

12-15-2006

## At the Cherrywood Cafe

Samantha Isasi  
*University of New Orleans*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

---

### Recommended Citation

Isasi, Samantha, "At the Cherrywood Cafe" (2006). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 491.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/491>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

At the Cherrywood Café

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

By

Samantha Isasi  
B.A. Eckerd College, 2001

December 2006

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following journals for seeing these poems into print:

“The Blue Sweatshirt” and “Mrs. Sosostris Decides to Intervene” in Ellipsis, 2003 and 2004, respectively.

“Dog of the Divorce” Freefall, in Fall 2006.

“Poem at Midnight” in Ibbeston Street Press, Spring/Summer 2006.

“William’s Confession”, “The Leaving”, and “Highway 10” in Sulphur River Literary Review, Vol. XXIII 2005.

“Love on a Barstool”, “Last Night’s Women”, and “Bob’s Advice” in Main Street Rag, Winter 2005.

“Auden at Twenty” in The Long Island Quarterly, Summer 2005.

“The Scar” in The Pebble Lake Review, Winter 2005.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	iv
Bob’s Advice .....	1
William’s Confession.....	2
On an August Balcony .....	3
The Leaving .....	4
Drinking During the Daytime .....	5
Auden at Twenty.....	6
Dog of the Divorce.....	7
After a Portrait of Diego Rivera.....	8
Ode to an Antidepressant.....	9
Love on a Barstool .....	10
Poem at Midnight.....	11
The Artichoke .....	12
For Li Po .....	13
Last Night’s Women.....	14
Waking Next to Orpheus .....	15
Abandoned Torso, New Orleans.....	16
For Number Nine .....	17
City Pastoral.....	18
Santa Fe Poetry Reading.....	19
The Blue Sweatshirt.....	20
Highway 10.....	21
What they are Given .....	22
Mrs. Sosostriis Decides to Intervene.....	23
On Burgundy Street .....	24
The House Fire.....	25
The Scar .....	26
Ladies Drink Free .....	27
Vita.....	28

## Preface

A girl walks into a bar.

A girl walked into a bar.

She walked into that bar and sat in the darkest corner.

She ordered a drink. “And make it strong, sweetheart,” she said.

Her voice did not match her words. She was still only a girl.

A girl walked into a bar.

The bar was the Cherrywood Café.

“Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyant, had a bad cold,” said the man sitting next to her.

A girl walked into the Cherrywood Café and sat down. She sat down and turned to the man next to her. “That’s T.S. Eliot,” she said to the man next to her.

“I love that poem,” she said.

“Fear death by water,” said the man next to her.

He yelled it; “Fear death by water.”

A girl walked into a bar. She wanted to talk about poetry, to seem knowledgeable.

The bartender looked in their direction. The bartender looked in their direction and said, “No one wants to hear you babble on, that damn poem. Shut up.”

The man looked at her and whispered, “Fear death by water.”

“I’ve read that poem,” she said. “Can I buy you a drink?”

“Nothing’s free,” he said.

She motioned to the bartender. “One for him, please.”

She said, “Free verse is free.”

The bartender set a drink on the bar for him. The man sitting next to her touched the rim of the glass. He said, “Free verse is only free of meter.”

He touched the rim of the glass and said,

“I do not find the hanged man.”

“How can free verse be free of only meter?” she asked,  
trying to ask a clever question.

She was trying to ask a clever question but the old man sitting next to her did not find it clever.

“Rules are imposed internally,” he said. “The rules come from the poet and the verse.”

“Poetry has laws,” he said, “just like everything else. What can be done with those laws...”

A girl walked into a bar and wanted to talk about poetry with the old man.

He was excited and waved his arm. He waved his arm, knocking over his drink.

“Think of sound,” he said, “think of repetition. Of form. Of communication. Of image. Of meter. Everything matters in poetry. Everything matters in free verse.”

“Look at the break of a line,” he said. “Look at the way a line breaks in a poem and there will be a reason. Look at it and you will know what that reason is. All free verse poets find themselves better poets by practicing writing poems in form. You must abide by the laws before you can escape them.”

He said, "Everything matters in free verse. How can you break any law without first acknowledging its existence?"

"Nothing is free," he said. "How about another drink?"

"Fear death by water," he said.

