

The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

Editorial Committee

Kofi Adisa

Tara Hart

Sylvia Lee

Rick Leith

William Lowe

Ryna May

Tim Singleton

Brooke Tyson

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

“Stalks” by Erin Kline



HOWARD
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

contents

poetry

An Ode to Poetry	4	Jeff Ray
Lemons on My Kitchen Table	5	Alexandra Whatley
No Words	12	Brittany Nixon
never a dervish once more	17	Eva Granzow
her last.	18	Susan G. Kramer
Silenced No More	20	Sky Garcia
Not This Time	26	Apryl Motley
Paragon	28	Chidi Ike
Honestly	31	Sofía Barrios
Christina's World	40	Eve S. Nicholson
My Heart is a Guarded Place	41	Jade Bucksell
notes from the mourning son	46	Bill Stanley
When Corn is the Landscape	54	Tim Singleton
Want to See a Magic Trick?	58	Randy D. Henry
Astoria	59	Joel Landsman
The Garden Cosmos	60	Michelle Kreiner
Features of the Land	66	Peggie Hale
The Family Curse	80	Nsikan Akpan
Exhausted Apologies	81	Katelyn Holcomb
Voyagers	82	Eva Miller
The Social Worker	83	Jim Karantonis
Shadows	84	Victoria Amos
12:49 AM Perhaps	86	Sail Park

prose

Eclipse	6	Marie Westhaver
The Things That Scared Me	14	Jim Karantonis
The Sound of Music—A Retrospect	22	Farida Guzdar
A Minute of Existential Dread	24	Alexander McDonald
Dreams	30	Jacob Dugan
Hanoi Hilton	32	Roger Chang
Rays of Sunlight	42	Naomi Narat
Secrets to Getting the Most Out of Your Saturday Morning Trail Run	48	Peggie Hale
Who Needs Love Anyway?	56	Lisa Cole
It's Not Always About You— Sometimes It's Bigger	57	Lisa Cole
A Bottle of Pills	62	Eve S. Nicholson
Creation	64	Jeremy O'Roark
Band-Aids	68	CB Anslie
The Investigation	72	Courtney McCarthy
Such a Vision	76	Sail Park

art

G.D.	13	Greg McLemore
#neveragain	21	Matt Korbela
Birds with Wisteria	29	Marie Westhaver
Galata Tower	39	Merzuka Rana Yalcin
Magic Home	55	Susan G. Kramer
Divine Mother	63	Sky Garcia
Butterfly Whiskers	67	Peggie Hale
Healing Heart	71	Lisa Cole
Littler Greener Monster	75	Amaal Yazdi
Wine Bottles	79	Erin Kline
Reimagining O'Keeffe's Red Canna	85	Ryna May

An Ode to Poetry

Oh Poetry,
You fickle fiend,
You look so pretty when you smile,
But you so rarely smile

Oh Poetry,
You have a nice personality

Oh Poetry,
I admire your perseverance,
No one else has stuck around
So long after their death

Oh Poetry,
Of all the great things I enjoy doing,
You'll do if the power's out
You are enjoyed by many people,
All of whom are illiterate,
and keep you around to look smarter

Oh Poetry,
You are the onion of writing
You have many layers,
And make people cry,
But at the end of the day,
No one wants an onion near their eyes

Oh Poetry,
You remind me so much of my brother,
And I fu**ing hate my brother

Lemons on My Kitchen Table

I left lemons
on the kitchen table,
a sour reminder of you
with those dagger eyes.

The sight of those lemons leaves my skin
burning with a stinging sensation,
digging deep into my aura.

Don't ever return to my kitchen table,
as I cannot stand the feeling
of your dagger eyes piercing into me,
just like those lemons do.

Eclipse

In the photo, I'm lounging on a raft in a yellow bikini, and Linda is halfway through the blue ring of an inflatable donut. Both of us have crazy pool hair. It is my favorite picture of us, more than the other one I have of us from Girl Scout camp in Japan where I am a head taller than her and everyone else, a praying mantis towering over everybody in our tie dyed t-shirts, jeans, and bandanas. More than the Polaroid my mom took of us at some family holiday which is mostly ceiling fan and the top halves of our heads because my mom didn't know how to work the camera. More than the two of us at Linda's wedding, where she wore a dress she designed and I made for her, while I wore my favorite dress in my closet at the time because she insisted I not spend any money buying some ugly maid of honor dress that I'd never wear again. The picture of us in the pool is truly candid—we had no idea there was a photographer around somewhere, or that they'd choose that picture for the July image in the next Girl Scout calendar. We were frozen in time there, on the cusp of becoming teenagers, but not quite. Look...! There actually was a time in our lives when we didn't care what our hair looked like.

In the smaller, accompanying photo is a group of girls gathered around another girl laying prone on the concrete by the pool. There are no captions to any of the photos, but I remember this situation and the girl's striped swimsuit. We were working on a badge for first aid and she was playing the part of the injured. I still remember that the first instruction was to get a blanket in case the victim went into shock. I went to get the blanket and missed some of the rest of the information that they went through to kill time until I returned. Today, I could call 911 and get someone who knows the rest of the instructions, but if anything happens to anybody in the meantime, I'm getting the blanket.

The uncaptioned photo always gives people pause. "What happened to that girl?" they always ask. "Is she okay?" A realistic Girl Scout calendar photo from that time would have shown all the girls huddled in one tent after dark with flashlights, reading fashion magazines, rolling on Strawberry Swirl Maybelline Kissing Potion, eating Pocky and li hing mui dried plums, and making weird cocoons out of gimp that involved a spool and some nails hammered into the top of it, with a tail emerging from the hole in the spool from the pattern made by moving the gimp around the nails. I don't know what the point of this was, other than to see how long you could make the snake before you got bored with it. There was also a brief craze of making a silver rick-rack necklace from the silver papers that came inside gum

wrappers, wrapping them into shiny zigs and zags until you had a necklace that was as tall as your boyfriend. (Not one of us had a boyfriend, but we did know from gum.)

"Stop showing people that picture of us where we look like drowned rats," Linda said to me once.

I feigned surprise. "You mean our swimsuit calendar?" and we both cackled.

Even though Linda and I were always linked by satellites connecting our cell phones and text messages, it had been a while since we had been in each other's mutual orbit for any length of time. By cosmic coincidence, the path of the eclipse was going to cut right across Linda's back yard in Knoxville, and we were making an extended weekend out of it. It would be like old times, trying exotic recipes at my house because Linda's mom hated the smell of curry. "Are we going to *'stink up the house with Indian food'*?" I asked in Linda's mother's voice when we were making plans, and she said, "Well, that's a given," so I packed the cumin seeds and garam masala.

The nonstop slumber party had begun a few days before, and Linda and I had plenty of time to talk about the problems of the universe in the car, over glasses of wine at the kitchen island, standing in line at Old Navy, on walks where we trussed up the two big dogs like reindeer. (*Are you a new dog here? I'm Cooper. This is my head. You can pat it if you want to. I love your hand...can I lick it?*) To talk about the astronomical cost of education in the U.S. What we would have done differently about our own if we could do it over. The ascendancy of our children and the waning of our parents. About a frenemy of Linda's who had the stones to tell her that her living room was ugly and she didn't know how she could stand it. What would go on our various top-five lists. We both wished we'd learned a language earlier. Neither of us regretted any of our travel.

There were a few eclipse-goaded, space-related memories from the past, because everything NASA had become trendy and cool after the 1969 moon landing. *Remember Quisp cereal, which was shaped like flying saucers? ... Pens that wrote upside down "like the astronauts use"...? Tang...?*

"For a bag of rocks...!" the lunar folks would marvel, that they'd gotten this great deal from our astronauts—Tang!—a canister of orange sand that made fake orange juice!—in exchange for a bag of their moon rocks. What a steal!

Outside, it was hotter than the hinges on the back door of hell—you wouldn't be outside at all if you weren't looking up at the sun, waiting for it to go dark. Even though there was no reason to doubt the solar glasses, it still made me nervous, so I took hesitant looks from time to time with my NASA-approved glasses and then ducked for cover under the umbrella. Linda, on the other hand, had kicked back in the chaise lounge with the 2x solar binoculars, watching every minute unfold and working on her tan, too.

The dogs weren't sure whether they wanted to be out in the heat with everybody, or inside where it was cool where smart dogs would be. Occasionally the wet nose of Linda's horse-sized boxer would snuffle into my hand: *Hi, I'm Cooper. You can pat my head if you want to.*

"Do you remember the train trip to Sapporo?" Linda asked me.

"The only thing I remember is that Denise Doyle dropped her underwear on the tracks getting off the train and they were laying there for everyone to see until they got run over," I said.

"I heard Denise Doyle passed away," she said.

"How is that even possible?" I asked. "Are we old enough to know someone who's dead?"

It was the worst type of ghost story, learning that someone you knew as a kid has died. Most of the spooky stories told around our campfires from the past relied on some element of the fantastical, if not titillating, such as the terrible tales of things that happened to teenagers necking in cars – in one story, a disembodied Black Hand would come along to get you, choke you, not let go of its grip until you were dead. Why? Because it was evil and looking for lust, and found it in the car.

So many questions come to mind now, blowing the logic of this story apart. Why just one hand, and why would it get me? What happened to the other hand? Was there another hand (a White Hand?) that would choke the girl's necking partner? Why not choke him instead while I made a break for it, and looked for that blanket he was going to need when he went into shock?

The spooky campfire story this time around had been an evening ghost tour of Knoxville, gearing up with our ghost-busting tools in an alleyway next to an Urban Outfitters, which used to be a church back in the day, where some dude tried to reanimate bodies. The tools looked like glorified flashlights, built to sense changes in temperature and energy—as an example, our guide told us to hold the instruments close to the ground where he knew there

was unshielded wiring beneath the asphalt—zing! Look! The instruments work! We walked around several ground zero areas for paranormal activity in Knoxville, one of them the Rowing Man statue on the corner of Church and Gay – not looking towards either of those controversial things, but towards the veteran's memorial in the distance instead, and an old graveyard straight out of a Tim Burton movie.

The news of the day was even scarier, stories of nothing but Charlottesville, where white supremacists had run a woman over with a car. "What planet are those people from?" Linda and I would ask each other, sitting down to watch *Hidden Figures*, each of us buried under a blanket, echoes of sleeping bags from the past as we watched a movie unfold in an even more racist Virginia of the past. Linda handed me the bag of li hing mui and we wondered why we had never heard about these women in NASA before.

Otherwise, every news story was tracking the eclipse as it made its way across the country, people blogging and taking photos and Facebook Live-ing their encroaching darkness. The hole in the sky looked as if a manhole cover was slowly sliding over it, until you could just see a slim rim of light around it from the other side, a skinny little ring of fire, and the world took on an eerie reddish tinge, sepia and rust.

The caramel smell of Chuck's bourbon wafted by in the heat, pungent, sweating liquor, floating languidly in ice cubes in the hot sun. On the table, drying in the sun were trays of the shirts and fabric Linda and I had tie dyed the day before, still steeping in the Tennessee heat. It used to be that you just pinched and tied as many rubber bands as possible on a t-shirt, picked a color, and dyed it, and if you were ambitious, you'd dip one half in one color, the other side in a second color, and let them create a third color where they joined and mixed. Today, there's books of patterns you can follow that trap marbles inside rubber banded sections that will make a dot pattern, twisting manipulations to make sunbursts or stripes, and instead of tubs of dye like a giant Easter egg painting factory, we had squeeze bottles and gloves. "Did we ever wear gloves?" I asked Linda, while I was looking through one of the Martha Stewart books. "Are these the adult Girl Scout badges?"

"Mojito badge," Linda replied, setting a cocktail in front of me made from mint from her garden. "Leather Bargains badge," she added. Our first stop after my arrival had been the Patricia Nash store, handbags and belts and wallets, all tooled in leather and the smell took me immediately back to summer camp, making belts with leather and hammering things out of copper. The handbags were tactile, rippled with designs you wanted to run

your fingers across, spangled with fake coins and dyed fun southwestern colors like teal and coral, boots that grew up to become a purse.

“Winery-going badge,” I added. “Ghost Busters badge. Independent-Living-Findery badge. Tennis Mom badge. What else would grown-up girl scouts want a badge in?”

“Multiple orgasm badge,” Linda said.

I toasted her with my glass. “Okay, you win.”

We had abandoned scouts after it was explained to us that Senior Girl Scouts didn’t go camping or earn badges or tie knots or use knives or build fires ... it was all community service after that. It sounded like adult Barbie dolls—like the parents of the dolls you wanted to play with. Linda and I have gone camping as adults since those days—one time with a tent that her now-husband sent with instructions, as if we didn’t know how to pitch a tent, something we have never let him live down. Another time, we almost set a picnic table on fire with the kerosene stove, though, which he has never let us live down.

I toasted the carved wooden bear downstairs too, saying to Linda, “Sally would never say that,” and we hooted with laughter. The bear used to be part of a set from Hokkaido, one carrying a baby bear in its mouth, the other with a fish, and my mother told me to keep the bears together, so when Linda saw them and wanted one, I told her she had to take both of them. Her mom later saw them at her house and insisted on taking one, even after Linda told her that they were supposed to stay together as a set. “Sally would never say that,” her mother insisted, absconding with the bear.

