigning strength is a specialty, not listed in my dossier.

I have learned that each day we win and every day we lose,
but it is by HOPE alone that we continue to persevere and not give up the good fight.

Because just maybe tomorrow my words may ease one’s pain,
perhaps even my own;

and that peace will enter stage left, that at least ONE will overcome,
or at least ONE will progress, and on a really good day,
this compass will lead at least ONE damaged soul out of this fog called life, into clarity.
Soliloquy of a Runt

With blind-eyed instincts,
I emerged from the labors of birth.
Brother and sisters trample over me
while I struggle to plant feet firmly on earth.
Their greed and girth displaces me
‘til my weak foundation teeters on communal turf.
I burrow pass walls of resistance;
I fight on, while Master lurks.
You call me “Runt!”
I cannot explain why this name hurts.
Rejected, unappreciated and declared not typical;
however, the disdain is not reciprocal.
I value all my scraps and scrap for my worth!
My endearing strength gleams among the muddled litter;
my confidence wags with unrelenting mirth.
may you heal

I ask myself in quiet moments, what do I feel? is it anger?
how could this be true? it is always true.
is it sadness? is it rage?
trauma—it changed you, didn’t it? it lingered.
your body, painfully remembered.
even when you didn’t.
your mind, created distance.
but here you are. ready to tell it, to shout it, to create discomfort
so that you can breathe, again,
but you’ve been screaming for years, haven’t you? no one listened.
maybe they knew
and here you are, ready. ready?
    breathe
transform your pain into healing, into hope, into
life.
The Difference They Make

These powerful superheroes are humans that turned into social workers. They use their skills to change problems into solutions. Their intention is to heal, but only if it meets your point of view. They come from different backgrounds, but don’t get fooled, even if they drive Audis or Beamers they will advocate for you. When there is no resource they find the means because that is what they believe. Equality is their mantra no matter your color, sexual orientation or where you are from. What matters is how you feel in the long run. They are full of emotions and they even cry. But they always bring hope and the light. They believe they are powerful and it comes from within and their intention is to minimize your sin. They are much underpaid, but they measure their success by the difference they make.
What Happened to Me

A pink slip, a divorce decree, throw in a little PTSD,
I am the woman who now lives in poverty, self-medication, addiction,
Dark alleys and doorways, living in the back of a Chevrolet
A vicious cycle, a catch-22, no illusions of grandeur,
No more dreams, no money, no job, I am a survivor
I just want a place to lay my weary body and to feel safe, I am
The person living on the streets, what happened to me, what happened to me.
Do You See Me?

Do you see me? Who I am and who I could be?
If only you could and if only you would stand next to me when no one else does-
Would it be only and just because?
I need you there, I need you to care—even to advocate for me if you dare.
You have the knowledge, you went to college.
To be there for me and to give me a voice. Because of your choice to follow your dream,
To become who you are, to be a light beam-
I can deal with the scars of the down side of life. You’ve helped me to live, despite trouble and strife.
And with the concern and the dedication that you’ve given you’ve helped me to see that life is worth livin’
I now have a chance to survive this life’s dance.
To make it one more day and to you I must say... I know you see me, who I am—who I can be.
Thank you, thank you MSW grad from USC!
Do Not Underestimate

Do not underestimate people like me
The ones with the big hearts that understand and show genuine empathy
The ones that will fight for you, a true one-man army
Those who give unconditional integrity, value your worth, and dignity

Do not underestimate the people that work behind the scenes
The ones that want to empower others who feel hopeless
You can find us everywhere assisting adults, children, and teens
Those who often need self-care because they bring home other’s stress

Do not underestimate people who go the extra mile with best intentions
The ones who see the good within the worst of the cases
The ones that utilize a mixture of theories and apply interventions
Those who are expected to do miracles and navigate through mazes

The unsung heroes assisting others while fighting their own demons
It’s destiny to be social workers, to be somebody people can believe in
The Visit

They told me I was going to see you today
It has been so long since I've seen your face
I wore the shirt that you like
I arrived calling out your name
but you were not there
they said you were stuck in traffic
I knew they were lying to protect me
but I cried because you hurt me

It's been a month since I've seen your face
but you're stuck in traffic, that has always been the case
through life you have always moved at your own pace
but you get mad when the social worker puts you in your place

