

The Apprentice

By Paul Wilborn

Looking down at the chicken boiling in the stock pot, Katrina thought it could be Brian - if she had tweezed out all his hair and let his severed head soak overnight. The violet Rorschach splotch visible just below the bird's waxy-white skin, she decided, was where the hardcover edition of *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats* had encountered Brian's brittle skull, ending his shallow, privileged life.

I didn't smack him. I smote him.

I visited him disastrously.

I struck him with passion and emotion.

Smite. Smote. Smitten.

It was Biblical!

After four years of poetry workshops Katrina couldn't help herself. And almost eight months after picking up her BFA, definitions and synonyms still ticked through her brain like playing cards snapping against the spokes of a bike tire.

And she could turn almost anything into a symbol or a metaphor.

The boiling bird represented the death of her love affair but the diced tomatoes, celery and bell peppers floating alongside, their Crayola colors vivid, were the new life she was cooking up from the old.

"Ola, Katrina! Despierta mi pequeña soñadora! Wake up! Time to skim. Skim!"

Katrina snapped back from her revenge reverie and saw Maria miming a skimming motion with her cupped hand, the tips of her stubby fingers golden from dredging trout filets through flour, egg and spices.

Trout a la Rusa was the day's special at La Septima Café.

Maria enjoyed it when she caught Katrina disappearing inside her head. After the first few times, she had dubbed her kitchen apprentice *Mi Pequeña Soñadora*, "my little dreamer."

Katrina picked up the big spoon and began to skim off the mucus-colored bubbles of fat rising to the surface of the pot.

So much for poetic justice, Katrina thought, as she skimmed.

Brian was alive and probably driving a new girlfriend around the Detroit suburbs in his black BMW while the chicken boiling in Ybor City would soon be deboned and spooned into a pan of rice yellowed with saffron and turmeric.

Deboned.

There was a word waiting for a poem.

Brian, I de-bone you. I de-lete you. I de-stroy you

But there were no new poems.

Since the day she had awakened and found Brian's goodbye note on her writing desk, along with a small stack of twenty dollar bills, Katrina believed her muse had left town with him. She refused to write any sad love poems. She'd heard too many delivered by sensitive sophomores who turned a break up with a horny frat boy into some very painful poetry:

*Porcelain pillow
blue veins drain
love's red remains
Huck Finning
down a corrugated river*

Not that Brian was a college fling or horny frat boy.

Together most of their senior year at the University of Michigan, they had taken a post-graduate road trip to the writerly Southern towns of Oxford, Miss., and New Orleans. As August gave way to September, they found themselves in a rent-by-the-week apartment in Ybor City.

Katrina had imagined them as the Hemingways slumming in Paris. She loved the aging authenticity of the historic district, the poetry scene around the Three Birds Bookstore, and the exotic food, a mix of Spanish, Cuban and Italian dishes that had arrived with the immigrants who built Ybor at the turn of the 20th century.

Part of her had always known Brian wasn't a forever thing, no matter how many promises he whispered while they made love. He talked about becoming a writer, but the only thing he wrote were random entries in a journal he left open on the kitchen table:

October 12, 1985: Warm and windy today. Washed the car. Out of dental floss.

A finance major, he confessed he had come to her weekly poetry group thinking it would be a good place to meet girls.

“Will you dump me if I admit I didn’t get that poem you read?” He asked her, on the first night they spent at his off-campus apartment, a luxury two-bedroom he had all to himself.

“Will you dump me if I admit I don’t really understand men?”

“Don’t worry. I’m not that complicated,” Brian replied.

She should have taken that as a warning. Instead, Katrina snuggled into him on sheets as crisp as fine parchment. He was tall and funny and he smelled like a walk in the morning through an evergreen forest.

Katrina realized now that she was his gap year. His artsy experiment. He was always headed back to Bloomfield Hills where his father was a battery magnate. Or was it solenoids?

