

The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

Editorial Committee

Tara Hart

Sylvia Lee

Rick Leith

William Lowe

Ryna May

Tim Singleton

Student submissions reviewed and selected by editorial committee. Faculty and staff submissions reviewed and selected by non-contributing editors.

Design Editor

Stephanie May

Cover Art

“Steppin’ Out: River Street, Savannah, GA” by K. J. Kovacs



contents

poetry

Pink Dress	4	Chathol-linn
Old-Fashioned Millennials	5	Nick Allen
Yves	11	P. Oscar Cubillos
Waking Eurydice	12	K. J. Kovacs
Did You Know?	20	Erin Standrowicz
Grounding	21	Pari Kumar
Mind Invasion	31	Peggie Hale
And Whys God's Phone Die Every Time That I Call on Him?	36	Stacey Sarpong-Adu
On the Prairie	41	Michelle Kreiner
An Ecstasy of Flowers	42	Tim Singleton
The Conductor	50	Melinda "Mindy" Abbott
Lovely Mistake	56	Darcy Rollow
Dancing with Demons	64	Benjamin Law
First Date	68	Jim Karantonis
Tutor	70	Nsikan Akpan
What Sets My Teeth On Edge?	72	Brittany Nixon

prose

Frank	6	Erin Standrowicz
Smiling Private Hardy	14	Jim Karantonis
A Woman's Makeup	22	Ben Leaser-Appel
"Law Enforcement Agents in The Urals Have Uncovered a Mass Grave..."	30	Writer: Elinor Abbott Artist: Bob Schofield
Meera's Story	32	Farida Guzdar
This is for Cows	38	Sam Kane
Midnight—A Memoir	44	Jim Karantonis
The Path of the Monkey	52	Shawn Fournier
Wynne	58	Alexander McDonald
Snow	65	P. Oscar Cubillos
It's Probably Nothing	66	Vincent Scozzari

art

Nagasaki Cat's Council	13	Greg McLemore
Tall Sun	29	Peggie Hale
Dawn	55	Erin Kline
The Reflection River	63	Benjamin Law
Autumn	69	Sarah English

Pink Dress

How hard they tried to shear the edges off
My strange, un-girlish personality.
A child has no idea of gender roles.
They always chose conventionality.

Not the doctor's kit! The nurse's bag.
But only boys use erector sets.
Girls can't be astronauts or pilot planes.
No, you can never be the president.

My mother nearly won the fight about
The need for me to take home ec in school.
The A's I got in science and in math
Confounded all the gender proctors' rules.

I recollect the day they made it clear.
What do you want for Christmas? Let me guess.
A telescope? A drawing board? A book?
A Betty Crocker stove and a pink dress.

Old-Fashioned Millennials

lighters dead so we strike a match,
burn trees the old-fashioned way.

phones dead so we strike a conversation,
communicate the old-fashioned way.

but "old-fashioned" is a concept based in relativity
and we are timeless,

holding each other,
nothing but now.

Frank

I adjusted for the hundredth time against the hard metal back of the laundromat chair. The cheap metal seats were set up musical chairs style in the center of the room. They faced outwards toward the washers and dryers that lined the walls. The hot wet air was stifling, and my thighs squelched against the seat. It was like sitting in the middle of a mildew rainforest, but instead of the sounds of birds and insects I was lulled by the rhythmic whirring and chugging of machines. I had put off doing my laundry today in hopes that it would cool off once the sun went down, but by the time I realized that the darkness had not put a dent in the temperature, it had gotten late.

Along with my laundry, I was also putting off a research paper that was due that week. I had enrolled in a Sociology class that summer to give a boost to my dwindling grade point average. It would do nothing for my English major, but it would put a bit of padding between me and an encroaching academic dismissal. I was finding it harder and harder to focus on my studies. They seemed to fall into the backdrop of my life that was instead filled with an exponentially growing student loan debt, an ex-girlfriend who didn't understand the "ex" part, one boss who was way too hyper about stacking cereal displays, and another boss who thought that dancing at the club should be my sole reason for existence. My chores did not care how full my schedule was, though. The pile of laundry that was usually confined to my hamper was beginning to fall over the sides, so, trying not to look over at the textbook on my desk, I collected the items I would need soonest and headed to the laundromat.

It was just me and Skinny Kid using the machines tonight. I'd seen him a couple times before. If he wasn't so bony, with sunken cheeks and shoulder blades that jutted out from beneath his t-shirt, he could have been handsome. I got a glimpse of his bright blue eyes when he held the door open for me once. He seemed like a nice kid. His frame was either the result of extended drug use or an unfortunately vigorous growth spurt. I decided to nickname him in hopes of the latter. Skinny Kid never looked at anybody, and I'd never seen him on campus. His sharp distorted features made it impossible to tell his age. He could have been 16 or 25. He was probably on the older side since he was always alone and I tended to see him only late at night. This wasn't the most savory street, and it wasn't the place for high school kids.

He kept his head down as he packed up his newly dried clothes. I imagined the heat of the fabrics he was handling and internally grimaced. It was the

kind of night where the heat made everything feel ten times heavier and twenty times as wet. It was almost a treat to take out freshly hot dryer clothes in the winter, but tonight I could only think of the pools of sweat under my boobs and hoped I would be able to limit my exposure to the fabric. I returned to my phone and heard the tinkling bell of Skinny Kid leaving. I was attempting to distract myself from the waiting and the heat by playing a puzzle game on my phone. I had opted to not bring a book to read tonight. I would have felt guilty for choosing a novel instead of my textbook, so I chose to forgo the whole book medium for the more neutral choice of perusing my phone.

The dim fluorescent lighting wasn't conducive for reading anyway. The owner still hadn't gotten that bulb near the entrance fixed, so I had chosen a machine in the back tonight. I was waiting for my clothes to finish drying as I stared down at my game. The faulty light flickered on and off behind me, and I allowed myself to become absorbed by the falling blocks. They were both hypnotizing and anxiety inducing. They were piling up on the left side of the screen, and I was about to lose when I felt a clammy breath on my neck. I screamed and tore myself from the seat in a flailing kind of pirouette. My phone flew from my hand and skittered under one of the washers. It was Frank. He was perched backwards on the seat across from mine. I glared at the dull grin plastered across his sweaty face. I must not have heard the door bell tinkle when he walked in, having been too absorbed in my game. His long fingernailed hands gripped the backs of our chairs together as he stared at me. My heart was beating a million times a minute and I could feel my lips curling into a sneer. Frank was a regular at the laundromat. I saw him here almost every time I came in, and I had a sound suspicion that he planned his visits around mine. I had met his kind before at the club. They are always a little too grabby, but not enough to alert the attention of the bouncer. They are always telling the raunchiest jokes and then winking afterwards like you should be impressed and turned on. I tried to be polite to Frank whenever I saw him, just because it was easier than the alternative, but it was growing harder and harder. The combination of the heat and the fact that I could still feel his rancid breath under me ear tipped the scales. "What the fuck, Frank?"

The widening of his smile told me that I had made a mistake. I had, up until now, only communicated with him in vague smiles and grunts in hopes that he wouldn't find an opening and would lose interest.

“Who’s Frank?” he asked

Shit. During my past laundry trips I had given a nickname to almost all the regulars just like I had with Skinny Kid. There was Frizz, a frizzy-haired shift-eyed little woman; Larry, a lumberjack-looking man who always had lemon scented dryer sheets; and the Asian twins, who weren’t really twins but a short husband and wife who always came in together and talked rapidly and angrily in hushed voices. My mom had a gross pedophile Uncle named Frank, so I thought it was fitting. He creeped me out. He was exactly the type of guy to lure kids into a white van with promises of candy or puppies. He made me want to button up my jacket every time I saw him. He always stared too long and had almost no concept of personal space. I had found him sifting through my laundry before when I had my back turned. Tonight he wore a version of his usual uniform, a short sleeved polo shirt that he tucked into a pair of belted blue jeans. He smelled of a mixture of over-ripe bananas and cheap cologne.

He would try to talk to any woman that came into the laundromat including me, no matter their lack of interest. I only saw him with laundry to do half the time. Whenever he did come in with stuff to wash, he always asked for detergent and dryer sheets. He even asked for quarters sometimes. He’s the reason I started taking little baggies of powdered detergent instead of the whole container. I got tired of him asking.

“No one. Never mind,” I spat back. I turned away and got down to my hands and knees to where I saw my phone fly a few seconds before.

“You were about to lose your game.” His slimy silky voice made my shoulders tense up. “Are those new shorts? I like them.”

I didn’t reply, but shifted my position to one less revealing. I could see my phone up against the wall covered in dust bunnies. I reached out straining and churned up some of the dust. I could feel it with the tips of my fingers when I breathed in a big ball of lint up my nose. Coughing and sneezing, I snatched up the device and emerged. I could see through my teary eyes that Frank was now in the seat next to the one I was in. I begrudgingly chose to remain standing next to the machines as I caught my breath. His cologne was beginning to fill the steamy room.

I looked down my now running nose to see that my screen was cracked. It wasn’t a super old phone, but I took pride in the fact that I had kept it in good condition for so long. I usually ended up ruining my devices in a matter

of months. I wasn’t due for an upgrade on this one yet and the sight of the hefty crack now running down the screen made my blood boil.

“Damnit,” I muttered.

“Tissue?” He held out the little package of tissues he had produced from his pocket. I scanned it with narrowed eyes. “You never know when you’re gonna need one,” he winked. I didn’t even want to know what he was trying to imply. I was too concentrated on my nose that was about to drip. He held the package to the side in a gesture that beckoned me toward my vacant seat. I stepped forward and sat, trying to hide my resent. I took a tissue and blew my nose on the fragrant paper. The relief narrowly beat the scent that now clung to my sweaty face. I held back a gag.

“I saw you from my window and figured you could use some company.” He jabbed his thumb toward the line of apartments across the street. “You never know who’s walking around at this time of night.”

The irony of his statement left a derisive smile on my face, but I guess he would take any kind of smile as an opening to expand our conversation. “What are you doing out here so late?” He asked.

“I was hoping it would cool down after dark.” I explained shortly.

“They say this heat...” he drew out the word “heat” and wiggled his eyebrow “is going to stay for at least a few more days.”

“That sucks.” I turned back to my phone. “Damnit,” I muttered again.

“You got a crack.” He leaned toward me as he peered over my phone.

“Yea” I said, trying to be subtle as I shifted away from him. “Just happened.”

“Sorry about that, I didn’t mean to scare you”

I pursed my lips and nodded but was saved by the ding of my dryer. I released myself from the sticky metal seat with a heave and, with my back turned to the chairs, began to unload my dryer clothes. My plan to wait until they were cool was ruined by Frank. I didn’t want to have to stay here any longer than absolutely necessary. It wasn’t a huge batch of clothes, and I wasn’t going to fold them here. I was stuffing them into my laundry bag when I heard the door open and close. I turned around to verify that I was once again alone. Frank had gone. I breathed a sigh of relief. Collecting the rest of my things quickly before the smell of him permeated my clean laundry, I began to walk toward the door when I noticed it. It was a hundred dollar bill in the

seat that Frank had been sitting in. I picked it up apprehensively and looked around again. It had the word “sorry” scrawled across it along with a phone number and a wink face. My mind quickly went over all the times he had asked to borrow detergent and coins, and I shook my head in furious disbelief. He had hundred dollar bills to give away to girls, and he was mooching off people that needed to use a cheap rundown laundromat? I pocketed the bill and pushed open the door. Fuck that guy. It wouldn’t matter if he had given me a thousand dollar bill, there was no way I was ever going to call his number. There was also no way that I would ever be able to return to this place. As I stepped outside a rush of hot moist air pushed the hair back from my face. There was no relief in the sultry night except the lack of banana/ cologne smell. The bill crinkled in my pocket, and I felt the familiar sensation of vindication. Taking money from creepy perverts had never phased me. I picked up the pace just in case he had been watching to see if I would take the bill. I would have to start looking for a new laundromat in the morning. It would be just another thing to keep me from that research paper.