When am I going to see your face?
Guest

I am just a white girl
walking into a Richmond afternoon.
Mellow dealers on the corner sneak
sidelong glances at me.
I walk up the stairs.
I haven’t come here for my health.
This city
Chevron’s womb
miles of liquor and check cashing stores
with storefront churches peppered in between
once home to Rosie the Riveter,
now produces toxins, asthma, and addicts at alarming rates.
I knock on the door.
One

We are connected
As one body blood circulates as lives have through humanity
Each person part of a collective mind
Creating the remarkable every day
We need each other; like legs and feet
We only move forward if we move together
But all the injustices and inequality has caused bruises
Bloody nose and broken bones a reflection of the ones who hurt
We’ve neglected this body; we are in pain
To make repairs we must pay attention to every part, every person
I can serve this body by helping to heal the parts that are suffering
What I hope for most is for all to be happy
For this world, this body, to function and be healthy
For everyone to realize that
We are One.
Myrna J. Molinari, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1999

Warrior Mission: At Ease

So many warriors wounded, steeped in too many cares.
Their struggle too great, the burdens too heavy.
Avoidance, isolation, and self-medication cannot repair,
A soldier’s weary soul ravaged, sinking in the depths of despair.

Armed for battle with the latest breakthrough trauma technique,
Accelerated Resolution Therapy takes on their internal war.
Eyes moving, story re-scripted, pictures re-drawn,
Physical and emotional sensations calmed to manageable levels.

Combat scenes reduced to facts and words on a page.
No vision left in the mind’s eye that’s disturbing.
No longer held hostage by scenes too hard to bear,
New purpose arises and hope shines its guiding light.

The ART of war on traumatic memories can heal.
A new day, laughter, camaraderie and new memories.
Warrior Mission: At Ease; Accomplished.
My Dark Passenger

I used to indulge in the Darkness, letting it envelop my being. 
In which I would become more Darkness than Light. 
I would play with thee, Dark Passenger, far too often. 
Sinking into the depths of my despair, the dark caverns of desolation. 
Sullenly accepting my fate of isolation in this unknown abyss. 
I even started to call it Home. 

We were inseparable playmates, stuck within quicksand. 
Becoming tainted by the tar, it starts to stick upon your soul. 
It weighs upon your heart, then slithers sneakily into your dreamland. 
You become stuck in that never-wanna-be-land. 

Now, I have two playmates in my life: that of Light and that of Darkness. 
Both essential for survival and growth: Hello Darkness my old friend. 

Be the Light, dear child, for the Light of Love will bring you Home. 
But don't forget about your Dark friends. 
For they too help to craft the beautifully messy path that we call Life.
Flight of a Chickadee

Lost and wounded was I, a bird without feathers, young life awry,
she showed me a glimmer, a sliver of me, a promise I’d fly.
“Life of discovery, your choice to make. Reach for the sky,”
beckoned she, an agent in gray, “I’ll show you the way.”

Wise-woman was she who set me free,
from treacherous bonds of despondency.
Feathers growing, my wings grew stronger,
day by day, held captive no longer.

School taught the history of agents of change,
life brought the wisdom I needed long range.
A glimmer, a sliver of sky, revealed by the lady in gray,
sitting quietly, holding my pain, long ago, that day.

It was her I had wished to emulate, some way.
Thirty years gone by, full feathered like her, a Social Worker in gray,
indeed, I fly, showing others a glimmer, a sliver of sky.
The Mourning in Motherhood: An Ode to Postpartum

She mourns for what might have been.
Instead of glowing with joy she feels stifled by anxiety.
She mourns for the woman she was.
Instead of feeling light and free she is weighed down month after month.

Her thoughts match her belly, growing bigger, deeper, harder to manage.
She starts to waddle; she can’t walk, breathe, or eat the same.
She starts to despair; she can’t think, love, or be the same.
In her depression she mourns- her pre-baby body and pre-baby soul.

I witness her post-baby body and post-baby soul transform into a mother,
knowing the opening, stretching, tearing, bleeding, and tears required.
She is a mother who cares, smiles, coos, wipes, and feeds;
but she is a mother who mourns as well.

I hold the space
For her to mourn
Her motherhood.
Esteem

The day he was admitted, he listened to me talk about rights, how he would be treated respectfully, how he could still call the shots when it came to what time he would get up or retire to bed, how he could even play his shiny sax as long as it didn’t bother anyone else.

The day he was admitted, he listened to me talk about liberties and choice and how he could name someone to manage his money or refuse to swallow a pill or simply smoke a cigar as long as he did so in the smoker’s ring outside. The day he was admitted, he asked me to talk about something else like dignity or duty or destination and how a guy like him could find a way to keep his worth, a way to earn his keep.
You and I Under the Sky

They tell you to dig deep,
When you’re under pressure, feeling vulnerable,
They tell you to dig deep into yourself.

