



# *The Muse*

spring.2019

# The Muse

*The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College*

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## Words Like Wind

My mouth is a storm drain.  
Hundreds of thoughts and feelings  
ready to gush out and flood anyone in my path,  
but it remains sealed closed.

My mouth is snow.  
Thousands of individual flakes pile on top of one another.  
Inches turn to feet  
of cool, cold, soft words  
that melt into rivers of ice-cold water  
as they hit my tongue  
and have no place to go.

When I finally speak,  
my voice is air.  
It's clear,  
it can't be seen,  
it has no depth,  
it isn't heard.

No one recognizes the air  
until it doesn't want to be ignored any longer,  
and that meaningless air turns into a gust of wind.

It blows the trees  
and knocks you off your feet.  
It's unpredictable,  
you have no idea what it's doing  
and no clue when it will end.

It doesn't make much sense to you  
and you want it to end.

So, you face it  
and you brave it  
and you smile,  
nod  
and pretend you understand.

One last burst of wind slams the storm drain shut.  
The heavy wind returns to air,  
and you go back to forgetting it's there.



## The White on His Flag Brings Colors to Shame

*How does a man wrap his mind around eternity, when he can't even explain his own composition? Don't you see it's bigger than you?*

—Title and epigraph: August Burns Red, “Indonesia”

In his forties, my Uncle David, youngest of my father's four brothers, bought a piece of land in Northern Virginia, remodeling the house into a delightfully airy, woodsy home. He named the property “Hollies Haven,” inviting our entire family, including a score of cousins, near a dozen aunts and uncles, and my grandmother to spend Thanksgiving there—and indeed invited us to stay much longer, even indefinitely, if we wished.

Crippled by unexplained neurological ills, Uncle David used a wheelchair; consequently, he had the house built with an elevator—a true necessity, with the fabulous library below ground level. On Thanksgiving, we all toured his home, our haven, marveling as he lead us room to room; wearing a colorful robe, head shaved, he resembled a modern shaman, a man attuned to nature, who knew and accepted his place.

At dinner he sat in his wheelchair at the head of the table, a nexus of warmth and peace, a cheerful glint ever-present in his eyes. The food was splendid, a repast fit to remind us of the great contentment hiding in simple pleasures.

As sunlight piercing the trees dimmed, evening enclosed us; eyes grew weary, limbs torpid, and inevitable departure imminent. Kin bade fare-thee-well to kin, brother embracing brother in the cheerful afterglow. We were small creatures, scurrying back to our burrows in the night; I wish we could have stayed. Our Thanksgiving at Hollies Haven, punctuated by Uncle David's gentle smiles and rich laughter, was an open invitation to love.

§

Uncle David's condition deteriorated over the next two years, manifesting a horrid attrition of his awareness and sanity. Periodic visits, while joyful, revealed his decline, strangling my hope he would recover. One evening, the phone rang, and my father picked up.

David's wife Gail shared the news: outside Hollies Haven, Uncle David had pressed a pistol into his mouth in a final act of self-mercy.

My grandmother Sheila, David's mother, openly subscribed to the Hemlock Society. It seemed reasonable a person in indelible pain should seek escape. Yet his death was still a thunderous blow to my imperfect psyche. I could not reconcile my memories of him—a compassionate, loving, and Zen, albeit fragile man—with the agony of his suicide.

My thoughts turned inward. I tried and failed to understand. For weeks I grappled disbelief, despair, depression, rage—a constellation of destructive emotions that refused to be corralled. I waited in vain for catharsis. Justice, fairness, and goodness could not supersede this tragedy.

Where I lacked words, music spoke for me. Three Days Grace howled hymns of pain. Rise Against roared disenchantment. Evanescence sang remorse. Black Veil Brides serenaded death.

But the more I listened, the more I began to notice, entwined with stygian emotion, a common shining thread—a thread of hope. Where I heard pain, I also heard recovery; where remorse, relief; disenchantment and perseverance; death and life. The musicians plucked truths from life's tangled skeins of dark and light—and wove them, warp and weft, on a loom of sound and need.

My need was answered most poignantly in August Burns Red's “Indonesia,” a song I discovered scant days after Uncle David's death. The first time I heard the song, I listened in disbelief; it seemed written for this exact moment in my life. Out of the infinite whole of human stories, the musicians and I shared a connection to altruists named David; “Indonesia” was a tribute to their friend David Clapper, a selfless missionary, dead in a plane crash. Their raw vocals and intense instrumentals revealed they knew my distress and longing; the lyrics, alternately dismayed and hopeful, reflected on “*a situation / we can't make sense of.*” They sang, advising, “*This is the time to turn down our heads and turn up our hearts / there's no scale to balance this out.*”

August Burns Red used music to transmute an experience—one both traumatic and awful—into *art*. Where I wallowed in grief and confusion, they discovered and shared the messages revealed by tragedy. They mourned, yes, but also celebrated; they suffered and commemorated; they raged and continued to love. My uncle's service to us and love for us could continue as long as we, his family, held his life and tenets dear to us, living as he lived, "*a man who lived / who died / to better this world.*"

Many nights after the first, I sat and listened with a quieter mind. "*David / rest in peace.*"

## Retired Human

I'm retiring from being human.  
Move along, I will no longer text you back.  
Hard lesson learned: I just don't owe you jack.  
I can not conform to ideals by men.  
I won't agree with empty opinion.  
Life as I've known it has fallen off track.  
Stop bringing me down for accepting that.  
I no longer need to hold it all in.

Gonna rip through this awful human suit.  
Really, there is no fairness in wearing  
something that never fit one so daring.  
It's time to embrace what is nothing new.  
It's almost off, there's nothing you can do.  
Don't try to stop me, it was always you.

## Heavy Baguette

Weighing in heavy and dragging the feet  
The smell of dough  
The sound of the crust crackling as it breaks in half  
The soft, warm center, intoxicating  
One more bite of course

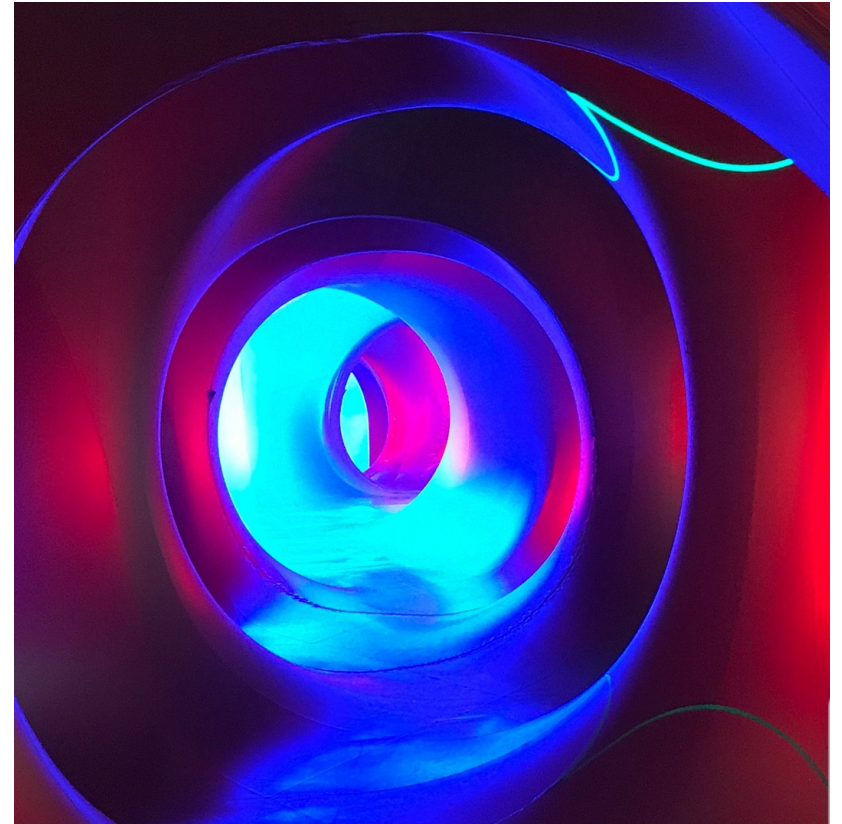
Knees sagging, the bones under a stone  
Spread the butter and feel the warmth against the palms  
The molars break through the crust, surprised by the softness  
Have the end piece

Thought about cutting it out  
Live without it  
That familiar crunch  
The spine is bending  
Okay

Walking lighter now, the feet do not ache  
The warm scent, just a bite but no more  
Missing the crust but no more

The knees do not cry, the heart feels lighter  
Just a taste  
No  
Oh, that familiar crunch

## Down the Color Hole



Photography, 2017

## Guilt

It was 1967 during the Vietnam War. I was a twenty-two-year-old, a medic and a psychiatric tech in an Army hospital in Pennsylvania. Most soldiers on the psychiatric wards were even younger, nineteen or in their early twenties. Early in the mornings there was an assembly line of soldiers who got pills: the obsessive-compulsive; a paranoid schizophrenic; the depressed; ones with panic attacks; there were sleeping disorders; an eating disorder; irritable bowel syndrome; severe anxiety reactions; and one with a lack of impulse control. Two or three had attempted suicide.

For a few soldiers, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays were ECT days. These patients also began the day with a pill, a valium to relax them for the procedure. We techs would wheel one of the soldiers strapped to a gurney up the corridor to the treatment room for one of twelve to fifteen sessions, sometimes twenty. ECT is electroconvulsive therapy. It was invented by physicians back in the 1930s and first tested on a homeless man, a schizophrenic who had no say in the approval process, the same as soldiers. Electro, that's electricity. Convulsive, that's convulsions. "Therapy," I liked to say, "was a misnomer, so why not just call it shock treatment and get on with it." Some psychiatrists swore by it. But at times it was a patient who swore at them.

"Fuck you!" A patient cursed the doctor. "Fuck all of you!" adding the same instructions for we techs. Or from another soldier, "Please... don't... please." Sometimes a patient thrashed about on the gurney and strained at the straps that held him down in the belief that he could, like Frankenstein, snap the straps and save himself from the mad doctor. I never ever saw a patient smile or sing on his way to treatment. No surprise that escape attempts were more frequent on shock treatment days. But most patients were stoic, asked no questions, and did what they were told. It was still the Army and they were still soldiers.

It was on one of those mornings while I stood over the soldier waiting to move him behind the curtained divider where the procedure was performed that I sensed he was staring up at me; I looked down at him.

The soldier looked like he should have been in high school. He had sandy hair, a round face with freckles, and buckteeth. He resembled the boy on the popular TV series; he was the Beaver. Beaver was pitifully sad, tear-jerking sad. He didn't speak but his eyes did. They asked, *Why?*

Other techs had warned me, "It's not easy, not the first time. But you'll get used to it." Well, by now, I couldn't count how many soldiers I had delivered to ECT. I had to wonder, "Do we get used to everything?"

And then the Beav spit in my face. The spit dribbled down my forehead. Just before it reached my eyes I wiped the saliva with the back of my hand and then on my pants. But I didn't get angry. I could feel his hate. I was hated...and I felt guilty.

## A Letter From Grendel's Mother

Your Majesty, King Hrothgar,

I am writing with concerns over the events which have plagued my realm over the last twelve years. I am overcome by grief knowing my lack of contacting you sooner has culminated with the death of my son, Grendel. My child was good-natured, and my habitat was a safe and positive place for him until the building of Heorot. With Heorot came a change in Grendel I wouldn't wish upon any woman's child. He, who had once felt every emotion with a natural awareness and sensitivity, slowly became un-natural, irate, unpredictable, and violent. I didn't realize how violent until he spoke his dying words in which he disclosed to me how he had continually attempted to stop the agony in his ears, the pain in his head, and the quaking he felt in every muscle and joint with each night your men occupied Heorot.

I understand the man who killed my son is the notorious Beowulf. The same man who boasts of the inhumane murders of gentle and beautiful creatures during a challenge to cross the sea. These creatures were peaceful beings I had spent extensive time with. I understood their curious nature and fear of the unknown. As he invaded their waters, I am certain they swam close to examine him, and perhaps even touch him to comprehend what he was. And he, with his unnatural and vicious predisposition, chose to kill them rather than learn of or befriend them. As I cradled the bloody and mutilated frame of my dying son, I reflected on that day when I found the slaughtered bodies of my magnificent sea friends. My heart is overwhelmed with anguish, as you celebrate your champion and his violent deeds.

Beowulf is a man, just as you are, just as the men who drove my son to madness. You cannot—no, you will not turn to your emotional nature to understand the world around you. Men seem to always choose the path of brutality. Men hunt for sport. Men trample on nature's gifts and raise self-gratifying stone images in their place. Men praise each other for cruelty and find it courageous to tear at the heart of civility.