Yves

I remember the brightness
of your round eyes, brown and blazing,
...
and you should have lived.

—From *Jewel* by Karen Erdman

just a boy, and,
I can imagine you writing a poem
like the branches of a wild tree,
much better than this
(as you did.)

I can see you teaching
with children glued to all words,
telling stories as if they were real
(so good at that!)

But memory insists at other events:
“Be careful driving,” you said
(but YOU were not.)
I was crying; “we love you.”
“I know you do,” you said.
And that was the only time.

Waking Eurydice

Asleep in the arms of Orpheus
 the poet's lips, sapphire blue,
 belonged to you.
 Singing head (mercifully) still
 attached to its natural home,
 your treelike body. Alone.
 No piskey-mazed maenids waiting
 in the wings to tear you apart, dear heart.
 How they loved and hated
 you, those women scorned,
 wooing and eschewing
 you all the livelong deadlong day.
 I thought they'd never leave.
 Especially sad, mad Tina with that neck
 as white as Leda's and the invisible ruby
 rose drooping behind her ear—
 she was the last to disappear.
 Dreambound, dreamily you bowed,
 held out your hand to me, gazed blue-lipped
 all the way down to the pearl floor
 of my soul's fjord and sang
*Eurydice, lie down in my bones;
 there is light in my blood,
 centuries old. Stygian waters
 can never dim the golden petals
 lit within these waiting limbs.
 Hades fades, the tale is told.
 The sun is here, Eurydice, behold:
 there is light in my blood,
 centuries old.*

Nagasaki Cat's Council



Oil on Arches Oil paper, 22"x30" 2015

Smiling Private Hardy

Private Hardy had a bladder problem. The nineteen-year-old Army recruit had the problem for as long as he could remember. He never knew his father. It was his mother who had explained it to him using medical terms he didn't understand.

"You have overactive bladder syndrome," she said.

"Why?" the child asked her.

"It's not your fault." She said in a resigned manner. "It was your father's fault."

"Why?"

Her young child was confused that it was his father who had done this to him since he couldn't even recall his father's face. The long-gone dad had left when the boy was just two-years-old. At that age wetting his diaper was not an issue. But now at the age of four the boy knew what his mother knew: he had an "I pee in my pants" problem.

"It was all that yelling" his mother said. "Constantly yelling at me ... me, your mother. And my precious baby, you heard it all."

"But I don't remem—"

"Yes, but the place that keeps your pee does. And then she returned to medical terms beyond the child's comprehension, "Your bladder remembers." His mother closed her eyes and seemed to talk to herself, almost a whisper, "As if it wasn't hard enough for us, a black man and a white woman, and a son that's both."

She focused back on him and leaned closer across the kitchen table. "Your father's inability to control his anger caused stress in your little body and that's why you've been unable to control your urge to urinate, to pee."

The child couldn't recall the yelling so he accepted his mother's explanation that the place that kept his pee, his bladder did remember.

The urge to urinate and the inability to control it wasn't an issue for the child so long as the day went well: no crisis to face, no difficult decisions to make, and the access to a bathroom was nearby. By the time the boy was five-years-old he had learned something on his own. As long as he was involved in an activity, busy, writing the alphabet, drawing pictures, playing with his toy soldiers, or engaged in any physical exercise, like playing ball or tag with the

neighborhood boys, his urge to "urinate," by now he had learned that was the grown-up word for pee, he could control his problem ... until the activity ended. But then, look-out, run for the bathroom. And at night if tired from playing all day, other than an occasional "accident," his problem was almost under control. Almost. But the year passed and then it was kindergarten time, preschool.

Hardy's mother filled out the school's registration form and was relieved she could finally go to work full-time knowing her son was in a safe place. Of course, in filling out the application form she would have to lie. The first question and the only one in bold type read: *Does your child have any physical issues or medical needs we should be aware of?* Without hesitation she check-marked *No*.

"Okay," She said to her boy, "now let's get a game plan. Okay?"

"Okay!" He said with enthusiasm. His mother always insisted on a positive approach to his condition, even though her son felt nothing but disappointment.

"First, when you are in class you will have to sit still for long periods of time with little to occupy yourself. That happens in school. Sometimes it's boring. So for the next few weeks you will practice just sitting, doing nothing but counting to a hundred and back to zero. This will help you get your mind on something else besides needing to go to the bathroom. And remember to sit-up straight in your chair. That will also help keep your mind on other things. You must keep busy."

"Got it!" he said recognizing the keep busy part of the plan.

"Second, I know this will be difficult but it will be our little secret. Okay?"

"Okay," he said. "A secret." The boy was used to secrets.

His mother reached into a paper bag and removed a blue and white cardboard box. She opened it and handed him a rectangle-shaped thick white napkin. At least, that's what it felt like to him.

"You will put this in your underpants in the morning when you head off to school." She said this matter-of-factly, like when she took his temperature and instructed him to put the thermometer under his tongue.

“And if, and I mean if, because I don’t think it will happen,” that was his positive mother speaking, “your bladder lets loose then this pad will absorb the liquid.”

“What’s absorb?”

“Soak it up.” For the briefest moment she closed her eyes, her hands went outward, her fingers stiffened, and then she exhaled slowly. She continued “This will soak it up.”

He wasn’t used to his mother being upset with him. He felt like he would cry. “What do, what do I do with it after it’s wet?”

“I’m sorry, dear.” She returned to her instructional mode. “When you get the regular bathroom break, you take the pad off in a stall where no one can see you. Throw it into the trash can. I will have an extra one in your lunch box if you need it.” Then she reassured him, “but you won’t need it.”

She returned the napkin to the box. She raised both index fingers and pointed to him across the table. “And now for the most important part of the plan. Just like when they flash the bat sign in the night sky to have ... Ah, what’s batman’s real name?

“Bruce Wayne!”

“Yes, and Bruce Wayne puts on his batman disguise. You will have your own disguise. And this disguise will rescue you when you’re in trouble. Just in case.”

“Where is it?” he looked toward the paper bag on the table.

You’ll have it with you always. If others make fun of you, put on your disguise ... guise.” she emphasized guise, “right in front of their eyes.”

“Hey, mom that rhymes.” He loved words and how they sounded.

She placed her hands over her face and ever so slowly removed them. Her mouth was opened wide, teeth clenched, and her cheeks raised upward in an exaggerated manner that made her eyes squint. He had never seen her smile like this before and it reminded the boy not of Batman but instead the hero’s enemy, the Joker.

“Your disguise is your smile.” she said. Her face had returned to normal.

“When they are being nasty, you will smile.” His mom gave him another wide smile but a quick one. “And that tells them that you ... are ... not the joke, you are in on the joke.” This confused the boy but he didn’t interrupt. “And,” she continued, “being embarrassed is not a big deal. You may blush ... that’s

when your face gets red and you may feel funny for a minute. But that goes away if you give a big, big smile.”

She moved around the table, knelt down, face to face with her son. “Watch me and practice.” She smiled and looked like the Joker again.

So he practiced. He practiced so often those few weeks leading up to his foray into the world of preschool his cheeks hurt.

So armed with the knowledge to keep his mind occupied, his extra layer of protection, and his secret disguise, he went off to school. And on that first day he had an accident. The class had quiet time, nothing to do but sit. Some napped, heads on their desks. He tried counting to a hundred and back from a hundred. But at sixty-eight almost to sixty-seven he felt his belly would explode and then he felt warmth in his pants. He immediately put on his disguise and smiled and no one knew he had a problem.

In the evening the boy devised what he believed was a better plan than his mom’s extremely boring instructions of counting and sitting up straight. He would write. Or think of writing. After all, what he loved more than anything were words. He was good at words. He even heard his mother say to her friends that he had a great vocabulary. He guessed that meant he knew lots of words. He didn’t know why he was good at words, he just was. So the rest of the week in class when nothing of interest was going on he wrote words. He copied the words on the bulletin board. He would use what words he knew to describe the scene outside the windows. Then he’d describe the room, the teacher, the other kids. “The trees are very green.” “The room is yellow.” “The teacher is fat. Not real fat but fat.” “Fat, Cat, Hat, Sat.” “The teacher is nice.” “The kids are nice.” “My desk is brown.” “Bob is brown.” “Maybe Bob will be my friend.”

When he couldn’t use his pencil and paper he wrote words in his head. And when his mother picked him up after school, he showed her his writing, told her his pants were dry, and she applauded both accomplishments.

But sometimes, the boy learned, something you work so hard to avoid ... happens. It was an afternoon, outside recess had been vigorous and he was tired. Others around him, including his friend, Bob, had their heads down on desks, naptime, so he joined them. And then, he leaked. Could anything have been worse he had worn khaki pants that day. A wide dark brown circle spread outward and down to his knees. He jumped up, raised his hand and frantically shouted, “May I go to the boy’s room? I have to go to the boy’s room!”

It seemed to him that everyone in the room had been waiting for this moment, the moment his mother had warned him about. The other boys, awake now, gathered around and pointed to his pants. And there was laughter. The girls covered their eyes or turned away so as not to look. There were giggles. The boy saw that even his friend Bob laughed. So he put on his disguise. He smiled.

The teacher told him to go to the boy's room, and he did, and he smiled as he left the room. In the empty hallway he stopped, the floor seemed to move. He looked up, the ceiling spun; he closed his eyes, leaned against the lockers so as not to fall down. This wasn't anything like what his mother had described about being embarrassed. This was something else. This was absolutely the worst feeling. He had nothing to compare it too. Even when he had the flu and threw-up for an entire day and night he hadn't felt this bad. It would be several years later as he continued to expand his vocabulary he would find the word that described what he felt: humiliation.

When he returned to the classroom he entered smiling.

§

Hardy's smile was there throughout elementary and secondary school. It was even more pronounced in high school. His light brown complexion and curly, reddish hair served as a backdrop to his wide smile reminiscent of a clown's face on a box that kids threw beanbags at when the carnival was in town. His smile was there for years where anyone who wanted to notice could have.

He smiled when he sat across from the Army recruiter who was a bit confused when the red haired young man checked Negro where it asked for Race on the enlistment papers. He smiled throughout the drills in basic training and as he stood in line to the mess hall. He smiled as he shined his boots and oiled his rifle in the barracks at night. He was smiling on that stifling summer day in Texas when on bivouac.

"Private, who the hell gave you permission to ... *your in ate?*"

"No one, Sergeant. I had to go real bad."

"Well, that's just too damn bad." The sergeant turned up the volume to include the recruits in Bravo Company in his lesson plan.

"So private, what should we do about it now that you've already ... *your in ated* in that dirt?"

"I don't know, Sergeant. I ..."

"Well, I know what to do about it." The sergeant said. "You have to remove that foulness from the earth and return it to where it came."

"Sergeant?" Hardy's smile was joined briefly by slight furrows on his sweat-beaded forehead practically hid under his camouflage helmet.

"Private, you scoop up that puddle of dirt, and put it in your pocket. You will take it back to the barracks and dispose of it in the garbage. You will not leave it here to contaminate our forest."

Private Hardy looked to the only spot of ground that wasn't parched.

"You do it now. You obey my order, or you will face the consequences."

"Yes, Sergeant."

Private Hardy knelt to the ground. He scooped handfuls of urine-soaked dirt and deposited the foulness into his pockets. He stood and smiled as the dampness darkened his fatigues.

