

The Muse

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The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

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Haunting

"...for better or worse, you're through."—Susan Johnson

Come endure the house of horrors!
Spend a night inside its drafty windows.
Legend has it no one lives to witness dawn.
Do you dare try to win the overnight prize?

Do not look into mirrors,
For, you will see ghoulish figures
None so terrifying as what will replace
What should be your own familiar face

Instead, you will see there is a zit
Or worse a weak-ass eyebrow game.
Why, oh why didn't you pack some dry
Shampoo?

Cobwebs. So many cobwebs hang
In the corners. In the dark.
Something moves them, a breath
A clown, a psychopath, a monster,
A rapidly approaching due date for which you are entirely
unprepared!

Footsteps now, that belong to a man with a gun
Approaching your child's classroom.
It's happening right now and you are not there to stop it.
What kind of mother are you?

Relax. It's not real! Have a nice harmless coffee.
A hot pumpkin spice latte, perhaps.
But whatever you do, don't dare let them see
How basic you are. You do NOT want to be basic.

Thunder, it's storming now and
The basement is probably flooding.
That tree sure is swaying a lot
It would be a shame if it fell on your entire family.

You'll hear a low growl down the hall
Coming from that room, you know the one.
Yellow glowing eyes are peering out
Climate changing, early budding.

Skeletons, vampires, spiders, rats
Secrets, politicians, aging, getting fat.
Moaning, groaning, chains that clatter
No response, runny nose, runny cake batter.

What happens if my cat dies?
And the ground is frozen and I can't bury her?
What if my husband meets a prettier, younger-
That thing's probably cancer; it's for sure, definitely cancer!

Do not fear, you have a choice
Run away free or stay and get eaten.
Nobody said it was an easy choice,
Either way, you will not see the light of day
From inside this house.

The Worst Year of My Life

Blue and red lights were flashing; I was conscious, of course. The Ambulance was racing fast, *it felt to me like we were FLYING*, my mother holding onto me. I was about the age of eight when it all happened fast and quick. We were rushed to the hospital, having to wait like animals while the towel was getting almost soaked with BLOOD! No one would attend me...

It was a hot summer day one morning, the sun beaming hard like a hot stove. Mom whipping up some food for breakfast. My older brother is on his way to summer school. He was in elementary in the year 2008 and so was I, in about 4th grade. We had a lot of friends to talk to, play around with, and much more. I had it good; I could say that I had it awesome. Mom gave me food, clothing, and more. I felt like the king of the house. Thanks to my parents as a kid I had everything I needed. Being eight years old was probably one of many intensive years of my life. Because life sometimes just hits you hard and you remember the worst moments ever. *As a kid I always remember the worst things that happen to me and my brain traces them back.* Sometimes I think something might just be inside of my mind that collects bad data. My mother gets a call from my aunt and they talk,

Halo, quien es?

Si, es carmen ya voy a llegar a tu casa!

Okay esta bien hay los vemos.

I ask my mother *who is it?* and she tells me *it's your aunt that called.* How did I know that so quick? I asked myself. *I might be a SIDEKICK or something!* But she said she's coming over because she didn't work. I soon ask my mom if we are going to go somewhere because earlier that day, she had told me that I was going to go with her to the store.

Mami, vamos a ir a la tienda hoy? I said.

No, hoy no porque no hay tiempo hoy es tarde y luego va a venir tu hermano.

Okay, ESTA BIEN!! But I knew inside me that I was furious because it was a promise.

You couldn't tell me no -then I would become the Incredible Hulk. Being the stubborn little kid that I was, I got mad when my mother told me to sweep the floor and then mop. Eight-year-old me wasn't happy about the situation, so I went running towards the deck at a full sprint. The giant booster seat is sitting right there but I don't see it. I trip over the chair. One at the bottom, middle, and top... I punch and break the bottom one with my right arm. *Wait I'm invincible! No way! WHAT!!*, my dumb ass said. Blood oozing from my hand splattering all over the floor, glass, and all over the ground. I had a huge v-shaped cut showing off my bone. I call my mom: *MOM, MOM come here!"*

She said, what happened?

I'm bleeding. I... I... cut myself.

This woman turns pale, I tell you pale white, she dashes like the FLASH to the kitchen grabbing a towel. She sits me down on the sofa and tells me, *Everything is going to be okay.* My aunt grabs the phone and calls 9-1-1. I'm worried. The ambulance flew because as soon as the phone call was done, they appeared at the door. One of them said: *Let's open and check.* They saw for a quick second. Then my brother said, *YOUR BONE!!* He tells me that you could see the bone moving with the tendons and ligaments. The other one said, *no - wait until they get there.* Finally, we get there, and they pull me out. Hours pass. No sewing. Blood rushing. They only came inside my room to check up on me. *Why the hell aren't they sewing me?! I'm dying over here.* I went into a deep sleep. I had a dream; I find myself in the same exact location.

Hello, is anyone here...

You're going to Dieeee!!

Woaaahh excuse me whoooooo is in heerrreeeee!!!

You're going to Dieeee!!!

Hey... don't play with me that way...

Then the silence grew stronger.

No one is in the building not even my mother, and I didn't know what to do because only the lights of my room were on, not even the person who slept on the other side of the room was in there.

I was getting worried. *Hello.... Nothing! Hello... Nothing!* Then someone said,

Why are you here?

I need them to sew my arm I'm bleeding out.

NO look again! But I couldn't see this person.

So, I look..... *NOOOOOOOOOOOOO! My-y-y-y H-a-a-and!*

I was so worried I didn't know where to go or what to do. But I said to myself I have to calm down, calm down; the only thing I can do is pray to God, ask him for help because I couldn't do it. Minutes passed as I was praying with my eyes open because I was scared. Then I abruptly saw something moving in the glaring light. I heard it again...

YOU'RE GOING TO DIIIEEEE!!

The massive thing comes at me and rushes through the room, but I can't do anything. I'm stuck and my feet won't move, nothing moves. It moves faster and quicker than ever.

What I do, what I do, what I do?

I'll tell you what to do DIE!

It jumps at me to annihilate me. I close my eyes and say, *The end of me.*

Someone said,

You're not alone MY SON,

Who is this? I ask.

I'm your father God, Jehovah the one who sent his only son to this world to die in the cross. You're going to get healed and everything is going to be alright.

There's like a force field around me because the massive thing can't touch me.

You're going to see my power today! I rebuke you with all my power! Demon soul!

The massive thing perishes.

I wake up shocked.

They came in my room and said, *Doctor's not here at the moment, you are going to a New Hospital.* I see mom, the other guy. Dad shows up. They say I had no type of glass in my hand. That was a huge relief for me. My skin was soaked with blood. *My arm! It's here. God helped me. He's real,* I thought. They put me gently onto the ambulance cart and took me away with my dad following them. They sewed me at 11:00 PM at Children's Hospital.

Acceptance

A devil stands over me and says

You can never purge the evil from your soul

And with a defeated stare I answer back,

You do not need to convince me

Of what I already know

To Sedlec, An Exquisite Corpse¹

Screaming as bats flashed long fangs,
 I saw a woman in a long white dress and I screamed.
 Images of bones all around me—neither young nor old,
 a beauty hidden under skeletal clothes.
 The scary night. The scary halls. The girl in red and white roams them all.
 Moon and star caress with silver fingers,
 but a visitor in a cage below heaven in which morbid humanism
 hashes the view.
 Walking through a valley of dry bones
 When the next raid will hit. Koopa troopa—
 Running from the empty eye sockets staring me down.
 Death is the only guarantee.
 I'm freaking out Scoob, ahh! A ghost!
 Clattering bones waltz among their brethren in a cold dark catacomb
 to the devil's fiddle that stole their souls.

¹*Exquisite Corpse is a collaborative poetry game that traces its roots to the Parisian Surrealist Movement. Exquisite Corpse is played by several people, each of whom writes a word on a sheet of paper, folds the paper to conceal it, and passes it on to the next player for his or her contribution.*

—Academy of American Poets

Each of the poets listed below in alphabetical order wrote a line of the poem completely unaware of any other contribution. The (edited) poem is titled “To Sedlec, an Exquisite Corpse,” images of the Ossuary at Sedlec being the inspiration and only guidance. The work was created on the eve of Halloween 2019.

The Collective: Rory Bailey, Mert Baysal, Tierra Burris, Aria Carlson, Roger Chang, Sheeba Fallah, Alex Jeffrey, Iran Mazaherian, Aki Mofoluwaso, Lisa Nwanna, Will Paulus, Melissa Rayo, and Jayla Waters. Note that the lines of the poem do not correspond to the order in which the students are listed here.

The Cold Embrace



Claire Delilah, Delilah Claire

The waves crashed, unsolicited, against the granite cliffs that caged her in. She was blue, tempestuous. She was brine and temptation. The house above the cliffs was white, solid white and ever a looming ghost in the night, so bright it seemed to glow, even with the lights out. A young woman inhabited that house; her name was Claire, Claire Delilah VanDoren. Claire Delilah had been an odd child, an only child, surrounded by pretentious old money surnames, similar to her own, and countless parties with endless streams of people. "A suitor," the guests would offer, "for your very lovely Delilah." Her father would always decline, a polite "A proper offer when she is older" or a simple "Perhaps."

She wasn't old enough then to understand the weight of the VanDoren Dowry, as the old money population called it, or comprehend the value she wore on her head like an invisible price tag, but as she got older, she understood quite well. "A... peculiar girl, that Delilah." Nanny would take her into town, hold her small hand in her larger, older one and walk down the street at a brisk pace. The ladies would stare, hushed whispers behind lace gloved hands and looks that dripped morbid fascination. "Worth so much but with so little to offer." The boys would stand on the asphalt at recess and watch her, curious, but always cautious. Even the birds, Claire would insist, found a reason to stare at her soft pearly cheeks and her long seafoam hair. Claire found them peculiar just as well. Peculiar, an echo in the past, resounding off the walls of the empty white house above the cliffs. "Pe-culiar, pe-cu-liar."

Claire walked, with idle purpose, past sheet covered chairs and cream gauzed over mirrors. Her high heels tap-tap tap-tapped like a stucco empty heartbeat across the whitewashed floorboards, the sound swallowed by her white sheet covered furniture. The lights blazed in the glowing chandeliers above her seafoam head, and the distant sound of the ever crying sea called out to her through open windows.

There was a knock on the whitewood door, and Claire stopped walking. Her usual night rounds to check the white on white on white house just after the sun set. Her usual tap-tap tap-tapping

and her usual aquamarine dress. The knock was unusual, however. "Peculiar." The sea sang, and she opened the door, and a girl, sopping wet and dripping on Claire Delilah VanDoren's white marble front steps, with eyes like deep, endless seas, stared back at her with a look that bore straight through you. Her wet hair, so black it almost looked blue, and so long it almost touched those white marble steps, clung to her in seaweed like tendrils, slithering; spiraling. "Peculiar." The waves crashed, unsolicited, against the granite cliffs.

"May I come in?"

§

It called to her and sang and screamed and protested against the cliffs that caged it in. She was blue, tempestuous. She was brine and temptation. She was warm brown skin and a misty smile that let show sharp white teeth, the only thing colorless on her. Claire Delilah VanDoren walked down the streets now, a darker hand in hers, casually and with a leisurely pace. People stared but for an entirely different reason. "Peculiar."

§

At the age nine, a little girl supposedly drowned at the bottom of the cliffs near the VanDoren estate. She was pale as a sheet and sopping wet when her parents found her on the white marble steps hours later, seaweed and a white nightgown tangled up on her legs. Before she had died, she had been worth the VanDoren Dowry, but after, well, after that all the suitors just wanted her money.

§

"Delilah." And there was a street and hands, she was holding a hand. "May I come in?" She had... her eyes were blue, possibly "Peculiar." Dark brown and— "Delilah." A woman spoke, with shoulder length blonde hair, dyed, surely. She looked at Delilah and you could almost smell the impatience that dripped off her crisp tangerine, not orange, blouse and her cotton, not pressed linen, slacks, not trousers. "I asked you about the girl?" She tapped her pen against a notepad she kept on hand at all times and in consistent intervals. One could never guess how often she would or wouldn't be holding her notepad. It was more often than not often. "The girl, Delilah."

Delilah twisted her fingers together in her lap and stared down at her hands. Her leg tapped incessantly against the grey carpeted floor. The woman sighed, "Delilah we can't get anywhere if you refuse to talk to me." There was nothing to talk about, Delilah was sure. Tap-tap tap-tap-tap...

The two made an odd, marvelous pair to stare at and whisper about behind cloth and wood fans. Behind hands. Behind parasols. Claire Delilah VanDoren was a beautiful girl, she really was, with soft, pale hair and gem blue eyes. The gossip in the town recently said she had inherited all the VanDoren wealth after the tragic accident her parents had suffered while on a trip. Tragic, they called it, unfortunate; sad; lackluster. Nora told her to ignore it. Nora who had hair longer than the ocean was deep. Nora who was shiny and bright and lovely. Nora, who held her hand even when the gossip wouldn't stop. Nora who held her hand now while people whispered, and stared, but Delilah ignored them for the beauty beside her. She watched deep ocean eyes, lips move on new, foreign words never spoken before. It was enchanting, to say the least. "How about a trip to the ocean, hm? The breeze is just right today." The two drifted to the ocean on excited feet, driven on by the hushed whispers and fueled by scones. Feet touched sand and then eyes met again for a moment. Dark blue to light. Nora never let go of her hand. "Shall we?" The sea... called and then everything was aquamarine, no, white. Everything was white, but the girl wasn't, she wa-

"As our time is not being used wisely, and as I do have other patients to speak to it is probably best if we end early." It was not a question, so Delilah did not have to answer. The woman stood up, all pressed clothes and her clipboard, and her impatience that smelled like fabric softener and too strong perfume.

She left the room behind, stood right outside the door and began to talk about Delilah like Delilah didn't have ears and couldn't clearly hear what she was saying. "These delusions," she turned up her nose the man across from her, "are only going to get worse if we don't treat them." Delilah could not see the man but she didn't need to see him to know exactly what he looked like. He would be stock still and expressionless; his left ear would tick, however, and his right hand would stuff into his pocket. He would smile at the woman, unconcerned, as he lied through his teeth.

"All in due time, Dr. Price, all in good time. Delilah, let's go."

So, Delilah stopped twisting her fingers and staring down at her hands; she looked up, across the room, at the door the man now stood in. His smile was gone, but his eyes told her everything she needed to know.