I would like to have the contention between us disperse. However, I believe you as a man, and I as a woman, have conflicting priorities. I, therefore, would like to request an audience with your queen. As a woman, I believe she will appreciate my desire to embrace the commonalities between us. We, as women, speak a more natural language; with sensitivity and sympathies toward each other, our differences, and our individual needs.

You may assume I wish to have this conference as a private conversation with the queen. I wish for the opposite, however. If you, Beowulf, and your men are privy to such conversations, perhaps you will eventually learn to negotiate more with the natural goodness found in your hearts and less with the unnatural reactionary fierceness which has brought us all to this point in time.

Please reply to my request promptly. From the grave, my son's blood pleads with me for vengeance. It is not in my nature to act with cruelty, but I feel the madness he experienced may become my own if nothing is done to bring a diplomatic end to the dispute between us.

Most sincerely,

Grendel's Mother



## Page Without A Face

I am what keeps you up  
At unholy hours  
What leaves you puzzled  
Raking through your coarse hair  
Searching for a beginning  
To eternity

I have no identity  
No features to speak of  
Or to write about  
Even still I gawk at you  
Peck at your insecurities  
Twist and churn your imagination

I am one of the great fears  
Blocking you from self-actualization  
But I am not your rival  
No that would be you  
I am just the mirror  
Reflecting the desires, the history  
Buried deep within  
The abysses of your being

Dirty me up  
Kiss me all over  
Strike me with your knife  
With your piercing darkness  
What is your fucking problem  
Why do you always leave me  
Unsatisfied

You must really hate yourself  
it's sad. pathetic. really  
That you'll just let those powers  
Go to waste

I'll wait  
All by my lonesome  
For I know, you'll return  
and caress me in your arms  
again.

## When it All Started

It all started when I was 7 years old. I would always play outside in my backyard usually by myself. That's when I first saw him; I thought I was imagining him. He was hiding in the trees staring at me. I paid no attention to him and thought nothing of it as I continued to play with the leaves and stay in my own imagination. As the days passed he seemed to come closer to where I would play until eventually I shot a glance at him and asked, "Are you going to stand there or will you come play?" This made him jump back. "You can see me?" he asked. "Of course," I replied as I played with a branch trying to draw circles in the ground. The first day we played together we had a lot of fun; we played hide and seek, tag, and other games I couldn't play by myself.

That was until my mom called me to come inside for dinner. I joyfully bounded up to her and said, "Mom, come look at my new friend." I turned around but he was gone. My mom chuckled as she asked, "Is this another imaginary friend?" "No Mom, this one is real I promise!" She laughed me off and we went inside for dinner. The next day I waited for him to come visit me, and after what felt like hours he finally appeared from the trees. "Where did you go yesterday?" I asked, and he told me that no one should be able to see him and that's why he ran away. "How come?" I asked. "I don't know" was his only reply. "What's your name?" "I don't know." I left it at that and we had another fun day running around letting our imaginations run wild. He seemed to act a lot like me even though we looked very different. I paid no attention to it as we played. And same as the day before when my mom came to get me he was nowhere to be seen.

This went on for months. We played outside for hours, but whenever my mom called me he vanished before my eyes. Finally it was winter, and I was all bundled up in my winter coat my mom made me wear and snow boots, but he was almost the exact same: no coat, no boots, just some simple clothes. "Aren't you cold?" I asked. "Not really," he replied. This time we were able to have a snowball fight! We made forts on opposite sides of the backyard and spent half the day throwing snowballs back and forth trying to hit each other. Once we got tired of that we tried to make an igloo, but it turned

out being a lot more work than we thought, and as we were taking a break I asked him, "Where do you sleep?" "I don't know." The same reply as always. "Come sleep over at my house." He gave me a confused look. "Sleep over?" I shot an equally puzzled look. "Yeah it's when you stay over at your friend's house and stay up all night having fun laughing and playing games." "But won't your parents see me?" "It's okay; we can sneak you in and you can sleep on my floor." "Okay!" He seemed to smile a little bit.

As we walked in I made sure that my mom was busy so I could sneak him inside. Eventually we made it to my room. He looked around at my room and saw all my toys. "What does this do?" I showed him around and showed him some of my toys—we played with my fire truck, my hot wheels, and a couple of other toys. Eventually we got tired, so I gave him a blanket and pillow and we went to bed. I woke up in the morning very excited, but when I turned around he was gone. I thought maybe he had to go home, so I got ready to go outside and play with him. When I went outside he was already waiting for me. Another fun day in the snow and then same as before we went back inside and he slept on my floor.

For a couple of days we kept playing outside, and at night he would come inside. We played with some of my toys, then he would sleep on my floor, and by the morning he was gone. That is until one day I woke up in the morning and he wasn't gone. He was under my bed! "Hey!" He looked at me, but this time he looked different; he looked mean. "Let's go out and play!" I tried to get him out, but he wouldn't budge. Instead, he stayed under my bed, growling. I decided to leave him there and go out and play by myself for the day. Eventually I came back in and looked under my bed and he was gone. I thought nothing of it and prepared for bed. I brushed my teeth, changed my clothes, and laid in bed. As I started to fall asleep for the first time without my friend, I heard a growl. I looked around and saw nothing. Bunching up my sheets, I tried to tell myself I was imagining it when I felt it. A long cold nail scratching my sheet, tearing through it as if it was a tissue. I screamed for my mom, and she came running in but there was nothing. "Mom! There's

something in here!" I shouted as I cried. She looked all around my room, in the closet, in every drawer, and even under my bed, but said she saw nothing. After assuring me I was safe and no one was in here, she left.

"She can't see me, you know that," I heard in a raspy low growl from under my bed. Terrified, I stayed awake the entire night waiting for whatever was in my room to come out. Nothing. Finally when the sun rose, I stood up and looked around and checked everywhere. Nothing. I thought maybe it was a bad dream and went outside, but my friend no longer came to play with me. I spent the day by myself just like how it was before. Eventually I went inside, got ready and laid in bed. I started to drift off when I heard it again, a low growl. Frozen in my bed, I realized what happened. I had a monster under my bed. I invited the monster under my bed.

## Capricorn



## Reasons to Fear Intimacy

Because twilight comes for us all  
 Because, despite everything, I still feel like I look weird naked  
 Because I can see you looking at my soul when our eyes meet  
 Because of the way you looked at me then smiled when  
     the sake till didn't make me bold enough to talk to you  
     but clumsy enough to kick over a bottle  
 Because I don't love you and the Lana Del Rey song  
     that played over and over as the backbeat  
     to me ripping her heart out and showing it to her  
 Because hurting you fucked me up so much that I don't know who I  
 am anymore  
     Because not knowing who you are can be somewhat of an obstacle  
     for a healthy relationship  
 Because I've been high every time there was a first 'I love you'  
     and I don't know what my love looks like without a handful of pills  
         or eight-too-many drinks  
         or various powders breathed in throughout the years  
 Because these days lusting and pining feels like online shopping  
 Cause I don't wanna be cute  
     Because I want to be cute  
 Because last night, in my dream, i took a shortcut  
     or what i thought was a shortcut  
     through a field of garbage  
     and i feel it best to do that sort of thing alone.

## Mono No Aware

*Mono no aware*

Late-March, cool sunlight,  
 a young girl sees the cherry  
 blossoms bloom—and cries.

Daybreak, late-July,  
 an old man sees the first light  
 split the sky—and sighs.

*Mono no aware*

October, dusk falls,  
 speaking truths into the wind-  
 blown leaves that lie.

December, midnight,  
 moonlight shining on a stooped  
 pine glazed in ice.

*Mono no aware*



## The Stoop of Friendship

Sitting alone on the stoop, Teddy looked content and smitten. Even his shadow enjoyed the peace and quiet of his company. Teddy sat on that stoop every day baking in the sun, feeding the blue jays and squirrels peanuts. He was happy with his animal friends and believed that they understood him better than any other human could. He did not interact or talk with anyone. He would mow his grass, or rake the leaves, and tend to his yard every day. And then when all was said and done, he would sit on his stoop sipping ice tea with his bag of peanuts.

Teddy was probably in his early 60's. The creases and wrinkles on his face would show his age like a tree stump's circumference. All of Teddy's experiences growing up shaped and molded his skin into the aged yet content look you see today.

Teddy had seen war; he had seen loss; he had loved with all his heart. But behind his peace and content on his stoop, you could see Teddy's pain. This was simply not a look you could shake...no matter how many years you spend enjoying the bird's song on the stoop.

And this is where Michael comes in. He was a young boy, skinny and pale. He had a freckled face and an awkward walk to his step. Michael would pass by every day after school on his walk home. The neighborhood stories always kept him looking down as he walked past Old Man Teddy's stoop. One day he decided to say hello to the old man on his way past. Michael, with a bit of courage, squeaked, "Hello sir." Teddy looked at him and gave him the smallest nod you could possibly give. It could have gone unnoticed if you were not paying attention close enough, but Michael saw it. He continued walking, but he had a bit of a smirk on his face as he made his way home.

Each day passed, and each day Michael got more and more confident. Teddy still never spoke to him, but every time Michael said hello, the head nod from Teddy grew a bit larger. One day Michael decided to approach the old man and asked if he could try to feed the animals some of the peanuts. Teddy spit to the side and did not say anything or budge. Michael knew he had come too far and invaded his stoop.

After that day, Teddy did not see Michael pass by for the rest of the week. He did not think much of it, but on Monday afternoon he got his answer. He saw Michael walking by with a hat on covering his face. Below that low brim of the hat, Teddy could see that the boy had a black eye. Teddy still kept to himself and continued on his normal routine. Pretty soon he started seeing Michael pass by with different bruises. It would either be a busted lip, a bloody nose, or an arm with scrapes and cuts. The boy no longer looked up and walked by with a defeated look.

Teddy knew something was very wrong. He did not know the boy at all, but he knew that the boy was not a bully or a fighter. He could tell Michael was just looking for acceptance from anyone.

It was the afternoon of the next day and Michael sprinted by, and not too far behind him was a group of boys chasing him. Teddy put the pieces together very quickly and realized these boys were the culprits behind all the bruises on Michael. This is when a fire reignited in Teddy's eyes. It was like he was jumping into the trenches once more with his brothers in arms. He jumped off the stoop and ran in between the group of boys and Michael. Then for the first time ever, Michael heard Teddy speak. It was a low growl, but it was effective.

"Why are you messing with my friend? If I see one more bruise on him, you are going to have to deal with me next."

This is all that needed to be said. The boys ran off like a bunch of dogs with their tails between their legs. After that Teddy walked back over to his stoop and sat down.

Michael slowly walked over and with a confused but appreciative approach. He shuddered as he said, "Thank you sir."

Teddy gave him a nod and asked him to take a seat to help him feed the birds and squirrels. Michael was astonished but hid his excitement and smile well. He sat down and took a handful of peanuts and threw them in the front yard.

From that day forward, Michael did not have any more bruises or signs of bullying. He would come by Teddy's porch every day after school. He would sit there a few feet away from Teddy until



the sun went down. They both never really spoke. They did not need to. Michael understood. They had created a bond and while it was a quiet friendship, it was the first time in a long time that Michael felt accepted.

And not to mention, it was also the first time in a long time that the look behind Teddy's eyes got less and less painful every day. Some friendships don't need words: just peace and the feeling of being content feeding the birds and squirrels.

## mountain momma

the mountains have become more like my mother than  
my mother; immovable behemoths of grace  
that hold the sun's hand as she falls,  
stand over her when she makes the heavy decision to rise again

they are like nesting dolls, mothers;  
how do you exist knowing you've sprang from something  
so impermanent; that you yourself will one day be  
twisted and worked into halves; how do you birth a child  
who is whole and know he will feel what you have kept from him:  
that you are a not a doll but a multitude of things  
sometimes beautiful, occasionally cruel or  
even full of fear

## Whistling of Time

The father held his little boy's hand as they walked to the park. Teetering hesitant steps paired with a calm, firm stride. It was a brisk morning in October. The wind scattered autumn leaves across their path. The father's face had a half-smile etched with creases. The young boy's ears were red, and his freckled countenance gleamed with energy as he breathed the air of the outdoors. His little arm tugged a worn baseball bat which he slightly dragged behind him. A soft whistle escaped from the father's mouth. The little boy grinned and tried to imitate his father. He sucked a deep breath of air and perched his shivering lips with a blow. A quiet whoosh of air was produced. His father laughed and proceeded to toss a baseball up with his free hand. The boy frowned and tried again. A puff of air was yet again produced. He wrinkled his brow and looked to his father for guidance. The father's beard shook amusingly as he patiently demonstrated again. The young lad huffed with all of his might to no avail. The father patted his son on the back and quickened his pace. "Come on!" he whispered.