"Now fall in with the others. And wipe that damn smile off your face."

Hardy joined the line of soldiers but continued to smile. And it was his smile that gained Hardy a new found respect from those who were witnesses. For the recruits, the smile represented Hardy's way of giving the finger to the sergeant, something the privates wished they had the nerve to do.

That night in the barracks Private Hardy wrote a poem. He'd been writing poems since before high school, sometimes to control the urge to urinate, and sometimes it helped to put into words how he felt about himself. So he wrote:

Once I was nothing,

but then I grew,

and grew,

and grew,

into nothing.

Private Hardy's delivery to the psychiatric ward occurred the following day after the noon formation when the sergeant walked the line inspecting the soldiers and saw a widening dark wet spot on Hardy's fatigues at the private's privates, and Hardy was smiling.

Did You Know?

She cornered my mom,
 Between the frozen corn and
 Microwave pizza snacks.
 Hissed in her ear
 Spitting and foaming at the mouth.
 She passed it like a disease of
 Bumps and boils
 To my mom.
 It was like angry bees
 Had filled her head
 And traveled home
 To be jettisoned into my
 Ears and eyes
 Which quickly filled with tears.
 Later, looking in the mirror
 I examined my
 Bucktoothed
 Bespeckled
 Blemished
 Bestial form,
 And demanded an explanation
 On how people could believe
 That this,
 Could ever be capable
 Of that.

Grounding

*"No matter how long you pluck and deconstruct,
 pain remains rooted, and all the while yes nests
 inside you like a seed"*

—Irene Latham

I am a tree, rooted beyond my years,
 Watered by continuous tears
 My leaves fall onto this earth,
 An attempt to rid of pain and sorrow
 I blossom again, though, I blossom again.
 And my leaves are reborn, wounds reopened, pain resurfaced
 Once more, they fall,
 They crumble and become one with the soil and fuel me over and over
 They never cease to exist, they never disappear
 They are a part of me, my veins, my stems
 No matter how I struggle to rid of them,
 They are my grounding,
 They are with how I survive
 For, without roots, a crisp swift of air would leave me floating,
 Floating without a path, without purpose
 Although my stems hold twisted and intertwined lines of pain,
 At least I have a base to try again.

A Woman's Makeup

Lena Kostas began her day in front of her powder room mirror applying and reapplying her slate gray eyeliner in hopes of achieving the same look that Alejandro from the makeup counter demonstrated for her the day prior. He informed her that a smoky eye was a simple two-step process, but after an eye-watering ninety minutes and one half-empty bottle of makeup remover, Lena determined that Alejandro was a liar and a thief. She had paid twenty-seven dollars for the liner—a point-of-sale that would contribute to his monthly commission check, no doubt—and she made a plan to return it that afternoon after her visit with her daughter, Athena.

“Well, that will just have to do,” she said to herself after her final attempt, depositing the makeup into her purse and giving her hair a generous spritz of hairspray before exiting the bathroom.

Lena’s husband, Peter, greeted her in the hallway, briefcase and umbrella in hand.

“Oh no, it’s raining?”

“Not yet, but they’re calling for it,” he responded, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek before heading for the front door. “Try not to melt.”

“Who ever heard of a business meeting on a Sunday?”

“They’re important clients and they’re only in town for the weekend. I would have rescheduled it, but they need to be back in Montreal by tomorrow evening.”

“Our grandchildren can hardly remember what you look like.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Well, don’t complain to me in ten years when you’re pitying yourself for not spending enough time with family.”

“Okay,” Peter said. “If that happens, I give you permission to file for divorce.”

As Peter walked away, Lena noticed a green smudge on the back of his suit jacket and remembered the lid to the paint sample she had left on the kitchen table. “You look very nice today, Peter,” she said, and turned towards the kitchen.

“Thank you, dear. New suit.”

“I noticed.” She smiled. “Drive safe.”

§

Athena saw her mother’s Mercedes pull into the driveway.

“Your mother-in-law is here,” she said to her husband.

Andrew looked up from his newspaper. “I’ll grab your Klonopin.”

“Already taken care of, my friend.” She walked to the foyer and opened the door as Lena made her way up the front steps.

“God, Athena, these steps are so slippery I can barely keep my balance.”

“Hi, Mom,” Athena answered. “You look nice.”

“I like to make an effort when I visit family,” Lena answered, eyeing Athena’s bathrobe and bare feet.

“Just a lazy Sunday morning for us.” Athena took the umbrella and coat from her mother’s outstretched hands, shutting the front door a little too firmly. “Andrew’s here too.”

“Oh, hello Andrew,” she said. “Where are the children?”

“Play date,” he informed her, moving from the couch.

“Don’t get up, you look so comfortable there in your pajamas,” Lena said before turning to her daughter. “Athena, you didn’t tell me my grandchildren wouldn’t be here. I barely get to see them!”

“You just saw them on Wednesday.”

“Yes, but I wasn’t feeling very well, and I didn’t want to be too close to them. God knows I’d never hear the end of it if I got your children sick.”

“Well, we do aspire to keep them healthy. Do you want something to drink?”

“Just a small glass of Pinot would be lovely.”

“Sorry, I think Andrew and I finished off the last of it over dinner the other night. But we have coffee. And juice.”

“Coffee will be fine, then. With just a little bit of cream.”

Athena walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. As she grabbed the half-and-half from the door, she eyed the bottle of wine resting on the lower shelf. Quietly, she picked up the bottle and gave a small cough as she pulled the cork free. She lifted it to her lips and tilted back her head, taking a generous gulp. She quickly took two more, then placed the bottle back on the shelf before closing the refrigerator door.

“Mom, you’re going to love this coffee,” she called into the living room.

“We got it from this little cafe in Dupont Circle a couple of weeks ago.”

She carried it out of the kitchen and handed it to her mother who was still standing next to the couch, frail arms crossed over her even leaner frame.

“Thank you, dear,” she said, taking the coffee. “I was just telling your husband about this terrible makeup I was tricked into purchasing at Neiman Marcus yesterday.”

Andrew looked up at his wife and grinned. “Yes, this Alejandro fellow sounds like a real con-artist. Look at your mother’s face: it’s a disaster.”

“What are you talking about?” Athena asked, taking in her mother’s pristine countenance. She touched her own cheek, brushing her fingertips against the two pink blemishes that she had been battling in the mirror earlier that morning.

“This eyeliner. For twenty-seven dollars you’d think I could find one that wouldn’t make me look like a rabid raccoon. I’m going to return it and tell them that Alejandro clearly doesn’t know enough about makeup to be manning the NARS counter.”

“I think you look pretty, Mom,” Athena said. “It compliments your dark eyes.”

“That’s very sweet, dear, thank you.” Lena glimpsed at herself in the small mirror that hung over her daughter’s console table before brushing a stray blond lock back into place. “But I’m going to return it. Unless you want it, Athena.” She sat down gingerly on the couch next to Andrew.

“I’ll take it. I don’t think I have a good eyeliner.”

Lena opened her purse. “Here you go then, although I certainly wouldn’t call this ‘good.’ And don’t give me any money for it, you can just repay me with a

few cups of your fancy coffee.” She smiled and took a tentative sip. “It’s very good.”

“I thought you’d like it.” Athena sat down on the leather club chair opposite her husband. “So how’s Dad?”

§

When Peter returned home late that evening, he found Lena in the living room watching a muted television that showed the local news.

“How is Athena?” he asked her, placing his dripping umbrella on the floor.

“She hates me.”

“Your daughter doesn’t hate you, Lena.”

“I can see it in her eyes, Peter. Like it’s painful for her to even look at me.”

“She’s just angry, I suppose.”

“Well how long is she going to keep punishing me? I mean, you’ve forgiven me, haven’t you?”

Peter removed his jacket and loosened his tie before sitting down next to his wife. “I don’t know if ‘forgiven’ is the word. I guess I just choose not to think about it anymore.”

“It was two years ago, Peter.”

“Is there an instruction manual for how to properly forgive your wife after she tries to seduce your son-in-law?”

Lena stood quickly from the loveseat, leaving a small dent in the beige cushion. A pillow fell to the floor and landed at her feet. “I was drunk, Peter! It was New Year’s Eve, for God’s sake. It had been the worst year of my fucking life, and I was a wreck. I can barely even remember what happened.”

Peter looked up at his wife. “Well, I’m sure Athena can remember all of the details.”

Lena held his gaze, then looked away. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore; it’s humiliating. I’ve said I was sorry. I felt alone and afraid and it could have been anyone, but unfortunately Andrew happened to be there. I know it was inexcusable.” She looked at him again. “Do you realize it had been over a year since you and I had made love?”

"I'm going to pretend like you didn't say that."

"What do you mean?"

"If you're going to try to justify your behavior, you're not going to find any sympathy from me," Peter said as he stood up. "I have forgiven you, Lena, but sometimes my forgiveness just feels like pity." He walked slowly to the doorway and paused as if he was going to say something more, then quietly made his way down the hall and up the stairs.

§

Shortly before midnight, Andrew knocked lightly on the bathroom door. "Off to bed," he said. "Love you."

"Okay, goodnight," Athena answered, standing naked before the bathroom mirror that was still fogged over from her shower.

She ran her hands through her wet hair, over her neck and along the outer curve of her breasts, down to the navel of her slightly loose-skinned belly. She pinched it softly and turned to view her profile, wondering how long it would be before she stopped worrying about her soft midsection. Her daughters were now eight and five, and while Athena was an avid runner and fervent devotee of Pilates, she surrendered to the reality that her body would never return to its pre-motherhood form—no matter how many miles she ran or plank-positions she held.

Athena released her gathered flesh and reached for the body lotion that sat on the countertop next to her sink. She smoothed the fragrant lotion over her hands and arms, gently massaging her pointy elbows and shoulders. After she was finished, she noticed her mother's eyeliner resting on the sink. She picked it up and turned it over in her hands.

"That's a pretty color," Athena said to herself. Her slippery fingers struggled to uncap it, so she placed the pencil between her teeth and pulled it free. She leaned over the sink and positioned her face inches from the mirror, pulling her right eyelid taut before drawing a perfectly curved line above her blonde lashes.

"That will just have to do," she said, surveying her work before lining her left eye. Her eyes began to water as she tilted back from the mirror.

"It compliments your eyes," she whispered.

Athena heard her cellphone ringing from her purse. She picked it up and extracted her phone, the caller ID displaying her mother's name. Her eyes briefly met her own in the mirror before she pressed 'Accept.'

"Hi Mom. It's late. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Athena. I just needed to talk to you."

Athena detected a rasp in her mother's voice and assumed she had been crying. "Are you upset?"

"I'm very upset, Athena. I can't do this anymore, I can't deal with this guilt."

"Mom, I..."

"Athena, did I ever tell you about how terrible I was to your Aunt Lydia when we were kids?"

"I don't think so."

"It's a regret I live with everyday. She was such a kind child, so tender and loving to me and to everyone around her. I looked like the devil next to her. I was so jealous because people were so drawn to her and so cautious of me." Lena paused. "Athena, are you there?"

"I'm here."

"What Lydia had that I didn't was compassion. And empathy. I watched her throughout her life, with her children and your Uncle Danny, and how freely she gave of herself to be present for other people. If I came to her with a concern about you or my job or anything at all, it was like I could see my own vulnerability reflected in her eyes, and I would no longer worry. I knew I could trust her with my feelings because she understood them, and she held no judgment towards anything I would say."

"She was a wonderful woman," Athena said. "But why are you telling me this now?"

"Because I need you to understand. All those years that I witnessed the goodness of my sister, I was petrified of being like her. Because if I felt that same compassion for you—not love, because I have always loved you, Athena—but compassion, it would be like walking off a cliff and falling into a world that I could never return from. I wouldn't know how to turn it off, and I was terrified of being consumed by your emotions and your fears and your insecurities. I wasn't strong enough."

