

**A Performance Poem by Stacy Smallwood
On the occasion of Workers' Memorial Day 2007**

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 tip 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,
Sunrise to sunset.
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 kindling
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
As he nailed the scales of the roof
Into place.
But he must have flown too close
To the sun that day,
Become more 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,
Where our decisions and dollars
mean life and death
For the millions that take their places
On the frontlines.
Their voices surround us,
Settle like dew into tireless palms,
Urging us to keep going,
Studying to show ourselves approved,
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 stand inside the gap
So many have fallen into,
Project *our* faces to the world
And turn their stories
Into solutions:
Strategies that will weave a web of safety,
A net to 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.