

The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

Editorial Committee

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Sylvia Lee

Rick Leith

William Lowe

Ryna May

Zachary Pajak

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Stephanie May

Cover Art

“In Her Fashions” by Dr. Ernest Williamson III



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Word-Weaving

Ready to carry it up—hold it aloft and help it soar.
 Often in writing,
 You barely have the luxury—
 Just bits here and there, of inspiration,
 And if you're lucky—an editor, or even rarer, a co-author.
 Instruments are not strong enough,
 At least not always,
 To do it on their own—in writing, you often need to *be* strong—
 It takes a while
 To find a partner in crime who isn't you yourself.
 Dancing and singing are very lucky—they don't need to make much
 sense—
 They can just be pretty and beautiful, with pure emotions slipping their
 way through the cracks of your brain,
 Nestling and finding a home.
 It's very difficult
 When you're on paper,
 To sing without a voice, or dance without a tune;
 You need to make the reader care.
 Word choice needed more than ever
 To pepper up a bland dialogue,
 Sentence fluency stirring a tasty broth,
 And characters for the ingredients—tastefully arranged, to produce the
 most exotic of flavors on the tongue—
 But without a recipe-plot, all nice, consistent, and more often than not,
 coherent
 It's easy to fall by the wayside, and have the readers reject the soup.
 You can't think too much when you write, though—save it for the recipe—
 Otherwise you'll trip and stumble,
 Discordant and strange.

Writing fiction is an odd little thing
 Words knocking around, waiting for release
 Put pen to the paper, don't be shy
 Just let the words loose.
 First one
 Then the other,
 As easy as stepping from foot to foot.
 But it's not like footsteps,
 Not entirely
 Footsteps don't normally spin into patterns like this,
 Unless you're dancing a joyous little tune.
 You can go fast-paced and whirling, conspiring to leave the audience
 breathless...
 Or slow and methodical and somber...
 But in a way, it's not a dance.
 Dance can't evoke fire, bring images to mind like a vivid mirage.
 They can't summon giant monsters,
 Fierce heroes,
 Whole characters out of the ether of your brain
 Just like words can.
 In a way, it can be like a violin,
 Singing out the words from note-to-note, playing along, and you *feel* every
 single word as it comes,
 The tempo the flats and the rests,
 All wrapped up in the package known as your memory, with more in store
 to come,
 But violins cannot do *everything* alone.
 They sometimes need help,
 Liftoff from another one of their kind:
 A simple piano partner
 Or an entire fleet of instruments.

My Metallic Light Blue Bike's Return

You know, I haven't told this to anyone even after my pop passed on. I saw a tiny six-year old on her bike the other day and it took me back.

I grew up, together with my sister and two brothers, in a poor suburb of Vitoria, Espirito Santo, one of the smallest states in Brazil. My mother was bartending at the local port's watering hole, where she met my father, a sailor on a merchant ship. Her big family migrated to Vitoria from a countryside region called Agua Doce do Norte when she was sixteen years old. My father was raised in Vitoria, and for both my parents elementary school was the limit of their formal education.

We lived on a hill in a shantytown on the outskirts of Vitoria. The streets lacked pavement, and during the wet season, the tropical rain made our lives more difficult, since everywhere that we needed to go to was located down the hill from our house. Our house had two bedrooms, a kitchen with a window looking out onto the orange roofs of the *favela* crowded on the hill, a small living room, and a bathroom. My elder brother and sister and I shared the same bedroom, and when the youngest brother was born, he stayed in the other bedroom with my parents.

My father's profession provided him with good pay, but he often managed to get himself fired from his contract jobs because of his short temper and for taking his position for granted. To boot, he was old fashioned macho, and did not allow my mother to have a job. As a sad result, my family was always in financial straits, and most of the time we had to procure necessities such as food and groceries on credit from the store owners at the bottom of the hill.

Pockets empty and not willing to show his face at the local grocery store, my father frequently asked me to go to Ana's little hole-in-the-wall to get one thing or another on credit, because he figured that Ana, the grocery store's owner, would be hard put to refuse a sweet little peewee in need. I hated facing Ana with every bit of my undersized being as she grumpily added another entry to my family's growing debt roster, but I had to obey my father.

A couple of girls in my neighborhood whose fathers managed to hold down a steady paying job or two were lucky enough to get a Cecizinha

(Se-si-zi-nya). The name originated from *cestino*, the Italian word for "basket," in keeping with the fact that it was Italian-made and had a little basket in the front. If you're going to dream, you better dream big, and this was my big dream: an impossibly cute Cecizinha girl's bicycle of my own with a little bell. Just thinking about it gave me goose bumps, but unfortunately, this was not a luxury my parents could afford.

Nonetheless, I was determined to ride a bicycle at any price, and I would sneak on top of my elder brother's bicycle when he would come home for lunch. The only problem was that my brother's bike was much too large for his pint-sized sister. It was an old bike model with a triangle, and I had to be creative, putting my leg through the triangle of the bicycle, my body inclined to one side, but my hands firmly in control of the direction, like a race jockey on top of a huge stallion. And every day, rain or shine, like a stubborn mule, I went down the hill trying to ride this bike.

I remember that when I was seven years old, my father finally succeeded holding on to his job that whole year, so my family was able to live comparatively well for a while. It was then that the magic came and Daddy decided to realize my dream. He bought me a metallic light blue Cecizinha as a surprise—when the store delivered it at my home I could not believe it was true: my own bike with a basket and a bell and everything!

The minute I saw it, I was overwhelmed with mixed emotions: I wanted to cry from happiness, I wanted to jump up and down and say loudly and with conviction that my father is the greatest and everything that bitch Ana used to say about him was not true, but at the same time I had the feeling of disbelief—has my dream really come true? Was it right there in front of me? As a child, I decided to give the benefit of the doubt to my pop and just go crazy riding my bike.

All my friends wanted to ride it, but I wouldn't let them. I was in giddy kiddy bliss, and though still not a very good bicycle rider, I got on it as soon as I could. Riding on this small bike after trying to ride my brother's enormous one was a piece of cake. On that day, I rode my bike down the hill several times, and could feel the wind blowing on my face and tangling my long curly hair; it was a feeling of freedom and pleasure.

That had been a good year for all of us, but, unhappily the magic ended all too abruptly. I still remember that night, when I heard my father, drunk, telling mom that he had lost his job once again. Sadly, this happened

before he could finish paying the monthly payments on my bicycle, and my beautiful metallic light blue Cecizinha had to be returned. I was again drowning in a boiling pot of emotions—I knew that I shouldn't have trusted him! He betrayed me once again. I was thinking that Ana, the grocery store owner, was right about him.

I was very heartbroken about losing my bike, yet what really devastated me was to see my Daddy trying to choke back his tears, walking down the hill while carrying away his daughter's dream on the long way back to the store. I could not bring myself to be angry with him because I thought this was a lot of humiliation for a father and that was bad enough.

Years later, when my father's irresponsible behavior had changed, my family transcended most of the hardships of that difficult time and we went on to a better, decent life...but sometimes, when I hear a bicycle's little bell, I remember my Cecizinha and my pop.

Sucker For Romance

I love too hard.

I fall too fast.

I hold onto pieces of the past.

I burn down bridges.

I play in the ash.

I'm blinded by memories; they cause me to crash.

I play with fire while I dance in the rain.

I am a sucker for romance, because I fall in love with pain.

I break my own heart and give it away.

I cause people to leave, but I beg them to stay.

I flip the script when I don't even have a part.

I ruin friendships before they get a chance to start.

I am a sucker for romance because it comes with an ending.

I am in love with this story because the end is the beginning.

I Walked a Mile

I walked a mile
 I walked a mile
 I walked a mile in the shoes
 of a man blazing blues
 The mile became a while
 as the blues began to cruise
 The cruise became at ease
 like a warm summer breeze
 The breeze
 just up and stopped
 while beads of sweat began to drop
 The thicker the blues that I choose
 the thicker my moods would ooze
 as I doo-wopped

I walked a mile
 I walked a mile
 I walked a mile down a trail
 of a winding weaving tale
 I played for hell
 and very well
 but not one coin
 fell in my pail
 back up behind me
 sang and wailed
 my lips blew blue
 at my harps sharp shreeeeel
 then went pale
 across the scale
 from one to ten
 and back again
 I walked a mile....
 I walked a mile.....

I walked a mile
 with my strings
 and pounder and wandered
 on heavy things
 I plucked and picked
 I picked and plucked
 I stayed played on deeper thoughts
I walked a mile a mile a mile a mile(((((((((((
 I walked a mile.

Whale Man



Terror at Thirteen and a Half Feet

It looked insurmountable. The numerous cement handholds, cast in colors I can only imagine were inspired by some fruit-flavored breakfast cereal, wound their way upward. They were anchored to a wooden façade that attempted to pass for stone, its true nature given away by chipping paint and the occasional roofing nail. I looked down. I'd ascended a generous two feet. Solid progress. "Use the rope ladder, stupid!" The shout came from somewhere far below and I ignored it. No self-respecting mountaineer takes the rope ladder. I climbed steadily, pausing occasionally to marvel at how small the people below looked. "They look like children!" I said to myself with a grin before remembering, "Oh right, that's Group B." Group B was comprised of six- and seven-year-old girls. No more distractions, I needed to focus. I continued climbing and when at last I reached the top, a daunting eighteen feet, the peak was not capped in snow nor could I look down on endless, green valleys. To be more specific, the peak was layered with a quarter inch of dust, and while the ground below was, in fact, green, it was of the less verdant and more builder's grade carpet variety. Perhaps, though, that shrill whistling coming from above was the arctic wind shrieking its way among the gathered clouds? No, I'm fairly certain it was just a loose air vent amid the vast sea of generic, off-white office tiles that passed for a ceiling. I had just gained the summit of Mount Supreme... Sports Club. Had I known of the monster that lurked below, a monster that was indeed abominable but likely weighed no more than 50 pounds, I never would have set hand or foot on that rock wall.

When I was fifteen years old, I spent that summer and several more thereafter working for the Columbia Association through a seasonal program for kids called "Introduction to Sports Camp." Our base of operations was the geometrically uninspired Supreme Sports Club building, which looks something like a series of beige-colored cement cubes someone stacked together haphazardly like an infant's building blocks. During the summer, Introduction to Sports Camp had a whole cube to call its own, which included roughly seven racquetball courts, a storage room, an office area, and a large, open space containing the previously mentioned rock-climbing wall. At that age I worked as a CIT, or "counselor in training," which today I'm reasonably certain was a convenient business loophole to get around child labor laws. Each morning, my time as a CIT was spent outside at nearby Hopewell Field,

hauling sports equipment and ten-gallon water coolers from one end of the Mojave to the other. Well, maybe not the Mojave, but that seemed close enough in the July heat carrying roughly fifty pounds on each of my arms and trekking across a hundred or so yards of brown, sun-parched grass. After lunch, however, came a merciful reprieve from the scorching heat as we spent the afternoons either indoors in our Supreme Sports Cube, at the Hopewell Pool, or in the local bowling alley.

The camp itself was broken down into groups labeled A through F, with A to C comprising the younger kids and D through F consisting of the older ones. As a CIT, I had no group of my own and thus spent most afternoons milling around the premises trying to help out where I could. It was on one such afternoon that, after taking half a dozen boys to the men's room at the request of a counselor, the winds of fate billowed up around me. In retrospect, I'm reasonably certain I must have been downwind of a pig farm.