“That’s the kindest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

Both women were silent for a few moments before Lena continued.

“When I... did what I did... I was missing my sister so badly, and I was so angry with myself for all of the ways in which I felt I had failed her. So I drank and I hurt myself, and worst of all I hurt my family.”

Athena waited for her mother to continue, then realized she was finished.
“Thank you for telling me this, Mom.”

“Well, I just felt like you needed to know.”

“I’m suddenly very tired. Can we continue this tomorrow?”

“Yes, that’s fine, dear,” Lena responded. “Goodnight.”

Athena heard the click of her mother hanging up the phone. She looked down at the tile floor beneath her feet, hearing her own breath and feeling the lingering drops of water that spilled down her back from her damp hair. Her vision became blurry, and as she stared at a small indiscriminate spot on the floor, she began to cry. She allowed herself a few minutes, then slowly lifted her hand from her side and picked up the eyeliner.

Athena placed the lid on the pencil and dropped it into the trash.

Tall Sun



“Law Enforcement Agents in The Urals Have Uncovered a Mass Grave...

containing the remains of up to 30 girls and women kidnapped and forced to work as prostitutes before being killed.”

- The Moscow Times (February 5, 2007)



* This story is not unique. According to Unicef 175,000 Russian and Eastern European women are victims of human trafficking every year. Learn more at The Global Alliance Against Trafficking Women: <http://www.gaatw.org/>

Mind Invasion

I give up. Please welcome to my brain.
Thoughts of you have been sneaking in all over the place.
I barred the doors and latched the windows,
But they find their way in anyway,
Like a stinkbug into a warm room in winter
(Maybe not a good analogy).

I do other things until
Thoughts of you tap at the doors of my mind
Like brat children that belong to the neighbors
And turn into Hitchcock's birds pecking away at my walls and windows
Or Poe's particular bird come to taunt me
(No...no, it's not like that at all).

It's true that I can't get you out of my mind.
It's more like you seep into my mind
Like fruit liqueurs poured over Italian pastries,
Befuddling me
Like the startled pleasure of unexpected applause.
(yes!)

Making me merry
Like the elves getting into the double-spiked egg-nog after
Santa finally leaves.
(uh, not so much with nog, no.)
Making me wispy and wanton like Marilyn singing happy birthday,
Making me dreamy and wistful like a summer vacation planner in mid-
February.
(yeah, yeah, it's more like those last two!)

There you are
in the back of my mind,
in the front of my mind,
playing computer games
in some shadowed nook of my mind.

Come to think of it,
Maybe you should stick around.
You are, after all,
Just what I had in mind.

Meera's Story

I grew up in a remote village in India. I know it was remote because growing up I never saw anyone except the people who lived in the village. I didn't realize there was a whole world out there beyond our small village. I don't think anyone even knew the name of the village or what state it was in. No one needed to since no one got any mail, and I think the government had forgotten about us because we did not have electricity or running water. Back then I didn't even know what electricity or running water was.

I wasn't taught to read or write and was not allowed to speak unless spoken to. After all, I was a girl and existed only to be useful to others. No one really spoke to me unless it was to tell me what to do. I knew I was curious and wanted to learn because, when no one was looking, I would look through my brother's school books and try to write the letters and words on his slate. I would make sure I erased the evidence so no one would know what I was doing—daring to go beyond what others had decided for me. In our village, the girls weren't sent to school. We were to help our mothers with the housework, fetch water from the well, wash the clothes, and all other menial work... to prepare us to continue to do the same for the rest of our lives in our husbands' homes!

The bright spot in my day was when I took lunch to my father in the fields where he worked under the hot sun trying to eke out a livelihood for our family. My father was a kind and gentle man who talked to me as he ate his lunch under the shade of the *peepul* tree. He knew I wanted more than the life I had and that I was capable of much more than he knew how to give me. He told me stories of his childhood, helping his father in the fields. He hadn't ventured beyond our village but he had heard about the big city and the exciting life there. I could only imagine what it was like, and my young heart yearned to experience it.

One day a *Nautanki*, a travelling drama group, came to our village. We were all surprised to see unfamiliar faces and wondered how they found our village. There was excitement throughout the village as they set up their stage in the center of the village near the *banyan* tree where the *panchayat* (council of village elders) met. For the next few nights they enacted plays from Hindu mythology that captured our imaginations. I imagined being a goddess dressed in silks and jewels with all the gods vying for my attention. I was feeling urges I had never felt before and couldn't understand this awakening. I

went through my daily chores as if in a daze and incurred my mother's wrath for daydreaming. I knew I had to do something.

On the last night of the *Nautanki* performance I stole out of the house and went to the field where the group had set up their tents and wagons. I hid in one of the wagons under some sacks of grains and vegetables. The next morning when the caravan left the village, I peeked out to see my village fading into the background. I was both scared and excited at what lay ahead. Of course, I had no idea what that would be.

Eventually the caravan reached the outskirts of what looked like what I imagined the "big city" would be. The wagons were emptied and I was found crouching in the corner. I didn't know what to say or do and it seemed the man in charge didn't seem to care why or how I happened to be there. In fact, he seemed to be pleased as he pulled me out of the wagon and asked one of the women to get me cleaned and feed me. They didn't seem to question anything either. I was soon to find out why.

The next morning the man put me in an auto rickshaw and we rode into the city. He kept looking at me with a smirk on his face. I asked him where we were going and he replied he was taking me to a place where there were many girls around my age and I would have a lot of friends and be happy. I was excited at the prospect. I was 13 and didn't know anything beyond the simple village life.

As the auto rickshaw weaved its way through the traffic, I stared in amazement at the world outside. There were so many people dressed in colorful outfits, shops selling all kinds of things, cows picking at garbage heaps, emaciated stray dogs limping along, children playing in the streets, and an unending sea of people. We finally reached our destination. We went up a flight of steps and the man pushed me toward a woman with a painted face and a gaudy saree. She asked me my name. I said Meera; she said that would do. What did she mean? Do for what?

She took me up a flight of steps into a hallway lined with doors leading to small rooms, some occupied by women helping each other dress and style their hair. I had never seen so much color and glitter. I yearned to wear one of the outfits. We reached a room at the end of the hallway and the woman opened the door and pushed me in. There was a girl a little older than me lying on the bed. The woman told her to get me dressed and ready for the

night. I was excited at the prospect of dressing up and going out to explore the city.

The other girl asked me where I was from and how I got there. I told her how I escaped from my village and my boring life. She asked me if I knew where I was. I said I did not but was glad to be in the big city. She didn't say anything but left the room and locked it from the outside. About an hour later the woman opened the door. A man was with her. She showed him in telling him I was the youngest and newest member of the house. He seemed pleased. She closed the door and left. He started undressing, and I let out a primal scream and ran toward the door. He blocked my way and put his fat, sweaty hands on me. I knew there was no escape. Thus started my life as a prostitute.

And then one day, things changed. A clean-shaven handsome young man paid handsomely to spend the night with me. I had never seen such a beautiful human being. I was smitten. At first he just wanted to talk. He said he had met his wife at college and they had fallen in love and got married. A year later they were blessed with a beautiful baby girl. Soon after, his wife became gravely ill and had been bed-ridden ever since. He said he loved his wife but needed to be with a woman. He was gentle and kind; not anything like the other men. He wanted me exclusively for himself and was willing to pay for the privilege. I let myself think that maybe there was a glimmer of hope for my otherwise miserable life.

I was in love and blossomed with happiness. I felt he loved me too, but we never actually said the words to each other. Then one day he said he was going to move me to an apartment where he could visit me without having to come to the brothel and deal with the scum of society. I was overjoyed. The apartment was gorgeous, and I set to decorating it like a young bride in her first home. I had a young girl to help with the housekeeping. I rarely went out; he didn't want me to go anywhere. He said my beauty was for his eyes only. He bought me beautiful clothes and jewels and I would wait for his arrival with his favorite meal cooked, dressed in his favorite saree. I was living in a dream. He even hired a tutor to teach me, and I finally got the education I had always wanted. I knew he would never leave his wife and daughter and I didn't ask him to. I was content with what I had.

Then one day he didn't show up. I thought maybe he was running late at the office or needed to be with wife or daughter. I called his mobile but it went to voicemail. I was in a panic. Was my happy bubble about to burst? I didn't know what to do or who to call. I didn't sleep that night. The next day someone from his office called. The unthinkable had happened. He was in an accident on his way to see me and had died on the spot. I was devastated.

Why would God show me what happiness was like only to take it away from me? I had no idea what the future held for me. Would I lose my beautiful home and be back at the brothel?

The following week, a couple of men in suits and with briefcases knocked on my door. I knew they were important people so I invited them in. They took out some papers and explained that my love had left the apartment to me and enough money in a bank account to last a lifetime. I couldn't believe it and burst into tears. I would have a comfortable life but I had lost the only love I had ever known. I knew I needed to do something to honor his life and his generosity.

Today is my 50th birthday and I am celebrating it with the women who I have helped educate and have an independent life through the foundation I started 25 years ago. Seeing these women flourish gives me immense satisfaction and helps ease the pain of his loss. I have never been with another man, nor do I want to.

As I look back on my life, I realize I have come a long way from the little girl in the village who did what she was supposed to but always wanted more. My path wasn't one I would have chosen but I learned so much on the way. I would never have gotten to where I am today if I hadn't stowed away in that *Nautanki* wagon. And I learned what true love is. I couldn't ask for anything more!

And Whys God's Phone Die Every Time That I Call on Him?

I'm convinced God's changed his number
Cause every time I call I go straight to hell
I mean voicemail
There's not even a dial tone
Just a beep
Like my heart beat
Yeah like it's always in tune with my heart beat
Like when I call for him all I've got is me
Like I'm blocked on his caller ID
But hey man, maybe I just wanted to see how you were doing
Cause I know how it feels to be overwhelmed
To be out of touch and I'm here for you man
Cause we all need somebody man
I mean sir
I mean father
I mean you know what I mean
So next time I give a call
At least let it ring
Cause it gets real scary when all you've got is the sound of your own breath to
your ear
You know what I mean
It's scary out here
And I just called to let you know that I'm still here
It's been a while but my number doesn't change

So just give me a call man
I mean sir
I mean
I mean, you know what I mean

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name.
Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth,
As it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
The power, and the glory,
For ever and ever.
Amen.*

This is for Cows

“Do we really need to do this?” Dan was having second thoughts as he cringed away from the funky-smelling veggie burger Claire held to his face.

“No cold feet! This was more your idea than mine, you dingus,” said Claire with a smirk. Dan wasn’t sure why he was so okay with “dingus” being the affectionate nickname she chose for him, but he smiled every time she called him one.

Still, he resisted. “This was dumb. I want a cheeseburger.”

Claire lit up. “Cheese? I can put cheese on it, you should have said so before!”

“I said cheeseburger.”

Frowning, Claire poked the faux-burger into his face a few times.

Dan ignored it. “One more piece of meat won’t kill me. Hell, don’t these things have, like, neurotoxins in them? I read somewhere that there are neurotoxins in them.”

“False. And as much as your good health means to me, love, it’s irrelevant,” she fired back, waving the burger up and down. “This is for cows, remember?”

He did remember. He’d never gotten used to the pang of guilt he felt whenever he drove past a field of grazing cows. Every time he fed his guinea pig or pet his dog, he remembered that they were meat in other parts of the world. Whenever he appreciated animals and their behavior, he would wonder whether or not it is a horrible thing that people kill and eat them on such a massive scale.

