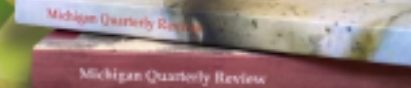


Lifting the Page

Resources for teaching creative writing from the pages of MQR



MQR's Anniversary Issue

Time Travel: Digging
(for HS students or older)

**Content
Warning**

**"what you'd find buried in the dirt under charles
f. Kettering sr. high school (detroit, michigan)"
by francine j. harris**

Created by Isabel Neal for MQR

**References to
medical and
sexual abuse;
substance use**



**This poem first appeared in MQR's Winter 2011 Issue and
was part of MQR's Winter 2021 Anniversary Anthology**

what you'd find buried in the dirt under charles f. kettering sr. high school (detroit, michigan)

francine j. harris

blood:

soaked and caked on white socks, on blue mesh net t-shirts.

the band leader's blue baton and drum sticks.

matchbook sulfur spilled over newport cigarette butts.

condoms in a few dull shades. tenth-grade chemistry books

modeling atomic fatty acids.

half-sucked orange dum-dums tucked under detention slips.

pictures from *black hair* cut out for pre-beautician consensus.

broken black glitter belts with pink buckles shaped like lips.

candle wax from last year's vigil when

de'andre "chucky" brown collapsed in the arms of his
teammate. the teammate's shoe prints rocking back and forth
where the vigil was held, biting his lip.

broken cellphones. pieces of the black rubber mat

below the entrance way, which we crossed every morning,

teeth clenched. notes of consent that girls wrote, but didn't mean
and wish they hadn't passed back.

broken teeth. lost retainers. crumpled letters written to counselors

and discarded for illegible handwriting. phone lists of

abortion clinics. deflated valentine's day balloons with

trampled white ribbon. sales ads on bassinette sets.

my first boyfriend's piano scarf. a phyllis hymen

album cover. the path from the

exit door behind the school through which certain boys
would not see certain girls leave.

torn up progress reports.

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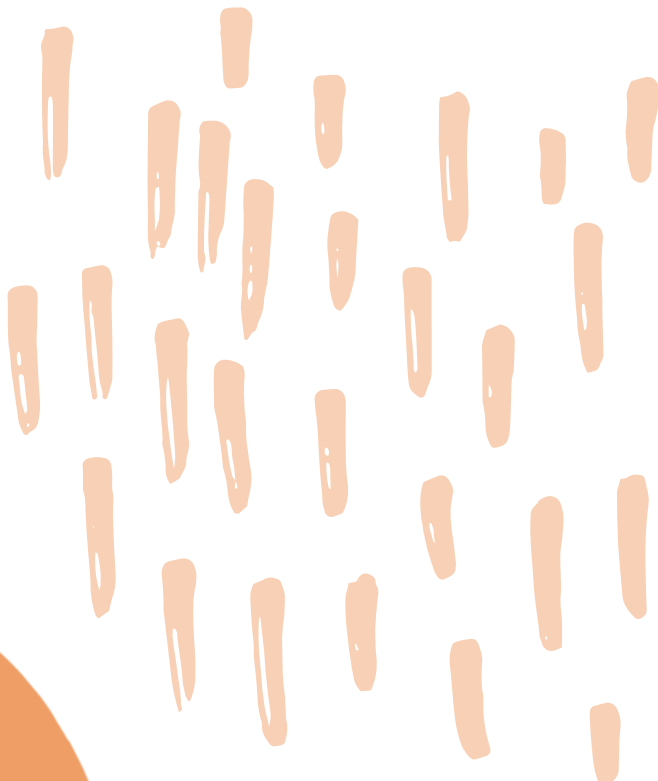
brass knuckles. two
afro picks on opposite sides of the school. germs on a hall pass
from a boy holding his crotch.
rusty rebar dust. pigeon bones. stolen phone numbers.
d.o.t. bus passes from 1960, the year of the groundbreaking.
suspended driver's licenses. broken glasses from ice
packed into snowballs. unread pamphlets on
charles f. kettering, a farmer with bad eyesight,
who invented the electric starter
and an incubator for preemies.
possum tails. original scores. balled up journal entries
written and torched, detailing abuses. genital fluids.
dna. envelopes from letters of acceptance
to states far away. math teachers' stolen answer keys
torn and burned by cigarette lighters.
cigarette lighters. hundreds of mcdonald's
fries containers because they flatten easily. weed.
imitation diamonds from homecoming tiaras
encrusted in shit-colored mud. research papers on kettering
detailing his treatments for
venereal disease
which involved heating up patients in thermal cabinets
until their body temperatures fevered at 130 degrees.
teachers' red pen marks on essay papers detailing abuses.
empty sprint cards.
a splint a football captain
was supposed to be wearing but decided made him look gay.
a fat boys tape. pieces of torn blue and white starter jackets
from the way boys wrestled each other
to the ground in spring.

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my first poetry journal. pages of its poems
embossed with patterns of early name-brand gym shoes.
crumpled suicide notes written in pencil and scorched with ashes.
lost house keys. pictures of first crushes. bullets.
unpublished articles by frustrated teachers
who briefly looked into research findings,
using the charles f. kettering instrument of school
climate assessment detailing the psychological impact
on students from external stressors normally associated
with adulthood domestic patterns of abuse. fat shoelaces.
bullet casings. a jim beam whiskey flask that the old principal ditched
thinking someone was coming.
my last boyfriend's lesson plan elaborately structured
on the back
of a comic book. imprints of my mother's modest heel
from crossing the barren frontal square at my graduation.
free press articles on unnamed minors whose bodies were found
in dumpsters near kettering. the crystallized block formed
from the tissue my father handed me at graduation
for tears i couldn't explain.



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Encountering the Poem

Begin by reading aloud, listening with open ears to all the sounds of harris's language.

The next time you read, read with a pen or pencil in hand. How does the sound take shape on the page? Circle or underline the places where a word, an image, or open space surprises you.

For you, where does the poem throw sparks? (Carlina Duan calls these moments your "personal heat points"!)

What questions come up as you read for a second (and a third!) time?

What images linger most strongly after you have put the poem down?

Brainstorming

Think about a place in your world where you have spent lots of time – home, or school, or a favorite place outdoors. At the top of your page, write the name of the place – its official name (maybe your school/street/skate park is named after something or someone specific) or the name you call it, in all caps.

What activities happen there?

Who comes and goes, who shares the space?

Free write for 3-5 minutes, describing everything you see when you visualize the life of your important place.

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Brainstorming (Cont.)

Now, close your eyes and visualize again: which objects (and pieces of objects) from your current era might be left there for a future visitor to find “buried in the dirt”? Make a list of 10-15 specific objects.

Which objects from earlier eras, times before you, might be left behind? Make a list of 5-10 specific objects.

To deepen this step, you might do some research into your important place: who lived or spent time there before you? What stories are – or could be – a part of the place’s longer timeline?

harris’ poem centers things left behind in the form of both objects and impressions, presences and absences.

What kinds of impressions (the marks, like shoe-prints, of things removed) might be left behind in your place?

Describe their shapes, textures, and residues.

What doesn’t leave a mark?

Discussion

For you, whose stories are a part of “what you’d find...”? Whose are not?

How does harris’ pacing and release of information let us, as readers, make connections between her lines?

What other choices on the page are important to your experience of the poem?

What questions remain for you after reading?

Drafting

Using harris’s poem as a model, and your brainstorm writing as a start, write your own “what you’d find...” poem.

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