**Phase 1**

The following four poems have their beginnings in passages from well-known prose texts. However, the poems begin to corrupt their sources almost immediately. The victim texts are, in order: *Moby Dick*, William Alexander Percy’s *Lanterns on the Levee*, the *Origin of Species,* and Thomas Carlyle’s published portrait of Samuel Taylor Coleridge at 50.

**River Rocks**

Call me Ishmael. Call me No-Money-In-My-Purse. Or call me Jewel

in a Shallow Pool. Dismiss my brackish reach, but you gotta admit

you like saying it. Jewels in pools. Now call me Jacob, who might

have made it to the sea, he was, even then, so grim about the mouth.

I swear, no tear ever fell from his face. Rain came and water rose

and when it did, he grabbed me and together we sought

it out, our whale of a time in canoes that did not float. It’s true,

what my father said when we showed up—so wet our clothes

felt like strips of cast—we might have died the water so cold

and so deep; the smooth rocks we couldn’t see were no anchor

for our progress. Call me head-soaked and simple. Call him

Don’t-Fall-In. But other days, call me knee-deep in Tiger Lillies,

Call him deep in country-red clay, his wolfdog fresh

from fighting, slick with some howler’s spit and blood. Call me

thumped and punched about or call me passenger. Call me sweet

and sour like Mrs. Gunter, who took us on a 6th grade field trip

into the deeper water of the sky because some of us would never

have such a chance. When we reached the clouds, even Jacob smiled.

Call me frantic on the riverbank the day he rowed out to catch

the copperhead halfway across the river and call me too afraid to cry

the day I caught a hook to the temple and had to hold the line

the long row back, where, on a root, I suffered my father’s knife and pliers

as he cut it out with his lock-blade. Call me Don’t-Sleep-of-Nights

later that summer when Jacob and I caught enough to bring back

for a family fry, some of them so big and hardy they lived long enough

to suffer his knives and my pliers. Call him The One Charm Wanting,

who winds a mazy way, because the last time I see him he will give me

a smile to this day I still don’t understand. Call him

Floodgates of the Wonder World Swung Open, whom I never talk about

sober, which means we must have been friends. Call me Rag of a Purse

stuck to my Daddy’s hip because aren’t we all lashed to the fate

we embrace? But pray he still lives, really lives, not just roams about

in the zombie-life I give him when I tell my children stories

lo these many safe and dry nights. Call me passenger, tourist because

I wasn’t there when it all skipped and sunk down for him, as it must

have, because it always does. Call me Ishmael, who was never there.

first published in *Notre Dame Review 34*

**Zombie Percy**

My country is the Mississippi Delta.

Mercy. Its boundary

is the river, mine

is my father. (Forgive me,

I have chosen perfection, not strength.)

My father is a monster

who rises from my bed

and pushes himself down the hall.

He is silt, old layer

like his father. I am the vast

depression they filled.

My life loops and coils, returning

on itself, turning on them.

Who will vex and sweeten

this land when we are gone?

It will be ages before

the black man cleanses this continent

of us. From the burden

of their service, I recoil.

My country is the Mississippi

Delta. It lies flat; I am badly

drawn. My solemn task

is to ensure

that history wins out. My father

believed, steadfastly, in my error.

When the waters came

and he was distant, I called

for poetry from Yale. The words

remained unread. My voice lacks

what it is that keeps

them on the levee,

on the crown. Though I cannot stop

what he kept inside from coming out,

sometimes, my grin

is wide as the meat

on my plate. With darting tongue,

I probe and kiss an ancient

depression. I swallow

(Solemn, my task!)

the shame no levee can hold back.

first published in *Notre Dame Review 34*

**As Naturalists**

Something, perhaps, might be made out

on this mystery of mysteries. The small skate

mimicked perfectly the color of the sand

brought in to save bright houses built

too close to the shore. We never saw it,

just the glittering cloud it left behind.

When on board, we were much struck

by the despotic sun, going down,

its abstract light thrown everywhere,

so we allowed ourselves to speculate

and draw up some short notes. *In summer,*

*we prefer unpitted olives, though they have cost*

*us crowns. Was it desire that made us fall*

*from forest canopies? What else erupts with such*

*cosmic force from such cosmetic minds?*

*Who now only drinks when she is thirsty?*

Impossible to answer. From that period

to the present, we have steadily pursued

the same object: to flesh out again

the pretty flowers picked and pressed

into our thick books. Our work is finished,

nearly, and our health is far from strong.

We hope we may be excused for these

personal details; hurt fingers will always

seek a mouth, and our seasons have grown

short, the horizon fat as a punched lip.

Summertime roiled our bellies and put buds

in our ears. Though it contains hardly

any original facts, by this work

we can say the body on water is enjoyable,

but we would rather fly. Nearly perfect now,

this art of scorn and scowl—The walrus

hugged in this photograph by the family

of tourists is quite clearly erect.

first published in *Map Literary* Fall 2013

**Zombie Coleridge**

The good man sat, the massive weight, face full

and round and spreading everywhere. I was

a swimming bladder, passive bucket, face

in a boundless sea of bewilderment, thickened

by muscle memory, when I came upon

the puddled cheeks, snowflake originals

once, in pain, confused at the animal end.

On Highgate Hill, I came to where the eyes

full of sorrow looked down, looked mildly out

in astonishment, on the sacred whole,

the city, object of—and subject to—

such carcass strength, those dead that must be brought

to this un-life.

That good and massive weight,

flabby and radiant, hungry and moist,

liked nothing better than to spy a weak,

impatient, parched-up body who might pause

in wonder at the strange effulgence, flat

imbecility, tragically asleep.

There, I came upon one undead, one who

misshapes himself, who waits incessantly

for what he likes, a manifest of stricken shapes,

or just one right peal of concrete laughter,

a convicted flesh and blood absurdity,

one burst young mind, who’ll puzzle strangely at

the massive weight, peeled of particulars,

the man who sat and uttered, as I came

upon him then, “Sum-m-mjects, om-m-mjects,”

with hunched and groping night fast coming on...

first published in *Notre Dame Review 34*