These qualms conflicted with his carnivorous tastes, even as they were recognized and nurtured by his vegetarian girlfriend. Claire was still stubbornly holding the veggie burger so close it was practically occupying the space as Dan’s head.

“For cows,” he echoed, having to cross his eyes to look at it. The smell of the thing was oppressive, a cardboardy, straight-from-the-freezer aroma tinged with a sickly sweet scent that brought to mind the image of a dumpster.

Claire loudly cleared her throat. “You’ve done this before. Step one: open your mouth.”

Dan felt stomach acid in his throat. “How do you eat this stuff? You can smell it, can’t you?”

She responded by taking a generous bite and dramatizing her enjoyment of it. He couldn’t help but laugh as she writhed in simulated ecstasy.

He looked down for a fraction of a second and then the burger was back in his face, this time with a big bite mark revealing its mottled, mealy inside. “Oh, wow,” Dan commented, lurching backward, “Wow, that is... that is disgusting.”

“You said the same thing about cottage cheese before I made you try some, and now we have a stockpile in the fridge.”

“Well, cheese is always good.”

Claire rose abruptly, plating the burger and shaking her head with a chuckle. “Gimme a minute, I’ll go dress this baby up. Some cheese, tomato, ketchup... you’ll wonder why you ever ate meatburgers.”

As Dan watched her turn the corner into the kitchen, a feeling washed over him. It was a deep sense of guilt, not for all the cows he wanted to eat, but for acting like a five year-old besieged by vegetables. He was surprised at himself: Claire had introduced him to many delicious vegetarian dishes, all of which he had willingly tried and enjoyed. Something about that slab of discolored veggie bits had really hit him. “Claire?” he called across the apartment, “look, I can give up meat, but I don’t think I’m gonna be able to force that monstrosity down.”

§

A cluster of five or six men in white coats trudged out of the kitchen and through a metal doorframe that was not there a second before. Dan’s eyes darted in every direction at once. The blank grey walls were not those of his home, and the room was just a room: four walls, a floor, and a ceiling. There was a thinly framed bed to his left, but any and all doors to other rooms, personal possessions, other furniture- he was sitting cross-legged on the hard ground- were absent.

“Daniel? My name is Doctor Berger. Do you remember why you’re here?” asked the stocky mustached man at the head of the procession.

“Burger? That’s your name?” Dan scoffed up at him from his cross-legged position in the center of the room. He had been terrified for a moment, but something was familiar about his surroundings. He had already acclimated to the shift in scenery by the time the doctor’s silly name made contact with his eardrums.

He would have burst into laughter had he not spotted Claire’s face by the door, peering over the men’s shoulders. Why was she wearing a sexy nurse outfit? “Claire.”

His view of her beautiful mug was obstructed by the talking burger. “Yes, Nurse Sinclair tells us you were giving her a bit of trouble. Can you tell us why you won’t take your medication?”

A large, manchild-looking fellow appear next to the burger and held a small plastic condiment cup to Dan’s face. He had to cross his eyes to get a look at the thumb-sized pill rolling around in it.

“Jesus,” he said, looking from the pill to the faces crowding in on him. Claire’s was gone. Picking up the pill, he grimaced. “Look at this thing. I think... this is for cows.”

On the Prairie

Home is so far away.

Road weary ears

hear a whisper

softly persuading us

to stop at the Tallgrasses,

where green is favored.

A subtle approach to color:

purple and orange petals,

white washed church,

gray shale and limestone.

A joyful chorus of

high stepping grasshoppers,

fluttering newborn butterflies,

swishing soft grasses.

The silhouette of a buffalo.

The promise of a starry sky.

Following the twisting

Southwind Trail,

soaking in the simplicity

found on the prairie

we eye the East

with familiarity,

the West with hope.

An Ecstasy of Flowers

*"Lovers don't finally meet somewhere,
they're with each other all along."*

—Rumi

1. *Magnolia Moonfall*

Nightwalk steps into a moment of aloneness
and contemplation under a magnolia tree
half in outrageous blossom, half in discard,
evidence passion-like in orgy-strewn
haphazard underneath, petals perfect
in disarray, slightly colored with bruise,
with moonlight, a landscape of effort and
after-effort, of connective energy, abandon.
It's a different light than candlelit skin, but
it's the same moment, two bodies going back
to being themselves, the moment
of as-close-as already drifting, lovemaking
now as much laundry as moonlight, yet
the tree, the bodies, though fading, glow.

2. *Force Majeure*

The air is full of you, the window fog-bright.
With it, the candle shares our skin, glistening.
The sweat silver that marks and joins
the space of each of us crackles, fused.
We've forgotten how to sound words,
just the heartbeating thrum, the heft
of unison, the breath aura. Neither of us
have any awareness and will bear no witness.
Moonlight pours from your mouth. Moths
line the inside of my eyes aching for the cavern
of your throat. The vines of my arms
tangle to the wall of your soul. The room
fills with flowers already echoing with
the birdsong morning will bring.

3. *After each little death*

Mortality returns. Eyes come open in the dark
of being. What we were looking for shies
from thought, the bones within us settle.
We return to separate dreaming, breaths
out of canter, the perfumed flower-laden air
fallen into invisibility, a bathroom light
beacons through an ocean-dark room
looking on emptiness. Skin retakes
its statue shape and seems to hold
the outer limits of the self. No longer
emanating light, the body's earth
slides into a soil-dark insomnia, mortality,
and it's increasingly your own mind
that takes you to where you are.

Coda

*Two hands
fingers laced
holding on
to this moment
the next and
as much of another
and ever after
as an afternoon
will allow.*

Midnight—A Memoir

Choices, my dad wanted choices for me: an education—a college degree, not like his past, or his present: a proprietor of a food market that was unable to compete with the big boys, the supermarkets. Dad, the son of Greek immigrants, seldom spoke Greek unless it was to mutter his mantra: “to μεγάλο ψάρι θα φάνι το μικρο ψάρι.” It was dad’s life lesson, “the big fish will eat the small fish.”

Dad never completed the fifth grade. Taken out of school to work in the family’s grocery store, he spent his youth in that store. Eventually he opened his own store in a small city in West Virginia. I was eight-years-old and several days a week after school I would catch a bus and head to the grocery to help Dad. After closing, I would accompany Dad as he delivered groceries to customers. It was the last stop on one of those evenings, the sun already finished for the day, and I was anxious to get home, late as usual. My father placed the box of groceries on the farmer’s porch and the two of them were engaged in conversation. Fortunately, I wasn’t hungry because I’d already stuffed myself with baloney and cheese sandwiches at the grocery. I was tired. I couldn’t help but wonder: How many cans of food did I stack tonight? I tried recalling the various types: sweet peas and regular peas; carrots; and beans, beans, and more beans, every type of beans: Lima, white, black, Garbanzo, whatever they were? And my two favorites, baked beans with bacon and beans with molasses.

Stacking the three aisles of food stuffs was my main task. Dad insisted on neatness and cleanliness, so I was forever dusting the aisles of cereals and pastas, another of pickles and canned goods, another of paper products, and whatever else some customer may have to get as a last minute emergency. If I found any damaged cans or boxes, I carried them to behind the meat cooler to the small supply room to be returned to the distributor. Once as I passed by my father, busy at the butcher block, I dropped a can and my dad turned to see what it was and yelped, he had almost sliced his finger off along with the lamb chops.

Dad was a stickler that groceries should never be out-of-date. Never give the various health inspectors reason for noting a deficiency when they conducted their periodic visits. He constantly preached to me, “There are rules to follow, in school, in business, in the army, and in life. Rules!” While shaking his finger dad would repeat what his immigrant father had told him, “You got to be good citizen, always follow rules.” I knew that meant the laws and all the

regulations that came with running a business. In simple black frames on the wall behind the always waxed, wooden, practically antique, cash register my father displayed the various licenses: a license from the state; from the county; from the city; and the most important one, dad said, the health department’s periodic approval certificate. He wanted customers to see that he was an honest businessman who always followed the rules.

So this evening on our last delivery when Dad nodded in agreement to the farmer and then motioned to me and the three of us headed out to the barn, I had no inkling as to what this was about. I knew Dad’s market wasn’t doing well. Many of the customers charged their groceries and paid something each month. It had always been done that way. But lately, I’d heard my father say it more than once, “They’re not paying their bills like they used to.” And just last week when a customer walked out with a box of food, and there wasn’t any ringing of the cash register, I watched as Dad jotted the charged amount on a yellow slip of paper. He put it in a drawer, looked at me and said, “Son, if I didn’t let ’em charge, we’d lose even more customers.” My dad sounded sad, like we had already lost. Even tonight while delivering groceries in the green panel truck, Dad had thumped the steering wheel with his palm so hard I jumped in my seat. He growled, “God damnit, the big boys can beat my prices anytime.”

So now crossing the yard to the barn, I couldn’t help but think: Had it come to this? Was dad going to take a farm animal for payment? No way, or would he?

When we entered the barn my dad said, “Go ahead, pick one. Go on. But remember, you’ll be taking care of him.”

The pup was small enough to hold in a catcher’s mitt. His fur was black on black with a slight tuft of white under the chin, a pink tongue, and sharp white teeth that nipped at the legs and ears of the other pups. He climbed on top of and over the other pups and back again while yapping as if he were giving orders. I looked up at dad; I clenched my fists in front of my chest that I thought would explode and said, “You don’t ever again have to get me another present, not for my birthdays or for Christmas, this is for all of ’em to come.” Dad’s eyebrows rose, the farmer let out a hearty laugh, and my dad managed the slightest of smiles.

When dad and I arrived home that evening, dad helped me take some large, thick cardboard boxes, once filled with goods from the store, to construct a doghouse in the rear of the garage. After hours of work, mom called, “Dimitri, get in here. Bedtime!” I had completed a two-room dog sanctuary. One side was enclosed—that would be the dog’s bedroom—in which I had placed several old blankets. The outer opened-space area with its cardboard floor would be the dog’s recreation room where I put several rubber balls and a knotted-up sock for the pup to play with.

Before heeding my mother’s request, I found a small can of black paint in the basement and with a small brush printed large letters, slightly askew, on the side of the doghouse:

MID NIGHT

Midnight and I grew-up together. Anytime I stepped out of the house, the dog went with me. When I played football or baseball with the neighborhood boys, there was Midnight running along the sidelines. Other times, Midnight and I would take off through the woods, exploring or going fishing, sometimes with friends or just the two of us.

The dog had grown large and husky with a beard that ran down his weightlifter chest like a freshly painted white line on a blacktop road. As for me, with my Mediterranean skin and dark black hair that hinted of my Greek ethnicity, I wasn’t large or husky. I was like most of the boys: average everything. But I just felt taller than most, maybe because I didn’t slump like others did, or look down much when I walked. There was too much to see all around me; what could be seen in the windows of the houses I walked by; the neighbors on their porches, or in their gardens and yards; the makes of the cars in the driveways; and the trees that surrounded the neighborhood, the formation of the limbs, how they stretched to the sky, to the clouds; and silver bullets that would pass overhead carrying people to places I had never been. I didn’t want to miss a thing. And while Midnight had a short, strong gait, I had a loose, easy walk, arms that swung freely and a body that swayed. Midnight would tighten his muscles and stop when a stranger neared. But I always felt comfortable with anyone anywhere, so then Midnight would relax and never growl. For me and my dog it was only good times when a day seemed to last a week.