"Hey Casey, are you busy?" a voice called from down the hall. I was loitering outside the racquetball court where the kids I had just taken to the bathroom were now ensconced slinging foam balls at one another. I glanced up at the sound of my name and froze. It was Naomi. She was two years my senior and had the kind of classic beauty I associate with Ingrid Bergman or Marilyn Monroe. She had golden curls that fell in ringlets to her shoulders, soft blue eyes, flawless skin, and the kind of trim, athletic figure that somehow retained its curves and seemed almost anatomically impossible. Like every gawky, teenage male receiving the attention of an attractive young woman, I continued the time-honored tradition of turning into an inanimate object before stammering like an incoherent idiot. Did she play her part in this adolescent theater production and give me the funny look I deserved? Yes, she did.

To my credit, I recovered quickly enough and replied, "Er, sorry, what's up Naomi? Need some help?"

"Yeah, I'm trying to help some of the girls climb the rock wall, but the rest just wanted to go up in the loft, and they're getting a little rowdy. Do you think you can maybe stay up there with them for a bit and keep them calm?"

"Sure, no problem!" I said entirely too eagerly and was already moving before I'd finished talking. Luckily for me, this situation afforded the

perfect opportunity to do something needlessly asinine and dangerous in hopes of impressing an attractive member of the opposite sex. Rather than taking the rope ladder up to the loft like someone to whom sanity and self-preservation are dear friends, I chose to climb up to the top of the 18-foot-high wall using the sparse handholds. Then, I slid down the summit along the sheer, sloping edge and into the loft which was a less-imposing 13-and-a-half feet from the ground. Who risks a nearly 20-foot fall to impress a woman he barely knows? Your average adolescent male, that's who.

I wore a triumphant grin as I looked down, hoping to catch her eye and bask in the adoration my showboating deserved and utterly convinced Naomi must be staring at me in awe. Instead, she was doing exactly what she *should* have been doing, working dutifully to spot the young girl who was climbing laterally along the wall in case the girl fell. She had missed the entire spectacle, and doubtless the egg on my face was ripe with salmonella.

It was then that the chorus of giggles echoing behind me brought me up short. So eager was I to please that the reality of what I'd agreed to had not actually registered. My eyes darted about the loft nervously. There were four of them in all. Two of the girls sat together, one kneeling behind the other braiding her hair. A third was toying with the Velcro of her shoes, her eyes staring off into the middle distance. The fourth unabashedly held my gaze entirely too long while chewing on a strand of dirty blond hair. They were young Group B girls, and I was neck deep in shark-infested waters.

"You're bad, Mr. Casey," said Velcro. "We aren't sposed to climb to ta top." The word *the* came out as *ta* because she was missing her two front teeth.

"Naughty, naughty, bad, bad boy!" the Braider and Braidee began to chant in unison before erupting into more giggles.

"Issh okay, Mishter CayShee" said the dirty blonde around her mouthful of hair. "I won't tell Missh Naomi."

My rapid breathing had nothing to do with the thinning air of altitude. I was approaching hyperventilation because I had no idea how to handle these four. Fortunately enough, Braider, Braidee, and Velcro decided I was boring and began singing some incomprehensible song about a pink

flamingo, a dingo, and the much more memorable canine from the song “There Was a Farmer Had a Dog.”

“Girls, keep it down a little if you can, please,” I said. I said it mostly because I had no idea what else to say, and I was there to be the voice of authority.

Hair chewer caught my eye again and after a solid three count of staring me down said, “I like you, Mishtur CayShee.”

I smiled faintly and said, “Uh huh, I’m glad you do. I try my best to be nice to all the kids here.”

I hoped I’d imagined the twinkle in her eye before she went on. “No, Mishter CayShee, I *really* like you.” I noted the waters weren’t just shark-infested but also uncharted. Here be dragons...

“Thish ish what my shishter doesh when she wantsh a boy to like her back.”

“Her sister?” I thought and looked on in bewilderment as she took the hem of her pink T-shirt in both hands. As it lifted past her bellybutton, I saw the horror on my face mirrored back at me in the pupils of her eyes before they were covered by the shirt. Whether she simply meant to flash me or if the shirt came all the way off as a harbinger of still worse things to come, I have no idea. I was not about to find out.

After her face was obscured by the shirt, I turned and vaulted the safety rail to the loft in a feat of gymnastic prowess I had no idea I was capable of. Unfortunately, in my abject terror, I failed to realize that Naomi and the rest of the group had moved all the safety mats away from the rock wall, and they were now doing jumping jacks and somersaults on them some twenty feet away. Then gravity and I had a brief misunderstanding as I silently, yet boldly stated, “I can fly!” to which gravity replied “*Bzzzzzt*, wrong answer.” After a couple pain-free seconds to reflect on my recent choices, I felt my ankle wrench painfully as I hit the ground with brutal force. Nevertheless, I came up running and was down the hall with Naomi’s voice echoing behind me. I ran, then limped, until I was well beyond the boundaries of our cube and cowered in the first men’s room I found.

When I crept into our afternoon meeting with my ankle surreptitiously taped up courtesy of an old first aid kit I’d found in our storage room, the entire staff was staring at me. My boss, Jay, tried to keep his face neutral but before long erupted and said, “You wanna tell me why in the hell you did something so extremely stupid in front of a bunch of kids that now wanna be every bit as stupid as you are? That damn fool ass nonsense doesn’t belong here and you know it. You could’ve landed on one of those kids, man! If they’d been on that wall what the hell you think woulda happened?” I’d jumped clear of the wall by a good five feet, but that detail of my glorious two seconds as Superman was evidently immaterial.

I could see Naomi looking at me somewhat guiltily, and I guessed she felt bad for telling Jay about my acrobatics and ensuing sprint. “Sorry, boss.” I said, trying to stall. I could either lie and hope for the best or come clean and tell him what really transpired. The latter wasn’t happening.

“Uh, a yellowjacket flew down my shirt, and I knew it was going to sting me, but I didn’t want to tear my jersey off or swear in front of several little girls!” It was the best I could do. The alternative was getting grief from everyone on the staff about my impromptu peep show for the next month and a half. His deeply wrinkled brow, glaring eyes, and flaring nostrils told me everything I needed to know regarding whether or not he believed me, but mercifully he let it go. Others, including Naomi, looked more sympathetic.

When the meeting finally ended, she asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said, not meeting her eyes.

“You sure? That was quite a fall. I should’ve told you I was moving the mats in case the girls wanted to get down from the loft or something.”

“No, really, I’m fine ’cept for this damn bee sting.” I made a show of rubbing my upper back where the imaginary yellowjacket had left its imaginary mark, complete with the requisite wincing and grimacing to hopefully sell the performance.

“Well, thanks again for helping me out today. It really made the things a lot easier. Any chance you’d wanna help me at the pool tomorrow?”

“No.”

The Curl of a Leaf

and the shadow under—
 The sky changes,
 one weather
 to another. Who sits
 here, watching and
 counting, as dandelion
 silk starts to cloud
 this view?

A robin's last worm
 before, perhaps,
 a storm; grey air
 and the leaf
 goes silver.

Cydweli

I chase your umbrella
 and damp, black jumper
 up curling stairs
 over tower-mirror-puddles
 listening for
 the textured echo
 of your voice
 on stone—
 a folk song
 in your own language,
 layered and deep,
 blending with the
 thousand tiny sounds
 of a leaky castle.

Until, found—
 a playful creature
 hiding in the kitchens.
 And I join you,
 for sheltered teasing
 and historical
 inaccuracy.
 Falling silent,
 I can almost feel
 the stitches of
 laughing cheeks
 as the picture changes
 and I notice
 your dimples.

Bits and Pieces

It was 1966, I was twenty-two years-old, a medic and a psychiatric technician during the Vietnam War. I remember what I believed when I entered the Army—that the war was the sole cause for the physically and mentally wounded soldiers. On my first day at an Army hospital in the hills of Pennsylvania I walked through the corridor past rooms filled with the physically wounded. Some soldiers in or next to their beds were connected by tubes to intravenous stands, with solutions drip, drip, dripping into the patient. One soldier was in a clear plastic tent and I could hear the rhythmic, swooshing sound of oxygen pumping like lungs. A burn patient was enclosed in a hammock while a medic turned a handle as if the soldier were on a barbecue spit. Another soldier had his neck wrapped in white gauze except for the dime-sized metal opening below his Adam's apple. His chest rose as the hole sucked air inward and made pfffff sound as he exhaled.

I could see that bits and pieces of the soldiers were missing: gauze bandage over an eye or ear; an empty sleeve stapled to a shirt's shoulder; crutches for missing feet or legs. Wheelchairs were everywhere. It seemed obvious to me. It was the war; the war was responsible for these wounded soldiers.

I exited the main hospital, crossed the narrow base road and followed a mulched pathway over a grassy knoll to a two-story building that hid secrets; the place where the Army kept the psychologically wounded. I saw young men watching me from the second floor through thick-wired screened windows.

On the psych ward I saw every type of behavior and illness: Paranoid schizophrenia; catatonia; manic-depressives; obsessive-compulsives; soldiers with delusions and hallucinations; drug and alcohol abuse; and antisocial personality disorders—a person who disregards and violates the rights of others. I had known guys like that in high school. Here on the psych wards the damaged part of the soldier was on the inside. No bandage marked the entrance wound. The war had injured the mind.

During my two years on the ward I caught glimpses of the soldiers' past: a visit from fathers, mothers, wives, girlfriends, rabbis and priests; contributors to the healing process to repair the broken part caused by the war. But I also learned during that time there were soldiers who had

psychological problems before the war; before the firefights; the battles; the explosions; the fire and smoke, the death. For some the illness had shown itself from the first day of basic training, with the constant yelling, "Out of your bunks, Now! Now! Give me twenty. Now! Now! Crawl faster. Now! Now!"—The marches, the physical exhaustion, the separation from home, the fear of the unknown.

Damage to some soldiers had been done years before by an abusive father, a smothering mother, having no friends, or bullied by classmates. Whatever defense mechanism that had kept their illness in check in civilian life had now failed; war was not the cause but instead the catalyst. I learned that each of them, each of us, takes something from all of the visitors in our life, the good, the bad and the indifferent. And this I believe: we are all bits and pieces, bits and pieces.

Birch Bark

We planted this tree together,
This sapling of birch,
In the springtime
Of our youth.

Fifteen years we've helped it grow,
Kept branches neatly pruned,
Each one a bone-white choice,
Discarded and left behind us.

What storms it has weathered!
Ones of terrible, howling fury,
Or the deep, lingering cold
Of the unvoiced hurt.

When those winter depths steal over us,
And with earnest eyes so full of fear,
I hear you whisper, "But the bark,
It flakes and falls away...is it not sick?"

"No, love, no. It is quite well,
For those tattered remnants,
Of what was once so tangible to us both,
Are merely the past and the wood beneath is hale as ever."

December Sky



To YouTube

This morning I spent two hours watching hair tutorials on YouTube
and learned for the hundredth time that I have been doing it all wrong.
Last time I learned that I was not using too much shampoo—
Curse the fiend who slathers “pea-sized amount” between “lather” and
“rinse”—

And this time I learn the purpose of washing only the roots,
because it is inevitable that the rest should trickle down.
You can learn anything on YouTube.

My mother is white with thin, straight, and now-graying blonde hair.
My mess of brown curls has always confounded her.
So I watch hours of tutorials on YouTube.
Girls with perfect curls guide my hands—
This is how you twist and wrap your hair for before bed—
and lay me to sleep on a satin pillowcase—
Satin—It reduces frizz and resists dryness.
But no product could rid me of this frizz
So I won't even try.

Okay, maybe once.
“Your hair could use some help.”
Mom comments on my curls, my curls
obscuring my peripheral vision but
tighter than usual, and less frizzy. This is a triumph and—
This is a triumph—
But I tie my hair back into its usual ponytail.

