

The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

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Dear Jane Austen

Dear Jane,
 did you know?
 me and my mom saw you today.
 we watched *Northanger Abbey*
 to keep our boredom at bay.
 the heroine goes to a ball
 and dances with a man
 blonde-haired and tall
 smiling and sun-tanned

Dear Jane,
 did you know?
 the heroine wears white dresses
 with ribbons and pearls
 to tie up her dark tresses
 with a shawl of paisley she completes the look,
 the look that appears in all of your books
 white muslin gowns
 and lace up shoes
 mesh, net, silk
 and a dash of rouge
 I can't remember how the discussion was sparked
 about the cavities behind your renowned art

Dear Jane,
 did you know?
 how your heroines get their clothes?
 that they wear when they despair
 about their romantic woes?
 my mom told me the story,
 that her grandmother told her,
 about how the british sought wealth
 with an all-consuming fervor.
 the muslin weavers of dhaka,
 whose art was as loved as yours
 imported goods across the continent

approval spanned many shores.
 the british found the weavers
 and, seeking to expand their sums,
 suppressed weaving with "colonial policy"
 and are reported to have cut off their thumbs.

Dear Jane,
 did you know?
 while elizabeth bennet danced,
 while fanny price dreamed
 an indian's hopes were dashed
 a culture was robbed of esteem.

Dear Jane,
 you knew.
 all of your people knew.
 and looked the other way,
 to fanny price putting on a play,
 to mr darcy saving the day,
 to emma matchmaking away.
 when you're at your next ball
 with mr sun-tanned, blonde and tall,
 look down
 at your gown
 of pure white,
 the bloodstained slight,
 and remember that while my

grandmother
 great grandmother,
 and great great grandmother

cried

and cried
 and cried

you all lived happily ever after.
 The End.

Sweatshirt

Created and carefully woven
by tired, calloused, scarred hands.
Lasting expedition overseas, longing for home,
wanted to be wanted.

Who is my size, will I fit,
where do I belong?
Will I be worn everyday proudly,
or bought never to be seen by another soul,

left to hang in the overflowing closet,
left to be cleaned out,
forgotten.

Stains, memories of trips to the outside,
adventures of every kind.
Holes, products of mistakes,
stitching and patches left for me to remind.
Strings, falling apart but holding it together,
apart yet entwined.

Yet, even after all of this,
I am willing, ready and purposefully
waiting
and wanting
to be wanted again.

I'm Only Fifteen

I used to hate school. Now I just hate living. Zoom in. Watch a video. Type. Click. Fidget. Zoom out. Pee. Zoom in. TikTok. Google. Snapchat. Zoom out. TikTok. YouTube. Zoom in. Zoom out.

All day I stare at a hot glass box, pretending to be myself as I would be if I existed only on the internet. It gets easier every day because less of me is alive in the real world. I log into my brother's classes and pretend to be him, too. He works at a packing plant, wearing two masks, but no face. I'm wearing at least two faces and none, I think, are masks. Is that wrong? I swivel one face, like a telescope, away from glass and towards the universe. I wait for it to touch me back.

Honestly, If I'm Being Honest

Well if I could be honest,
I sometimes forget that I'm
wanted,
and if I could be honest,
I like to be wanted.
If I'm being honest,
I don't mean that in the most
honest way.

Honesty looked a lot like
being touched,
and being touched only looked like
how it felt:
on the surface

Well I've been trying to feel more than that;
trying to feel more than old habits,
old memories,
and your fingertips.

Well if I could be honest,
I sometimes forget that I'm
wanted,
and if I could be honest,
I like to be wanted.
If I'm being honest,
I don't mean that in the most
honest way.

Honesty looked a lot like
not being able to fall asleep in your bed,
and not falling asleep in your bed felt like
how it looked:
rather lonely

But I've been doing better,
a lot more than I realize;
and I realize that doing better,
looked a lot like being honest.

If I'm being honest,
I know that I'm not forgotten;
and if I'm being honest,
I remember that I'm wanted.

