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$y = mx + b(\text{eauty})$

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$$y = mx + b(\text{eauty})$$

by  
Chris Dollard

A Thesis Submitted for Honors  
in  
The Department of English

Rhode Island College  
Spring 2010

**Approval of Honors Thesis**

in

**Creative Writing**

for

$y = mx + b$  (eauty)

(title of thesis)

by

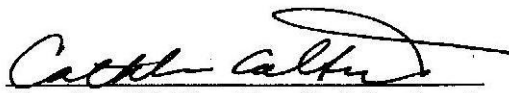
Christopher Ballard

(thesis advisee)

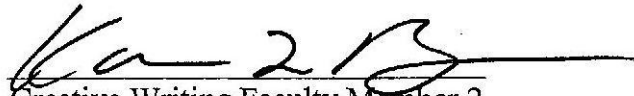
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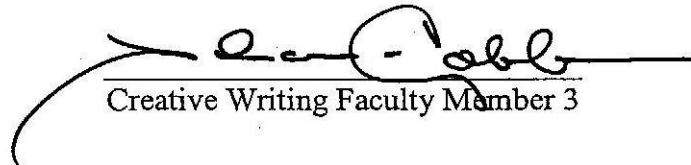
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## Missing

*you can't figure out*  
when an iron is too hot for a shirt,  
the smell of singed cotton

*when something is wrong*  
a teakettle screams itself  
hoarse and dry

*but you said*  
weeds overtake the verge,  
invading the tomato garden

*your problem is*  
a bathtub boils over, bubbling  
on the green linoleum

*you know the truth*  
when a mother drives away,  
ignoring the rearview mirror

*when someone lies*  
and a father mows the lawn,  
burning in the sun

## Solitary (Brave)

Everything I know about prison  
I learned from you

when I was five. I asked how many

birthdays parties you missed and why  
you dug a hole through your closet

into mine with a pencil

to pass me notes,  
both of us huddled in places

where we knew we shouldn't be.

We heard heavy footfalls  
that somehow never found us.

You drew stick figures in striped pajamas.

You said, *That's what we are,*  
but I thought I wasn't.

I could still leave my room.

You weren't allowed to,  
and every note you pushed

through plaster I didn't understand.

I only saw the alphabet, letters  
I was still learning.

You sat in each corner

of your room, dreaming  
of sheets tied together

out the window,

of scaling walls, of running  
through the woods with me.

## King

I don't remember what made me  
run away that day, down the path,  
past the tree-house and deep  
into rusty leaves, but I remember  
ignoring Dad's cowboy whistle,  
calling me home to eat or sleep.

There was far too much to see and be  
out here among the unnamed streams  
that ran between monster boulders,  
overgrown with birch and oak,  
and I thought myself a king  
like all the boys did.

I'd meet my imaginary knights  
and they'd follow me, running  
around the evening star,  
swallowing the last drops of sunlight,  
swashbuckling with sticks  
and fighting off everything but us.



# Forgive

—for my brother, Jason

That Sunday I went to church  
and dressed in the usual garb:  
the black cassock and white surplice

that freakishly draped  
my nine-year-old frame.  
I would carry the flame

of the Holy Spirit behind  
Father Boisvert, and Jason  
would lead us down the aisle,

bearing the Crucifix. We gathered  
in front of the church, where our Savior  
broke his wrist when Jason tripped

and the silver Christ kissed  
the sidewalk outside St. John's.  
That was the only time Father

said *Shit*, quick and hushed,  
before the only mass we'd carry  
the cross sans Messiah,

an empty frame, lonely right hand  
still nailed to the beam.  
Next Sunday I grinned

at the gray scar on Jesus' arm, his body  
soldered back onto the cross.  
Then I knew what Jason might say

in confession that Saturday.  
Father might repent, too,  
but there was nothing to forgive.

## Concessions

Dad loves to correct my swing,  
to tell me how great it is  
after a few adjustments.

*Keep your shoulders down,*  
*eye on the ball,* the smallest ball  
we've ever chased over the longest  
distances, over striped fairways  
precisely mowed as if the mower  
knows how important these days  
are supposed to be.

I never play this game on my own,  
just with him, driving the noiseless cart,  
watching how his smile erupts  
after the putt, sound of ball-in-cup.

Then he looks at me and his eyes say,  
*Aren't you enjoying this?*

And I know that my expression  
betrays my reason for playing,  
but I quickly adjust:  
smile, nod, high five, *nice shot.*

## Bench Warning

This summer my tomatoes won't bloom.  
The sun hid for a month behind thunderheads  
and when it reappeared it burned them  
into black blight. Houdini weather.  
Someone's having fun. I watch dust storms kick up  
like there's a baseball coach who's mad  
at the umpire. Too bad I can't toss him  
from the game, he keeps ruining things,  
but he's calling the pitches and runs right.  
Players peel around the bases like screeching cars  
when they hit home runs.  
The red clay blooms into the sky.  
My garden becomes a diamond for forces to play,  
and the umpire calls what he sees. No judgment,  
only objective truth. My tomatoes are home plate,  
the corn outfield, beans at first base, potatoes  
on the mound. Cleats run over, treads shred.  
This is no place for food.