The girl was wiping off her wet arm with a few bar napkins. The bartender gave the girl more napkins and another round.

She asked, "Why *The Waste Land*?"

She asked him and he said. "Belladonna. The lady of the rocks. The lady of situations."

He called her Belladonna. "What is poetry to you, Belladonna?" He said.

"I don't know how to define poetry," she said.

Trying to be honest, she said, "I don't know what poetry is."

"Could it be communication? Could it be an evaluation of the universe? Could it be a summary of the world?" He asked.

He asked, "Could it be?"

He touched the rim of his glass.



The girl had walked into a bar and sat in the darkest corner.

“Look at Adrienne Rich’s ‘Terza Rima’,” said the man sitting next to her.

He said, “Look at how the form is not followed. Look at how idea of the form relates to the ideas in the poem. Look at that poem and realize that poetry encompasses so much that it is only definable in certain aspects. It is as if they are traveling through this cyclical experience that cannot be contained in any other manner.”

He said, “Look at that poem.”

He asked, “Do you know that poem?”

He touched the rim of his glass. She looked at him and shook her head.

She shook her head and he said, “Do you know the myth of Orpheus?”

This time she nodded.

She nodded so he said, “Imagine poetry as Eurydice. Imagine Orpheus. You have known Eurydice. You can know what she is but you cannot touch her. Orpheus could only keep his love by keeping faith that she was behind him. He could not hold her to make sure she was there while they ascended from Hades. Orpheus needed faith in what he could not grasp. That is what love and poetry have in common. You must have faith in them or they may disappear. When Orpheus turned around, he lost his faith.”

He added, “Some things were not meant to be defined. Some things were meant to be understood in a different way.”

“Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyant, had a bad cold,” he said.

A girl walked into a bar.

The old man called her Belladonna.

The old man called her the lady of situations.

He was calm now.

He said, “There is no escaping the laws.”

He said, “The laws are everywhere.”

The girl took a sip of her drink.

The man sitting next to her was just watching her now.

“Fear death by water,” he said.

“Fear waking next to Orpheus,” she said.

She had wanted to talk about poetry.

“I don’t think that you understand,” he said. “My Belladonna, my dear, pay attention.”

He said, "Pay attention."

She said, "Isn't all poetry subjective? Isn't all art subjective? Can't you be wrong about everything?"

The old man nodded. He touched the rim of his glass.

"No ideas but in things," he said.

"That's William Carlos Williams," she said.

The bartender set another round of drinks in front of them. She put her finger to the rim of her glass to wipe away a smudge of lipstick still clinging to it.

## Bob's Advice

Now you are staring into your drink  
as if you could find some answers imprinted  
at the bottom of that glass.  
I've seen this all before.  
You've wandered in here  
because it's dark and bleak, maybe it seems romantic.  
That's your first mistake.  
Do you want my advice?  
Finish your drink  
and wander home  
before you need a twelve-step program  
to help you remember your name.  
I would hate to have to welcome you  
to the real Cherrywood Café.

## William's Confession

They had been there for days  
waiting for a mouth to take them in,  
that pair of overripe plums  
almost frozen in the icebox,  
their yellow flesh close to crystallizing.  
I'm sure you were disappointed  
at breakfast—still smug in your bathrobe  
after last night's argument and finding my note  
where your plums should have been  
from where I had taken them  
and with the flex of an arm  
had pitched one, then the other into the dark yard.

These two red plums, my love, falling.  
When the second one hit I was ready  
to confess another sort of disposal  
into a poem, so you would be too charmed to question  
the midnight creaking of the back door or the dirt  
still fresh on my bare feet.

## On an August Balcony

My dog, under your chair, snored in her sleep.  
I sat next to a cup of coffee  
leaning a little, resting my feet

in your lap. On the balcony  
we sipped slowly and I paged  
through anthologies to read you poetry.

That August even the air had shades  
of sweat, dripping through the stiff  
days. I breathed through Yeats,

read Auden, Thomas, Frost, the cliff  
notes of the greats, the words  
pouring through me, tiny fists

of rain that collected verbs,  
nouns, adjectives, descriptions carefully  
wound into a way to serve

the knowledge of a different beauty.

