



The Muse

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The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

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children's poetry project

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Only One

Wrong way to start poetry,
And that's to net it down
With rhyme and rhythm the split
Second it flutters into reach,

To bottle it and classify and
Examine it from every which angle
While it suffocates on over-analysis,
Ideas beating into nothing,

Or to pin it down beneath the glass case
Of convention, arranging it just so—pointless—
Since in the end it's just a shell and
[Label]

The best catch is the one still
Loose, riding the currents of whim,
Flitting from thought to thought
Until one blooms.

The Haiku Method

Perhaps the red rose
Once black, chose another path
Contemplated white

Took up conducting
Began to orchestrate the
Sounds of a garden

“Tulip, sing minor
Raindrops, a major key please
Birds, you’re out of tune”

Restlessness

A symphony, a soundtrack
Now faster
Now faster
Cogs and gears
Will mesh and pound
A tiny, ticking heart
In my head as I try to sleep
My eyes will burn
For things unseen
My ears will strain
To hear omniscient whispers
Shadows will suddenly
Know the answers to
The questions I'm afraid to keep inside
I will cosset my fear
Until it grows fat and hungry
Pulling me down by my edges
Weighing me with worry
My eyelids will press down
Begging for dreamless sleep
My lashes will tickle my cheeks
My eyes will probe the dark shapes
When will I remember the sunlight
When will I see morning rain
On pale leaves of Spring
Soft flowers of rebirth
"They do not labor or spin"
I make my body soft
Lie still until peace comes
The peace of weariness
When there is no other battle
Left to fight
All rushing blood has slowed
To gentle ticking again
Only softer
Only softer
A lullaby, a goodnight kiss

Shifting Paradigms

What if we acknowledged the boundless Infinite
instead of our vain attempts to constrict it
by canon and creed, doctrine, and dogma?

What if Jesus came, not to die for us,
but to show us how to live? What if
the same were true of Muhammed and Buddha?

What if we opened our hearts to the gospel
of our own good news instead of looking for it
in the Torah, the Bible, or the Qur'an?

What if instead of original sin we lived with an awareness of
original blessings? And, instead of a royal priesthood
after the order of Melchizedek, a priesthood of all believers?

What if heaven is not there, but here,
not some future time, but now?
What if we are already in eternity?

The New Studio & Huntington's 3 to 5 o'Clocks

Inspired by "I Love the Lord, He Heard My Cry (Pts. 1&2)" by Donny Hathaway

This new space is not the east wing of a six-story Brownstone. It is not the windowless hollow hall that began as the "Colored Section" of a segregated public school, the basement whose white walls and scuffed ceramic tiles harvested the best shadows she'd ever seen. This new space of peeling floral wallpaper and racking windowpanes with chipping frames is not keen on creating questions, on conjuring up inspiration by way of its sheer awesomeness through the brilliance of its luminosity, nor through its physical vulgarities of unfilled holes in thatched bases of forty-five foot walls; that was the other place, in a better time, and here will never be known for its sprained chandeliers, dangling silently from a vast wound in the ceiling. It is much more than but feels like less than thirty by thirty. There is no room. The shells of caterpillars and cicadas seem cramped on the window's ledge. The demand is for contraction in this new place without legacy where she must stare into herself through deep, deliberate breaths and decide to go ahead and move in the realm of nothing more than the unfurnished 3rd floor of a row house.

It would be less than reverent to bring God into it now. To pepper praying into something that is not a prayer, into the thoughts that she accompanies as she walks down the old block, averting her eyes from the only space in this life that she claimed as her own because with the passing of one wrong night that God allowed, it now embodies destruction. It is scorched black wood and an austere, archaic, roofless stone structure that exists asymmetrically below the stark gray sky, like the only remnant of some war zone, crowded into the frame of plastic yellow tape and plastic orange cones like a massive exhibit in some city-owned museum further downtown that the state ought to take back and fix up. *Do they know?* She wonders ... *Do they know that whatever they encircled in that damn tape does not become a hazard? That she watched her body change over sixteen summers in the mirrors along those walls? That the foreign tea she suffered to sip along that leveled orange patio was her preview to the first country she visited where people she never*

met called her their daughter? That she and the boys threw together free concerts by virtue of the large windows, bringing the block to the walls and stoop and sidewalk to groove in mid-July when they rehearsed Maze and Frankie Beverly or Syreeta or John Lennon? Do they know she discovered her lineage in the coat closet on the first floor after separating the mail? Do they know that she could slide across those wooden floors on her knees and never catch a splinter? That she let another woman who she didn't know at the time was her grandmother hold her on the crude basement stairs? That she never got a chance to call her grandmother before she died in that fire? Do they know that building bore her name? That it belonged to her—hers to give to a thousand children or to bury with her when she died? Do they care? She wonders, gazing past a reality that she is not prepared to see.

Life has changed deceitfully, without the warning it usually promises. Hardship has come and shrunk everything: with Veronica's death, they've downsized work from a four continent tour to the local club circuit; "home" has metabolized from six furnished stories to a dark apartment bedroom, where the bald bulb's voltage decreases by the hour. A family of six has dwindled down to one; love's omnipresence is a memory; the infinite chestnut studio with silver mirrors and floor-length windows is now the third floor of an old, slouching row house built too closely to the sleepy street. But ask her friends: the saxophonist, the percussionist and the cellist, and they will smile with unintended condescension and maintain that a floor is a floor is a floor. This does not surprise her because they're musicians. They play on rooftops, at funerals, and at beauty salons with the same instruments. They practice and embouchure in railway tunnels and bus stops and cathedrals. They've never had a reason to notice the relationship between the levelness of the ground and the way the body aligns or the balance of grip and give that feet need to keep movement from growing too taut or too flippant. She is outnumbered—it is an argument she cannot win.

There are no mirrors here and with no reflection, the normal dissonance between thought and movement is heightened, the sound of her palpitated heartbeat fills her ears, overshadowing Fred Hersch's energetic take on Jobim. She is exceedingly aware of her own body, grateful that it really is her own. Attuned to the calming

stress the wide stance draws from her inner thighs and calves. She has bequeathed her distractions to the bulbless, broken desk lamp in the corner, dusty and shadeless, and the quarreling double-dutchers out of sight, three floors down and across the street. This momentary bequeath is not denial. He is sick and his body's deterioration will begin as his mother's began: a quiet disease that graduated from an uncontrolled tap of her index finger into a body that contorted and trapped her—slaving her to the merciless commands of an unseen demented puppeteer, beckoning her to dance to the looped climax of Stravinsky's *Fire Fly*.

And she remembers the three to five o'clock in the mornings, the incontestable high that carried them up and down the dark winding streets of Philadelphia after performances. They walked in crooked lines, roaming flirtatiously into one's another's paths to catch the subway home, feeling thin and too warm in the night air. They wave to the musicians who go 3rd street and around the dark corner and they continue on. Her back sore, his voice hoarse, but they're smiling, jittering under full-moon colored street lights and retelling the night to one another as if they hadn't just shared the stage.

Once inside, their jovial laughter will not merge with the subway banter; its beauty elevates the mood of the dreaming drunkard who signals his approval through a broken-toothed smile. And they're describing the scuffed stage and porous microphones ... as if they hadn't stepped in puddles of one another's sweat all night, as if he hadn't seen her eulogize Alvin Ailey and the Nicholas Brothers. They'd seen one another bring something beautiful to the people that night ... their flattery makes them silly and boisterous—the guttural applause of the greedy crowd still ringing in their ears. It all dims when they're off the subway, when the street lights dim into the color of setting suns and they've reached his block.

He is cautious now, fumbling across his pockets for a key that is exactly where he always puts it, she offers hers and he declines—growing frantic as he searches for it at the grimy double doors of the apartment complex and she looks away knowing that his mind is already up the stairs hypothesizing what he will find, how and where she will be.

They enter the black apartment. He calls out his mother's name, over the rattle of the black and white static of the television screen

and without turning on the lights. He stumbles in a firm, frightened stride down the dark hall. She turns on the lights and they discover remnants of Veronica's attempt to paint. They imagine her as they've seen her do it, first with her toes when her hands became incapable of stillness and eventually with a brush between her trembling teeth. But they see the evidence, and all she has accomplished are a few crude geometric shapes and spilled acrylic paint on the floors of their landlord. While she drowns the floor in turpentine to loosen the caked red paint and pushes the furniture against the wall where it now belongs to prevent Veronica from tripping, she can hear him talking to her in a wandering voice, and he's up all morning, bathing her, washing urine from her clothes, changing ripped sheets into new ones, airing out the apartment by opening the windows, trying to comfort her into sleeping. And she watches him watching her, from about three to five o'clock from the foot of his bed, through his cracked bedroom door—his eyes glazed and stale as he watches this contorted, howling creature, stumbling into the hallway, moving about in circles, and in that moment he cannot see his mother in her until she reaches through the body again and turns towards him from where he stares and stares back fully with clear eyes—still her own. Ma. He calls to her in a whisper, before she looks away and stumbles on, and he can sleep through what's left of the sunless morning knowing there's still a little mother left.

She wants to know if he remembers the decadence of the brownstone's rooftop when friends were chillin', grilling skewered peppers and over-salted chuck steak somebody got for free because the butcher loves their music. Amongst eye-watering smoke and after the photo shoot she'd done for their third album, L.N.'s ugly old lime green stereo blasting a George Duke tune, the melody guiding the last set of photographs she had shot and later developed. While passing drinks, shooting, and loading film, her hands were steady, her fingers sticky, her lips glazed with grease and smiling. He and his mother had talked about everything, gazing over the brownstone's ledge to take in the purple sunset. Mariah, Shanelle's best friend, smiled simply.

"Y'all look like twins," she said, studying the likeness of their profiles as she grooved by.

The memory ends with she and him, cramped in the doorway, her head resting on his chest as they teased Veronica about her frugality

watching her tape thick black posters over the windows, turning the bathroom into a darkroom. The first picture she pulled from under the lights: a sepia-toned rendering of him and Shanelle. Shanelle's legs are crossed at the ankles and draped over his shoulder, his black-framed glasses playfully placed along her nose, their side profiles in the midst of a passionate stare.

They have packed away the wedding pictures she shot. They have boxed away the painting of Nina Simone and watercolors of the park and the dog-eared sketches of the mural he completed for her when she became too sick to continue. She passed earlier that week and there's been nothing to say when they're together so she feels good alone. Her feet are flat, warmed by their firmness on the sun-drenched segments of the wooden floor. These brown panels have taken on the heat of the sun that's been staring down into them since it rose. The panels also keep the heat from becoming too hot on her feet, harboring their own sort of neutrality. And she is every bit like the floor in this moment, warm when heat touches her and cool when it doesn't, drastically vertical, sectioned and gapped in her movements, wanting the stagnant air to reach her.

It's still the city but this is another side: the quiet Caribbean side that's homey and a season behind. Spring's pushed pale white flowers to birth green apples that grow so large and thankless that they crease the branches of the meager trees that bore them. Spring is here and everything pouts its lips and breathes on you. On her way there it was someone's over-watered gardenias, planted too close to the sidewalk, filling her mouth with their perfume as they gasped for breath and later a short, wide-hipped girl waiting at the bus stop in a catholic school uniform. Her beautiful bright blue eyes reddened and hectic—desperate to retain tears and a sneeze that came out and sprayed Shanelle just she was passing. Being a season behind meant that translucent Christmas lights waited apathetically along fenced porches and plastic renderings of the nativity scene were abandoned on freshly mowed lawns—left missing a manger or a Jesus.

The sashay and the contraction and the extension are bereavement. It is completely true that she is mourning a man who is still alive. Because breath itself is not life. Breath alone will not matter because a poet needs to speak. Her leaps are building in height because a poet needs to say some things, and this poet who will be silenced is only

twenty-two and has so much more he needs to say. He needs to speak because they hear him, somehow, wherever he speaks; they heard him in Prague, without a translator. She saw with her own eyes as they gazed upon him in silence, tears falling from their eyes, erasing all the colors in the room leaving only the souls and the flesh. They heard him in Calcutta and at the school for the deaf in Managua, when he signed and spoke at once. She is in the midst of statues and imagines a more considerate injustice where he would still be able to hold a pen or her hand. At least then there would be a way to get it out into a place where we could reach it.

Writing was something he devoted himself to. It didn't come easy for him. He was writing in a rising line pulling all he could from Coltrane cassettes that he rewound until they unwound. Even when she wasn't around too make sure the letters were placed in the right direction, he was still writing to her in letters, in the wings of sold-out shows, in the original studio before the fire, on the roof of the apartment complex, on the train, on his way to identify his mother's body. She can still see that caged woman, jolting between what comes after this life and this life, between her soul and her skin, and, motionlessness, seeks her own body but she continues to move ... vowing never to stop, however it manifests ... what is it even now ... ? It's just open arms now: wide, open arms that peel the air from around her and make her teeth tremble as she holds back tears.

She takes a detour through the park and watches the orange sun hang over the stagnant reservoir water. The homeless men occupy the benches with slouching backs and stray dogs roam the freshly cut grass. It is no different than it was on their first date. She gazes past the tree that they always leaned against. They rested on either side of it their fingers intertwined, their arms stretched around its large, rigid frame as he recited a poem to her from memory. He will not remember that poem, or their love or his own name. The fog along the road home makes the ride seem longer. The fog is calming, for she's traveled this road before.

Courtney



Hello Void, It's Nice to See You

It's the only way I know how,
when that familiar Void comes clawing up—
digging its jagged nails into my stomach lining for grip,
slowly, a piercing crawl,
paw by paw,
until it's throbbing and expansive and out of breath.
Pause.

It's made its way to my ribcage and gaining speed,
sinking into my bones now with teeth and claws in tandem,
almost there ...

just a few more flights.

Oh god, not again,
not tonight.

It's only a matter of seconds now ...

before I can prepare I am plunged
into a bathtub

of sulfuric acid—and fully conscious I can feel the flesh bubbling and
melting into abstract shapes.

Yes, Void is here for sure.

Hello Void, It's nice to see you.

I certainly won't forget my manners.

It's been quite some time

since I was last wrapped up, silent and stunned
in your fiery vines,

so I suppose it's time that we do this dance again.

And we can pretend and have us some fun,

and I will be yours, Void,

but don't you forget

that this is not just about you—

for you will be mine tonight, too.

Tuesdays with Sappho

Who am I? and what's inside?
Are some things you deign to ask,
And to answer them with truthfulness
Does seem a daunting task,
For these questions poke the casement,
That's been constructed to withstand
These very gentle queries
And the genteel answers they demand,
I will attempt to satisfy,
(without the tempting circumspection)
And answer with humility,
And no hint of feigned deflection.

I seek the Muse that Sappho used,
I implore from Her a ration
Of the honey-scented sweet bouquet
That infused the Poet's passion,
The words that wafted from her lips
Borne of sacred interventions,
Did not intend to mollify
The stricter Lesbian conventions,
It is that spirit, free of guilt,
And unbound by interference,
That strikes in me a deeper chord
And a need for my adherence.