Next summer, I promise myself. Next summer.
I'll go to work with my mane unleashed and my coworkers will ask to
touch it.
And I will be proud, and I will let them, and when they ask about it,

I will concede that YouTube taught me and
I don't know if I want children.
I don't know if I will try to have them or adopt,
and I don't know if I'll have a little girl, or
if she'll be mixed and if she'll want curly or straight
or hot pink or silver or pitch black or
no hair at all but
whatever it takes to get there
my daughter will not learn from YouTube.

Birdhouses



Bird-Like

I'm taking my bird on a walk today.
Not by choice, of course.
Actually, if it were up to me,
this bird would stay in its cage.

Oh, but the way it tweeted and tweeted
kai come, kai come
I just couldn't refuse

So she came.
She walks behind me,
tweeting about this,
tweeting about that.
Man, I whisper, does she ever stop chirping?

No, she tweets back.
And she flutters her wings here,
she flutters her wings there.

It's a good thing I took her
on this walk because
one day
she'll fly away
completely.

Archiving

My bony index finger, with its distinctly un-manicured nail, traces a curve of the face captured in the photo on my nightstand. Its image stirs vivid memories; the feel of her loose dark hair and high cheek bones. My own dark eyes focus on her hauntingly beautiful ones as they sparkle back at me. Her scent lingers in the air of my mind; I breathe deeply, bathing myself in dreamy wisps of sandalwood. A rap on my bedroom door crashes into my silent reverie.

“Yeah,” I say.

“The gloss you wanted.”

Grabbing my wallet, I scramble to open my door. My younger sister, Izzy, stares at me. Her newly manicured black and white nails, with spider web tips, dangle the tube in front of my face.

I cup my hand as she drops it into my palm. “Thanks,” I say, “how much do I owe you?”

“Seven ninety-nine, plus tax.” As I leaf through bills, she says, “You don’t have to pay me right now.”

“Like hell I don’t!”

“Give me a break! I know where you live.”

I hand her a five and four singles, “I don’t have change.” Izzy rolls her eyes at me, snatches the cash and heads off down the hall.

“Whatever!” she says.

Closing my door again, I stop in front of the mirror hanging over my dresser and check my face. It’s clean, makeup’s not smeared; eyes look tired but not tear stained. Applying the new gloss to my lips.... *I have your coloring.* I slip into clean jeans and throw on a blue hoodie. In seconds I’m out the back door.

The late November air is crisp; inhaling deeply, it fills my lungs. A frosty chill prickles my nose. My head registers the assault: *brain freeze.* I trudge

four blocks to the museum, staring down at the cold concrete sidewalk, cloaked in the privacy of cotton.

Reaching the museum doors, Sam, our security guard, greets me: “Hi! You work today?” His smile is broad and genuine.

“Yeah.”

“Heard about your mom. Sorry.” He gives me a hug.

“Thanks.”

“You okay?”

I sigh, looking past him at the rough, uneven stone structure of the building; it looks the way I feel: chiseled and prickly. “Doing my best.” Changing the subject, I say, “I hear you’re leaving us?”

“Got a better job. Better pay, good benefits.”

“Great!” I smile; giving the thumbs up as I slip through the glass doors. “Talk to you later.”

“Later,” he says.

Someone else to miss... I blink back tears at the thought. *Don’t go there....*

My job today is scanning dozens of dusty old letters into the database. The Tribal Museum received the letters as a donation when an elder passed. *Old Words, Old Ways...* Once I scan them, they will be catalogued, archived, and preserved. *Pointless shit, but at least I get paid.* Deep down, I’m grateful for the repetition. It interrupts the near constant flow of thought about her.

I place a letter in the scanner and listen to the hum of the machine as light glides evenly over the surface of the document, gently lifting handwritten characters from deep within pressed fibers.... *You went to sleep one night and never woke up. You’re gone. Aneurism.* Reloading, I jab the start button too hard. The machine gives a jerk, making a loud rumbling noise. My index finger throbs. Blood drizzles around the crevice of my broken nail. I lick it; then shake my hand in the air to numb the pain.

Sometimes Izzy just stares at the wall and won’t eat. She’s lost too much weight. Andy has nightmares and can’t sleep. Dad breaks down crying a lot; usually late

at night when he thinks no one can hear. But I hear. And Gran, you know how her eyes used to dance so brightly—well, she looks empty, hollow. All she does is rock back and forth wailing for you with cracked lips, chanting her ancient words, hour after hour.

I drag my swollen finger over the smooth metallic surface of the machine, spreading the hurt as I load, scan and remove more letters. Something about the machine's humming and the effortless flow of light under its lid as it glides soothes me. Periodically it stops, pausing for words. I reload and press the button, punctuating the pain, desperately archiving, as another passing of light lifts loss from deep within pressed fibers, page after page after page.

Next to Me

You, just across the room,
A few feet away from me, yet your mind is far from free,
Casting out looks anywhere but here.

Legs crossed, jaw pulsing, lips tight:
A proper pose. You still don't see me.

Fingers tight, laced with old age and maturity.
Wrinkles and veins have an artistic display.
Even as you don't see me, you sit across from me.

Eyes flash despair, shame, a movie before me.
Uncovering mistakes as they unfold.
You, a statue made of anything but stone.

Finally legs extend, feet firmly planted on the sandy rug.
You try to dig your heels in, the sand washes away.
You cannot stay.

Here: is when your eyes meet mine, defrosted.
No more trembling or revealing secrets,
Just anything but stone moving away from me.

Now: you walk up the old creaking stairs.
There is nothing left to share.
Yet as you ascend, I feel you, right back next to me.

—Yuan Mei, *Just Done*

singing praise
to the gold rays
on the water

my words,
from this well made full,
took flight.

They Say

They say I'm an artist,
 All of that is true.
 They say I'm a rebel,
 I could be that too.
 They say I'm a freak,
 But I'm not, nor am I a fool.
 I modify my body, with metal and with ink,
 and covered myself in beautiful jewels.
 But they know nothing of me,
 Nor do they try to learn.
 I'm an amazing artist,
 and my passion, it burns.
 I make jewelry, I sing, play music and I write,
 and I keep to myself, almost every night.
 I bother no one, say nothing, and move on,
 Why, then, do they fog up my sun?
 I'm kind and creative
 a Baltimorean Native,
 and when I see them, my stomach churns.
 People look upon me with fear and with lust,
 and due to that blending, they lose all their trust.
 They will never understand me, nor will they see,
 How beautiful I am, and how beautiful they could be.

Untitled



Nights Like These

It's hot summer nights like these
 That make me feel like we're
 In the womb of the world.
 We're young,
 The night still pulses with energy,
 A swirling in the middle of the sky
 Like the perfect peppermint mocha latte.
 We think perhaps in a few days,
 Or a few years,
 We shall be going on big adventures.
 For some it is years shed on a battlefield,
 For others it's the markings of madmen.
 Some of us will feel as though
 We pilot the universe,
 While others will waste time
 Analyzing shades of black.

We think of the instability
 Of the language that consumes us all.
 We think of the frailty
 Of heartbeats and breathing.
 We imagine our friendships tonight
 Fading away when the sun rises.
 People so present today,
 Out of our lives forever tomorrow.
 One minute we are here so vividly,
 The next we don't exist at all.
 We're aware of time and space
 In a remarkably vague way.

It's cold nights like these
 That remind me why
 We need to stay together,
 To hold each other.
 The flames from our affairs
 Only illuminate so far.
 Darkness awaits around the edge,
 Leering intently, always ready
 To grab hold and pull us in.
 We are different this year,
 Different from the year before.
 Same things with new meanings.
 Several years from next Monday,
 We will not be going on big adventures.
 A decadent rose made of icing
 Sliced in half on our anniversary.
 Librarians put on shelves
 Other people's memories.
 We dare each other to hold hands
 And look up to the sky.
 We try to find God
 And only find each other.

Blackstone

The Chipped Plate Diner closed at two in the morning. Mary looked up from wiping off tables to check the time on the rusted old Pepsi clock on the wall above the coffee pot. She had fifteen minutes left; there had been no customers for twenty minutes now, so she began to close up.

She poured out the sweet tea urn into the sink and washed it with hot soapy water, then did the same with the unsweet. Filling up a pitcher with soda water, she dropped the spout of each urn into it and started twisting off all the nozzles of the soda machine and plopping them in the pitcher as well. Behind her, Mary heard the bell on the door ring loud in the empty diner.

“Christ,” Mary muttered and rolled her eyes. She was about to tell the intruder that the diner was closed; this would be nothing new. She had been at the Chipped Plate for nearly six years now and Otis, the owner, allowed her some liberty. For some reason though, she didn’t ask him to leave and found herself straightening her uniform before plastering on her *how may I help you* smile and turning to face the intruding customer.

She was instantly taken aback; the obvious out-of-towner sat at the end of the bar, hands neatly folded in front of him, a ring with a large Blackstone on his right ring finger. Dressed in a dark gray tailored suit, he was clearly a professional of some sort, yet with the collar of his crisp white shirt slightly open, he gave off a relaxed demeanor while still seeming professional. He must have been in his mid-thirties, his skin a soft brown with olive tones, and his neatly cut, nearly black hair caused his bright green eyes to glow in contrast. His face was chiseled, with high cheek bones and the jaw line of a Greek god; he had an air of confidence that Mary could almost feel. He was perfect, a level of gorgeous Mary had never seen before; only, she thought, in those old *Twilight* movies. She felt drawn to him, finding herself wondering what it would be like to run her finger along his smooth, tanned cheek.

Lucky for her, Mary recovered quickly from her initial surprise and approached the man with her usual level of professionalism.

“What can I get for you, sir?” she asked in her chirpiest voice, keeping her smile strong. There was something about this man that made her feel

nervous and quivery inside, the total opposite of strong. She wasn’t sure if it was something bad she was sensing or just the taste of something exciting happening to her for once.

The man tilted his head slightly, as if examining her thoughts. Mary felt her palms start to get sweaty and wiped them nervously on her apron.

“Coffee, please.” His voice was deep and soothing, hypnotic. It was silky smooth and Mary could almost feel it on her skin. She found herself staring into his eyes; they seemed to grow more intense, almost changing colors, getting brighter by the second, and for a moment she was at a loss. The man’s lips moved slowly into a steady smile, showing her a row of beautiful white teeth. He then cleared his throat quietly, bringing Mary out of her trance.

“Yes, coffee, right away,” she managed to sputter out and promptly turned and walked over to get a clean mug and fill it with the last of the coffee from the pot. She dropped the first saucer she grabbed and spilled most of the coffee as she poured. The fridge door containing the cream, the same fridge that had never been anything but nice to her in the past, decided it was time to stick. She tugged on the door, embarrassed, several times before taking a quick look over at the man. Once again he smiled and opened his hands in a gesture of kindness.

“I would love it black, if you don’t mind?” Mary dropped her hand from the fridge door and started walking toward the bar. Her hands shook slightly, causing the mug to clink quietly on the saucer as she carried it to the man and set it in front of him.

“It was the last of the coffee, would you like me to put on a fresh pot?” she asked, desperately hoping he didn’t hear the shakiness in her voice.

“This will do just fine, Mary, thank you,” never losing his smile. Mary couldn’t help but return what felt to her was her goofy smile, as he blew ever so softly against the surface of the steaming cup before bringing it to his lips. To his flawless lips, she couldn’t take her eyes off of them as he took a few sips, not noticing that he never took eyes off of her.