## The Leaving

Somewhere a dog is barking,  
but on my street all is silent now.  
We stand under the calm dark of the night sky.  
I have told you to go, and you are.  
You pause for a moment at the gate, before jingling  
the keys in your hand, before getting into your truck.  
No use in throwing dishes or more  
accusations. The dirt grinds into the soles  
of my feet, the cold air chills me  
toward some edge of clarity. I put my hand  
on the metal gate; the spoke of it digs  
a cavern into the tip of my index finger.

Drinking during the daytime

is better than drinking at night;  
you don't have to worry about  
bumping into someone's  
cigarette. I nod at the woman next to me,  
the afternoon mood mellow.  
She wants to talk about poetry,  
but I'm thinking about Willie Nelson  
and she doesn't know the words  
to any songs I play on the jukebox.  
Bob grunts when I ask him to turn up the volume  
and pours another one for the girl who has been  
twisting her hair into knots for an hour or so.  
Blue eyes cryin', but her eyes are brown and so are mine,  
and no one's crying, so I buy her another drink,  
one for me also; we toast Willie Nelson and T.S. Eliot  
and the poets of the everyday and the ones she wants to talk about,  
but first I sing her the parts  
of the song that she doesn't remember.



## Auden at Twenty

The boys in Berlin were better.  
You walked the streets looking for a lover  
to bruise like fruit,  
to watch the angles bleed.  
Wrote later, it was not love.  
Moving with the rhythm of touch  
it was easy to let the phone ring after,  
to listen to its echo down the halls of your rented rooms.

So different from the child at Gresham.  
Ranting --  
a poet.  
A snob,  
weeding through the reasons of poetry,  
you flew your poems like paper planes  
over the small nearby lake,  
and rescued them the next night  
by torchlight, hopeful again  
of the strength of your own words.  
You let them dry for days, hung over  
the backs of chairs, near windows.

How could you know  
love would be like this?

## Dog of the Divorce

I remove the splinter from her front paw with sharp tweezers.  
The small stake is curved and crooked.  
We share custody of the hurt. Later I will feed her pieces  
of bacon and she will favor her right side.

There is no blame. She looks at me with a steady gaze.  
I run my hand down her length. We lie in bed, flipping through  
the T.V. channels. Is there anything else I can do for you?  
The dog does not have any answers for me.

What if I should be more worried? There is nothing  
to do; it is almost midnight. My ex is somewhere across town,  
unaware. We used to lie here together, the dog stretched across our legs.  
If I called him now, we would just argue. It's not his day to care.

Here next to me the dog breathes a steady ache.  
We lie in a blue T.V. haze, surreal light,  
that reminds me of paintings, of the people who loved  
Gertrude Stein. She leans her head against my knee, silent in the glare.

After a Portrait of Diego Rivera by Frida Kahlo

He could have been any man  
sitting for a portrait, trying to be still  
tapping his fingers against his knee  
while you considered the best blend of pink  
to match his tight smile, the brown to mimic the  
seven small moles strung across both cheeks,  
the eyes so dark the pupils barely show through.  
Diego, your love, is leaning against a gray wall,  
eyes focused on something far.

## Ode to an Antidepressant

No thunder, no warning  
rang from the air,  
only the sky calm as water.  
An unremarkable anxiety has poured in  
through these halls lined with handprints and lead paint.  
After the soft click of a shut door,  
I am told to take one pale pill  
every morning to stay the same as the sane day before,  
to keep happiness coloring my skin. I am told poets  
are meant to be drunk  
with words, with sadness. But I do not want to  
observe the lie that obsession  
can make art more meaningful.  
There is nothing beautiful  
about this.

## Love on a Barstool

There are worse parts of town to drown in.  
At least here, I don't have to pretend to be happy,  
and Bob, the barman, will always slip me a few for free.  
He knows how it is, understands a broken heart,  
the calm that comes at the end of a glass of bottom-shelf bourbon.  
I breathe in the boozy residue of last night's warm bodies  
and leaning laughter. Yesterday's women left cherry lip prints  
on the rims of the glasses, and today I wipe the faded kisses  
with my thumb, breathe in the thought of their perfume,  
and signal for another drink. No use in pretending  
being here is any better than being anywhere else.

## Poem at Midnight

The night was full of nothing—  
only the smell of dirt, and jasmine  
hanging from the trees  
to remind me I stopped someplace,  
his touch just circumstance,  
small as a cherry stone and as light,  
almost capable of leaving behind a stain of fingerprints.  
I expected to see a red blush on my arm  
when his fingers lifted, one at a time  
as if in a tentative, miniature salute.  
His touch was nothing like the night.

