

**A Performance Poem  
by Stacy Smallwood**

On the occasion of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the  
Occupational Safety and Health Act  
NORA Symposium 2006  
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April 18, 2006

Somewhere on the other side of time  
There is a gap  
Filled with ghosts.  
They cling to the walls of ravines,  
Wrap around branches,  
Refuse to fall in  
Until their stories have been told.

I've seen them.  
At night, in my sleep,  
They visit me.  
Inhabit me.  
Beg me to remember their FACES  
When I awaken,  
Inscribe my palms with their accounts  
In hopes to help me hold on to them.

There are so many.  
But some strike me harder,  
Like sledge hammers to brittle bone,  
Won't let me forget the impact.  
Like the nurse whose face  
Was deep and grooved,  
Sharp.  
Daily she traded blood for hope and  
Balanced the lives of untold millions  
On the tip of a needle.  
Without fear she wielded the hollow-bores  
Like swords,  
Never thinking that the blade might kick back,  
Show its double edge,  
And pierce her delicate skin.  
It comes with the work, she says,  
That you gotta take some pokes  
To save a life.  
But this time the blood was tainted,  
Crawled into her streams and laced her  
With hepatitis C.  
As it multiplied inside her,  
She weakened and withered  
Before her family's eyes,  
Forced to trade out livers  
Like broken hearts  
For the rest of her life.

I felt her,  
Like pinpricks in my side  
Tracing the outline of multiple incisions  
Made to replace her ailing organs,  
The strangers her body would not accept  
If not for prescriptions and prayers.  
And still she thinks of the lives  
She could have saved  
If not for the fragility of her own.

She's still on this side,  
Although the poison in her blood  
Cuts at her daily,  
Reminds her of the daggers  
That float in her iron streams,

Like the tears that stream down  
The next face.  
This one is harder.  
Craggy.  
Like it was chiseled on the side  
Of a Great Smoky Mountain,  
Dotted with fraser fir trees  
And brush.  
For eleven years,  
He'd specialized in paving pathways  
For others he'd never know.  
Took pride in the pouring of concrete,  
Asphalt tops,  
Fleshing the roads that led  
From grade school to Grandma's house,  
Wedding to honeymoon,  
Memory to memory.  
Until October 25, 2000,  
When his forested features  
Were mowed down  
By a wayward SUV.  
It ran off the road  
And sideswiped him,  
Tossed him twenty feet to the north,  
Left *him* with multiple blunt force traumas  
And his family with the memories  
Of a man who made a living  
Connecting people to their memories  
One mile at a time.

But sometimes even distances  
Measured in feet  
Can be deadly.  
Like the eighth grader  
Whose face is like rose petals  
Plucked too soon.  
He was doing a man's work,

Building shelter from the elements  
That fall from the sky.  
As the sun blazed his back,  
He worked the nail gun and shingles  
With care and rhythm.

1-2-3.

1-2.

1-2-3.

1-2.

Like the irregular heartbeat of youth  
That lets him know he's growing into his adult self.  
I wonder if he felt like an eagle  
Working around that skylight,  
As the sun bent around its curves  
And found its way down inside.  
I wonder if he felt his shoulder blades bear wings  
And hover him  
As he nailed the scales of the roof  
Into place.  
But he must have flown too close  
To the sun that day,  
Become more like Icarus than Daedalus,  
As gravity brought him crashing home  
Through the sky.  
He had never been taught how to fly.  
He had never been taught how not to fall.  
Now he is periwinkle petals pressed flat  
Inside the pages of my dreams,  
A haunting question that should never  
Have been asked.

And they don't stop there.  
They come to me more often than ever now.  
From the heights of skyscraper scaffolding  
To the depths of West Virginia coal mines,  
The fishing boats of Alaska  
And the trauma units of Houston hospitals.  
Recently, the faces have become darker,  
More brown and bronze,  
With tongues that sound like Oaxaca  
And San Salvador,  
Hair thick like ancient canopies  
That hold hardship like humidity  
On a hot summer day.  
And they are younger.  
Softer, smoother skin,  
Stronger eyes,  
Brighter smiles concealed too soon.

They are patchwork  
On the insides of my eyelids,  
Pieces of a quilt  
That's the size of any heart

That's ever taken pride in the  
Work of their hands,  
Broad as backs built and broken  
On construction sites,  
Deep as the bend of knees during lifting,  
Proud as bright orange and red signs  
That say "stop" and "slow"  
As the road from A to B is made smooth.

They have come here now,  
Here to the place where research and practice meet,  
Where recommendations can mean life and death  
For the millions that take their places now.  
They are here with us,  
Urging us to keep going,  
Studying to show ourselves approved,  
Studying to show ourselves *improved*,  
That we may improve the lives of all men and women  
Who have ever been proud to make a living  
In their chosen field.  
We are now on the other side of their time,  
And they cling to these walls,  
Portraits of pain and suffering  
From hazards that should  
Never be considered occupational,  
They should be unacceptable.  
So let us shape our studies wisely,  
Never forgetting our aim  
To advance the health of the public.  
Let us stand inside the gap  
So many have fallen into,  
Project *our* faces to the world  
And turn their stories  
Into strategies.  
Strategies that will knit these faces  
Into a web,  
A net that will protect those who labor  
From free-falling into fatality.  
No one should die while  
Trying to make a living.  
No one should have to die  
While trying to make  
A living.