“I understand you are closing soon,” he said slowly. “I am so sorry to be keeping you, I won’t be staying long.” He paused and gestured to the barstool beside him, his ring catching the light as he moved. “Would you care to join me? I am sure you could use a break.”

Flustered once again, Mary found herself walking from behind the bar to take a seat next to him. She lifted up the partition that separated the serving space from the rest of the diner. She tried to appear confident as she walked toward him, but it was hard knowing what she probably looked like after a long shift. She started to look for her reflection in the diner windows but decided against it, figuring it was better not to know. She sat down on the vinyl bar stool beside him. As if he was answering her thoughts, he turned to face her, once again piercing her with his brilliant eyes. He reached over and placed his hand on hers; it was warm and soft, but without being feminine. Mary felt her heart rate quicken and an odd feeling of excitement and fear run through her. It was getting very hard to distinguish the difference between the two emotions as he held her gaze, eyes ablaze with something almost sinister but enticing all at the same time. She trembled under his touch and felt chills ripple up her spine.

“Tonight, Mary, you’re coming with me.” He looked deeper into her eyes, so deep it felt he pierced her soul. She decided that she was not afraid.

Mary nodded slowly, completely entranced now, almost helpless with desire and a need she couldn’t understand. The man put a few dollars on the bar then stood up, Mary’s hand still in his, and led her to her feet and to the door, the bell ringing behind them as they left. It never occurred to Mary that she had forgotten to wear her name tag that night.

Completely captivated, Mary walked out of the diner and into the dark with this mysterious man whom she had just met. As they continued to walk across the street, hand in hand, Mary’s eyes were locked into his, completely oblivious to the world. With her firm grip on his warm hand, she couldn’t imagine letting go even if she wanted to. His touch was so welcoming and something she desired, it almost felt like she was glued to him. Since she stepped outside of the diner, it was almost as if the world had stopped spinning and it was just the two of them; as if no one or nothing else existed. All Mary could see was this man standing in front of her in the dark and she seemed perfectly content with that.

The world behind Mary was lit by red and blue flashing lights as Detective Morgan’s car pulled up behind several other police cars. Detective Morgan got out of his car and entered the lonely, late night diner, where he found a young, beautiful blonde woman in a Chipped Plate Diner uniform shot in the back. She was lying on the floor, behind the counter, dead. He briefly looks around to see there was no sign of forced entry or foul play but

notices an open and empty cash register. He walks over to her body as a uniformed officer approached him and told him there was security footage that shows she was shot 10 minutes before the diner closed and hands him her personal belongings. He immediately pulls her wallet out of the small purse where he sees a picture of a young woman with a small boy sitting on her lap. He holds the ID in his hands. “Mary Johnson 24 years old, damn,” he said aloud.

The man continued to hold Mary’s hand and pointed her direction towards the diner window. She realizes there are other things going on around them and sees several cop cars outside the diner. “Maybe I should go see what’s going on and talk to them,” she said with fear rising in her voice as she rushes towards the diner. “Oh, that’s not necessary. They are there for you, just like I am,” he said as matter of fact. Confused, Mary thought for a moment and replied, “What do you mean? I don’t understand,” without giving him time to answer before she’s inside the diner. She looks around and sees nothing but chaos. “Excuse me sir, I work here—can I help you with something?” she asks one of the officers but is taken aback when he doesn’t respond. Nobody seems to pay her any mind when she notices most of their attention is on one side of the room, which was behind the counter. As she moved closer, she saw a body. It was the body of a young, familiar woman. She saw herself lying on the floor.

The man walks up beside Mary and sees how frightened and angry she is.

With tears starting to form, she asks, “What the hell is going on?”

“What do you see?”

“I see me,” she screamed, confused. “I see my lifeless body lying on the floor with a bullet in my back. What happened? Why did I have to die?”

“There was a robbery and you were killed; he shot you before you even turned around to face him.” he answered.

“But why me?”

“Mary, I don’t have all of the answers. I come to those who need me. I am but a guide. You needed me to show you your path, where you needed to go. This world is over for you,” he tells her.

“Who are you?”

"I am one of many who come to those who are ready to move on. You have to understand that I'm here to help. If you stay here, you'll be consumed by your emotions—fear, confusion, anger, frustration—and become a vengeful spirit and will never be able to leave. I need you to come with me."

Mary falls to her knees, trembling in fear, sobbing uncontrollably with her face buried in her hands. "Joshua ... my sweet, little boy ... I'll never see him again," she cried. She becomes completely silent, tears still streaming down her face. The man kneels beside her to get her attention. She removes her hands from her face and they stare into each other's eyes. The man watches as the last little bit of her true self fades away. Mary's face hardens in anger. "Fuck you! I will find who did this and I will kill him. I will find the man who took me from my son. He will pay," she seethed through clenched teeth.

The man, still kneeling beside her, looks into her empty eyes and realizes that she's gone. "I'm sorry, Mary, I tried," he said softly. His comment elicited no response from Mary as though he wasn't there. He stood to his feet and started to walk away as Mary's angry screams got louder and louder. He turned to look at her one more time, noticing her fists were clenched; her face was distorted and distraught in anger, with sounds of her screaming at nothing.

"I'm sorry it had to be this way," he said as he opened the door of Chipped Plate Diner and faded away into the night.

Silent Bride



The Poetry of Transformation

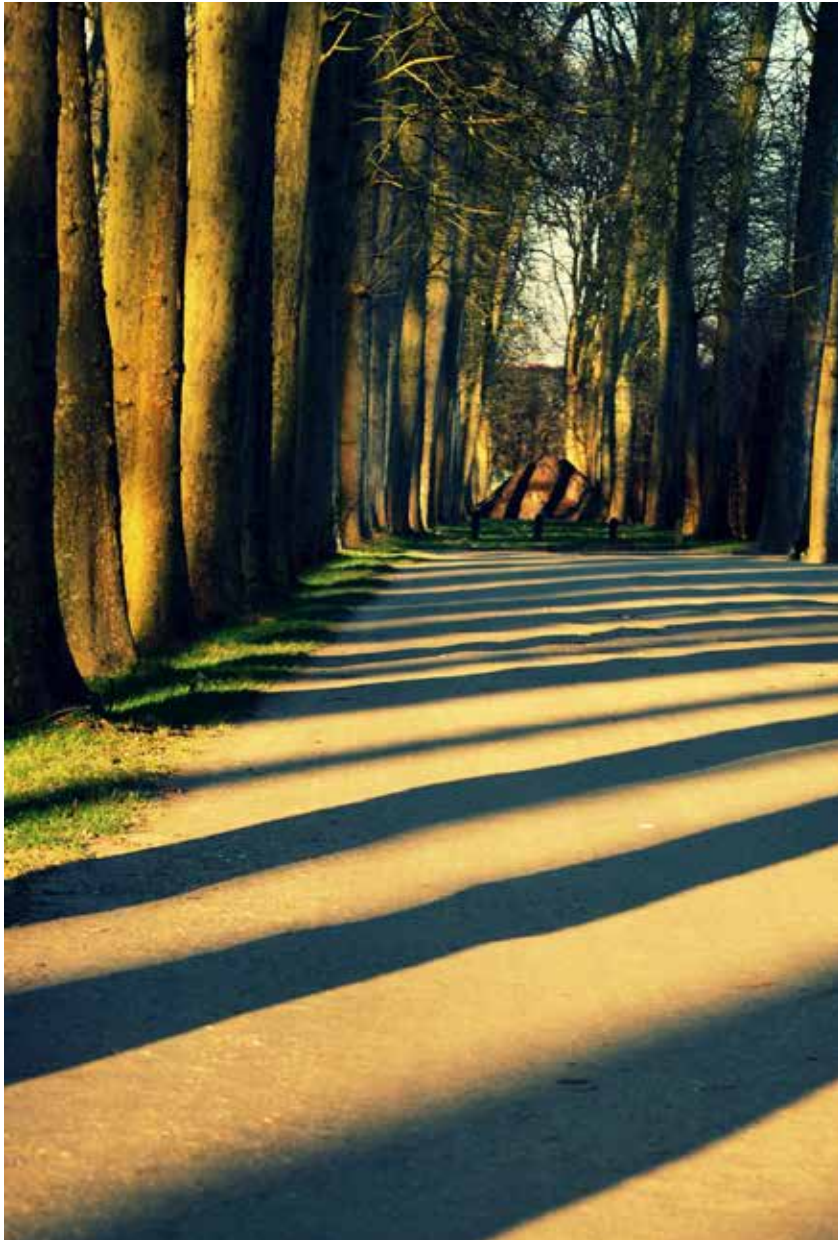
(A visit to Eastern State Penitentiary's Artist Installment by Hannah Bertram)

The ground powder of men's regrets
 culminate in an oriental rug
 that comforts not one set of bare feet.
 Ebony birds stay in corners
 turned toward the solitary door.
 This new way of looking is fragile
 like the threat of a soft breeze
 or the remains of a shadow.
 With rue their wings are laden.
 The weight of the permanent past
 burdens freedom
 and caged birds fly no more.
 Spinning the hourglass
 particles of pain
 Settle, float,
 Settle, float.
 Rust from decaying metal
 drifts delicately
 dispersing the color of blood.
 Transformation and time are illusions:
 one toe brushing the dust rug
 and birds blend into
 a black hole of despair.
 Any wind could cause total destruction
 and the poetry
 to disappear.

My Honest Poem

So, you want the honest me?
 The whole of me?
 I'll give you half,
 and not even that:
 2 feet and 10, 90 pounds.
 Half Chilean:
 Not completely here
 Or there
 2 children but,
 How do I count
 the one that's not here?
 Nine years, even more
 Half of me's with him
 Half of me's with you
 Less than half mathematics
 More than half musician,
 In my dreams.
 More than half my days here
 Before, I was in Chile.
 Good sense of humor,
 But weird, they say
 I like music, but not Chopin
 Too darn romantic,
 And fake.

Follow Me



The Five of Us

The stars were out in full force tonight, only fading out as the bright lights of the Ocean City boardwalk leached into the sky to the right of us. My dad had the keys in the ignition of the Jeep, the stereo running on battery power and the speakers in the roll bar sending music around the campsite easily, no doors or roof to keep the sound in.

My feet were kicked up in the seat of the chair across from me. Katilin was sprawled out in the passenger seat of the Jeep, laughing at something Nick said from his spot across the fire pit. Flo was sitting in his lap, taking sips out of his drink.

The adults were talking amongst themselves by the side of the fire nearer to the road, not paying us any attention. I took a sip from the can I was holding, the strawberry flavoring mixing with the alcohol to coat my teeth and stick in my throat, and I tilted my head back to look up at the sky.

It was a rare bug-free summer night on Assateague Island. The air smelled like smoke and the ocean, and my mouth tasted like Mike's Hard Strawberry Lemonade. My stomach was pleasantly warm, my limbs loose with the perfect amount of alcohol, and I realized that this was probably the last time we'd go camping.

Already, things were different. We weren't in Delaware, for one. Tessa was missing. Nick brought his girlfriend. Kaitlin was already a deep tan from her time at East Carolina University. We were all drinking alcohol instead of just the adults.

I thought about the fact that we would never find the plastic Titanic my brother had buried in the campsite one year. We'd never again run into the owner of the Fractured Prune in the Food Lion and get offered free donuts if we came in with Sophie, our severed head.

Twelve years of summers, spending a week living in the sand and the ocean, perennially dirty, smelling like the campfire Nick had carefully engineered: all coming to an end. Wearing the same clothes the whole trip, not seeing the point in changing when I was already dirty and pretty much living in my bathing suit at that point. Running wild, the adults uncaring about the usual rules, having free reign over a town with four other kids all

looking to cause some mayhem and no one to stop us. It was all coming to an end.