§

Peeling wallpaper greeted Delilah the moment she stepped into the House above the cliffs. The air smelled of stale salt and paint and something she couldn't place. It reeked of old money and hopelessness. Delilah never liked the way hopelessness felt as it crawled across her skin like a thousand and one ladybugs. Lucky, sure, to the average person. Delilah's creepy crawly ladies didn't feel so lucky to her. Her eyes trained on the faded, ripped painting at the end of the hall. The frame was mirrored, dusty, and seemed to reflect life inside as opposed to out. She was jarred by the sound of a door slamming behind her, and she whirled to face Mr. Whiber. "We do not have all day, Miss Claire. I can't have your nonsense mind waste my time the same way you waste Dr. Price's." He walked past her at a brisk pace and brought a whiff of stale, old air with him. Delilah bristled, but was not intending to do much other moving. She cocked her head, slightly, as he walked past her.

Delilah held many things, but she held no nonsense inside of her. She liked to hold birds and flowers and people. Delilah didn't hold nonsense, not the way Mr. Whiber and Dr. Price seemed to think. The woman with seafoam hair nodded at Delilah in agreement from across the room. Mr. Whiber brushed past Delilah in favor of the rickety stairs that led up to the second floor in what she could guess was a never ending spiral. She'd never walked the halls of this House before, not in person, but she knew where all the bedrooms were, and how long it took to run across the length of the ballroom.

"I haven't talked to anyone in ages," the woman said with a small smile. "You seem kind."

§

Nora pressed dark fingers against Delilah's cheek gently, some hoping not to rouse her from her sleep, some part of her hoping she did. Delilah didn't wake, but she stirred momentarily, her face turning towards Nora's hand. Nora smiled softly, for a moment, then drifted away down the steps. She'd never liked the way Delilah's

house was always so colorless. White walls. White drapes. White floors, furniture, faces. But where everything else was white, Nora and Delilah were a bright splash of color begging not to go unnoticed.

Not one thing in Delilah's closet was white.

Not one bit of Nora was colorless.

As Nora stepped onto the last step it creaked in protest, as it always did, but she paid it no mind. She headed down the hall with the portrait of the VanDoren family at the end. The only thing in the house, that she'd seen so far, that contained any ounce of color, and even then it was stark blacks and deeply hued blues.

§

The room was in a state of disarray, like someone had left it hurriedly and no one had ever bothered to pick it up. Delilah was almost certain that no one had the stomach to come into the home of such a gruesome murder. Save for, at present, Mr. Whiber and herself. Delilah stepped around a fallen perfume bottle. It was thick, pinked glass with a puff on the end. Delilah didn't know what the puff was called, and in all honesty it wasn't majorly important, but it still bothered her nonetheless.

"We aren't going to find what I came looking for here."

Delilah looked up to find Mr. Whiber stock still and expressionless; his left ear ticked, and his right hand stuffed into his pocket. "I can't say I'm not disappointed, Delilah, I can't say I'm not." It was not a question, so Delilah did not have to answer. She stepped over the bottle on the floor and went to stand next to Mr. Whiber. "This field trip was a majorly disappointing waste of my time, Delilah, I'll have you know I'm quite dissatisfied." This wasn't a statement, even if it sounded like one.

Delilah rapped her foot against the carpet sharply in succession. Tap-tap tap-tap-tap, "I go to therapy. You go to where I want." Mr. Whiber sighed, "Nonsense mind, Delilah, I don't have all day." The woman next to Delilah pointed towards the sea and sighed, "I miss her enormously." Delilah nodded in sympathy and Mr. Whiber stuffed his other hand in his other pocket.

"Aquamarine," Delilah muttered, "and ocean."

The Cold Child

Waves washing over skin and bone,
 heels dug into the soggy sand,
 a body lay cradled in the cold.
 Over a wrecked wooden sailboat,
 seaweed hangs like gallows above
 the shore of an unforgiving
 sea. The frail body, still alive
 only in spirit, gallivants
 free of the weight of life and pain,
 leaving behind short memories
 of a short life.

Leftovers

The sheer vastness of the ruins before me instilled a sense of creeping dread. This was not my first foray into the unknown. Decrepit structures, some clearly still in the process of construction when the residents met their untimely demise, stood as silent as the atmosphere surrounding them. It was like a graveyard, reaching several stories into the sky above.

I hadn't noticed how quiet it was. There were no traces of animal life, as if nature itself had abandoned this place. The smog stretching over the ruins gave everything an uncompromisingly gray coloration, and I knew that nothing save for pitch darkness would be here once the sun went down. So, I trudged along, moving as fast the rubble would allow.

"Find anything you can," my handlers said before I left. "Records are our first and foremost priority." If I were the insubordinate type, I would have told them right then how futile that was. Anything that might have survived the initial calamity here, God knows what, had surely crumbled to dust long ago. My handlers were confident, however, and confident enough to give me coordinates for the structure I was now struggling to find.

Passing crumbling statues of long dead men, I began to think about the circumstances that led me here. My colleagues regard me as an archeologist, but more than a few government agencies consider me to be nothing more than a looter. To be under their employ now is nothing short of disappointing, but they had to catch me eventually. I guess I should count my lucky stars that they didn't put a bullet in my head and call it a day. Still, whatever it is they are searching for must be important, if they must resort to sending people like me into this irradiated hellhole.

A voice breaks over my radio, and I can identify an officer mumbling about checking in. I respond in kind, but the words don't mean much. Tracking my movements must be becoming more difficult, as I venture further into the urban decay. The call does shake me from my thoughts, however, and I realize I have almost made it to my destination. I make a quick right turn and a tall, proud structure stands before me. It is marred by age and soot, but that

must only bely its importance. Some kind of town square sits before the building, with more statues lining the edges. I realize that, if not for those statues, it would be hard to know if humans truly lived here at some point.

The front doors are blown off, with one visibly lying 20 meters away in the middle of the square. Before I step inside, I make one more call to the powers that be. The radio crackles as I press the button to transmit.

"Scout to Chief," I say, unfettered.

"Go ahead Scout." The transmission is garbled, static.

"Arrived on location, communications and tracking will be scrambled soon."

"Confirmed, transmit documents once they are acquired. Erase originals."

"Copy, requesting coordinates of extraction." Interference is rising.

"Will comply when documents are sent. Communications breaking up. Get it do—"

With that, my radio devolves into a flurry of static, so all I can do is shut it off. I make my way through the destroyed entrance, feeling as though I'm encroaching on a tomb.

As if stepping through a portal, the world on the other side is dark and quiet. Not even the wind reaches the inside of this place. My lights flicker on, clearly affected by the increasing radiation, and I am greeted by visible particulates hanging in the air. Compared to the city outside, the interior is well-preserved. Beyond the front desk, stairwells reach up to the second and third floors of the building. There are unintelligible words spread along the floors and walls; directions left behind from a society I don't understand. Thankfully, my handler was *kind* enough to provide me with translated building schematics.

My objective is in the director's office on the third floor, and I start my trek up the stairs. I can see that my first observation on entry may have been entirely incorrect, as I have to avoid holes in the stairs that were obscured by the all-encompassing shadows. At the top of

the stairs I can see that the scale of the structure is enormous, and in any other situation I would lament not being able to explore further. But this is a dead place; my expedition feels like nothing short of sacrilege, and my rising rad count shows my presence is unwanted.

Breaking open the door inscribed with indecipherable letters, I gather up all the documents I can find. I run down the stairs, carefully mirroring my previous steps and escape into the last vestiges of sunlight. My radio is still dead, but I scan and transmit what documents I can.

With my job done and no way to contact the handler, all I can do is wait. One of the square statues sits in front of me although the only pieces left standing are a pair of some poor chap's feet and a plaque below them. It reminds me of a story my father once told me as a child about a great and glorious ruler whose empire had long ago been consumed by the desert. Vestiges remain proclaiming the ruler's greatness, but at least the narrator was spared the silent dread of a destroyed civilization.

On the Stoop VII; No One Ever Dies- We All Just Melt Into the Texture



How To Not Die In Life

Laugh at it

The dehydrated koala bear tearing up from the wildfire smoke

The whale washing onto shore in a fleshy plastic mess

The Indiana couple drinking the brown from their faucets

The lead breaking the brains of destitute geniuses

Laugh at it

The assassination of a terrorist

The crash of '08

The grumbling of year-old bellies

The homeless blind jangling steel cups of disappointed hope

The drugged dreamer living fantasy on broken sidewalks

The millionaire actor stumbling their way onto the award stage

Laugh at it

The face of a mother just being told she has stage 3 cancer,
wondering how she will pay

The trans person being denied access to restrooms

The black teen in for weed possession, sharing a cell with a serial
rapist

The scent of snuffed dreams in bloodied school hallways

The sex slave being stabbed in the eye after not making quota

The broken backed, middle aged Amazon worker trying to lift
themselves by their bootstraps

Laugh at it

The children, the women, the young men spending whole lives in
sweatshops

The drone strike raining hell on a school bus of Yemen innocents

The Japanese man jumping off of an Apple production building

The Uighur in Chinese concentration camps

The Mexican child being ripped from their mother's bosom

Only for them to be unwashed, unfed, and violated

Laugh at it

Your own disgusting poverty, wretched existence

Working long hours to merely breathe in Death's air

In an uncaring society, that'll either tell you to get with the program

Or lie beside the residential pool of rat piss

Laugh at it

All of it, please

Even if your cracked lips are sewn shut

And the tongue is no longer there

Otherwise, you'll die

From a choke full of tears

Laugh at it, in the Face

Of Life and the Cards it deals you

And you'll become God

Over the Kingdom of Shit

The Fisherman

I cast my line into the waves, the bobber floating gently in the sea-green water. I adjusted my seat, the old wooden chair creaking as I did, the legs grinding against the moldy boards. An idle thought came to my head; I should probably replace the wood soon, just to make sure it doesn't fall apart next time I'm fishing. Making a mental note of it, I returned to my rod, the sun setting in the distance. I could almost see the moon shining in the sky, the stars twinkling around it.

With a nod, I looked back to the water. Of course, before I could continue fishing, I heard footsteps behind me. I turned to the source of the noise, and I could feel my expression sour slightly. Standing on the dock was a young woman in a lab coat, a reflective pair of glasses on her face and her clipped black hair hanging behind her to her neck. My sister, Marie. And there was only one reason she'd be here.

"Kyle..." She said in a familiar disapproving tone, and I internally sighed. *Here it comes...* I thought, and just like that my sister began to lecture. "When are you going to take this situation seriously? We're facing a crisis, and here you are, fishing like you don't even know what's happening. Like you don't even care about the crisis that humanity is going through."

I turned back to my fishing rod and rolled my eyes quietly. *If Marie had seen that, she would be lecturing me for another hour...* I grumbled internally as I looked up at the barely visible moon.

"And you just looked at it! You don't even care about the problem, even if you acknowledge it!" Marie shouted as I mentally cursed myself for giving her fuel. "And that isn't all, you're fishing in the ocean!"

A moment passed, as I considered what to say. I would probably regret this response, but it'd be worth it. "Yes, the ocean is where fishing happens," I said. "That isn't too much of a problem." I could practically see her face get red with anger.

"We're in Iowa! The middle of the continent!" Marie shouted at me, stomping on the dock. "You're fishing, in the ocean, in Iowa, and you don't think that's weird?!"

I rolled my eyes once more. *Of course, but there's not much I can do about it.* I thought to myself, even as I looked back to my sister to see that she's scowling at me.

"Ignoring every big problem and focusing on your own goals. Honestly Kyle, you're just like father." Marie spat, before her eyes widened and she covered her mouth, having realized what just came out.

...Right. That's it.

I rose from my chair, turning towards my sister. Oddly enough, I didn't feel angry. My posture was relaxed, my expression was serene, and I was just...calm.

"So." I said to the increasingly scared Marie. "I'm just like father, am I?"

I slowly walked over to her, as she began to back away. "Well, let's review exactly what father did, shall we?" I said, even as Marie raised her hands to try and placate me.

"K-Kyle, there's n-no need to—"

"No, no. You were the one that brought up our dear dad, so let's talk about him.

"First up, he managed to get a job in a special military project that involved a brand-new type of moon base. Not only that, that job was as head designer of said base, such a great achievement, right sis?" I smiled at Marie, who flinched.

"Oh, but that wasn't the end of it," I said. "With his work, he managed to design a fantastic new power source. One that would be able to fuel the entire base singlehandedly. What were his words...? Oh yes, he said he would 'pioneer a new era of space exploration'. He did such great things, didn't he sis?"

"K-K-Kyle, please—" She stammered, even as I continued.

"It was the first test of that power source. It would be on the moon; after all, how embarrassing would it be if something intended for space couldn't work in space? Now, you and I know what happened next." I smiled even wider as I pointed upward at the moon.

Specifically, the gigantic hole right through it.

“That power source of his was so unstable, it blew a hole right through the moon. Meteors rained down for weeks, and we were lucky to survive. But from the sudden loss of lunar mass, tide levels rose, and almost every continent was partially flooded. And what did father do?”

My smile turned into a violent, horrible sneer. “He denied everything. Shoved every bit of responsibility onto his coworkers. And when that didn’t work, he went on the run, leaving the world to clean up his mess. So, tell me, sis.” I leaned into her face, which had gone pale white. “How am I like father?”

“I...I’ll go.” She squeaked out.

“You’d best.” I calmly said, heading back to my chair. I could hear her footsteps walking away as I looked at the waves, curving up and down. *Well, something did come out of this whole mess.* I thought to myself, even as something began to yank on my line.

It made fishing easier.

A Room

A room is all he had and desired
A wooden single bed
With a chair beside it
To leave a book maybe when
His eyes were heavy with sleep
A small square table
Served as his basin
And a jug of water
A mirror hung above the table
For occasional grooming perhaps
Beside it a white towel
And a chair for an occasional guest
Whose pictures are on the wall, I wonder
Can it be him?
Is that how he saw himself?
A window to outside world
That lets the light in
How little we need to survive
I think to myself
As I walk in D’orsay
A room with a view
A bed to share
I can be happy in this room.

Living Things

Who are you all,
 you living things,
 dwellers of this earth
 Creatures, bound
 by hunger and sleep
 Love and pain—
 wrapped in skin
 You draw in the
 same Breath
 yet exhale yourselves
 miles
 apart

 Who are you all,
 you living things
 Gliding down your roads
 in glistening beetles
 Drinking in the world with parched eyes
 Sunlight spins into images
 only they're dirty
 —Tainted
 by all the things
 you wish to
 see

 Oh, how strange it is
 to be
 anything at all

Knock, knock
 who's there?
 Who dwells behind those dusty eyes?
 whose voice ripples off
 your papercut lips, and
 travels into my
 mind?