## Fourth of July, 1966

My father should've died  
that day. He and his friends  
tied a homemade tin-box  
flash bomb to a telephone pole.  
Six kids on a sidewalk in Astoria,  
ready to relive the rocket's red glare  
as they watched the powder hiss  
up the fuse and under the flap,  
when nothing happened.  
A dud, they thought,  
and climbed out from cover  
behind a dumpster,  
took three steps closer to investigate.  
Maybe it was the flash  
before the blast that made my father  
turn his back to the fireball  
as shrapnel shot his legs  
while the pole buckled,  
knocking power out across  
six city blocks. Six casualties  
fell amid blown-out window-glass  
and live blue sparking wires.  
One could almost hear the cry  
of *Medic!* from the wounded.  
Maybe then they knew  
what waited for them

when they turned eighteen and crossed  
an ocean, marched into a jungle.

## On the Hudson

We floated out from the Battery in a little rowboat  
and saw the gaping toothless holes  
of death at Vesey and West Broadway.

My father pointed at Lady Liberty,  
said how magnificent she was,  
but her face was cannonshot, her torch burned  
green while a whiskeydrunk leer jet  
crashed into a helicopter taping the high speed chase  
up F.D.R. Drive.

An airliner ditched a thousand yards behind us,  
rocking the boat, the struck geese  
turned to ground feathers in jet engines

while my brother leaned over and offered me a joint,  
saying it would calm everything down,  
but I turned away toward my mother,  
who slapped my grandfather as he slugged grappa  
while stinkwater washed over the gunwale.

The wake of the sliding, sinking plane  
soaked his shirt and he cried and threw it  
to the dead birds floating by Ellis Island.

## On the Flight Deck

We're flying through the stratosphere.  
Storm clouds ahead on the radar. Two blips.  
The blips are us.  
Oh, man—here comes turbulence,  
here comes heady weather.

I ask you for coordinates. I ask,  
*Which way around?*

But you can't look at me. You gape  
at thunderheads in the window. You say,  
*Let's fly straight into them.*

I should call you crazy, but I take  
my hands off the yoke.  
Set to autopilot. I turn to you.  
*Say you love me. Say you love me.*

## How to Survive a Plane Crash

The machine you're flying in is beyond your understanding  
other than the concepts of *lift*, *pitch*, *roll*, and *altitude*.

A jumbo metal tube packed with wires-bolts-jetfuel-hydraulic-  
lines-luggage-seats-newspapers and people,  
some in dreams, some all too aware  
of how unnatural thirty-thousand-feet is.  
The inflatable vests are manifest optimism.

Remember, people died crossing oceans before they flew planes;  
wanderlust has its risks.

Remember, slamming into water  
at half the speed of sound will be virtually painless.  
You won't recollect a thing.

Remember, there's nothing you can do.  
It's just your time. Breathe the oxygen, go to sleep,  
and wake up on the other side.



## Crescent City

The passing headlights lit  
your ghost face while you gazed  
at the growing skyline, the stars,  
getting closer to the city.

I told you, *This is all about sickness.*  
You nodded, kissed me,  
and grabbed the wheel.

But we never went back  
home, and everywhere was new  
when we didn't know  
which way to go.

We parked the car on a bridge  
overlooking New Orleans, waiting  
to unpack, but not here.

We kept the car running,  
aching to reach the horizon glow  
and throw ourselves over.

## Portrait of a Man Losing His Shit in Public

Liquored-up words spit from his gob  
as he slaps the bouncer for ripping his shirt  
while being dragged from the bar.

He staggers onto the sidewalk,  
hurling epithets and falling down the street.

Give him a pack of matches  
and some gasoline and see how far he'd go—  
arson or suicide?

Shirt collar tattered  
like a war-torn flag on his shoulder,  
wrecking-ball heart,  
brain of ashes and saliva,  
buckshot tongue,  
eyes like melting coins.

Headlights swerve around him  
as he stumbles across Broadway,  
howling at the streetlamp  
as if it were the moon.

## Gamblers

You put quarters in my mouth  
so I tell you about the future,

but you don't like what I say,  
so you sock me on the chin,

breaking my teeth on nickel  
like some punch-drunk boxer

that couldn't win. You say,  
*You lie*, and I have to agree

even though I know  
that my answers are bullshit

fortune cookies, but my answers  
aren't mine. They mean

rotten eggs. They mean the cops  
will come for fingerprints

on bloody coins. They mean  
kill the messenger.

## Masquerade

We never hang out anymore  
so I dragged you to the party  
in handcuffs and we took them off  
in front of our friends like a magic show,  
rubbing your grooved wrists of resistance.