And Katrina was always going to be the daughter of a union carpenter and a high school guidance counselor from Flint. The academic scholarships, the poems and short stories published in obscure literary magazines couldn’t change those facts.

Brian had said as much in a note that was barely longer than his journal entries:

It’s not you. It’s not me. It’s the “us” that’s broken.

He added a shaky metaphor about two planets with briefly overlapping orbits or some crap like that.

After she tore Brian’s note into tiny pieces and flushed them down the toilet, Katrina let the shower pound her until the hot water ran out. Then she stood naked in front a mirror, noticing a thickness in her hips, a heaviness in her breasts, she had never seen before.

If she had written about herself before the breakup, Katrina would have likely used a word like “willowy”: *tall, slim, slender, svelte, lissome, long-limbed, graceful.*

She wouldn’t use the word “beautiful”: *attractive, pretty, alluring.*

Her features were too sharp, her lips too thin for that. But she was long-legged and lean with a high-wattage smile and dark Joan Baez hair she let fall below her shoulders or wrapped in a loose knot around a single chopstick. She looked like a girl you might spot across the room at a smoky party in an artist’s loft.

Katrina still fit into her college uniform - vintage cotton dresses with flowing skirts and a sexy scoop at the neck, but the clothes were tighter. The road trip, the hours in bed, the long lunches and dinners, the sheer happiness she felt with Brian had settled itself on her body.

What was added by love is now weighing me down.

There was a poem there somewhere.

Her college girlfriends swore by "The Heartbreak Diet," that sick-to-your-stomach ache guaranteed to drop all the happiness weight you picked up during a love affair. But after tossing in bed each night, her thoughts shifting from revenge to remorse, Katrina woke up ravenous.

Instead of paying her rent or buying a ticket home with the money Brian had left, she used it to eat her way through Ybor: *Boliche*, from the Colombia Restaurant; *Crab Chilau*, at the Seabreeze; and *Picadillo*, a fragrant Cuban stew of ground beef and tomatoes, with raisins for sweetness and olives for salt, from La Septima Café.

Katrina was savoring that dish when she met Santiago.

"I like a woman with a good appetite."

The man standing over her corner table was tall and swarthy, with the thick curly hair of a teenager, but the fleshy look of a middle-aged man who had never missed a meal. His girth was partly camouflaged by a white guayabera, the loose-fitting Cuban dress shirts, with four front pockets, favored by Ybor businessmen of a certain age.

Katrina could smell mint after-shave and thought she saw makeup covering the craggy remains of teen-age acne.

"I am Santiago," he said, his manicured, feminine hand settling on her shoulder. "I like to make up stories about my customers. It passes the time. Want to hear what I came up with for you?"

"I like a good story," Katrina said, shifting a little, hoping he would get the hint and remove his hand.

"You are a beautiful young heiress from Manhattan on the run from a domineering father. You are hiding out in Ybor City pretending to be an artist, but secretly hoping you'll meet the love of your life. How's that?"

"You could tell all that just by looking at me?"

"It's a gift."

Katrina smiled up at Santiago like a teenage girl who had just been asked to the prom by the best-looking guy at school.

“I’m not looking for love, but I am looking for a waitress job. Any chance I could work here...for you?”

“You’ve waited tables before?”

“All through school,” Katrina lied.

Aside from keeping the house and making dinners for her dad and her younger brother after her mom died, Katrina’s work experience was wrapping Christmas presents each December at J.C. Penney.

But she wasn’t ready to go home. She needed to eat and pay the rent on her apartment, a light-filled one-bedroom above an art gallery on Seventh Avenue. And these exotic Ybor dishes – so different from any of her Midwestern meals - gave her the only joy she’d felt since Brian left.

Santiago told her to come back the next morning and wear black.

“If I could, I’d really love to learn how you make this,” she said, lifting her half-empty plate.

“I can teach you many things,” he said, sliding his hand slowly down her arm.