No more seeing movies in Coastal Highway's dinky Lowes, Delaware theatre, feeling jarred by the civilization and the air conditioning, sticking out in our rumpled clothes and grime-cruste feet encased in shabby flip-flops that barely passed for "shoes." No more sitting in an empty theatre, everyone sprawled out across three rows, the adults sitting up front, pretending not to know us. No more paying careful attention to the advertisements that ran before the previews and calling up the numbers on the screen, seeing how far we could go before the person on the other line hung up.

All those years perfecting the complicated and delicate ritual of getting into a hammock while wrapped in a sleeping bag, and I'd never have the opportunity to use that knowledge ever again.

I wouldn't be visiting the dunes, trekking through sand and spiky trees, sitting on that huge, inexplicable mound of sand and talking, rolling down the hill.

I remembered breaking into the beach at night, driving there piled into the back of a pickup truck, ducking whenever a cop passed us going the other way. I thought about the feeling I always got when I stood on the cold, flat sand of a sunless beach, stars taking over the sky, the rhythmic pounding of the waves a few feet away, a breeze whipping my hair off my face as we all raised our hands into the air and whooped and ran down the length of the beach.

I thought about riding our bikes everywhere, going to the nameless ice cream place in downtown Lowes where we thought we had found a dead guy in the back room until Nick stomped his foot on the echo-y cement floor and our dead guy jerked awake.

Waking up early enough to go on the morning coffee run to Wawa, bundled in a too-big jacket that smelled like a campfire and a pair of sweatpants hastily pulled on over shorts to fight off the early morning chill that came from a ride in a doorless, roofless Jeep.

Hours spent in front of a fire so enormous the ashes have to be emptied out every afternoon and I had to develop an exact formula of where to place my chair so that I didn't lose my eyebrows but my body stayed

warm. Staying up after the adults go to bed and talking, learning darkest secrets and how much everyone else has grown up in the last year, moving shadows caused by the flames flickering over our faces. Playing "Never Have I Ever" and blushing on someone else's behalf when a sister breaks her promise of secrecy in order to win.

Going to Walmart, the adults peeling off from the group immediately to get groceries and avoid whatever trouble us kids caused, Dad telling us the one rule: if you get arrested, don't call me because I won't get you from jail; that one rule never stopping us from doing our worst, seeing how far we could go before the security guard at the front door began making her way over.

Walking the hundreds of steps to the top of the old observation tower by the ocean, huffing for breath until the moment we reached the roof, and then losing the ability to breath altogether as we took in a view that went on for miles, 360 degrees around. Taking in the sight of a glimmering ocean and tan sand and a brown-and-green forest and hearing nothing but the wind that was always blowing this high up. Shuffling forwards right up to the chain-link fence keeping us from toppling over the edge and looking down so we could read aloud to each other the messages spelled out in pinecones on the ground below us.

I thought about how every year, the anticipation built from the moment spring began, until the day finally came when we would meet at my house, packing hammocks and grills and duffel bags onto the trailer, the five of us eagerly fighting over a coveted seat in the Jeep for the drive to Delaware. I thought about how, from the moment we pulled out of the neighborhood, the game was on and all the rules we had at home ceased to exist. Without doors, windows or a roof to keep us contained, we spilled out of the sides of the car, screaming ourselves hoarse as we heckled and harassed everyone that had the misfortune to pass us by.

I thought about how a week went from no time at all to torture by the third day there. How the bickering increased as the laughter disappeared altogether for days at a time. I thought about the time spent looking for Brittany when she stormed off in tears and the heaviness of a fully occupied campsite sitting in complete silence, pretending not to see tears rolling down someone's face. I thought about how camping became less about fun and more about tradition, how, one by one, we all grew up.

I thought about how it was always the five of us, until it wasn't.

Million Dollar Highway

We trace the mountain-edge,
sprinting twenty-two miles per hour
faster than evolution ever intended.
I look up from my biology textbook,
contemplating how the Million Dollar Highway got its name.

It got its name from the million dollars
per mile it took to build
or it got its name from the million dollars
worth of gold ore buried beneath the black asphalt.
It got its name from what some folks would give
to see their granny on the other end of it—
it got its name from the view
of a glowing town in the pocket of a mountain
thousands of feet below me without even a guardrail
to stop the car from barreling over the precipice,
to stop us from sinking to the bottom of the mountain like an anchor
to stop us from tumbling with sandwich wrappers, with air,
with fanned out biology pages

explaining how the pearly light of rock-ribbed mountain skirt
will funnel through our pupils,
how our contracting ciliary muscles
will thicken our irises, bend light rays,
sharpening layered grays of bedrock,
mossy crevices, crumbling edges
how the scene—I can see—
will unfold on our retinas like tiny movie screens
sending rod and cone cells into frenzies,
releasing chemicals that positively charge optic nerves,
how our occipital lobes will interpret the widening, jagged images,

and our hypothalamus' will send signals down pathways
of neurons like chain-linked hands
triggering fight or flight response
with no way to fight or fly and I know

it got its name from what you'd have to pay me
to ever drive on the Million Dollar Highway again.

At Any Moment

“They’re celebrating her great-grandmother’s 102nd birthday! But wouldn’t they just be scared at that point that she’d drop dead at any moment?” I say at ten years old while talking about one of my friend’s plans for the upcoming weekend. “Why even bother celebrating her life anymore? They should be planning her funeral.”

It was one of those rare moments when I was actually speaking to my father, a man I had despised since the time I was old enough to feel the pain of always being someone’s second choice, even as an only child.

Anyway, I was feeling chatty for whatever reason after we sat through a practically silent dinner at the cheapest restaurant he could find in Columbia, where I lived with my mom at the time. He was driving me home in his large, red pick-up truck that smelled so strongly of cigarettes that I had to keep the window rolled down to let fresh air in. If it was raining or snowing, on the other hand, my nose and lungs were screwed.

I was minding my own business, my face halfway out the window, when he actually responded to me. “You know, Mal, people can die at any moment in their lives. Old age isn’t the only thing that kills people,” he stated matter-of-factly. After a long, poignant pause, he continued, “That’s why it’s so important to spend time with the people you love... while you can.”

Seriously? I thought to myself. This was coming from the man who left my mom and me out of pure selfishness. This was the man who always found a way to “get held up at work” or “have to go to bed early because of an early shift tomorrow.” Those were supposedly legitimate excuses for being three hours late or leaving halfway through our Monopoly game or most often just not showing up at all. These excuses were ways to get out of spending time with his only daughter: me.

Because of his passionate love of music, he had wanted to teach me how to play guitar for years. Whenever he caught me looking longingly at one of his guitars in his terrifying, smelly row house, he always offered. I always refused. That charade went on until my best friend and I decided in the seventh grade that we would become world famous rock stars. We had been writing lyrics and melodies together for many months, but we

needed to learn how to play guitar so we could actually finish our songs and perform.

He accepted my request gladly, shocked that I even asked. We started off with some basic chords that most beginners are taught: C, G, and D. I felt an instant high from the pressure of the steel strings on my fingertips and the pleasant tone from the guitar. I fell in love with the instrument. I wrote song after song while practicing those first three chords.

Our casual lessons carried on for many months. He even bought me two guitar tablature books for Christmas, which was probably the first time he put any thought into a gift for me, instead of allowing his girlfriend at the time to buy it for him.

He died on March 23, 2008. I was twelve. It was sudden, of a heart attack. Just a few months earlier I learned he was a drug addict, which was in addition to being an alcoholic. I already knew about the alcoholism from years of watching him down beer after beer on our occasional, brief outings.

I don’t believe in heaven. Sometimes I wish I did, but I just don’t. I do, however, believe that one’s memory is carried on by those he or she leaves behind. Partially due to his memory, I am now studying music therapy, so I can show others the power that music holds in so many different aspects of life.

Despite my intense, volatile mixture of negative emotions toward my father, I have remembered those unusually wise and highly out of character words he said that day. They later haunted me for years to come, especially after I realized that even when you hate someone with every ounce of your being, the human heart is somehow capable of loving that same person twice as much. I forgive you, dad. I wish we had more time together so I could tell you face to face, but we don’t.

I Remember

As I sit here and try to remember
all the memories I spent with you,
all I can really come up with are words.

Words like April, and trees, and
fast food restaurants and poetry.

And then I begin to remember
summer days in comparison to you
and I couldn't decide which one was
more beautiful.

How your eyes reflected every inch of
the morning sky
and your smile every inch of the
universe.

As I think more and more, I remember
how we never danced
but walking in the rain, and holding
hands and pushing each other on swings
came close to it.

I remember your voice, and how
I still have it embedded into my mind
in case I have trouble sleeping at
night.

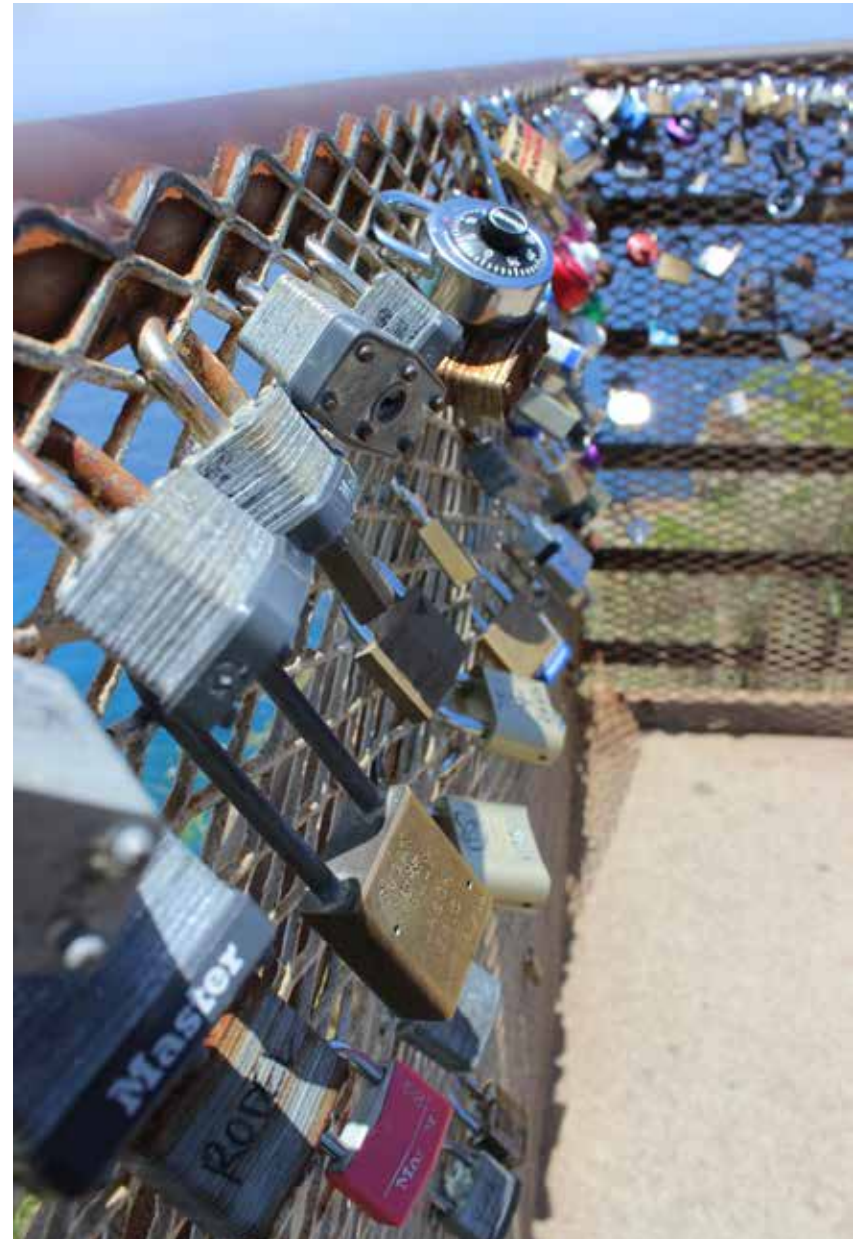
I remember how imperfect we were
together and how that made it perfect.