But there was one time, one incident—it happened when I was ten and it scared me. It was on a summer, honeysuckle-smelling day. Eddie, my human best friend, and I sat fishing from the bank of Rainbow Lake, really a large

hidden pond in the woods that the creek fed into. Eddie was shorter than all the boys but that never bothered Eddie. He always had a slanted grin, like something was funny and he was getting ready to laugh out loud. His mop of brown hair was the color of his dog, Sophie. She was Midnight’s girlfriend. We knew that because of how excited the dogs got when they saw each other and the way they played together. Sophie was small enough to crawl under Midnight as he stood still like a sentry, his head up, chest raised, she would crawl under him back and forth, back and forth.

So on this fishing day, Midnight and Sophie rushed around the shallowest part of the shoreline. They paced and looked and looked and paced and then each jumped on a fish, swatted it to the shore clamped teeth on their catch and carried the fish over to where the two of us sat, as if saying “Here’s ours, where’s yours?” Eddie and I didn’t catch anything, and the dogs flaunted their prizes as we all headed back through the woods for home. The dogs with tails high in the air, fish in their mouths, rubbed it in: “Look what we got, and you don’t.”

But this is no fish story.

Looking back on it, I can’t recall why Eddie and I took a different trail back from the lake. It happened fast. The dogs dropped the trout and raced off the pathway through shrubs and brambles and sprang across a narrow creek then up a treeless hill toward a small clapboard house. Off to the side of the house was a chicken coop. I had never seen two dogs dig into dirt as fast and furiously. At the base of the fence that was keeping the dogs out there from the chickens in there, Midnight and Sophie worked in sync practically shoveling the dirt, soft from recent rains, with their paws through their hind legs. Dirt was flying while the chickens were screeching like a symphonic orchestra tuning violins.

We did the only thing we knew to do: we yelled.

“Midnight! Here boy. Here boy. Midnight! Get over here!”

“Sophie! Sophie! Sophie! Sophie!”

The same time the dogs got into the coop, the house door opened and a bearded giant in faded overalls came out with a shotgun.

“Oh, God, Eddie, he’s going to kill our dogs.”

The dogs, now inside the coop, didn’t care one bit about the possibility of dying. They were chasing chickens and catching chickens. Screeching

was so loud with feathers flying and chickens almost flying, bouncing off the wire fence as they tried to avoid the gnashing teeth of our dogs who probably believed they had been given the keys to doggie heaven.

Midnight! Midnight!

Sophie! Sophie!

We were scared. This was not like watching a Frankenstein or Wolfman movie scared. This was more frightened than anytime I could remember which wasn't that much to remember since I was just ten-years-old. If what I felt for Midnight and what Eddie felt for Sophie was love, we couldn't love a person more. And when the bearded man in the overalls fired the shotgun, a thunderclap, KABOOM! and a flash from the muzzle, Eddie and I mirrored each other with eyes wide, mouths open, and bodies frozen. Midnight and Sophie didn't freeze. They were into the dug-out hole and out of the coop, splashing across the creek, with dark red goo and white feathers stuck to their muzzles. The dogs raced up the path while the bearded man cursed.

"You damn dogs! You damn boys! You damn ..." He damned this and damned that as Eddie and I ran and caught up to our best friends. We returned home, cleaned up the dogs, and never said a word to anyone, not even to each other. It was as if we believed by not mentioning what happened, it didn't happen.

A couple days later I was helping dad after school in the store when in walked the bearded man wearing those same faded overalls and carrying over his shoulder a large, brown burlap sack. I was behind the canned goods shelves and slunk lower so the man wouldn't see me. At that moment I thought the man would hear my heart beat. The man wasn't a giant now but he was big, like a lumberjack on one of the cans of beans I had stacked that day. He had dark greasy hair running down over his back collar and a salt and pepper beard angled like briars that fell down to his chest. He slung the sack from his shoulder on to the counter in front of my dad.

"Your damn dog killed my chickens." He sounded like he had a hoarse throat. I thought maybe the man got it from yelling damn so loud.

Dad opened the sack and looked in, closed it, and scanned the store.

"Son, get over here."

I felt like I was moving in slow motion when I stepped out where they could see me.

"Did your dog do this?" Dad's look said he wanted a straight answer.

"Yes ... but it happened so—

Dad turned back to the man. My father wasn't going to listen to me; he called explanations excuses.

I heard dad snap out a question, "Howmuchloweya?" I couldn't hear what the man responded but dad went to the register, pressed the keys, there was the familiar ringing sound, the drawer opened and he took out some bills. Dad counted out the money and placed it on the counter.

The big man nodded his head like he was satisfied. He picked up the money and the sack but before he could put the sack over his shoulder, my dad grabbed hold of it.

"I paid for those chickens, they're mine." Dad said it like there was no more to say.

The man shrugged, put the sack on the counter, turned and left the store, never once looking in my direction. Dad took the sack back to the butcher block. I could see him through the window of the meat cooler as he plucked the feathers off those chickens, preparing them to be cut-up and sold like any other meat in the cooler. Dad never said a word to me about those chickens, ever.

The Conductor

MARTÍN ESPADA READING AT THE BLACKBIRD POETRY FESTIVAL
APRIL 28, 2011

Martín’s dress shirt is a bit too large.
Ninety pounds on the stress diet
his voice,
his amazingly resonant voice,
says to the woman in the front row.

He leans on the armrest as he sits with a sigh,
reading glasses on the end of his nose
silver, like his beard,
but not yet his hair.

Introduced as The Voice of
Those Who Have No Voice,
The Neruda Norteamericana,
He says *I’m from Brooklyn*.

But then he begins.

This author of The Republic of Poetry,
finalist for the Pulitzer Prize,
flexes his left knee,
toe twisting as he lifts his arm.

The orchestra, silent,
awaits his signal
then he raises his left hand and
The Symphony of Las Palabras begins.

The staccato beat of every word is
tightly pinched between his thumb
and, raised like exclamation points,
his forefinger and pinkie.

He leads a song without a tune.
The piccolo of humor lilts.

The kettle drum is honesty.
The cello mourns; the French horn cries.
Las palabras, poised between these notes,
were written in the fields and kitchens,
shaking, taking flight like beans,
leaping from the kettle drum.

For someone who says he can’t carry a tune
he has perfect pitch.

Verdad.
His voice,
his amazingly resonant voice,
speaks loudly, clearly:
truth. Veracity.

Despite the hour, his having to travel
again tonight, he signs our books
but, when no one watches,
looks oh, so tired.

I ask him, as he autographs,
how we keep on writing truth,
experiences not our own but
to which our words bear witness.

His eyes, two black holes—gravity,
rise slowly from the page,
all things stellar, universal,
drawn within.

His baton, the pen, pauses
above my open book and then
his voice,
his often amazingly resonant voice,
whispers:

What choice have you got?

The Path of the Monkey

I opened the drive-thru window hoping the cool breeze would energize me until my shift ended. I had not seen a customer in the past hour. I started to doze off when a honking car horn approached my window. My friend Andy was screaming at me.

“Mike! Wake up! I need your help!”

“Lower your voice, Andy. My boss will be pissed if he sees you around here again.”

Andy had been hanging out here a lot lately with a weird new group of friends. They never did anything wrong but my boss didn’t care. He didn’t like friends of employees hanging out here.

“Mike, I need you to deliver something for me.”

“Andy, I’m working right now. I can’t help you. Besides, why don’t you just deliver whatever it is? Why do you need my help?”

“I can’t explain but I need you to do this. I helped you with Sandy. Remember, you were too shy to tell her how you felt. I wrote that letter for you and slipped it into her locker.”

“Fine. What do you need me to deliver? Whatever it is, it is going to have to wait until I’m done my shift.”

“That’s fine. Here it is.”

Andy grabbed a small, bronze box with a small star-shaped lock, sapphires on each corner, and writing on the lid. The writing was definitely not English.

“I need you to take this to our old treehouse in the woods of our old neighborhood at midnight. Thanks Mike. I really appreciate this.”

As Andy passed the box through the window, I felt a tingling up my arms. What was I getting myself into?

I arrived at the old neighborhood just before midnight. I thought about just going home and returning the box tomorrow morning. However, my curiosity got the better of me and I entered the woods.

As I started traveling through the trees, I could hear the crunching of leaves under my feet and the wind howling through the branches. I didn’t even know how far into the woods I had traveled when I came across the old treehouse. The sign at the entrance read “No Grl Al ow d”. Part of the roof was caved in. A bag of dried-up balloons dangled from our Water Bomb Attack Station window.

A shimmer near the base of the tree caught my eye as I heard a branch snap behind me. I swung around just as a sword sliced the air aimed for my head. In a panic, I moved the box into the path of the sword. The impact knocked me down and the box flew a few feet away from me. As I rose to my feet, my attacker revealed himself. He was about 9 feet tall with arms and legs made up of bulges the size of my head. He made good use of those bulges when he backhanded me. I flew backwards, narrowly missing the box.

The sound of monkeys caused me to turn around. It appeared to come from the bronze box which had been opened in the fight, the lock in pieces next to it. Inside, there were two curved daggers with wooden monkey head handles. The attacker, noticing the open box, charged at me with his sword above his head. I quickly grabbed the daggers and started to run up the ladder to the treehouse. I felt another tingle running up my arms as I reached the top. The attacker started to shake the tree, causing earthquakes under my feet. I slipped the daggers into my belt and jumped out of the treehouse. I reached for the nearest branch, swung a few times before landing on top of my attacker. The attacker grabbed the back of my shirt and whipped me around. As I approached his front, I slid both daggers from my belt and plunged them into his chest. I broke free of his grip as he staggered back into the treehouse. I ripped the daggers out of his chest as I jumped to safety. The attacker’s head destroyed the treehouse before he fell forward, his hair brushing my feet.

I dropped the daggers and started puking on the attacker’s head. I leaned back against a tree, my legs feeling rubbery. I had only begun to catch my breath when a door opened in the ground and Andy appeared with his new friends.

“Andy? WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?!!”

“Just calm down Mike.”

“CALM DOWN?! I just killed a guy. At least I think he’s a guy. Wait! Why did you just come out of the ground? Did you know I would be attacked? Did you set this up? I WANT ANSWERS!”

“Well, first of all, you didn’t kill a guy. At least not a real one. Second, this was a test. And you passed except for the puking. This means the real training can begin. There is a lot to tell you. Why don’t we do it somewhere a little more private?”

Still shaking from the encounter, I followed Andy and his friends towards the door. I noticed a couple guys following behind me, one with the daggers and the other with the bronze box. Part of me wanted to run away and never return. However, my curiosity got the better of me again and I continued through the door, down a set of log stairs.

Dawn



Lovely Mistake

My body breaks with the weight of it all,
 bending backwards so I can't see straight,
 but your heart hisses as it is blocked by your doors.
 Please, my hands wont stop shaking, my eyes wont stop leaking,
 my brain wont quit working, memories please just go away.

Your heart, I pick it off the floor,
 dust it off, and cradle it so delicately.
 But you plucked off the pieces effortlessly,
 Not even acknowledging that I was there for you.

Blue veins transpire near my fingers,
 tendrils of hope shape a cross, and whisper into my fears,
 that our paths were destiny. But with it so heavy,
 my bones begin to shatter—darling, I'll hold on, no matter.

Except that I didn't. I did not this time.
 Selfishly, I turned away. It scraped at my soul,
 killed me slowly, as I witnessed your face across from mine.
 In that small room, where I took your heart giving it back—
 back to you, a gift I could no longer use.

What you don't see now, is what I am going through,
 I broke all connections so how could you know?
 I scrape my fingernails down the wallpaper, dragging fists
 onto where we framed our memories
 Madness leaks out the pores that you countless covered.
 Toxic clichés grip at my chest swelling,

romance stirs like a midnight drink, agonizingly—
 attracting—disturbing me.