On the other side of the hole closing above us in the sky, was her dad, was my mom watching us? We waved just in case.

Linda’s daughter Miela was sitting next to me in the yard finally as the sun went dark, our faces turned like sunflowers to the sun, as if we were watching a 3D movie in the sky with our cardboard glasses on. She was playing Bonnie Tyler’s “Total Eclipse of the Heart,” on speakerphone. In the halfflight/moonlight, she could have been Linda. We all looked up.

In their ignorance, people in ancient times who looked up to see what was going on with the glowing orb in the sky suddenly going dark too early that day would be permanently blinded for their curiosity; those who kept their heads down and didn’t look up to see what was happening would be spared. Why do we look up?

At no point during the eclipse did the dogs stop and look up to see what was going on. They had a barkfest and then were like, whatever.

At last, the eye of God blinked for one moment, and we were inside the beachball, the plastic nozzle had shut, inside a bubble with the light outside. There was a brief flare right as the sun was finally edged aside—the diamond ring! And then, a pause behind the curtain while the Great and Powerful Oz changed film reels and then, the sky gradually lightening up again, dawning again. Two days in one, exiting platform 9¾ for the second leg of the day, but for a flash, we stood still as time itself seemed to stand still, just for a moment, right where you wished it would.

No Words

I remember something
beautiful and nameless
while I was still sleeping.
A trickle of water, a trace of a scent.

It was a warm bath of light,
like falling asleep
in the early afternoon.

It was hearing birdsong
but I couldn't see any birds.
Having knowledge
without any words.

I crossed over for an
infinite second and returned
with a rustle of wings
in my memory.

What is it that I remember?
The feeling of being cold and then
realizing that I'm warm.

G.D.



Oil on Arches Oil paper, 22"x30" 2018

The Things That Scared Me

When I was little boy the things that scared me were lighting and loud thunder and monster movies. When I turned eleven-years-old I found out what real fear was. My dad had a grocery store in a small city in West Virginia. He had been his own boss all of his life. But new supermarkets moved outside of town, and my dad had to close his store. We moved to Baltimore where my dad took a job working night shift in the Bethlehem Steel Mill. I had to leave all my friends and my dad gave away my dog, Midnight. I had picked out Midnight as a pup when I was seven-years-old. So I lost my friends and my dog and I was angry. I rebelled. I got in trouble. I got in fights. I failed in school. My dad would come up to my room at night to punish me for one thing or another, and it seemed I was always doing something wrong. Music would be playing on my radio; it was the early years of rock 'n' roll and music was my escape. I remember the Coasters on the radio:

Who walks in the classroom cool and slow?

Who calls the English teacher Daddio?

Whack.

Charlie Brown

Whack.

Charlie Brown

Oh oh oh oh oh yes I'm the great pretender

Whack . . . That was another night

Pretending that I'm doing well.

I had to watch Dad's right hand because it delivered most of the pain. I was so scared of my father that sometimes I hid in the alley at night watching for the red taillights of his car to come on when he would drive-off for the nightshift. Then I would go home.

The worst time I remember was one day when I had taken the garbage to the trashcan and was heading back inside the house when dad drove up. He yelled to me, "Freeze Mister. You go back and put that lid on right."

I looked back at the trashcan and the lid was slightly askew. Dad came across the yard and he reached for me. I know he meant to grab my arm but instead he grabbed me by the chest, the fleshy part around the nipple. He dragged me back to the trashcan and I could feel his nails digging into my skin. I thought, "Oh my God, my dad is going to pull off my nipple. How am I going to take showers after gym class with no nipple?" Sure enough that week after gym class in the shower with five deep gashes, black, blue and strangely grayish with specks of blood surrounding my nipple the other boys saw it and one asked, "What happened to your chest?" I replied, "I was attacked by a werewolf."

Then I got older and my family moved back to West Virginia where my dad became his own boss again. Another food market. I stayed with my older brother and went to college. But then I was scared again. I was scared that I would never forgive my father for what he had done.

But for the next forty-five years my father treated me with kindness. Treated me with respect. He helped me and my family financially. He was proud of the work I did. And he was proud of me.

Every Saturday morning when my dad was eight-five-years-old I would pick him up and spend the day doing his favorite thing: going to the local fancy supermarket. With him leaning on a cart, we'd spend two hours going up and down the aisles. Boxes of cereal were in the second aisle. At eighty-five years old my dad was hard of hearing. His eyesight also was affected so that he couldn't see straight ahead, only left and right. We would start on one end of the cereal aisle:

"What's that?" He would yell.

"That's Cheerios."

"What's that?"

"That's Wheaties."

"What's that?"

"You can't have that. That has sugar."

We would work our way down a hundred boxes of cereal and every time when we got to the end of the aisle he would say: “What was that one back up there?”

On one particular afternoon after a good time at the supermarket we were sitting on the porch in the sun and he was peeling an orange. He’d hand me a piece and then he’d take a piece. It was like the godfather movie, a piece for me, a piece for him.

And then I don’t know why I said it but I did.

“Dad. Do you remember when you used to hit me?”

I soon as I said it I got scared. I got scared he would say it was my fault. That I was a bad boy, I failed in school, I got in trouble, I talked back. But he didn’t say that. He looked confused. And then a look I’d never seen on my father’s face. I’ll never forget the look ... the hurt.

He almost whispered, “Why would I ever want to do something like that?”

I realized then that I loved my father so very much I didn’t want him to remember when I was an angry young boy ... and he was a werewolf.

never a dervish once more

dervishes prance their dream dance
to become enlightened—religiously
when I swirl in my imaginary waltz
somehow I just wrangle my corpse
from becoming completely obsolete
seriously comic or comically serious
days I still dream of dancing
with my leader of the viennese
at sixteen when I felt like a dervish

her last.

bootstraps pulled tighter
with numb-like circulation
with my daughter, niece,
and sisters ...
we pulled our christmas
sleigh ... blades edging tight
against the
threshold
(of her last home ...
here. with us)
we suspended ourselves
into a fantasy ... into a spirited
but watered-down holiday
rituals once rich
(without sadness ... loss)
her last breaths (without
assistance), last precious
energies spent (without
needing to be spoon-fed)
without warning, we six
were unleashed into
her last christmas
(here. with us) a holiday
time ... was her favorite
anxiety. her joy.
the days before the eve
of christmas ...
she bowed down, fucked
cancer, mounted a
department store wheel chair
to make
her magic ...
for all of us.

when the magic was always her.
all along. all of the years.
all of the everything.
the words of wisdom,
befriending so many,
being “aunt lenny” to so
many.
mom, grandma ... to her five.
her last christmas ... she, we
wanted magic ... we thought
a miracle was given ...
(scans delivered news of
“major progress”) ... she knew.
socks, sweaters, fancy boxes,
and the search for the perfect
bow-tie ... for the love of her
life ... her doctor.
who couldn’t save her.
she knew ... she threw
her everything she had at
her last christmas.
and we five were there,
diving, sweating, scrambling
to capture, gather in our hands
(and hearts) each magical
moment as if they were
tiny, bright, blinking fireflies
floating in the air.
in a flash, their dance of light
disappeared.
when she did. days later.

-sgk

Silenced No More

Ask me my perspective, I just wanna be respected. Cos i'm feeling so neglected in a society where women aren't protected.

It seems like every word is an apology, like I was born to be sorry. But I won't be.

I wanna be heard, these words.

Are just words but they're strong, and I won't move on until I have what I desire.

I am a woman, sparking a fire. A flame that's taking names, and I refuse to live in shame.

When I'm done, I'll be a woman on the run, a smoking gun, born to stun.
Born to fly, while ashes fall from my eyes.

#neveragain



The Sound of Music—A Retrospect

The *Sound of Music* movie has been a part of my life since its release in the mid-sixties. I was around 12 years old, growing up in Calcutta, the middle of three sisters. Like everyone we knew back then, we saw the movie at least ten times during its first release. Like everyone else, we bought the songbook and memorized all the songs. I remember them to this day.

My sisters and I attended an all-girls school, which looking back now, was a training ground for the good wives and mothers we were expected to be. Our mother took her job of raising three of the best wives and mothers seriously. I think the teachers at La Martiniere for Girls, where we went to school, were eager partners in this endeavor. Why else would singing and needlework be part of the curriculum!

Ms. Ray, our singing teacher, confronted her job with gusto and determination. She was a large woman and everything she did was big and boisterous. Her fat fingers would bang out Broadway tunes on the piano, and we were expected to sing the tunes with passion and resolve. She decided we would master the songs from the *Sound of Music*.

Most of us had seen the movie several times, and memorized the words to the songs and most of the dialogue too. We followed the romance of Liesl and Rolfe and ached for the Captain and Maria to find each other. Of course, the Baroness was the most elegant woman we had ever seen. Her earrings twinkled when she stood on the balcony and tells the Captain “somewhere out there is a young lady who will never be a nun.” I watch the movie whenever it comes on television around Easter and Christmas, and anticipate this scene, which I believe is a turning point in the movie.

The 1960’s was a time of awakening. We were young and naïve, reading romance novels and dreaming of our future. The *Sound of Music* was the first 70 mm movie at the Globe theatre. Seeing the larger than life romance of the Captain and Maria on the big screen stirred something in us. We weren’t sure what it was since no one had talked to us about adolescence and the feelings and thoughts that came with it. It’s the subtle romance of old movies that I have always loved. So much was communicated without ever saying a word!

I have visited Salzburg where the *Sound of Music* was filmed, twice. Like all tourists, I’ve taken the *Sound of Music* tour where they play the movie score on the bus throughout the tour. Like all tourists, I join in with the sing-along with voices and accents from all over the world. It’s amazing how this

movie unites people from different backgrounds and beliefs. The story is of universal appeal—triumph over adversity, love conquers all, and family means everything.

The magic of the *Sound of Music* still lives on in me, bringing back memories of simpler times and an invitation to “follow every rainbow until you find your dream.”

A Minute of Existential Dread

Your eyes flash open to view the darkness of your bedroom. You glance at the alarm clock beside your bed—the red LEDs read 2:47 AM. You're still exhausted, so you attempt to just roll over and go back to sleep ... but nothing happens. Your body remains firmly in place, held fast as though you're encased in cement. You try again, harder this time, but it somehow seems as though you've moved even less.

You try something smaller this time: just your head. But you can't feel your neck at all—not just that tingling numbness your hands and legs sometime undergo, but it's as though it has suddenly vanished from existence, abandoning your head to just lie on your pillow for the rest of time. It's at this point the dread starts to sink in, as you come to the slow realization that you're completely paralyzed. There's zero sensation anyway in your body, and your limbs feel as though they're leagues away. You can't even open your mouth to scream for help, as your jaw is locked firmly in place. All you can do is look around helplessly in the dark.

After what feels like hours, finally something starts to change, but you know instantly it isn't for the better. The shadows in your room start to elongate, twisting and coiling like the tentacles of some eldritch horror. They seem to coalesce into a shape by your door, something indescribable for your tired, panicked brain. Something large and inhuman, that would have a name like Zstylzhemghi or Nyarlathotep. But whatever this is, you can feel its malice oozing into your dark bedroom, as its eyeless face stares your unmoving form down. Every time you blink, it's closer. Each time you try to draw breath, it's shallower. You're counting the seconds as it keeps suddenly shifting closer, and you start to get lightheaded from the lack of oxygen in your body ... before you suddenly shoot upright in your bed, so quickly you nearly flip over yourself onto your stomach.

You look at the clock again. 2:48 AM.

§

That was my first encounter with sleep paralysis, at least as far as I remember, from back when I was in 5th grade. There aren't too many things that I'm legitimately scared of, besides the kinds of average fears everyone has—grievous bodily harm, drowning, burning alive, etc. But the one thing that absolutely terrifies me is the thought that my sleep paralysis will be the end of me: whether my body never moves again and I'm stuck in that living hell for

the rest of my life, or one of its accompanying waking nightmares will end up being real and perfectly capable of and willing to kill me.

Sleep paralysis is a relatively common occurrence for me. It happens a handful of times every month or so; often enough that I can never be rid of its grim specter looming over me. It's something that you get used to after eight or so years, to the point that it ceases to surprise you, but there's always an element of panic to it. Every now and then, I'll awake to my face buried into my pillow, and I'll struggle and fight to wrench it free so I don't suffocate to death.

The waking nightmares are thankfully less common, but that doesn't mean I'm completely free of those either. Just last year, I dreamt of some creature made of mud and rotting plant matter reaching out to me, and when I woke up, I could feel its hands gripping my throat as I clawed at my sheets and comforter. Those, unfortunately, you can't ever get used to. They're unpredictable, and they never behave the same way twice. At least with sleep paralysis, it's generally the same sensation (or rather, lack thereof) each time rather than whatever fresh horrors your still-sleeping mind has decided will torment you this calm autumn evening.

But I suppose it's just one of those things you get used to as you grow older. You get up, go to work, pay your bills, and pray that the shadow demon forged in the depths of your existential dread doesn't feel like devouring your soul *quite* yet.