## The Artichoke

I did not imagine it  
would look so much like  
a flower, delicate and

pale, laid at the bottom of  
the stovetop steamer,  
scattered dark green streaks cut through

pale circle of leaves still left  
from the blossom, the  
heart that I've left sitting all

afternoon. I dip fingers  
into the softened  
leaves, this mimic of flora,

half-drowned lily or something  
O'Keefe should have thought  
to paint, something that could be

found somewhere in a book that  
delegates species  
and genus, instead of how

to steam, to wither the stemmed  
green. Beauty, always,  
blossoms unexpectedly.

For Li Po

You died the way a poet should,  
reaching for the reflection of the moon,  
that glow that wavered with each touch, the image  
grasped so clearly to the dark lake water it looked real.  
You fell through, loving the universe too much to stay solid,  
becoming the wind's breath dancing over lute strings,  
the somber space between friends parting again,  
the kiss that seals the letter saying, if you are passing nearby,  
I will come to meet you as far as Cho-fu-sa.  
When it is too late, one realizes there is silence  
where the birds once sang and think about you.



## Last Night's Women

were a little drunk, dressed up,  
with their tits out and their hips nudging some almost  
attractive man with promises they might  
fulfill after another round and the right small talk to fit  
a future they'd decided is the one that looks right.  
They believe romance still exists,  
under the veil of something fifty proof with someone new,  
wedding rings dropped into shallow pockets, no talk about  
the everyday. This is the place where it is okay to binge  
on the idea that something good will happen, that someone  
sitting on one of the cigarette scarred barstools could be the Romeo  
who will make breakfast in bed, who will walk the dog  
and shovel the snow from the driveway  
without even being asked.

## Waking Next to Orpheus

Asleep you are beautiful and far,  
someone else's name tattooed on your arm,  
a subtitle for your face, a strange scar.  
Asleep you are beautiful and far.  
I gaze across the ruffled sheets, our  
bed an ocean. I have drowned in your charm.  
Asleep you are beautiful and far,  
Someone else's name tattooed on your arm.

Abandoned Torso, New Orleans

Call her Venus, Mary, Agnes, Esther,  
the carved wooden torso,  
a woman caked with the strange luster,

the remnants of a February rain, coarse  
where it does not show, her back  
pressed into the roughness of the afternoon, the forced

sensuality of curves, breasts, cracked  
open arms—as if she werewaiting  
forever to hold the rain, lying abandoned in the black

yard, leaned against a rotting tree, still reaching, as if aching  
for some kindness in the air, as if there were some  
purpose in reaching upward and what is missing

would come back if only welcomed.

For Number Nine

Mongrel, instant fixture, I never wanted you.  
Stray cat that I cursed and named Number Nine  
because you wandered through my kitchen window  
about that many times before I conceded.  
The dog would follow your path through my rooms  
whimpering and wagging her tail, hoping you would love her  
while I eyed you from a careful distance.  
Number Nine, you multi-colored genius, I tried  
to give you away. Now you are gone,  
and I catch myself listening for your soft purr  
while the dog whimpers at the curtains, waiting for you  
to end this endless game of hide and seek, wagging her tail.

## City Pastoral

Smoking one last cigarette  
near two-thirty a.m.,  
I can exhale halos to crown  
any insect into an angel.  
On this city street, nature  
breaks around the porch light's stiff hum.  
I breathe gray air into a dark morning,  
into an hour when even the cars  
seem content, tucked  
into the night under  
spots of scribbled dew.

## Santa Fe Poetry Reading

I sit at the back,  
tapping my fingers to the rhythm  
of someone else's words,  
nodding when a line flows just right  
and hits me so deeply  
that I want to repeat it,  
roll it around silently  
in my mouth,  
want to have said it first.

I met Jose at the supermarket.  
I was in line to buy film...

Voices beat staccato drums.  
Pauses are lifted from paper.  
Standing behind a podium,  
even the nervousness becomes poetry.

... and I told him, "I have not seen tumbled weed  
before today."