 Knock, knock
 Who fills your lungs?

 your breath laps against unseen shores
 Particles dance in and out
 of you
 and maybe
 me, too

 Oh living thing,
 Let me hear your
 symphony of thoughts, your
 heart's melody—
 That dark and beautiful chorus
 you never sing aloud.
 Let me hear
 you

 Come out, come out
 wherever you are
 I want to see you—
 the real
 You, the
 I behind your eyes

Or just give them to me
 I want to see your world
 not mine
 Your world, with your feelings
 crocheted across
 —thick and fraying
 Glimpse the storm cloud
 brewing on your
 horizon

 Let me hear your thoughts,
 warring inside
 Let me speak with your
 lullaby voice
 Feel the calluses on your fingertips, and
 every scrape against your
 heart

Let me trace that
spiderweb trail of tiny cracks
 across your skin
 —Remnants of love
unrequited

I long to know you,
Living thing,
So take me—
 weave me into your being
Grind me into a fine powder, then
inhale me
Breathe me in, and
make me
you

Oh, how strange it is
to be
anything at all

Sometimes
I don't want to be alone
Separated by skin and soul
 so come,
Take my place
 Wrap my pain around
 your knobby knees,
 — my searing blanket
 of iniquity
Let it burn you to the
bone

Wash away my pretty paint
 and see the layers—
 Crisscrossed scars and
bleeding wounds
Feel the ridges around my heart
 the fog that clouds my mind
 Go, curl up in my bed
when pain pounds
 from inside

Hug my knees
when sorrow strikes
On blizzard nights
when I don't want to be
anything

Come, come
Possess me, Soul
 Move my blistered feet
 Listen to the erratic
 radio
My mind—
 calm and Chaotic
 drizzle and flood
It isn't so bad if you
ignore the background buzz,
 the
existential static

Share this being with me
 its joy and sorrow
Step inside,
carry my pain and love
 Come, come
 share my breath
 my footsteps
For you see, I'm a living thing
 and
I don't want to walk
alone

Close your eyes
 if you wish to see

me
But not the hidden parts
 stay away
From the tabernacle of shame
 —those secret places
stowed deep
 places even I won't go
 but maybe

the things I fear you'll
see in me
I'll find in you
Maybe
when I look in you
I will see
my own two eyes
Gazing back at me

After all,
Where does I end and
you begin?

You, you
Do you tire too? Maybe you feel
lonely and out of
place
or maybe you're searching,
for a thing you cannot name—
Searching for a sun
to dry out your rain
maybe
we aren't so
different

Oh, how strange it is
to be
anything at all

Drink from me,
you living things,
Soon I will evaporate
into static sky,
rain upon the earth
Nourish, purify. Become
everything

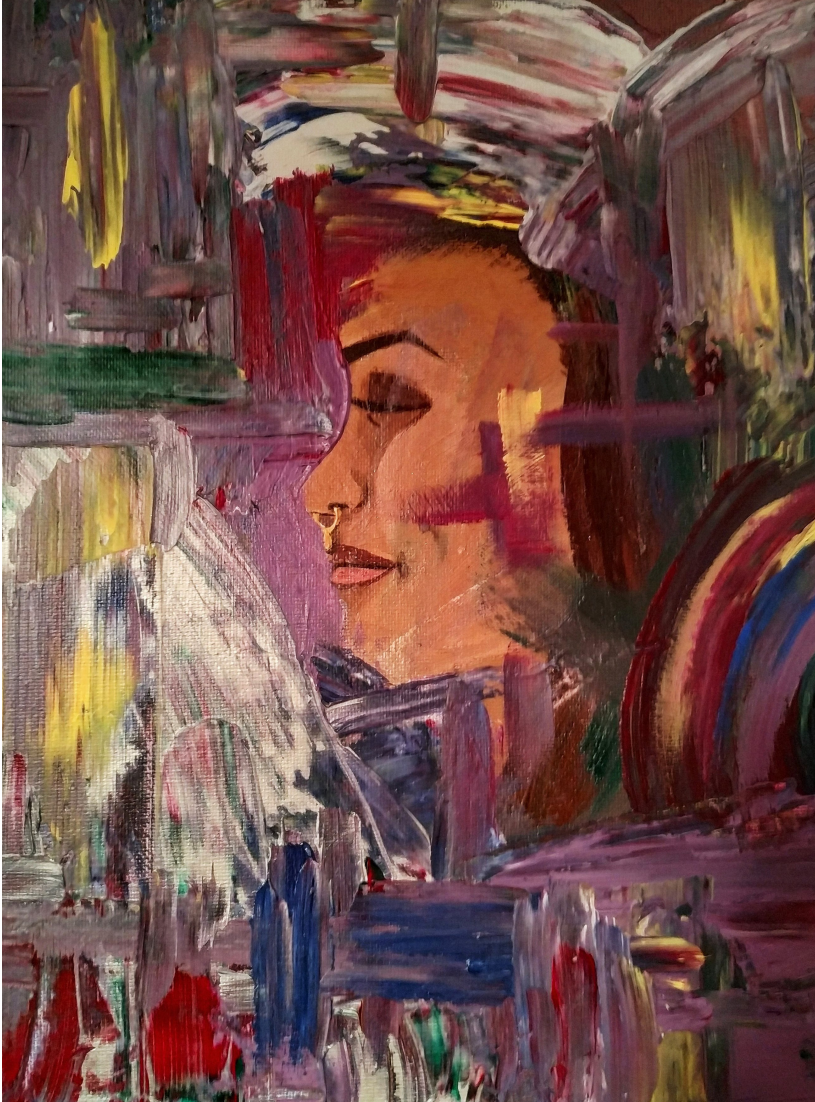
Drink me, living things,
collect my words
For I'm passing,
passing
A rain-soaked blossom

—fragrant
the edges already curl
Drink me, drink me
before I fade
and crumple
into
earth

Oh, living thing,
I want to
soak up your pain and
exhale it into Beauty
I want to
hold your hurt in a glass jar—
Shake it into stardust
Tie our veins together
so my blood warms your heart
even though I'm
freezing
cold

Oh, how wonderful it is
to be
anything
at all

Silent Power



Medium: Acrylic Paint

“Black” girl

“Little black girl, why are you so scared?”
They ask me as my weakness seeps from my eyes
They will never understand the world I live in
I don’t feel like this little black girl
I am not this little black girl
They look at my skin tone
And tell me to submit to all authority figures, even if I did nothing wrong
They look at my skin tone
And tell me to make sure I always have my hands at ten and two if
I’m ever pulled over
They look at my skin tone
And they ask me if I grew up in the ghetto
They look at my skin tone
And ask me if I was adopted when they see me clinging to my white mother
I may have never been this little black girl
But I sure as hell look like her

A Season on the Mountain

My first work day begins at 5:45am. I start with a frozen burger cooked on the stove. I would be laboring in the single-digit cold, and I needed all the fat and protein I could get. After forcing down breakfast, I lurch onto the 6:15 bus from Gunnison to Crested Butte, forced to stand in the aisle for lack of seats amid the crowd of skis and their riders. My sleepy bitterness melts away as I peer out of the windows of the bus, surrounded by majesty on my morning commute. Fog sits snugly in the frozen valleys, whose sweeping shores climb into massive peaks, riddled with narrow, craggy passes. Dry, arid plains made way for rocky fissures and soaring fells; elk grazed among groves of aspen and fir. The sunrise, timed uncannily with the bus schedule, pierced through the quiet darkness, illuminating the sundry miracles around me.

Our arrival to Crested Butte felt like the jarring end of a pleasant dream. I drag myself off the bus, and recognize a familiar face in the horde of passengers. A coworker of mine, who I'd met briefly on being hired, exits the bus a few places ahead of me in the line.

"Matt," I call to him.

He turned around, "Hey, what's up, man?" he replies.

Matt shows me where to clock in each morning, and then to the locker room, where we could keep our skis or snowboards, and lock up our uniforms after each shift. After putting on our blue Crested Butte jackets and snow-pants, Matt and I clomped up the stairs of the grounds shed and out into the blinding white alpine morning.

"Here's where we keep the shovels," Matt said, as we approach a small shack loaded with various salts, picks, and snow blowers.

"The shallow yellow ones are for pushing, and the red bucket-shaped ones are for digging. If it's icy, we take out some salt and those picks."

We trudge along through the grounds of the resort, passing the early morning crew finishing their shoveling, towards less tended paths. On the way we pass a number of landmarks:

"That place serves dollar pizza slices at 3:00pm," Matt comments as we pass a particularly delicious-smelling bakery, "and Jefe's sells tacos at half price on Tuesdays."

He points to the where the cheapest cigarettes can be found on the mountain, and even where to smoke them without being spotted by a supervisor.

Our first shoveling assignment was at a building on the far south of the resort property, a large set of apartments connected by a series of overarching bridges, balconies, and courtyards. It made for a sizable amount of shoveling, and the physical toll of the job became apparent early on that first day.

The second spot was less demanding, a small cul de sac of townhouses overlooking the adjacent valley. The vista was remarkable, and allowed me to forget my exhaustion. Indeed, the mundanity of the task at hand was eclipsed by the enormity of the beauty around me; I felt the fulfillment of physical toil in the morning glow.

After some hours passed, Matt showed me where to eat lunch, and we continued to work after some food.

Work ended at 3:00pm. I find myself waiting in line for a dollar pizza slice longer than anticipated and missed my bus to Gunnison. The next bus, taking another hour and a half, is too long for comfort in the Colorado winter, so I decide to stick my thumb out and wait for a generous driver.

Before long, an aged red station wagon slows to a halt beside me, and I climb in. An older man who looked to be in his mid 70's sat at the wheel. He said nothing at first. He wasn't particularly friendly, but he clearly meant well. His one comment the whole drive was something about being in the same position when he was my age. That gave me pause and reflected in my thoughts the rest of the way.

There was an eternal, perennial quality to everything in this place. The vastness of the land and sky was cosmic, and life was hardy, selected from only the strongest. The things that manage to survive here, the scrubby pines, the elk, that old man, stayed here forever. They were uniquely adapted to it, caught in a beautiful struggle removed from the world as I knew it. I wondered if I would stay too.

The old man dropped me off in front of Wal-Mart.

"Farthest I'll go," he said.

That's alright, I thought. A five-minute walk from home wasn't so bad.

"Thank you, sir," I reply. He grunts and drives off.

The next morning I sleep in. The weather had been clear, no shovellers needed today. I'm relieved, though the fickle nature of my work puts a nervous thought in my head of a snow-less, and accordingly hungry, winter.

After enjoying a late breakfast, I bundle up and decide to take a walk around Gunnison. It's a small city, and before long I've seen most of it. The architecture of the buildings matches the high-desert backdrop, featuring motifs which paint the picture of a storied Western town. An old bank, complete with classical columns and granite facade, sits across the main drag from a hundred-year old saloon. Wagon wheels and prickly pear decorate the residential yards.

I eventually come to a path adjacent to my apartment complex, and follow it to the foot of a nearby hill—a mountain by Appalachian standards. I slowly, absentmindedly, proceeded up the winding switchbacks, dodging slick patches of snow and unsettled rocks. Sage brush grew in plenty against the red stone hills, giving the shady northern slopes an attractive purple tint.

Little by little I made my way up, until I came to the summit of the great height. I looked West toward the lowering sun, and the staggered layers of mesa tops and craggy prominence receding in a sea of swatches.

I thought again about the timelessness of the mountains, the stubborn survival of the deer and lions and fir trees, and that old man, not unlike myself starting his life right here in Gunnison. The feeling of fixedness, and of harsh, unwavering equipoise felt relieved by the rapid descent of the sun, and the series of changing hues projected over the clouds and sky.

Suddenly a story I'd overheard in town that day sprung to mind, of a kid not much younger than myself found dead by mountain lion. I decide to return to town before it got any darker.

The last of the sun had just slipped behind the horizon when I arrived home, and the stars just beginning to peek through the veil. I ate dinner in front of the TV, then smoked a cigarette. The temperature kept me inside, so I went to my room and leaned out an open window. It felt like space; the dead, cold air, the vista of

stars and planets, the remoteness. I admired it some more, until a roommate interrupted:

"You're letting all the heat out," he said.

I was annoyed, but he was right. Heat was precious in Gunnison and what little we had was to be saved.

Time passed, and the ski season ended soon enough. Five months of working and playing on the mountain blurred to a moment, fleeting quickly and leaving me without employment or pastime. Jobs off-season are hard to come by in rural Colorado, and I soon found myself in a hard spot. With what little I had left, I rented a U-Haul, loaded my belongings, and made my way back to Maryland, over the Rockies and away to the East.

I was sad to leave the place I'd come to call home, I wanted to see myself as part of that mythical landscape; one with the elk and giant cats and ruling mesas. Someday, I thought, I might go back, prepared, experienced; or else not and I find another place to call home. Until then, I continue to explore the wide country, always looking out for new mountains to climb.

I Was Foolish

I was foolish to think I could outrun you,
You who outrun us all
Like a wildfire,

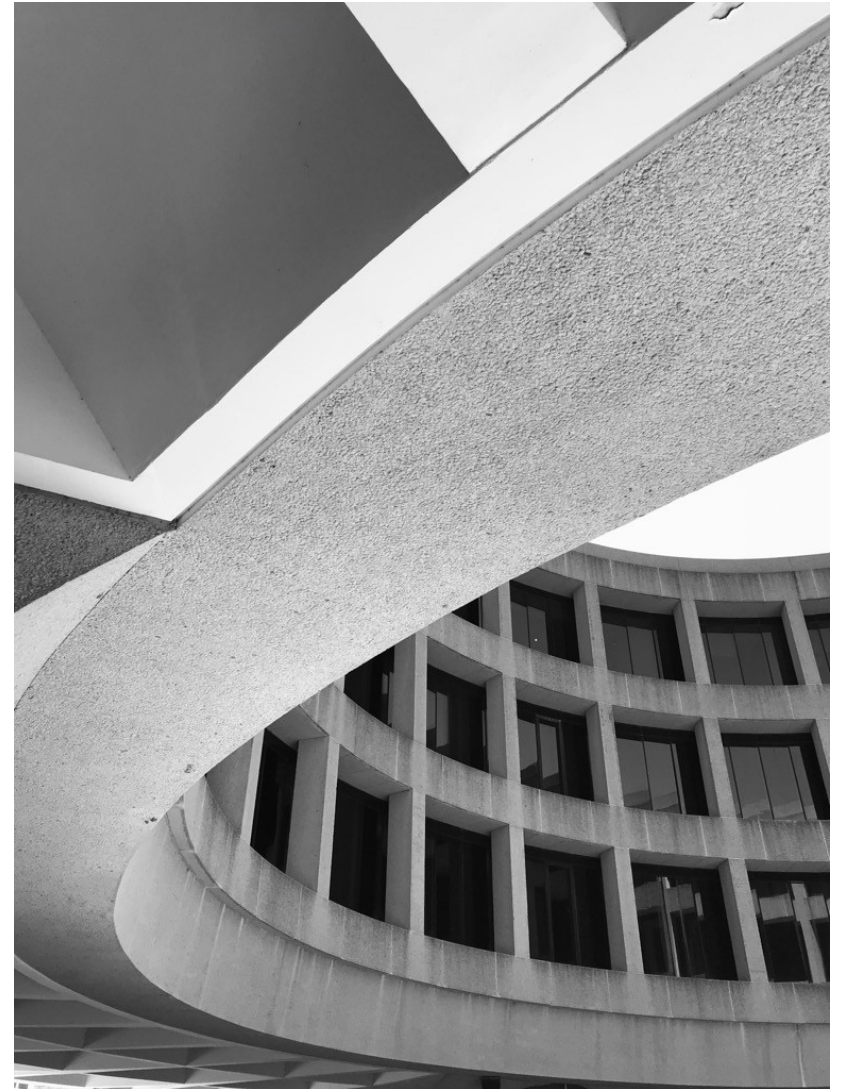
Searing the heart, consuming the old life
until it is unrecognizable,
Razing dreams of the future, too.

