

CAMILLE DUNGY

Lynchburg, Virginia

GOF Finalist

ARTISTIC RESPONSE

"Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time, the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics."

Mary, Setting Down the Book

She would eat again, certainly. She would sleep, without a doubt. But something different would happen to her dreams. Her mouth would not be satisfied, that crying from her stomach would not silence easily anymore.

Beneath her dreams, in the skin under the skin she wore outside, something different. Inside that thought inside that kitchen sat Mary.

Someone small could stop her thinking with his own, complete her day with demands and his own hunger. Someone tall could stop her, could complete her day delighting in his rage.

But how could she complete herself inside all of that? Mary'd never spoken so before.

And why not? The grease of her days and the blood of her nights raised the texture of those walls.

Why not shape those stains toward reason? Why not stretch the marks, make something she'd never had the chance to think about before? Mary knew hers was the weight of that brick, by that mortar balanced the substance of her life. She'd never spoken so before, but why not? Make something different, she thought, settling into this new business, dreaming.

WHAT DOES YOUR ART MEAN TO YOU?

In my early years at Stanford University I belonged to the nearly one-third of college underclassmen who plan to go to medical school. My primary motivation: the belief that being a physician was the way I could help individuals lead healthier, more fulfilling lives. During the second quarter of my sophomore year, I enrolled in *An Introduction to Reading and Writing Poetry*. Over the course of that quarter my intellectual focus shifted from the sciences to the art of poetry, and by the end of that term I accepted the new direction of my passion and embraced the life of art I still live today.

I have always written, and have always read and loved poetry, but until that year I had never believed that it could be the sustaining force in my life. During that term I submersed myself in poetry with new dedication, reading the poems of traditional and contemporary masters and beginning my own apprenticeship. I understood, as I took more courses, wrote more poems, and eventually applied to graduate school in creative writing, that there were myriad paths by which to help people and that living through and for the art of poetry would lead me to my path.

It is my belief that the job of the poet is to remind us where we have been, where we are going, and who we might have forgotten along the way. This tradition of giving voice to the forgotten or silenced is strong in both the women's and the African American writing communities, but in much academic poetry that final charge is overlooked. As a woman poet of color within the academy, I place particular importance on bringing marginalized voices into the mainstream. Through my teaching and my writing, I share with the world what is important to me: a continuous and conscious striving toward a clear understanding and articulation of the breadth and scope of all our capabilities.

HOW WILL YOUR LITERARY PROJECT BENEFIT THE COMMUNITY?

The poetic project I will pursue with funding from the Gift of Freedom Award through A Room of Her Own Foundation, will serve the community who will be its focus in several ways. The poetry writing workshops that are at the core of the project will provide a supportive context in which residents of women's shelters can express themselves, and the poems these women produce will be collected into small anthologies that can be used for fund-raising and community awareness projects. Case Studies, the poetry manuscript I will write as a result of this project, will provide an artistic forum for the creative articulation and dissemination of the voices and experiences of these women.

The benefit of articulating and organizing past events through emotional disclosure, the form of therapy associated with harnessing creative expression, has been documented by James W. Pennebaker and other mental health researchers. Writing workshops in women's shelters will provide a varied forum for women to begin to record and interpret their experiences. As a trained teacher, writer, and workshop coordinator, I am well equipped to manage the variety and spontaneity of situations that are likely to reveal themselves in such an environment. An African-American woman eager to help the women I will encounter to document their lives through poetry, I will provide a loving ear for these women, many of whom have had limited access to their own voices. I will do this not because I am paid by the State or their shelter to be their therapist, but because I believe the "emancipation" afforded by art should not be beyond the grasp of "the poor poet [who] has not in these days" had much of a chance to write poetry (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*).

Funding from *A Room of Her Own* would allow me to travel to women's shelters in Central Virginia, Seattle, Washington D.C., and New York City, organizing and conducting writing workshops. Though many such establishments would love to implement such programming, scarce funding frequently makes this impossible. The Gift of Freedom Award would provide me the necessary funding for the basic materials I would need for the workshop, and it would eliminate the need for me to seek monetary support from the shelter or other public sources. In exchange for the shelter's provision of facilities and the attendance of willing participants, I would be able to perform this community service free of charge.

Along with helping women access the healing and revelatory power of their own voices, the Case Studies project would allow me to conduct the research necessary to fully and accurately portray the lives and experiences of this spectrum of our nation's women. My time in various regions of the country, in cities of different sizes, and among shelter residents of a wide range of socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups will provide me with a range of details and narratives to collate and disseminate in my poems. The success of similar oral history compilation projects, like *The Laramie Project* and *Fires in the Mirror*, demonstrate our nation's large-scale thirst for accurate representations of even the most gruesome aspects of our collective realities. By raising awareness and inspiring an urgent call for change, art benefits communities.

Case Studies, as well as the collections of poems compiled after each workshop, will garner increased levels of exposure for women's rights organizations and women's support programs. I will work with residents and staff of involved shelters as we select and arrange poems from the shelter workshops, and I will assist in developing distribution routes for these collections. Monies earned from these collections as well as Case Studies can be used for fund-raising campaigns launched by women's shelters and affiliated organizations.