Not This Time

For Estelle & Evelyn

One time these things we endured in the name of surviving
 Wailing at them
 Watching fate
 Weeping resignation
 As babies were ripped from our arms
 Living with them
 Washing clothes
 Sweeping dirt
 While eyes undressed us

Next time these things we ignored in the name of moving on
 Sitting behind them
 Averting eyes
 Keeping emotions
 Through too many trials and too few triumphs
 Standing against them
 Singing hope
 Marching streets
 Over the way watered with tears

Another time these things we pushed aside in the name of moving on up
 Living beside them
 Feeling unwelcome
 Waiting for the wagon
 As we worked towards the dream
 Creating with them
 Hearing someone else sing our songs
 Hoping for recognition
 Above retaliation, but angry still

This time these things demand that we be still and know God
 Praying for them
 Voting yes we can
 Being sole head of household

Under so much stress and duress
 Asking them why
 Wondering when our lives will matter
 Burying boys killed in cold blue
 Beyond explanation but worthy of exaltation

This time
 We can't
 We won't
 We shall not
 Be moved

This time
 It's on

Paragon

Never far from a warm touch
When night falls,
Never found on the crumpled sheets
When tousled hair shines—
She was always one for fleeting ecstasy,
For stories of forever are often written in scars
And band-aid lovers need not be perfect.

Birds with Wisteria



Dreams

Some days I awake, not remembering what it is that I dreamt the night before; other times I vividly recall varying scenes. In one, it is the end of one incredibly long day. We have hung up our weapons of war—the signs of protest, crackling microphones, and speeches long since uttered—and enjoy, at last, the vibrant sunset that has eluded us for so many years. Other nights I see countless people huddled around the smallest of fires for warmth; a dark-skinned woman coughs, her face gaunt from years of hunger and fatigue. My lover turns to me, his thin frame shivering in the night air as tears fall down his face. “How could it come to this?” he asks, as I awake, sweating and troubled at the visions that have now passed. I have had dreams where people of all genders, colors, and sexual orientations are locked up, where every individual has a hopeless face, where everyone has given up. There are more dreams: some nights I see overfull boats leaving the country with the “passengers” crying, tombstones in a newly made graveyard with my name among them, rainbow flags or black lives matter signs stained in blood. I see the futures of our country, of our world, and many of the paths lead to darkness and despair; there is, however, one path that leads to a new dawn, and the waiting sunset behind it. The blissful sunset we seek is real, it is a time just out of reach, but if we stand together and never relent we may yet live to feel the warmth we have been denied all our lives.

Honestly

I am loud and quiet, dark and pale, but
Don't pale in comparison.
Jodines, I cuss sometimes and I'm
Prone to daydreaming of freedom and being
Covered in fur that's not mine.

I understand fear and love.
I hear a lot, see too much, and hope for tomorrow, even though
Sometimes People make me worry.
I spend time wondering where the deer go at night,
And if they hurry.

I understand fear and love.
Like fresh tamales, a song in the dark,
And gazing into eyes,
Homes with their drawers and doors asking
To open.

Hanoi Hilton

“Don’t get captured,” barked Sgt. Maj. Pawelski at battalion headquarters.

Being only a young lieutenant on his first mission leasing an A Team plus, I listened to every word of our battalion Sergeant Major, who had two masters degrees. We readied ourselves for the next mission deep within Viet Cong territory. We slopped and smoothed green and brown face paint to mask the color of our skin. Branches tied to our rifles would break up the telltale silhouettes. We prepared to search and destroy.

We watched the depressing newscast of our unfortunate: downed American POW pilots and aircrews shoved by North Vietnamese Army guards to join the captured and chained soldiers; marines being paraded down one of the main streets of Hanoi, the capital city of North Vietnam. Mobs grew into the thousands of angry civilians, men, women, and children spitting and screaming curses at the top of their lungs. Our American POWs had visible scars from their torture and endless interrogations that still stung with slight infections starting to grow. The bruises colored their pale skins compared to the darkly tanned crowd yelling and throwing stones, eggs, garbage and feces at these captured Americans. The North Vietnamese captors broadcast these vivid images for the world to see. These battered POWs became unwilling “guests” at the “Hanoi Hilton”.

Sgt. Maj. Pawelski prepared to brief the young Lt. Jhang leading his A Team plus on the dangerous mission of trying to search and destroy a suspected Viet Cong cache of Soviet Union supplied rockets that recently hit the U.S. Air Force base at Pleiku.

With his voice of experience, Pawelski calmly stated, “Gentlemen, your mission to search a suspected VC village for the Russkie Rockets will be tough. Don’t get captured, tortured, and become a guest at the ‘Hanoi Hilton’. Evade capture the best you can and try to escape right after capture. Don’t wait. You will be briefed on the situation and location. Pay attention to every detail. Your life could depend on it.”

As Jhang returned the right hand salute from Pawelski, who’d given him the traditional first salute after his being commissioned a Regular Army officer, graduating from ROTC, while his left hand had the silver dollar to pay for that first salute.

“Thanks, Sergeant Major, you can count on Team Alpha One Zero to get the job done. We aren’t going deep into VC territory and should be able to get back safely after finding and blowing up the rockets. All our training and teaching will now pay off.”

§

Right after the detailed briefing, we boarded the chopper with blades slicing through the thick, humid Vietnamese jungle air with the A Team plus of fourteen Green Berets aboard to drop into a suspected Viet Cong guerilla stronghold. The triple canopy jungle was so thick that an Air Force fighter-bomber had to drop bombs just to clear several potential landing zones for the Team to be dropped off by the helicopters.

Deep into enemy territory, Team Alpha One Zero risked life and limb to destroy a huge weapons cache and return safely. As the short, but wiry A Team Leader, Lt. Jhang Fu Jeh, jumped from the chopper to the ground followed by his close buddy, the huge Bill Smith, who towered more than a foot taller and was over twice his weight than the lieutenant.

The fourteen camouflaged and face painted team members fanned out quickly and moved into the thick jungle towards the hidden Viet Cong guerilla village of dried mud walls and thatched roofs, but well hidden from aerial view. Alpha One Zero cut their way through the undergrowth infested with blood sucking mosquitoes, poisonous snakes, and lizards of all kinds. Even the stagnant water had bloodsucking leeches waiting to get a sip of fresh American blood. Not a word was spoken, as each step taken was as quiet as a mouse. Every exposed piece of metal was taped for silence. We even learned to control breathing to minimize any noise that would alert the unsuspecting Viet Cong.

With good intelligence, we found the Viet Cong village and fanned out into attack positions.

I whispered to my two fire team leaders, “Go to right, Bill. Go to the left, Jack.”

The fire team leaders nodded in silent acknowledgement. This highly trained and well-equipped augmented Special Forces A Team quickly set

up Claymore mines that blast out thousands of metal pellets with explosive power. Another weapons team set up machine guns.

The weapons team loaded the 90mm recoilless rifle with that distinctive metal clank piercing the dead silence of the night. The Viet Cong lookout in the village quickly sensed the danger and started firing blindly even though the tower guard couldn't see any real targets.

The exchange of gunfire was loud and horrific, but the Viet Cong had been surprised. Our Team Alpha One Zero had reached their village doorstep without being fired upon. The powerful 90mm gun blasted the lookout tower. The heavy machine gun automatic weapons fire poured into the village.

As darkness descended erasing all the shadows on the ground, we took advantage of our night vision goggles on that starlit night to enter the now quiet village. We searched, but not a single Viet Cong remained. We found dried blood, tattered clothing, and the stench of rotting flesh wafted in the air as the members of Alpha One Zero cautiously entered the village to claim the prized Soviet supplied rockets.

Fire Team One of five members searched the village thoroughly as Fire Team Two and the four heavy weapons troops secured a perimeter around the village waiting for a counter attack.

"Hey, Boss, no Russkie rockets!" as Jack spotted the opening to a tunnel. "This is their getaway tunnel, sir."

The Viet Cong had gotten away! This could be a trap! We had to find our way back to friendly lines across a wide river with only a single wire stretched across it at a special guarded crossing point.

As the night wore on, we realized this was a trap to capture more prisoners of war to be beaten by the mobs in Hanoi to gain public support against the unpopular war in Vietnam. We now had to evade capture or face the torture and public ridicule of being invading foreigners defeated by North Vietnamese Regulars.

As the unfamiliar sounds of tanks and heavy-caliber, Soviet cannons began to fire on the tiny village with dried mud walls and thatched roofs that were now in flames as a very large military force closed in on the fourteen Green Berets, we would become the prize of the ambush. We hunters became the hunted.

After motioning the Team into the escape tunnel, I quickly scurried into the escape tunnel myself and headed towards the single wire river crossing. The

rest of the team moved silently as we heard the huge force of hunters closing in on our VC village. Anything too heavy to carry was just left behind. The North Vietnamese Regulars were waiting in that pitch-black night. The ground was wet and slippery, so that the slightest noise like a broken twig would give away our positions to the hunters looking for fresh prisoners to interrogate and parade in front of the Hanoi mobs for the world to see. We dispersed quietly and quickly.

I held the branches as they bent so that the snapping noise against my clothes wouldn't give away my hiding place. Even my smooth controlled breathing eliminated telltale noises.

We spread out in different directions to try to evade our would-be captors. Silence was golden. As I lay quietly on the wet ground, I heard Team members getting captured ahead, so I quietly moved deeper into enemy territory away from the critical river crossing point that was only a few miles ahead. I slipped down a steep damp ridgeline by holding on to the base of small shrubs to prevent myself from tumbling down.

At the bottom, I quietly lay in the underbrush and just listened. The hunters sounded further away, but still searching. I kept moving further into enemy held territory using my memory of the detailed briefing provided before we boarded the choppers. I moved away from the hunters. After quite a trek, all alone and covered in mud and dew from lying in the underbrush, I could hear the loud screams of teammates being tortured for information.

There was no Geneva Convention to protect Prisoners of War. The captors would break each prisoner in time with constant pain and discomfort and lack of sleep. We all have a breaking point.

The NVA Commander barked out his orders in Vietnamese: "Catch white devils alive! Uncle Ho want make show of them for world see."

"Yes, sir, Colonel. We locked together so no American get through. We trap them good."

"You, American drop gun...raise hand."

"Tie up he."

"You, come."

At the initial NVA holding and interrogation area: "American Dog, you sit. Tie cross leg to post. What you name? What rank?"

“Smith, William, Sergeant.”

“What group from?”

“Smith, William, Sergeant, EN1208226.”

“What group you from? Where from?”

“Smith, William, Sergeant, EN1208226.”

“Bend him back. You tell my question.”

“Ayyyow!”

“What group you from? Where from? What you want?”

“Smith, William, Sergeant, EN1208226.”

“Give Radio Hanoi.” The NVA soldier wired up prisoner Smith’s ankles with copper electrodes.

“What group you from? Where from? What you want? How many American?”

“Smith, William, Sergeant, EN1208226.”

“Bend back...give Radio Hanoi. You talk or Radio Hanoi visit balls.” The interrogator pointed between the prisoner’s legs.

“Ayyyooowww! Stop! Stop! I’ll tell you whatever you want...”

Meanwhile, from the rapidly fading memory of the operations map, I kept moving silently toward the river far north of the critical crossing point. Finding a dead Viet Cong, I changed clothes to look like a local and then headed north for miles away from the combat area. The villages were quiet and peaceful as I quietly traveled far away from the ambush site and screams of my tortured buddies.

I eventually found the river bend far north of the improvised wire crossing bridge and then followed the river heading south instead of north from the shortest route in the south. I evaded capture and painful torture at the hands of the sadistic full battalion of NVA Regulars.

As I reached the single wire crossing in the pitch-black night, our friendly South Vietnamese security watch silently greeted me after I provided the correct password “Tech Tool”.

He helped me hang upside down on the wire bridge with my rifle slung across my back to cross to the other side of the river while pulling with my hands and folding my legs over the single bundle of reinforced wires.

Tired and wet, I pulled with my last reserves of strength hand over hand. I was only the third and the last Team member to reach this wire bridge. All the others were missing, dead, or captured. None of the other supporting team members had managed to evade the NVA trap. Half way to freedom and safety across the single wire bridge, the Viet Cong sighted my lone silhouette in the distance hanging upside down pulling myself across the putrid river waters below me.

They fired mortars down range. Fortunately, the wire bridge was tied to jungle trees high enough over the water that the explosions below me had the lethal shrapnel contained in the river waters. Only splashed with dirty water hit me.

I kept pulling with my muddy and blistered hands and fatigued arms because dropping into those waters with mortar rounds exploding would have definitely been fatal. The blasts got closer as the spotter adjusted the mortar range and direction. I pulled harder and faster as I felt the blisters on my hands breaking and hurting more. I finally reached safety on the other side of the river as I dismounted from the wire bridge and ran for cover as fast as I possibly could with every last ounce of energy I had left.

As I finally got to the hidden pickup area, I was quickly guided to the exit assembly area to be evacuated by the waiting armored personnel carrier mounting a heavy 50 cal. machine gun for our protection. I was still breathing heavily and my heart thumped along as my adrenaline kicked everything up a few notches.