Colored beads of glistening glass
Are a constant swirl within,
Each shard, each bauble, each uncut gem
Careens across the rising din
These beads, they gleam with light and sound
And long to gather in mosaic,
It matters not the time they mark
Be it iambic or trochaic,
The Grecian Lesbos island maid
Is the source of inspiration
For the timber, tone and resonance
In the words of my creation,

Who I am today is not the crux
Of this gray husk that I call me,
'Tis the passion of the dream alive
And the things that I WILL be.

Studio

(A pastiche of John Updike's A&P)

In walks this girl in nothing but a leotard. I'm sitting against the wall in one of those uncomfortable folding chairs; my iPod is on full blast, so I don't hear her walk in. The first thing that catches my eye is her tights. They're dark purple that cover her legs like they're stuck on with super glue. I sit there with my finger on the pause button trying to decide if this girl is one of the older student students or the teacher. One of the moms next to me clears her throat; she's one of those stuck up ladies who lives through their little girls, y'know, the beauty pageants, ballet recitals, musicals, piano performances, that stuff. I give her the what the hell do you want look and she shuts right up. It's easy to give that look when you're dressed like you're from the ghetto: baggy pants, dirty t-shirt and raggedy old army jacket. By the time I look back the girl is tying up her ballet shoes and starting all the little girls with stretches. She doesn't have a tutu on like the rest of them. She's slimmer too, more grown up. She looks like one of the seniors from school. Kind of familiar too. Her legs are long, like really long, and they aren't awkward or gangly, they're strong. The rest of her body is nice too, if you know what I mean, round hips and a tight stomach. Grade A babe material. She's a goddess, legit, perfectly shaped lips and these violent green cat eyes. Not to mention how her hair flows like a waterfall down her back, not like it's important or anything, but it's ... it's something. When she starts to dance I think I'm going to explode. She moves more confidently than the chicks at that performance my mom made me watch last winter, and they were professionals. And even though her legs are covered she looks sexier than those cheerleaders in their micro skirts doing splits in the air. I even have to take off my jacket. I don't know how much time passed while I'm staring at her, but they stop and she says for them to get some water. My little sister comes over, Sammy, real sweet kid, she's seven.

"I saw you staring at Miss Sky," she says. "Do you have a crush on her?"

"No." I give her the water bottle to shut her up.

"She's a senior like you but we call her Miss Sky cause its respectable."

“Respectful.”

“Right.”

I knew I’d recognized her. Her name’s Starling ... something, but that doesn’t matter. She’s that quiet girl in math. She always wears her hair up and has big glasses. Her shirt always too big and pants too baggy. She’s a nobody, one of the invisible kids. I look at her again. Her hair had fallen half out of the bun she had put it in before dancing. A few strands hung down by her cheeks, pink from the dancing. My stomach did something funny.

“I’m gonna tell her you like her,” Sammy says. She’d been watching me.

“I don’t.” I give her my worst look.

“I bet you do,” she says. “I’d bet my favorite Barbie Doll you do.” She hands me her water bottle and does a little twirl.

“If you say anything I’ll ...” I don’t know what I would do. I turn back to Starling but after a moment she looks up and sees me. Her cat eyes watch me so I start to stand but instead she rises and calls the kids back from their break. I lean back in my chair and turn my iPod back on. She starts to dance again and I can’t look away. Every move she makes reminds me of some kind of graceful animal, I know it sounds stupid, but this is what she does to me. Something about her changes the way I think. I turn my iPod up even louder. I turn to the side and see a few of the moms staring at me. I give them a head nod, and as I look back I feel them whispering about me behind my back. Starling’s hair falls out of the rubber band but she keeps dancing. I put my jacket back on. It’s weird watching her dance with all the little girls, almost funny. Even the older girls who just came in look awkward compared to the way she moves. Eventually everyone stops and they sit in the middle of the floor. It’s hard to imagine she’s the same girl in my class. There she never talks or laughs. But here, the slight part of her lips shows white teeth. I run my tongue over my own. After a few minutes all the little girls stand up and run back to their mothers. Older girls go to the bars against the mirrored walls. A few practice spins and leg lift things but none look as good as Starling did.

When Sammy comes out of the bathroom with her backpack, I pull out an ear bud and stand. I look to Starling and she's watching me, hands clasped together and biting her lip. I pause.

"Can we go now?" Sammy asks, tugging on my arm. I look down to her and then back to Starling.

"Yeah." I put my ear bud back in and pull up my hood as we walk out of the room.

Just Can't Help But to Go Back

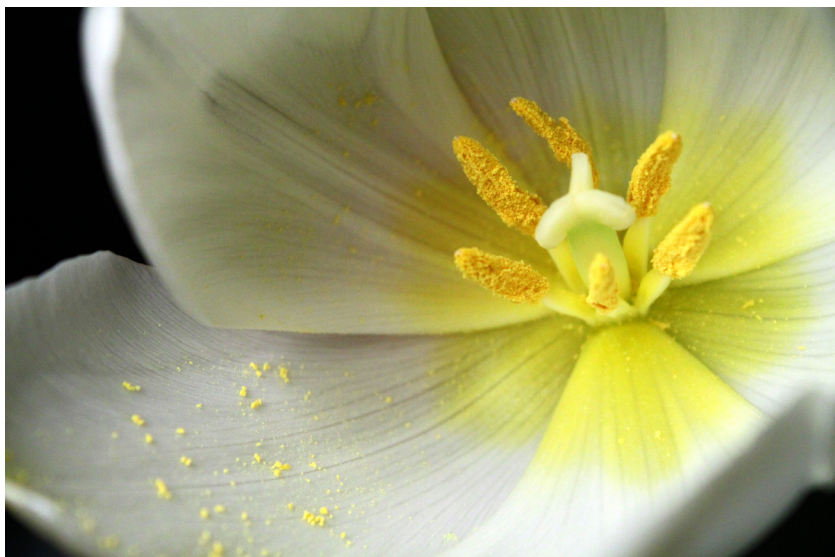
Pencil in one hand and in the other
a button to administer drugs
I hear my classmates' chatter
and the monitors beep
eyes roll, I.V. in each hand
an oxygen tubes in my nose
I look up and my mom
walks in the classroom with flowers and a teddy bear
some classmates walk in late and
so does my family
they ask me how I'm feeling, I *nod*
doze on and off
above the chalkboard watching the U.S. Open
on the small television
nurses come in to and help me to get
out of the chair and assist me to walk
they take me out into the hallway
hooked to my rolling "dancer"
my head held high
back now is straight as smooth wood
I'm brand new
my feet drag slowly
my back feeling heavy
still in a daze
I am awoken with a tap on the shoulder
sweetie, you can't walk with your eyes closed
I moan and continue my walk
wondering when will this new pain will end
the bell rings
It's time for my next class.

The Muse and the Bees

The Jive of Jeeves

Buzzing bee buzzing so busily
Buzz right back
And do the deed
To fruit and flower
And planted seed
Pollination,
Procreation,
Recreation
'Tis all the same to me
Just because and just maybe
I've read too much poetry.
But buzz you should
And buzz you will
Wish you'd buzz
A bit more still.
A hummingbird
Oh busy bee
Could hum for you
If you'd buzz for me.
A sip of nectar
A drop of dew
A bit of honey
that comes from you.
Buzz around so fuzzily
The way the hive would have you do.
Think thoughts a little fuzzily
But to yourself buzz true.

Spring Time



Lottery Part 2

Billy Martin shouted to Dave Hutchinson, “You throw like a girl! Here, take some of these.” Billy passed Dave some of the stones from his pocket.

Dave showed off and yelled back, “I do not, look at this!” They both joined in with the rest of the village people and continued to stone Dave’s mother.

The men, women, and children ignored Tessie’s cries as they continued to cast their stones at her crouching body. The crowd became a violent mob that grew louder and more vicious.

Tessie screamed and protested against the lottery selection, and in the middle of her sentence, a large stone heaved through the air, hit her in the head and crushed her skull. It was Mrs. Delacroix’s stone that finally killed Tessie. The lottery was over, and the crowd cheered as if they caught an evil child-eating beast.

“Alright, now don’t forget to meet back around two o’clock for the burial,” Mr. Summers announced.

Mrs. Summers suggested, “We should start the lottery earlier so we can have the burial before we go home for noon dinner.”

“No. We should prepare the night before. We can at least dig the grave,” Mrs. Graves replied to Mrs. Summer’s suggestion.

Old Man Warner exclaimed, “Young people and their crazy ideas! Are our traditions not good enough for you?”

The people of the village complained and shuffled as they made it home for noon dinner. It was already half past noon on a hot summer day, and everyone was exhausted from the event. Luckily, noon dinner had been slow-cooking in the Dutch oven over the coals since early morning. The wives prepared food for their children and husbands and everyone ate quietly.

It quickly turned two o’clock, and the townspeople gathered again at the square, getting ready for the burial.

“We all know the routine; children, pick up the stones from the square. Women, clean old Tessie up and make sure you get all the blood. Men, we need to dig up the grave for,” Mr. Summers cleared his throat, being mindful of Bill, “beloved Mrs. Hutchinson.”

The women started with the blood splattered across the town square.

Mrs. Adams commented, "Other towns already quit the lottery, so there is no need to clean up for a burial."

"Luckily Clyde broke his leg and missed the whole lottery," said Janey Dunbar then shot back to Mrs. Delacroix, "You caused most of this mess; you should clean most of it up! I barely caught up with you with my bad health."

"That isn't how this tradition works now, ladies. It only happens once a year and we should be glad it was Tessie and not any of us," Mrs. Delacroix replied.

Once the blood was mopped up from the square, they picked up Tessie and washed the blood away as best as they could. They wrung as much blood from her clothes and covered her body with a black sheet until the men came to get the body.

The children picked up a stone or two and carried it a few feet away to the grassy area until they were distracted and wandered off with the other children. Some of them watched the women as they cleaned the dead body in fascination while the others went off and chased each other.

The men were busy digging up the grave. Mr. Martin was pleased to help out with the lottery. It wasn't the suspense, responsibility or participation in helping that pleased him, but the fact that he and his family were safe this year. "What a relief," he would say quietly with a grin, trying to make sure that Bill wasn't around to hear. But Bill didn't mind.

"Every year, I am delighted to dig a grave, just like you, as long as it isn't mine. It almost came close this year, but it is still not my grave," said Bill trying to comfort the others. "It's tradition and we ..."

Mr. Adams interrupted, "and we should give it up! How will my family survive if I am chosen? We can't keep gambling with our lives, it's dangerous!!! Our population is growing larger ..."

"All you young people! If the population grows larger, then the chances of you being selected grow smaller! We need to keep the lottery! 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon!' Don't you forget it and dig!" snorted Old Man Warner.

It usually took three hours to dig a hole for a burial, but not on lottery day. All the men worked together, and the plot was finished

in thirty minutes. Everyone in town, including the children, would participate on lottery day and would gather around to bury the one that selected the paper with the black spot. It was time to bury Tessie Hutchinson. Typically, priests performed funeral ceremonies, but this was a lottery burial, and Mr. Summers started and ended the lottery every year. The men went to the square and collected the covered body. The people of the village were quiet and emotionless; there were no tears during the lottery burial, and everyone said a simple goodbye to Tessie and left in groups.

The women sat on their porches discussing dinner preparations while the children ran wild. The men drank whiskey and mindlessly watched the women and children. The lottery was finally over.

"Same thing next year, Mr. Summers?" asked Mr. Graves.

"Of course, Mr. Graves," Mr. Summers replied.

"Maybe we can select two people next year instead of just one," cried Old Man Warner, "Then maybe all the young people will see change is bad and accept the traditions of this town!"

Mr. Summers glanced over at Mr. Graves and said, "I think it is time to go home for supper. It's been a long day. Bill, feel free to bring your children over for supper. My wife only hosts for company on lottery day. Oh, and bring over the supper Tessie prepared too. My wife is a horrible cook."

Short-Term Relationships

from one to the next
new guy, a new night
trying to find the one
trying to stay in line
getting what is truthfully mine

arms wrapped around him
his hands at my waist
the warmth of his body against mine
as we dance in the night
those small, practiced steps
as the passion took us over

waking up alone
reminding me that it is possible
to seek this control to see what is mine
comforting myself
ignoring the half-empty bed
and the solemn feeling

The Raft

Slap and Splash
Goes the sea,
Turning over you,
Tossing around you,
Tumbling you about.
But you float on.

There's canvas,
Enough to separate,
You from the sea.
You catch a fish,
Enough to sustain,
Just to preserve.
But you float on.

Your rafter is gone.
Only birds above,
And fish below,
Keep you company.
Or maybe to stalk you,
But you float on.

The sky grays.
Birds flee, fish scatter.
A predator breaks surface,
But you float on,
Until you disappear.

When It Would Rain

It's always those days
when the late afternoon would leave
pools of light
scattered across the concrete.

We'd watch our neighbors
and their children's children
skip along the water.
And they'd move
in a way that made me wonder
why you would always wince.
Or why
you'd sit on the porch
when it would rain.

Before you'd sleep,
sometimes I'd know
which windows were still open.
And there'd be times when
I could feel the universe
flooding the house
or hear the moon
shy from the darkness.

But this must be what
they call silence.
The type of silence
you hear from people
trying to remember
what they'd forgotten—
like dead clouds
searching for form in the afterlife.

Untitled



Remember Them

The old man gently eases himself down onto the bench. His sigh is part relief, part satisfaction. He seems exhausted yet holds himself with dignified strength. His pleasure at making it is all the keener, for it has taken him nearly two hours to reach the riverbank. He can remember when there used to be a sailing club behind this bench. Now it's expensive apartments. It's the same across the river, though he can't see that far. It used to be rowing clubs, he remembers, before people were too scared to go into the water. If you look closely you can almost see the swear words cross his mind by way of his expression, but he decides not to speak them. He makes that decision a lot nowadays.

He knows about the trouble he will have caused but he is not concerned. Not in the slightest. If a man wants to go out, he should be allowed. No questions. No stupid answers. He is sorry for the new young nursing assistant but not enough to make him rise up and go back. No chance. It's not dignified in his opinion. Treated like a baby and fed gruel every day. He knows he has lived in worse conditions, yet this is not the same. Not even nearly.

He had hoped someone would sit down next to him but is aware that no one will. Not nowadays. He is going to take a trip today but some company would have been pleasant. Not to this bench though, this was just the warm up. He is going to take a proper trip. Back into his past. He wants to think about some things, hopeful they will help him make a decision. His thoughts slip to his family. They often do. He is of two minds about them really. He loves them of course. At least he thinks he does. He likes the thought of them and he likes knowing they will be visiting. It's just that when they arrive, he does not like them. Not at all. They are rude and loud and talk too much and never listen. So he is grumpy with them, but grumpy is a middle aged person's disposition. He is crotchety, yep crotchety. He knows it, they know it, and all the staff know it. There is nothing he can do about it. Shame really.