We run because it hurts so much.
Who wants to voluntarily walk into those
Flames,
Into the tears of leave-taking
and finality?

No one wants to go through that,
So we pretend we're done with our grieving,
But it isn't done with us

The flames lick at the edges, waiting,
waiting to consume, to burn until the
burning is complete, and the heart
understands.

Geometric



White Lightning

It was the summer of 1923 when deep within the mountains of the Tar-Heel State, Sam “Bug” Smith, brother to William Smith, was arrested for making’ moonshine.

Prohibition was in effect; thus he was sentenced to five years prison time. He might’ve been the eldest in the Smith Clan, but he sure as hell wasn’t the brightest. His momma used to say, “If brains were leather, he wouldn’t have enough to saddle a Junebug.”

However, what he lacked in traditional smarts he made up for in sheer idiotic determination. Some say it was that same determination that taught him how to catch a fly by its wings. But jobs for flycatchers didn’t exist. So Ol’ Sambug had to settle for his next talent, making moonshine.

William, on the other hand, had always been clever. Assuming he’d been given the chance, he would’ve made a brilliant engineer. However, luck didn’t strike often for the Smith Clan.

Instead in 1908, at eighteen he married Clementine Eldridge. Over the course of the next decade, he went on to have five kids but few job prospects. Though he’d found some work as a Brick mason, few people *wanted* to move to the South much less the mountains. With six mouths to feed, the pressure was beginning to mount. That was until Sambug, fresh out of prison in ‘28, showed up on his brother’s front porch.

“Sam?” William said breathlessly.

“Y’know you’re the only one who doesn’t add bug at the end?” Sambug responded with a light chuckle. “Well?... You gonna let me in? I’m plumb wore out,” he continued. William opened the door wider for him.

“I’d say you’ve seen better days,” William said.

Sambug had fewer teeth this time around and sweat ran from his neck to his waist.

“Those boys don’t pull punches, I tell ya,” Sambug said. “You could tell em’ you were the president’s ass and they’d still beat the shit outta you.” He placed his old hat on the dinner table.

There was definitely more gray in his temple.

“You mind fetchin’ me a drink? It’s hotter than a goat’s ass in a pepper patch out there.” Sambug wiped his brow.

“O’course,” William said as he opened the back window.

“Johnny!” He yelled. The kids, who were playing ‘Cowboys & Indians’ immediately dropped their sticks at the shrill sound that came from up the way. The blonde-haired boy looked at his siblings with eyes as wide as saucers. “Johnny! Git your ass up here!” His father continued. Quickly Johnny followed his father’s command.

“Sir?” Johnny said when he reached the window.

“Go fetch me some water,” William ordered as his son as he handed him the old wooden bucket. Though irritated, the blonde-haired boy went off to fetch some water.

“You’ve got a lot more since I saw ya last,” His brother rasped as William sat across from him.

“Lot can happen in five years,” William responded. Sambug turned away from his brother’s bright blues.

“I know it,” Sambug replied. “Where’s that lovely wife o’ yours?” He asked, trying to move past the awkward silence that seemed to ebb between them.

“She’s takin’ care o’ Maryanne. Fell ill few days back with Tuberculosis.”

“O’ Bless her heart, that’s some nasty business.” He said placing a hand over his heart.

Just then the door opened to Johnny struggling to hold up the bucket full of water.

“Careful or you’ll spill it over the floor!” William said as he took the bucket from the exasperated boy. Johnny huffed for a moment as he placed his hands on his knees.

“Good lord is that who I think it is?” Sambug asked as he stood up and walked over to the young boy. Johnny’s head perked up at the strange voice. “My God, last I saw ya you weren’t but knee high to a grasshopper!” Sambug said as he put the kid in a headlock and gave him a noogie. Johnny struggled in the grip of his estranged uncle. When Sambug released his grip, Johnny furrowed his brows, still gasping for breath.

"Sambug...?" He asked, still unsure of the man who stood before him. Sambug flashed a smile, Johnny immediately ran to his uncle's arms and hugged him as tight as a ten-year-old could.

"See? Even your kid calls me Sambug," he said with a laugh.

"How long has it been?" the kid asked.

"Five years," William said gruffly as he gazed at his brother.

Sambug turned away from William back to the kid. "Listen son, me and you're paw need to have a word," Sambug said with a faint smile.

"Alright... you promise to come play with us when you're through?"

"Promise." He replied as he ruffled the kid's hair. Johnny gave him one last hug before returning to the 'battlefield'. "I must say I'm surprised I caught you on a mid-afternoon—"

"Why're you here Sam?" William interrupted. The shock of seeing his brother had now faded, as the reality of his return began to weigh on him. Sambug released a heavy sigh. As he turned back to meet his brother's eyes.

"It ain't my fault what happened," He said as he returned back to his seat.

"How in the hell ain't it your fault?" William said as his anger flared in his tone. "Were you not the one makin' moonshine?" Sambug furrowed his brows.

"We was sold out by them damn Benton boys! Lord knows they was always tryna take our business away," Sambug retorted. William shook his head.

"Well it ain't their fault youse the one makin' moonshine," William said. Sambug gave up. This was one argument he wouldn't win. He took his hat from the table and held it to his chest, in an almost formal manner. "What is it?" William continued with narrowed eyes at his brother's gesture.

"I need your help Will," Sambug ebbed.

"With what?" William responded as he crossed his arms. "Hardly got enough room for the kids."

"I don't mean that." William furrowed his brows in confusion, until a moment of clarity overcame him.

"Damn you, I ain't doin' that shit!" William yelled. "Hardly a week outta prison and you've got the nerve to show up on my

doorstep askin' me to help you? Get the hell off my property..." William continued on his rant as he pointed to the door.

"When was the last time those youngun's had fresh food?"

"Don't go draggin' my kids into this you sumbitch," he growled.

"I'm tellin' you the reality, there's good money in it... hell you might even be able to start that farm you always wanted," William shook his head though his mind began to run with the idea.

Though he didn't want to give into his brother's delusions, he couldn't remember the last time his family had a good meal. Sambug watched as the gears spun in his brother's head, a hopeful smile plastered on his face.

"Besides you know as well as I do, ain't nothin' better than catchin' lightnin' in a bottle," Sambug muttered.

William looked back at his brother, a deep sigh escaping his mouth.

"I swear to the good Lord above if we get caught doin' this, it's your ass." Elated at the response, Sambug threw his arms around his brother.

"Them Benton boys ain't gonna know what hit em'!"

This would mark the beginning of the end for the Smith Clan.

Route 50—Going Home

Seagulls glide over empty fields.
Bronzed water pools around perished ash trees.
A convoy passes on tall tires,
every truck the color of pralines.
The corn maze
hasn't been maize
in years.
Vultures surround powerful oaks
alerting to something's demise.
At a gas pump
two men
make an exchange:
one unmarked cardboard cube
for a box labeled pressure cooker.
Over marshlands
a murmuration of starlings
pattern the sky.
Whitehall Inn
still stands
bleak and lifeless,
causing contemplation
of a U-turn.

Riverbend

There are many faces
in places no one goes.

Throughout the bog and hills,
under the tear-a-piece flow,

lies a lonely willow,
waiting—
for you to show.

Growth 3



A Girl Behind Every Tree

During the height of the Vietnam War in 1968, we University Army ROTC cadets would push through picket lines of classmates blocking our attendance to scheduled military classes. War protesters singled out uniformed cadets even though many of us would be drafted by the Army shortly after graduation as I was. So being in Army ROTC simply provided better training and an officer commission.

Preparing to go into combat included realistic escape and evasion from a mock Viet Cong village with underground escape tunnels. Being captured by 82nd Airborne paratroopers who played the Viet Cong meant electric shock torture by a Radio Hanoi hand crank generator shocking our body parts and stretching us as our legs were tied to an Apache pole solidly pounded into the ground, creating screams of pain for the mock prisoners of war.

I managed to evade the capture and torture by feeling my way through the pitch-black woods and slippery slopes in the exact opposite direction of the shortest path and walking many extra miles to the escape crossing. Finally, I pulled myself hand over hand by hanging upside down on a single wire bridge over the filthy cesspool like Nashua River as the trainer tossed grenade simulators into the water below me. I was only the third cadet to evade capture just before the practice exercise ended very late at night.

Jungle training for Vietnam included a full week in the Georgia swamp with blood sucking leeches in the water and hungry mosquitoes in the air trying to sleep on the wet soggy ground with no time to wash or get clean.

“Don’t hug me until you take a good long shower and burn that uniform,” begged my pregnant wife upon my return. I don’t recall if my German shepherd greeted me either.

During my first real assignment after graduating and completing the required training for Vietnam jungle combat, I tested electronic equipment used to locate hostile communications in the dense jungles of Vietnam. I was a professional soldier destined to active duty for the duration of the Vietnam War.

“Captain Chang, with United States troops out of Vietnam, you will stay at this Post in Arizona to go to the Advanced Course training for your branch.”

With my one-year old in my arms after work every day and my commute to the local University to work on my doctorate under the GI Bill, staying in Arizona a few years sounded great until two weeks later.

“Captain Chang, your two-year assignment is being cut short by a year to send you to the Aleutian Island of Shemya due to an IG complaint by the Commander of the Joint Army/Air Force Unit there. He knows you and highly recommends you for the job.”

“You just told me I would be staying here to complete the Advanced Course. When can I do that requirement?”

“We can cut your unaccompanied tour short and still give you full credit after ten months, but this mission is the Presidential Key Intelligence Question of the nation.”

After moving my wife and baby off Post closer to family and friends, I sat on my Reeves Aleutian Airlines flight to Shemya, Alaska, 1500 miles from the Alaskan coast. I was told Shemya had a girl behind every tree and a full twenty minutes of sunlight a year. The wind swept two-mile by four-mile island simply had no trees. They also exaggerated the sunlight by 25%. My entire time on Shemya had only one 15 bursts of sunlight, when troops and airmen took off their fur tipped parkas, shirts, and olive drab undershirts to get a 15 minutes tan in the near freezing cold air.

To finally get some women on the island, our Base Chaplain planted some trees behind the Chapel, so miraculously, a handful of women did arrive before I landed. I didn’t quite understand the correlation of having a girl behind every tree required someone to plant trees on this windswept barren island.

In my Army issued fur tipped parka and my insulated thick rubber boots, I looked like Mickey Mouse in an olive drab hood as I walked to catch the shuttle bus to get lunch. With a 115-knot wind blasting my face, I was lifted like Dorothy in the Wizard of OZ. Unfortunately, I was flying off the ground I could see how small island was. My more massive non-commissioned officers beside me simply dropped their jaws in amazement as I pulled in the parka lift to land back on the ground and catch the shuttle bus for lunch.

My devoted troops started to scour the island for rocks to put in my pockets to weigh me down because no one wanted me to be blown off the island, especially before I signed their orders to leave. My classmate from military school had orders for combat,

but another officer traded him for this same Shemya assignment to replace him in combat in Vietnam.

Vietnam had a lot of trees and therefore a lot of women behind them. That must have been the reason.

We never got much snow accumulation because it simply blew across the treeless island to create a smooth glaze of ice over the ground. The ice glaze on the runway caused one of the very large four-engine Air Force jets to skid so far on landing that the front wheels and cockpit area just in front of the navigator cracked off and fell into the ocean.

I met the navigator on that Air Force jet. I was offered a ride on one of the jets, but I had to pass the water survival-training course first. My predecessors used to get orientation rides without having to go to survival training and parachuting into icy waters. I passed on the ride.

Happily, Shemya lacked blood-sucking leeches like Vietnam. Instead the tundra grass leaves were several inches wide. In the “warm” days, blood sucking mosquitoes the size of a large dragonfly would emerge from under the huge tundra leaves to suck a lot of blood. Swarms of these monster mosquitoes could take down a caribou, so I certainly tried to avoid them.

With 1200 lonely men on this island and six women, with one married to the power plant engineer, the demand for companionship was extremely high. A very popular contractor secretary named “Fat Pat” kept renewing her contract and would dance with as many as six men at one time. Our alcoholic rations on Shemya exceeded the normal allocation for 1200 soldiers, airmen and contractors by several times. Parties at the firetrap World War II era wood buildings called “Smokehouses” on the island went late into the night.

My Air Force counterpart first met “Fat Pat” getting off the same Reeves Aleutian Airline I rode in.

“I might not look good to you right now, but six months from now, I’ll look really great,” boasted Pat.

“You know, Roger, it has been only around two months and Fat Pat looks great already!”

“We just have to get to a place with a lot more trees!”

Halo

A dot of light reddens in the dark alley,
Alone, puffing away the halo
Of white rings. His eyes aim through it,
Looking for a signal, a watch light to turn on
To start the show that crawls its way
Into the heart, twisting.

Clanging, empty cans rolling,
Echoing along the pavement.

Plastic bags stuck on
Razor wire, flagging.

A flick, a cigarette butt crushed underfoot;
The watch lights flicker, his whistle blows,
Thousands of torches light up,
Fires raised by the wind.

The caged man says:
“Broken wings,
Raise the flames higher!”
Let them blaze until smoke becomes
Halo clouds,
Drifting freely above the razor wires,
To send out ideograms.

Until flames become ashes
The night echoing.

Clanging, empty cans rolling,
Along the pavement.

Plastic bags stuck on
Razor wire, flagging.

Alone, a dot of light, the halo
Of white rings. His eyes aim through it,
Looking for a sign for the broken wings
To keep flapping.