Birds scattered from the trees as they approached a park with a small baseball field. The boy scampered ahead of his father to receive a pitch. The dust settled upon the old field and an old chain-linked fence surrounded its outskirts. The boy reached first base and began to swing his bat. His father gently swung the ball towards him. The bat made contact and WHOOSH, it glided across the air. He cried, "Dad, lookit! My bat's a-whistling." His father chuckled as his son ran to pick it up. They continued until the sun set upon the horizon. Sweat poured on the little boy's face as he trudged back home with his father. A squirrel frolicked ahead of them and an owl beat its wings as it settled upon an old oak tree. The little boy's sparkling eyes soaked the passing of daylight. His father reached for his small hand which fit neatly into his bigger palm. They reached their house and put the bat and ball away before heading inside. The light in their kitchen flickered off as their house fell asleep in the quiet neighborhood.

*30 years later...*

The little boy was now a grown man. He had returned to see his father. It was a quiet afternoon as they set out to revisit his childhood park. Again, they walked side by side, stride by stride. Only this time, it was different. The young boy now towered over his father. Shrunken with age, the father hobbled with a cane and held his son's arm for support. Ancient wrinkles now creased his face and his hair was an array of white. His son peered at him with fond eyes and he started to whistle with a firm deep breath. The father released a deep reminiscent laugh and said, "Y'sure have improved on that, my boy." Rabbits scurried into their holes and crickets started to whirl with their evening chirps. The worn path stood silently still for a moment. The father, weak with exertion, began to breathe deeply. They plowed dust as they continued to their destination. They stopped in their tracks as they neared the baseball field. The son guided his father gently to a bench overlooking the scene. As they sat, the father nudged his son with a shaky hand and said, "My boy, remember the time your bat a-whistled?"

A soft laugh erupted from his son as he immediately recalled the memory. They scanned the park lovingly and sighed with peace as the day began to draw to a close. A flock of geese triumphantly landed on the grass nearby. The familiar hum of crickets again began to take rhythm. The father closed his eyes and his nostrils expanded as he breathed the crisp air. The sun was beginning to fade into the horizon. Though little was said, much was understood. The father had fallen into a soft slumber with his arms falling gently upon the bench. The son tenderly looked at him and whispered, "Dad, I want you to know that I'll never forget those memories. When I have my own son, I hope to do the same for him." Despite his sleeping stance, the old man's tired face formed a smile and he slowly shifted his hand to grip that of his grown son. "Time my boy, is a precious thing. Before you know it, it'll whistle away." The son knowingly nodded and grasped his father's weathered palm. As dusk settled, they began their journey home whistling... side by side, stride by stride, with their roles almost—just almost, reversed.

## they say

I speak English like you.  
 Maybe better.  
 I spoke Spanish like them.  
 But I forgot.

“If I could do it over, Spanish  
 only at home,” *Mami* says.

Too Mexican to be American.  
 Too American to be Mexican.  
 Disconnected from my indigenous roots,  
 because of Uncle Sam  
 and Hispania  
 and Zé Povinho  
 and Marianne.

“So, what are you?”  
 A person.  
 “Where did you come from?”  
 PG County.  
 They forget about deciphering my ethnicity.

Mouths downturn, O-ing.  
 They account my coloring.  
 They eye me like a shiv.  
 They notice the ink on my skin.  
 One time, at my *quince*—  
 “Clarisa, I didn’t know you lived in the ghetto.”  
 It ain’t.  
 I can show you the real ghetto tho.

Yeah, I can’t walk 2 minutes to the grocery store without  
 elevator eyes  
 or smooth comments.  
 Yeah, I’ll hear—  
*Bang!*  
 at night, not knowing if they’re fireworks,  
 or gunshots.  
 Yeah, a twenty-year-old was murdered three blocks from mine with a  
     hole in his body that swirled  
 dusty red into the river.  
 Yeah, his name was Everett Robert Brown.  
 He was turning his life around.

Some of my friends were ashamed.  
 I told them, “Take it as free rep. They’re afraid.”  
 Now it’s all they claim.

*“Clarisa, I didn’t know you lived in the ghetto.”*  
 “That’s right. So don’t mess with me”  
 because I’m *so* tired of you.

## Gaia



20" x 20" canvas, fluid acrylic, 2017

## The Ides of October

I'd rather be the moon  
For she can be gazed upon  
without the blinding pain of the sun's corona  
She is noxious in the darkness  
Autumnal,  
cold and grievous  
Hanging there heavily,  
lush and languorous  
Like the womb of the world,  
she guides the ebb and flow of life  
Selenic and motherly,  
She is fertile and ever changing  
Her surface is cratered with millennia of wear,  
but she still glows beautifully, unaffected,  
like a goddess of the night

## The Blue Expanse

I woke up in a world of blue.

I had no memory of who I was, or where I'd come from. I discovered that I was in a scuba suit. I had flippers on my feet, a light on my head, and I floated like a feather.

I looked all around to see where I was. As far as my eyes could see was an endless world of blue. I kicked my legs and pushed with my arms to reach the surface. Once I did, I was greeted with an equally blue sky with hardly any white clouds to see. I dived down once again and found to my surprise that my lungs did not feel the pressure of one who holds their breath too long underwater.

As my eyes became adjusted to the translucent, glimmering blue water, I discovered that the seafloor was not as far below me. I noticed a school of shimmery fish swimming toward some rocks. I followed them into the rocks and into a small fissure in the side of an underwater mountain.

Why am I here? Who or what put me here?

As soon as the fish cleared through the gap and I could see beyond them, I came into a realm of green. The water itself was green, healthy. There was vibrantly green flora growing there. Grass grew along the seabed and the rocks on the floor. And tall leafy kelp plants sprouted to reach the surface of the water.

What I thought would've been a cave turned out to be the basin of a dormant volcano. Amidst the green there were some clumps of coral and anemones along the walls and on the floor of the basin. There were fish of every shape and size, turtles, sharks, etc.

One such shark, a great white, startled me as it swam out of the tall seaweed. However, it meant no harm to me and swam off.

As I explored more and more, deeper and deeper I found more species of fish and aquatic life and hundreds more caves and flora in this beautiful world of vibrant colors and peaceful quiet.

I came a deep and living canyon with hundreds of beautiful fish racing along at a fast clip. I noticed as I watched closer that the water was moving them along faster, like an undercurrent that hurtled through the canyon. I swam and thundered along with it, allowing the force of the water to guide me to its destination.

My surroundings flash by me, a pod of playful dolphins came and frolicked in the current. One of them got so near to me that I was able to touch it. Though I could not register what it felt like, the action itself was breathtaking. I grabbed hold of its dorsal fin and was rocketed upward, breaking through the pristine barrier between water and sky. As we both soared over the waves, the clouds in the sky reflected off the surface and we crashed down into the water once again.

Then I swam into a land of pink flora, anemones, and sea stars. Coral and rocks. A vast desert submerged in water. As I traveled this area with the pod of dolphins, they lead me to yet another canyon whose rocks were yellow from the sunlight.

Larger orca whales, turtles, dolphins and the like coursed along the driving current. The young dolphin I had been holding took off into the current and dispatched me onto the back of a young orca. It made a small chattering sound to me before whisking away, out of my sight.

Like the young dolphin, the young orca and I jumped clear of the waves and crashed down deep into the waters. When we slowed down, I looked about to find no form of living flora or rocks or creatures. The world around me had become dark, even the water in the distorted sunlight looked grey.

The orca turned away. I pushed on ahead.

As I swam, I saw glimpses of the great white through the dead flora. Then, suddenly, there was a small device that, when I came closer, began to glow and the area began to regrow itself. Dumbfoundedly, I carried on further into the waters beyond. Eventually I came to a series of caves that I thought were to be dark as well. Much to my delight they were full of luminous jellies that buoyed themselves in the still waters. When I emerged on the other side, I was at the edge of a great cliff that looked down, down, down to the great ocean depths. I could see where the light gave up and refused to penetrate the cold, sheer darkness. Seeing no other place to venture to, I plunged further into the abyss.



As I dove deeper and deeper, a homely sight greeted me. Blue whales emerged from the darkness. Their size and their tranquil nature put me at ease. Many other whales, like humpbacks made deep rumbles in the water. A few escorted me to the seafloor and go upward for oxygen. At this point I had not once used the light mounted on my mask. The world was now pitch black. I could no longer perceive the rays of sun above me, nor see what lay beneath me or in front of me. As the light flickered, I found myself in a graveyard of bones. Bones of hundreds of large whales, fish, and other sea life.

Along the seafloor were tubeworms and heat vents that bubbled with the deathly life. Fish that walked on legs, crabs, octopi, and squid were in abundance as well. Buried in the murky floor were discarded equipment, cars, and bicycles. From there, I found myself in a world of bright red light, the area full of strange mechanical shapes and computers and floating debris. When ventured closer to one of them, I felt a numbing pain and then nothing.

I awoke once more in a world of ancient stone, a city under the waves. Large castle towers and battlements were the most prominent structures in this strange place. Beside me was the great white that had startled me earlier. We journeyed silently through this strange city. Seeing flea markets, arenas, gardens, etc. We swam passed a wall of mirrors.

My reflection showed me my body. I made of metal and wires and was not the human as I had first perceived.

My heart was merely a strange tablet with a screen full of numbers that I could not comprehend. Soon the shark and I were in a simply gorgeous prismatic world of color and light. Many creatures lived there. It looked like a heaven on earth, beneath the waves. There was such daylight and wonder and simultaneously, there was night and mystery. The shark and I frolicked together in this world below the waves. Followed by a large trail of fish and the like. We lived in triumph over something that we had not known. The strange red shapes that had created me. We saved an ocean from dying. We united, his soul and my computer. That is where my story ends.

## One More Stone

The unbearable romance of autumn begins today.  
 The last great storm has rolled through.  
 The leaves are somber,  
 the grasses less vigorous than but a day ago.  
 The birds are satisfied,  
 their chicks fledged  
 and fat with summer seed.  
 Hopeful insects cry;  
 fireflies flicker  
 and dance just a bit more desperately.

We finish our picnics,  
 roll out of our hammocks,  
 crease the corner of the page  
 in that sunburned book.  
 We take a final sip of lemonade,  
 wiping moisture off the glass;  
 we laugh again,  
 and skip one more stone.

Our bare feet brave the blacktop without burning,  
 crush the sweet cool grasses,  
 linger in the sand.  
 But then we go.  
 We roll our windows down,  
 driving through this perfect realm  
 of clouds and light,  
 to vanish from our favorite places,  
 perhaps forget them for a while—  
 the unbearable romance of autumn begins today.

## At the Bottom of the Bottle

I raise my hands and count the callouses on each finger. One on my index finger, two on my middle finger, and the numbers only increase from there. I feel the rough, pad of my thumb tracing over the back of my other hand. There isn't any soft skin left on me. There isn't anything soft left about me. I try to distract myself from the endless voices making white noise so loudly in my head, but nothing can silence the screams of *Do It! Just do it, you coward! You know you can't stop it!*

My hands, they shake. The callouses, my scratchy thumbs, the almost-completely picked off nail polish that barely clings to my nails.

I'm shaking, now.

And my eyesight is blurry. I can barely see a foot ahead of me. All I can feel is the ground going slack beneath my feet, and...slam! My body collapses into a kitchen chair behind me. I barely reach stability against the table, accidentally swatting at the only thing keeping me numb—the near-empty bottle of whiskey.

It hits the floor at the same time I hit the chair, and a string of slurred curses escape me.

Almost immediately, my mindset goes completely haywire. That was the last of bottle in the house. I'm not even in bed yet, how am I supposed to sleep? Terror and fear plague me. I'm afraid I'll remember things I want to forget before I can close my eyes.

The shattered glass barely registers as a hazard as I get from the chair (which feels like an eternity of sitting, thinking, and debating my next coping mechanism). Luckily, I make a near miss on slicing open my foot; that, or I'm too numb to feel it. I'll find out in the morning.

I stop in my bathroom on the way to bed. Mouthwash. I can see it, I can smell it, and I can practically taste the similar burning sensation it'll leave in the back of my throat. I don't remember much else after that. Not after waking up with a bottle of Listerine in my hand, only halfway across my bedroom floor, not even under a blanket.

The pounding in my head, you'd think that after years of practice, the hangovers would be better. The only reason I continue and can tolerate such a pain. The pounding feeling and sound is about forty times better than having to listen to a wild, invisible voice shouting abuse at me. It's a hard path to walk—harder considering I *did* find a shard of glass in my foot—but I've chosen it.