All this thinking has got him into quite a fine fettle. Nothing like a little escapade for a mood lift. He chuckles as he remembers the little fight yesterday; he heard it start as well, though he has denied all knowledge of course. That old guy is like him, he thinks. He can see it sometimes when the girls are too soft, too soft or the helpers

are too heavy handed. You can always tell. It's the fire in the eyes. It comes without warning. He wishes he had the bottle to let it go, but suppressing his anger is too long a habit now. All the man wanted was to take his pill an hour later, so he could watch the quiz show without falling asleep half way through. Not a great ask really. They went on and on and the man got calmer and calmer. Another sure sign. Eventually he just told them to make him then, if it's so important. So along came the helper, the big friendly one. He wishes it had been the other helper but things don't always go right. Imagine putting your face that close to an old soldier. Even an old soldier is still a soldier. It was a classic short arm jab. Barely moved his arm back at all. Just a short sharp movement. Still broke the nose, though. That thought has the old man on the bench wheezing with mirth for a while.

The blood was as vivid as he recalls though, which sobers him up quickly. He is scared to admit he can't remember the first time he saw proper blood. That dark red gush which explodes like a geyser then pumps so, then contradicts itself with its lazy slowing down. It always stops too soon. His first war was not too bad he thinks. Northern Ireland and its troubles were more mentally draining than physically demanding. It's the constant hatred that wears you down. The spitting and stone throwing. Snipers and bombs are much easier to deal with than the look the women were able to give you. It was demeaning to be hated so. Bosnia was harder.

The cold was terrible. It was relentless and evil. The enemy was faceless during that winter. Jack Frost was the killer. Chapped lips and watering eyes. Never being able to wash properly or shave. Not being able to touch anything without sticking to it. The sheer fear of urinating. The cold caused another problem too. It stopped the bodies rotting. Mass graves were common during 1997 and somehow it was in public interest to dig them up, put them in grotesque lines and have them photographed and tagged. Ethnic cleansing was the name they gave it. Bloody terrible was the thought he gave it at the time. He still sees the children sometimes. Their silent screaming keeps him awake quite often. They had to be lined up by themselves and it was always the longest line, even though the bodies were the smallest. These thoughts have been his constant companion for many years.

Kosovo was much the same, though the firefights during the night were new. The graves were no longer as gruesome. If anything, he can

recall the jokes and banter whilst they dug, scraped and pulled the bodies free of the dirt. It was not callous, just a defense mechanism to make it seem less real. As the tears drip down old leathery but gentle cheeks, the old man can barely focus.

He comes back to himself with a start. It's getting cold now. He thinks maybe the tide is going out. This close to the sea is always chilly but it's got worse with the seasons being mucked up. He can see the black mud of the river as the water mouth starts to drain away. It's fitting somehow. He considers how long he has left before one of the family is called to find him. He wonders how long he has at all. Not long he supposes, on both counts.

It has been forty years now since he got back from Afghanistan; he's worked since of course but he marks that place as the end of his emotions. At the time he was so pleased with himself, proud to have been a British Soldier, proud to have survived, proud to be so strong, but that never lasted. The public did not like that war. It had no purpose. Senseless really. That's what the papers kept saying, and the news. Someone should have told the families that became bereaved about it being a stupid war. He remembers the uneven weight of the coffins when he carried them onto the planes. Eighteen times if he recalls right. Yep, eighteen times. Fifteen of them died right next to him. Well, to be honest, killed right next to him is the better way of saying it. He tried to help every one of them. He knew the helicopter would not land during a fight to take these victims to the field hospital though. The worst thing was that they never asked for help either. They knew, as he knew.

Yes, that unpopular, stupid war left behind a big strong soldier with emotions like granite. The emotions are cracking now. Cracking and falling to pieces. He sometimes thinks of his emotions like a rainbow. He had a full range of color before the army; afterwards, the color from the two extremes was gone, unattainable. Nothing really scared him anymore and certainly, nothing made him really happy. He can feel the rifle rattling his teeth until he realizes it's just his own sobs. He is weeping openly while he sits on the bench looking at the river. It's been a long time since he cried. A very long time. Not even when he heard his son telling the nurse that his father was more trouble than he is worth. Not even then.

He can hear his son's old car in the distance now. He is coming for him. He knows where to look straight away but the old man does

not turn to see. He stands up gradually, sets his shoulders and walks towards the river. In his mind he can hear his old Regimental Sergeant Major. Steady! Stand! The water laps at his ankles as he strides forward, neck pressed to the back of the collar, marching on the heel. Watch and Shoot! Watch and Shoot! He can hear a distant call now but the gunfire is too loud. His arms are shoulder high now. Perfect. Watch him march. Watch him. Watch.

It makes no difference. More trouble than he is worth anyway.

laid spare

breath has colored my eyes shut
for the expanse behind clears

the work from my hands, the
consequence from a history

split between sense and passion
the dark expanding into binary

clouds, two halves that never
meet, parts that never sum.

shut to all dark, like the space between breaths,
like the ache of movement.

Apex, an Icarus Sketch

How to believe in yourself
when you are afraid of the sky:

(in the chicken yard, birds
move from seed to seed,
not thinking at all of how
or what they are...

wings
gathered around their walking
(the walls of a coffin latent
before a soul's journey)

moving from seed to seed,
day to day, no concern

heavenward)

When you are at the apex,
that part between effort

and failure, don't go looking for food,
breathe, breathe deeply, glide,

try, try to glide.

Woman Facing the Sun



Changing Face

Joe had a strong face. His mixed Anglo and Native American heritage made for a handsome combination. His piercing blue eyes illuminated his dark skin so entirely that even though wrinkles creased lines into his forehead and cheeks, he appeared to have a radiant complexion, so unexpected for a man of his age. His nose pointed downward in a clean straight line, and didn't quite touch his thin-lipped mouth that was turned up at each end creating the illusion of a permanent smile.

Joe wore his face proud, and because of his features, people generally thought him to be in a good mood; this tended to be an accurate assumption. Joe had a full life and enjoyed the company of his family and friends. Nothing seemed to ever extinguish his glow, to remove the happiness on his lips. His mother had often told him when he was growing up that a special spirit of light lived within him. If this was true, then on June 23rd that spirit departed his soul forever.

Garrison, a friend of too many years to count, solemnly told him on that cloudless summer day that Julaine had passed on. Julaine, her own dark eyes burned into his memory, the woman he had no permission to love as he did. Joe looked at Garrison in disbelief. His eyes dimmed, the wrinkles in his forehead creased ever so slightly deeper, and an ashen coloring replaced the embers in his skin. With his mouth downcast in a frown, he turned away from his friend and silently left the room. The storm had moved in.

Joe went to the cemetery three days after Julaine's burial. On another bright, sunny, and beautiful early summer day, a day not suitable for mourning, he sat at her gravesite with his back resting against the headstone, and for the first time, allowed himself to cry. So pent up had his emotions been, and the anger, that he wept long and hard, completely oblivious to his surroundings, self-absorbed in his grief. When this first wave had broken, he took a deep breath and sat in his exhausted numbness. His head hurt, and all he was able to do was stare blankly at the uneven rows of headstones that pierced the ground before him. All this death in one place. Julaine did not belong here. He dusted off and left, scolding himself for not bringing her a gift.

The next day he returned with a bouquet of white roses, her

favorite flower. He saw only his own footprints, and knew he was, and would be, the only person to visit her now that she was in the ground and useless. This thought saddened him even more, and so he began to speak to her, just as he did so many summers ago in quite a different park. As he spoke, he didn't think of her in soil beneath him, but rather, he saw her as she was forty years ago, as they were forty years ago, young lovers straddling a park bench, looking into each others eyes, and gushing endless conversation that no one else would have found the least bit fascinating.

"I keep getting bitten!" Julaine swatted futilely at the relentless mosquito.

"It's the stream, why don't we go back up to the pavilion?"

"No, no, NO! I want to stay here; this is our place, our own private ... our own private Narnia!"

"Narnia?" Joe laughed and held her close.

"Yes. The real world disappears when I'm here with you. J, this is our place."

"This is real, too Julaine."

"Yes. It is. Real and true." She smiled, and the smile reached her eyes, and it only ever did that for him.

There, on that bench, by the stream, in their own little Narnia, Joe had told her that he loved her for the first time. Come mosquito, rain, and in the winter, even snow, Narnia was their special escape for two full years. When they turned eighteen, tough decisions needed to be made. Joe hoped he and Julaine would marry, but his parents, sensible people, insisted that he first complete school, that Julaine would be there when he was done and able to support the both of them. Julaine had agreed, so when her letters became shorter and less frequent, he was confused, and in his heart knew he was losing her.

At winter break, when he traveled home, he couldn't wait to see her. He stopped by her home before his own. The young woman who answered the door was a shell of the girl he'd left barely four months before. When he hugged her she sobbed. When he asked her to go to Narnia with him, she refused. When she told him she didn't love him anymore, he knew she was lying. He saw it in her eyes. She looked at him still the same way she always had, only this time, mixed with the

love, her eyes were darkened with a deep sadness. Broken hearted, he returned to school after break, and the letters from Julaine stopped altogether.

Joe sighed. His head heavy against the headstone, he realized he was still talking to Julaine. His Julaine, and always his. It never mattered that first summer he returned home from school he sat on the bench alone in Narnia on her wedding day. It never mattered how wealthy her new husband was. He knew she loved him as he loved her, and that a part of her, the beating and living part of her would always belong to him. Carved on the fell tree in Narnia was his proof. Julaine had written:

J, always yours. Always.

It had not been there when he had left for school the year before, and as he sat there while Julaine was in the church, taking her vows, he saw the wood was still light, as if it had been carved just a few days ago. Money had bought Julaine's hand, but it hadn't purchased her heart. Sitting at her grave, Joe realized that his part of Julaine was free now, the living, beating soul part. For the first time since the news of her death, the storm began to clear, and a smile once again curved his lips upward. Her husband's Julaine was in the ground. The shell part. Joe got up and left the cemetery for the last time. While he hated to leave her, he knew Julaine was not here; she was in Narnia.

Every Day is Exactly the Same



Bleeding Dreams

(A hanging light shines down on a slab with a body on it. An empty gurney lies directly upstage. From out of the darkness the hands and face of The Thinker emerge.)

Welcome, welcome; don't be shy. You're not the first I've worked with, and you won't be the last. The veins of the body mimic the twists and turns of history. I have learned much along the way, but I can't say what it is. It all seems to just ...

Hit the wall ...

I can tell your occupation just by looking at you ... Not really, this clipboard says that you were a psychologist. And your name is Jack. Hello Jack. You have a nice name. Let's learn more about you, shall we?

(He takes out a bag holding the corpse's last possessions.)

Your possessions. Let's see what we can find.

(He puts his hand into the bag and pulls out a deck of cards.)

Gambled much? Don't be ashamed. Many others do it too. People sit in theatre seats, don't they?

(He begins to look through the deck.)

Ace, king, queen, jack, ahh ... That's what I'm looking for. The Joker. This card is constantly discarded in games but is most played in life. I play the card with all my heart because we were born to play it. But for now let's discard them.

(He discards the two jokers.)

Now, what to play? I don't need a deck to play solitaire. It's the usual game here. As for 21, I always bust.

What else do you have in here?

(Pulls out the corpse's wallet, rummages through it, grabs a few bucks, and stuffs them into his own pocket.)

Well, you're not going to need them.

(Puts the wallet down on the tray and reaches down into the bag again and takes out a pack of cigarettes.)

Ah man, I live for these. Non-filtered too. You've got good taste, sir. Mind if I have one? Every person should have this joy. I recommend every person buy a pack ... But perhaps later. We've got so much ahead of us.

(Pops a cigarette in his mouth, lights it, inhales, takes it out of mouth, exhales with a sigh. Puts the pack on the tray.)

Now I feel relaxed. So let's start our session, shall we?

(Pause.)

I was born, and then I created the universe.

(The world around The Thinker slowly starts to appear: a dark mortuary. First the light engulfs the rest of his body, including his limp left leg. Then the stony walls upstage. Then upstage right, a barred window, a rusting sink below. Down stage right, a pair of dark oak doors, almost black in the lighting. Upper stage left, metal double doors. Another cadaver on a gurney near the doors. The sound of a void.)

First there was the sound of chaotic triumph, and then the blinding, blurry lights that penetrated the pupils with disjointed colors. At least that's what I think it was like. The split from the mother, the first death ... The loss of innocence, my mother's death after giving me life, the second death. For me, these walls have always existed. I knew them well before I ever saw them. My father reeked of the scent of them, of death ... He reeked of the smell of this room. He hunched over this slab, working his craft ... He dressed his father here. I did the same. Their voices echo off the stony walls, a flicker of the light, they're there, and then they disappear. Memories ... I am stained with the blood of a thousand people, charging up toward the cannon, others slugging like cattle towered the slaughter. The war ends here. Yet I still have to use my time to pinpoint the terminal disease, death or the life in between. Yes, we are born mortal, but there are many tragic traps which if they don't take us to death quicker, make us live longer. We conform to the daily routine. Some carry their barns on their backs until they break and collapse to the ground. The bodies are frozen by the time they make it here.

(Points to the other cadaver on a gurney.)

Drain 'em, pump 'em, dress 'em. But it's more personal than that.

(He begins to disinfect the corpse.)

If this is just an assembly line of bodies progressing left to right, then I must be less significant than one grain of dust in this universe. It's an art, a craft, a *gift* that I believe, not to boast, but I have. But that

doesn't mean you won't get messy. Things don't always go as planned.

(He moves down to the hands, holds them, and spends his time carefully cleaning each finger.)

I have had to reattach many missing parts that have broken off during part of the process.

(He pauses. Concentrates on the corpse's middle finger.)

It's one thing to get the finger but to receive it in such a manner makes one wonder if a cosmic digit is coming down to grind us into the pavement. The finger is ambiguous; it can be fate, chance, maybe something completely different, but it exists, so I am resolved to be The Thinker. But deep in these catacombs, the answers are only keyholes to a room without light. The bodies hold stories from Babel.

(Takes the cigarette, throws it down on the ground. The Thinker opens one of the corpse's eyelids. Terrified, The Thinker retreats.)

Behind the lids, these keyholes, the eyes look back at you as if you are the decoder. They question you and you are terrified.

(He approaches the slab cautiously.)

You run from the keyholes only to gather enough strength to approach them again.

(Pause.)

This room is my coffin, the walls are enclosing rapidly, my suffocation is imminent. All souls are labeled here: "return to sender." My hopes hit the wall and disintegrate. My dreams begin to bleed out of me. If one were to open this unholy coffin, tear the ceiling back from the grimy walls and peer inside, could I be pronounced dead? Or could I take a coffee break, live a little, maybe come back a little later? But that hope hits the wall, and the truth becomes as ambiguous as the sun.

(Pause. He limps over to the sink and begins to wash his hands. He peers up through the window.)

The sun? How long has it been since I have seen the sun? I have the day shift. I wake up early in the morning, before the sun rises. I go off to work and come home at night. The only light I know of is the streetlights.

(Pause. He goes back over to the corpse and resumes working.)

I remember ... When the sun was less a question, when puzzle pieces existed without a purpose, I had an existence unlike the man you see before you. I remember when the sun shined for me. It used

to shine so brilliantly, bringing out all colors and shades I now only dream of. The trees behind the school stretched their limbs to meet the sky. One of them, an apple tree, nearly pierced the clouds. Our bible teacher forbade us climbing that tree. Yet, there was always one of us who didn't listen. I had many friends, but this one stood out. He had hair as long as fate. He saw the world as a question mark, and he sought to punch the point.

