

Once Lush Fields

by *Skylar Hamilton Burris*

© 1998 (revised), Skylar Hamilton Burris

"And you'll never meet a person in this world who will love you just for who you are. Every being that walks this earth wants to mold you, shape you, make you into tiny mirror images of themselves."

That's what dad told me, anyway, after apologizing for losing control. I ran my tongue inside my mouth, and the salty-tinge of blood brought back all sensation. I told him he was right, of course, though I was pretty sure Satan would take him just the way he was. But I didn't say things like that to dad, not when he'd been drinking, not when I was late for school, not when I only had two weeks until graduation, and then maybe, just maybe, I'd be out of his apartment and out of his life forever. No, I just agreed, clinched back the tears, wiped away the blood, and walked out on the street.

I was jolted in my seat, and the incessant chattering of twenty young teenagers resounded in my ears. I hated this part most of all. In classes, at least, only the teachers were talking, and they were easy enough to drown out . . . But on the bus I was forever conscious of just exactly where I was, exactly where I was going, and exactly what I would return to when the day was done. And I was too old to ride the bus. All of the other seniors drove to school, or they lived close enough to walk, but they never went through this.

I was also too old to let my father hit me, but it was better than striking back, better than learning the lesson of abuse his own father had taught him. Besides, I might have been too good a student. I might have killed him. So I just stared out the window and watched the double yellow lines tracing out an endless path.

Every being that walks this earth wants to mold you, shape you, make you. Who had ever asked him to change? It could not have been my mother. In the fifteen years that our lives overlapped, I had never seen her ask him for a single thing. Perhaps she had asked for a funeral, or a memorial, or even just a prayer. But I never knew.

Someone, however, must have tried to change him. And he would not be sifted like wheat, broken into pieces and reformed. No, he preferred to find a complacent companion, someone like my mother, someone who could never say "I love you," and who could never ask for love.

I loved her voice. Whenever Ellen went to the front of the classroom to read, I'd close my eyes and pretend to sleep. That way I could listen, and no one would know. She sounded like my mother might have sounded if she had ever been able to desire anyone or anything.

Ellen was a beautiful poet, too. I just turned in meaningless, badly rhymed poems like the rest of the guys who took Creative Writing for an easy A. It wasn't that I couldn't write--I could. It wasn't that I was afraid of seeming unmanly. I never much cared what others thought of me. It was simply that if my teacher read my poetry--my real poetry--she might begin to think that I was someone worth giving a damn about, and I hated that.

So I just leaned back in my chair, and I listened to the words roll off Ellen's tongue, just as if she were sighing...

"In spring," she read, "When childhood slips from conscious thought, and past fades from distant memory, I return to train tracks which stretch across a dying field..."

When childhood slips from conscious thought. Had Ellen had a childhood? Was there ever a time when she never wrote words that could grieve my soul and tear my heart? Had she played with dolls and swung on swings? Had she laughed without a reason, cried for attention, smiled just to smile? Or had she, like me, been thrust into adulthood the moment she could breathe? *Childhood slips from conscious thought.*

I opened my eyes, just a little. I wouldn't look long. I wouldn't gaze into those emerald eyes. "Once I sat with other children," she continued, "Shroud in innocence, and lost in time's wonder, we watched the train roll by across hot iron and hard oak wood, and we listened as the engineer, kindled by thoughts of his own youth, blew the whistle, just for us."

Just for us. She brushed her hair aside, auburn strands aside. *And you'll never meet a person in this world who will love you just for who you are.*

"Gravel rests now by that track. A huge mound of earth and stone. No train rolls by, and the ground is barren. No children lie on once lush fields."

No children lie on once lush fields.

They clapped for her, and the teacher, as always, beamed. I could guess from Ellen's expression that she hated this reflexive, hollow honor. I imagined she felt humiliated, as if she were breaking off a little piece of herself just to be applauded by a bunch of people who would forget her words the moment the lunch bell rang. She went back to her desk, and she folded up the poem, and she put it in her pocket. *And you'll never meet a person in this world.*

"We're closing soon, you know." The librarian was kicking me out again. That was all right. It would still be an hour before I could walk all the way home. And by then, maybe dad would be passed out. I only hoped today hadn't been the day--I hoped they hadn't fired him yet. Who knows what he would do to me.