That the only heaven I ever needed
was in your arms,
in your hands,

And as I came back from the present,
having remembered all these things

I realize I could still start fires
for what I feel for you.

The Locks



Bayou

Day.

We're playing hide and seek—me, my older brother Russell, and three or four of the neighbor kids. Russell is “it”. I decide to make a dash to a different hiding place when his back is turned, but I won't make it before he turns and spots me, so I leap behind the tree. This outlet which only my body separates from the tree has been here years longer than we've lived here—probably longer than any of my family has lived. We play in it all the time, splashing each other, skipping rocks, slinging our fishing rods into it—but no one ever goes in, wary of the “CAUTION: ALLIGATORS” sign just a little farther in the opposite direction.

I've never seen one loose, but they're all over Louisiana. There must be fifty alligators to every “CAUTION: ALLIGATORS” sign in the region. Maybe one hundred. That's what my friends and I guess.

When I go around the tree, I realize what a bad hiding place it is, but it's an even worse standing place. The spot between the tree and the water is especially muddy, and I throw my arms around the gigantic tree to keep my footing. But the mud wants my footing, too, and it tries to swallow my leg.

Maybe I scream. Maybe somebody gives away my position. Maybe it's me, grasping wildly for a handhold on the slippery, wet bark. Whatever it is, my brother is suddenly there, and he grabs both my hands with both of his hands, and the mud is no match. I fly from its jaws, though it stubbornly withholds my shoe, so that when I withdraw from the game and hop home to explain to mother how close I came to feeding the alligators, it is on one foot.

Dark.

I am in the backseat of the car, nearly tumbling out of the open window. Has somebody mentioned the possibility that alligators might find him before we do? I see another sign. “CAUTION: ALLIGATORS”. So many bodies of water in this swampy region, alligators lurking around every corner, just waiting for your golden retriever to slip his leash and wander into its waiting jaws. I am not in tears, yet.

Day.

We are invited to the lake. It isn't far from our house, so we walk there. I am hardly ever anywhere in the neighborhood beyond my own dead-end street. The next street, and the following, and the townhouses which are so close but which I always forget are so close, are like whole different worlds to me. Everything is different. Everything except for the outlet which leads right from the lake to our house, strewn over so many yards with the same sign. “CAUTION: ALLIGATORS”.

The signs start here. I am sure that we'll see an alligator today. We are at the ultimate body of water. Their nest must be nearby.

The neighbor who invited us onto his boat for the trip covers a few safety tips, which I defer to my parents to take down for me. I am surprised when we are on the water and he encourages us to go out for a dip. Doesn't he know about the alligators? The signs are everywhere. Maybe he can't read. I won't say anything. But he stops the boat. He and his kids dive into the water. Amazingly, not one of them is even grazed by an alligator.

Dark.

I pull my head in from the window because the mosquitoes are becoming overzealous. It's getting dark and my parents are discussing that it might be time to go home. We haven't found Dennis yet. I wish that he would stop doing this. Every time he escapes his leash, he is off having a good time running wild, and I am hanging from a window, calling his name into the darkness. I'm certain that if we let the night pass, the alligators will get to him first. But I am probably being silly. My parents know best, so I don't interrupt their discussion.

Day.

Maya thinks that we should play together at recess without Miranda. I tell Maya that Miranda is my best friend. But Maya thinks that people like us shouldn't play with people like Miranda. I am confused. Then I tell Maya that my mother is white. While Maya tries to explain to me why it is acceptable in my case, I walk back to the bench where Miranda balances a red ant on a leaf. For all the “CAUTION: ALLIGATORS” signs I have passed, I don't think a live alligator could scare me as much as Maya has today.

Dark.

Mom explains it to me: Dennis was very sick. He probably would have suffered if he had lived much longer. I hear her. But I don't understand. We watch the men lug a giant trash bag into the bed of a truck. Mom rubs my shoulder and Dad and Russell are nearby, but I don't bother to take notice of what they are feeling. What am I feeling? I am confused. Dennis is our dog. I love him. But now he's gone? And it was not an alligator that took him.

I have lived here for... I don't remember how many years. Alligators are all over Louisiana, that's what I was told. So for years, I have paid heed to all of the "CAUTION: ALLIGATORS" signs. And I have never seen an alligator outside of the zoo. Of course I am bitter. I have been prepared for all of the wrong dangers.

What We Are

The Bible says women
are like jewels in a necklace.

I wear the woman my mother gave me
in a pendant around my neck.

It rests, a proud face, over my sternum, dangling
each time I tie my shoe, bow to my elders.

Sometimes,
without even realizing, I find myself

holding it in my hands, rubbing it between
my fingers like a shaman talisman

and it winks as though it knows a secret,
held inside its cut universe.

Placing it to my ear, as I used to do
with sea shells to hear the rushing

sound of the ocean, I make out a
fine voice, thin as a silk

filament, thin as a bony
finger, pointing, sinister.

*I don't know much, it says,
But I know when to keep my mouth shut.*

Like Jewel Tones in Blackest Night

Folly Quarter Road at night is dark. The world is black outside the scope of the headlights where, even then, everything is painted in dark jewel tones besides the luminescent road lines. Thick forest reaches out from one side while corn field stands guard on the other. My dad and I spoke, our voices loud, broken here and there with laughter. Then a deer, large as a mountain with a rack of worthy of gold mounting, leaped into the road. Just as we saw it, the buck looked at us, eyes reflecting bright green in the headlights. By the time my dad could react, the corn had swallowed it up and it was gone. The car on without notice and we fell frozen. The air inside was loud but we were quiet. Our first words preceded by the release of held breath.

“Whoa, did you see that?!”

“It was huge!”

“Did you see those antlers?!”

“It had GREEN eyes,” I said.

There was a pause before my dad agreed, “Yeah, it did.”

“It was a green eyed buck deer! I’ve never seen one of those before.”

Slowly, my imagination kidnapped me. “They must have super good night vision and it was so big. I bet they’re bigger than other deer, than the white tail deer.”

This was the first time I saw a “green-eyed buck deer,” not long into elementary school, but it wasn’t the last. Every time my story got wilder until I was creating stories of how I had read or seen this program on green eyed buck deer and how they were bigger, faster, and more secretive than white tail deer and that they ate meat instead of plants.

At no point did my dad stop me. He listened to my tales the way a daughter listens to bedtime stories.

§

During the day, in a short section just past St. Anthony’s Shrine, Folly Quarter Road becomes a rave. Sunlight from up above filters through the tree leaves. It’s hard to see through squinted eyes, but if you look close enough, and focus, you can see through the trees on one side of the road. Look even harder and you can see so far you wonder if there was anything that could hide among them.

And from it, the start of a story I couldn’t get out of my head.

Of flickering, blinding sunlight. A girl staring out from her car door as “Hey there Delilah” plays from the radio. All this seen by a werewolf with a body at its feet. He sees her and then she sees him through the trees. And the song goes, “Don’t you worry about the distance. I’m right there if you get lonely.”

The stories of other books echo through my head as I start my own, and only in middle school, just like my favorite author who finished her first book at 13.

§

The paper bag crunches as he takes another swig.

“Learn anything new today?”

“Nope.”

Pavement and trees pass as he drives me home from Atholton High School.

“Did you see any deer today, dad?”

§

One week, a couple years after high school, brought into my life the boys who represented the wild times I was starting to get past. Together they made for one of the worst weeks in my life, worse than the hard life at home I had been trying to avoid, and it nearly gave birth to my future. A future I put on hold.

I wrote though. I wrote as I ate, between my meals, and when I should be sleeping. And I read. When I wasn’t writing, I was reading. Food was picked for the length of time it took to get ready and was eaten, not tasted.

I read and stared at the computer, writing, so much that I would have to squint my eyes against the kitchen lights and cringe from the sound of cupboards closing. When I couldn't write or read any more for the day, I went to bed forlorn.

And soon my pillow would be wet as my cheeks.

Writing got me through it all and from it came a book. It's called *Crimson Stripes*.

§

Thumb in the air, I walked along the road. I was tired and drunk and really didn't want to walk the rest of the way home, even though I had gotten out of the car saying I would. Headlights passed me over and I walked on. Three boys ran across the street, talking, until they saw me.

"Whoa! Are you okay?"

"Yo, don't talk to her!"

"Yeah," I said to the boy who had asked.

The boy waved off his friends and they left.

"Are you sure?"

"Eh, I could be better. Are you okay?"

He gave me a strange look.

"Hey, don't let me keep you from hanging out with your friends." I started off walking again.

He shook his head and followed me. "You shouldn't be walking home alone this late."

I laughed. "I could say the same for you."

He laughed too.

We crossed the street and as we rounded building, cop cars pulled around us. The boy turned to leave and I encouraged him. A female officer pulled

me aside and a few male officers caught up to the boy, his hands now up. I told them to leave him alone.

"Understand, we have to ask questions when someone is covered in blood."

I turned to the female officer who shined a light on my arms and pants.

"It's not mine... or his... it's my dad's. He was drunk, attacked me, I'm fine," I shake my head. "It's a long story. Everyone's fine."

§

I stare at the little collection of books on my desk: the book that got me into reading, two volumes of a literary magazine I was published in, and a required reading for a class. It sits beside an award for being the Editor-in-Chief of my school's newspaper and the can of Lysol when I can smell the stink from my parent's house.

Parent's house because I was soon moving out on my own.

I go first to math, and then creative writing. Second day of class and my teacher asks me, "What is something you wish you didn't remember?"

A memory which makes shades of grey out of feelings I wish were black and white, like headlights on a dark country road turning blackest night into jewel tones.

Fish and Fern



Yellow

Songs blossom in my mind
Warmth radiates through my fingertips
And out into the world
I feel alive

Notes dance around me with joy
Vibrato ringing in the sky
A crescendo
They rise like the sun

I am blinded by the color of the music
It smells like spring
My heart blossoms
My head feels free

This is happiness

And when the music stops beating
So does my heart
A tempo too slow
To dance to

Broken Whole

Sirens loud and wild reverberated down the endless halls like a painful shriek down a cave. Staggered beeps talk out loud to each other, communicating to different rooms. Sometimes there would be desperate chatter seeping in through the halls, or the smell of salty tears that forever stain the air. Shamed laughter shaped the silence, along with the anticipation of my beating heart.

It was all white, with fluorescent bright lights that made me want to cringe. The illness was like a permanent aroma that clung to every aspect of the place: the walls people leaned on for support, the floors where many have fallen, and especially the air where people blew out their last breath.

I entered a room: her room. I looked to her face as her eyes met mine. Her face covered in black and blue, the outline of her face swollen like an overgrown grape. Coating her shoulders are burns she got when the concrete made contact. Scars had already started to develop where they had dug glass out of her shoulder. A short jagged scrape cut across her forehead where smooth tan skin used to be. In her eyes I saw surrender. In her legs I sensed death.

Six months earlier, I slept soundlessly in my bed; I didn't yet know what I would be waking to. As a little girl around the age of ten I had not known of the dangers of the world.