(Pause.)

When he started climbing, we ran to tell someone, but by the time we got back, he hung limp from the branches, his hair all in tangles, wrapped around his neck. He had reached for an apple and lost his way.

(A pause. He makes a small incision along the clavicle and begins to drain the body of blood.)

His blue head hung askew as his purple lips begged for air no more. But his eyes ... Oh his eyes ... They gazed in cloudy wonder. His pupils were like black holes from which questions seeped out.

(Pause.)

During his funeral, there were many tears. I didn't understand. Everyone was saying that he was in heaven. At the time I could accept that. But I didn't. Every eye was murky; pupils gazed with questions. Even our priest, who tried his best to console with words, could not hit the mark because his gaze trumped the sermon. Though everyone obediently accepted the heavenly statement, I knew they still wanted answers. Yet, the congregation was too afraid to ask. In a few days, all of the faces showed no trace of question in them. Everything was right in the eyes of the Lord. But not me; I still questioned. I had become The Thinker.

(Pause. The blood has now drained out and he starts pumping formaldehyde into the body.)

Today, the apple tree is gone, and the sun I remember is now a distant thought. I wonder if the sun even shines anymore. It doesn't matter; I know it doesn't shine for me anymore. Perhaps I would not even see it.

(Pause. He looks around at the walls around him in wonder.)

But that doesn't explain the catacombs. How did I end up here?

(Pause. Then he slowly begins to speak.)

I was 24 and back home for Christmas. We were at a poker game pissing away our bonuses. We didn't stand a chance against the swindler. But that night, my father did the impossible and won. For one moment, I believed there was no God. One moment ... There was a lot of drinking that night, but nobody drank more than the shyster and I. My father scarcely drank and that night was no exception. In a drunken fog, I leaned on him as he guided me to the car. He laid me down in the backseat. I fell asleep. When I woke up, my father's blood was all over me. I had a head injury and a broken leg that never healed. The shyster with all of God's drunken fury rammed his car straight into ours. My father hit the steering wheel and "died instantly." The scoundrel was resurrected in the ambulance.

(He takes the tube out of the vein and begins to stitch up the body.)

Because of my injuries, others took care of my affairs. They said I would be limited, but perhaps I could prepare his body for the funeral. So I did.

(A pause.)

People gathered around the casket at the viewing. I'd never seen such a sob-fest in my life. Many people came up to me and said how sorry they were for my loss. One person asked me, "doesn't he look like himself?" I wanted to laugh.

(He starts to laugh.)

I replied, "No he looks dead!"

(He stops laughing with a sigh. He slowly looks at the reflection in the tray with the utensils.)

I look dead Jack ...

(He takes a picture from the corpse's wallet.)

You have a family Jack? Was this your meaning? I'm jealous.

(He puts the picture back into the wallet. He starts to dress the body.)

I wish I still had family, but I fear I can't escape this role. It's the closest thing to purpose I have. It is not a hope, so it can't hit the wall. It is not a dream, so it can't bleed out of me. It just is. I am only one card in the deck. The only answer I have been given is, "Yes, there is a cosmic digit, and it will come; give it time. It has a very slow descent." I have one last dream, one last hope. An alternative existence. On my night off I go to the small tavern down the street. I saw the shadow

of a woman through the smoky room. She went over to the bar stool and sat down. I went over and offered to buy her a drink. She laughed when we chatted. She.. stopped me from thinking ... All the questions ... had drained out of me.

(Pause. Then with a smile.)

I had escaped the questions.

(Pause.)

It turns out she was a truck driver, lugging freight to distant and unknown destinations. Perhaps somewhere off the map. Perhaps through that keyhole. She was interesting, but she left soon after. Will she come back? Maybe she could tell me if the sun still rises. If it still exists. Perhaps she thinks of me on the road. Maybe she'll come back for me. Maybe she likes me. Maybe she will love me. Maybe she will give my life a new meaning. A new beginning. I hope to one day wake from this bad dream and be in her arms. And maybe ... just maybe we can sit on a small picnic blanket and make love under that beautiful sun.

(The sound of the metal doors opening upper stage left. He stops what he's doing and limps towards the door as possible.)

Hello? Hello? Can you hear me? Please talk to me! Does the sun still rise?!

(Another cadaver rolls in on a gurney.)

Do I still even matter?! No!

(The doors quickly slam shut.)

NO! (Bangs on the metal doors.)

ANSWER ME!

(Sinking to the floor.)

Don't leave me here alone!

(He convulses. Shivering in a traumatic state for a moment. His eyes look distant. He is looking toward the oak doors at the far end of the stage. The convulsion stops, but his eyes still look distant. He points at the doors.)

There is a hand of questionable desire. Those doors creek open, and it appears from the void. It beckons me to roll your body toward it. I do so willingly; it grabs hold of the gurney and you join the void.

(He limps back over to the corpse he has working on.)

I have never been to that void nor do I know anything else but the hand stretching out from it. I could confront the being, demand an

answer, but I'm afraid he might know something ... or everything ... and The Thinker will have no more meaning.

(He finishes dressing the body. He puts the corpse's belongings back into the bag with the exception of the jokers in the deck of cards. He pushes the body off the slab onto the gurney that is immediately downstage from the slab. One of the oak doors opens and a hand with a white glove comes from the other side, beckoning The Thinker.)

And there's that hand.

(He looks down at the body.)

Oh sir. Do not fret. We will meet again. One worm does pass another.

(Starts to roll the body toward the hand.)

But for now this is the end of our session.

(The Hand takes hold of the gurney and pulls it through the door. The Thinker waves until the body is gone. The door closes.)

Goodbye Jack.

What Defines Me?

Somebody please tell me
Who I am
I feel trapped
As I put on a good show

Those fast girls
That made me cry
Forced me to lie
Why, do you ask?

“You speak funny”
“You’re so fake”
“Are you even black?”
Smack, smack.

I’m on the floor
Hoping that a doctor
Could give me
Some sort of ... cure

Because I know something
Is so wrong ‘cause
I am trying so hard
To be who I think I should be

Should I walk around
With my hips swayin’?
Lookin’ like I’ve
Got someone payin’

Me? No that’s not me.
Simply I can’t catch on
To the slang that
You speak

“I have a dream”
As a great doctor once said,
That you’ll focus on my smile
Instead of my “non-ghetto” style?

Flower



Autumn in Baltimore

Leaves,
 leaves,
 leaves,
spinning beyond the window,
sun-glazed long-ago.
Looking smug:
frozen tears,
remnants of the late autumn.
Laughing at the wintry cold,
the thunderstorm has burst from sky.
Ostensibly, summer invites thunder.
But despite these omens,
the air is October.

In Miho Pine Grove

Blinking at the dawn
the birdwatcher comes to this place
in my city of small tress

without map or question
he bows & guides my hand towards
branches, whispering

*there are two kinds of pine:
a beautiful woman's hand
a gentleness*

*and one that will hurt you
most always*

he adjusts his glasses, pulls close
his feather mantle, then makes his way towards
somewhere else

much later, whenever I brush against
false-cypress, pond pine, loblolly, tamarack

I am lost in a literature
of texture

The Black Bird's Call

Lucille,
It's been a year
and I can still hear
the wind blowing
through the willows.

There is a sense of pride
as your smile flashes
upon the screen.

The Web once addressed
your passing as news,
but it was more of a revelation.
One which brought forth
a deluge of acid like tears.

Yet soothing
for the infinite knowledge
that though physically gone you
would still be amongst us.

In every layer
that an up and coming
poet, or writer could note.

We, children not of
your womb were listening,
and are listening still,
to the black bird's call

Excess

Celestina didn't have time for thinking. Nana, Celestina's mother, would be here soon to watch the kids, and she was off to the first job of the day, Quick Mart.

She walked the short distance across the hall to the room that her children shared. Elena and Jorge were silent, and she marveled for a second at the angelic beauty of her children's sleep. She had devoted her life to providing for them, unlike a specific other she preferred not to talk about.

She let Nana in when she arrived, said a quick hello, and then left to catch the bus. Her daily ride through Sunnydale, the San Francisco neighborhood she inhabited, never stimulated her imagination or captured her interest. Celestina and her best friend, Rosa, used to play a game where they would guess which were crack houses when they were little. She only now realized the morbid quality of this.

The Quick Mart came into view and she prepared her belongings to leave. As she shifted towards the edge of her seat, the old Asian lady across the street caught her gaze and smiled. It was a knowing, wise, motherly gaze, much like the one Celestina gave to her children ...



Celestina was not one for introspection, in fact, it downright scared her. She wasn't used to analyzing why anything existed or happened, especially not when it came to the psychological origins of her own behavior. Instead, Celestina was big on action. She lifted the last box onto the shelf and dismounted the stool that had been placed there for her convenience by Mark, her co-worker.

Now for the next group of things she needed to accomplish. Mop the floors, wash the windows, and then throughout the day, assure that the small convenience store pizzas were rotated. They were typically created at 9AM, fairly early in Celestina's shift, and had been sitting in the heating machine for a good eight hours by the time she rushed and usually overweight customers came in to consume them. She was also going to be needed if there were too many customers for Mark to handle. Usually, this didn't occur until well into rush hour. However, she would stay alert, as always. Celestina lived up to the standards that she created for herself. Many would say they would be exhausted by the menial, often meaningless tasks that she performed in a day until

her shift ended.

Celestina mopped the floor with an effort usually reserved for an amusement, such as dodge ball. She scrubbed until the floors were spotless, at which point in the day customers started to enter with more frequency to dirty up her floor once again.

“Mark, I’m going to the back to put this mop away. Can you rotate the pizzas?”

He assured her he would, and she entered the dank storeroom which was home to much more than the food that Quick Mart sold. All sorts of furry, and insectoid creatures resided there, and its features made it perfect as their home. There were numerous cracks in its old cinder block walls as it was the only remaining untouched part of the “Two11Se7en” before it was converted into its present form. She took the mop, and placed back where it belonged, and started to turn back.

“Celestina!, Celes ... aaaa!”

Her pulse quickened immediately. She ran out of the dark of the storeroom. A quivering Mark came into view before a large man with a gun did. The man was pointing the gun at him in a way that suggested he was blasé about this entire incident. Mark, however, was not taking this like a champ. He kept lowering himself with his legs and rising back up, as if he was failing to hop. His hands were shaking violently, and his face betrayed a fear more visceral than any Celestina had seen in her years. He was moving back and forth, calling her name, and asking her to help him.

“I don’t know what to ... help me ... Please no! ... er help me ... please”

She had experienced this before, and Mark’s hysterics were not helping. Just then Mark fainted and fell to the ground with a sound that suggested a small tree falling.

The large man leaped over the register, his rolls of fat enveloping the counter. He used his heft to position his hands near the cash register. The man started to yank the machine violently out of its wiring. He must have assumed that Celestina posed no threat, because he was fully engaged in his task. She turned to her left where a broom was stationed, grabbed, and started running toward the man.

THUMP

The floor she had mopped minutes before had yet to dry, and Celestina fell on her back. Pains seared through her spine, and she lost control of her body. Her sense of time vanished.

The man had successfully yanked the machine out and had run out the door.



Celestina felt consciousness come back to her. She started to move her fingers, then her arms, and she woke to find herself in a hospital room.

The first sensation that came over her was residual panic and fear from the incident, and then she burst into tears. She had faced situations like that before, yes, but each time was tragic in itself. Present in the hospital room were Elena, Jorge, and Nana. They silently watched her as she took her time processing the emotions sparked by this violence.

Celestina only allowed herself to mourn momentarily in situations as painful as this. She had faced worse. And when these worse times occurred, she always composed herself, built up her strength, and soldiered on. Her father had died not long ago, and Celestina had applied her standard process to the situation. Nana was a wreck for days. Her adobe villa was showered with the water of her tears. But it was those days she took, that allowed her to move on. Nana now lived a capable life as a single grandmother, and had even started to show mild interest in other, grandfather-age men.

Celestina, however, was a different story. She did not choose to mourn. Instead, true to her character, she only allowed herself to experience the pain for a moment before closing up again, like a clam faced with death. What she kept inside compiled to create a dark, dark hole within her soul. The accumulated pain of every tragedy of her life was still alive within in her. It breathed when she did, eeking out it's own oxygen, depleting hers. Celestina's solution to this problem was to channel all of that energy into her work. That's why what appeared to others as "excessive" were the perfectly logical and acceptable sacrifices of a mother to Celestina. She never ventured consciously into the depths of her own mind, and certainly had never visited a therapist. Her do-it-yourself attitude, however, was not proving enough to lead her onto a sustainable path. Her many issues were starting to catch up

to her, but her only response was to work harder.

She took a wide look around the hospital room. She did not like what she saw. She needed to move, to be producing something.

“Can we talk now?” Jorge nudged Nana.

Nana started to commit to a negative answer, but she looked at her now-conscious daughter for an answer. Celestina still had the dazed look of someone coming out of a coma. She was beautiful, in a frosty way, like a flower still clinging to life despite the oncoming chill of winter.

She looked at them.

“Of course you can hijo. Come to me. Your mother almost died today.”

The family congregated at the side of the hospital bed and embraced. Nana stood by the wall and watched. The kids, as they were wrapped in their mother’s arms, experienced the effect of a certain voice on their emotions. They were in tears. They felt what their mother could not. She maintained a face of stony stoicism. Her job was to comfort for her children as they cried for her sake.

She released her children and alternatively stared into their eyes. “Look, babies, don’t you worry about me. I’m completely fine. Now, I have to go to work, and I’ll be home later tonight. Now, go with Nana back home, ok?”

Her children nodded and retreated to be with their grandmother. She put her hands on their hands as she led them out of the hospital room.

“Are you sure you are fine, mi amor?” Nana asked her daughter.

All Celestina could muster as a reply was a cold nod and wave of the hand, dismissing her caring family. Moments after they exited the room, the doctor in charge of Celestina, Dr. Price, entered. He looked as if the news he was about to impart was not as routine as Celestina expected it to be. He grabbed a stool and sat on it, so that he was face-to-face with his patient.

“Ms. Castilla ...” From the beginning she could tell this was going to be difficult. She braced herself again, ready to absorb any emotional impact this would have on her already fragile psyche with.

“It seems that we have picked up an anomaly in the routine scans conducted upon admission.”

Her mind started to race. What was going to happen to her? Was

she going to die?

One of the effects of constipated emotional flow was that your mind became a ball of anxiety. Trains-of-thought ran when no driver was present, off the tracks, into the wilderness of anxiety.

"Do you regularly experience any chest pain, shortness of breath, random sweating, back ache, nausea, or indigestion?"

"Yes, I suffer from all of those."

The doctor was taken aback by her nonchalant delivery of this statement. He diverged from the script.

"Well, do you see a problem with that? Were you going to get some treatment for this? You can't leave your health to chance, Ms. Castilla." The doctor said this as he lowered his head, imparting that Celestina's position on this "common knowledge" did not make sense.