I have to wade these waters. I have to suffer. Completely alone.

In the kitchen, the microwave reads 12:31 p.m. That's more sleep than I expected. And, considering that I haven't been a morning person since I began gigging late at night, I can't complain—not when my internal demons like the 3 a.m. callbacks.

I sweep up and toss the broken bottle in the trash. I clean the minor injury on my foot. (The folks in the emergency room just saw me last week, so it isn't worth another visit.) I scour around an empty fridge and decide the best breakfast option is a half-rotten banana. Breakfast *is* the most important meal of the day.

I let the dogs out and set out their food bowls. I prepare for the day.

I've got a lesson with Tommy at 1:30 p.m. And I've got to get the equipment ready. I've got to get myself ready. Really. This is the only thing I've got going for me. And he's a good kid. His parents pay me good money to do nothing more than glorified babysitting. But it pays the bills. It's getting cold. I need to pay the heating bill. I can suffer through guitar lessons.

"It's a G chord. Real easy. You can get it, kid. I know you can."

With my guitar on my lap, and Tommy's on his, I can see him struggling with even the easiest things. But he's trying. That's all that really matters. He smiles when I give him some encouragement, and he asks if I've always wanted to be a rock star.

After a moment, I smile and nod. "I think so. I don't think I've ever really planned on doing anything else."

A few seconds later, his father comes in the front door. He's angry, scowling, and it's clear to me he reeks of booze.

"He still tryin' to play it with the wrong hand?" His father slurs with a half-assed, mean smile.

“He’s doing just fine, thank you.”

I think about sticking around until Tommy’s mother gets home, a sensible adult who cares and looks after him as best she can. I even offer to take Tommy out for a snack until his father sobers up. But it isn’t my place, and all I feel is shame.

I pack up my instruments, sheet music, and give Tommy a handshake. He’s strong, but he doesn’t deserve this. Nobody does.

I drive home; I practice my mundane routine. I let the dogs in, I feed them, and I try to make something half-sensible for myself.

Unfortunately, when distractions have worn off and there are no tasks left in the day, I can’t run from the voices any longer. They scour my brain for any happy memories, any clarity, and block them from me. I’m already thinking about how to get rid of them—drink.

Drink until you can see the bottom of the bottle.

But...almost as a twist of fate, or maybe it’s a purposeful decision. I didn’t get to the grocery or liquor store today. There is no more food in the fridge. My stomach is empty. Worse, there nothing more to drink, and my head is pounding. My hands are shaking, but I can’t hear the voices. I can still think. Barely.

Maybe I will try sleeping tonight without any extra help; maybe I will keep that image of Tommy’s father in my brain, drunk and stumbling around the only people that care about him. Maybe I will just try, because this headache can drown out the pain I’m trying to drink away.

I’m in bed, staring at the ceiling. For a moment, I scream into one of my torn pillows, then put them beside me.

Quiet. In all the white noise, there is quiet. I’m not drinking tonight. Even if I only get an hour of sleep and wake up with regret, I am determined not to drink.

## Awash



Photography

## The New “Old” World

“This isn’t exactly what I expected” I say.

“Quite right,” Dr. Reginald Smith adds. “I didn’t expect to find anything. But this is smashing.”

“Bill, you said this might be interesting. But...this goes way beyond that. It’s great!” Dr. Nancy Warner marvels.

“I love this,” Dr. Timothy Hudson says, as he takes photos.

“They’re dinosaurs all right. But they’re acting a bit like big birds.”

We hide in the jungle and look at a clearing. I see what looks like a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, but it doesn’t look like the paintings and drawings in my books. Its walk is more like a bird’s and it’s not dragging its tail. I realize that the bone displays and pictures in museums and books might be incorrect. The skin isn’t drab. There seems to be some feathers. And the creature is more colorful than I expected. It doesn’t even roar; the sound is more like a clucking hen.

In front of the predator is an *Ankylosaurus*, just like in the drawings in the museums, including the Peabody at Yale where I work. However, it’s making more of a honking goose sound.

Nancy asks, “Bill, how did you find out about this place? How come no one ever discovered it until now? This is almost right out of Doyle’s *The Lost World*.”

“Do you know about Professor Georg von Klein,” I say, “the head of the paleontology department at Heidelberg University?”

Everyone says, “Yes.”

I continue: “He had heard stories about this island—the Island of Bird Sounds, when this was part of German New Guinea. He was set to investigate here in the fall of 1914, but we know what happened. So, he couldn’t.

“In June, before the war, he published a short piece in a journal about this place and his plans to explore it. Late last winter, I found a copy of that journal, had it translated into English, and then I wrote him. He wrote me back. Do you know what he’s like now?”

“Bitter,” says Reginald, “and hates the allies. I’m surprised he wrote you.”

“Why is he so bitter and hateful?” asks Nancy.

“Because he lost three sons during the war,” I say.

“I know some people at Heidelberg who will still talk to me,” Reginald says. “They say that von Klein has lost all his fire. He goes through the motions, but there’s no spirit in his lectures anymore. It’s really sad.”

Timothy asks, “How did you get permission from the Australians to come here?”

I say, “Why do you think we have the Oxford professor with us? Reginald knows the head official in Rebaul, and he let us come to New Britain.”

“Look over there, it looks like a duck-billed dinosaur,” says Nancy, pointing to her right. “Listen to the sound... it’s like a trumpet. To its left, isn’t that a *Triceratops*? It’s making a chirping sound, sort of like a robin.”

“Yes, it is. The duck-billed dinosaur is actually called a *Hadrosaurus*,” says Timothy as he takes more photos.

“I’m a geologist,” Nancy affirms, “you’re the biologist. Bill and Reginald are the paleontologists, so you know more about them than I do. However, these dinosaurs seem to be from the Cretaceous. I’d love to check out some of the rocks to see if they’re from that period too.”

I keep an eye out to make sure she doesn’t wonder too far looking for rock outcrops. Nancy has determination, which is why she’s on this trip. I’m sure she was a suffragette at 15.

“Look out!” Reginald shouts, pulling his revolver.

I suddenly see two, no, three strange, hungry looking dinosaurs coming at us. I can’t place their kind, but I don’t have time to figure them out. They are man-sized, with large, sharp teeth. They make a loud, hawkish sound. I pull out my revolver, too, and start shooting at one of them.

“Let’s get back to the boat!”

Reginald hits one and it goes down. Timothy unslings his rifle and hits another. More dinosaurs are coming at us now; without saying a word, we realize that we have got to get off this island. I start shooting at the dinosaurs. Pop, pop, pop, go our weapons. One hit drops them, but there are so many that we can’t hope to kill them all.

Nancy pulls an automatic pistol and stops another of these monsters. I grab her hand, and everyone starts running down the jungle path towards the beach and the waiting boat and its two-man crew. As we run, we shoot wildly at the pursuing dinosaurs.

I yell, "We can't aim, but it might stop their chase."

Just then, Timothy trips on a root in the path and falls. Reginald grabs his hand and pulls him up while Nancy and I stop running for a second and kill two more.

When we get to the end of the jungle and onto the beach, we yell at the crewmen to leave immediately. The two, who were brewing some coffee, get up, see that we are running right towards them, hurry to the boat and push it into the water. We make it to the boat and head out into the surf. The crewmen start the engine, and we start heading back to the ship. We are exhausted, but happy that we weren't a dinosaur's dinner.

One of the sailors asks, "What were those things?"

"Dinosaurs!" yells Nancy.

"They're extinct," says the other sailor, "they can't be dinosaurs."

"We thought they were extinct too until about a half hour ago. But look for yourself. After those monsters go back into the jungle, we'll go back and get the stuff that we've left behind. It's good that we have photographic proof of this place." I say.

"Oh no!" yells Timothy.

"What is it?" I ask.

He says "When I fell, the camera broke open and the negatives are ruined! We don't have any photographic proof!"

## The Winter Air

Winter cruises through the town, making autumn leaves shrivel.  
The waning sun hides behind drifting clouds.  
Forlorn birds escape in haste the stale air and frozen boughs.

Such a scene enclaved by a frame,  
Above the dire hearth it hangs; alone, my heart beats  
The time impending for the coals to course their way to flame.



## Notes from This Strange World

*for Albert Einstein & his dear friend, Michele Angelo Besso*

My co-moving light-wave has left this beautiful day a little ahead of me. He has gone to that place where his lost keys are. He himself is not lost, he never was lost, he will always know where he is. Though he walks randomly (& always has), there is a general drift towards me, his friend. Like petals on water, we who must know each other zig & zag towards the tête-à-têtes that constitute a life. The problem of motion is not a problem. I see that now. Although it is 1955, it is also 1905, as well as long before & well after. I am always on a streetcar moving at the speed of light away from silent chiming clocks. All of us are moving bodies, foraging little animals, most guileless when biased towards light. Soon, Besso. Now... & before.

## Lessons from trees



Linotype print

## Only a Photo

The red plaid thermos is on the counter, so I know my father still lives with us. The stove looks new and the floor gleams with the reflection of twins. One serious face looking at one silly face. The serious face belongs to me. The jumpsuit on my brother seems an unusual piece of attire, but it marks time. Straight ahead through the kitchen window is a brick wall, but if you were able to look to the right, you would see the middle school and high school. Look down and you would see our baseball diamond, which really is a miniature. By the time we reached fifth grade, we could hit much further than our confines, so we made a new rule: hit the wall, automatic home run. During the hot summers, we longed for the pool that our apartment manager always said was coming. Our complex had enough room, but it never got done. I'm not sure I believed them anyway.

Our living room window faces the same direction as the kitchen, but the view is wider and deeper. If it's the Fourth of July, you can sit in the living room spotting bits of the city fireworks. We could also see the middle school dumpster which was frequently set on fire. My brother and I enjoyed this happening: the commotion of fire trucks, sirens and spraying water. We never saw anyone setting the fires but were always entertained by the aftermath. Not only could you see the schools from the main room but there was the hill we sledded down in winter and rolled down in summer. Once, when I was rolling inside a dismantled box, my friend in his box, rolled on top, pinning me inside. It was my first experience with claustrophobia and panic. I could not move my arms and it was all I wanted to do. I peed myself while screaming, "Let me out! Let me out!" It made no sense that I panicked; I'm a twin—I've been in confined spaces before.

Atop the hill was a fence full of Honeysuckle that we all loved to taste. One summer day the maintenance man told us to stay away because they had, "just sprayed pesticide." We didn't know what that meant, but his serious tone made us stop immediately. Even now when I smell Honeysuckle I remember its taste. When we were old enough to cross the big road, we found blackberry bushes in the woods. Eating them right from the bush was also short-lived as our

parents joined the pesticide fear brigade. In winter the apartment felt smaller, and I waited for my willow tree to grow its little leaves into a green canopy. My mother had a tree painting hung on the wall. If you looked closely you could find "LOVE" spelled out by branches. This intrigued me, but I disliked the orange, burnt yellow, and brown. Who paints a sky orange? Plus, it had no branches hanging low enough to hide under. This was what I liked about the willow tree outside of Lori's window. It was closer to her window, since I was on the second floor, but I thought of it as mine. On any given day I could be found hidden under its canopy. There was one branch sturdy enough to hang upside down from, and that was my favorite thing to do.

On a recent drive, I noticed that the willow was no longer present, and I felt that familiar tug of loss. For years I've been growing a willow tree in my front yard, hoping for a thick canopy to hide under. The process of growth has been slow, and only this year were we able to take off the staked ropes. The skinny trunk still sways so easily in the wind that I fear it will break. By the time it grows sturdy I may not even exist. But this tree belongs to me. I paid for it with my own money. Planted it with my own hands. Staked it, watered it, and fed it. It is mine, unlike the willow of my childhood, which I had to share. There's nothing between young twins, or in an apartment complex, that you can truly own.

## Wash



Monotype print on Strathmore, 2019

## Cher Winter

Cher Winter,

I'm sending you this letter  
in hopes that you change your  
mind about me. I'd love to for  
us to become friends. I admire  
how cruel and harsh your accompanying  
months can be. I also have to tell  
you that I adore the view of  
your breathtaking sunsets at 4:50pm  
everyday. I have to commend you on  
how unforgiving you are. But most  
importantly, I absolutely admire how you  
stick around for so long that I begin to wonder  
if Summer will ever return.  
I hope we become the best of friends.

Sincerely,

The Girl You're Never Nice To

## The Death of Father Jacob

### CHARACTERS

NURSE, 50's

FATHER JACOB, a priest, 70, older brother of Benjamin and Anna.

BENJAMIN, a university professor, 65.

ANNA, a psychologist, 67.