I did this to myself. I had to. A purpose
 you would only understand, if you had to.
 Love, I had to let you go, but just know—
 somehow know,

my voice aches for your name, my body starves for you touch,
 withdrawal from your misguided words,
 deprivation from the people, us, that went unseen.
 Insanity harbors my mind from the memories that
 I keep trying to toss away, because you,
 You I know, were my first lovely mistake.

Wynne

I was abused by my birth parents constantly when I was a child. In a rather darkly amusing twist, though, my father was the emotionally abusive one who told me I was a waste of space and money, while my mother was the drunk who beat me. I have no idea when exactly it started, but it thankfully ended before my fourth birthday, owing to my mother slamming my temple into the corner of the dining room table in one of her drunken rages. I was rushed to the hospital by my father, and in that Pediatric Ward was where I met the woman who would become my adoptive mother. Her first words to me were: “Don’t worry, sweetie. I’m never gonna hurt you.” She was the first person I’d ever met who took the time to care for me and show me affection and never once raised a hand against me. As unlikely as this may be, for whatever reason, I trusted this woman...And I told her that I never wanted to be apart from her.

The process of someone liberating a young child from their abusers and placing them into someone else’s custody is a long and arduous process that involved a lot of meetings of lawyers and court cases, but suffice it to say I was able to spend my sixth birthday in a new home with a new mother.

In my youth, I could scarcely speak a complete thought to anyone other than my mother, and I’d cower behind her whenever we went out in public. Thanks in no small part to the beatings and insults hurled at me by my birth parents, I was so terrified of everyone else around me wanting to hurt me at the slightest transgression that I clung desperately to the one person I knew could never, ever do that.

Now, no mother could ever say she was ungrateful for having a child who loved her as intensely as I did, but she was understandably worried for my emotional development when she noticed that I still was scared of smiling whenever it wasn’t just me and her alone at home. So, in an attempt to acclimate me to social situations, she started bringing me to work with her when I didn’t have school. She’d have me spend time with the other children of the Pediatric Ward, playing and reading. It did help me progress a bit in becoming more “normal,” but after a few years of it, I still had difficulty speaking more than a complete sentence or two to a person. Even when I could manage some semblance of conversation with someone, I would stutter profusely, and I spoke in a very timid whisper. But that all changed when Wynne came into my life.

I was ten years old when my mother told me there was someone special in the Pediatric Ward she wanted me to meet. I remember very clearly that it was the dead of winter at the time, just a couple of days after Christmas. On the car ride, I was fully engrossed in the Harry Potter book I had received just a few days earlier. My mother seemed very excited to bring me in with her that day, and I remember being confused by that. None of the other times she had brought me in with her, except maybe the first, made her this excited.

“Liam, sweetie,” she said, squeezing my hand gently as she led me to a bed, alerting me to pull myself away from my book. “This here is who I wanted you to meet. Say hello to Wynne.”

When I looked upon her for the first time, I didn’t know what to say or think. She was a small thing, even for a five-year-old. She had very short and choppy brown hair, and her skin was pale like porcelain. Well, all that was visible of it was. About fifteen percent of Wynne’s skin on her left side was covered in bandages. I figured that whatever had caused that to happen to her body was also responsible for the state of her hair.

But the thing that was most striking about her was her eyes. They were this bright, sky blue, and they were very large. She looked like a tiny, frightened animal as they darted around, shifting rapidly between me and my mother. Eventually, though, they rested on me, studying me with an intensity I had never encountered before.

“Umm...Hi,” I finally managed to squeak out, my voice soft and timid. “M-My name’s Liam. You’re...Wynne?”

Her attention darted to my mother, then back to me, before giving a small, almost imperceptible nod.

“Liam, honey,” my mother murmured softly, now crouching beside me. “Wynne had a very bad accident. Her house burned down, and she barely managed to get out. She doesn’t talk, and we don’t know if she ever has.” She paused.

“She’s had a hard time here these past couple days. She can’t really play with the other kids, because she’s in a lot of pain from her burns. So I thought you could read with her. Is that okay?”

I nodded. Even if I didn't want to, I didn't have much of a choice in these matters. I moved around to the other side of Wynne's bed, taking a seat in the wooden chair and pulling it closer to her. My mother gave us both a smile before departing to make her rounds of the Pediatric Ward.

We sat there in awkward silence for a long time, her staring at me intently as I blushed and avoided making eye contact. Finally, though, I broke the silence by clearing my throat, and I cracked open the book I had brought with me. I began to regale this frail, wide-eyed, mute five-year-old with the tales of Harry Potter and his magical friends and foes, making sure to show her each illustration that accompanied the beginning of a chapter.

Around eight hours later, my mother returned to us at the close of her shift. "Hey, sweetie, did you and Wynne have fun together?"

I turned to look at Wynne. She was giving me that same intense, piercing gaze, scanning every last inch of me with an almost animal rapidity. Despite not having a single clue what she was thinking, I smiled and nodded. "Yeah, I had fun with her," I said in my trademark nervous whisper. "Hey, can I umm... Can I come back tomorrow, too, Mama?"

I came back every day for the rest of my Winter Break. I read every last one of my favorite novels to Wynne, as well as every book in the Pediatric Ward, and then a few more I picked out of the library just for her. Over time, I began to notice her slowly relaxing and feeling less on-edge as I came in and read to her. Some of the other children in the Ward began to start paying attention as time went on, and the mobile ones would come near us to listen. At the same time, I began to speak louder and put more effort into reading out loud, shedding a great deal of the nervousness I carried with all of my actions. The final day I came in, I was doing dramatic voices for all of the characters in the fantasy novel I was reading to her, and I acted out what I felt like the characters would be doing. But none of it was for the crowd of patients, visitors, and medical personnel gathered around us — it was all for Wynne, for this mute little girl, covered in bandages and burns, who had nobody else in this world to read stories to her.

When I finished the last book at the end of the last day, I was panting from the effort I had put into acting it out for her. There was a big round of applause from the Pediatric Ward, but I paid it no mind. No, what held my attention was something I hadn't seen up until this point — a tiny little smile, spread across Wynne's lips. I was positively beaming when I noticed it.

But all of that joy slipped away when I had to leave. I was crushed—my last two weeks had revolved around doing everything I could to make this little girl happy, and now I had to go back to school without her. I bawled my eyes out when my mother told me it was time to go, and it took another half an hour for her to get me moving. But I needed to tell Wynne one last goodbye.

I sniffled and wiped my eyes profusely. "I-I...I gotta go, Wynne..." I choked out. "I can't read to you anymore. I-I'm...I'm gonna miss you." Then, I did something so unprecedented it shocked my mother speechless: I leaned in and gave Wynne a soft kiss on her forehead, then placed the book on her lap.

As I pulled away, Wynne reached out and grabbed hold of my hand. Her lip quivered, and tears probably would have started rolling down her cheeks had her tear ducts not been damaged by the fire. It took everything I had to let go and leave, sniffling and hiccupping as I walked alongside my mother out of the hospital.

In my mother's words, I was despondent for the next two weeks. I stopped reading, I hardly ate, and I barely said anything in school or at home. I was so broken up over being separated from Wynne, I couldn't function normally; hell, I was worse-off than when I started. Sure, I might have been quiet and nervous, but at least I enjoyed my life.

That all changed on a very particular Saturday in January. I was curled up under the covers of my bed when my mother poked her head in.

"Liam, honey?" she called very softly. "Come on, you need to take a shower and get dressed today. Put on that polo shirt Nana got you for Christmas, you need to look nice."

Begrudgingly, I complied, getting cleaned up and putting on a plain orange polo shirt and khaki pants. As I stood waiting by the front door, I asked my mother, "Where are we headed, Mom?"

"To the hospital," she said simply, pulling the door open. She flashed me a smile before adding: "To go get your sister."

I was confused for about a minute, before I realized what she was talking about. Slowly, my expression shifted from something of reluctant vague awareness to near-indescribable joy. I was positively giddy, bouncing up and down the entire way to the hospital. As soon as we arrived, I rushed ahead to the Pediatric Ward.

Staring out the window from her wheelchair was a small, five-year old girl. Her left side was covered in bright pink burn scars, and long brown hair cascaded down her back. She had these piercing sky-blue eyes that searched every little detail of every surface. And I had never seen, nor ever will see, anyone more beautiful in my entire life.

“Wynne!” I shouted, running in at a breakneck pace. She perked up immediately, and as the orderly manning her wheelchair turned her around, a look of shock was clearly visible on her face. But that quickly melted into one of joy — the purest joy I think I’ve ever seen anyone exhibit, and something my mother insists to this day was only equaled by my own.

“Li-am” She practically breathed those two syllables. The first words I or anyone had heard her speak since she came to the hospital. She slowly pushed herself forward in the wheelchair, until she was directly in front of me. In her lap, I saw, was the book I had left her with. She slowly reached out to me with her unburnt hand, and I took it gently in my own, leaning in and embracing her tenderly. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” I croaked, tears beginning to soak her gown. “But we won’t miss each other anymore, I promise.”

It’s been nine years since that day. Wynne and I have had a profound effect on each other in that time — it was in her that I found somebody that I felt like I could give myself over to and care for, and give me a reason to be strong and unafraid. Without her, I only had my mother, and she could always be there for me. But now here was someone else who needed me. And if she needed me, I couldn’t just be a meek little Mama’s boy anymore, could I? No, I needed to be brave, to be strong, to stand head-and-shoulders above all of those heroes from the books I read to her those years ago. I needed to give her all the love she could ever want, and show her that the rest of the world wasn’t anything to be afraid of; and if anything ever scared her, it could never hurt her so long as I was by her side.

The Reflection River



Dancing with Demons

I'm blinded by lights flashing everywhere;
 I breathe in the hot, dark, smoky air.
 I hear high, heavy voices of laughter with sweaty drums beating,
 And I see glossy red eyes staring at me,
 But their pearly white teeth and their reassuring smiles encouraged me to go
 for a slide.
 It was a little bumpy at first,
 For I ended up spilling some of it on my white buttoned-up shirt.
 I took a sip from the devil's cup;
 I thought it would cool down the fire rising within my soul,
 But I just got hotter with each sip,
 And I should have ran out the front gates before I ever got this far.
 I remember the days when I used to pray.
 I feel my religion slowly slipping away.
 What is this inside my drink?
 I remember when the bishop said, "Nothing good happens after midnight."
 I should have stayed with the cross and used his advice.
 Now, I'm dancing with demons, demons, demons.
 Now, I'm burning up on the hard, dance floor.
 It's becoming harder and harder to see;
 It's becoming harder and harder to breath.
 A lavender haze melts away all of my cloths,
 And I am left bare to all the elements exposed.
 Inside my ears drip tiny whispers,
 Luring me further away from the natural world.
 What happened to the birds, the trees, the flowers?
 What happened to the escalator, elevator, ladder?
 As soon as I took my very first sip,
 It all disappeared.

Snow

It started to snow, first slightly. We were walking back from the grocery store that was almost three miles from the married students' apartments of the University of Iowa. Then a car came by. "You want a ride?" shouted the driver. Weird, we thought, because it was not uncommon for students to walk to the nearby town of Coralville, where the grocery store was. But soon we realized the reason for the unusual amiability: the snow started to fall so heavily that we could not see more than two feet ahead of us; the temperature had dropped precipitously, and the wind was blowing with such force that we could barely stand straight. Months later we learned that was called a blizzard, something we had never heard of, coming from a country with a Mediterranean climate. At that moment we realized that we would probably not be able to make the one and a half miles remaining to our home. We were desperate to remain alive, so I had almost forgotten why we had gone to the store. The telephone had rung and it was my brother from Canada, calling to give me the bad news: "our mother has died," he said. It was not completely unexpected, because my mother had been diagnosed with bone marrow cancer about a year ago. Therefore I told Ledda (my wife): "I need to go out; I cannot stay here."