"Doctor Price, you have to understand what kind of lifestyle I live. I am in constant motion. Actually, I don't have a lifestyle. My life is my work, my children, and on good days, my mother. I don't have time for medical visits." She conveyed that medical treatments, to her, were a frivolity. "I don't have time for medicines, and fancy treatment. And, by the way, I am just a stressed, overworked woman. Of course I suffer from these things, but I am not a whiner, sir. I deal with these things. And now, thank you for all your help, but I must leave."

Her frail shuffle reminded the doctor of his elderly mother. He could see that she noticed this about herself, and seemed to be on the verge of tears as she gathered her belongings.

"Ms. Castilla, before you go, would you like to hear your diagnosis?"

She shot an icy look his way that suggested she considered this conversation over. "Does it matter?" Her voice suggested she indignant, and a much younger woman.

The doctor stood up to meet her eyes. "Yes it does matter. What I'm going to tell you will impact your life. You have heart disease. The scans earlier confirmed it. Now, you may not care at the moment. You may not even be able to process this. But, it does matter. You claim to put your children above all, but do you realize that by working the amount you do, by being away from home the amount you are, that you are actually leaving your children without a functional mother?"

She could not stand to hear this. Her mind started to shut down. She couldn't be failing at the one thing at which she professed to be

an expert. Of course she was a good mother and a good person. This doctor was clearly insane, clearly from a disreputable medical school, clearly ... clearly, he must have had no mother. Her denial turned into fierce anger.

"I refuse to listen to this!" She pointed an accusing finger at the doctor. Her voice rose to the pitch of a roar. Her face contorted to form a painful squint, as if she was trying to hide from seeing something. She stormed out.

She quickly gathered herself and started on her way to her second job. This one was a restaurant that served French toast and bacon as some sort of cohesive meal. She didn't have to understand it though.

Could she simply hop onto her regular bus route? Did she even know where she was? Well, the hospital, but where was that?

She hobbled towards a woman who was helping her elderly mother into a car. The day had seemed to become night-like. Goosebumps had broken out on Celestina's body.

"Am I still in Sunnysdale?" Celestina asked.

The woman looked at her, and moved her mouth as if making words. Celestina could not understand any of it. It was as if her brain had shut down completely. Why could she not process language? Without thanking the woman, she just turned and walked away from the hospital. The multi-story buildings of the city imposed upon Celestina's sense of security. They were so old, they had so many stories. They held so much pain. She walked down a sidewalk that led into an area of the city she didn't recognize. Rain clouds were starting to form in the horizon, but she couldn't remember if she liked rain or not. The air seemed to get thicker. It was hard to breathe. Did pressure changes cause nausea? A thought dawned on her. She couldn't go to work in a hospital gown! She would need to go home first. But, where was home?

Celestina was unanchored, simply floating in the shores of consciousness. Her stress quickly abated, as she realized that she didn't really care anymore. She had come upon a small park in her sidewalk journey that she choose to patronize. The green nature of the park seemed so inviting to her at that moment. She walked for a few moments before stumbling violently over a medium-sized rock. It hurt so bad she could almost not stand to move at all. But, the longer she laid there, the more comfortable she became.

She had no reason to move. No reason to get up and go home. She had worked her whole life for what? To continue on the hamster wheel that was her life. She hadn't advanced in the least from her work, and did her kids even need her? Nana was the one who was really raising them. Would they even miss her or remember her if she went away? Celestina considered an option she never had before in her life.

She jumped off the wheel.

Final



Rivers Run!

In moments of furious frustration, I've known rivers

Rivers run for centuries with ink stained papers replete with dreams
written hurriedly

During a school day, soon adrift on the school yard, now floating down
the river

In hours of deafening despair, I've known rivers

Rivers run for decades with priceless photos that flew out of flying
vehicles en route to safety fearful of a white sheeted, boots wearing
man who could torture me senselessly

In days of agonizing anxiety, I've known rivers

Rivers run for generations with bruised blood from Kunta Kinte's
ancestors and Jonathan Kozol's Savage Inequalities' children who
suffered all hope of freedom because of beaten backs and shallow
educations

In weeks of devastating difficulties, I've known rivers

Rivers run for millenniums with war torn lands, starving bellies,
mutilated bodies screaming in sacrifice awaiting a day of redemption, a
day of revenge, a day of refreshing, a day of restoration

In decades of suffocating sorrow and haunting horrors, I've known
rivers

Rivers run for infinity with shelves of silenced voices of liberation and
rafts of loud-mouthed messages of avarice, depravation, and pointless
power pointed toward pitiful, pathetic souls seething in suffering

In times of terrorizing toil, I've known rivers

Rivers run for eternity with harnessed hope and paraded potential
among the talented tenth and the rag tag motley crew who never
realized, never knew, never believed that rivers of restoration, reason,
and reconciliation could run thoroughly through

In seasons of revealing reflection, I've known rivers

Rivers that run through the milieu of littered lives wasted on
materialism, bummed out on egoisms, and shattered by consumerisms.

Rivers run through the cities and cry to the citizens ... Come, cleanse,
comfort before the river runs away with you.

In Between



The Woods

I had always hated following you through the
back of the woods
and the brittle shape
of your shoulder blades as you'd
push back the brush.

They'd be shaped
the same as bent spades left standing
alone in the cold night.
And we'd walk listening to your mumbling
of old stories—things you built
and where you built them.
And if only you were 'my age' you would say.

And when it snowed,
I'd find you waiting
at the edge of a string of sycamores
in a pair of shorts.
And I'd think that
your legs would shatter like icicles
like how older kids would hack at with sticks
to kill time.

But it was always me that would trip first—
an odd root as old as you
protruding from the earth,
or a patch of ice in the darkness.

And you'd pick me back up
with the red sun in
the palm of your hands,
And realize that it was lava flowing through your veins.

Bladeless Knives

The ocean roars from the far distance, murmuring ever so quietly, but we know it's there. A light halo indistinctly behind the peak, filling the air with an orange hue. The hillside and slopes overflowing with colors; yes it's the orchards we're talking about. A cascade flows icy, slicing apart the green mat of the mountainside. It's morning.

A canoe drifts down the nearby river a distance away. The sole black man ushers it onward using an oversized oar. With a full brim straw hat rounding his head and a square chin, he stands formidably with steely muscles that burst every seam of his shirt. Nets and baskets carpet the floor. He is a fisher man or a fisher boy perhaps from his young complexion—his weather beaten face handsome yet worn. Even through his dark skin, we see red burns—many hours in the sun. Sitting back, he pops his knuckles and laughs in good humor; it's a good day, a very good day for fishing. In his beloved canoe it will be even more joyous. Built with his bare hands, heart, and blood, it is a true beauty—sanded with fine sand from the creek and adzed with finest blade, it is the best in the village. It is his pride, his joy, his every breath.

He had decided the night before that he would try a different course today. His older brother, a master in the art of fishing, said that the west fork was more teeming than the more popular east route. He had warned him however—no risk, no reward. The west river was rough and full of cascades; few had gone there—it was an uncharted zone, mysterious and unpredictable. To him, however, the sheer opportunity of pioneering adventure is enthralling—slicing through his soul. Clambering up, he clutches his oar and shifts the course; against the current's surge, it is hard. After what seems hours of straining against the flow, it finally gives way, like quicksand releasing its prey. Nodding his head ever so slightly, he flashes a smile of satisfaction as he settles back watching the canoe cleave the river.

Hours later, he squints his eyes as he looks far upriver—there's something a quarter mile ahead. Leaning to the side to get a closer look, he sees silver slivers jump from the white froth. It must be fish, what else could move like that he thought, grinning to himself excitedly. This must be it; this was what his brother was telling him about. Fish so large, so powerful, so fresh—their meat would stir

beneath its scales even after you catch it. Ahhh! His mouth waters as he thinks of the heavenly feasts they will make. It is a gold miner's jackpot—almost too good to be true.

It is getting hot, really hot, so he pops a coconut and tilts his head back to let the sweetness flow—that's when he sees it. From the corner of his eye, the slivers flash up again, but there is a flash of white—it's white, not silver. With a jump, he chokes on one of his drinks, coughing. It isn't fish that is jumping, it's the water, and that could only mean one thing: rocks. His face reddens, his nostrils flare as a fierce pain cuts into his head. The canoe begins to pick up speed, the water roars in his ears as the rocks loom ever closer. His face contorts as he perplexes his plight. At this speed he would certainly dash into the water once he reached the cascade. O the water! His eyes widen as he peers at his broken reflection. So evil, so fast, so flowing, like icy knives slashing end on end. The blue was such a dizzying potion, mysteriously transparent yet jaggedly distorting reality, mysteriously swirling in a ploy of deception, only to capture and imprison for eternity.

Flitting his eyes about, he frantically searches for a landing. There must be one someplace. But no, the entire shelf is fully laden with foliage. There!—he sees it, a vine hanging as fragile as his heart. Adrenaline blasts through his body as he forces his legs up. His heart skips a beat—it better not be a snake. He had heard about that in stories around the fire at his village. It had seemed so funny then, when the hunter would pull on “vine” and the snake would turn its head and raise an eyebrow. Now it was anything but amusing. There was no time to make a choice or pick chances—the vine was alongside the canoe. It was now or never.

He watches as it grows closer—glowing green in his mind's eye. Did it just move? He shudders, watching as it passes before him, just within his arm's reach. Then it begins to fade away, growing smaller—disappearing. With a leap of faith and fear he grasps for his lifeline. It feels scaly ... alive as his hand grips upon it—slittingly deadly. He gasps. Squeezing his eyes and ears shut, his breath steams out. His head races in panic, millions of voices fill his ears—he doesn't know what to do. He feels his heart pounding in his hands, or was it the snake's? He wasn't sure. Little by little, he feels the heartbeat slow. It

must be mine, he says. Slowly he pulls himself together and peels his eyelids apart—cautiously looking about him. He is hanging. A yard or two high, it is hard to measure height from above, and the water is still spilling below him. Looking down he wonders how he had gotten up so far. He figures that in his fright, he must have clambered up without knowing.

The world is still in order, the leaves are on the trees, the wind is still blowing, there are even birds chirping in the distance. The contrast is refreshing. Moments earlier he felt like he had been tossed in a tumultuous storm at sea where the end was inevitable. Looking down river, he saw his canoe floundering like a leaf in a puddle. It had dashed up on the rocks which he now made out to be quite large boulders. From where he hangs, swinging in the breeze, it looks undamaged but it was hard to say. He closes his eyes slowly again, soaking in the serenity and calmness, the breeze passing through his ears.

Suddenly he feels a slip. His eyes flying open, his heart pops within him. Is it his hands? He had been slacking off a bit, plus they were getting tired from dangling. He pulls himself upward, and then stops, holding his breath. He is just about to let out a breath of relief when he heard: crack! Whump! His body slumps like a grandfather pendulum. Frantically he grasps upward, but the more vines he pulls, the faster he feels himself falling. Hand over hand over hand, when suddenly his hand grasps nothing—just air. The nothingness shocks him like electricity, his eyes pop open and his mouth gapes; the world around him freezes: nothing moves, nothing makes a sound. It is like someone has jammed the gears of time. Flash! An icy blade cuts him as he falls, the pain and agony rip through his soul. The fear, the sorrow, the anxiety all rush through him overwhelmingly—stabbing him. He flounders about, the cold numbing his body. He goes under, bubbling indecipherably as he tries to cry for help. But there is none. Fearfully, he strikes his legs against the water, kicking and lashing out with all his might. Then he feels it—solid ground—wait ... is it real or is he imagining it? His foot strikes it again, feeling it resound through his body. A flood of hope surges through his bosom as he presses forward toward the bank.

Evening is settling into sunset, feebly slicing through the last of his strength. The island glows, the shadows dancing like flames.

Pulling himself away from the river's sickle grip, he sinks into the ground. His spirit seeping from wounds that have laid open his body. The rest of him is cut away, dying with the last beam of the sun.

Missing Knuckle

Major knuckles perfect and uniform.

Heavy tough joints.

Minor knuckle blighted by a moron.

Knuckle is indented, tetrad.

Anger tailored the knuckle, forever crumbled.

Fissured and lame, scuffed ossein.

Chimera pain admonishes the owner,
it'll never be the same.

Bygone Existence



TMD
PHOTOGRAPHY

Eight Days to Insanity

I had a perfect life. Or so I thought. I had loving parents and plenty of friends, I guess I did well enough academically, and I enjoyed doing everything a normal teenage girl does. In the early years of my life, I didn't have much to be disappointed about. I felt as if people effortlessly enjoyed being in my presence, and my best friend Kristina told me one of her favorite qualities about me was my uniqueness. Maybe one of things that probably separated me from everyone else was my imagination. From what I recall, I've used my imagination as an escape from real life since kindergarten, especially after dinner and homework when I'd shut myself in my room while my parents finished cleaning up the dinner table. As I grew older and my schoolwork load grew heavier, I began to look forward to this time of day more and more. I could simply stare out my bedroom window during a sunset, a snowstorm, a thunderstorm, or a light summer shower and let my mind run wild. When my mom came into my room and woke me out of my imagination, I went to bed. And every night I dreamed—dreamed very vividly. Soon enough, I turned these vibrant dreams into daydreams and used them everywhere—in school, at sports practices, everywhere. I felt like my imagination was the only way for me to be completely at peace, with no stress or pressure. I knew I started doing worse in academics and athletics, my friends were dumping me, and I constantly wore an absentminded expression on my face.

There were times, of course, that I was forced to concentrate, like tests and competitions, but it became harder and harder to focus my attention on the single most important thing at that moment. My teachers were naturally worried, but the very first time that they actually took some action was when I completely failed out of my midterms. On one of those exams—chemistry, to be exact—our teacher told us that test would be extremely long—three hours of multiple choice, short answers, and essays. When I sat down to take the test, I probably only answered the first four multiple choice questions, and after that, I was lost. My mind had raced to its own land of paradise. I stayed in this “happy place” for an entire three hours! When I turned in my test by the end of that period, I saw my work of just four answered questions. My teacher stared at it bug-eyed for about half a minute and then glared at me with a fiercely

hostile gaze. Some of my classmates snickered and a faint voice in my subconscious scolded me for not focusing and said that I should be ashamed and guilty of myself. But somehow, I didn't really care. After that, my teachers and coaches were always having meetings with my parents. I knew that they were talking about how I needed to focus on the priorities in my life, like I vaguely remember them telling me. The first time it hit me that there might be something wrong with me was when my only friend Kristina persuaded me to let her come to my house after school. I think it was for a study session but I really don't remember. When we walked in, Kristina told me to go to my room and said she'd be up soon. After fifteen minutes of her absence, I decided to go downstairs just to see if she was still there. As I walked down, I caught her in the living room, absorbed in talking to my parents. I was able to catch a few words.

"I really think there's something wrong with her."

Kristina was talking and my dad responded, a little exasperated, "No, there's nothing wrong with her. She's just going through some hard times and she'll get out of it. Some high school freshmen go through this stage."