### SCENE 1

*(The lights come up on a hospice room with a bed; in it is Father Jacob. He is apparently very sick; his head and torso are raised so we can see his face. He is asleep. The music "Spiegel im Spiegel" is heard very softly. A screen shows Father Jacob doing some good deed, like consoling a widow or something similar. After a while the Nurse enters through the only door, on the left. She touches Father Jacob's shoulder gently. The music stops and the screen goes blank.)*

NURSE

Father, two priests have come to visit you.

FATHER JACOB

Didn't I tell you I cannot see anybody?

NURSE

Forgive me father but they insist; even for a couple of seconds, they said. I told them that that was not possible, but they kept on insisting, even pleading in God's name. They haven't seen you since you got sick; they knew that there is not much time left.

FATHER JACOB

NO!

*(The nurse leaves and the scene of the screen refreshes. After a moment, the nurse comes back. She gently touches the shoulder of Father Jacob. The screen goes blank.)*

NURSE

Father, your brother Benjamin is here to see you.

FATHER JACOB

Let him in. Why do you ask me?

NURSE

Because you said you didn't want to see anybody. You know that I care for your well-being, and I believed that you wanted peace more than anything else.

FATHER JACOB

My family, especially my brother, is different. You should know that because we have talked about this. Remember? *(Pause, thinking.)* But there is something about him.

NURSE

What is it?

FATHER JACOB

I don't know... but I haven't seen him for years. Now I feel very tired, but I need to talk with my family; I have only a week or so, according to the doctor. I wish I could have received everybody, but I don't have enough strength.

NURSE

Yes, I remember what you told me, but I thought I had to make sure, just in case. The other visitors showed so much interest to see you, "even for a moment," they said, but I understand your feelings and I explained to them that you felt so very tired. I think they understood.

FATHER JACOB

You are right. I was, and still am, very tired. I know that they appreciate me and the work I did as a priest, but I could not continue

seeing people. Except my family, as I said. Now, go and bring my brother; he is waiting.

NURSE

I know, I'll go get him.

*(NURSE exits.)*

FATHER JACOB

*(To himself)* He finally came. He should have known I'm almost dead. My youngest brother!

*(FATHER JACOB falls asleep again. A screen, above FATHER JACOB, shows three children that could be JACOB, ANNA and BENJAMIN, playing some kind of child's play. JACOB's peaceful face shows the effect of the dream. After a while BENJAMIN enters. BENJAMIN looks at his brother pensively, and then he sits.)*

BENJAMIN

*(Softly and then a little louder.)* Jacob, Jacob.

*(Jacob wakes up and the screen goes blank.)*

FATHER JACOB

Ah, you are here. I fell asleep. I was waiting for you.

BENJAMIN

Here we are, finally facing each other, after how long? Five years? *(Waits a moment for an answer, then,)* You wanted to talk to me?

FATHER JACOB

Yes, of course; Benjamin, I'm dying.

BENJAMIN

That is what I was told.

*(Father Jacob jerks with pain.)*

FATHER JACOB

Who told you?

BENJAMIN

Anna, who else? *(Noticing his pain.)* I see that God isn't helping you much.

FATHER JACOB

That's cruel, Benjamin.

BENJAMIN

No. I'm just pointing out that God, if He exists, is not very helpful in practice.

FATHER JACOB

If you see a person in pain, that calls for compassion, not mocking his beliefs. Besides, my faith does help me to endure the pain.

BENJAMIN

You can do with whatever you have. Religion if you have one, or your children and grandchildren if you have those, or your tribe or homeland, whatever you want to call it.

FATHER JACOB

*(Calmly.)* When did you stop believing?

BENJAMIN

When did you start believing?

FATHER JACOB

I've always believed.

BENJAMIN

I don't remember you being so religious when we were children.

FATHER JACOB

No. I wasn't, but I was not a nonbeliever either, just like you, until you lost your faith.



BENJAMIN

When did you start being more religious, then?

*(Enter NURSE.)*

NURSE

It's time for your medicine.

*(She gives some pills to FATHER JACOB.)*

FATHER JACOB

Thank you.

*(NURSE leaves.)*

FATHER JACOB

How is your wife?

BENJAMIN

Jane's alright. Busy as always.

FATHER JACOB

And the children?

BENJAMIN

They're okay too. You haven't answered my question.

FATHER JACOB

Which question?

BENJAMIN

When did you start being more religious?

FATHER JACOB

I didn't think that that was a real question.

BENJAMIN

Yes, it's a real question.

*(FATHER JACOB seems to be making an effort to remember.)*

FATHER JACOB

When I was about 13, I started to notice the suffering of people, and I remember the pain I felt looking at sick people, old homeless people, and people hurting people; then I started questioning whether it was possible for us humans to stop all that suffering.

BENJAMIN

*(Interrupting.)* Funny, because those were the very same reasons I **stopped** believing.

FATHER JACOB

*(Ignoring the interruption.)* At that time, you may remember, our mother became sick, and I prayed for her recovery; she did recover, and I took that as the answer to my prayers. I started going regularly to mass and to church; there I became friends with a priest who recognized my vocation for the priesthood. My decision to become a priest took about two years.

BENJAMIN

*(curiously.)* Are you happy with your decision?

FATHER JACOB

Of course. I'm happy. I mean, I was happy, before I became ill. How about you?

BENJAMIN

Sometimes I'm happy too, most of the time. But, are you happy keeping celibate? Or have you not?

FATHER JACOB

*(Ignoring what BENJAMIN just said.)* I'm satisfied that I was appreciated by my parishioners. I did good work. I suppose you too are proud of your prestige, your academic credentials and such.

BENJAMIN

I am, even though a definite contribution is still eluding me. But I have at least done something.

FATHER JACOB

Something? You mean something of value, of course. I've always been proud of you, Benjamin.

BENJAMIN

*(Dismissively.)* Yeah, yeah. I know that.

FATHER JACOB

*(A little resentfully.)* You should be more humble, you know. *(With a commanding tone.)* Pass me the Bible.

BENJAMIN

How dare you give me an order?

*(FATHER JACOB is trying to overcome the surprise at this outburst when ANNA enters with a bunch of flowers.)*

ANNA

Hi Benjamin. Hello Jacob.

*(She kisses FATHER JACOB on the cheek, puts the flowers at the end of the bed, and takes the vase.)*

BENJAMIN

*(Taking the vase from ANNA.)* I will get the water for the flowers. *(To himself)* I'm sick of this.

ANNA

Okay, thank you.

*(BENJAMIN exits with the vase.)*

FATHER JACOB

*(To ANNA.)* What's the problem with him? He seems to be so angry.

ANNA

He had a quarrel with Jane. She was crying when I called this morning to ask if he was coming to see you.

FATHER JACOB

Thank you, Anna. I did want to see him, but now ... *(He doesn't finish the sentence.)*

ANNA

I'm sorry, Jacob. I just wanted to help.

FATHER JACOB

Don't be. I want to leave in peace with everyone in my family; I have to talk some more with him. You know I haven't seen him for a long time.

ANNA

*(Suddenly emotional.)* Make peace with him Jacob. He is not well.

*(FATHER JACOB looks at ANNA with surprise, then after a moment of silence, with understanding.)*

FATHER JACOB

Yes, I will try. Is his marriage in trouble?

ANNA

That's not the problem. He has a very nice family.

*(Enter BENJAMIN with the vase with water, hands it to ANNA who puts it on the table and arranges the flowers in it.)*

ANNA

Benjamin, may I have a word with you? *(Signals the door with a movement of her head.)*

BENJAMIN

Yes, of course.

*(Both exit the room; almost immediately FATHER JACOB falls asleep.)*

SCENE 2

*(FATHER JACOB's room darkens while the room to the left is illuminated; it is a waiting room with a couple of love seats. ANNA and BENJAMIN sit close to each other.)*

ANNA

Benjamin, please talk with your brother. Let him die in peace. We were a very united family; I could even say that we were a happy family. Don't you remember how we played together? With almost no toys but we managed to have a lot of fun. Don't destroy those memories. Talk with him.

BENJAMIN

I am talking with him.

ANNA

I think you know what I mean. You both have issues that you have to confront and resolve.

BENJAMIN

Easy for you to say. It's not your problem, and you don't know the problem.

ANNA

Whatever it is, you fix the problem.

BENJAMIN

But how?

ANNA

I don't know, of course. It's you who have to find the way.

BENJAMIN

So, you want me to confront him? Wouldn't the remedy be worse than the malady?

ANNA

I don't think that confront is the right word. You should be mindful of his condition. He is dying and, after all, he is your brother. Also remember all the work he has done, how loved he is by his parishioners. I do think that you can appreciate that, even though you are an atheist.

BENJAMIN

Yes, I know all of that, and I can appreciate his work.

ANNA

So, make peace with him.

BENJAMIN

I'm not sure I want to do it. It will be painful for me as well as for him.

ANNA

Please do it. Think about it. Do you want to live the rest of your life without possibility of resolution? There will be no other opportunity.

BENJAMIN

No. *(After a moment.)* Let's go back to Jacob's room. I will talk with him. I'm doing it for you, but I'm not sure it will help.

SCENE 3

*(ANNA and BENJAMIN come back to FATHER JACOB's room. Right room is illuminated and left room is darkened. The screen is showing another of JACOB's dreams: he, as a young priest, is running. JACOB's face shows the agitation caused by the dream.)*

ANNA

*(Softly.)* Jacob. *(He wakes up. The screen goes blank.)* I have to go. *(Kisses him on the cheek.)* I'll be back tomorrow. Bye Benjamin, Jacob.

BENJAMIN

Bye Anna, I'll see you.

*(JACOB only signals with a gesture and a movement of the lips. ANNA exits.)*

FATHER JACOB

I'm sorry about your fight with Jane, but you can't blame me.

BENJAMIN

*(With intention.)* It was about you. She wanted me to come to see you, and I didn't want to. Finally I had to say yes.

FATHER JACOB

Why?

BENJAMIN

She became emotional, and I didn't have a reason I could tell her.

FATHER JACOB

I meant why didn't you want to come? I wanted to see you for the last time. I'm sorry if there was ever a misunderstanding between us. It's never been my intention to offend you.

BENJAMIN

Of course not, but that's not the problem.

FATHER JACOB

What is it, then? Oh, Benjamin, I feel so tired.

BENJAMIN

You don't remember? Can't you guess? You were about twelve? I was six or seven.

FATHER JACOB

No, I don't remember. That's a long time ago; anyway I already apologized for anything I might have done to offend you.

BENJAMIN

No, Jacob, a general apology won't help.

FATHER JACOB

What then? Tell me what I did.

BENJAMIN

*(After a moment of silence, accusingly.)* I met Robert. He was an altar boy. He claims he knows you. Do you remember him?

FATHER JACOB

Robert who?

BENJAMIN

Robert Smith.

FATHER JACOB

No. I don't remember him.

BENJAMIN

You don't remember him? *(shouting.)* You son of a bitch. You are telling me that you don't remember the boy who was an altar boy, helping you? The boy you abused?

*(FATHER JACOB looks with surprise at BENJAMIN, then after a long silence he seems to understand.)*

FATHER JACOB

No, I didn't. Where did you get that from?

*(In the following dialog, BENJAMIN ignores JACOB's interruptions, in parenthesis.)*

BENJAMIN

I met Robert in a support group; he told us everything, with details. *(Takes the vase and gestures to throw it but desists. Puts the vase back on the table.)* You started by giving him small gifts like chocolate or candies; then you invited him to your home "to show him some toys" that turned out to be pornographic magazines.

(FATHER JACOB)

(No, no!)

BENJAMIN

Another day you invited him to use your big tub.

(FATHER JACOB)

(That's enough! Stop this!)

BENJAMIN

Then you undressed and got into the tub. Do I have to continue? Was that the first time you abused him?

FATHER JACOB

But he didn't resist. He never resisted.

BENJAMIN

He was a child, animal! And at an age where the sexuality is not yet well established.

*(Long silence. FATHER JACOB seems to be in pain and confused. Finally, he is resigned.)*

FATHER JACOB

He was the only one, and I have done a lot of penance for that.

BENJAMIN

I don't believe you. I don't think you could suppress that tendency.

FATHER JACOB

My faith has been a great help. I could not face my creator with that heavy burden.

BENJAMIN

Don't you remember how you abused me?

FATHER JACOB

*(With surprise, after a brief silence.)* Yes. *(Another brief silence.)* I was hoping that that was forgotten; you were so young. I was also young and a fool. *(He seems to remember something.)* Did you tell Anna?

BENJAMIN

No, but she seems to have known all along.

FATHER JACOB

But she never said anything. Not to me, anyway.