The Bench

I once saw a man lying on a park bench in the dead winter's night. He lay there like stone. His back faced the seat to protect himself slightly from the howling winds and dense snowfall.

I approached the man. He did not move much but twitched. Perhaps he noticed me but did not fear or care. Not that my intentions would have been at all bad. But one must be careful, alone, so late. I had been staring for quite some time. If he had noticed, I had no idea. What would he think? Or say? Is he scared?

I looked upon him and asked, "Why sir do you insist on laying here in this incessant cold? Might you want to find better shelter?"

He responded. "The other places I've been are much too bright and too warm. I couldn't sleep. Here is much better."

"What brought you finally to the park? To this spot in particular?" I asked.

He responded, "I was led here. Forced. So here it is now that I find myself laying because in this area it cannot harm me. The warmth and the light."

"The warmth? Light?"

"I had seen before me what were like diamonds," He said. "That glimmered in the morning sun, dancing about, as to celebrate the passing darkness. And before me, as I had seen it, was a great vast open vineyard. A place to rest and catch my needed breath. I want it now to be as it were before then. When the diamonds did not dance about. For I cannot sleep as another shimmer has caught my eye. For the beauty is too radiant for me to take my attention and place it on to anything else but admiration. No. I must be here where it is cold and dark."

I took a moment and thought about what the man said. I realized that I too, once long ago, had such a dream. However, my diamonds were dark coals radiating a glorious fire. I was looking for somewhere for me to feel warm. Alive. Why then was I here on this night? Surely this was not coincidence. Was this a reality or a dream intertwined? Linked? If not by some cosmic chance we ended up in this specific place. To have similar yet different visions. And his much

more vivid than my own. At such late hours, cold, freezing, blistering night, it must mean something?

"May I sit down?" I asked him. He shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly.

Scooting over he said this: "If I were to say that in five years' time, I would be nowhere else but here, now, and in another 50 a tree will have grown. A great shadow comes forth, blossoming alongside the tree. But it does not block out the rays which grow brighter and hotter by the day."

"And because I cannot move," he continued, "I cannot seek comfort in the tree's protection. I lie here 500 more. The tree is gone now. In its place stands a man. The man stands there. For a few moments blocks out those blaring lights. I sleep for but five seconds when a loud voice asks me what it is I am doing. I reply. He, however, does not. But it seems the man takes pity and stands there for 5000 years more. He does not move, expect his mouth. I know his mouth moves. 'I cannot sleep,' He says."

"I see," I said.

I looked up to where I had been moments before. I saw another man. He was not like most men. He stood still, and I could feel his cold-hearted glare upon me. Frozen, I could not move. The man had no eyes. No Ears. No nose. Only a mouth. He stood there whispering. But I could not make out as to what he says. He did not move and blocked the light behind him. He would leave when I did. Thus, I did not move. I remained motionless. The man beside me started to ramble.

"The beating heart grows still and soft. Cold and quiet. Observed by outside forces. Interacting on its own accordance. How then does it beat when all it hears is uncertainty? It begins to palpitate. But before long grows slower. Slower until it finally stops all together and with it the voices and the light. Now here is the true tranquility. Here now is peace. What glorious day it is that rest sets in. Now I sleep among the rest. How cold it is."

His voice grew softer.

"I see before me now a new valley. A new plain to cross. Here! The lights have shown me the way. I follow in the path in which they point. Leading me toward the darkness before me and it befalls me. Now it grows quiet. I cannot hear the sounds. It is dark all around. Coldness comes forth and burns my skin. Shivering I press on. Walls begin to form. A cave. Narrow from feel. Closing in. And in the distance, there is a new sound. Do you hear it?"

I heard it talking to me. I hear it now. The figure moved its mouth and spoke what sounds like white noise. In the noise faint words made slightly clear. It sounded familiar.

"It's the voice of the new to take my place. I am now descending. Gone is the old world. I live on in a new level. It's more than freezing. There are no stars here."

His voice faded. I was alone listening to the figure. Though he only had a mouth he stared, and I knew he could tell I was there.

I lay back and try to sleep.

The bench now was gone. The morning came and went again and again.

The figure had still not up and left.

It stands there.

I can hear it now, but I cannot process the sounds it makes. It's speaking. I hear it. Coming closer. I shut my eyes I hear its voice. Grating on my ears. Like harsh static. Blaring loud. I cannot get rid of the sound! The lights are no longer just dreams but tangible beings. The being and his voice are over me blocking the beings of light. But I grow tired and weak. I have been awake for days. I do not dare turn back and look at what shadows over me. I'm here curled up on the bench. What I hear is enough to know that the man I met that night was not crazy. In a way he had it good. He didn't hear the new voice. He lived in comfort. He moved on. I have not moved since.

Vertigo



Twisted spiral curls,
Endless vertiginous stairs,
Like M.C. Escher.

Eat your Beets

The dining room table had an extra leaf put in to accommodate the two families for this occasion, a going away dinner. Our family was leaving the hills of West Virginia to a home I had only seen in photos, a country of concrete, the city of Baltimore. My father's grocery, now closed, he would no longer be his own boss. He had taken a job in a steel mill. I was to be separated by hundreds of miles from my cousins and my friends. Dad had even given my dog, Midnight, to some farmer, "The city" dad said, "was no place for an animal." This evening an image flashed through my mind of The Last Supper: *Is this what they were feeling, not exactly sure about the occasion?*

My uncle, the host, this was his home, sat at the head of the table. My aunt and her two boys and my mother were around the table somewhere. If someone could be excited and unhappy at the same time, it was me. I was sitting to the right of my uncle, the man I wanted to be like when I grew up. I was only eleven years old and I already knew that. My dad's place was at the far end of the table, the man I didn't want to be like.

The table was filled with my favorite Greek food: green beans in tomato sauce and onions; baked chicken rubbed with oregano and garlic; roasted sliced potatoes in olive oil and lemon juice; a salad of cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, black olives, and topped with Feta cheese; and plenty of crusty baked bread and butter. But for me there was one bowl that barely got a passing glance: beets in their bloody juice. No way would those deep red, shadowy pieces get on my plate. I crinkled my nose and turned to see a possible antidote. Below a large ornate mirror on the buffet sat small bowls of rice pudding sprinkled with cinnamon.

My uncle was successful. He was respected. My mother said it so often and especially in front of my dad that once he banged the kitchen table with his fist and shouted, "Your brother is successful. All right. Enough! Enough!" And then he left. When dad was upset with mom, he always left the house, got in his car and drove somewhere and didn't return until hours later. She would especially get dad upset if she asked about our market, and whether we could pay our bills. "It's none of your God damn business." He would say,

"It's my business." Well, I knew one thing. Dad wasn't successful. He had failed. Bankrupt. We got punished.

My uncle was an attorney. Mom never called him a lawyer, always attorney. I thought lawyer and attorney were different professions. Uncle was a prosecuting attorney; he sent the bad guys to jail. Superman, Batman, the Green Hornet and all those other comic book heroes were make believe; my uncle was the real thing.

Although I wanted to be like my uncle, I didn't want to look like my uncle. My uncle's skin wasn't tanned. Mine was. His was typical of someone who spent more time inside than out. He had brown hair, sparse; you could see the dome of his head. Uncle was a short man and had a bit of a paunch. He wasn't muscular but he sure had a grip. When he shook my hand he'd look me in the eye, tilt his head slightly to the side, and with a devilish kind of grin, he would squeeze and squeeze and squeeze my hand compressing the bones until I felt a sharp pain run up my arm to the back of my head. *Don't let him know*, I thought. I knew he was testing me, always testing me. He wanted to see if I was tough; how I would handle the pain. Could I take it? So I took it.

But even if uncle didn't look tough, he had an attitude of someone you wouldn't want to mess with. What we boys called "a scrapper." I thought of myself as a scrapper. I wouldn't give up until you proved it to me. You had to beat me: in games, in sports, in wrestling, racing, climbing a tree, or even in a school spelling bee.

Uncle signed papers with the immigration department and brought relatives from Greece, family on his mother's side. He found jobs for the new immigrants with painting contractors operated mainly by Greeks or working in one of the Greek diners. Uncle donated a hefty amount of money to the local Greek Orthodox Church and served on its board of directors. In his large family room with its picture window overlooking the valley, the framed awards dominated an entire knotty pine wall. Awards from local civic groups. Kiwanis; Rotary; Elks; the Lion's Club; and there was the March of Dimes award which I knew helped those crippled kids that had polio. Every time I visited, I'd look at the awards and think *That's what I would do, be successful; make money; and help others. I would be respected.*

Respect, now there was a word you would think I understood. "Respect your elders."

“Respect your teachers.”

“You boys, stop the giggling and show respect. You’re in church.”

“Do not talk back.” Whack! “You have no respect.” That was dad’s line as his right hand smacked some respect into me. But that came later, after we moved to Baltimore. For now, on this evening I sat next to my uncle bursting with admiration as he reached over and rubbed my head. I was special.

Food was served, the bowls passed around, everyone except me taking portions because my uncle took my plate and filled it. Beans, chicken, salad, everything, even butter on the plate along with a slice of baked bread. And then there on my plate, menacingly, beets with blood inching toward my potatoes.

Whoa, my mind started racing I’d heard it all before, from dad, mom, other visits with relatives, *Beets are good for you. Beets will improve your eyesight. Beets will do this for you and beets will do that for you.* Well for me, no nice way to put it, but beets will make me puke. I just knew it. No, it hadn’t happened but some things even an eleven-year-old just knows.

We lowered our heads briefly for my aunt’s quick prayer of thanks, we made the sign of the cross, and we began to eat. I maneuvered food away from the beets making certain the oozed blood didn’t contaminate anything on my plate and dug in. I watched as my uncle cut a slice of beet in half, spear it with his fork and paint his teeth red as he held court on subjects where the words “politics” and “foreign policy” were mentioned repeatedly. No others around the table shared an opinion other than asking a question or two that uncle answered without hesitation and in that tone that reinforced my long-held belief that he was smarter than anyone I had ever known, especially my own father.

Eventually I had eaten everything on my plate, except the beets. Uncle smiled at me with that sort of devilish grin and said matter-of-factly, “Good boy, now eat your beets.” And then he returned to some other subject about the community and the Greek church and the many projects they were working on to improve Greek lives in the community.

My uncle had only to announce the directive for any issue and it was followed. He had power of presentation; charisma; authority; the quality of generals. The opposite of my dad. My dad was more

a dictator and never to be disagreed with by anyone in the family. If Dad said the sky was red and I saw the sky was clearly blue, it was red. No discussion, no disagreement, no opinion of your own. I knew it and my mother knew that too.

But this wasn’t my dad telling me to eat the beets. This was my idol: my uncle. I took a breath and made the decision: I’ll eat the beets. That will please him. I can do it. I could eat dirt for him. But just then at the far end of the table, my dad made a mess. He had poured milk into his glass but far too much and the milk overflowed and soaked the tablecloth. Milk ran off the table and dripped to the floor. My mother sprung to her feet and using her napkin, not paper but cloth, began to soak up the mess on the table. Meanwhile my aunt rushed to the kitchen to get a towel. My dad held the carton up as if he were examining it. I could see it wasn’t a carton container that I was familiar with in our home. It was a brand that I guess attorneys knew to buy, not failed dads with fourth grade educations. I was embarrassed for him.

Dad stuttered, “This c,c,c, carton opens on the corner, not in the middle, that’s not good, too easy to over pour.” He looked across the table at my uncle the attorney as if he needed to convince him of his innocence. “It wasn’t my fault,” Dad said. He sounded whining. “This carton is not as good as the milk cartons we get.”

And that’s when uncle responded to my dad in a sing-song tone as if he were talking to a child, “Yes, I’m sure your right, has to be the carton. Has to be the carton.”

“The spout should be in the middle,” No more whining, my father had returned to that certainty that he knew best, down is up, up is down.

“Yes, I’m sure it has to be the carton, not your fault.” And then my uncle winked at me. It was our little joke; our little secret. “You’re right, your cartons are better,” still speaking to a child. But the law-school-educated, godfather of the community, the uncle I wanted to be like, EUREKA, I wanted to be like no more. In an eye blink, he lost my respect. I was eleven years old and I learned a forever lesson: I can say something bad about my dad, but don’t you say something bad about him. There had to be a price to pay.

I didn’t touch the beets.

Dinner was finished and the small bowls of rice pudding were passed around. As I ate the dessert it was the first time that my aunt's rice pudding, that sweet creamy substance with cinnamon and raisins, was flavorless. No specialness on my spoon, tasteless. Then my sense of sight was affected. My eyes refused to even acknowledge that the beets were still on my plate. When my aunt and mom started to clear the table, my uncle tested me again, earlier it had been the handshake, now came the taste test.

"You will not leave this table until you eat your beets." Uncle stated it as a matter-of fact, the same as "the sun will come up tomorrow," expecting it to happen. He then tilted his head slightly to the side and raised eyebrows and gave me that grin as if that should be enough. Nothing more to say, he had spoken.

My dad didn't interfere. I didn't expect him to. He knew how angry I was for his failure. The entire family left me at the table and proceeded to the recreation room to watch television. Several hours later, with my lower back aching and a sore neck, I stared straight ahead as both families passed the table and went to their designated bedrooms. Not a goodnight from any of them, not from my own mother; probably the general had issued orders. My aunt left a lamp on for me and I sat there, me and my beets. My thoughts raced! *Trust! Respect! Respect! Trust! Respect! Trust! Trust! Respect!* They both lost.

I don't know how many hours later it was when someone shook me awake. I'd fallen asleep with my head on the table and, fortunately, not on the plate and the beets. My aunt said, "Go to bed now. No more will be said about this."

If I Could Draw

If I could draw

I'd draw your eyes first. The way your pupils mimic a brass door; only opening if you knock hard enough.

If I could draw

I'd draw your hair. The way my hands run through it, tracing the lines.

If I could draw

I'd draw your hands, because as rough, bruised, and calloused as they may be, they still fit perfectly in mine.

I'd draw an oasis. Just so you can see what you mean to me.

I'd put my drawing on display ripped and almost destroyed. So that whoever sees it knows what you've been through.

If I could draw

I'd put you in a dark room; only seeing the color once you open your glued-shut eyes.

If I could draw

Mona Lisa would be put to shame.

As people come from all walks of life to study *you*, write dissertations about just what *you* mean about life, love, death.

If I could draw

I'd encapsulate myself in your arms. Because at least then I'll always know where I'll be.

If I could draw

I'd draw the ending of *Grease*. You in the driver's side, me beside you. Driving off into the clouds. Into the heavens that we created. Never coming back down

My Stoney Boy

Insert Scene. A young blond girl, three years of age. A fortyish year old married couple. A new, fluffy puppy, and a lot of hope and love.