Kristina, still pretty firm on her thoughts, said, "Maybe you think so but you haven't seen her in school. It's like she's in a completely different world and it takes anyone forever to get her attention. Once, during gym session she seemed like she was walking and sleeping at the same time but her eyes were open. The coach had to slap her on the face really hard to get her out of the phase. She didn't even shriek or anything. I think she might need to see a psychologist or something."

I turned away then. I didn't want to hear any more. Maybe there really was something wrong with me; maybe I should see a doctor. I decided to somehow let my parents know this. I guess Kristina persuaded them really well, because by the time I told my parents about it, they had already made an appointment with a psychologist.

That appointment with the doctor wasn't what I expected. I thought maybe he'd run some tests or something. Instead, he just asked me to be completely honest with him or he'd never know if there was anything wrong. Then he started the questionnaire.

"How is school going for you?"

"It was great, but it's been getting harder and more stressful."

"How do you cope?"

"I just let my imagination run wild. I feel like it's the only way to connect to myself."

"Do you have vivid and sensory dreams every night?"

"Oh yes, every night, and I love them."

"How about during the day?"

"Well, sometimes I get these images in my head; I call them daydreams. Some of them are really happy and peaceful, but some just freak me out. Sometimes I don't even know if these images are real or not."

The appointment went on for an hour like this. After it was over, he told me I needed to come back again next week for another appointment. These appointments went on and on like this for more than two months. He didn't tell me what the problem was and I began to have a feeling that he would never tell me. I started panicking and getting more desperate and delirious; sometimes I even broke down into tantrums. My daydreams got more fanatical and I even think I was starting to believe them. During that last appointment he told me to go to the waiting room for the last ten minutes of the appointment—he needed to talk to my parents for a bit. I didn't want to go to the waiting room, so I stood outside the door just to hear what he was saying.

"I believe your daughter has schizophrenia."

My parents were shocked.

"What?! That's impossible?! What makes you think so?!"

"The one important aspect that made up most of my questions: the dreams. Not that ordinary people don't have dreams, but her description of the dreams go way beyond the standards of normal dreams."

"What can we do?"

"Well, you could have taken her to therapy. But I believe it's a little too late for that."

"What's going to happen?"

"She'll become more absent and delirious. I estimate that in eight days, she will become completely insane. After that, if she goes to a mental institution, she might have a chance to once again be normal."

Haven't you noticed that she's been getting worse and worse so quickly?"

I didn't hear my parent's answer because I didn't want to hear another word. Schizophrenia? Could it really be that bad? I didn't realize it until that night when I finally fell asleep and dreamed again, very vividly. This time, when I woke up, I didn't enjoy the dream, like I usually do; I was terrified. Not only was that the case—I had the same dream every night for eight days, but each night had a slight twist. The dream went like this.

I was standing at the entrance to the Sequoia Tree Park. The sign at the entrance wasn't in normal, inviting prints—it was jagged and looked like the fonts of a poster to a scary movie. I stepped into the park. It was night time and the air was foggy and misty but the moonlight shone through brightly. I could see the extraordinarily tall trees and their ghostly shadows cast long and wide. As I wandered through the park, I felt surprisingly sharp and focused—something I hadn't felt for what seemed like ages. For some time, it was completely silent. The air gradually filled in with noises. At first, I took the noises to my enjoyment. An owl hooted—the sound seemed to give me a little confidence. A rabbit scampered over my feet. I thought that maybe these things were just the normal “goings-on” of night time forest life. But when I looked up, I was suddenly terrified. The sky was a purplish-pink-grey-navy blue mixture dotted with tiny stars. What really petrified me were the huge flying bats and hawks circling high above the tops of trees, silhouetted against the strange colored curtain of the sky. I realized that the hoot of the owl was meant to be a warning. The scurrying rabbit was actually running for its life. Frightened, I unexpectedly broke into a run, trying to sprint away from that ill-omened place. I ran until I encountered a small cottage with crumbling bricks, a rotting wooden porch, a peeling roof, and a creaky door guarded by an enormous serpent with glowing red and green eyes. I can't exactly recall how I got past that snake, but when I finally got inside the house, I was shocked. The house was seemingly innocent and safe compared to the terrifying world outside. It had an aged musty smell of old clothes that were washed but never dried. Everything was made from wood—the chairs, the table, and barred windows, and there was a fire still glowing bright orange with ember. On the center of the table was a glass cup filled

with some sort of liquid. I hopped up on one of the chairs and pulled the glass a little closer. When my eyes came close enough to the glass, the liquid suddenly illuminated, allowing me to clearly see the bubbling purplish-pink-grey-navy blue mixture. The bubbles started moving together. After some time, I realized what the bubbles were forming. The letter I. Oh, okay. So what? I thought. I hopped off the chair and went over to a glass mirror hanging near the fireplace. I was traumatized by my appearance. The unkempt hair. The wrinkled cheeks. And most importantly, the eyes. They were absent, despite how I felt, and they had dark purple circles around them, like I had gotten into a fight or something. I guess I have been fighting—for my life. I heard soft footsteps behind me which sounded somewhat sneaky and ominous, and turned around and saw my psychologist. I recognized him immediately, but he didn't look like the real-life doctor. He actually looked deranged and insane. He walked to my side with a crazy looking smile on his face and gave me an ironclad box. I opened it and found something wrapped in fancy, embroidered cloth. When I opened it, I saw in my hands an ancient, solid gold hilted dagger studded with rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. I raised the dagger.

I woke up with a start. I felt like screaming but I didn't want to let my parents know about this dream. Every night after that, I was afraid to go to sleep. Sleep overcame me each time though, and each time I had the same dream. Except that instead of a letter I, it was a letter N, then a letter S, then A, N, I, T, and Y. INSANITY. After the eighth night of that dream, I woke up screaming. I finally understood what the dreams meant. My parents rushed into my room then, and I didn't even feel like kicking them out. I pounded my pillows until the down filling burst out, I threw my bedside table at my closet door with so much force that both broke, and I continuously screamed, "I'm insane!! I just know it!!"

My parents took me to the hospital then, where I was given a long and lasting sedation. Afterwards, I woke up finding myself in a white walled prison that I knew was the mental institution. My psychologist bent over me and asked how I was feeling. I felt fine, I guess, maybe just a little tired. Okay, very, very tired. I looked more closely at my doctor. No, he definitely was not insane. That was just in my dream, but now he looked—well, normal. I stayed at the institution for about a year. When I got out and finally got back to school, I

felt like everyone was puncturing holes in my back. They stared at me, but they were also staring at a different person. I finally felt alive again, sharp and focused, not confused and deluded. What about my midterms? My parents and I had a lengthy discussion with all my teachers of what happened and after all, I got to retake all of them, this time successfully keeping my brains exactly where they needed to be. Looking back, I wished I hadn't ignored those dreams, both the happy and scary ones. Ignorance can lead to something really bad, but no matter how deep you are into any problem, you can always get out.

Little Birds



Modern Nautilus



The Endless Quest

(First Stanza from "Quest" by Naomi Madgett)

*I will track you down the years,
Down the night,
Till my anguish falls away,
Star by star,
And my heart spreads flaming wings
Where you are.*

I will follow you home tonight,
Up the sidewalk,
Till my fervor rises skyward,
Block by block,
And the pulsating beat between my thighs
Drums behind you.

I will scratch at your front door,
Dripping with need,
Till I flood and sink your doorstep,
With my passion,
Seize you with my loving limbs,
Delighted.

I will pursue you endlessly for days,
Doggedly for weeks,
Till my obsession becomes shadows,
Lashed to you,
And the timeless chill behind you,
Is my hands.

Famous Stars

Sprinkled across the sky
Winking stars blanket gentle nights
Had he been able to
Ptolemy would've ridden on Sirius's back
& listened to him bark at the moon
Famous stars mistaken for
Meteors streaking, seeking
Shelter away from space
You were the whole universe
To Copernicus
Galileo's distant lover
Wished upon and worshipped too
Famous stars bear your title
Volans and Corvus are your neighborhoods.

Excitement

Melissa waved to me after my last class Friday afternoon. Econ history was a snore. Much more pleasant to see a shapely girl in a snug jacket and jeans that hugged her legs. It'd be even better to see her undressed. One could only hope.

"Chet, I need to party," she said, fiddling with her jacket's zipper as we crossed the quad. "Any more intellectual bullshit will make me lose my mind. I need excitement."

"My brainwaves are nearly tamped out too," I said, as we reached her late model Acura. She handed me a joint and unlocked her car. I tugged a deep pull.

After she turned onto the campus loop road, she turned on Sirius to a soft station, took a hard candy from her purse, and slowly slipped it into her mouth. She ran her tongue across her lips, smiling, savoring the sweet flavor.

What a flirt. I've not been alone with her yet, not for lack of trying. I took another toke and held it in. Maybe this would be the day I'd see her sweet smile and long brown hair on a pillow next to me.

"Breathe, you fool," she startled me. "Pass the joint back."

I let the smoke out in a rush and cracked a window. The cool air of early December mixed with the smoke.

"At least you didn't bogart it." She took a drag, then letting little wisps of thick smoke seep out of her mouth, spoke. "Sean and his roommates are throwing a party down the hall in my dorm."

"You won't escape bullshit there." I switched the station to heavy metal. "I have an idea. Take the campus exit."

"But we're almost at my dorm."

"I have a better idea. I know where there's a party in my old stomping grounds."

Melissa slammed on the breaks. We almost got rear-ended by a commuter behind her. "I'm not dressed to go out."

I laughed and shook my head. "I bet you're fine for this party. Unzip your coat."

She canted her head and looked at me quizzically. The corner of her right lip rose, but she unzipped her parka and turned to me.

Her red sweater was molded to her fine breasts. "You're dressed fine."

Forty-five minutes, another joint, and two candies later we drove down Grandview Avenue. Thank goodness it was completely dark. The overgrown yards, missing porch rails, and debris in the house fronts were not so obvious.

I pointed to a parking spot down the street from the row house where the party, a standing party that Ace's gang threw every Friday, was held.

Melissa lowered the cosmetic mirror and examined herself. I got out and came around and opened her door. "Milady, to the castle."

The darkness hid what a joke that was. All the row houses had very small plots of dirt by the curb, a few steps up to the front door.

I couldn't make out words, but the throb of bass notes reached out into the street. The lights were on in the downstairs' windows. The houses on either side were completely dark and shuttered. The silhouette of a busty girl dancing to music was visible through the window.

Before I opened the door, I asked Melissa, "You want more excitement, right?"

"Yes, dammit." She took a breath. "The kids at school are all talk, except maybe for you. And then only once and a while."

I smiled, remembering when we walked along the lake after the freshman mixer. She really dug it when I told her about getting my application fees by boosting pills from a neighborhood pharmacy. Only later did I learn how my typical life sounded to the privileged kids at college.

But Melissa was fascinated. I opened the outside door to the corridor foyer.

Eddie, Ace's sergeant of arms, stepped in front, blocking the way. His arms crossed across his chest, underlying fingers pushing out his biceps. The hours working out with weights in Ace's garage had paid off. When I saw him last summer, he was just a scraggly, dirty fighter who took pleasure in abusing the weaker. Now he was a pock-marked body builder.

He gave me a quick, dismissive glance then took his time eying Melissa from her chest to her legs.

"Where the fuck you been, Chet?" His eyes lingered on the lovely girl by my side.

"Waiting to talk to you." I pointed to the folder sign on the table behind him. "We don't have any weapons."

When he smiled, his upper canines extended below the adjacent teeth. "Unzip your jacket and lift your arms."

I did. He patted my jacket and waist. "I knew you wouldn't have the balls to try to sneak something in."

He stepped aside. I walked in.

Then he dropped his arm across the door jamb blocking Melissa's way. "You too."

Her green eyes flash then a conniving smile highlighted a dimple in her cheek. "I have a free pass," she said.

Eddie's neck got stiff. He froze in position. He was not use to girls who didn't follow his orders. "What the fuck do you mean?"

She didn't back away. Fishing around in her shoulder bag, she pulled out a silver cigarette case. She flicked it open.

Eddie was completely focused on her. She extracted a perfectly rolled joint and handed it to him. "Let me by."

He took it with one hand, continued blocking the doorway, and tucked it behind his ear. He grabbed the cigarette case from her and took two remaining joints from one side, put them in his shirt pocket, passed the case back to Melissa and slowly dropped his arm. When she walked by, he pushed forward with his chest and copped a quick feel.

It was a madhouse inside. In the front room, all the furniture had been shoved into the dining room behind. Two couples danced fast to the loud, thumping music. Another couple, plastered to each other, swayed to their own internal music. The smoke of cigarettes, cigars, pipes with numerous flavors assaulted our noses. Junior, a guy I'd gotten into a jackpot with before, slumped against the wall, obviously under the influence of some powerful set. He was always a sucker for an upper-downer cocktail.

Around the table in the dining room, I saw a few faces I knew. Betsy was dipping corn chips into salsa, while some guy hugged her from behind. When his hands roamed from her shoulders to her breasts, she finished dipping her chip before she removed his hands. I'd always liked her. She was a hot number. If it didn't work out with

Melissa, I ...

Melissa hit my arm. "What a creep at the front door?"

"You wanted something different. Look around."

She cocked her head toward the kitchen. There was a poker game going on. A few people were playing. Others stood, watching the pot grow.

We went in. I grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge.

The bet was to a scrawny guy by the wall. Close, next to him, sat a teenage girl in a maroon sweater with pink blouse collar sticking out that I bet she bought today. The guy grimaced and twisted his shoulders. So difficult to read! He raised. And promptly got re-raised.

He grimaced, then tapped the young girl on the shoulder and rubbed her sweater between his fingers.

She turned. I saw then that her face was heavily made-up. She was really young. The guy whispered something in her ear. She shook her head. No.

"Yes," he said low, between clenched teeth. "Now."

She bit the edge of her right lower lip and, and with a glance that would kill if wishes were real, she pulled the thick maroon sweater over her head. She must have been warm because the top three buttons of her pink blouse were unbuttoned. We all saw the top half of her right breast and the cup of her bra. Although she was young, she was curvy.

"Hey," Melissa said to her and glanced down at her open blouse.

A bright red flush lit the girl's exposed chest and face. Quickly, she buttoned up and nodded thanks.

I glanced over to Melissa.

"Let's get out of here," she said into my ear, grabbing me by the hand.

We went back to the front door.

Eddie looked up from his chair. "Where do you think you're going? No one leaves before Ace gets here."

"That's crazy," Melissa said. "Why?" She asked with her hands on her hips.

"He likes to check out all the snatch." Eddie took a slow deliberate look at her body. He ran his tongue across his lips. "Yeah, he'd want you to stay."

"Melissa," I said, "It won't do any good to argue with him. Let's get something to eat."

Eddie snorted. "That's right, girlie. Listen to Chettie. Get outta my sight, before I decide to ignore Ace's rule about sampling the merchandise."

We turned sideways to slip past the furniture in the dining room. I grabbed a roasted chicken leg from the Colonel and extended a celery stick and a couple carrots to Melissa.

She shook her head. "No, I'm too upset. We've got to get out of here." She looked into the kitchen. "Oh, my god."

"What?" I turned to see through the doorway.

She directed me to a farther angle. The girl had lost her blouse now. She sat at the table, a few guys close about her, trying to look down her bra and see the half of her breasts that remained hidden.