BENJAMIN

Her religion, most likely. She treats you as a priest. Because she is also very religious.

FATHER JACOB

She may have been showing her compassion.

BENJAMIN

*(Ironically.)* Toward you, of course. How about me?

FATHER JACOB

She's showing it now.

BENJAMIN

How do you mean?

FATHER JACOB

She asked me to make peace with you. I suppose that she is thinking about you more than me. *(Long silence. With emotion.)* I'm sorry Benjamin, can you forgive me?

*(BENJAMIN, who is sitting now, covers his face with his hand; he is crying. JACOB extends a hand to him. BENJAMIN starts to exit; gets to the door, looks at his brother, doubts and then exits without looking at his brother or accepting his hand. The lights go down on the scene.)*



## The Lessons of Summer Storms

I learned last summer that  
some lady bugs bite,  
blood-suckers come out after the rain,  
and the aggression of hummingbirds is understated.

I learned last summer that  
treasures become trash,  
assurances don't pay,  
blue tarps disintegrate,  
and that those with less lose more.

I learned last summer that  
after a hurricane,  
oak trees grow leaves with thorns.  
I've understood why  
since way before last summer.

## Truffula Tree Blossom



Photography

## Oh, My Stars

Just cross the street & wait at the Light Pavilion for a shore-bound bus. Imagine a young girl carrying a white ceramic pitcher as she tentatively steps off the passenger ship *Pannonia*. Imagine her misstep, the quick shattering, the girl's sine curves of grief. Imagine the null dust. Now the bus will come. Alight.

Citywide, the trains & buses will either be running three minutes ahead or three minutes behind. No matter. Edge yourself to the center of this shore-bound bus & sit down in the only empty window seat on the left side. You won't be able to see the water from here, but this is where you must sit. Did I mention that your father should be with you? Your father should be with you, for this is his hometown.

In a moment an older gentleman will sit down in front of you. He lives near the university, he will explain to your smiling father. The two of them will chat for the entire journey, shaking their heads softly, trying to remember the scent of a cocoa served downtown in long-ago winters. As they tremble in their quiet memories, a warp in the space-time continuum will cause particle lifetimes to lengthen & shorten. Your father's new friend will lean forward, whisper hoarsely, "I have my own theory about how mass emanates."

Then, the bus will stop & he will wink and laugh. This will be your cue. With your father, step off the bus. There will be an ocean before you & stairs lit in twinkling lights of five colors. Swim or step upwards. It is your choice.

## Playing with Bugs

Black, shiny, horned beetle  
walking slowly, stately  
on the road, King of the Sidewalk

Cool, blue  
clean road—

Flipped, its whitish  
legs running faster  
than it ever could  
Suddenly,  
it stills,  
breath held,  
plays dead  
...

Black sticks flicking the air, speedier  
one or two legs catch the grey walk  
edgily, tremulously  
the King pulls its body  
to the edge and pulls back  
onto all six

Flipped again  
legs battling the air—  
Raucous noise lingers  
as the shadow leaves.

## Light on Glass

Autumn was ten years old when she first fully explored the train tracks outside of Mills Grove, Pennsylvania. Riding her bike from the apartment she lived in at the center of town, watching the roads and businesses and sprawl slowly fade away into fields of wheat and corn and farmhouses, she could feel her face lifting in excitement at the prospect of what she might find. Finally, two or three yards past the stoplight at the corner of Cooper's Street and Buck Lane, she made it to the familiar rails cutting through the road and causing a break in the field, but instead of continuing forward or turning back, she turned to the left, walked her bike far enough so that nobody could see it, and laid it in the corn. Adventures like this one needed to be on foot.

The tracks cut through field for about a mile or so before entering a field (an area?) surrounded by a thick, dark forest. Autumn looked up, her eyes glued onto the height and power of the trees around her. Her original goal of following the tracks was quickly abandoned when she saw a small path of stones over a miniscule creek to her right, leading deep into the dark foliage. She wondered if anybody else had been out there before, quickly shaking the thought from her mind. This was her place to explore, uncharted territory that none had laid eyes on before. As ash and sycamore trees passed her by quickly, she wondered what might live out here. The sounds of birds and bugs, so loud in the field, were now almost nonexistent. Minutes turned into over an hour in the forest and her imagination ran wilder, picturing epic battles between good and evil happening between trees, evil spectres hiding in the shade, and ancient beings such as dragons living in the ground under her, sleeping for now but soon to awaken. She was listening for the sound of anything to support these ideas when she found the house.

The house was nothing special; calling it a house might almost be generous. Autumn stood in front, pulse quickening and eyes wide to take in the vision. It stood one story, built from wood presumably taken from the forest itself and rotting silently. There was no yard; hardly anything was there to separate the house from the surrounding woods except a small stream cutting in front of it

that might have served as a moat, had the house been grand enough to be imagined as a castle. The small porch sagged sorrowfully into the moist ground, a hole in the center emphasizing its lack of utility. A matching hole graced the ceiling in what almost could be called a stylistic pattern, and broken windows next to an empty doorway served as the finishing touches. To most observers, the house would be an eyesore or a hazard, something that needed to be gotten rid of in order to not take up space. But for Autumn, it was a hidden treasure.

She walked through the open doorway gently, pulling her penlight out of her pocket and looking around the surroundings. If the outside was garish, the inside was positively repugnant. The spot under the hole in the ceiling was sagging into the ground, covered in mold and rot from rainfalls past and smelling like decay. The rest of the room was sparse and empty, spilling out into the left side of the house with only a small wall separating it from the right. There was none of the furniture that Autumn associated with houses, and the emptiness made her shiver. There was also none of the graffiti that she'd always been told was put in abandoned buildings by kids older than herself, kids that she'd do best to stay away from. There was just a layer of dust, mixed with abandonment, sorrow, and mystery.

The next room proved no different, a broken window providing the same amount of light that the hole had provided the last. She shined her penlight on the floor of the narrow space, noticing sparklings of glass shining back up at her. Looking, she immediately pulled back and gasped. Laying on the sparklings was a bird, eyes closed and still. The crimson of its feathers and body contrasted the gray of the dust on the floor, and Autumn could tell that it had been there for some time. The dust around it on the floor was undisturbed.

"That must be how the window broke," she thought to herself.

After she shined her light around the room, seeing the same emptiness as in the last, she started to turn to leave when a gentle tapping sound caught her attention. She turned, looking around the room again but seeing nothing. Next, she looked out the window, but was still only met with absence.

The tap rang out again, louder. Looking down at the glass, Autumn's eye caught a flicker of crimson movement. The flap of a single wing. Watching, she saw the cardinal slowly twitch its wing,

then reach out its foot against the glass. *Tap*. It slowly stretched itself out some more, then started to move into a standing position. Autumn stepped back to give it room. As the vivid rays of the afternoon sun brought life into the cardinal's body, Autumn could swear she heard singing, but it was simply the wind blowing through the broken window. The cardinal stretched its wings again, then gently flapped up in the air, as if testing its ability. Finding itself not lacking in flight, the avian moved to the window, and then was gone, carried on the breeze.

When Autumn's mom asked her if she had seen anything interesting that day, she shrugged.

"Not really."

## The city

A man stands surrounded by chaos,  
flashing lights,  
blurring movement,  
silver meets coal with a crunch and a squeal,  
blowing springs and cogs past his ear,  
more order dominated by disarray,  
his shoes melt into asphalt as oil and acid blood spill from his eyes,  
his feet are devoured next as effervescent pigments stream past telling lies,  
slowly inhaled by all-consuming black,  
grey silver yellow black red white,  
drunk on colors, he speaks one last word,  
swallowed by tumult,  
before he's engulfed by ash and tar.

## Block

Two pages, both of them slightly coarse to the touch and thicker than printer paper, sat in front of her. Devoid of any sort of blemish, whether it was a tear or a bent corner or a single stroke of silver graphite, the two pure white pages took up almost the entirety of the space on the desk. To the right of them was a bag covered in a faded, multicolored flower pattern, and to the left was a collection of markers, pencils, and pens that had once been stored in the bag and were now haphazardly scattered about. Some of the markers teetered dangerously close to the edge, running the risk of falling—there one went now, hitting the ground with a light, plasticity clack-clack-clack as the two edges fell one after the other and then came to a stop against the leg of the chair. The marker was left sitting there, waiting for a hand to reclaim it that wouldn't come until the girl could take her eyes off of the white abysses in front of her.

She wanted to draw. She *needed* to draw; her hands felt stiff and tense, almost as if she had bent her knees in preparation to jump but had instead stayed poised and just sat there. She had brought out her sketchbook and scattered her art supplies out to her left so all she had to do was reach over and grab something. It could be anything, anything at all, she just needed to draw. The energy was there, resonating throughout the muscles in her hand, and the natural thing to do was follow through and unleash that impulse, but... she couldn't. The mind that had overflowed with ideas when she should have been focusing earlier that day was now blank at the prospect of putting any of them onto the empty, endless expanses of pressed parchment in front of her. Nothing latched onto her consciousness and consumed her, forcing every thought to come back to that particular subject until it was the only thing she had room for in her head. Nothing appeared and drew itself in her mind's eye, showing her everything she needed to include down to the last smudge that wouldn't come off no matter how many times she cleaned that eraser and tried again. Nothing overwhelmed her like the waves against the shore of a craggy beach on a cloudy day, threatening to engulf her emotions until that was the only thing she could feel until she finally finished it.

She moved her hands. But instead of grabbing any of her drawing tools, she picked up the sketchbook and turned away from the numbing voids she called pages to instead flip to the front. It had been difficult to get started since she had brainstormed so many ideas, but none of them had felt right for the first work in a brand new book. Even though she was the only one who would ever see what she created, she always put an immense amount of thought into what she added to her sketchbook. Her creations, wrought from nothing but her imagination and the tools before her, were little pieces of herself taken from her head and eternalized in the book. Because of that, when it came to her art, what she thought and what she wanted were the only things that ever mattered. Before she had found her inspiration for that first piece, she had filled the margins of every paper she came across, creating thumbnail after thumbnail until she finally decided on the perfect design: marigolds, orange mock flowers, spider lilies, geraniums, and aconite in black and white ink, with the negative space between the flowers shaping the page into an all-encompassing black rose. Food and sleep hadn't meant anything to her while she worked without pause over the few days it took her to finish it. But there it was, in all its finished glory. That pale chasm of nothingness had turned into a finished work that captured her eyes and held them in place until she had absorbed every last detail and stored it back in her head where it all came from.

She turned the page to see it full of hands, her own hands, in different positions and angles as a sort of practice. The last drawing on the page was her favorite: she took her fingers and made it the base of a twisting, oozing monster hand, twisting the joints in ways that weren't possible and drowning the drawing in a mess of ink that revealed just enough of the intricate detail work underneath until the mere sight of the drawing was enough to make her want to close the book. Instead, she turned the page again. This time it was a single self-portrait in delicate watercolors that took too much time to dry before she could add anything else. Some of it was a bit blurry because she had gotten impatient and added more paint before the previous coat had completely settled, but that didn't matter. She



hadn't messed up the eyes, painting them to make them look as real and shiny as possible. They were positioned in a way that if they were the only thing she focused on, it was like her own eyes were staring back at her from the page, causing the already soft rendering of her other facial features to blur until those eyes were the only thing in sight.

She turned the page again, revealing a dead bird she had found in her yard rendered in a soft colored pencil to contrast the stark image. She turned the page again. This time, it was an oil painting of snow before it started to melt but after cars had driven on it and stained everything a gray color that resembled a wad of chewed up paper. She turned the page again. In pencil, her messy bed with blankets that were too soft in reality, but not soft enough in the drawing, and filled with smudges from where her hand had gotten in places she had already shaded. She turned the page again. Now it was oil pastel, the blobs of easily smudged browns, greens, and grays working in her favor to emulate the yard outside her window after it had rained. She turned the page over and over again, looking at all of her old art and losing herself in what she made before. She kept searching for something that would let her take the energy in her hand and release it, just like she had when she made these, but art piece after art piece flipped past until they all started to blur together. Nothing called her name and refused to let her turn away until she paid attention to it. Nothing showed her what to use and how it all come together even if it seemed awful in the middle. Nothing was there in her brain, or her sketchbook, or her hands—.

Nothing was there. She looked at her hands in disbelief. The energy was gone. She didn't need to draw. The art supplies laid motionless next to her, and the bag they came in was flat and dirty. She flipped back to the clean pages from before, forcing herself to take a pencil in her hand and place it down onto the paper, but her hand refused to move. Even after she had spent all that time searching for inspiration, the emptiness of the pages and her mind now matched the strength in her fingers, the pencil falling onto the sketchbook with a small thud. The belated revelation of this weakness made her stomach knot and loop, with only the slow roll of the pencil distracting her from a rising panic. Even that reprieve didn't last long, however, as it eventually fell off of the sketchbook and left her staring

once more at the blank space in front of her. It was the only thing she could see, the only thing she could think of, the only thing she could feel as her panic came to a head—a crash, followed by a scattered horde of clack-clack-clack-clack repeating over and over.