Sometimes emotions got the best of the little girl, and as she cried, her small, curly mutt would always nuzzle. The irony was this “mutt” was quite territorial. That didn’t mean he didn’t have a soft spot for his family, especially this young girl’s father. Every nap the man took, the dog would curl at the foot of the living room sofa, so he could nap as well. Never too astray. He was named by the girl’s father, a Civil War buff. The pup went by “Stoney” in homage to General Stonewall Jackson. A tad dramatic, but this three year old would have named him, “Cutie” or “Sweetheart” otherwise.

Stoney was a loyal, half Pomeranian/ half poodle mix. He barked when he deemed necessary, he watched over the neighborhood, and he growled at those he felt deserved growling. He had a soft spot for children, however. As our young girl grew older, elementary school walks became the new go-to activity. Every child wanted a small hand in Stoney’s creamy tan curls, which showed his age considering he once was a gray poof. His family used to joke about his “dog puberty.” Stoney loved the attention from the children; his chocolate brown eyes would squint in the sun as he received pets.

Years go by and we reach the young girl’s adolescence: 13. Stoney now has bad joints, and “gives up” in the winter when it snows, laying his body down till Dog Dad carries him home. He gets sick sometimes now, but always better.

Wait, he’s sick. Why isn’t he getting better this time, though?

“Mom, what’s happening?!” Words couldn’t explain her fears as he became more lethargic, ill, and out of touch with reality.

Both mother and daughter were caught off guard, and as the vet’s receptionist put them into reality check over the phone, it was made apparent that Stoney’s kidneys were failing. At only 10 years of age. Being the runt of the litter was most likely the cause. Or the fact that while his diet got better with age, the family still had to account for the table scraps he was given repeatedly early on. Stoney was not one new to surgery, but this family never thought they wouldn’t be able

to save him this time. They felt incredulous, guilty, and sick to their stomachs. The thirteen-year old girl couldn’t remember when Stoney was neutered or pinpoint the exact day he had a threatening knee surgery. All she knew was the right here and the right now, and it was not looking great.

The ride to putting down your childhood pet is the worst ride you will ever have to partake in. The family felt this presence of immense sadness, and less than a few miles down the highway, Stoney let out a screech. A heart-wrenching last gasp, and a sound that destroys any morally just person’s soul. There was no need for the vet. He died in pain, and that would sit with her forever. The next three years were some of the most difficult for her and tested her mental health like never before. She gained a lot of fear that day, because she now knew what it was like to lose a vital part of herself.

Years went by, and Stoney’s remains lay buried in the backyard of the home he grew to know from puppyhood. Every Spring, the flowers bloom upon the flowerbed of his grave. On this occasion, Jill and her four year old Cavalier Spaniel/Chihuahua, Lucy, go out to soak in the sun near his presence. Jill may have never been very religiously devoted, but she certainly knew after all these years, that there had to at least be a rainbow bridge.

Sometimes when Jill is at her vanity these days applying makeup, she starts to daydream about the beauty of the future despite all the personal challenges and few losses she’s had. They were scarring, irreversible images. They will always remain. She is optimistic, but she will also admit that she is fearful that her life could come crashing down at any moment. You see, death is not one of Jill’s personal fears, but it is the idea of something bad happening to the ones around her that she loves so dearly. That is the fear.

The Honeymoon: A Journey Interrupted

My marriage to my foreign husband was unique in the way it happened. It was totally untraditional from my culture's point of view or his. We had just met and fell in love in London where I had lived for a year and gone to a language school. My plan was to go back to my country where my family and my job as a teacher were awaiting me. I loved my life in London where I had made many friends and been independent.

It was the summer of 1980 and I had my return ticket to Iran, but how was I supposed to leave? I had just met the nicest and kindest man I had ever known and felt the true love. The thought of separation and not seeing each other again made us weep every time and that was when we decided to get married. Everything happened very fast. We married in a registry office with a few friends and my two now sister-in-laws. The news of our marriage shocked our parents. "What, marrying a foreign man and living away from us" my father had said.

A week after our marriage I flew to Iran. We wept and said goodbye and planned to meet in the Island of Lesbos in Greece for our honeymoon after a month. Back in Iran, everybody was happy to see me. My family who had now accepted my marriage, had a big party for me to celebrate.

The Islamic republic regime in Iran was in its second year of ruling and many changes had happened since the days of the Shah's monarchy. A change that concerned women was the force of wearing hijab, which meant covering your hair and most of your body. Iranian women who had been used to western styles of dressing hated this rule and over the decades they fought and made this restricted dress code to a more stylish and modern look, but they still hate to be told how to dress by the government.

On the second week of my visit, we woke up one morning with the news of an air attack from Iraq, Iran's neighbor in the west. American-backed Iraqi government had long had disputes concerning some islands in the south west of Iran, but the real reason for this attack was beyond this. The first target was Tehran's International airport and some other parts of Iran's large capital.

My city, Mashhad in the North East of Iran was too far a distance for Iraqi airplane to fly to and back, so we were safe. This was a devastating thing for Iran who had enjoyed years of prosperity and respect among other countries in the region during the Shah's regime. Now a war had broken between the two countries.

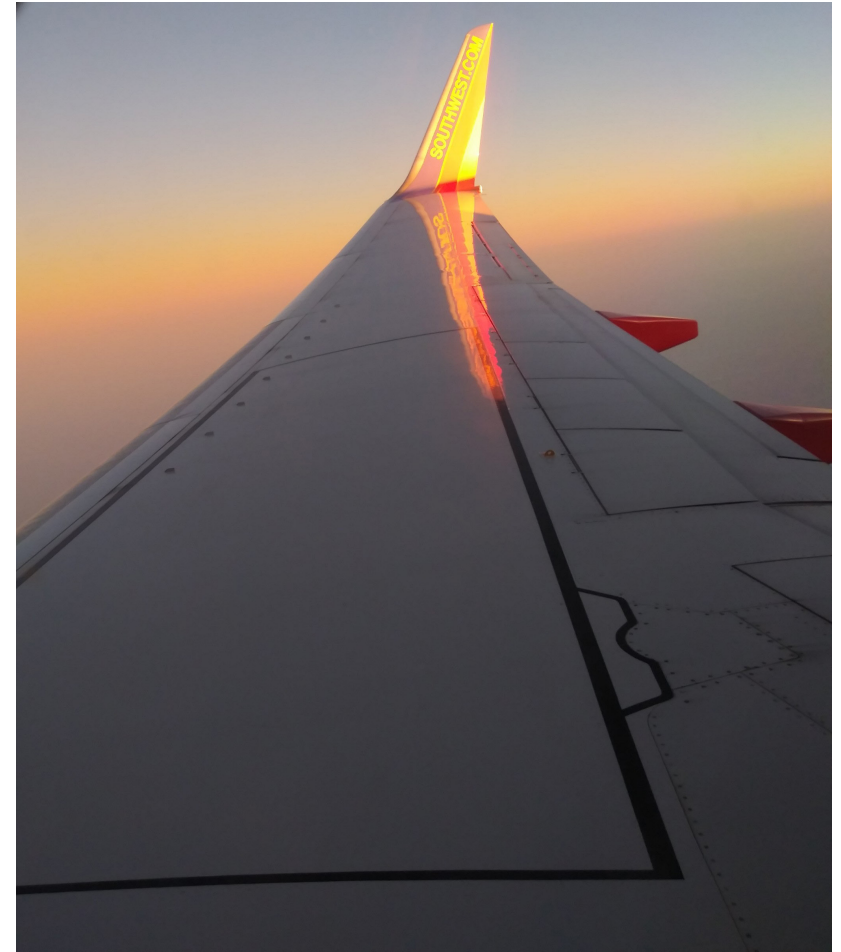
My family and I were all worried that how I was going to get back to England and join my husband Louis. The communication was difficult then. Louis was already in Lesbos, but he had heard the news of the attack on Iran and was terribly worried. He managed to call me a couple of times and telling me about different ways of leaving Iran. The only option was to leave by bus through Turkey on the North West of Iran. A happy occasion for my family had turned to a worrisome time, the only person who was happy that I can't leave was my little sister Touran, who wanted me to stay with her at any cost.

My uncle who lived in Tehran managed to find a ticket on a bus for me. My mother and I traveled to Tehran on the train. I was supposed to leave in three days. There was an atmosphere of nervousness, fright and uncertainty to be alive, especially for those with small children. The first night in Tehran was an unforgettable night for me and my mother. At four in the morning when everyone was asleep, suddenly we woke and jumped out of our beds. It felt like another planet had hit the Earth. The sound of it was loud, deep, and round! An Iraqi bomb had hit somewhere near.

On my departure day we went to the bus stop. The station was mostly full of families who had come to say goodbye to their sons and daughters, who had come home for summer vacation from different European countries where they were studying. The young passengers were happy to leave the war-ridden country, but the parents were looking sad as though they were thinking that was the last time they were seeing their son or daughter but happy at the same time that they will be going to a place that they will be safe. Saying goodbye to my mother had always been the hardest emotion I had to deal with.

It was a ten-hour drive to Iranian-Turkish border and when we arrived, we were amazed by the number of buses at the border. There were at least fifty buses all waiting at the small border control facility to be checked and get permission to leave the country. We waited for forty-eight hours sitting in the bus and waiting for our turn to be checked. In this time great friendships had been formed among the young passengers. Some of the boys were already in love with some of the girls! I tried not to think that we were close to the Iraq's border and any minute there was a possibility of an attack there too. At last after two days an official came to our bus and checked our passports and gave a pass to our driver so we could leave. We were all relieved as we crossed the border. I had become friends with three other girls in the bus. We shared the food and snacks that our families had sent with us. It took another two days to drive to our destination in Istanbul, where we each had to find a way of traveling to our respected countries. The bus took us to a hotel where me and my three friends shared a room. Louis had already finished his vacation and gone back to England, waiting for me. I called him as soon as I arrived at the hotel in Istanbul. Because my return ticket to U.K was originally from Tehran I had to buy a new ticket. It took me four days to find a reasonable ticket to London. I said goodbye to my friends and flew to the London airport where my husband that I had missed so much was waiting for me. We hugged and kissed and cried with happiness that we were together again. Our honeymoon in Lesvos didn't happen until thirty-five years later when we visited the Greek Island with our daughters.

Early Morning Flight



Tryst with Destiny

*“Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny,
and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge,
not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially.
At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps,
India will awake to life and freedom.”*

—Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's first Prime Minister*
Midnight, August 14, 1947

As India gained independence from two hundred years of British rule, amidst celebrations of a new nation rising to freedom, and the chaos of riots and killings between Hindus and Muslims as they left the only home they had known for generations to move to a new country (India or Pakistan) demarcated by arbitrary borders, a child is born. After over nine long months, mostly spent on bedrest, it was a difficult birth for Sheela, as the only midwife in her small village of Burj in the state of Punjab close to the new border between India and Pakistan, helped with the birth. It was hot and stuffy in the tiny thatched roof hut made of cow dung patties. It seemed like all the women in the village were crowded around her *khatiya*, the raised rope bed the villagers made to keep away from the scorpions and snakes that roamed around freely.

Sheela was gasping for air as the midwife massaged her belly to ease the baby out. The smell of the mustard oil made her nauseous. She wanted to scream as the pain overwhelmed her, but someone had pushed a dirty rag into her mouth to prevent her from yelling. Her mother stood beside her, torn between helping her daughter and the shame and dishonor of a daughter without a husband giving birth to a child. After what seemed like hours, there was a feeble cry, and a little girl came into the world at the stroke of midnight on August 14, 1947. Sheela gave a sigh of relief, looked longingly at her tiny daughter, and drifted away into eternal sleep.

Gurinder was a strong woman. From a young age she had worked in the fields and raised a family. Now she had lost her daughter, her only child, and had to raise her granddaughter, an

illegitimate child in a village with strict social norms enforced by the village elders. She named the baby Indira, *beauty* in Sanskrit. Indira was a happy child, helped her grandmother at home and in the fields, and even though she looked different from everyone in the village, her serene nature made her loved by all.

“Nani, why do I look different from my friends? Where are my mama and papa?” Indira would constantly overwhelm her grandmother with questions. Gurinder didn’t know how to respond. How could she tell her granddaughter that her father was a British colonel in whose home her mother had worked as a maid? Unlike many such liaisons, Colonel Colin Wright and Sheela had loved each other. He was married with children. Society frowned on such liaisons, and yet, during two hundred years of the British Raj, there were many Anglo-Indian children with British fathers and Indian mothers. They didn’t seem to belong anywhere—the British looked down on them and the Indians ostracized them.

Indira had inherited the best of both her parents. She was tall like her father and had his light complexion. She had her mother’s chiseled features and her long silky hair. She was a good student, but Gurinder could see that her granddaughter was destined for bigger things. Punjab was a progressive state, India’s granary, and the farmers were prosperous. As the new India was being built, there were opportunities for higher studies in the big city. Although Gurinder was afraid to send Indira to Amritsar, the closest city, she knew she had to get her away from the village. Indira’s beauty was turning heads; the men looked at her lasciviously, and Gurinder knew what that could lead to. Indira was naïve and could easily be duped. She decided to send Indira to her sister in Amritsar, who would look after her, and she could go to college there. Indira wanted to become a doctor and specialize in obstetrics. She wanted to make sure no woman died in childbirth and no child had to grow up without a mother.

After India gained independence and his military assignment ended, Colonel Colin Wright and his family returned to England. But he never forgot Sheela. He didn’t know he had a daughter and

that Sheela had died giving birth to her. Sheela remained in his heart and memories. He was torn between his duty to his family and returning to India to find his love. Years passed as he struggled with this conflict, which he couldn't share with anyone. But his wife sensed it. Olivia had always known. One morning she said, "I'm leaving you. We both deserve better. Go find her." He was taken aback! Had she known all these years? Suddenly he felt hopeful.

Colin booked a flight to India and headed to Punjab. He knew Sheela was from Burj but didn't know anything else about her since the time he had left India in 1947, twenty years ago. A Britisher in Burj was an unusual sight and everyone came out to see who this *gora* was and why he was in their village. He asked around for Sheela and was finally directed to Gurinder's home. Gurinder knew who he was; she had spent so many years hating him for ruining her daughter's life. She blamed him for Sheela's death.

In the many years he had spent in Punjab, Colin had learned the local dialect and customs. He put his palms together in greeting and touched Gurinder's feet, a mark of respect to elders. Gurinder's heart melted. After all, he was Indira's father. Her acceptance of Colin would give Indira at least one parent. She invited him into her home. As he sat cross-legged on the floor, and ate the meal Gurinder served him, she told him everything from the day Indira was born to the present, studying in medical school in Amritsar. So much had happened – Sheela's death and finding out he had a daughter. Colin was almost in tears. Gurinder held him close and said, "You are part of my family. Go to Amritsar and meet your daughter."

