

“At Arms Length”
Heather Jinmaku April 2007

I love you.
I miss you.

You were a mystery to me throughout my life
Presented by my elders as an example of what not to be
A walking cautionary tale of lost potential
Spoken of with eyes downcast, heads shaking in bewilderment

I feel I never knew the true beauty of you— the artist, the musician
Lean and long legged, a rock and roll cowboy
All easy laughs and charm, our own street philosopher
Your brilliance concealed beneath the mask of your disease

We loved you.
We loved you even though it wasn't always safe.

We loved you at arms length
For fear that the stain of your addiction
Might spread across the fabric of our world
And color us with your controversy

We loved you at arms length
Eyes closed tightly to the reality of you
As if to fully embrace you might somehow make us
Complicit in your crimes against yourself

We prayed you would have some necessary revelation.
We prayed you would not turn away.

Whenever I thought of you, I imagined you alone
Back against the wall, shivering in the dark
The hardest lesson was to learn our love alone could not heal you
That we must let you feel your truth, and watch you fall

So many times our compassion encouraged your coercion
Our sympathy inspired your subterfuge
Never considering the bitterness created in those who loved you most
The casualties of your creative truths, though the greatest casualty was you

Yet we believed in you.
We believed you could set your soul free.

One Autumn day, the call came— the one we had expected for decades
Yet could never be prepared to receive
The call came with the words that no one ever wants to hear...
You were gone.

And it was only in that moment that I realized
I had been holding my breath for all those years
All those years, waiting...
And still I did not want to exhale

I was not ready to let go.
Still, I am not ready to let go.