“Thank God, I made it!”

As I reached the resting area with hot food and coffee, I could finally click my paratrooper combat boots to return to the reality of this training exercise for Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) Cadets at Fort Devens, Massachusetts.

Our berets were blacker for our cadet Counter Guerilla unit and not green. We were fourteen real classmates participating among others from other classes. The torture was real and individuals really broke and cried.

Nobody died that night.

We were being trained to go to Vietnam combat. The North Vietnamese Regulars were active duty soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division, who got a kick out of capturing and torturing future officers using the Apache Pole to stretch prisoners' legs in directions they weren't meant to go while our feet were tied together...very painful.

Radio Hanoi torture with a hand crank generator produced electric shocks...breath taking experience, but non-lethal unlike connecting our naked gonads at one end of full house current while standing in a bucket of salt water with the other full current connection. We didn't get burning bamboo strips under our nails, because this was only training for ROTC Cadets.

Training was realistic, but not real. The fantasy ended.

Galata Tower



Christina's World

After a painting by Andrew Wyeth

Shards of russet hay bruise weak muscles

Fallen

Futile calling out to long departed ears

Hurt

Wounded but resolute hands grasp rigid earth

Arid breaths

Songs of beetles aid onward thoughts

Striving

Perhaps by dusk, maybe winter

Or to slumber

In dreams bodies don't ache, loneliness isn't grey

My Heart is a Guarded Place

It's a guarded place

Caged in thorns

And frozen over

Chained and gated

Locked tight

And sealed with a hex

To keep my secrets mine

And none of yours

Rays of Sunlight

They told me to be careful. But they were caught. They told me to stay prepared for the worst. But they had absolutely no premonition of what would happen. They told me to deviate from personal questions and to lie even through extreme torture. But they were forced to tell the truth. They told me to live. But they died. They told me never to cry or show emotions. I cannot. I will not. I shall not. That is impossible. Life is too cruel. Life is too unforgiving. One mistake can cost you your life. One promise can change you forever. One dream can vanish in the twinkle of an eye. One road can take you to the gates of hell, the other to an angel's arms.

It was a chilly day. February, I think. The snow fell from the sky like soft petals upon an icy breeze. The sun hid from the world for a few moments. Darkness seeped through the cracks of clouds until the sky turned dark, thick black. The ground was covered with pillows of snow. Puffs of smoke leaped over the brigades where they were. They were looking up to the sky. Or maybe at me. I could not tell. My vision was blurred with tears. Tears of anger. Tears of love. Tears of sadness. They stood there, like frozen statues awaiting their end. The gunners formed a line. Whistles were blown. Trumpets blasted. Icy gusts of wind screamed and fled. The snow began to leap down from the sky. I was in oblivion. I could not hear a thing. It was almost like a movie, that scene where only the heartbeat is heard, and the rest is muted. They turned and saw me. Trickle of tears were streaming down their faces. Or was it snow? Nothing was clear. They stared at me as I moved closer. I remember everything, even now. Every little detail is vivid in my memory. The day we vowed to never give up, the day they were caught, the day they died. I remember everything. The whistles blew again as they were herded against the wall. The gunners faced them, loaded their rifles, and aimed. Their eyes turned towards me. I was sobbing uncontrollably and forced myself to move closer to say farewell. I stumbled on the lumps of snow and gasped; I frantically stretched out my hand towards them. Slowly, they began to smile. All of them were smiling at me and for a brief second, I was confused. Just before the triggers were pulled, they whispered words that travelled with the wind. Stay alive. Tell the world. Fight. The shots were fired. I nearly screamed with horror. Blood trickled down onto the snow until it became a bright, red blanket. I was still on the ground with my arm outstretched, rocking with disbelief. They were still smiling at me even though they were dead. The soldiers marched back to their stations and the wind died down. The sun cast its rays upon the bodies strewn about. I ran to them. They smiled, lifeless

smiles, and their eyes gazed at me. They were dead. The sun continued to shine.

Does the sun really shine during the darkest moments of our lives? I feel as if the heavens are always laughing at me. The clouds seem to snicker and smirk. The sun giggles in the corner and shyly peeks from behind the puffs. The sky opens and rumbles with roaring laughter. Tears from severe hysterics trickle down to the earth as rain. Could God perhaps find my woes amusing? Perhaps once you read this, you, my reader, may sympathize with me. I am going to tell you my story. No, that is incorrect. I am going to tell you our story.

§

I'll go as far back as I remember. I am flipping through my mental photos of childhood. My first real, memorable birthday. The times I went fishing with Dad and Mum. My first dance. The cool taste of champagne on my amateur lips. My first kiss. Good times they were indeed. Stop. I recall a vivid memory. When I was only ten years old, my father was drafted to fight for our nation. Upon hearing the news, I felt my whole world collapse in a moment. On the day he was to take the train, I sulked and hid behind the station. He found me, placed me on his lap, and whispered in my ear: "I love you. I will love you in the trenches. I will love you in the barracks. I will love you everywhere I go. I will love you even through death. You know why? Because you are a part of me. If I am gone, a part of you will go with me. My little angel. My precious angel will fly with me to battle. We will always be together." I stopped sobbing and snuggled into his warm chest. I breathed deeply the strong scent of lavender soap and minty breath. Slowly, he unclasped my arms from his waist and solemnly boarded the train. The furls of smoke coughed and choked at first, but soon they shot up. My Dad's face stared straight ahead in the window seat. The train impersonated a groaning donkey as it pushed itself towards the horizon. It soon glided across the tracks, as smooth and graceful as a gazelle. I ran, trying to keep up, but eventually stopped. My father's head slowly turned around and he mouthed words: "I will love you forever." I stood alone in the middle of the prairie watching the train disappear to someplace beyond. The sun shined.

§

My father was reported missing in action a year later. Months later, a grim telegram on our doorstep bore news of his “unfortunate” death. My family received a medal honoring his memory. A shiny, silver medal that was somehow supposed to recompense for his death. Death. Icy black cold fingers creeping inside the body, sucking all life from within. Death. A painless wave of deep sleep that tranquilizes the body and carries its soul to its future home. Death. Thousands of angels carrying a casket into heaven. Death. Thousands of demons carrying a casket into hell.

My father’s face slept peacefully in the dark coffin. Death stared straight at me that day. I stared right back.

§

“Name?”

“Gianna.”

“Age?”

“I will be nineteen this October”

“Place of birth?”

“Somerset, England”

“Family?”

“I have none.”

A thin pale man with delicate fingers typed rapidly. The interrogator continued.

“Where are your comrade spies?”

“I am not a spy.”

“Lies, lies, lies. That is all I ever hear in this bloody hell of a place.”

“I am telling the truth.”

“No, you are lying and I will give you one last chance. If you choose to confide their location, then you will be unharmed. If not... well, we both know what will happen. So, where are they?”

The typist paused. The room was silent save for the ticking of the clock. My

interrogator remained expressionless. Two piercing eyes were rooted on me. I was sitting on a hard, wooden chair in a sweltering room enclosed with flimsy wooden walls. The typist fumbled in his coat pocket for a handkerchief to wipe his dripping perspiration. Through a torn window screen, I could hear the faint drone of warplanes nearby. The two eyes were growing steadily impatient. I decided to wait for an explosion of fury. The typist’s fleshy nose twitched as he removed the wet cloth from his glistening neck. Just five seconds more. There. The two eyes had enough.

“Since you refuse to cooperate, I think you require special treatment.”

SLAM. His hand flew from nowhere and delivered a stunning blow to my face. Again. And again. And again. I soon stopped counting. My lips swelled, my cheeks burned, and my head throbbed. He stopped, panting for breath and spoke in a menacing growl.

“Where are your comrades?”

I was too dizzy to reply. No one told me it would be this painful. My head lolled to the side and my parched tongue contracted as I swallowed. Thwack. I shielded my face that time. His demeanor transformed suddenly, and he slowly reached for a flat, wooden club.

“Game over.”

The typist froze. The noises from outside stopped. Everything went black.

§

Open. Blurry images float around me. Close. Darkness envelops me. Focus. I am in the same room. My interrogator and his pitiable typist have disappeared. I wince as my weak arms push myself up into a sitting position. What a marvelous job the interrogator did. Blue and black bruises litter my sensitive skin. A chuckle erupts from the other side of the room.

“He messed you up pretty good, huh?”

“Who are you?”

The voice paused for breath.

“Number 89.”

notes from the mourning son

it rises,
i sit.
the sun, my son
seems to speak.
Children of the earth
don't care to listen.

emerges spring
Children, chirping,
sprout from creeks
trampling budding
flowers and grass
scrambling robins' eggs
on the trail
of icy days.

it sets,
i rise.
the moon, my Child
seems to leak.
Children of the night
don't choose to dream.

summer surges.
fresh tar bubbles,
hot twixt toes
and fingers
crawling, sniffing
flowers,
fondling memories
of easy times
blind as faith
in better days.
crack bang! gang!
peter pan be damned
nobody's growing up.

it rises,
i lean.
my son, the sun
seems to reek.
Children of the dark
do not awaken.

autumn crashes
student falls
in and out
of school
cheat but for
god's sake don't fail.

it sets,
i lie
the moon
my ami
seems to shriek.
Children of the earth
try not to hear.

winter is called
on account of
whether we
like it or not
all god's children
gonna freeze.

it rises,
i sit.
the sun, my son
seems to speak.
Children of
the earth
must learn
to listen.

Secrets to Getting the Most Out of Your Saturday Morning Trail Run

Legs pumping, breath straining, the two young men ran neck and neck, all out. As they cleared the trees, Zayne pulled ahead, beating Adam to the marker post by a dozen steps.

Adam pulled up, breath still heaving next to where Zayne stood, stretching and tapping at his fitness tracker. It was the latest gadget and underground buzz about miraculous fitness and health improvements had everyone clamoring to get the FitDrivr even before it was released. But Zayne, being Zayne, had somehow wrangled a beta version.

“So, how’s that working for you? How long have you had it?” Adam asked casually.

Zayne looked up from the tracker and smiled smugly at Adam. “Well, you know I signed a non-disclosure agreement, so I can’t say much, but,” his face broke into a charming grin, “since I got this thing, about two weeks I guess, I have been having great runs, better workouts... and I feel great!” He slugged back a bottle of water with a “boutique blend of organic electrolytes” that promised “enduring energy” as they began walking toward the parking lot. Adam noted that he didn’t toss the empty water bottle in the trash like he normally did.

“Seriously, though, that was my best time ever on this trail! The FitDrivr has changed how I feel about exercise! Tell you what,” Zayne said sliding into a racy sports car, “when they come out for sale, I’ll buy you one. So. Same time next week? I need someone to beat and you generally oblige by losing!”

Adam answered with an obscene salute. Their weekly run was really the only time they saw each other anymore. Adam made the Saturday morning run a habit – mostly because the trail was near his apartment and it fit his running routine. Zayne blew it off at random, a thing Adam did not necessarily mind. They weren’t as close as they had been.

It was two weeks later when they met again. Unwilling to be so easily beaten by Zayne, Adam had escalated his running regimen. He was still unable to keep pace with Zayne that morning. Zayne had never been a slug, but now he looked amazingly lean, fit, hard, and fast. He finished the run a good forty

seconds before Adam. Zayne, usually a mouthy victor, was surly and impatient as he had been for the whole run.

“Damn, you are slow, punk! No competition at all!” he grunted between gulps of another “enhanced” water. He checked his FitDrivr and frowned, “I need to get more miles in. See ya, Chump!” he said and ran off down the trail in same direction they had just come.

Adam shrugged at the rudeness. “Jackass,” he said under his breath. He should just change his running time; he didn’t need the aggravation.

Walking back to the car he checked his time on his fitness tracker, a budget version from FitDrivr’s competitor. His fitness tracker said he had just cut a whole minute off his best time ... *ever*. It was a huge record for him and Zayne had beaten him with ease.

§

A few days later, a jolt of excitement shot through Adam as he entered his apartment door. The package had been delivered! Inside the kitchen, he dropped two bags of groceries and his briefcase onto the table and plunked into a chair. From inside the large padded envelope, he pulled a bubble-wrapped blob. He checked the envelope for more paperwork, but there was none. Inside the bubble-wrap was a small white box with basic black printing that said, “Never needs charging. Gets Results. Fat Loss & Muscle Gain Guaranteed. Cardio, Aerobic, & Anaerobic Fitness Improvement Guaranteed. Your FitDrivr must grow accustomed to you: For Best Results, Do not Remove.” And there was his very own FitDrivr. Removing his old fitness tracker, Adam picked up the FitDrivr. He liked the matte-black band with the gleaming black touchscreen. The underside of the band had a silvery sensor pad so velvety-soft it almost tingled on his wrist.

Over the next few days, Adam enjoyed the newness of the FitDrivr. The FitDrivr had sensors that analyzed motion, workouts, activity, heart rate, respiration, sweat, and a variety of other health markers. Based on that analysis, the FitDrivr made suggestions, not unlike nagging, but well-meaning advice from your mom. It would buzz his wrist, at first gently then with increasing force, until he tapped the screen. Sometimes the insistent buzzing

left his wrist itchy. So, Adam didn't love everything about it, but he had made some of the suggested dietary and fitness changes and he was genuinely feeling terrific. He had great runs and was looking forward to seeing Zayne's face when he showed up with his own FitDrivr.