She had thrown the sketchbook and her art supplies off her desk. It sat there, face down, hiding everything she had accomplished as she stared at it in a limp stupor, the weakness in her hands spreading to the rest of her body. The thought of getting up from her chair to reclaim the book barely registered as if it echoed up to her from the depths of a cave, going unheeded as she remained seated. The art supplies had stopped rolling by now, finding their way under her desk, her bed, her chair, and yet they couldn't serve as the motivation she needed to rise either. The mess that she had made surrounded her, but there didn't seem to be a point in moving at all. The sketchbook stayed on the ground, waiting for her to find her strength to get up and try again, to search for her inspiration once more.

She left it there.

## The Battlefield



Photography

## On The Way

music like joy, a foreign concept—  
 so I change the station  
 just to listen to the ads,  
 pretending someone's there,  
 pretending someone wants to talk, to *me*,  
 pretending there is more to me  
 than carefully architected loneliness  
 penetrated by occasional inadequate  
 forays towards clarity or meaningful interaction  
 with people who I imagine could someday love me,  
 or at least think enough of me to care—  
 because if there's a candle of compassion  
 in this darkness I move towards it, though I know  
 it cannot survive this whole, unceasing night,  
 because if I can gather enough token demonstrations  
 of affection, they can be redeemed  
 at the Department of Fragile Things  
 for a Moment of Forced Optimism, a Moment I will  
 need so I can cut my leg and not my wrist,  
 remembering you once told me you thought I would  
 look nice in that grey polo and those dark jeans,  
 and after all, nothing is more American than  
 hiding scars  
 to uphold and satisfy our desire for  
 illusion, for the illusion  
 everything's okay,  
 and we're not just creatures dying slowly,  
 in the front seats of fast cars,  
 comforted only by the churning voices  
 on the radio and the house of clouds  
 above, both so enchanting in the moonlight

## Childhood Unpleasantries and Such

it's such an unpleasant feeling  
 walking in, only half conscious from the sun,  
 to find your mother deliberately and quite aggressively  
 hacking apart chunks of pigs' feet.  
 you instantly flee, no point in staying to watch  
 the process of boiling and of crumbling  
 and of total disintegration.  
 if you do, you might be thrust out of your house,  
 pulled back by a hook in your gut  
 to your great grandmother's village in Zhytomyr  
 where you're running barefoot,  
 feet barely holding traction on the slick paths  
 of mud and rotting dandelion leaves and chicken shit,  
 until you arrive at a hut and stare through the open doorway,  
 mouth agape and catching flies,  
 at your grandfather and your teenaged uncle  
 shirtless and grinning and bathed in sweat and the blood of the pig  
 that Marusya Grigoryivna is making her holodets from this evening.  
 don't take a step forward you'll slip! it's too late—  
 you're falling face first into one of the blood puddles  
 and tasting the iron lazily stroke your gums.  
 you wouldn't want to be at a long table at twilight,  
 surrounded by looming adults with unwashed hair— that reeks of  
     cigarette smoke and various  
 unidentified oils—  
 being served a large chunk of holodets.  
 it'll look at you, the gelatin trembling under your disgusted gaze, the  
     parsley sadly wilting on the  
 top;  
 mean and mocking in the face of your distress.  
 so hastily retreat outdoors and wait  
 until the smells of bones and garlicky hooves  
 will be safely contained in the contents of the refrigerator.

## Old Spice

My father's aftershave is laced  
 with the scent of high seas adventure:  
 Pimento Berry,  
 Clary Sage,  
 the spices of secret places.  
 I pretend he travels  
 to exotic locations  
 whenever he is gone.  
 Sailing on a ship  
 identical to the one  
 that adorns his aftershave.  
 Riding wave after wave  
 until he determines  
 enough distance is between us.  
 Innocently, I wonder  
 Does he live on a peninsula?  
 An archipelago?  
 An island where fantasies come true?  
 When I miss him  
 I take out his aftershave,  
 rubbing it like Jeannie's bottle,  
 wishing for his grand return  
 when I can once again  
 watch him shave,  
 shake and splash,  
 his scent  
 back into my landlocked life.

## Home is Where Things Can't Kill You

The familiar, electric hum of fluorescent bulbs moved through the air surrounding the gas station as a bus pulled up. Stained from years of wear and tear, the bus could have told its own story as a young man drove the large machine. Jimmy looked up to his rearview mirror, a small ornament which looked like a house hung from the reflective object. *Do this quickly.* Jimmy thought as he parked his trusty machine. He was almost out of fuel and aware that he needed to be in and out of that place in no time. Running over to the gas tanks with containers of his own, he tried to collect as much as he could when he swore he heard the faint sound of footsteps. *Shit!* He grabbed the bat that he had been carrying in his backpack, large nails protruded from all sides, dried blood covered the spikes. Sweating frantically, Jimmy swiveled his head fast, looking for any sign of life. *Maybe it was in my head? No, it's never in my head.* The laugh of a little girl came from behind, and he turned fast.

A girl with bright red hair, around seven or eight years old, stood looking up at him. The anxious pounding of Jimmy's heart threatened to break his chest open as he spoke.

"I've never seen you before," he said.

"Have you seen my mommy?" the girl asked.

"That won't fucking work now," Jimmy said as his grip on the bat tightened.

"You're no fun!" The voice of the girl became deep.

A horrible snapping sound rang out as the girl became distorted, stretching out and shrieking as her eyes became red. Taller and demonic looking, the thin, terrifying figure showed its long-yellowed teeth and screamed in Jimmy's face. Not giving the beast time to think, Jimmy smashed it in the face with his bat and grabbed his gas can, running back to the bus. *Things are never fucking easy in this world!* When he got inside he started the engine; he could wait to fill up the bus anyway. The monster's shrieks subsided as it regained focus and noticed its target getting away. With a terrifying scream it jumped at the bus as Jimmy tried to drive away, its claws dug into the sides.

"Get off!" Jimmy yelled as he tried to load a gun.

The creature climbed to the front of the bus and tore off the hood. Jimmy fired at the beast to stall it from tearing up the engine. It screeched when a bullet tore through its arm, but it did not stop. Terror flooded over Jimmy as he ran to the back of the bus, pushing his belongings aside as he ran, and then the monster reached in and tore out part of the engine. Jimmy broke the back window and jumped out before the bus erupted into a violent torrent of flames and exploded. He hit the pavement hard, and his breath was knocked from his chest. He heard the monster's shrill wails as it ran away, fire consuming its body. *It will be back. They always come back.* But he did not care about the monster in that moment, as he watched the machine that had kept him safe for years, burn down. He stumbled over to the blaze, trying to find anything he could salvage, but did not find anything. *Move.* Quickly, he turned and ran.

Jimmy was walking in the middle of nowhere, fields and fields rolled on for miles. A broken-down car with blood staining the windows sat empty. Hours had passed since the crash, and the sun was starting to show just over the horizon. *I'm vulnerable out here.* He then saw a town in the distance. His lips felt dry, his tongue was rough. He knew that there would not be relief when he made it to the town though, but where could he go anyway? At least he could hide in the buildings if that creature came back to get him. Jimmy walked on to the town. The buildings were run down, and dust and dirt stuck to the sides showing the age. He took note of the broken glass on the street and followed it to a window where a skeleton leaned out of its frame.

Cautiously, Jimmy walked into a building that had once been a restaurant, judging by the tables inside. He searched and found water bottles. Just as he was looking through the old bottles of beer and whiskey, music started to play. *Fuck!* He then heard footsteps in the distance, the scratching of fingernails for atmosphere.

"You morons are starting to get on my nerves with your atmospheric bullshit!" Jimmy shouted.

A gust of wind from behind came to warn Jimmy, but it was too late. A hand covered his mouth and a figure dragged him back.

He tried to fight, but the figure had wrapped one arm around his own so that he could not fight. He looked up and saw the figure's white mask, pristine even though Jimmy knew that the figure had probably gotten it red with the blood of its victims before. In a panic, he bit into the figure's hand and it made him jump. Jimmy grabbed a whiskey bottle and smashed it over the figure's head, but it did not bring it down. The figure lunged, but just then a machete sliced through its chest and pulled back in. The figure fell into a pool of its blood and a young woman stood behind holding the bloody weapon. *She saved me?* Jimmy thought as he stared.

"I told you idiots before not to kill each other in my home!" The woman yelled.

"You saved me!" Jimmy said.

"Get out!" She yelled. "Before I kill you too!"

"Thank you so much!" Jimmy yelled. "I've never met anyone not willing to kill me!"

"Big fucking surprise, now get out!" the woman yelled.

"You have no idea what it's been like! One minute you're feeling safe, then BAM, another one of those guys comes to kill you!" Jimmy could not contain his excitement as he reached for the woman as she tried to walk away.

The stranger's eyes widened, and she swung her weapon at him.

"That's it!" She yelled.

"Wait, wait! Don't kill me!" Jimmy shrunk back as he yelled.

The woman's expression changed, and her eyes widened at the sound of Jimmy's terror.

"Wait... why are you scared?" she asked.

"Because I'll die if you stab me," Jimmy said.

"Are... Are you mortal?" She dropped her weapon.

"Yes." Jimmy slowly got up

"That's impossible! All mortals are dead! There is no way!"

"Look, I don't care what you believe but I know that your friend is going to wake up soon and kill me, so I'm leaving." Jimmy grabbed a bottle of water and ran out of the building.

"Wait! I'm coming with you!" The woman ran out of the building.

"You need me!"

Jimmy would have argued, but he hadn't had company in so long. He could not do anything about it anyway. His lovely bus was gone

and without it he was a moving target; he needed her. "We need to find a bus or vehicle." He said. The woman nodded.

"And fast," she said as she pointed to the figure with the pristine white mask standing in the doorway. The wound from the weapon looked as though it had healed, and the only evidence of the injury was the blood on his clothing and the hole in his shirt.

"He won't run after us, but there will be more." The woman said as they walked. The two walked on, knowing it would be hard to find a vehicle that was in good condition.

"How did you survive?" the woman asked.

"I was living in a bus and some little girl monster destroyed it." Jimmy said. "I'm Jimmy. What's your name?"

The woman was silent for a moment.

"Oh, come on, it's not like I can steal your identity now." Jimmy said.

"My name is Allyson," she finally said.

"You're like them?" Jimmy asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Then why are you helping me?" Jimmy asked. Allyson looked thoughtful but did not say anything.

The two were silent for a while as they walked, and they eventually reached the site of the crash. The pile of rubble depressed Jimmy as he walked over. Allyson did not speak as he picked through the remains, finding a small, half-melted ornament. Putting it in his pocket, Jimmy walked on with Allyson.



## City of Sorrow

Hot and raspy, the seat digs into my sweaty skin  
 The sweltering summer sun beats down,  
 yet around the area I see  
 a few white beaters, and nice bright beam.  
 Mercedes Benz it screams  
 and my mind can't believe,  
 how am I stuck in this box, and that person drives my dream?  
 Meanwhile the flavor of the smoky beef, and all of those meats, scent  
 the air  
 and I hear a few swears,  
 here and there.  
 Now that I'm grown, or so I believe  
 I think about that Benz, and almost dream  
 That Benz and wait, what about those men?  
 They probably went to the village, or over east.  
 Maybe to the falls, or over to the creek.  
 And so I speak, praying that my friends remain be.  
 Long Live Up Next\*, but never may it be,  
 Long Live my friend, for he was beat.

\*Tyreece Watson

## Fauna



Digital, 2018

## Misty

As I awkwardly hit the notes on a handmade Steinway grand piano by comparing the sheet music notes to my chart of piano keys, the rich tones of this flared version of a Steinway filled the room with full-bodied tones, mellow and well-tuned. I struggled.

My wife of 45 years picked out this particular piano from an entire store selection of handmade Steinways. Each piano sounded quite different and unique. Lula was able to sit down and create music that sounded like a full orchestra playing without any music sheets or formal lessons. When Lula played in the background, friends on the telephone actually asked me, “Which station are you listening to?” The music flowed out, rich and melodic, without copying any tunes or music.

Her natural music contrasted to my one note wonder as I tried to play “Misty.” “I’m as helpless as a kitten in a tree,” as I struggled to get through the sheet of musical notes that would flow into her favorite song. Surviving cancer and bad back surgeries for 16 years put stress on our lives and made her dependent on opioid painkillers. She angered easily and my response was self-control.