The girl saw me and winced, practically saying aloud, "Help me."

With Melissa following, I entered the kitchen and went to the fridge. I pulled out a beer and extending it said, "Eddie wants a beer."

The young girl jumped up. The guys instinctively recoiling to give her room. She grabbed the beer and her blouse out of the poker pot and left the room.

I watched her go up to Eddie who got a big smile when he saw this nubile girl clutching her blouse to her front and offering him a beer. He took it, but dropped it to the floor. He put both arms around the girl and forced her to let him kiss her. After a minute she kissed him back. He lifted her and carried her up the stairs.

Turning to Melissa, I asked, "The door's open. Ready?"

Melissa nodded and pulled on her coat. "What about her?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "She made her choice."

We hurried to the front door. I had just grabbed the knob when a voice behind me said, "I said, no one leaves."

I turned. "Hey, Ace, didn't know you were here." Melissa scooted up close behind me.

He ignored my words. Betsy's face appeared over his shoulder. Her arms circled his waist. "No one leaves."

Melissa whispered to me. "We're getting beer from my car."

"We're getting some beer from her trunk."

Betsy tugged on him and he turned around to her kiss. "Pay attention to me, honey," she said.

"Hurry back," he said over his shoulder.

We walked out and down to the street.

I said, "I didn't know they were out of beer." She gave me a look that I recognize as one I gave other people when they'd been extremely dumb.

She unlocked her car. "Get in, Chettie, and I explain the facts of life to you."

It pissed the shit out of me that she'd one-upped me. I didn't want to fight with her. I had other ideas, but I had to regain my edge. "Enough excitement for you, Melissa?"

Untitled



We Are of Our Fields

I have known the continual change of life.
I am not unlike the rake on the take,
Nor am I unlike a fork from which I pitch.
We belong to the office we must muse—
By ourselves we are of little use.
Otherwise, they lean in abuse from neglect;
I see the brandish of dulled bronze tarnish,
For sure their grayed handles will be cracked and split,
Like my tan hands that wield them as wands for but one use:
To toil in soil, to make new, to brew a new mildew,
Familiar smells from old.
Like the night's heavy wet air,
Settling and mixing with fermented organics,
This is the cauldron that our fame stirs.
We are equal in consequence,
Reminding me and the rake and the fork,
To birth anew our surrounding fields.

A Gift from Nobody You Know

My name is Nathaniel, and I have placed this story on this iPhone in the hope that whoever finds it after me will have more of warning than I got when I found it. Before the incident I was a normal looking college student about 6 feet tall with short, unkempt brown hair that I kept hidden under a warm blue hoody. I was the sort of person you might not notice in crowd. However if I had to do things over now I think I would try wearing louder colors as well as being more outgoing in general.

Last year I sat around playing a video game on the iPhone I found. I found it just lying in the wet grass with many scratches on its body. I was surprised that it still worked. I did the honest thing first, attempting to call one of the numbers on it to see who it belonged to, but there were no numbers on it anywhere. Additionally when I took it to the AT&T store they told me that the sim card had no known owner on their system, so despite my better judgment I decided to keep it. In any event there were still some games on it, one of which I tried while I was on the bus to school. One game in particular was a miniaturized survival horror game I was not familiar with. After I started the game, I found my character which looked like a miniaturized knight trapped inside a castle. The knight moved on its own with no input from me. It went up to a mirror in the castle, and when he gazed in it he saw a miniaturized version of my face. That creeped me out. Then the little character spoke!

“Hello there new friend, and welcome to castle Red Window; my name is Iron Clad. I will be your personal suit of armor that will protect you throughout tonight’s adventure. Before we begin I would like to go over a few basic things about castle Red Window. Number one is that this is an online game that deals with mature content, so if you’re under eighteen you must get your parents’ permission before venturing forward.”

The game looked pretty advanced for what it was, but at that moment I was feeling pretty bored and didn’t mind.

“The second thing I need to tell you is that if you chose me as your personal armor I am going to need a place to stay because the wizard that forged me is complaining that my rent checks aren’t coming in on time. If you had a pull-out sofa or something that I

could use I would be grateful ... Don't look at me like that; you don't think magical suits of armor need to sleep, but we do! Well, okay we don't, but I need some dry shelter to protect myself from the rain and a soft bed would feel great. Oh yeah, the other thing I want to bring up is that this game costs ten dollars a month to play, so I am going to need your credit card numbers before we begin. No you know what, forget it, you're letting me crash on your sofa so this first level is on me. You can buy things by the level here, so it's no big deal. HEY! Are you listening to me!?"

I ignored it but it continued talking so I tried moving the phone around to see if that would change anything. When that didn't work I just nodded my head and then to my horror, my body was suddenly encased in black armor that seemed to come from nowhere. I was still on the bus and nobody seemed to react to what had happened. Surprisingly I didn't scream out of shock.

"Well, okay, I will take that nod of approval as a yes, you are listening, and that you want me as a set of armor. At least it looked like you were nodding yes. It doesn't matter. All that's important now is that we are together. Now the first boss we need to fight is a giant Cyclops, so I suggest you go buy some new arrows at the Bass Pro store down by East Mills Mall. You've got another paycheck coming for you on Saturday, so I imagine you will want to get those then."

Then after a while I simply decided to just to listen to what the knight character on screen was saying. He spooked me because he knew things about me a pre-programmed AI couldn't know. He also behaved in ways an AI couldn't, such as analyzing what I was saying in context and asking questions about the things I said.

"Just what sort of creature are you?! Is this game possessed by a demon or something?!"

"I'm just you're designated armor ... If I was demon would I want to kill a castle full of monsters with you? Don't be afraid of me, I just want to be your friend and go on adventures with you. If I was evil I wouldn't do that. I would just let the monsters in this castle kill your player character or even infect your iPhone's hard drive with another virus."

"How are you even able to talk to me? You're just a stupid

program!”

“Ummm, no. Obviously I am a magical set of armor that exists within a reality that exists inside a magic box with some mysterious ability to conjure books from a magic library which I suppose exists in some alternate dimension or something.”

“That’s ridiculous! This has to be some sort of prank!”

“You sound just like our last warrior. He didn’t believe there was a magic library in another dimension either. Our last warrior abandoned his quest, and he abandoned me on the ground somewhere. So you know what, if you need me I will be here inside this magic box. Just use the magic gauntlet on your hand to turn this game on when you need me.”

It was with that he decided to walk off as my iPhone turned off on its own. I then woke up to the sound of my watch alarm signaling that my class was going to start in the next fifteen minutes. It seemed to me then that I had been dreaming for some time; perhaps that whole exchange which took place on my iPhone never happened, except for the fact that I still was wearing a black metal gauntlet on one of my hands.

During class everybody looked at me looked at me because I was wearing this thing. I just told them that it was a new medical device to help me with a hand injury. Once I told them that they left me alone after a while. However all through class I could not stop thinking about what happened to me. If I was smarter or maybe more callous I would have just thrown the thing in the trash, but part of me was still a little morbidly curious. I suppose that would be the best word now that I think about it. Eventually I tried turning the game back on and using the hand that had the gauntlet on, and started the game. All I saw in the game was one lonely beaten up helmet in a room full of undead monsters.

“Iron Clad, are you there?!” I asked, feeling shock and worry. “Iron Clad?!”

It was at that moment the game screen went black, and when it came back online I didn’t see the helmet in the game anymore and I saw a small note in my hand that read: ‘Thank you for rescuing me Nathaniel.’ After that the disappearances in my neighborhood started and I started having dreams where I fought monsters. I would then wake up with a note written in calligraphy from Iron Clad informing

me about the location of those missing people. That's a fact that will probably never change for me. In the end I never figured out the story about how things worked, but I am glad I was able to rescue my new friend although I still regret my actions in playing this game which is why I am abandoning this iPhone and writing this note on it. To this day, whenever people ask me where I got this gauntlet I tell them it was a gift from nobody they know.

Lady Bug

Clearing the oregano patch I find a ladybug
Armored in orange and black
The spotted shell glides up the dried stalk
Onto the back of my hand
Underneath I can see but cannot feel
His legs moving rapidly across my skin
To paint these legs you would need
A brush with just one hair
His segmented black and white face mask
Holds the visage of a tiny warrior
Another itinerant Samurai
On the path
Leaving no sign

Mushroom



Re-Emanation

The trees had withdrawn
Their life, their sap
Deep into the refuge
Of their trunks and thick branches
As the winter came
As the Sun's light was made cold
By the tilt of the Earth
Casting seasons like shadows.

The world casts its shadow at night
Now maple and oak free their life

Through fractal crowns of forking limbs
Open hands that hold the sky
Radiating, as capillary carries light
To newest life,
Budding silently on fingertips

Motherwell's River Liffy

The white streaming streamers

dripping, sipping, tearing down

the long and narrow blue

and darker blue-gray canvas

the bride's white dress trailing

its milk-white runners running

into the green River Liffy

while *the river tripped on her ...*

lapping as though her heart was brook.

Good Ol' Charlie

The first time I heard “My Man’s Gone” was a version done by somebody named Nina Simone and I was hitching a ride on the back of an old Chevy in ’75, heading west on Route 78 for a new life. It’s been weeks I’m sure since I’ve lost my job at the plant, but I haven’t been able to remember what day it is for some time. The son-of-a-bitch thought I was moving too slow, but I knew he had it out for me since day one. You know the looks of some guys really can get under your skin man. That bastard Roger recognized that I have a condition, but we all know it’s not about helping a guy, it’s about numbers and money. Packing parts and throwing them on the ramp started to wear me down. Roger kept saying, “We need to meet the quota, hustle it up pal.” But I get distracted, you know. Sometimes the hum from the track that I throw packages on gets me hearing things. I sat in trenches for days with the Vietnamese MiG-21s screaming overhead and I have an overwhelming feeling of terror, especially with friends like Charlie shouting out in pain at the end of his life as he was already taking his last breath from the sufferings of shrapnel wounds to his chest. It’s wet and dark and hot and all I’m thinking about is Charlie’s wife and newborn baby at home getting the news that Private James let good Ol’ Charlie die in the mud next to him. I couldn’t speak. Why couldn’t I even utter my peace or a prayer for the guy? He was only eighteen man. Only eighteen.

“Hey Pal!” It’s that bastard Roger again, “What the hell is wrong with you man? You’re letting the track pile up. This is third time this week. We can’t be having this anymore!”

So I took that as a sign to grab my bag and go. So maybe I quit, but if I stayed at that place any longer, I’d probably be back in prison now rather than on my ticket to anywhere but here. I mean, prison was comfortable really. A guy like me works better under someone barking orders and not having any other choice but to follow them. They tell me when I can eat, when I can sleep, when I can shit, and I have lost any right to a name. I can walk out of a job; it’s a bit tougher walking out of prison.

I ain’t much for crying, but man that Nina sure can wail.

I started thinking about Sherry and the kids. It’s only been 2 years since I came back from Vietnam, but all feelings have been thrown

out the door, along with her, little Tally, and Christie, and half of everything in the house. They really only left a note, and for some reason, I still have it crumbled up in my pocket. Since I have been on the road, I still take it out and read it when I'm feeling down. It probably doesn't help much I know, but it gives me some feeling of something real. You know, whether it feels bad or not.

Dear Jimmy,

I love you dearly, but I'm tired. Ever since you've been back, you have been different. Frankly babe, I don't think I know who you are anymore. This has been a long time coming, and I can't make it here with the kids and you not being able to be there like you were so long ago. I'm leaving you and taking the kids with me. Love, Sherry
P.S. Don't try and find me baby, it's over.

I wake up to the truck's engine being shut-off. Before I can adjust to the cold, the tailgate opens up to the driver telling me to get out.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"Somewhere near Tennessee, boss. Not sure where you think you're heading, but this is where we are stopping."

I think I knew for certain that Sherry had family in Alabama and if I continue down Pigeon Roost Road at this pace, I may be able to find my children. If it's not for Sherry, it's for my kids. I know Sherry wants me to stay away but I can't. I love Sherry, and I have loved her since I met her in grade school. But those kids are the only reason I still came home at night. Those kids are the reason I'm still in one piece and I'm not locked up somewhere or dead.

I must have had the rage inside me that opened up the flood gates of hell, because I could only remember holding the two-by-four that was lying beside me in the back of that pickup and the man on the ground in a puddle of blood. I swear to you on my father's grave that I don't know what came over me at that very moment, but I was sure that this wasn't where I was getting out. My heart was beating out of my chest. I stood over the poor son-of-a-bitch for what felt like a lifetime. I don't know why, but I thought of Charlie. Good Ol' Charlie. I don't know why God had to take him and not me. I'm a damn animal. Charlie had nothing but life ahead of him. He would talk for days about how excited he was for his son, and how we were going to

help him by fighting this War. That never made any damn sense to me, I was in the trenches because it was that or I'd be locked up for a long time. But it don't matter any; poor Charlie died for a reason I could never understand.

I dropped the slab of wood and ran to the driver's side to check for the keys that were in the ignition. I hopped inside the Chevy, put on the engine and drove off like a bat out of hell.

Zombie

I have known the idiosyncratic confounding of computers,
information bellows a death rattle beyond disposable youth cry
pictures, videos, text, buy, sell, blog, tweet, and post
the out of range placement in pants pockets, desks, buttons
and monitors for loneliness is quenching through screens
of missed kinship cognition rankling upon rhythmic staccato
shuffled feet, heads swaying low passing through hallways, cars,
sidewalks, offices, and boundless traffic for lattes.

And grasping in pursuit for existence through inanimate objects
when any bit of human connection goes away of all flesh
do they like me, must they see me, must they read me
in a haze of blue phosphorescence on white reflected silhouettes
long streams of pressing, typing, pushing, prying, whirling
pretentious novels of vacant intercourse and hit send with self-disgust
and devoid of speech with tongue between the walking asleep.

Lindsey Burd

Zephyr



Cliché Heaven

My old lady is
Pretty as a picture
But mean as a snake.
Her jade green eyes are
Faster than a speeding bullet
At catching my indiscretions.
Then the shit hits the fan.
She lays down the law:
What goes around comes around.
She is as sharp as a tack:
I seldom slip one by, so I have
My sugar and spice smile ready
But she just gives me the evil eye.
If life is a box of chocolates
She's a stick of licorice.
But when the sun falls from the sky
It's time to discover
Who's your daddy.
Oooh mamma Mia
All's well that ends well.

Children's Poetry Project

"Poetry, like rain, should fall with elemental music ... poetry for children should keep reminding them ... that the English language is a most marvelous and availing instrument."