But by next week, Adam was seriously considering skipping the weekly run. His mom had called him the night before. It seems Zayne had "gotten rough" with his mother and had "hollered" at his sister. Adam hated when family complicated matters. And moms could be *so overdramatic*. Now Adam had been "mommied" into some snoop and snitch investigation to find out why Zayne wasn't "acting like himself."

Adam scanned the lot as he walked towards the trail. Zayne didn't seem to be nearby, but his car was in the lot. Adam had to look twice; the car that was usually detailed and polished was grimy with empty water bottles and energy bar wrappers on the seat and floor. Zayne was particular about a clean car. Adam's concern notched up.

Adam assumed that Zayne was already on the trail and that he would pass him sooner or later on the out-and-back course. As he started running, Adam checked his FitDrivr, which reminded him to lengthen his stride and to maintain even breathing. A half-mile into the trail, Adam saw Zayne running at a high pace towards him. Zayne didn't even acknowledge him as Adam turned around and sprinted alongside Zayne back to the starting point.

Zayne slowed his pace going to the car. Adam caught him by the arm, and Zayne swung around fist raised.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Adam stepped back, checking his friend from head to toe. Wow! Zayne looked like he stepped out of a fitness magazine. He was ripped, lean, and muscular. "What's up, Z!?"

Zayne seemed to focus on Adam for the first time. "Oh. Hey, Adam. Gotta get to the gym."

"What? The gym! You just ran five miles! You need to slow down!"

Zayne slid into his car, "Nope. Just ran fifteen miles. Slow is for chumps who can't get good gear. See ya, Chump," He sped off, riding over the curb getting out of the parking lot. He never noticed Adam's FitDrivr.

Adam stood in the parking lot and wondered what he was going to tell his mother. The word "drugs" skittered around his mind. But the sky was blue, and the sun was out, and it was a great day for a good run so why let Zayne

ruin it? Off he loped down the trail—he even decided to take the path up to the overlook and add a couple of miles to his run.

Over the next few weeks, Adam was really seeing improvements with his fitness and wanted to focus on that, but his mom and his aunt were now nagging him non-stop. Adam tried to catch Zayne at his gym, but he wasn't there. The two well-muscled employees at the counter smirked when he asked about Zayne. The guy said he had seen Zayne coming in at night and that he hadn't been very sociable. The lady with the blonde ponytail and muscular shoulders said, "If you've seen him lately, you know what's up with Zayne—" The guy behind the counter tried to cut her off, but she talked over him "—*everyone knows!* Steroids! Steroids. Zayne's a case for sure."

Adam tried to absorb that. It was possible. Zayne had a penchant for the finer things with a reluctance for real work. Steroids might be a shortcut he would take. Adam thought about it as he did a 90-minute circuit of the gym's latest equipment. He was already sore from his increased running regime, but the attendants had offered him a free session and he figured, why not.

By Friday, Zayne's mom and Adam's own mom had filled him in on even more of Zayne's behavior. His attendance at work had grown erratic. He hadn't been seen in several days and was in danger of losing his job. His house was a mess. Workout equipment, sweaty workout clothes, empty water bottles and energy bar wrappers were everywhere. Adam was starting to feel suspicious about the pricey water and energy bars. Who knew what was in all that stuff.

Saturday was gray and blustery and damp. Adam hadn't expected Zayne to show, but his car was the only other car in the lot, parked diagonally across the back two corner spots. No sign of Zayne. Adam sat in his car pulling on an oversized hoodie. He usually didn't run with his phone but slid it into the side pocket of his running pants. He glanced back at the passenger seat as he got out and grabbed the last item from the seat. "Ya never know," he muttered to himself and slid the weapon into the front pocket of his hoodie.

Adam set out down the trail at a brisk pace. He kept scanning and expecting to see Zayne in front of him, but Zayne never appeared. Adam settled into the rhythm of his run, pushing himself faster on the way back. Yanking up the sleeve of his hoodie, Adam checked his FitDrivr: Doing Great! He had just turned into the last stand of trees when he was tackled from behind.

Adam automatically rolled and fought something heavy and strong. A bear? No! A hulk! It was Zayne!

“Nononono! You can’t have it, you can’t have it!” Zayne snarled in Adam’s face. Zayne, an enormous mass of muscle, soon had Adam pinned.

Zayne was fumbling and trying to unclasp Adam’s FitDrivr. “You just can’t stand that I have some good gear, too!” Adam was so pissed he gave a mighty heave that nearly pushed Zayne away, but then Zayne yanked the Fitdrivr off and Adam screamed in agony. With his other hand he grabbed the taser, shoved the pins in Zayne’s right shoulder and pulled the trigger. Zayne’s body jerked and jumped and then he fell over to the side. The smell of ozone, burned hair, and urine filled the air. Adam looked at his wrist. Where the FitDrivr had been was a two-inch wide strip of skinless, oozing, bleeding tissue.

Through a haze of pain, he heard Zayne muttering beside him, “I saved you. Promise me you’ll cut it off.” Zayne still had Adam’s FitDrivr in his hand, Adam’s skin and flesh still attached. Dozens of translucent hair-like tendrils extended from the base, through the attached skin and flesh and moved, seeming to seek purchase in new flesh. Adam threw up. And then some more.

When Adam looked up he saw Zayne nod at his wrist, “It makes you crazy. It makes you exercise.... I saved you. Promise me you’ll cut it off.”

“The FitDrivr makes you—?” Adam asked, slowly understanding, “You want me to cut your FitDrivr off?” Adam wasn’t sure he could stomach it and he was in his own considerable pain.

“No. My arm. You have to cut my arm off, it’s all in my arm.” He lifted his arm to show Adam. The band of the tracker had been overgrown by skin. Obvious sensor tendrils seem to spread out under his skin and go all over his body. “It won’t leave me alone. Please. You have to cut it off,” he paused and sighed, “Or I’ll tell everyone you barfed like a girl.”

Adam barked a short laugh. “I’ll tell ‘em you peed yourself like a baby,” Adam responded.

Adam’s phone began to ring, a ring tone they both knew as “mom.” They both groaned. At the same time they said, “Don’t answer that!,” and then “I’m not answering that!” They both laughed. But the ringtone ended and started again without pause so they kept laughing until they cried. Adam called 911 and they waited.

Two weekends later, the skin grafts on Adam’s wrist had healed enough for a run. He had his old reliable fitness tracker on his uninjured arm. It felt nothing like his FitDrivr.

Zayne was still in the hospital. Adam visited him every afternoon. The taser blast had electrically killed Zayne’s FitDrivr. Surgeons had been able to remove most of the band and screen, but the sensor filaments were still woven all throughout his body, and doctors were still figuring out whether they could remove it at all.

There were several other major incidents and the FitDrivr company had some bad press. However, their stance was that people pay for results and while certain documentation may have been missing, everyone had been told to avoid removing the FitDrivr. As for Zayne, he admitted that he had purposely entered ridiculous fitness expectations into his profile. FitDrivr, the company said, had tried to help him meet his expectations. Pictures of Zayne and other users, even Adam, had run in the media. The results were obvious.

The waitlist for a FitDrivr went from thousands to millions. Adam had been offered an obscene amount of money for his “used” one... “if he still had it.” Adam didn’t have it and didn’t want it. It didn’t matter anyway. It had disappeared at the hospital.

Adam didn’t have a very good run.

When Corn is the Landscape

Summer and the highway windows are filled with faces
Looking out on fields and fields of corn halfway to harvest.
There's promise in the sun and a green energy speeding
Through the landscape's furrows. This row might go feeding
Cattle, that row ground to masa. Farther afield the hue
Of cornbread starting to shape in the kernels. Others
Are already whispering of how they will pop and dance
In a pan on a Saturday afternoon, and get served with salt,
With butter as gold as the sun under which they now grow.
Some will fall away to feed mice or a midnight raccoon.
For now, one car stops to take pictures of farmland
That reminds the driver of a far away home, and the meals
Of childhood and family around a feast of corn.

Written on the spot at the request for a love poem to "corn" for the What Improv Group?!?! "Valentine Affair" 2018 show intermission project.

Magic Home



Who Needs Love Anyway?

I loved her. With everything I had. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. We thought she would beat the Cancer. She did in so many ways. She lived longer than her original oncology doctor thought she would, an awesome feat and one she was incredibly proud of. Telling that story would light up her smile and eyes. She fought the demon for years. Though ever present in our relationship, we lived despite the cancer.

I became a caregiver. Not full time. She worked until the last possible minute. Working was very important for and to her. She could maintain some independence and dignity and continue to be proud of her work. I'd never been a caregiver.

Something happens inside when your partner in life gets diagnosed with Cancer. A fierce, loyal sense of protection engulfs you. You'll do anything to help. You just do. No training required. A kind of automated will to protect and help your loved one survive turns you into someone on autopilot, a force beyond imagination.

You do what you need to do. Somehow, some way, you don't get sick. The colds and flu that others get bypass you. Though I didn't recognize that at the time, I certainly did after the fact.

I've come to believe I need love but that love can be found in so many ways and in so many places. Most of all, love comes from within. Without that, love is at risk of being extinguished and breaking hearts into crispy bits. For now, loving me is plenty.

It's Not Always About You—Sometimes It's Bigger

I needed you to talk to me about the cancer. To talk about a possible future without you. At first we believed that you would win the fight. How could we not? We prescribed wholeheartedly to hope and strength and perseverance. Each radiation appointment caused your ninja warriors to rise to the occasion and fight with gusto, killing off the bad guys. You looked forward to each chemotherapy, whether via IV or pill. There was no cure for your cancer, yet that didn't squash the fight in you. In fact, I believe it expanded your focus, hope and strength.

But, you couldn't talk to me. At the time I didn't understand why. You kept that energy, what it would've taken to discuss my life after you, for yourself in order to fight the Cancer demon, the monster who was trying to steal you away. I didn't mean to be selfish, wanting you to talk to me. I longed for discussion instead of denial and drowning out what was really happening. I wanted to be close and not see such distance in your eyes.

It took years, years for me to realize the breadth of your fight, that you were trying to stay for me. You didn't want to leave me.

Now I know you chose me. Why it took so long I'm not sure. Grief possibly. Thank you, Kelly.

Want to See a Magic Trick?

I can make myself

f

a

l

l a p a r t.

Crumble completely.
Shatter into thousands, no, millions
of tiny shards.

Ready?

Voila!

“How did you do it?”
They say always.
“A magician never reveals his secrets.”
I respond most days.
But I am no magician you see.
The trick simple as can be.
I picture your image.
You and me. *We*.
What we had—might
have had. Now, the trickiest part of all

One I have yet to figure out
I will attempt to put
These pieces back together.
Could take days,
Months,
Years,
A lifetime, perhaps.

—Now you see me. Now you don’t!

Astoria

A bridge holds two homes together
Trust carrying them across
Rusted green chips flake off into the pacific
I stand on the dock
With gulls diving to a bed of waves

Sturgeon shine out of the dusty tides, clapping
Wings make peace with the water, clapping
Native conversation and jokes clapping

Through a lens that ticks
I throw in another quarter my feet on its metal rim
Footprints shaved off the name
Astoria

Tiny painted houses slid off the hill
Like marbles they rolled
sitting at the foot of an abyss

Looking out now
All the empty space
Tick....
My lens cuts to black
And I feel far so far away

The Garden Cosmos

The moon blooms
bright pink
from the ebony sea.

The dark waves
crash whitetips
onto soaked sands

like the white
cells colliding
in his young body.

The ascending
Mexican Aster
brightens with height.

It turns
tangerine
and for a moment

a fire radiates
like sun
beams

across the Milky
Way
into his disease.

Luna's light show,
brings hope
of healing.

The moon
above glows
its usual color

like an aged
Dandelion
waiting

to be wished upon.

A Bottle of Pills

I'd been in love with her from the first day of high school.

Not because she was gorgeous, or popular, but because of the way she smiled.

She was shy and quiet.

I heard her laugh once in English class. I purposely sat behind her, but I never spoke to her.

One day, Nick knocked over her books on his way to talk to me. I didn't scold him. She peeked at us with timid eyes as she picked them up off the floor. The most innocent eyes I'd ever seen.

We were together on a group project once. I got her number. I never went to the meetings, but took credit for the grade.

People do that for me. I'm the guy everyone else wants to be. I have the hair, clothes, attitude, personality.

I saw her at the winter formal. Her dress, probably a hand-me-down, was a little too big. The straps kept falling off her shoulders. Her date didn't seem to notice. What an idiot. Angelina noticed and mocked her. She's an idiot too.

I read her poem about solitude when we had to switch papers in class. She read about a fight I had with Angelina.

I was going to tell her.

One day.

No one would care after graduation. It was only four months away.

They called an assembly that afternoon. They wanted to tell us how it happened. To prevent others from making that choice.

I hadn't seen her in English.