It seemed darker than usual, but I didn't mind. The street lamps cast a serene glow on the street, and the pleasant scent of after rain added to the illusion. This surreal part of life, this dream-like walk in the aftermath of rain. . . it hurt, in a strange way, like my father's blows never could.

I kicked the gravel from the street. My hands were deep within my pockets. I could

stay like this forever, suspended in this halfway world, where hope was so overwhelming that it was no different than despair. Between dusk and dawn, I stood, and I wanted to walk on, because at that moment every dream seemed possible, but I wanted stay, because part of me knew that only here could it ever seem so.

I lay on my bed listening to the rain as it battered our barred windows. I assured myself my father hadn't been in an accident. He would be home, in time. He'd probably just stopped into a bar...he'd driven home successfully countless other times.

Do I wish my father dead? I'd asked the question before. And the same hushed shadows had played against the wall then, too. I was lying in bed, just like this, with that same solitary lamp casting its indistinct glow. And the same silence answered.

I thought of Ellen. There, beneath the street lamps, where hope and despair merged, I had envisioned a bond between us. Now, the dim lamplight, the patter of rain--it too tried to lull me. But soon, the familiarity of my surroundings pierced me. Tomorrow, all those dim glows would be washed away beneath a stark stream of sunlight. Ellen would seem then as she was--beautiful, profound, and yet as unconscious of my pain as any other stranger.

I knew I would live through tomorrow as I had lived through today. Every day, we are just living for the next. Every phase in life, we are just waiting for the next. Oh, if only I could reach high school, then it would all be better...in college, it will be different...if only I was an adult, if I had a job, ah, then I will have arrived. And where does it end?

I heard the rattle of keys, a creak, feet falling hard on the wooden floor. Quickly, I turned out the lamp. Dad wouldn't bother me if he thought I was asleep.

Ellen had written a poem about her father, but she didn't want to read it. The rest of the class kept prodding her, perhaps because they earnestly thought she was a good poet, but more likely because they didn't want to be called on to read themselves.

"It's all right," said the teacher. "Sometimes, we don't want to share our poetry. Essentially, every poem we write, we write for ourselves."

That was a lie, I thought. No one writes for himself. Nothing in this world is worth anything if we do it for ourselves. We write poetry so we can share it with others, so they can feel what we are feeling, know what we know, see what we see. There's no use in writing for ourselves. I knew--I'd been writing for myself for years.

"I do want someone to read today, however," the teacher was saying. "I want someone who is willing to share his or her work to come up here."

No one stirred.

"Somebody?"

"I will," I said, and every individual turned. Had they even known I was there before? Was Ellen looking at me with surprise? Her too?

I walked up to the front of the room, and I unfolded a single sheet of paper. "To Ellen." I saw her look quickly downward, as though her desk was suddenly the most fascinating piece of furniture she had ever seen, and I doubt she looked up as I read the poem. I wouldn't have known if she had, because I stared at the black ink the entire time I read:

*"In these heady moments,
When even rain seems bright,
Riot rides the tail of peace,
And sleep evades the night.*

*My mind won't cease its roving;
No rest greets me where I lie.
And so the time will pass,
'Til unrequited, love must die.*

*Yet lives the torturer hope,
Who will not let me be;
And the object of my love
Knows not my agony.*

*My dreams are but a prison
Where desire locks my chain,
Where I feed on hateful yearning,
And drink down pleasant pain.*

*Two keys exist to free me,
And neither one is mine--
The first is love requited,
The other's Doctor Time."*

I'm not sure exactly what I expected. I certainly never believed Ellen would hear my poem and fall deeply in love with me. I'm not even sure I expected her to speak to me. But if I had allowed myself to dwell upon the mockery my classmates would subject me to, I never could have roused the courage to read the poem.

Yet I *had* read it. And why? Because my mother was dead, and I wanted to live? Because I thought that if I allowed the world to know that I, too, could ache like every other human being, that it might make me human in their eyes?

And now that it was done, I did not mind the jeers and snickers of my classmates. For this is what it means to live--to do something for someone else you never would have done if you were just yourself. Even if it means losing a piece of yourself, you do it. You serve up a portion of your soul, and you become a little more like someone else. You are

never quite the same. Part of you is missing, but at last you realize the time has come for you to carry on. And no children lie on once lush fields.

Previously Published: Raconteur. 2.11 (June 1995): 25. Schuylkill Valley Journal of the Arts. 18 (Spring 2004): 98.