But when everything is crashing into you,
You have to remember what it feels like
To be standing under a sky full of colors,
Melting all over you, delivering peace, everywhere.

And what it feels like to know its not just you under the sky,
Or me,
It has always been you and I.

Because our adversities call for diversity.
Just as you thought that no one else could understand you,
You are not alone.
And if the world is crashing down, who will catch it?
I think that two hands are better than one.
Introductions

What kind of job is social work?
They ask.
The answer is found outside the box.
An ambiguous job description.
It’s an intangible product that fathoms the capitalist system.
The worth of our work can be heard
It’s the rising voices of mangled warriors that were once suppressed
Echoing through polluted systems
Cleansing the unthinkable that once was
We are the rising tide
A wave that crumbles barriers
Our duty to mankind
That allows you to think our job is complete.
Nursing Home, Hiroshima Survivors

They don’t speak of it,
the black ash of footsteps
their haiku.

A song of hate from a single beautiful bird.

My husband every day
I call for him every day
ten years gone.

Light as a leaf
one hundred years remember
one lost child.

In shade the stone path comes to an end.
I met death. Surprisingly, peace greeted me. Body clutched wheel.
Pain visits me daily. I conquered battles- depression and won.
Clear the clouds of confusion. Roll out the knots of trauma in my body.
Pain drips out as sweat and tears in hot yoga.
Back breaking work, abuse, segregation, stigma of brujeria-
ancestral trauma weigh heavy on my bones. Increase 4% of Latina LCSWs.
Bi-cultural coping, compartmentalizing. Re-integrate system.
Wake to transform fear to love, pain to strength, confusion to clarity.
Heart shaped leaves, meeting a ‘blessed’ homeless man, being taught
about space by a child of an addict- Reenergizing moments. New friend
neuroscience validated intuition-Old neuropathways can be replaced
by new ones. Interrupt Old signal. Create new signal. LOVE.
Connect to raw kinetic energy in your body. Inhale love. Exhale fear.
Only you have ability to use energy to heal, create anew.
Mind, body, and soul- I am integrated, I am free, I am whole.
Of Struggles and Starfish

To fill up the void caused by not enough loving
To make a real difference, for even just one
To give something forward in a life that is fleeting
Is to share in a work that will never be done.
To be discontented with giving out fishes
To know that “well-being” requires something more
To realize the depth of the human condition
Is to taste pain and joy not encountered before.
I hear the voices by others rejected
I see divisions of class, race, and creed
I feel the tug of my own scars and weakness
On I go, knowing this: love and grit supersede.
This Work We Do

I explain to mother; her daughter has choices.

Mother is inconsolable.

I tell him calmly he must leave; he has broken the rules.

He is screaming.

I explain the children cannot return home.

Mom must complete court mandated tasks. She is sobbing.

I help her load possessions in the van; she leaves another home.

She is heartbroken.

I tell him I cannot say where she stays.

He is cursing.

I inform her the limit is reached for food cards.

She slams the door.

I leave the family shelter; intakes are done.

He tugs on my pants; he smiles.

He tells me he is five. He asks, “Can I go with you?”
Do you know how important you are?
after Maya Angelou & Tupac Shakur’s conversation on the set of Poetic Justice

Do you know our people layed spooning in the bowels of ships not fit for pigs, forced to sleep in their own filth all that you may live here for the world to watch you till concrete to roses? When was the last time someone told you how important you are? Don’t you know you have the capacity to turn mountains to ash with your words, but instead choose fists & steel forged in fire all that you may prove to others how much of a man you are? Do you know how much time our people spent noose-necked on auction blocks, so that you may know your worth is beyond the measure of another man, woman, child, statewide test, piece of paper, or professor’s 10-cent words could ever dare to inspire, capture, or deny? When you speak, know we see the blue-smoke pour out. You try to hide from yourself holding dreams at arms length like it’s doing something new. Don’t you know what happens to a raisin in the sun? Better yet, a dream deferred? Don’t let them take what is not theirs to take. Ambitious child, to you I reach with leadened heart that lightly speaks of heavy dreams & open wings too often met with brevity. Today is a day like no other. Let consciousness rain down on you & anyone that has the false hope & wayward audacity to take your name in vain. You are holy. You are chosen. You are worthy.
The Trick

Social is so not cool.
Tech and blogging is
what is for school.