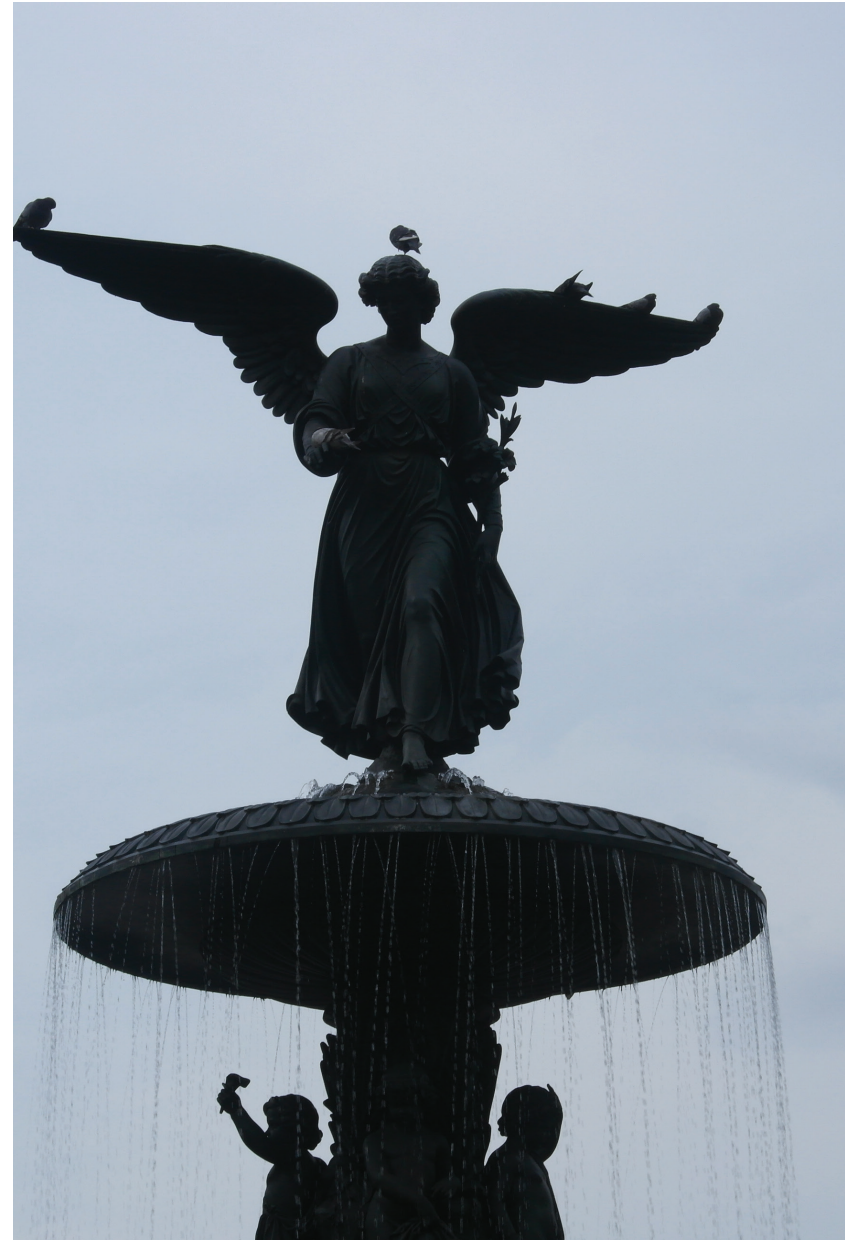
I sat in the back. Put my sunglasses on and my feet on the chair in front of me. When they told us, I left. I think I looked callous.

I broke.

I wish... oh, how I wish I would have said hello, just once, and smiled at her.

Maybe she wouldn't have done it.

Divine Mother



Creation

In the beginning the coffee wasn’t made. There were still some dirty dishes in the sink. And beside those was an unpaid bill that was due in two days.

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

God started to do the dishes. But God said unto himself, “Dammit, you can do this. This is finally gonna be the week.”

God sketched some mountains and erased some of them and stared at them for a while.

And there were some half-assed mountains sitting there in the void. And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

And God made a vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And God called the vault “sky.” And God wanted to check Facebook. But God thought, “No, not this time.” And it was so.

And God gathered the water and separated it from the dry ground. And God thought, “Jesus, I should have given myself at least two weeks for this.”

Then God made the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees. And when he got to the red oak tree, God thought, “This is just a rip off of the white oak tree, real original, God!”

But God brought forth the red oak tree anyway. And God thought, if he’d had eight or nine days, the cherry blossoms could have really popped in neon colors like he’d planned. God decided that on Wednesday morning he would come back and see all that he had made, and for better or worse, he would deal with it.

And God made two lights to govern the day and the night, and then started making the stars. God thought, “I didn’t know this part would take so long. This should have been done on day three.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

And God made the land produce living creatures: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals. And God thought, “I got carried away with the bugs. I just always thought it would be cool to have lots and lots of bugs. Classic God.”

And God started the kangaroos by making the front legs way too small and then in a panic overcompensated with the hind legs and then tried to distract

everyone with the pouch thing. This day God did check Facebook and ended up blowing off the rest of the afternoon and felt like a real kangaroo afterward. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

Then God formed a man and a woman from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, and they became living beings in God’s own likeness. And God thought, “Yikes, I kinda put myself out there on that one.”

And God was excited to tell them what He was working on and what the plan was, so He wrote,

“I am the LORD your GOD, you shall have no other Gods before me. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

And God wasn’t sure if he should be so direct or whether He was really up for that level of commitment.

But God hit “send” anyway.

God looked at all that He had made.

And God thought that He should have brought along more of the other colors because He ran out of them and, shit, that was a lot of green He’d had to use there at the end. And God thought that He wanted the people to like Him, and maybe that was the real reason for adding the parrots.

But there was something else too.

God noticed how the sandpipers were completely dependent on the snowpack to melt into rivers for their nesting scrapes and enough snails to eat each year. And God thought of how incredibly delicate and fragile the whole thing was turning out, but also resolute and fierce. And God was filled with hope.

And God looked at his green-stained hands. And God felt that He was part of something, that He and His creation and all His mistakes, even the bugs, were connected, strung like Christmas lights along a vast current extending into time and space beyond what He could see. God had set a story in motion, and it was part of a bigger story. Bigger than He was.

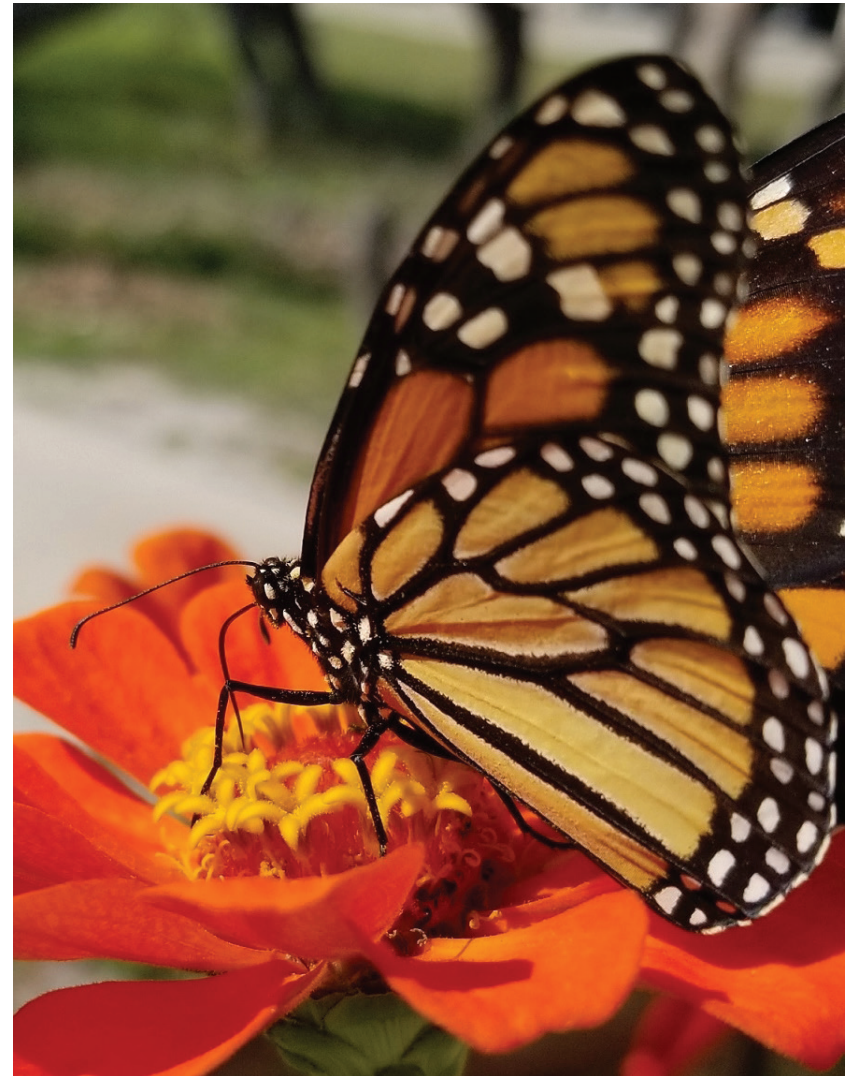
God thought that He had been pretty brave to go and do something like this.

And God saw that it was good.

Features of the Land

Fences. Always fences.
Trash could blow
a long way
All the way
Away
but always
gets snagged in
Fences.
Everywhere
In the middle of nowhere
to keep beasts in; people out.
Nothing but miles of
Fences.
Keep beasts out,
people in,
secured by so many miles of
Fences
 chain link, split rail, wrought iron,
 cross slat, barbed wire, brick wall,
 chicken wire, little white picket
Barriers.

Butterfly Whiskers



Band-Aids

After applying a Band-Aid to his skinned knee, I give him a hug. “All better?” I ask. Five-year-old blue eyes grin at me, “Gram, you’re the best doctor ever!” In an instant he’s off to play again, leaving behind words that sink deep into my heart, stirring up memories of a shattered dream

“Are you ready?” Dad asks, giving me a smile and a quick wink. It feels like a thumbs up from God because he’s wearing his clerical suit today. Both nodding, we begin loading my seventh grade Science Fair project into the car for the short ride to school. The Science Fair will run all day. All the kids in school will visit it during their science period. Parents, including mine, will come in the afternoon. Awards will be handed out at the end of the day during an ice cream party. *I can’t wait to see who wins!*

Inside the school’s large multipurpose room, Dad and I quickly set up my trifold poster with its freehand sketches of the stages of embryonic development, neatly drawn in chalk on the two inside panels. I finally completed the last one, late last night, painstakingly fussing over every smudgy, powdery gray, black detail. The center panel has glossy, full-color photos published within the last month and neatly clipped from *Life* magazine. Images magnified hundreds of times, showing a sperm cell fertilizing an ovum and then its implantation into a womb. The images, never before visible to the human eye, are being viewed through the use of microscopic cameras, cutting-edge video technology. Carefully, I lay out my thoroughly researched report which Mom typed for me. I begged and pleaded with her to type it because typed papers are worth more points from the judges.

The room is buzzing with kids and parents setting up displays. This year’s theme is biology. Dad and I take a few minutes to stop and admire my best friend’s display. Annette’s project is an aquarium. She has actually brought her fish tank and is setting it up right on her table. Several types of fish are in the aquarium, which also has a variety of lighting to mimic day and night underwater; she has also added an air filter and plants. *She’ll probably win, but I’d be thrilled to take second or third place.*

Opposite Annette’s table, two guys from our science class have built a working volcano. They are busily testing it to make sure it works. It erupts, spraying slimy gelatin which oozes down its craggy sides. We eye it curiously. I lean over, whispering to Annette, “I don’t get it? What does a volcano have to do with biology?” We both shrug and walk away.

During first period, language arts, I work on my grammar worksheet, laboriously attempting to make subjects and verbs agree. Suddenly, I hear the sound of someone in the hallway; the principal is angrily shouting my name. “Where is that kid? That dirty, filthy minded...!”

My science teacher races into the room towards me. Her glasses slip down her thin straight nose, and strands of her shoulder-length, wispy blond hair flutter from the sides of her head like wings. She grabs me with both hands, yanking me from my chair, “Come, right now!” she commands, her voice urgent. She’s half dragging me as we run for the back end of the open space language arts room. She pushes one of the heavy metal doors open with her free hand, firmly ushering me through the exit onto the blacktop where sixth graders play Greek Dodge Ball during recess. We make it to a cluster of trees at the edge of the school property, and then stop as I gulp air.

Minutes drag by. Finally, my language arts teacher trots out to let us know the coast is clear. We can safely re-enter the building. “What’s wrong?” I want to know. “What did I do?” I ask. My science teacher sees the perplexed look on my face.

She says, “Give us a few minutes.” The other teacher nods and hurries back inside the building, her pink sweater billowing with every step, and her long, black pony tail bobbing up and down. Crouching down to be at eye level, with me, she begins, “There’s been ... well ... sort of a problem with your project.” She lets that sink in. “I’m sorry. I feel terrible about it.” She continues, “I should never have approved it. You see, the principal is very upset by the subject of your entry. I’m afraid your entry won’t be able to be considered by the judges ... for a ribbon or a prize. I know you worked very hard on it.”