## The Blue Sweatshirt

Traveled to Tijuana, to San Antonio,  
to New York. Traveled on trains,  
cars, airplanes, draped on the backs  
of chairs, floated to the bottom of your closet,  
rubbed against the bottom of your nose,  
the corner of my eye, slid across banisters,  
and was found in the dumpster behind the A&P  
three days before they found you.

## Highway 10

During rush hour traffic  
on highway 10 I see  
what Rubens must have understood:  
this streak of sun breaking through clouds  
highlighting the distance;  
this light and how it settles  
across the blue lake of sky;  
this sharp slice of clarity I hinge my sight on  
while I tap the steering wheel  
and inch closer to home.



## What they are Given

Save the hands, they mean nothing  
to what they've touched,  
(Absorbing stiffness and texture, they do remember  
the fabric of a lovers skin over many July nights,  
sharp imprints of new grass leaned on too long,  
flutter of fireflies in between cupped fingers, like eyelashes,  
long neck of a beer bottle, slick with perspiration,  
sweaty pen, the scrape of paper as the hand travels over it)  
the pores, a thousand mouths,  
kissing but only kissed back in handshakes,  
the clasp and then empty return to where they had just been.

Mrs. Sosostris Decides to Intervene

Call me the Queen of Cups,  
the woman of the Cherrywood Café;  
I've been here longer than any barman or drunk,  
have watched scenes play out like a piano's anxious jazz,  
know-it-all, fortune teller from experience.  
I've not been surprised in a long time  
by what type of trouble clouds each barstool.  
I know what no one wants to admit,  
know Bob, standing behind the bar  
as if he knew something other  
than how to pour a drink,  
leaning towards a woman, young and new,  
her fingers wrapped around a lock  
of her curly hair. I get up from behind  
the bar's bills, spread on the table like tarot cards,  
to go sit next to the girl who is now chewing on her straw  
and looking at Bob as though he could give her  
the empty universe.

## On Burgundy Street

the smell of peaches haunts my room, pale, almost pink perfume, round globe, a sudden scent; dark, almost midnight, the deep world falling into spring, the windows wide for the first time in weeks, as I watch the shadows the epileptic streetlight casts through the window, a wandering reflection on my wall like a flailing fire trying to motion itself into something bigger. One day somewhere in the summer you and I were sitting side by side talking about poetry, your nose hunched into your knees while you breathed focused breaths, thinking, closing your eyes; when you opened them you told me your knees smelled like peaches, different from the rest of your body, which smelled of sunlight somehow, if sunlight could be pinned down to scent. Now nowhere near the park where you covered your toes each time the geese snooped by, convinced they might try to eat part of your feet, when it was really your knees that smelled like fresh delicate fruit, the same supple scent moves through my bedroom tonight despite the absence of peaches anywhere near.

## The House Fire

                  caught the attention of the whole neighborhood.  
Her body inside the house  
burning like a crooked candle.

The neighbors gather in their thin nightclothes,  
leaning, wishing they could see  
her body so they could understand  
so later they could describe  
with some authority the way she burned, like a tide,  
her body separated by heat,  
her body a snapped shoelace,  
her body a string-less violin,  
a canvas peeled back from its paint,  
now only a subject of discussion  
and she no longer anything.

## Scar

Slowly we agree to the end of us.  
We grasp at words to make the other okay.  
Today is bound together like a scar,  
thick tissue pinched into itself to protect  
slim strands of skin laid over and over each other;  
a reply to panic. The cavity of chest holds  
the only rhythm in this room, pushing us still  
into function. You touch my arm for maybe  
the last time; my skin catches against your fingers  
and I can feel all of the rhythms of my body,  
almost out the door already.

## Ladies Drink Free

Thursday's until ten,  
and boys, you know what that means;  
you'll look better under that drunken light,  
able to move through the smoke-blurred air  
with extra confidence, and find true love  
for a few hours at least, and really who wants more?  
So skip the brighter bars, the noisy nightclubs,  
the rituals of flowers and romance.  
It's Thursday, ladies drink free,  
and you know what that means.

## Vita

Samantha Isasi was raised in New York. She was lucky to spend her high school years reading poetry and taking workshops with some of the poets in Long Island. She received her B.A. from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida in 2001. Samantha moved to New Orleans to work towards her M.F.A at the University of New Orleans a year later. She now lives with a dog, a cat, and a man in a small Florida town where she writes poems while trying to figure out where she is going next.