Everyone was dressed in comic book garb.  
Your eyes had ivy wingtips  
and raspberry feathers that swept  
up your eyelashes, eyebrows slick black,  
redhead villain. I was the detective  
that arrested you.

You gave me sips  
of cranberry and gin and bribed me,  
baby, to let you go, behind the pool table  
while the stereo shouted shotgun anthems.

O, beguile me—pull me down  
to kiss your sour juniper lips  
even though we never tried  
in the years we drove around,  
my hand on the steering wheel  
while you smoked cigarettes  
with your wiry fingers  
and lemon-twist mouth.

Our rabbit hearts always beat  
too hard to say what we wanted.  
But tonight in our costumes,  
identities erased, we'll go back  
to my place and fall to bed,  
touching skin we've never seen before,  
forgetting who we'll be tomorrow.

## Rainbow Lightning Sunset

We drove to Provincetown,  
late June, slurping oysters and hoping  
that an aphrodisiac might help.  
We did everything couples do,  
losing ourselves in our warped reflections  
from the pier while licking ice cream cones.  
I looked at you while holding hands  
down Commercial Street in a gay parade,  
and you looked away.  
The two gray-haired men making out  
next to us seemed younger than you and me.  
We drove to the beach,  
the last romantic resort,  
but got more than we came for  
as the sun slipped toward the edge.  
Thunder rumbled.  
You walked back to the car.  
I stood alone on the sand  
while bursts of cloud moved above,  
soaking me. Lightning arced  
across the blood-orange sunset,  
forming twin rainbows.  
I felt longing for sun,  
fear of thunder and flash,  
hope in color-washed light.  
I smiled as you sat in the front seat.  
You stared at me and shook your head,  
so I drove you home.

## Therapy

### I.

The only thing I know about loneliness  
is sitting in bathwater while the steam  
melts holes in the ceiling.

Wind pocks the window. I shave  
and dip the blade, hair scattering across  
the surface, tiny ships sailing away

from each other. I climb out of the tub,  
fresh-faced, with pickled fingers.  
The storm outside beats on someone.

### II.

The only thing I know about pain  
is wanting to drink smoke,  
hoping it'll hit like whiskey.

I hitch a ride home  
in an ambulance in case something  
goes wrong, in case I breathe fire.

I want to defibrillate myself,  
push the reset button. *Press  
play again. Beginning, middle, end.*

Red-blue strobes turn purple,  
like fireworks and bruises.  
Flowers bloom under mottled skin.

### III.

The only thing I know about addiction  
is spending between time in bed  
together. Anesthetic orgasms, how many

does it take? This is fun. Then this is not  
fun; this is routine. This is wanting  
to be thrown against a wall again

and over and again. *I don't know why  
I do these things, but I want the Birth of Venus  
in my bedroom, and this is how to get it.*

## Work

Cut and shucked scars.  
Julienned thumbs. Pan-seared skin.

Knife calluses  
split our right palms.

Braised fingers, licks of pink  
that spot our knuckles.

Panhandle temperatures tattooed  
up our forearms. Boiled burns

that boil over, crimson splashes,  
melting grease-fire blisters

and deglazed fingernails.  
Double shift, no glory.

These are my grandfather's hands.  
These are my hands.



$$y = mx + b(\text{eauty})$$

*The first question I ask myself when something doesn't seem to be beautiful is why do I think it's not beautiful. And very shortly you discover that there is no reason.*

– John Cage

let  $y$  equal each time  
the sun rained on concrete,

equal bloody leaves & plastic bags  
in flame maple trees.

let  $m$  equal antihistamines  
& rusted iron lungs,

equal buckets of steam  
& smog in broken light.

let  $x$  equal opposite spectrums  
of color, equal negatives

that do not equal the definition  
of negative, just differences

of opinion. let  $b$  equal  
beauty & un-beauty,

the slope of lines, low to high,  
from asphalt to granite peaks,

equal rainbow oil puddles,  
bonnets & deathbeds,

equal you & me until  
we cancel each other out.

## Leonid

We sit on the hillcrest  
and watch meteors  
spit bullets of light  
as we ask questions  
of the dark sky between  
the earthward flares  
and think of how we  
could fall, colliding  
like those fragments  
of broken alien rock.  
We flash the same way  
through time,  
but we won't know that  
until we look back  
at our vapor trails  
showering the past  
with bright stars  
and searing sparks.

## Ninety-Five

I drive north, passing shades of rust as New Haven  
skirts the freeway. Tenement houses and oil silos

almost touch the guardrails. Autumn fell late,  
and I watch the sun set in my rearview mirror.

Our star slides back and forth, curving with the lanes,  
until it slips. The leftover light turns the leaves

to candles, glowing as I pass my birthplace  
on the banks of the Thames River. I see the hills

to the north as my car climbs the bridge. I see all  
the places I've lived, leaving home to come home

and passing home on the way. Five exit signs  
on this hundred-mile stretch mark those places.

I keep slipping between them, but always  
coming back to where they call me *Christopher*.