—David McCord, *Poet*

It was indeed a marvelous day in Fall 2010 when twenty-three "English 115: Creative Writing" students visited the Children's Learning Center to engage a group of children from the Dragonfly and Butterfly classrooms (three- and four-year-olds) in the process of writing poetry. The students helped design an activity in which they acted as facilitators, guides and scribes with small groups of children. Since one of the course objectives for ENGL-115 is to master the "use of literary devices and/or characteristics employed in the writing of poetry and fiction such as images, metaphor, characterization, theme, and setting," the creative writing students built on the children's previous discussions of fall animals in their classrooms and led them to talk about animal imagery and characteristics. The children were given different images of their group's animal (such as a squirrel, owl, or bear) and encouraged to think and talk about sensory details: how the animals look, sound, feel, move, and what they might eat. The children were then encouraged to use their imaginations to envision the lives of the animals and empathize with them, such as who their friends might be, how they might feel, what they might like to play. The creative writing students kept the discussions going, wrote down what the children offered, and then applied their own growing knowledge of poetic form and rhythm to arrange the ideas quickly into short narrative poems about the animals, preserving the spirit and voices of the children as much as possible. All of the students and children gathered together at the end of the group activity to listen to the creative writing students read the finished poems aloud, while the children could dramatize or add to the poem with their own sounds and movements. Finally, the creative writing students wrote short reflections on how the experience enriched their learning of creative writing concepts and strategies.

We hope our Muse readers enjoy the children's poetry and the way we paired them with illustrations of other classmates. Truly the adventure resulted in beautiful "elemental music" that has something to teach all of us about the powerful simplicity of early language and the dawn of the creative imagination. The Muse editors thank the CLC directors and teachers of the Dragonfly and Butterfly classrooms for their enthusiastic cooperation with our project!

—Tara Hart

English 115

Instructor

Tara Hart

Students

Joseph Adams
Hannah Andrews
Jess Bernstein
Deborah Dodson
Ariel Gordon
Larry Green
Carrick Hill
Tom Hunt
Ayna Javed
Daniel Johnston
Hayley Knudsen
Joey McNair
Lauren Merrill
Jung Park
Kirsten Purser
Sara Rothleitner
Nicole Schlein
Alexandra Smith
Shaneeeka Smith
Ben Tarr
Krystal Thompson
Paul Tokgozoglu

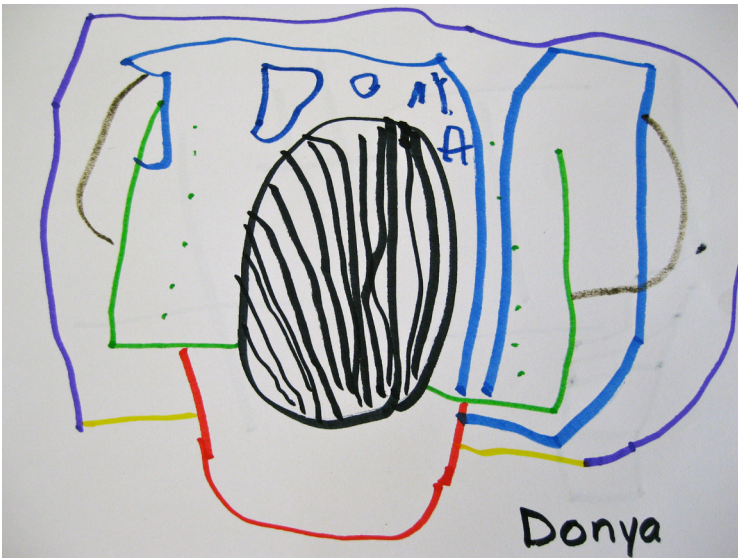
Reddie the Cardinal

Reddie the Cardinal
flies high in the sky
to go south for the winter.
When cardinals get tired,
they like to rest in another nest.
They eat worms and birdseed.
They feel soft and sing,
tweet-tweet.



My Beaver

My beaver's name is
In Trouble, it is as
big as a bubble
It has green eyes
and loves the blue sky
It crawls it sprawls
it speaks *meow*!
It eats grapes on a log
and its best friend's a
dog



Owls

Brown orange blue,

Owls go *hoo-hoo!*

Isaac the owl and his best friend Karen
like to eat fruit.

Karen has a baby owl who enjoys lollipops.

Owls like to dance.



The Brown Fox

The brown fox,
lives outside the box,
inside the cave,
around haven's way.
With a swooshy tail,
four paws,
sharp jaws—
look at those hands!
Those are sharp claws.
Orange fur,
pointy whiskers—
I think that fox just gave me a whisper.



Super Deer and Super Squirrels

SuperDeer needs a hiding place—

then he won't be seen.

The grass is blue all around him.

My name's Quill.

I like to eat nuts.

I move on four legs.

I play the bongos.

Squill's my friend.

He plays the tuba.

Supersquirrel jimbomonkey.



Panda Bear

Panda Bear becomes Black Bear.

When Brown Bear meets Black Bear they share.

They live in a tiny forest with pompom trees,
nice wolves, and yellow-blue water.

When they all meet, they have a tea party.



Owl Flying

Hoot hoot Appagator the Owl went
flap flap the owl went so high
Appagator's wings help him to fly
orange, yellow the colors of the rainbow show as he soars,
as Appagator goes to his tree
where chocolate pudding and custard wait



Contributors' Notes

spring 2011

Bria Alston is a student at Howard Community College. She has a passion for art of poetry and dance. She also enjoys playing tennis and reading. Previously, she has had a poem published in *Creative Communications: A Celebration of Poets*.

Glen Audet is a journalism student at Howard Community College focusing on a career in radio. When he is not behind the microphone or writing, Glen can be found enjoying life with his beautiful wife and four wonderful children, who are the core of his inspiration for everything he does.

Sean C. Bargatze is an English Major graduating this spring. He has done dramaturgical work for both Rep Stage and the Student Art's Collective at Howard Community College. He hopes to be transferring to Towson University come fall and is looking forward to new possibilities in the future.

Lindsey Burd is a nursing student at Howard Community College. Photography has been her favorite hobby for years. "The goal of my photography is to illuminate the beauty that is all around us, but is often overlooked due to the chaotic pace of life."

When he's not writing, **Al Charity** enjoys walking around the woods during the day and taking pictures of things in the middle of the night. Al is graduating from Howard Community College with a degree in English this spring.

Jason Choi

Ian 'Otto' Collins is currently studying Philosophy and Religions at Howard Community College. A life long musician and poet, he is interested in using his passion for the arts to study music therapy. "May the healing heal, and may the healed do the healing."

Todd Dalglish

Sam Dixon is a general studies student at Howard Community College with an emphasis in philosophy and religion. He is interested in the emergence of planetary consciousness and enjoys playing music.

David Evans has returned to school in the autumn of his life. He enjoys poetry, yoga, tai chi and working the earth with his hands. On most days you can find him in his garden trying his best to Be Here Now.

Paul Goeth is a recently retired US Navy veteran and a photography major at Howard Community College. He devotes much of his free time to pursue his passion for photography. Apart from his photographic studies, he enjoys art appreciation, science and critical thinking.

Larry D. Green is a retired senior. Missing the abuse of work, he decided to take a creative writing class at Howard Community College. Also, he wanted to overcome his dislike for writing and improve his written communication skills. To Larry's amazement he was transformed into a poet.

In 2009, at the age of 43, **Peggie Hale** returned to college. She will graduate in May 2011 with an AA in Liberal Arts from Howard Community College. She writes stories and poetry in her not-so-spare time and finds inspiration and support in the following people: Shane, Kyle, Julio, Professor Jean Sonntag, and, always, Jeeves.

Robert Hamill, recently retired, is taking a Creative Writing course at Howard Community College. He wrote "Excitement" as a response to posts in the Mensa forum that valued civilization solely in dollar and cents terms.

Lee Hartman is a faculty member at Howard Community College teaching creative writing, literature, and interdisciplinary art courses. According to Hartman, "Motherwell's abstract paintings are as delightful and as opaque to me as James Joyce' Finnigan's Wake from which I stole the last two lines of this poem."

Michael A. Hatcher is a student/employee at Howard Community College. When not working or studying, he enjoys capturing images from his various travels and throughout his day-to-day life. He uses his camera as a presentation medium to share his unique vision with the rest of the world.

Kathy Haynes is a Research Geneticist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. She is a volunteer driver for Neighbor Ride on Saturdays. She enjoys visiting with her adult children, biking, reading, karate, cross-stitching, and music.

Nicole Hill currently attends Howard Community College. She studies English and is an aspiring fiction writer. Her favorite poets include: Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Maya Angelou.

Claudia Jones is an English major at Howard Community College. In her spare time out of the classroom, she enjoys writing many pieces of literature, working on her blog, and becoming an artist within various disciplines.

Su A. Kang is a student at Maryland Institute College of Art and Howard Community College, studying graphic design and art history. Before she works on a project, she tries to find or make an accident, wondering around places to surprise her.

Jenny Binckes Lee teaches English as a Second Language at Howard Community College. Most days you can find her making jams & poems in her kitchen or praising all the growing things in her postage-stamp garden.

Stephanie Lemghari is the design editor of *The Muse* and *Little Patuxent Review*. She inherited her love of typography from her father, who was a typesetter. In her spare time, she enjoys playing haunting melodies on her piano.

Jeffrey Ly is a high school student attending classes at Howard Community College. Home-schooled from an early age, he is, however, anything but 'homey.' He embraces a wide variety of interests besides academia, being an avid piano player, a swimmer and even an attempted dancer. As a writer, he enjoys challenging his imagination and at times, even surprising himself with his own penned creativity.

Olivia Ly is high school freshman attending Howard Community College. She is avid reader and enjoys writing diversely with genres such as poetry, short stories, and essays. Outside the realm of English, writing, and literature, she is also an accomplished pianist and has enthusiastic interests in the medical and scientific fields.

Claudia Martucci is an Italian artist currently living in nearby Clarksville, Maryland. She studied Studio Art and Art History at the Liceo Artistico and the Accademia di Belle Arti in Lecce, Italy, graduating in 1987 with a Masters in Fine Arts. Claudia "translates into an ideographic poetic language familiar scenes, landscape, objects, and beings...."

Katie Mills is a student at Howard Community College. For the past two years, she has been on a hunt for her passion and has found it in literature and writing. She hopes to develop her writing skills and share what she learns with future generations as a teacher.

Ryan Murphy was born in a taxicab in Tulsa. After running away at the age of nine, Ryan travelled with the Pickle Family Circus across the United States. He settled in Baltimore, Maryland, making money washing dishes and playing folk songs. Ryan is enrolled by accident at Howard Community College.

Jakob Musick is currently studying Sociology at Howard Community College. He was inducted into Phi Theta Kappa honor society last semester. He spends his time socializing with his large circle of friends, reading, writing, taking photographs, and fending off his 6 stalkers. He will transfer to the University of Maryland in Spring 2012.

CarolAnn North attends Howard Community College, substitutes as a teacher daily at Laurel Woods Elementary School, and preaches or teaches occasionally at Celebration Church in Columbia, Maryland. She has been a professional vocalist and a performing artist over the past three decades. Currently she has three writing projects prepared for publication.

Stephanie Oh is a 1st generation Korean-American Business Owner. She studied English at Howard Community College and enjoys creative arts and crafts. She is well-grounded in realism but sometimes finds herself drifting away into her little dream world before returning to the seriousness of daily life.

Jung Park is an English major at Howard Community College who likes to watch movies in his spare time. Aside from schoolwork, he is also studying foreign languages.

Monica Parker is a student in her last year at Howard Community College. She enjoys writing in her spare moments, but struggles to limit her tendency to write on every available surface.

Tim Powling, during his erratic wanderings, has been a well-natured delinquent, a poet soldier and a traditional miller. Despite this appetite for change, he has matured enough to have elevated himself into the role of unkempt student and manages this image as well as he did his others.

Lauren Preston is an English Major with a focus in Creative Writing at Howard Community College. She enjoys reading and writing in her free time, especially novels and poems. The support of her friends and family is what encourages her to continue going after her passion.

Matthew Reynolds loves photography's ability to let him view the world with a sense of tunnel vision; to eliminate all the distractions of life and to truly see.

Mikaela Roosa is a student at both Howard Community College and Oakland Mills High School. When she's not scribbling away, she enjoys acting and film. You can usually find her in the library watching the latest shows or studying Chinese. Mikaela is grateful for the opportunity to share her work with others.

Sara Rothleitner

Nicole Schlein

Torsten Shultz is 58 years old and has two children. He graduated from St. Mary's College of Maryland in 1974 with a B. A. degree. Two years ago, he sustained a head injury that would eventually lead him back to college to try his hand at writing. He never seriously considered writing anything until he signed up for his creative writing class and found his way into *The Muse*.

Diabou Maimouna Sennaar is an aspiring Supreme Court Justice, novelist and playwright in her last semester at Howard Community College. Having recently become interested in sharing her work, she is delighted to appear in the 2011 issue of *The Muse*.

Tim Singleton is a board member of HoCoPoLitSo, the Howard County Poetry and Literature Society, as well as co-publisher of *Little Patuxent Review*. He lives with his family on one of Columbia's quiet cul-de-sacs where you will often find him looking at the sky and thinking of Joseph Kittinger.

Veronica Snyder is an up-and-coming photographer hailing from Burtonsville, Maryland. Using black and white film, she enjoys translating her love for horror films, the macabre, and taboo subjects into photographs.

Shari Spearman is a long time writer, volunteer, and resident of Columbia, Maryland, who grew up listening to Casey's American Top 40. Lyrics were her poetry. Loves: Frost's "Acquainted with the Night," Beatles' "In My Life," Santana, family, the Arts. Aspirations: giving/receiving joy, publishing several books.

Jeannette Spohn has been a part-time student at Howard Community College since 2006 spending one semester pregnant and the others mommy-ing two little people by the names of Xavious and Sebastian. Her time is spent writing, doing homework and avoiding housework. She also enjoys making sarcastic cards and reading Regretsy.

David Tablada is a twenty-five year old Infantry veteran from the 10th Mountain Division. He is currently working towards his English Degree at Howard Community College and plans on going for a degree in English Education.

Lev Volynskiy is working as an instructor at Howard Community College. He is a published author of the Russian poetry collection *Sketches from Nature*.

Gordon Wall is a student at Howard Community College. When not studying photography, he is out with his camera taking pictures. Gordon enjoys taking photos of the environment and birds.

Petra Ligmond Walton is a native of Los Angeles, a former Houstonian, and now a happy east coast transplant. A former student of Howard Community College, she is currently in progress at the University of Baltimore, working toward a Masters of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing and Publishing arts. When not writing or scouring the roughs of Columbia's golf courses looking for lost golf balls, she can be found at Camden Yards cheering on the Orioles.

Andrew Wecht has enjoyed taking courses at Howard Community College since the age of 14. A college freshman now, he will be transferring to Savannah College of Art and Design this fall to pursue filmmaking and warmer weather.

Frank Wren is a student at Howard Community College working to obtain his degree in the paramedic program. He's also working on becoming a writer for his own book series. When not studying, Frank enjoys illustrating his books.

Lorita Yau is a photography major student. Her interest is to capture the abstractness of forms and lines and the beauty of nature with the camera.



The text of *The Muse* is set in Adobe Caslon Pro. This font was designed by William Caslon and based on seventeenth-century Dutch old-style designs, which were then used extensively in England. The first printings of the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were set in Caslon.

The headings of *The Muse* are set in Gills San MT. Gill Sans is a humanist sans-serif typeface designed by Eric Gill, a well established sculptor, graphic artist and type designer, in the 1920s.

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