We didn't know where we were, and the only thing we could do was to guess our way. "You better drop the groceries," said Ledda, but I stubbornly kept them, with my hands freezing, even by alternating them, one holding the bag and one in my pocket.

Suddenly, a shadow appeared in front of us. Where were we? As we got closer I recognized our building, and soon we could enter our small apartment. We were safe but I felt a horrible pain in my hands and in my throat. However those pains were welcome because they alleviated the other pain.

It's Probably Nothing

I used to be a hypochondriac, and I wasn't sure what I should do about it. I'd just be worried, all day, every day. Y'know like: I have a fever and my neck hurts? *Bacterial meningitis*. Headache for three days? *Ruptured aneurysm*. Chest hurt for a minute while I was running three miles? *Incoming heart attack*! Not a fun way to live.

I knew for sure that I had hypochondria because I looked up the symptoms for it on WebMD. Which they had a whole professionally made site listing symptoms and stuff but really, they could've just had a white page with big, black letters that said "If you're here, you are."

So I wound up wasting a lot of time and money visiting doctors over the years. Every time I went, the doctor would just say "Yeah, there's nothing wrong with you. Still." They would never tell me not to come back, which I think was funny. On the one hand, I mean, you definitely should not ignore certain symptoms—which was the angle the doctors would always come from. But also, they kinda want your money. Which I don't really fault them for, because well, I've heard that it costs a lot to go through med school. I don't know if it's actually true, but I've definitely heard it.

Anyway, I eventually just kind of grew out of it. Or maybe that's not the right phrase. It was more like my point of view changed and being sick wasn't a big deal anymore. It's a silly thing to worry about all the time, right? Being sick? It's ridiculous! Really, it's silly to worry about anything!

Because, I figured, everything that has happened or ever will happen is just the result of a chain of causality that started at the beginning of the universe and will continue until it ends, so free will is an illusion, we have no control, and life is meaningless.

So I cured my hypochondria—by having an existential crisis.

At the time, I was living with a guy who really, really liked smoking pot. It was great for him. It made him feel more creative, it actually helped him focus on his hobby of writing code and, most relevant to my interests, it got rid of any anxiety he had. I'd heard all this stuff about pot before of course, but I had never tried it. All through high school, I couldn't convince people that I didn't smoke. They were all like "You're so laid back," or "You laugh so much, how could you not smoke pot?" They couldn't believe that I just didn't care about

some things and thought stuff was funny. So I just never really felt the need to smoke.

But then a few years later life was suddenly meaningless and I had a need to not think that thought anymore. So one evening my roommate and I partook.

Over the next few hours I came to learn an interesting new fact about pot: it does not effect everybody the same way. While my roommate was just happy to snack and listen to ambient music, I huddled in the corner of his bed, holding two fingers up to my throat to try and find my pulse. Pretty much every single person I've told this to has said something like "Oh, well, you probably had the wrong strain. A beginner should really start with 'Yo-Yo Orangutan' or 'Chocolate Riverstink'" or some other equally ridiculous name. I tried to smoke at least a dozen other times and every single time, I wound up in the fetal position on a bed or a couch, trying to convince myself that my heart wasn't about to explode for about four hours straight.

So then I was extra depressed because I couldn't just use pot to escape this crappy, life-is-meaningless reality I lived in which is why, I assume, most people start smoking.

I decided to do what I probably should've done in the first place and go see a therapist. After we talk for maybe thirty minutes, she says, "Oh, yeah, you need drugs." Turned out I was on the right track with the weed all along!

She prescribed me Zoloft. Started me on the half dose. Said to do that for a week, then jump up to the full dose. After a week, I didn't feel any different. Still crappy. So I was looking forward to the full dose. I was so ready to y'know, *not* be depressed. I finally pop the full dose and fifteen minutes later, my face explodes. Turned out I was just allergic enough for the half dose to do nothing and the full dose to make it look like I lost a fight. That was a couple of weeks ago and the therapist is trying to get me on a different medication now, but I'm afraid to take any of it because, y'know, *my throat might close and I'd die*.

But I guess that doesn't matter.

First Date

The moon's midnight lake
 Invited the two to walk
 Until the only
 Sound heard
 Was their
 Breathing
 And the
 Repetitive
 Chirping of
 Crickets.

The farther they walked
 The closer drawn
 As if by accident
 Hands touched
 For a moment
 Then
 Touched again
 The smallest fingers
 Sought each other
 Intertwined

A timidity to talk
 But not to touch
 He explored
 Her fingers
 Tracing
 Each
 As a separate body
 Entitled to its own
 Singular attention
 And caress
 She turned her hand
 Allowing him
 To run the tips
 Of fingers
 Along
 Lines
 That told
 Her dreams
 Her future
 And his

Autumn



Tutor

His hands shake
like grain
being poured into a basket.

Sunspots décor
his face more
old than it was
last Tuesday.

He repeats himself
because he forgets what he says—
and because
I'm
really bad at math.

At the end of each session
we close our books,
put the pencils away
and he asks me if I've got it.

I want to tell him no,
that I don't got it;
that I've not learned a thing
about math in the last hour

But I do know
the casualties of the 1950s
the fun he had skipping rocks as a boy
because there was no wifi to
keep him occupied

and that the man of my
dreams
is only the man of my dreams
when I'm sleeping.

"You gotta wake the hell up!"
he said
"And see what's in front of you."

So much better than a dream.

Still as ignorant in algebra as I was before
I smile and thank him for his time.

What Sets My Teeth On Edge?

"How strange it is to be anything at all."

—Lewis Carroll

What sets my teeth on edge?
Do I know? Is it something
Forgotten, fell off the ledge?
Faded out like a broken pen?

Sentimental.
Sacrificial.

I feel so free like I could do anything
I don't have to go to college
Not really not yet
I can do anything.

Leaving exhilaration.
It feels good to think about not being in Crowded places.
It feels strange to think about moving.
Detaching
Where the hell am I?
Leaving again.
Breathing again. Looking to the sky.
Leaving again. Feeling again.
My stomach feels funny.

Breath in.
It burns.
Breath out.
Nothingness.

Up.
And down.
Have you forgotten?
Has it faded?
Did you get a new pen?

I feel free, but I need
To come back down to earth
Conventionally.
A Sacrifice.

I don't know if we're here or not
But I know that I love
The way sunlight dapples
Through leaves on a tree.

Of the sun and water,
The golden eyes
And silverlight,
You won't find me there
On the doorstep dying.
Look underneath and find the key
And I'll fly away.

Contributors' Notes

spring 2016

Elinor Abbott has been previously published by The Hairpin, Human Parts, Bright Wall/Dark Room and other publications. Her chapbook 'Is This The Most Romantic Moment Of My Life?' is forthcoming from Banango Editions. You can read more of her work at littlethousand.tumblr.com.

Melinda Abbott, BSW, M.Ed., is a poet, author, sailor, teacher, trainer in mindfulness for children and adults, and creator of neurotic dogs. Her work has appeared in *Little Patuxent Review*, and the Maryland Writers' Association's anthology *Life In Me Like Grass On Fire: Love Poems*.

Stacey Sarpong-Adu was first introduced to free verse poetry in 8th grade when her middle school, Oakland Mills, featured a performance by a spoken word poet. Ever since, she's been in love with the art of poetry.

Nsikan Akpan is a writer residing in Howard County, Maryland and former student at Howard Community College. She is very fortunate to have been published in *The Muse* twice.

Nick Allen is an Howard Community College graduate and Columbia native currently attending University of Maryland University College for English. He is a traveler of imaginary worlds and loves all arts.

P. Oscar Cubillos was born in Chile; he came to USA to get his Ph.D. in Mathematics at the University of Iowa, in 1976. Oscar has worked as a university professor, software engineer, and Math Teacher. Although Dr. Cubillos is new as published writer, he has been interested in literature, both as an avid reader, and as an unpublished writer. Oscar's other interests include classic music, chess, and history.

Sarah English is a graphic artist in the public relations and marketing department of Howard Community College. She enjoys learning how to garden and photographing nature.

Shawn Fournier is an up-and-coming writer and actor. He has plenty of stories in his head and is currently working on getting them down on paper. He hopes to one day write a children's book.

Farida Guzdar has worked at Howard Community College for almost 30 years. Her interests include writing, movies, travel, and gourmet food. Farida's debut performance in Love, Loss, and What I Wore was a huge success. Farida is an exceptional fundraiser having raised almost \$30,000 for the Guzdar Family Music Endowment in memory of her late husband.

Peggie Hale, an alumni of Howard Community College, is currently trying to find her niche in the land of literary journals while making arrangements for post-grad work on an MFA. She currently lives in Ohio, but thinks of Maryland as home.

Sam Kane is currently taking classes at Howard Community College. He enjoys playing guitar, drawing, reading and, more recently, writing.

Jim Karantonis took his first creative writing class from Lee Hartman at Howard Community College in 2009. Since then he has been fortunate to have been taught by other professors from Howard Community College including Ryna May and Tara Hart. Several of his stories and poems have appeared in issues of *The Muse*. Jim's teachers have earned his deepest appreciation.

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

K.J. Kovacs is an adjunct instructor in Howard Community College's English department and tutors in the Composition and Literature Center (CLC). She is a freelance writer, editor, and artist and also works for Great Shoals Winery.

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.

Pari Kumar is a student studying psychology with desires to later pursue a career in occupational therapy. She has a strong background in scientific writing, but also enjoys exploring her creative side through poetry and dancing in her spare time.

Benjamin Law is a writer who generally likes to write about relationships, human behavior, and nature. He studies at Howard Community College as a full time student and is also a part time seafood sales associate. He hopes to one day become a journalist or work in public relations.

Benjamin Leaser-Appel took creative writing at Howard Community College and was accepted to Columbia University where he will study creative writing and human rights beginning January, 2017. He and his husband live in Elkridge, and Ben works as a hair stylist in a hair salon in Columbia.

Chathol-linn is a person who loves to read and write. Her interest is fantasy fiction. Before enrolling in Creative Writing at Howard Community College, she wrote fan fiction based on *Lord of the Rings*. The Creative Writing course encouraged her to try things she would not have attempted on her own.

Alexander McDonald was born in Columbia, MD in March of 1997 and has never lived very far away from the hospital in which he was born. He discovered his love of reading all the way back in preschool, and writing followed only a few years after that.

Greg McLemore is an Artist and Adjunct Professor of Art. His recent work documents the architecture of Nagasaki, Japan and Baltimore, MD. A main interest is to describe how the architecture of each city acts as a psychological reflection of the city's inhabitants.

Brittany Nixon is a freshman at Howard Community College.

Darcy Rollow is a sophomore at Howard Community College majoring in graphic design. She had a poem and a memoir published in *The Muse* in 2015.

Vinnie Scozzari is a new Liberal Arts student at Howard Community College who always walks on the grass. Being raised in the suburbs outside of Detroit made him acutely aware of the fact that he wanted to move. After seeing Jurassic Park as a child, he often dreamt of being chased by dinosaurs.

Tim Singleton, a once upon-a-time student at Howard Community College where he now teaches philosophy, is co-chair of the HoCoPoLitSo board and co-publisher of *The Little Patuxent Review*. "Ecstasy" was created in response to the collage artwork of Ram Brisueño for *thelightekphrastic.com* project where it was featured in May 2015

Erin Standrowicz is a student at Howard Community College. She is a Dance Major and an English minor.



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

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

The Muse was published and bound by Indigo Ink, Columbia, Maryland.



Submit to issue.15

Deadline: March 1, 2017

Email submissions to themuse@howardcc.edu

Visit www.howardcc.edu/themuse for submission guidelines.