A lump forms in my throat, and tears well up in my eyes. “Why not? What’s wrong with it?” I whimper. “You said it was wonderful.”

“It truly was wonderful! But the principal was offended. You see, some people just don’t feel children should know where babies come from or how they grow.” The silence is broken only by the sounds of a bird’s whistle.

My lips quiver. “I better go get my project,” I snivel.

“Um, that’s a problem. The principal ... well he ... he tore it down ... ripped it apart. It’s all in pieces. There’s nothing left. Some of the teachers were able to save one of the pictures you drew.”

My head starts to swim. A strange sensation of numbness begins creeping from the top of my scalp around my head, into my chest and shoulders, then to my arms and down my spine; it continues into my stomach, and along my legs. I struggle to keep my balance. I can see my teacher’s lips parting, moving in slow motion. I hear her voice blending with the warble of the bird. The sound of my own voice, wailing inconsolably, rumbles through the air like thunder. I fall to the ground.

It feels like hours before I fearfully make my way into the multipurpose room to witness the destruction for myself. The other kids back away from me; they part, then fan out into a wide circle, surrounding me. Their taunts reverberate in my ears, sharp and steely:

“He stomped it!”

“...tore it down!”

“He ripped it up!”

“...into little tiny pieces!”

“Dirty, filthy minded!”

“You’re out of the Science Fair!”

“Dirty, filthy minded!”

“...Out of the Science Fair!”

“Dirty, filthy minded!”

“...Out of the Science Fair!”

My dream lay torn to pieces, scattered about that multipurpose room. After all these years, I still cry while watching my grandson play because no Band-Aid, no medical degree has ever fixed ... “Dirty, filthy minded ... !”

Healing Heart



The Investigation

Everything about Mr. Byron was unsettlingly strange.

Since his appearance in the quiet little town of Rutherford, 9-and-a-half year old Liv Madden had been spending every spare moment trying to figure out who he was.

It had started roughly two weeks ago, when he'd shown up on their porch with nothing other than a small suitcase and that ever present grin. Her parents had welcomed the old man with open arms, laughing and plunging immediately into a conversation she was promptly shut out of.

Liv, usually the center of attention in her home, was told to go finish her homework, and the kitchen door was closed tightly so that the adults could catch up. As an only child, Olivia Madden was used to being the topic of conversation at any social event. So to be shunned for an entire evening was simply unthinkable for her.

He was an odd fellow, this Byron. Introduced only as "An old friend who will be staying with us for some time", and given the guest bedroom next to hers. He dressed in dark colors mostly, and had thick framed glasses that sat proudly on his long nose. The neatly combed silver hair matched his curious eyes, which took in the world with a nearly invisible twinkle. But the most fascinating thing about this person, about this old man, was the ancient key that hung on a short chain around his neck. It was an odd piece of jewelry for a gentleman to wear, Liv had thought upon seeing it, but intricately beautiful in its own way.

His interactions with her were brief, collected into the time after her school bus dropped her off at the top of the street. He was always seated in the decorative wingback chair in the living room whenever she spied on him. It was easily the most uncomfortable chair in the house, and squirreled away in the formal living room that they hardly ever used. It didn't have a TV or anything, just a dusty old fireplace and a mantle filled with her school pictures. He read often, books with font too small and boring for her to read, and it made her reconnaissance missions boring enough to abandon. Aside from that, they spoke very little.

But sometimes, in the very dead of the night, she could hear him murmuring in his room. The walls were reasonably thick, so Liv could never fully hear the words that he spoke, but she could almost swear it sounded like he was having

quiet conversations. Roughly a week into his stay, Liv walked past his room and saw through the open door that the only change that had been made to the guest bedroom was the placement of a yellowed human skull (surely fake) on the dresser. She didn't know what to think of it, but the primary question that kept popping into her head throughout the following days was "how did the skull fit into that little suitcase?"

Most of the time she had the distinct feeling as though he knew she was watching him, and it left the hairs on her arms raising. Mr. Byron had owl eyes- the kind that flickered at the slightest movement and seemed to hold a wealth of information behind them. His entire face was lined with deep wrinkles, each of which had a history of memories, feelings, and stories to tell.

And Liv, more desperately each day, wanted nothing more than to figure out the puzzle that was plaguing her house. Because despite the otherworldly strangeness that swirled around him, her parents were completely and utterly enthralled by his presence in their humble abode. Liv was beyond frustrated that she couldn't even determine who he was to them to inspire such an awed response. He couldn't be a grandparent; she had already attended three funerals, and as of two months ago was still receiving itchy sweaters for Christmas from the remaining one.

A teacher perhaps? Or an uncle twice removed. Nothing suggested they were related by blood. In fact, something in the back of her mind had been playing with the idea that he wasn't related to anyone on this Earth. An alien it was, then.

Then, on a rainy afternoon in April, Liv woke up with a sore throat and high fever, prompting her mother to allow her to stay home from school. It was an uncommon occurrence, as Madden's rarely fall ill. This unplanned change in schedule had her slipping down the stairs at midday in search for something to eat, still groggy from the late morning and medicine her mother had administered before leaving for work. With her blanket wrapped around her shoulders and hair still unbrushed, she made her way into the kitchen. It was on her way back to the stairs that she heard the chatting.

"...ut only for a little while longer, my friend." Mr. Byron assured someone.

Quiet as a mouse, she gripped her blanket tighter around herself in one hand, her snack in the other, and crept closer to the formal living room.

“Until something else comes up,” a keening voice argued.

Liv had always tried to imagine what exactly the old man did in his spare time, while she was off at school and her parents were at work.

Mr. Byron seemed amused when he replied “As it always does, you poor thing. How about I make it up to you.”

“I don’t see how you could.” the voice sniffed petulantly.

“Well, if it suits your fancy I could introduce you to someone new. It’s been a while since you spoke to anyone but me.” Byron suggested, and Liv knew almost instantly by the way he raised his voice slightly that she was in trouble. “Olivia, why don’t you come join us?”

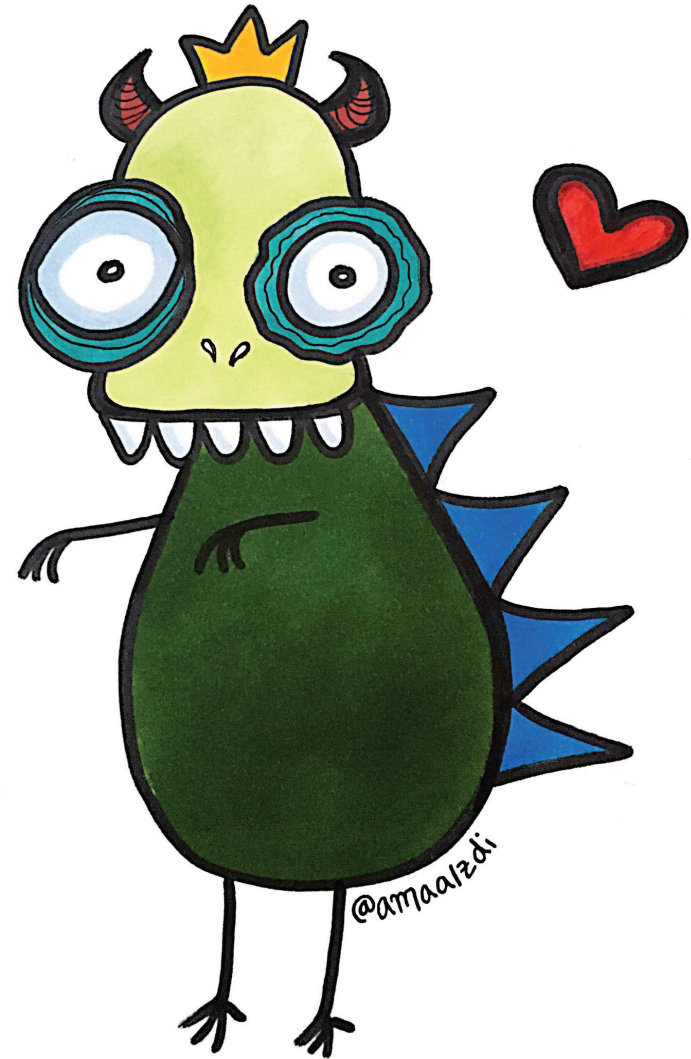
Half-eaten bagel clutched in hand, she rounded the corner with as much dignity as a pajama-clad eavesdropper could hope to muster, only to find the mysterious old man seated by himself in the wingback chair. And the skull on the mantle, next to her 2nd grade picture, the one with the blue dress and matching hair ribbons.

There was no other person for him to be talking to, and she had been quite certain that it was another voice conversing with the mysterious Mr. Byron.

“Sneaky little thing, she is.”

The voice came from the skull, and Liv sucked in a breath, ready to let loose a scream at the empty eye sockets trained on her.

Littler Greener Monster



Such a Vision

“I had such a vision of the streets, as the streets could hardly understand.”

Lara listened to what I said, nodding slowly, buried in her collar. Her family was wealthy and she wore clothes that never hung where the rest of us shopped. The classical cut of her coat was wild with plush disarray, the rich thickness of the fabric like lean pillows and blankets veiled with such a hushed privacy that I just stared at her coat, the quality of the black like our black Asian hair back then. Her own red hair burned near the beam of light that slipped past a length of the askew blinds.

Her coat had spilled into a messy pile of expense when she had squirmed and slid into her present position on the couch. Smoke was rising from her cigarette—we all smoked so much back then. She was buried up to her eyes in her collar. The funereal sense of things did not escape me. We were young and full of vision and our health had the strongest tails and eggs back then. I tap the long and tottering civilization of the ash at the end of my cigarette into the crystal ashtray. I love watching cigarettes suddenly flare red with closing rings of bright fire as they burn with the inhalation of defiant youth.

Lara’s eyes are shadowed and the deep lines of her smile or laughter are wedged with darkness. I am fond of the darkness in those lines, deeper than they ever should be for a kid of her age. I am not as lined of flesh—I think of wild rides with friends when we weaved across all the lanes of a highway, the lines then things to be transgressed. My face did not invite happy transgression back then. I watch the growing pile of ashes in the sparkling ashtrays, satellites to our slouching forms felled and dispersed throughout the room.

She replies, “You read too much.” At this, I muse much past an answer, for our conversations are broken things, shattered with drugs or slowed into internal eternities with alcohol. We are so dense with what we feel and seem to know. We can never imagine an age when we will lose that immortal density along with our hair. When bald spots infect the density of what we felt and knew in our youth, how we should regret the loss of warmth and strange fur. I say nothing. I feel much more than I can express. The roots of what I feel search deep, deeper than even I know, for the coming expression.

I cannot disappear so deeply into my collar and coat. I only peer into the soothing shadows all around us. I shop nearer to the middle class. Smoke and shadows and comfortable emptiness are all around us, contrasting with the

lung and density of our new bodies, nicely marinated, unshaven and sleepless with recombination run away.

Ours is a roomful of twilight, grainy with faint light, even for our young eyes. Rich darkness fills all the wrinkles of our minds. We should always be so black with testosterone, or so red with estrogen. I am saying nothing. Laura is saying nothing. No one else is saying anything. We just let the darkness of the room slumber over us. We just let what we feel be broadcast over our silence: We are so fucking high/drunk/exhausted/mesmerized by the black silence, as black as the blackest record spinning out the rebellious songs, the needle cracking over the dust in the grooves.

I ain’t doing shit. We ain’t doing shit. We are just going to chill, chill like the Universe exploding everywhere, everywhere leaving. I want to be all webbed up in my black coat, and wait for an explanation in a spider-less world. I want the web of things, the cobwebs of the oldest memories of our friendship and brotherhood and the new webs wrapping us now, to reverberate and communicate the finest details of our struggles from all to all. I am sleepy and I love the narcotic of sleepiness. We all do. Health mixed with exhaustion is the warmest drink, the deepest sweetness of emotional transpiration. Perhaps I do read excessively.

Lara shifts and the liquid chaos of her coat spills over the sofa, falling open. She is lovely in the hazy half-darkness, the kaleidoscopic half-light, the decay towards half-life. There is a glow to the darkness—I love the night, I love the glorious Universe up there, the roof of the Sun gone until the morning—I love Emily Dickinson and her dashes—so quick and explosive with surprise—just like the Universe. A strand of red hair falls down her face, still submerged in the collar of her unfathomable coat. She is pale, lunar and red, in the safety of the darkness with us. Just the rare redhead and the even rarer AMWF hapa in the darkness, straggled out with our crew of raw Asians.

I love that we aren’t going anywhere or doing anything, except luxuriating in whatever combination of drugs, alcohols, and thoughts best lavished our recombinations with visions and rest. I’ve roamed the wild streets with them all. I’ve gotten into bar brawls with them all. I’ve seen Lara punch a stupid bitch in her face a couple of times at our favorite haunts. Now, I’m wondering what does it all mean? What does anything ever mean?