Indira had been in class all day and was exhausted. She wanted to get home, eat something, and go to bed. As she exited the medical school building, she saw a Britisher standing in the quad. Everyone was looking at him and wondering who he was. Colin saw a younger version of Sheela walking down the steps. He walked up to her and introduced himself. "Indira, my name is Colin Wright. I am your father. Your nani told me all about you." He showed her a baby photo of her that Gurinder had given him so Indira would know he was really her father. Indira stood motionless for a split second before collapsing. Colin caught her and held his daughter, now a grown woman, for the first time. When she came to, he gave her some water.

They sat on a bench and talked for hours. Indira couldn't believe it. She had a parent! She wasn't alone in the world anymore.

Colin rented a flat in Amritsar and saw Indira every day. They spent hours getting to know each other, making up for the lost years. Colin was there at Indira's medical school graduation. He thanked Gurinder for taking care of his daughter and making her the woman she was today. He asked Indira to come back with him to England. She said she would visit but wanted to set up an obstetrics practice in Burj and help women get pre- and post-natal care. She didn't want another child to lose their mother for lack of medical care. Colin respected her decision and was proud of his daughter.

Colin is getting on in years but visits Indira in India every year, bringing her medical supplies and equipment for her practice. Indira is well-known in the region and women walk miles to come to her clinic. Indira believes this is her destiny... to make sure no mother dies in childbirth and that no child grows up without a mother. Unknowingly, Indira made a tryst with destiny the day she was born, and now she has redeemed the pledge.

Quick to Slow Down

You ever hear about those folk who have so much money, they don't care how many fines they rack up parking illegally, speeding from one place to another, littering, all that? Those people with no regard for the law, as long as they knew they wouldn't be too terribly inconvenienced by the consequences? I used to be one of those people. I never considered that maybe there was a real good reason for laws being the way they are. I didn't know that the difference between 20 and 30 miles per hour was the difference between somebody sitting with a cast on and somebody lying dead on the asphalt.

On hot summer days, I used to love to whizz around with the top of my Porsche down, feeling the wind rush through the strands of my hair as they tangled about freely. It was always such a pain to brush out my curls afterwards, but my hair was truly the most stress-inducing aspect of my life at the time, so I continued to indulge myself in these heedless joyrides day in and day out. I have always been quite the bold and brash young lady, so I am no stranger to street racing. When a car would pull up next to me and rev up, I'd immediately feel a rush of adrenaline and would never turn down the opportunity to spontaneously face off with whichever stranger may be in the vehicle beside mine. I may have forgotten to mention, but I'm no stranger to cops either. Luckily for me, I was never actually busted for racing. Even luckier, I never caused any kind of accident while racing. I did accumulate an impressive number of speeding tickets, however. They were no big deal to me. I was always able to brush them off, managing to avoid points on my license and moving right along with my life. This was back in the days before red light cameras were all over the place, but I'm sure I could have snaked my way out of trouble for those, too.

I always used to consider myself a decent person despite all the misdemeanors. I never truly considered the impact those types of things have on other people, until this night that keeps coming back to me every time I settle down to sleep. It was a little cooler than usual. Very dark and quiet, aside from the rumble of my intentionally obnoxious, eardrum-bursting engine. Even then I was thinking that

the lack of insect chirping set an ominous tone, like a scene in a movie right before something awful happens. Every day I wish that I were just a character in a movie, rather than a rash girl who liked to act like a star. Anyway, as I was just about finished with my drive and the excitement was wearing down, I pulled into my neighborhood. It was still quiet. Everything had gotten even darker as the sun sank lower and lower, descending further beneath me with no bright moon out to reflect its light or to make me look up and let up on the gas for just for a moment to admire it. I was eager to get to sleep, going 40 miles per hour in my neighborhood's 25 zone, when I hit somebody. I realized what I had done immediately, and as soon as I stepped out to examine the damage I think my heart sank down lower than that sun that I really, really wish could have been up. A very kind man who had every reason to think he had plenty of time to cross the street was now dead.

When people tell these stories, you usually hear a lot more about what kind of person they were and how much their family loved them and how many friends they had. I don't think it's necessarily appropriate for me to go on about that now. Instead, I just want to encourage you to take a different path than I did. Lead a more considerate life. Be mindful of all the systems we have in place to keep people safe and comfortable, no matter how small they seem, because no one should have to fear the consequences of rules they didn't break.

Liberty and Justice for All



Last Night's Cigarette

I am a fire
Burning amidst the rain,
The last of humanity
I'm all that remains

But I'm no hero
More often the criminal,
Don't call me the antidote
I'm too toxic to be medicinal
Sneaking through the windows
Raiders meet the rebels,
Yet I'm only a ghost
By the time the dust settles

Lying through my teeth
If I only knew why,
Cast down to this Earth
I'm Hell's angel in disguise

But I'm just a man
Undeserving and unkind,
Locked in a prison
That prison is my mind

With eyes too meek to open
And blood that begins to boil,
I am a machine
And I am running out of oil

A danger to the world
A virus, an infection
With no god to call my own
I'm a sinner beyond redemption

Relinquish don't remember
The night I slowly fade away,
For I shall forever be last night's cigarette.
Smoldering in the ashtray.

Metamorphose

The office smells like dust and stasis, and while stasis isn't a smell, that's the scent it gives off. There are no windows, and the water from the tap in Baton Rouge isn't trustworthy enough to drink from, so you had to buy a water bottle with a built-in filter from Walmart. When you joined this program, it was for the college money, it was for the gap year so you could figure out your life. When you joined this program, you didn't expect there to be anyone like you, and so you resigned yourself to remain hidden. Because you'd gotten used to it in high school, you'd gotten used to the internal flinch every time someone used "she" in reference to you, you'd gotten used to sucking it up when the class was separated by sex for P.E. class. But when you got to the campus (that's what they called it, where our "home base" of sorts was located), there was someone like you there. With a name tag with their name and preferred pronouns, and you felt a sort of hope bubble up within you. Everyone was assigned a team of 6-10 people with a Team Leader, so you approached yours about getting your own name tag.

You didn't wear it when you were deployed to Louisiana.

Starting hormone therapy had crossed your mind before but ultimately you weren't sure about it yet, so your voice is high, and the work hours are too long to wear your binder without risking damaging your ribs. So your teammates know, but your bosses do not. And that's fine with you. Because this is the south, and you are terrified. Your bosses seem nice enough, but you can't trust them; you can't trust anyone down here, because you don't know where their loyalties lie, and you don't know what they think. And you're certainly not going to ask. It's hot down here, and you'd resigned yourself to growing your hair out before you joined, but that was when you thought you'd be playing the part of a regular girl fresh-out-of-high-school. When you thought you'd have to keep acting. But you don't, so you cut your hair. You go to a Hair Cuttery and you tell them to shave it all off, and the hairdresser (a woman) looks at you like you're crazy, "are you sure?" and you say yes very forcefully because you know she's asking only because she thinks you're a girl. Thinks it's some life changing, momentous decision for you, because traditionally long hair is associated with femininity. But you're not a girl, and you don't give a shit about your

hair, so you tell her to shave it down to a 3 and you walk out of there happier than you've been in a while. On Monday when you go back to work, your boss Gwen expresses surprise and says something along the lines of "nice haircut, you go girl," thinking it's some expression of female empowerment and you just smile uncomfortably and nod. You don't correct her. You never correct anyone.

You use the women's restroom, and you share a room with a woman on your team, and you wear a bra to work every morning. And you don't complain. Even though it hurts. When your teammates call you "Rory," (and they don't mention the fucking character from the *Gilmore Girls*) and your teammates don't use "girl," it hurts a little less. But one of your teammates makes you a little nervous—you find him a little bit hard to trust. You've always been a bit suspicious of overly friendly people, you don't like being touched by people you don't know well, and you don't like being pried open into talking by people you only met a month ago.

This teammate applies to both.

This teammate—you'll call him "Jude." A while back your team had a bonding exercise as a get-to-know-you introduction past your names and initial basic information, presenting a drawing based on an exercise called "River of Life," where you present your life chronologically using a visual of a metaphorical river. Jude confessed to having questioned his gender and started hormone replacement therapy before joining the program, having quit beforehand because of his unstable hormones potentially interfering with his work. He didn't want to use female pronouns either, didn't want to make anyone "uncomfortable," and refused when you offered regardless (because everyone else's comfort shouldn't take priority to comfort in your own identity, and you know this well). He wanted to be your friend—birds of a feather. You reluctantly agree because he corners you by telling your Team Leader he wishes you were friends, and texting you asking to hang out sometime. You're in no position to refuse without looking like an asshole, because he hasn't done anything (yet). He does this to you a lot in the following months.

He tells your bosses that you're transgender, and no, he doesn't ask you if that's okay. He doesn't speak to you beforehand. He doesn't warn you. He doesn't ask if you wanted to do that. He tells you offhand, casually, "I told your bosses about your pronouns," in

the middle of lunch and you're astonished. You're scared out of your mind, because you thought he understood. Because he's questioned his gender before—multiple times, even. It's more dangerous out here for transgender women than men. He should know. He should know. But he did it anyway. And you don't know what he told them. You don't know what he said. And you're horrified, because this is the deep south, and your bosses have southern accents, and just earlier that year four transgender people alone had been murdered in Louisiana. Your people. And there would be more to come that following year.

Your Team Leader reprimands him for it, because he didn't ask; this is your life to lead and not his. And you come to work the following day with an endless pit in your stomach and a cold sweat breaking across your hands. Nothing happens, because you're still here, but they still call you "she," and they still speak to you like "one of the girls." Stasis. And sometimes the fear is knowing that even when you expose yourself, even when they're given your most vulnerable self, they choose to willfully ignore it for their own comfort.

After Louisiana you're stationed in Florida. Your Team Leader speaks with the program's administration about you and Jude rooming together, a more comfortable arrangement for the two of you—who don't fit neatly into male or female. Even though he's older than you by 5 years, he asks you for advice, because he's been in the closet longer than you have. You give it to him genuinely, because you like to help—you wouldn't be in a volunteer program if you didn't. Sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night to him sobbing, curled into a ball in the middle of his bed. Sometimes one of your other teammates is cradling him in a hug while he shakes. You don't know how to react, so you don't.

Jude's words are often biting and harsh, smiling even as he says cruel things that rip apart your self-esteem. He always apologizes afterwards, but it doesn't stop him from doing it again. On your birthday everyone on the team gives you an extravagant birthday card full of paragraph-long wishes and heartfelt sentiments. Everyone but him. Jude says you're brave for being forthright about your gender, but that you should "tell the world, because if you don't, then who will?" It isn't your responsibility to educate people, and not at the cost of your own safety. You told him this. He didn't listen. You think bitterly about crossing out his section, because you wonder if this is all he knows

about you. If this is all he cares about, trying to live vicariously through you. He never apologizes for outing you without your consent. Not really.

And the worst part?

He does it again.

It's been a few months since the last incident, and now you're stationed in Texas. When you get to your housing there are enough rooms for most of you to have a room to yourself. You gratefully take one. Jude takes the room next to yours. The two of you are working in the same section, and he gives you these sorts of knowing smiles you think he might believe are comforting, but they make you nervous and sick, so you avoid looking at him. And when you're gone for a bit to use the bathroom (the women's), when you come back your section's boss asks to speak with you privately. He told her. In Texas. In Texas. There had been four murders in Texas, too, in the past year. She tells you not to worry, and she'll tell it to her subordinates. But once again, nothing changes. Their vocabulary stays the same. It always hurts more when they know and they ignore it anyway. He'd already betrayed your trust before, but now he did it again. You move to another section, where he can't tell your boss.

You have two stress-induced breakdowns that January from a build-up of small, seemingly harmless comments he's made throughout the year. Vicious words disguised behind his laughter and a fake-friendly smile. He destroys himself and everyone around him, offering shitty half-assed apologies to the people he hurt when everyone begins to ignore him. You don't forgive him, but you feel bad for him. He's stuck in his own self-made spiral of fear, incapable of breaking free from it, so he drags everyone else down with him. You tell him he'll never be happy if he continues like this. He calls you an asshole and blocks your number. This time it doesn't sting. Jude starts hormones again, once, twice—before the program ends. He quits both times. A stasis of his own, unable to accept himself. Unable to move on. But not you. The paranoia never ebbs, though.

And the fear that anyone could turn on you at any moment never goes away.

The feeling that you're living on borrowed time never leaves.

But you smile and laugh, and you keep going, because if you don't—then who will?

The Man in Blue

It wasn't professional of a waitress to yawn while serving food, the groom's mother said. The plate—still slick from the dishwasher and heavy with a steaming slab of steak I would be lucky to gnaw the scraps off of—burned my hand to scarring. But what was truly unacceptable was that I was tired, of course. I apologized with the tone of feigned sincerity that anyone working in customer service has learned to master, and took my place by the venue house doors again.

I had only just subtly leaned back against the wall to take the pressure off my feet, when the man in blue approached me. He'd been sitting beside the groom's mother, silently watching her rant. His suit looked tailored down to the cufflinks, too deep blue to be called a sky, too light blue to be called an ocean. His laugh lines and forehead wrinkles suggested he was quite a bit older than me, but not yet middle-aged, and he sported a thick beard. As he got closer, the smell of alcohol wafted off of him.

"Need to get off your feet awhile? You look tired."

I held back a sigh. I would have disappeared back inside the venue house to hide in the kitchens and eat the coconut macaroons people discarded, except I was expected to stay and serve. "I'd get fired for that. No thank you."

He laughed, a strange noise between a wheeze and a cough. "I'd give anything to trade places right now."

"Here I thought weddings were fun."

He grimaced, waving his hand in a 'so-so' gesture. "Depends on the quality of the champagne."

"Too bad I'm three years too illegal for that," I said. "So who are you here for? Groom or bride?"

"Both. I'm the groom's brother," the man pulled a cigarette out of his front pocket, and a lighter from somewhere up his sleeve. He clicked the lighter twice before the cigarette caught, and took a long enough drag that I thought he might choke. He exhaled slowly, like this were some strange yoga breathing exercise. "And the bride's baby daddy."

I remember thinking a number of complex, shocked, panicked things. But all I said was, "yikes."

"Yeah," he gave another laugh, tinged with bitterness. "Wasn't something stupid, though. Not one of those soap opera things."

"Then what was it?" I asked, wishing I hadn't.

The man shrugged. "She wanted a kid."

I glanced towards the outdoor tent where the bride and groom were currently swaying to Tina Turner's *Simply the Best*. The other couples around them were in varying states of slow dancing and trying to jam out; as if anyone really knows how to dance to that song. "So," I stopped to think. "Does he know, or—?"