Text me your deets.
Do not look me in the eye,
but you may send me a tweet.

Getting a degree over the net.
Don’t involve others and
we’ll be all set.

Here comes a hug my way.
Looks like this is already
a bad day.

Reaching out is easy today.
It is making a real connection
that is tricky.
The Work

You will be the one they blame when they’re too overcome with shame

You will be the one they blame when things are frustrating

When people are hurting

Some will never appreciate you, others will never understand,

but that doesn’t really matter.

Regardless of what they yell at you, regardless of what they say,

You are there for that one person, that one child that you made smile.

You are there for the one who has a better life. A better life with less pain.

People may discourage you, make you feel like you do no right

But remind yourself— it is for one life changed that you fight.

You brush off the words. Sleep off those long days

And advocate for the people who need to see change

It won’t be easy... results can seem impossible

But you were chosen for this
The Journey of Social Work

Life is a journey of ups and downs
Some are searching for the rose
Some are searching for the crown
How can we know the way that we should go?
When to give in and when to fight?
These are questions that keep me up at night
Some days it's hard to stay strong to keep on
But, I think we're here to overcome fear

Take my hand and I'll take yours
I'll take the rose, you can have the crown
There is plenty of life to go around
Walking together, we'll understand
We can all use a helping hand
To make the world a better place
Sharing with each other a touch of grace
The Imposter, Not

I am an imposter in this moment, taking notes of him, her, them
Does he, she, do they really think I can help him, her, them, solve his, her, their problems?
Be his, her, their savior?
For as long as I’ve known myself, I have been someone’s confidant, someone’s mouthpiece
Someone’s eminent protector and nurturer...
I always knew I wanted to learn, wanted to teach, wanted to help, wanted to protect
I reluctantly but most confidently wanted to lead
When all my hopes, dreams and fears collided with the real experiences of the world
Its pain and endless struggles, it willingly, without remorse allowed people to face, I quivered...
Imposter! You can’t fix it! it’s beyond your foolish, naïve, grandiose thoughts and capabilities!
Reality is, people don’t so much need a savior in me, as much as they need a listener
Amazingly, there is much value in others feeling heard, to have someone defend and support
Realizing that no, I am not an imposter, I am a therapist, I am an advocate, I am a change agent
Here is who I was created and destined to be, a social worker
So I’m off, I’m off to change the world...
A mere gene

I am you, only half.
Yet we don’t love the same, only sharing the rage within
But Father, I am still you—I always will be.

This half aches to know, the guilt that lies upon your chest
As well as the temptation of those restless nights
Yet the other half silently begs that you have never left

I question that, that of no answers
With hopes one day I will stand before you
Only to look down at the feet that have wandered
There I am, upright and against the silence you reluctantly roar
Meanwhile in fear, that perhaps your eyes have remained so black
They may be welcoming once more

But Father, I cannot be half of you.
It is impossible
Because here I stand, tall and whole.
Art Therapy

Clients are like film
negatives on display, covered
in darkness.

Social workers are the photographers
preparing clients to be developed by the light of their own resilience
each empty space filled with the brightness of hope,
cautious of overexposure, leaving only the positive behind-

Therapy is like painting
each session a different stroke, a shifting element of change
on the client, once a littered canvas
with an array of colored hues now blended
to form a completed picture of a possible future

encased in oak frames we celebrate
the masterpieces they have become.
The Movement

Flop the folder lands on your desk.
A pretty name on the tab.
One that voice her origin.
In white and black it says,
Migration patterns erratic,
not following a strict heading.
Initial visit,
Her gleam orange like the
sunset that rests on the horizon.
Black outline so you know she’s there.
Revealing she adjusts migration
based on her environment.
Far from home, she craves warmth.
Must travel and move
to carry through.
God’s Theatre

Hope sustained me, when all I knew were the hopes that others had for me. Hope breathed life into me when I was gasping for air in a wretched world. Loving kindness cultivated the seeds of my souls garden. Born into hell, I learned to construct heaven with what I was given. My thoughts. My feelings. My energy. The energy that surrounds me. As my soul’s consciousness grew, hope gave me the will to live well. On the precipice of dying, Hope carried me past the river of styx. Hope led me to realize that I was the architect of my reality. The weaver of my dreams and the only thing that I need hope for. I relaid the roots of my mind cutting off what no longer served. From the darkest of places by soul’s flowers bloomed. I play my part within the intricacy of life’s theatre. In turn, I nourish the lost souls that wander in need of service. It is my honor to water their seeds of hope with devout integrity. And so it is that hope begets hope and the evolution continues.
A Client, A Social Worker