The train of musical notes grew as I mastered another line and added to what became deciphered musical code from that sheet of dots with little flags and tails. At last, my perseverance reached the culmination of both pages. The melody actually sounded like “Misty” and I even threw in a few chords. As Lula smiled, I had accomplished what at first seemed impossible.

My rendition of “Misty” came only shortly before Lula would depart.

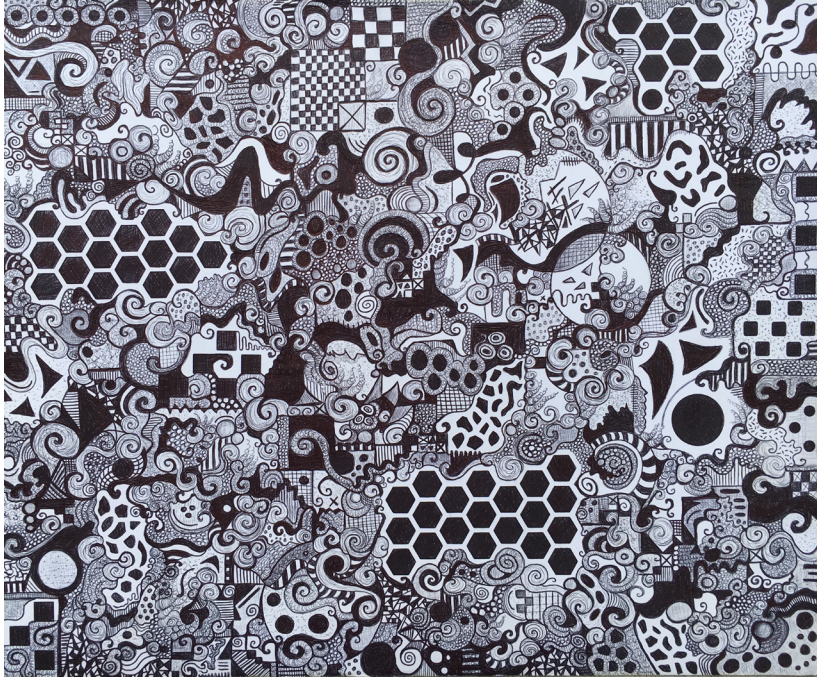
Her doctor demanded she get diagnosed for unusual symptoms at Howard County General Hospital Emergency Room prior to receiving her renewal prescription for monthly painkillers. Her spleen was blocked and needed immediate surgery. Both kidneys had failed and toxins showed up in the blood tests. The platelets that help our blood to clot from simple wounds became non-existent, requiring two hours of pressure to stop the bleeding from the blood test needle. Her liver showed damage. The hospice doctor assigned thought that her cancer had returned in her bone marrow. Listening to the

diagnosis and test results depressed me, but bolstered Lula’s courage. She had enough pain and surgeries through surviving over 16 years... enough is enough.

My wife of 45 years signed herself out of the hospital that night and refused any further surgery. With my help, she struggled into her clothes, careful to keep the pressure bandage on that small blood test puncture wound. The night air bit into our flesh, cold and icy. As in the ending of her favorite song “Misty”, I would very soon also be “On my Own...I’m too misty and too much in love.”

*Author’s Note: Erroll Garner created the song and music for “Misty” in 1954. Among the notable artists performing this song include Johnny Mathis, Ray Stevens, Count Basie, Bing Crosby, and Sarah Vaughn to name only a handful.*

## Containment



14" x 17" bristol paper, ink pen, 2016

## The Kraken

Kraken, creature of chaos,  
 Devouring all in your path.  
 Myths so strong you instill fear in even the mightiest.  
 You are glorious.  
 Opening your beak to consume the ships of cowards—  
 Or the most noble.  
 Their status means nothing to you, for they are all your fans.  
 Their screams reflect their admiration for you.  
 You are superior.  
 They praise you.  
 As some would sacrifice their own kin for a false god,  
 They rally their ships for you  
 As you swallow each soul one by one.  
 They want to see your power,  
 Your destruction.  
 You are divine, creature of chaos.

# contributor's notes

**Sophie Betlejewski** is in her third year at Howard Community College and is hoping to take her writing skills with her after she gets her associates degree this spring. She began an internship writing articles for an online magazine in January.

**Audrey Boytim** is a current HCC student who intends to major in English and ultimately get a Masters in Library Science. When she's not listening to music, reading, or spending time with her fiancé and cat, she's likely making short films.

**Bianca Burvick** is a current Communication Studies major at Howard Community College. Bianca moved from her hometown in North Carolina to pursue becoming an investigative journalist in the DMV area. While her primary goal is to develop a career in the journalism and media industry, her love for creative expression is the defining motive.

**Mr. Vincent Carmody** is a retired Department of Defense employee. He was born and raised in Connecticut and received his BA in history from the University of Connecticut in 1982. He lives in Howard County with his family and is attending classes at HCC.

**Roger Chang** fills a void with the help of a Special Angel, who emerges from the lyrics of a song. Happiness is not an eHarmony arrangement.

**Marcus Chewning** is a student at Howard Community College and majors in English. Some of Marcus's hobbies are writing, reading, playing video games, and spending time with loved ones. In addition to those hobbies, he plans on transferring to a school which offers a creative writing major or track.

**Brynnli Cortes** is a liberal arts student in her final semester at Howard Community College. When she isn't working at her job or forgetting when her assignments are due, she can often be found playing video games with friends or drawing. Her favorite characters in Smash Brothers Ultimate are Zelda and Palutena, and she also plays Shulk on the side.

**Wayne Crim** is a young man trying to figure out his life and find himself while enduring the daily grind of this world. Wayne enjoys reflecting on life lessons taught by his daily experiences and the influence important people in his life.

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

**Emily Grace Dachis** is an intermediate writer who has had her work published numerous times since the age of 14. She currently resides in Clarksville, Maryland and is a full-time student at Howard Community College working to attain her Associate's Degree.

**Torrey Dolan** is an illustrator, writer, and filmmaker who received an Associate of Arts Degree at Howard Community College in Fall 2018. She enjoys drawing and writing stories where she can experiment with character writing and surreal ideas. She is currently working towards a degree in Interdisciplinary Studies, with a minor in English & Literature at Stevenson University.

**Thomas Engleman** is full time visual arts faculty member at Howard Community College. He earned an MFA in Printmaking from the University of Miami FL and maintains an active studio life exhibiting nationally and internationally.

**Kourtney Erin** is a first-year, non-traditional student at Howard Community College majoring in English. She is originally from Youngstown, Ohio, and previously attended Spelman College. Her poems have previously been published in the 2012 volume of Spelman College's literary journal, *Aunt Chloe*. In addition to poetry, she also enjoys writing fiction, making grocery lists, keeping a detailed planner, and scribbling lyrics on the cardboard backing of notebooks.

**Katherine Farrell** of Ellicott City is a retired public health physician who has been an oil painter for 25 years and also explores other art media including printmaking. Her arts education has been primarily at Howard Community College and in private classes and workshops.



She has had work in numerous exhibitions in Maryland and in Ireland, where she grew up.

**Chris Grenchik** is an amateur writer and an aspiring historian who enjoys writing as much, if not more than, reading books. He started writing short stories in high school and still writes some for a Facebook page. This is his fourth semester at Howard Community College before he transfers to a four-year school to further both his writing and history careers.

**Hebah Haddad** is a Howard Community College alum. She loves traveling, trying all types of food, and taking pictures at every opportunity she gets. She enjoys summertime, music, and reading.

**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](http://www.facebook.com/heandmehiking). She is currently working on a book about the grandest examples of the southern live oak.

**Jazmyn Hensley** is a Communication student in her sophomore year. Jazmyn was inspired to begin writing again as she took a creative writing course as an elective in her first semester at HCC. Her favorite form of creative writing is poetry.

**Farah-Amanda I. Hizoune** is an English major in her sophomore year at HCC. She is a full-time employee at a commercial real estate firm in downtown Baltimore where she lives with her cat, Josephine. She is a fashion blogger, stylist, makeup artist, and writer in her free time. An expert shopper, Farah loves to spend time planning and executing stylish outfits. She is Moroccan and speaks broken French as well as Darija, a Moroccan dialect of Arabic. She is currently attempting to break into the local Baltimore magazine fashion editing division and working on her magnum opus to be published.

**Steven Hollies**, briefly and locally famous for his flamboyant mohawk, is now better known as an English major, scholar, storyteller, poet, volleyball coach, nuisance to his professors, wordsmith who enjoys crafting long sentences, “Steeeeeve,” and “that guy who used to have a cool mohawk.”

**Gauri Jayasinghe** is a current HCC student.

**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, will always be his muse.

**Nehaal Khan** is a sophomore in college and an avid fan of the arts.

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

**Michelle Kreiner** is a preschool teacher on the campus of Howard Community College. She has an Associate’s degree in Early Childhood Education and a Bachelor’s Degree in English. While Michelle’s passion is writing poetry, she has recently begun work on a collection of personal essays. Previous publication credits include *The Muse* and *Life As An [insert label here]*.

**Jenn Laczko** was born on March 5, 1998. She was home-schooled and was taught according to her interests in addition to what was necessary. She enjoys crocheting, painting, drawing, writing, researching, and exploring nature. Currently, she is pursuing a Business Administration Degree at HCC and plans to transfer to UMBC by fall of 2019.

**Jenny Binckes Lee** lives, writes, & whispers to growing things in Kensington, Maryland. Stringing words together is how she reminds herself to notice bravery, kindness, & the quicksilver beauty of small things.

**Clarisa de León** was born in San Diego, grew up in Prince George’s County, was dragged to Virginia Beach for a year, and then Hawaii for four. She’s moved back to Maryland for a year as a pit stop to reconnect with family before moving on to Boston for two years.

**Jenna Line** is a Visual Arts student at Howard Community College.

**William Lowe** teaches literature, ESL writing, and Asian studies courses at HCC. His poem “Mono No Aware” is a set of interconnected haiku written to a music progression on a guitar tuned in open E. In this open tuning, his guitar began to speak



Japanese. He believes that when a guitar begins to speak Japanese, it is wise to listen.

**Emma K. McDonnell** is a visual artist based in central MD, primarily creating small-scale original artworks inspired by nature, magic, and dreams. You can find Emma's work on Facebook and Instagram @technicolorfamiliar or at ekmcdonnell.com.

**Nyla McGrier** is a current HCC student.

**Lucia Mollaioli** was raised all over the world and speaks Italian, French, and Spanish. Lucia has been in the Army, plays the violin and piano, is a mother of three, a wife, and works for the government. She enjoys writing and desires to bring her readers into the present with her.

**Naomi Narat** is a pre-nursing student who hopes to transfer to nursing school in the Fall of 2019. Her goal is to receive her doctor of nursing practice degree and specialize in pediatrics. She developed a strong passion for writing at a very young age. She is currently working on her first novel, but she also enjoys writing short stories and poetry on the side.

**Huyen Nguyen** is her name. She is currently studying at HCC to be a nurse. She loves writing and it has been her passion her whole life, but she never really exposed herself to the literary world. She has a degree in English and a minor in creative writing. She loves nature and uses imagery to convey emotions in most of her poems and writings. She hopes you enjoy her piece "The Winter Air"!

**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.

**Fola Oludemi** was born in Lagos, Nigeria. She currently lives in the United States. She is currently a full-time student working towards a Bachelor's degree in Psychology.

**Victor Razuri** is a Business major who enjoys writing on the side. His preferred style is stories with a twist ending to make the reader think and question.

**Natalie Rudin** is an HCC student majoring in Communications and is a music teacher and an amateur poet.

After nearly a decade of playing dives and gutter halls with a metal band, **Tommy Whiting** returned to school and found theater where performance became an obsession once again. Outside of the theater, Tommy dedicates much of his time to writing poetry and songs, having done so since his early teens. He will be transferring to The University of Maryland, College Park in the fall where he hopes to finish his performance degree in musical theater and break in to the DC theater scene.

**Samantha Wypych** is a college student at Howard Community College. She lives in Fulton, Maryland with her parents, brother, and her dog that is a pitbull-terrier mix. She is working towards majoring in Social Work and eventually becoming an addictions or domestic violence therapist.



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.18

Deadline: March 1, 2020

Email submissions to [themuse@howardcc.edu](mailto:themuse@howardcc.edu)

Visit [www.howardcc.edu/themuse](http://www.howardcc.edu/themuse) for submission guidelines.

Dirty me up  
Kiss me all over  
Strike me with your knife  
With your piercing darkness

—Marcus Chewning, “*Page Without A Face*”