My legs, tangled in my sheets, not yet long enough to hit the bottom of the bed. My eyelashes felt like butterfly wings, gently dabbed at my cheeks.

I twitched, smiling at something, lost in my dreams, somehow aware that I was awake. I tried to stay in my dreams as long as possible, not wanting to wake up.

The slanted shades on my windows sparkled for a second; then the sun burst past them, alighting the room into morning light. The sun was impatient that day. Finally I stirred, and abruptly opened my eyes.

I pushed myself upright. My small hands rubbed my eyes tiredly from waking up so suddenly. I remember pushing back my short dark hair behind my ears because I never liked when it tickled my face.

Immediately, I felt it, that warning in my chest. My stomach felt squirmy like I had eaten too much the night before and was paying for it the morning after.

I knocked the floral covers roughly off and leapt out of bed. My heartbeat already made itself a little faster paced than usual. This didn't go unnoticed by me. When I planted both bare feet on my hardwood floor it creaked slightly and I cringed at the sound.

My parents always hated when I got up so early in the morning because they were never up then. They said I had a loud voice and I should be an actress, so I was worried when my feet made lots of noise.

I went to open the door. My hand turned the golden brown knob slowly, and I knew something wasn't right by the way my hands shook. I had thought that was ridiculous and I was just being anxious because I had an anxiety disorder. I thought it was just getting worse since I couldn't separate myself from my mother.

Earlier that week, I kept imagining the worst, like when my mother would go on walks something would happen. I worried about her falling, or getting eaten by wolves, even though I knew that Maryland didn't have wolves. I had checked constantly. I had perched myself on my windowsill, nervously watching the street to make sure she was okay. When she finally appeared on the path, relief would sweep through me, and I would run away so she wouldn't catch me watching.

So when thoughts started circulating in my mind about frightening situations and wanting to wake up my parents to check on them, I thought it foolish, and tried to chase away the fear. I knew it was unrealistic for those things to happen, but I couldn't separate my mind from the worries.

I was stubborn back then. I was way too innocent for my own good.

I decided that I would just go peek in my parent's bedroom that morning to make sure everything was all right, and if they didn't hear me, then I would go back to my room and busy myself with something.

Heart racing in my chest, I swallowed the rising anxiety in my throat like a physical thing. My palms were sweating with uncertainty and shame. I racked my brain for a logical explanation to why I was freaking out

but no answers came. My footsteps echoed down the hall. My heartbeat quickened as time ticked slowly.

Confusion swept over me and I choked back the fear that threatened to strangle me. Looking down at my feet as one foot stepped in front of the other in measured steps. Bracing myself, I reached out slowly to the door. I tightly latched onto it, turning. I knew something was wrong. I felt it in my gut and it could not be ignored. Flashes of the worst had struck through my mind.

Questions raced through my mind: what if someone broke into our house? What if my mother fell on the ground and couldn't get up? What if someone murdered them? I knew the thoughts were extreme but I couldn't convince myself they weren't real.

I slowly opened the door and entered the room. Instead of something gruesome like blood staining the floor, or bodies on the ground, my mother and father sat on the bed looking at me. I was confused by my own reaction, and irritated that they heard me down the hall. I felt frustrated with myself; they were fine, and they were probably upset that I had woken them up with my worries.

"Sorry I woke you up." I grumbled and planned my retreat but my mother's painful gaze struck at my unscathed heart. Her ocean blue eyes flooded with tears, stopped me dead in my tracks, and I knew I hadn't escaped whatever I believed true this morning.

"We need to talk. Something happened last night." My mother said as if just wanting to spit it out or to rip it off like wax. I didn't want to listen to what she had to say, so I had taken a step backwards, but her frown that never sat on her face kept me in my place.

My hands shook involuntarily and my lips quivered with unspoken words. My heartbeat quickened and I heard the blood start to rush in my ears. I was worried I wouldn't be able to hear anything with the pulsating in my head but the words she said could not be unheard. I knew even if I had earplugs in, somehow, my heart would still have heard her. Somehow, my brain would still compute what she was saying. The words sliced through me like knives. They made my heart freeze solid, never to be melted again.

"Your sister was in a car accident last night. The man who drove was drunk and hit an oncoming truck. The woman in the passenger side did

not make it, and Mia flew out of the car, landing on the sidewalk." My mother enunciated each word making each one hit me harder. The words were each like a rock being thrown at me, and each time one hit, I sunk deeper below the surface. My mind was swimming with questions but I felt myself drowning in the answers. My heart surprisingly calmed down as if this was what it was waiting for.

I didn't hear my voice. I didn't hear a thing but the silence that was all too loud. The silence seeped into every part of me; it sunk into my skin, it darkened my eyes, and slithered through my ears like the unbearable words I couldn't mutter. The tears caught in my eyelids. I didn't want to shed them because I knew if I did they would never stop coming. My eyes stung and the realization hit me like physical pain. I heard my heart break down like I would in the next few seconds, and then I heard the words that no little girl ever wanted to hear.

"Your sister, we're not sure she is going to make it."

Recipe to Go

Coat mouth with syrupy venom,
Pepper 'til peaks of salty blows;
Dust with angry momentum,
Conserving blame and woes.

To battered broken soul, bones discarded,
Blend grist of vices; stuff minced with this decay.
Combine budgeted morsels,
Chunks of indebtedness to pay.

Drizzle with Dreams Mixture: smashed up, slightly shattered,
Whipped heart, full up with fear.
Sift well through disappointment;
Bake for 30 year.

Cool 'till unresponsive,
Take many months then go.

Orchid



I Am ME

I grew up in India, a somewhat homogenous society, even though it has many religions, languages, and dialects. India's class system is book-ended with the outrageously wealthy and degradingly poor. And in between is the growing middle class broken up into the upper, middle, and lower middle class. As is with most things in India, everyone knows their place and tends to remain within what society has destined them to because there are dire warnings of serious consequences that befell those who dared cross the lines for something as natural as following one's heart or voicing an opinion.

Like everyone I knew growing up in the sixties in India, I followed the rules and stayed within the lines. Therefore, I did not meet or interact with anyone from a different class, country, or most of the time, even a different gender besides the males in my extended family. Fast forward to 1979 when I came to the U.S. as a young bride with my new husband (arranged, of course) whom I barely knew. During the layover at Heathrow I saw so many Indians transiting or working at the airport that I wondered if I had really left India! Then I landed at JFK and saw people of every color and nationality! And I saw my first snow!

Throughout the 35 years I have been in the U.S., no one has ever identified me as Indian, not even other Indians. But I can't fault them because I belong to a very small religious and ethnic community with rapidly decreasing numbers. I am a Zoroastrian Parsee. Zoroastrianism is the oldest religion in the world and flourished for many centuries during the Persian Empire. Due to religious persecution around the seventh century, some Zoroastrians left Persia to preserve their faith and came to India. They are known as the Parsees because they came from the area of Pars in modern day Iran. I am a proud descendant of that ancient faith and the Parsee community that has thrived in India and around the world. Centuries of marrying within the faith, marrying at a later age or not at all, and having fewer children, has decreased our numbers to such an extent that most people have not heard of the religion or the community.

So who am I? I'm never sure what to check on a form when asked for ethnicity. I'm not ethnically Indian or Asian. But there isn't a box for Persian and truly I can't identify with an ethnicity that I'm centuries removed from. Most people in the U.S. mistake me for Hispanic. It's

interesting when I'm in a predominantly Hispanic area and someone comes up to me and starts talking in Spanish and is offended when I don't respond or even shocked that I don't know my native language! One night years ago while driving back from the beach, I got a speeding ticket in one of those small towns on the eastern shore that depends on proceeds from out-of-town speeders. The officer checked "white" on the form for ethnicity. I find it amusing that I'm Hispanic by day and white by night! When I was in Italy recently, an old lady I was buying something from asked me if I was visiting family there. When I visit Turkey, I'm welcomed like I belong there—that I can understand since it's close to my heritage.

I actually like the fact that people connect to me no matter which part of the world they are from. I think of myself as a citizen of the world. After all, Farida means unique, and I am uniquely ME!

Nostalgia



The Sole

Scuff-scuff a quarter-mile more,
 Past the pool place and used car lots,
 Kicking up gravel and grit,
 Scuff-scuffing another quarter-mile more.
 Beyond the overgrown fields where the goldfinches fly,
 And that stretch where the drunk sidewalk makes you walk that way,
 Scuff-scuffing a half-a-mile more.
 Over a muddy creek after the night's heavy rainfall,
 Swatting at mosquitos and nasty things.
 Scuff-scuffing another mile more,
 Up that steep hill, panting and puffing,
 Past the post office and miscellaneous lanes
 to find that the sidewalk ends
 at a cemetery just outside of town
 and new shoes never come cheap.

Where Were You Last Night?

Where were you last night?

The weight of the words falls heavy on my lips but I don't dare open my mouth to say them. I can feel them trying to crawl up my throat, begging for an escape through my teeth but I clench my jaw, determined to keep them at bay. It is now morning and I find myself no longer feeling like the woman I was the night before, but a cat whose obsession with curiosity has left it clinging to its last life. *Where was he?*

Last time I felt brave enough to question his whereabouts, it resulted in a week long silent treatment that I was sure would be the death of our relationship. Phone calls, text messages, handwritten letters and e-mails, in person house visits and appointments made at his office were all ignored. This was typically how our arguments went: me grasping at straws trying to figure out how to get him to love me again and him ignoring all my attempts to fix things whether or not I was at fault. Days later to both my relief and dismay, he forgave me for jeopardizing our future with my constant skepticism. The catch? I was no longer allowed to ask "stupid" questions about where he goes to in the middle of the night and why he sometimes returns with smeared lipstick on his collar. It was both a challenge to prove my love and a punishment for wanting him so badly which I gladly accepted, but like I tell myself: *I made my bed so now I must lie in it.*

Unfortunately, the weight has become such a burden this morning that even our Tempur-Pedic can't quite absorb the tension building up in my neck muscles. I stretch out as far as I can, fingertips and toes reaching towards each corner of the mattress, all the while making sure I do so carefully and quietly. He had been out all night and crawled into bed only a few hours ago just as the sun began to peek in through the curtains. From the looks of his chapped lips and darkened fingertips, I could tell he had been drinking and smoking "socially" again. Where, I'm not sure. With whom, I'm dying to know.

I now lie wide awake, itching to escape the sea of questions buried in our bed sheets, so I head downstairs to get a jump start on my Sunday morning routine. I slip off the edge of the bed and into a fuzzy robe laying on the floor next to my nightstand. It's covered in rubber ducks, a gag

gift from my sister Dahlia that managed to become a main staple in my wardrobe when I'm at home. I haven't seen her much since she got her big promotion, but we try to keep in touch and meet up for coffee every so often. Thinking about her makes me crave my usual morning cup of hot coffee with an extra two shots of espresso but the last thing I want is to be more alert. That's when my mind wanders to the darkest parts of my subconscious and reminds me of all the things I had worked so hard to keep beneath the surface, away from everyone including myself.

I grab a glass from the cupboard and pour myself a glass of orange juice. *Perhaps the surge of vitamin C will help my immune system battle the wave of negativity and anxiety that's bringing it down,* I think. I take a few sips and turn on the television. The news anchor is communicating via satellite with a journalist reporting on another bombing in the Middle East, sand and wind blowing in his hair and muffling the sound of his voice. Lost in this segment, I sink into the couch and habitually reach for the newspaper that is usually lying on the coffee table. I grab something slick and cold, and as I retract my hand I find myself face to face with a cell phone I'm not familiar with. It isn't mine and no one has been over to our house since the holidays. Seeing as no one has tried contacting us regarding the whereabouts of their missing phone, it could only be one person's: *His.*

I feel the weight again, this time not in my mouth but in my hand. The answers to all the questions I have are now within reach. He usually keeps his phone close, face down and locked, eliminating any possibility of me finding out more about his life than he allows me to know through conversation. I have always felt like he held me at a distance and now, I am closer to him than ever. All I had to do was be brave enough, hungry enough, daring enough to find the answers myself. For a moment, I think of putting it back on the table and walking away, but I abandon the woman I was when I woke up and become possessed by the woman with the need to know; so I click the "home" button.