Her weathered body is a sparrow in a storm, so small in my office chair
Wringing her hands like tough clay
picking the moons of dark skin blistering across her knuckles
Outside the rain knocks with a heavy hand

The story starts slow
front fractured teeth lost to a fifteen year war at home
She just wants to smile without her own reflection reminding her of everything he took

There is map tucked in my front pocket
I unfold it as I explain I cannot tell her which way to go
But I can point to places that might help her in the darkness
Resources, navigation, accessible small points of light

Thunder rolls low in the wind
She asks How can I chart the stars in a storm?
I answer You are not alone
Before offering her a lantern
The Infinite Possibilities

Dedicated in remembrance of the late Dr. Michael Kaminsky, who spent his life work advocating for others.

Stand outside and look to the sky 100 billion stars lighting the night
But in the darkness I fail to see the light
100 billion neurons in the brain surely, he’ll wake up again
This is the man that taught me to be brave, how to adapt, to have faith
This the man that showed me the word impossible is a ridiculous obstacle
We are meant to change, to grow, to connect much like a neuron
Never dreamt that I’d be holding his hand praying he’d come back again
I could say he was a compass or a guide but that would be a lie
He pushed, he challenged, he dared me to find the soul that lied inside
Stagnant was not a choice and because of him I found my voice
I know who I am, I know what I am worth, I am no longer ashamed
No longer here to hold my hand challenge my mind and fuel my soul
His voice may be silent but his influence remains
I look to the night sky and remember his dream of infinite possibilities
Not only for me but for all of humanity I carry the torch onward
Going to work in the morning wondering
What is it going to be today? Who am I going to meet?
Where do I have to go? What were the charges? What
Referrals are due? Will I meet my deadlines? Can I help
this family today? Will they be reunited? How sad will it
end or will it be a happy day? I remember what she says,
“Where there is breath there is hope” and I agree.” Isn’t
That why I do what I do? No one understands what we do. No
One really understands how many children we see, what the
Job is, and the toll it takes. If I can save one child, reunify one
Family, it is worth it. I’m a social worker, I change lives.
New Path Forward

You are my father: young, strong, and statuesque. 
I am a social worker: anxious, new, and unsteady.

You are quiet like him. 
And decided like him.

Acknowledged the injury — pointing to circumstances.

You say you don’t belong and you can’t go on. 
Goodbye is all that comes to mind.

I stand before you, grown. 
Contextualized, I see you now and understand.

I hold your stare and extend my hand. 
I overcame and you will, too.

You are not my father and I am not your child — I sit with you.

We both begin anew
From Where Does My Hope Come?

From where does my hope come? Does it come from the powers that be?
The powers and principalities that reign? The terror of indifference?
Contempt in the form of callousness? Bootstrap philosophies?
Does it come from the pulpit, with no prophetic voices, sold to the safety of silence?
Does it come from ammo waiting to penetrate more deeply than love?

No. Hope cannot live here.

My hope comes from my child who asks why Santa brings
More to the haves than the have nots.

My hope comes from my mentor that says
“Embrace your difference, it’s your gift to the world.”

My hope comes from my teacher who said “You can do it. You are more than you yet know.”

My hope comes from the social worker that keeps her eyes, and her heart, wide open. Anyway.

My hope comes from the sharing amongst the homeless, the hugs amongst orphans, the smiles
Between strangers, the outstretched arms of the elders. The places we rarely look.

We don’t just hope. We are hope. Hope is where the heart is.
Shadow Girl

Shadow Girl
   a menace is lurking here
   launching another brutal battle

He uses law as weapon but is the criminal And to you his mask is invisible

For every woman
   doomed from justice by man

Be strong
Look mighty
Fight him
Smash society

And then, they will see
They will hear
They will know

We are her hero.
Deodorizing his presence

I too had noticed him come into the store
Bed of cardboard, cloths, blankets, a suitcase of all his possessions
A rickshaw of miseries, our miseries
Survival on a shoe string,
A bath, a luxury.
Eyes feasted on his visible troubles
Attentive only to the embodiment of his problems;
The shadow of our gaze, the reality of all our miseries.
From the shelf the store attended pulled a bottle of air freshener and sprayed.
Phew....
Disgusted, I blurted out: Why are you spraying us with this “sh..t”?
Pointing with his eyes, he said, I ‘m deodorizing his presence.