"Yep."

"And you still got invited to his wedding?"

The man gave me an affronted look, his forehead scrunched so hard it nearly touched his nose. "Why wouldn't I be?"

I raised my hands. "Just asking."

"Yeah. So. I wish I were serving food instead of sitting there pretending everything's fine."

All this because I yawned at the wrong table. I wanted to go home. "Well, if you're serious, I'll give you my stuff and you can wear my nametag. Although I'm not sure anyone would believe your name is Clara. My coworkers definitely won't."

He smiled, tapping his cigarette, the ashes drifting down like snowflakes. "I'm guessing I'd have to serve my brother and sister-in-law eventually, and that'd be awkward."

"You can always ask my coworkers to do that. We always beg someone else to deliver food to super unbearable tables and stuff on the usual days." I paused. The smell of roasted chicken was beginning to seep from underneath the venue house doors, and my stomach growled. I still had one oat grain stuck between my molars from the singular Kashi bar I'd had while driving. I prayed the guests wouldn't eat too much, or that they sent some food back.

"I shouldn't keep you," the man said, seemingly noticing my silence. "You've got work to do. You should join a comedy club or something though. You've got a knack for witty shit in bad situations." He pressed his cigarette against the venue house wall,

leaving a circle of black behind before flicking the extinguished butt into the bushes. I'd have to go pick that up during cleanup duty.

"If it's any consolation, if you and your brother are cool now, then there's a pretty good chance you'll be involved. Maybe you'll be the kid's favorite uncle," I said.

"I better be," he huffed. "I'm their only uncle." He gave me a slanted salute before turning away, making his way back towards the tent.

I lost sight of him among the throng of guests hogging the dance floor for the next song. The serving bell rang, telling us the main course was ready to be ferried out. I turned away too, nudging the venue house doors open and following the scent of maple-and-pecan sauce, fresh fruit, and still-sizzling beef to the kitchens. Even though I doled out food for the next three hours, I didn't see the man for the rest of the night.

After the guests left and cleanup duty began, I found one untouched champagne flute at the 'groom's family' table. I watched the bubbles sputter and dance as I poured it down the drain, and in the dim, flickering lights of the kitchen, they almost looked blue.

Pause



A Monday Night in Early September

"Have a nice night, ____."

It is going to be a nice night, Steve... Asshole.

"Later ____."

Sandra, I will be seeing you later. Hopefully not in these godforsaken cubicles again, though I don't think it will be any better.

"We still on for Friday, ____?"

Yeah Dave, we are. I don't know if I'll make it though.

"See ya later ____!"

Goodbye Bridgit, out of everyone in this office, you're my favorite. Your bubbly personality and pink kitten heels don't truly show how pure you are. I regret the night I took that purity away. I was stupid and young and horny. There's still a stain on my blue slacks no matter how hard I try to get it out.

Step. Step. Step.

My feet are heavy. Weighed down by a bag of empty binders.

The world is a blur. Colorful people in colorful shops next to abandoned houses. The mish-mash of wealth gives me a headache.

Ring-ring.

The monotony is killing me.

"Hey Honey, can you pick up milk on your way home?"

Of course I can. Would you like ice cream too? To further diminish your self-esteem?

I think I love you too.

Ring-ring.

Hello Jessica.

No, I don't want to know what you're wearing tonight. I'm not in the mood to be perfidious tonight.

I'm sorry you need constant attention. I'm sorry you are desperate. I'm sorry I gave in to those big tits and lonely blue eyes.

Goodbye Jessica.

I want to throw my phone in the trash. I don't want to be reminded of my mistakes. Of the mistakes I continue to make. I can't seem to be a good person, no matter how hard I try; the temptations always seem to win. Temptations of mind and soul. And flesh.

Ring-ri-

I hear my phone hit the bottom of the can.

Do I regret it?

No. At least, not for long.

Thud. "Sorry."

My pocket is now empty. I don't need to check it to know.

I'm not surprised.

It is starting to rain.

Step. Step. Step.

My face feels wet. I wonder if I will catch a chill. It's cold for a night this early in September, though that could just be me.

Crash!

I didn't see the lightning. People chatting on a bar's terrace leaned over to look out at the pouring sky, their smiles still gracing their faces. They oohed and aahed at the next lightning strike.

Bark! Bark!

The dog is yanked back by the chain. It chokes. I smile.

I'm not the only one in pain.

The street has become more and more abandoned. I have been walking for hours with no intention of stopping. My briefcase is lying on a street corner somewhere for someone who is no one to find.

There is no such thing as being someone, only wanting to be someone. I've realized that I'm no one. I've accepted it.

"Veteran, need money for dog food."

The sign is getting wet, the black ink runnin' down the cardboard. I pick it up and put it under the shop's awning next to the sleeping man. I would put money in his cup, but my wallet was stolen.

Pitter-patter.

The world is quieting down. All the drunks are in their clubs dancing on people they want to have sex with but aren't quite drunk enough to. All the girls leaning over cars have gotten in and been driven off to either be fucked or murdered. All the normal people in the apartments above dreaming that they were anyone but themselves.

HOOOOONNNKKK!

Too much yelling. I don't want to listen.

Neon lights look inviting after the wreck outside.

"Man it fuckin sucks that the pinstripes didn't play tonight! I'da loved to see Clemens get that win."

Such unimportant conversations. Who won what game, who you hate at work, and attempts to impress the lady in the low cut top is all I hear. The yelling outside is better than this.

It's at least more human.

"I'm sorry, Arty! I promise I'll do better tonight, just gimme another chance!"

I should probably help that woman. She is bloody and begging, on her knees in fear. A hand is raised.

Smack!

Arty stands over her sobbing form in silence, her tears mixing with the blood on the ground. Her bare skin was golden in the streetlight, barely covered by a tube top and tiny skirt. Her fur jacket lay a few feet away on the ground.

Is she worth it? Arty is big and muscular, I'm small and fat. Another mistake.

She's not worth it. Neither am I.

Her fur jacket lays a few feet away, wet, stained and probably worth nothing like her.

Vroom.

The cars on this bridge are loud and invasive. I am sat on the ledge looking out over the skyline. I just want some peace and quiet. The world is too loud. My head is too loud.

The sun is up. The day has started. I doubt anyone is looking for me.

WOOOOSSSHHH!

That is low for a plane.

BANG!

Holy shit! HOLY SHIT!

There is smoke. Lots of smoke. And I swear I can hear the screaming from here. Or maybe I'm imagining it. Or maybe it's me.

My face is wet again, but now it is not from rain. I grip the railing tightly, I don't want to let go. I don't want to stop watching. There's another plane.

BANG!

The world stops. There is a hush. For once, there is silence.

I take a breath and the noise begins again.

Now it's not pointless. Now I see the purpose in the monotony, the safety.

A few black dots fall from the burning buildings. I know what they are. I know that they're doing what I was planning, hoping to do tonight.

Now it feels pointless. They're jumping from a burning building because their doom is inevitable. Is mine? They... they don't have the choice that I do. They don't have the ability to still say, "no, no I am not going to die today."

I do.

Step. Step. Step.

I need to stop by the store for milk.

And ice cream.

Prayer in My Watch Pocket

For the beautiful *Monarda citriodora*,
lush, purple, flowering,
smelling of oregano.

For the vibrant green parrot
squawking for crackers
when he really wants nuts.

For the feared wasp
small and stingless,
saving trees like nature's superhero.

For the exaggerators,
elongating every explanation
until they're no longer believed.

For the reserved observers—
seen as unfriendly—
seeking familiarity for comfort.

For the young person
battling demons to the edge,
then walking over.

Let us close our eyes
until the phosphenes
remind us to breathe.

A Flavor Out of This World



contributor's notes

Gabriel Barrow is a very quiet person but she comes alive on the pages. Creative Writing has always been not only an outlet for her but her own personal niche. She hopes that her work can bring light to someone's life.

Aria Carlson is a current HCC student majoring in English. With a passion for writing and art, she's always expressed herself better on paper than in speech. When she isn't creating, she can be found jamming out on her electric guitar or cozied up with a good book.

Roger Chang, Colonel US Army (ret). The irony of eight years of training and testing equipment for Vietnam, the War ended for America in 1973 and he never went. Instead, he answered the nation's Key Intelligence Question on Soviet ICBM multiple warheads on a remote island in the Aleutians called Shemya.

Marcus Chewing is a sophomore who currently majors in English at Howard Community College. In Marcus's free time, he enjoys to, of course, read and write, but he also likes to play video games as well as watch and make meaningless arguments about anime with his friends.

Helen Clark is an adjunct English and FYEX professor and the faculty advisor for The HCC Times. She is also a writer and editor and thrilled to be included in this year's Muse.

Josue Contreras was born in New York and raised in Maryland. Josue comes from a family of poor ancestry and parents from a Hispanic background. Josue currently attends Howard Community College majoring in General Studies going into CyberSecurity. Josue not only writes creatively but also tries to write from different perspectives. He feels as though writing creatively opens your mind to learning new things and exploring the outside understanding of writing.

Farida Guzdar is enjoying retirement. Last year she travelled to Morocco, France, and China. She continues to volunteer in the community including serving on the Howard County Commission for Women. "Cordeteen," a piece she wrote on the current pandemic, was published in the The Village in Howard and Overseas Adventure Travel online newsletters. She is spending this time at home taking an online writing class and working on her memoirs. She was recently featured in Horizon Foundation's

video about the importance of advanced directives and appointing your healthcare agent, especially in the current environment.

As book enthusiast and cliché bloodhound, **Jillian H.** spends most of her time reading fantasy novels, obsessing over her newfound internet pastime, and eating Swedish fish. Her favorite color is pastel pink, but she never wears it, and her favorite food is cucumbers with fancy dip.

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.

Hannah Keepers is a Maryland-native freshman at Howard Community College who fits her schoolwork in between sleeping and playing piano. The joys of her life are two massive dogs who bark at sketchy leaves blowing in the wind.

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. In January 2019 Michelle started The Get Lit Book Club. In addition to reading and writing, she loves to travel. Many of her photos come from these adventures.

Charles Levie is a senior adjunct instructor in mathematics at HCC. He has also been a high school math teacher for 45 years in 11 schools in 4 countries. He describes mathematics as his reason for getting out of bed in the morning, but photography is his passion.

Maya Maree is a young writer who currently lives locally with her family. She aspires to pursue a career in screenwriting after graduating from Howard Community College.

Holly Mays is an honor student in Communications Studies at Howard Community College. She is also a mom, wife, photographer, feminist, and lover of horror and comedy. After graduation Holly plans to take an internship or full-time position in the human or public relations fields.

Jillian McCarthy, or Jill according to her friends and family, is currently a Communications student finishing up her last credits here at HCC. Her plans involve transferring in the Fall to the University of Delaware, most likely where she will pursue Fashion Merchandising.

Greg McLemore is both an artist and art instructor at HCC and other institutions. His art employs the idea of Magical Realism as a starting point to explore the tragic, mysterious, and often comical aspects of life. The images here depict dark and tumultuous scenes in Baltimore City.

Clara Moyer is a Howard Community College student in her final semester. She is studying social science, and writes creatively in any free time she can find. In the future, she intends to make creative writing her minor to whatever her major may be.

Huyen Nguyen is currently a student pursuing her R.N. program at Howard Community College. Her hobbies include swimming, writing poetry, and strolling the park whenever she can. She loves nature and uses imagery to convey emotions in most of her poems. She hopes you enjoy them!

Kelsey Noll is a passionate young writer, painter, baker, and... all sorts of other things. She simply can't gather enough hobbies, finding interest in absolutely everything. She is currently planning to focus her studies on linguistics, but may end up running off with the circus.

Will Paulus is an artist from Columbia, Maryland. He currently attends Howard Community College.

Syeda Rahman is a passionate, cross-media artist who started to pursue art from Dhaka, Bangladesh prior moving to Columbia, Maryland. She enjoys painting images that reflect her culture and background. She wishes to spread more awareness about other cultures through her artwork as well.

Rory Rawlings is primarily a free prose and short story writer. In July of 2017 through March of 2018, he joined a volunteer program called FEMA Corps, dedicated to assisting survivors of natural disasters. The excerpt from his memoir published here is a portion of his experience that impacted his development significantly.

Melissa Rayo, though still a senior in Reservoir High School, is dually enrolled at HCC and hopes to major in English once she graduates high school. She aspires to be a writer of fictional novels, finding inspiration

from Stephen King, Edgar Allen Poe, J.K. Rowling, and other authors. Her favorite genres to write is psychological thrillers and fantasy.

Tyler Rowe is a Cybersecurity student, video game enthusiast, and horror film fan. His inspiration tends to come from Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic*, John Carpenter's *The Thing*, Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033*, and the Dead Space video game series.

Joey Sachs is a student at HCC. His mission is simply to create and foster work that taps into our keen emotions as people and takes a peek into the human condition because we are all just humans, right?

Finnian Sheerin is a young man with dreams of writing. He wishes to achieve great things one day, such as writing the storylines for video games. He also has a love of video games and writing, and has an interest in drawing.

Logan Smith is a third semester student at HCC. In that third semester life's many struggles have manifested into the many works created in that time. Even in elementary school, Logan created haunting stories. He hopes that his stories will, at the very least, make you think.

Maggie VanVranken is a first-year student at HCC. She enjoys writing poetry and short stories as well as things like playing ice hockey and spikeball. She intends to continue her writing career throughout her whole life and hopes to eventually have a published book of short stories and poems. She is planning to graduate in the fall of 2020 and go to UMD to study International Relations with a minor in creative writing.

Marie Westhaver is a Professor of Humanities, Coordinator of Film Studies, and Director of Film Festivals at Howard Community College.

Danielle Williams is a freshman at Howard Community College majoring in Pre-Law. Writing poetry has always been a passion of hers. She loves reading poetry books as they make her feel deeply connected to the writer. She is honored to be chosen for *The Muse* and hopes to continue writing poetry and maybe one day get more of it published.

Amaal Yazdi is a Maryland fine artist who works in several different mediums including body painting, ceramics, and digital illustration. She is heavily inspired by nature, and most of her work depicts images of flora and animals. Her body painting series, "Growth," depicts the empowering beauty of plants and flowers.



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

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

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Submit to issue.19

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Email submissions to themuse@howardcc.edu
Visit www.howardcc.edu/themuse for submission guidelines.



“Poor Ariel” by Bella Horvath

Oh living thing,
Let me hear your
symphony of thoughts, your
heart's melody—
That dark and beautiful chorus
you never sing aloud.
Let me hear
you

—Aria Carlson, *from* “Living Things”