As expected, a pass code is required for entry into the unknown. Panic sets in and I consider backing out, putting it down and accepting my miserable life of ignorance, but the adrenaline pumping through me blinds me to logic and I continue forth with act of defiance. I try a few dates like his birthday, my birthday, our anniversary, last four digits of his social, but nothing happens. I start entering names of food, cities he lived in, previous pets. Out of desperation, I begin entering names of people. First his, then mine. I run through his family tree, three generations back. Still nothing.

Realizing I have come so close and may end up leaving with nothing, tears well up in my eyes and I feel them tighten as they prepare to release a tsunami of emotional distress. Defeated, I begin entering useless words and profanities. I begin to wish it was like old times when I was younger, without a love, never even had experienced love or heartbreak, or gut-wrenching betrayal. I miss my hometown in Southern California. New York is so cold, and it's only become colder as time goes on and I realize I am an extra terrestrial to these native city-goers. I type my kind mother's name, "S-A-R-A.". My loving father's, "D-A-V-I-D." My protective brother's, "P-A-U-L." And my dear sister, "D-A-H-L-I-A," when all of a sudden I hear a click, and the lock screen disappears to reveal a brightly lit home screen...

I am in.

The Opening



Traffic Jam

Tripping over Aristotle on my way to dance with Degas
Stuck in another traffic jam on the road to my perdition
I suppose that is what it's all about, whatever *that* is
Living life through Buddha, chanting to the birds
Singing songs, to the waning moon
Wondering if there is really anyone out there
Stirring the pot...
An Omnipotent, all powerful, Alpha Omega
being that hears the crickets
Smells the burning molecules of my tiny grey matter
While I ask questions, cursing this traffic that killed the dinosaurs
Guess I am going to be late for the dance again
Should have never left my cave, but I was curious
Should have never tasted that apple, but it looked so good
Will Darwin ever forgive me for being so late?

Opening Night

Some students ask why the poet cannot write more clearly,
cannot “come to the point,” but in a poem, periods are no more
about closing than a white moon means the end of the world.
We concede too many points, leak from a thousand diminutive punctuations.

How much better to conceive the moon floating above the breaks,
the white of it training the aisles, its glow laying itself down
to disperse our illusions of solid flesh, and lines of time.
It renews a right spirit to be there under the moon,
knowing our life is but a soft line emerging from one shade,
washing into the next. I want to tell my tired father
that the moon is a whole note, floating long
on the air after our human ears cease their drumming.

Contributors' Notes

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Nsikan Akpan is a sophomore at Howard Community College. She enjoys writing short stories, poetry and essays. Nsikan is currently working on her first memoir.

Nick Allen is a student at Howard Community College. He has loved reading and writing since he was very young, and plans on majoring in Literature when he transfers to a four-year university.

CB Anslie has been writing non-fiction for over twenty-five years. In 2005, she began dabbling in fiction. Two of her poems, "Dying Time" (2005) and "Dubious Symphony" (2007), have appeared in *The Muse*.

Kayla Burchett-Zelmer is a full-time student at HCC where she strives to excel in the nursing program. She lives in Columbia with her husband and daughter. She has a strong passion for music, writing, and helping others.

Michaela Chiarella works in the president's office as an Office Associate at Howard Community College (HCC). She also received her Associate's degree from HCC and continues to study at the University of Maryland. In her spare time, Michaela enjoys hiking with her Husky and exploring the outdoors. She lives by the phrase: There's always room to be a better person.

Katy Day is a student at the University of Maryland, College Park, pursuing an undergraduate degree in English Literature and Psychology. She is the current student board member for HoCoPoLitSo. She has attempted to write in nearly every form, including poetry, fiction, blog posts, text messages, and food orders at her old waitressing job. Some people call her Mommy.

Marcel Fanara has, in recent years, enjoyed marvelous opportunities to travel, live abroad, meet interesting new friends, taste perplexing delicacies, explore various nooks and crannies of the world, and write. These experiences continue to inspire her even as she rediscovers her home state of Maryland.

Farida Guzdar is the president's assistant at Howard Community College where she has worked for 29 years. Farida's interests include writing, reading, traveling, movies and global cuisine.

Hebah Haddad is a Howard Community College graduate. She enjoys all forms of arts, loves reading, visiting museums and outdoor activities. She loves working on her photography.

Peggie Hale, a 2011 graduate of Howard Community College, is currently trying to find her niche in the land of literary journals while representing the underprivileged. She currently lives in Ohio but still considers Maryland home.

Dominick L. Hardy is the Security shift supervisor at Howard Community College in the Department of Public Safety.

Tara J. Hart was awarded a Pushcart Prize for Poetry in 2011 with the publication of "Patronized" in *Little Patuxent Review*. She has a chapbook entitled *The Colors of Absence* and several poems in the anthology *to linger on hot coals: collected poetic works from grieving women writers*. She is a Professor of English, Arts & Humanities and Coordinator of Fine Arts and Creative Writing at Howard Community College in Columbia, Maryland, and is Co-Chair of the Board of Directors of HoCoPoLitSo (The Howard County Poetry and Literature Society).

Amal Hassan is a first year student who likes working on art relating to women of color, immigrants, and international current events and likes soft mangoes and soft music.

Patricia Jakovich VanAmburg is a poet and educator affiliated with Howard Community College and *the Little Patuxent Review*. Her most recent chapbook is titled *Watching for Birds*.

Mallory Jensen is currently a music major at Howard Community College with plans to transfer to a four year university to earn a bachelor's degree in music therapy. During her senior year of high school, a brief memoir she wrote was published in *Creative Communications*, a journal for teenage writers.

Kendall Johnson is a 20 year student, born and raised in Maryland, who is currently attending Howard Community College. He is a musician who spends a lot of time listening to and creating music, and he also loves watching foreign films.

Jim Karantonis was a psychiatric technician at an Army hospital during the Vietnam War I. Following his service, he returned to school and graduated from Howard University with a M.A. degree in African American history. Jim was a civil rights worker until retirement when he began to take creative writing from Howard Community College. He continues to take classes and to write about his experiences in the Army and his work in civil rights.

Erin Kline is an Howard Community College employee who enjoys capturing the uniqueness of what surrounds us.

Michelle Kreiner is a preschool teacher at the Children's Learning Center on the campus of Howard Community College. She has an AA degree in Early Childhood Education and is currently working on her Bachelor's Degree in English.

Sylvia Lee teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at Howard Community College.

William Lowe teaches writing and literature at Howard Community College.

Paola Marquez is a freshman at Howard Community College.

Miranda Mason is in her senior year at Centennial High School and has completed a creative writing course at Howard Community College. She is Editor-in-Chief of *The Wingspan* and has had creative works published in *Teen Ink Magazine*, *Teen Ink Online*, and in *The Split Infinitive*.

Jennifer McLaughlin attends Howard Community College and is a Frederick P. Schoenbrodt honors student majoring in both Sociology and Secondary Teacher Education. She is an aspiring writer and poet, mother of three, and a community advocate for the elderly and homeless. She will graduate this May and hopes to continue her education and journey in becoming a teacher.

Carl A. Merritt is a motion graphics artist and promotions producer for Howard Community College Television. He is most interested in the expression of humanness through various media from the written word to interactive computer software design. He is currently continuing his studies in storytelling.

P. Oscar Cubillos was born in Chile and came to the USA in 1976 to study mathematics. He got a Ph.D. in 1980 at the University of Iowa. Since then, he has worked as a professor, computer engineer and teacher. He is now retired and taking classes at Howard Community College.

Lenett 'Nef'ahititi' Partlow-Myrick is a poet, visual artist, and senior adjunct instructor at Howard Community College. She teaches composition and literature classes and has held writing residencies with the Ripken Reading Center, Liberty Medical Center, Baltimore Homeless Union, and Miami Light Project. Her poetry has appeared in numerous publications, including *When Divas Laugh*, and her visual artworks have been exhibited in solo and group shows including the "Earth Project" and *Passager: A Journal of Remembrance*. Her innovative work as a performance poet has been captured in the award-winning video documentary *Mbele Ache* and the CSN-TV special "Voices of Our Past."

Abby Pollock is a part-time student at Howard Community College and is currently being home-schooled as a high school junior. She plans to pursue a career in clinical psychology.

Alyssa Pumares is a full-time student looking for her "yellow paint."

Darcy Rollow is a freshman at here at Howard Community College and majoring in graphic design. She also loves to write and may change her major to English when she transfers. She is currently taking a creative writing class and hopes to get her work seen by others.

Ian Simmons currently attends Howard Community College and is majoring in Exercise Science with a minor in Creative Writing.

Tim Singleton, a once upon a time student and current adjunct instructor at Howard Community College, is a co-chair of the HoCoPoLitSo board and co-publisher of *Little Patuxent Review*.

Courtney Sloan is a student at Howard Community College.

Amanda Starr is an artist, writer, and jewelry designer, working to complete her Associate's at Howard Community College. She will be transferring to Towson University to complete her Bachelor's in Jewelry Design and Metalsmithing. She is a firm believer in individuality and being free to express yourself. In her free time, when not working with and helping animals, she writes stories, draws pictures that are out of this world, and makes jewelry unique for each person.

Mollie Rose Trail is a writer born in Maryland, raised in Howard County. She will soon be a graduate from Howard Community College and afterwards...? She aspires to be a college level English teacher and hopes to publish her writings and inspire at least one person to be unafraid of doing the same.

Christi Tyler works in the public relations and marketing department as the Creative Services Coordinator. Her free time is spent with her husband, daughter, and two dogs. She enjoys making jewelry, reading, running, and a good glass of wine with friends.

Alex Ward is currently a Freshman at Howard Community College. Even though she is pursuing a career in Computer Science, she is hoping to sharpen her writing skills, especially in the field of fiction.

Casey Whitaker was born August 6th, 1983 and grew up locally in Columbia. Very much a homebody, he and his wife Rebecca recently put down more permanent roots with the purchase of a home in the area. This major step forward comes with the traumatic realization that no one will magically arrive to fix broken appliances or refinish a weathered deck. When not working to keep a roof over his head, he spends his time working toward finishing his degree, reading and writing for pleasure, and taking long walks with his wife and two beagles.

Dr. Ernest Williamson III has published creative work in over 550 journals. Professor Williamson has published poetry in journals such as *The Oklahoma Review*, *Review Americana: A Creative Writing Journal*, and *The Copperfield Review*. Some of his visual artwork has appeared in journals such as *The Columbia Review*, *The GW Review*, and *Fiction Fix*. Dr. Williamson is an Assistant Professor of English at Allen University and his poetry has been nominated three times for the "Best of the Net Anthology."

Celma Yofin hails from sunny Vitoria on the east coast of Brazil. She has been living in the United States since 2004 and works as a Registered Nurse in the Emergency Unit at the Providence Hospital in Washington, DC. She received her Associates Degree in Sciences from Prince George's Community College in 2013 and continues to take classes at Howard Community College. She enjoys sports, cooking, and reading short stories, poetry, and plays. She currently lives in Columbia with her husband.



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.

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