Wordlessly, I open to the experience as much as I can, becoming as transparent as a ghost, I let the scene take as many neurons as needed to save the darkness and my friends—but I cannot save them—I want the neurons that saved them to dance a truth, growing as dancers into a light that I can follow into my old age. I look at Lara, burning with hair, ashes strewn across her coat. I look at my friends—all our meat nicely browned in the moment, the stomachs of our experience swollen with the moment. We will weep when we are old and our poor meat should no longer brown as much for our own tasting. We will weep when we no longer have the appetite for our own meat.

I look at Lara and see the bright red in the darkness, there is something there I know, but I cannot realize it, I cannot express it yet. I feel roots deep within my soil searching for what branches and leaves will come. I feel neurons dancing like growing dancers spreading their arms, arching their backs, and kicking their legs in my mind, the brain of which, is impeding less and less.

Wine Bottles



The Family Curse

How long does it last?
Enough for seven winters to pass
and summers, too.

The curse creates a world
where there
are no springs and autumns,
and no residue

to show you
where things went wrong,
what happened,
exactly.

The only constant thing
in your life
is failure and the sight
of your parents gray hairs.

You sigh
because you know
they will never
get to see the light
of a sunset-filled vacation.

Exhausted Apologies

I'm sorry
The words flow as easy as water,
But they burn like acid.
I'm sorry
From the day I was born it was tattooed in black ink on my forehead,
It starts my conversations,
And it will end my life.
I'm sorry
It's more of an imprinted greeting than hello,
Spoken more often than I love you.
I'm sorry
I was taught to apologize for you running into me,
To apologize for wanting to speak to you.
I'm sorry
I know to apologize when the clouds don't let the sun show,
I take the blame when the rain doesn't stop.
I'm sorry
I'm trained like a dog to bark it out every chance I get,
It is my master and controls every molecule of my body.
I'm sorry
It stole first breath in and will ride my last breath out,
It's such a muscle memory I could say it in my sleep.
I'm sorry
I find myself apologizing for apologizing and apologizing and apologizing
and ...
I'm sorry,
What else am I to say?
Sorry.

Voyagers

We stood on the shore
of a lake vast as an ocean
water rising to meet the sky
to form its own horizon.

The waves were stinging cold
even during the heat of summer
the shore was brown and grey pebbles
conspiring to hide marbled agates.

The pizza was hot and melting
chicken and wild rice falling off
We sat on the beach to eat
and watched the tourists pass us by.

It was busier here
where the roads still reached
than on unnamed shores to the North
found only through water and mud

Where the city's lights never spread
the milky way sprawled overhead
stretched across the sky
like the arched back of an awakening cat

Where we ate food from pouches
heated over a precariously balanced stove
or cold while our canoes drifted
grinding away at beef jerky.

Buildings did not surround us
but darkly feathered pines
backlit by distant suns
to spread their sharpness against the lake

Where we stood together
the loon howled its pain
alone in the dark waters of time
until its answer reverberated down from the stars.

The Social Worker

She never listens, Daughter said
I certainly do, Mother said
You don't
I do

She never does what I ask, Mother said
I do too, Daughter said
You don't
I do

Dad had to leave, Daughter said
He was a drunk, Mother said
You are
Am not

I hate you, Daughter said
See how she speaks to me, Mother said
Hate you
See

Promise, the Social Worker said
One week, no yelling, She said
Maybe
If
....

I'm home, Social Worker said
Your workday's done, Daughter said
They hugged
A kiss

Dinner's ready, Husband said.
I'll wash up, Wife said
She ran the water
And cried

Shadows

Wandering into the woods at midnight
I see behind me a dark silhouette of my reflection
To be quite honest I really feel scared but not quite panicked, nauseous
Or suicidal
I am caught in between the gloominess of the night
With a shiver and fright
I just keep walking
And I don't feel like talking
I whistle when I am nervous
Thinking that someone or something is lurking
Somewhere in my distance and presence
With a little instinct and resistance
I never fear
I am thinking that God is with me
To this very day
I don't know why I am wandering into
The woods this very night

But one thing I will tell you is that when I hear
An angel speaking to me as I walk through the woods
That dark silhouette of my reflection
Is my shadow
There are many stars in the sky
And I know you are probably wondering what propels me
To tell you why I am walking in the coldness of the dark

Reimagining O'Keeffe's Red Canna



12:49 AM Perhaps

Verse is such pyrrhic prose,
More Serendipity than truth
Then truer than despised reality.

Poetry is a way of thinking, feeling, and being.

Perhaps about a lost love:
Don't you feel like
Upside down shadows
To what our last words meant,
I do.
We first kissed exactly 3825.161 miles away from the Eiffel Tower.

I do imagine you giggling,
Mincing a little dance around your former pyres,
Your lovers I think you called them.

A poem should perhaps squawk:
Be a flock of parrots who wield
Just landed holds,
Clasping and unclasping claw-holds
On rowdy and loud branches of verse
(They are as good as any other schools of versifying)
For the cacophonous merriment
Of the secret ultraviolet crowd.

A poem should perhaps communicate a Soul,
Deep within avian words
As light as feathers,
As it were,
Falling upon the birth of a falcon.

A poem should perhaps describe a summer afternoon:
Warm and ghostly,
We saw the summer blooming T-shirts and chase.
White as sclera curtains,
Billowing the sunlit blush of ghosts
Embarrassed to be caught enjoying the summer afternoon.

Poetry should have been dangerous for you:

There are particularly jagged poems
Still hypnotic with old blood:
Old blood of mine on painful words past,
Peeling off like paint off bright red farmhouses,
Curling off like babes rocked to sleep.
The chips should fall in a heap,
Garland the soft feathers where fair talons
Crushed the hollow bones of melancholy:
They're feathery bubbles of snow in my hand,
I marveled once.

I wonder if ever
A window in Amherst faced nights
As difficult as mine:
Panes calming the raging son,
Daring to fill with stars,
Two reflections of shattering anger:
One of glass,
One of flesh.

Of those stars,
They are Suns to me,
Family to Sun, Earth, and I.
For they defeated my vanity,
That I should not fulfill my reflection.

Poetry perhaps did save my life.

Contributors' Notes

spring 2018

Nsikan Akpan is a student at Howard Community College who loves reading, acting, and watching long movies. Apart from that, she writes on her beloved blog: onmogul.com/nsikan-akpan

Victoria Amos is a current student at Howard Community College majoring in English. She is an aspiring author and hopes to one day publish her own novel. As a student here at Howard Community College she has taken many different courses in English to hone her writing skills.

For more than twenty years **Carol Baldwin** (CB Anslie) has written non-fiction. Her experience spans virtually all forms of writing, from business to technical writing, from newsletters to scripts, from manuals to instructional materials, and more. While working as a tutor in the LAC, her love for creative writing bubbled over, and she began dabbling in fiction. Carol and her husband, James, are the proud parents of three grown daughters and one lovable fur beastie, Ruckus.

Sofia Barrios is the daughter of two Latino immigrants and a student at Howard Community College. She plans to pursue a career in social work after graduating with an associate's degree in general studies.

Jade Bucksell was born in Washington D.C. August of 1997. Majoring in engineering, she still enjoys writing in her free time.

Roger Chang, Colonel US Army (ret): The irony of my years of training for the Vietnam Conflict, testing specialized equipment to deploy, and a Regular Army commitment to stay on active duty for the duration of the war, the War ended for America in 1973 and I never got to Vietnam with the special new equipment.

Lisa Cole finds peace in painting and writing. Painting and writing equals breathing to Lisa. When she can't be creative, she is short of breath. Just the motions Lisa goes through to prepare to paint and write are calming.

Sky Garcia is a deeply passionate person. She strives to do things with attentive care, with the intention to spread light within spaces she occupies. Sky loves to write, paint, and sing, expressing herself through any platform in her grasp. She loves nature, and connecting with the outdoors. Sky plans to use the intersections of her own identity and experience to help marginalized communities.

Eva Granzow works at Howard Community College in the LAC and enjoys spending her time here and in her beloved France. She made a new year's resolution this past 2017/2018 eve, and that is to write a poem each day.

Farida Guzdar retired from Howard Community College in 2018 after 31 years. Farida's passion is writing, and she hopes to do more of it in her retirement.

Peggie Hale is a Howard Community College alum with a variety of interests. See more of her pics, poetry, and prose on www.facebook.com/heandmehiking. She also has an e-book available on Amazon: *Hurricane Harvey & Rockport, Texas: Images and Words of Devastation and Recovery*.

Randy Henry is a practicing attorney in Baltimore, MD. He is also a personal fitness trainer in Baltimore and Howard County. Randy's passions are fitness, reading, writing, and coffee.

Katelyn Holcomb is a freshman at Howard Community College studying biotechnology. She hopes to transfer to UMD to study genetics and move on to vet-school to get her DVM.

Chidi Ike is a student majoring in psychology, who enjoys spending his free time with a pencil in hand, or ball at his feet. He aspires to have his words touch and possibly change the life of one individual; as one is more than enough.

Jim Karantonis was a medic and psychiatric specialist during the Vietnam War. Afterwards, he became a civil rights worker. Jim took his first creative writing class in 2009 from Lee Hartman at Howard Community College. A special thank you to Professors Ryna May and Tara Hart for helping Jim tell his stories. His wife, Mary Lou, always will be his muse.

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

Matt Korbela is a modern day adventurer and photography enthusiast. Presently, he is designing a boat to be built and sailed on the Great American Loop upon retirement from the Federal Government. The building and year-long adventure will be documented.

Susan G. Kramer has been Howard Community College's Arts Collective producing artistic director since its inception; 23 years. Kramer has worked for Howard Community College for the past three decades. She dedicates her writings and photographs in memory of her mother, Leonora M. Kramer (1937 – 2018).

Michelle Kreiner is a preschool teacher on the campus of Howard Community College. She has an A.A. degree in Early Childhood Education and after many years of hard work, she will finally have a Bachelor's Degree in English by May 2018.

Joel Landsman a student at Howard Community College who discovered a love for poetry and literature late into high school. He writes to inspire and evoke the purest emotions. Joel's main influences are author Yukio Mishima and singer-songwriter Elliott Smith.

Ryna May teaches literature and humanities at Howard Community College. She loves baseball, music, her wife, and her two rescue dogs (though not necessarily in that order).

Courtney McCarthy has lived in Howard County for all 20 years of her life, and has spent most of that time reading. Some of her favorite things to read are poetry and fiction, and she hopes to transfer to a four-year university next fall.

Alexander McDonald was born in Columbia, MD, and has lived in and around Columbia for the vast majority of his life. He is a Howard Community College student currently majoring in General Studies after being very indecisive in his first few semesters. This is his second submission to The Muse; his first submission (a short story entitled "Wynne") was published in the Spring 2016 issue. He also has run out of ideas as to what else he should put in this bio, and hopes nobody else reads this far.

Greg McLemore uses Realism as a starting point to explore the tragic, mysterious, and often comical aspects of life. His work ranges from elaborately detailed urban landscapes to fantastical, surreal narratives. Greg earned his Master of Fine Arts at The University of Arizona. He is an Master Adjunct at HCC, and teaches at other colleges in the area.

Eva Miller is a Howard Community College student majoring in anthropology.

Apryl Motley, a natural storyteller, is a professional writer and editor. She has worked as a tutor in Howard Community College's Learning Assistance Center for 15+ years. When she's not writing, editing, or reading, you'll find her working a crossword puzzle while watching Law & Order.

Naomi Narat is a pre-nursing student. She developed a passion for writing at a young age. Frequent trips to the library often culminated with her snuggled beneath a bookshelf, reading. At the age of 16, she began to write her first novel. She hopes to someday publish her writing.

Eve S. Nicholson is the author of *The Tripartite Soul*. She is a logophile with a legacy to live up to as a storyteller. When she isn't playing with words and stories, she is working toward her long overdue English degree, or enjoying time with her husband and six sons.

Jeremy O'Roark teaches writing at Howard Community College.

Sail Park is a hapa of mixed creativity. Sail Park is a non-traditional student, who has returned to school after many years. He has lived a long and wandering life. He is rich with stories. He is a film major who plans to write and direct movies in verse form. He still ponders the stars.

Jeff Ray is a sophomore at Howard Community College and an aspiring writer majoring in secondary education.

Tim Singleton, a once upon-a-time student at Howard Community College, now teaches philosophy, is co-chair of the HoCoPoLitSo board, and co-publisher of *The Little Patuxent Review*.

Marie Westhaver is a professor of humanities, coordinator of film studies, and director of film festivals at Howard Community College.

Alexandra Whatley is a student at Howard Community College who is majoring in General Studies. She is interested in pursuing a career in communications and design.

Merzuka Rana Yalcin is a student from Istanbul, Turkey. She has been shooting on film explicitly for the last two years. She is majoring in graphic design. She has a passion for photography, design, and movies.

Amaal Yazdi is an artist who covers many different mediums including ceramics, ink work, and product design. Her work "Littler Greener Monster" is a sequel of her signature figure "Little Green Monster", which can be seen hiding all over Columbia and is an abstract reflection of herself.



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.17

Deadline: March 1, 2019

Email submissions to themuse@howardcc.edu

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