My Liqueur

Passion is nectar to savor
It is a rare and fleeting quality
For dispassion is a bittersweet liqueur

The world spins with its vigor
Vibrant and soaked in novelty
Passion is nectar to savor

Observe the fever of nature
Do not forget her beauty
For dispassion is a bittersweet liqueur

The spirit, a fickle traveler
Brevity, her only philosophy
So, her passion is nectar to savor

It takes a certain character
To embrace the flames of vitality
For dispassion is a bittersweet liqueur

The years have whittled my fervor
My palette singed with apathy
And while passion is nectar to savor
Dispassion is my bittersweet liqueur

Stained Cage

These patterns and trends
lead to the same end.

The clock ticks forward
our distance gets further.

Your words blur
your kisses stain.

The bird—cage of
promises,
now vacant.

So why does it
still sing?

Left with its door
wide open

Hoping that your word
would come and mean
something again.

A Breath of Leadership

Nobody understands me. They think

I'm from North Dakota. No-one knows

Acronyms like I do. I diverge from the neuro.

We are free. I beg to differ. But freedom
it does not mean freedom for all. So,
I will make it mean so. I will hook up
my computer to the Executive Office.
The world is now an open sandbox game.
We are sculpting the world for ourselves.

My ceramic assistant stares at me.

He picks up my journal.

I gave reality to his eyes.
without thinking through

I've done the math.

Cost of living for my
followers are low.

All of this written on
post-its. I've come to
reality. I want to cry.

I wasn't the best leader; I tried.

Past Jungles

The air is thick
but their minds are thicker.
Mosquitoes bite hard
but not as hard as
The bullets
that bit their loved ones.
Each step,
Each breath,
Each second,
could be their last.
The thick brush paints their fates
and covers their paths.
With craving stomachs
and dirtied faces,
They search
For salvation
Away from their pasts.

My Guardians Failed Me

From ages one til' right now
 judgement will always find me:
 Incompetent Needy
 Freak Faggot
 Dramatic.

Descriptors,

used not by me,
 but for me
 by those who were tasked with
 defining me,
 to help me figure out who I was,
 From ages 11 to now:
 Me... Parent #3
 Anxious Student
 Show-Off ...

[Suicidal]

Leaving me,
 to pick up the pieces of
my potential
 not knowing what's supposed to fit
 or who I'm supposed to ask,
 left with nothing
 but the possibility of who I
 could
 be
 If I so choose:

Caretaker.

Lover.

Chaser.

From now to forever
 rising above everything and anything
 basking in the success that belongs to
Nobody
 but

Me.

Summer and the space of night

Summer and the space of night fills the house
Through open windows. There's a carrying on
In the quiet, an expectation that things
'Out there' move about as they do.
No seeing to confirm what isn't quite heard.
We expect lives play out as we'd expect,
The foraging, coupling, continuing. A humble
Existence between dusk and light again,
An owl lifts something out of that pattern.
There's hardly a noise. In fact, the silence
Goes quieter until a voice utters
Its last sound, an unforgettable horror
Of a voice, something trying to say "I am"
Terrified, and simpering into was.

I Held My Head Up High

I kept my head down and fastened my pace
The hawks watched me take steps across the street
Their piercing eyes on every piece of my body
It was as if they owned it
Looked at it like a piece of meat ready to grill
Hunger and lust shone from their filthy eyes
Why was my head down while theirs proudly high
It was them in the wrong and not I
Mother always said keep your head down low and gaze to the floor
She said if I did this the men would bother me no more
Why did no one teach them to keep their gaze down
They snickered and they barked with proud heads
So I too picked up my head and I walked ever so confidently
It was my body and I owned it
I stared them down until they cowered back into their holes
And my head has now always been high as I walk the street with pride

O Little Town

The glorious Bethlehem Star
is really just planets
aligned. Extra moons
that belong to Jupiter
have tagged along. Even
through binoculars
I am unimpressed.
“The hopes and fears”
of this past year,
pulse inside me. Why
aren’t you spectacularly bright?
I believe in planets aligning
and stars shining, but
I want this to feel
miraculous.

Focusing on the Galilean moons,
I remember the sun is a star.
A guiding light.
And tomorrow,
I will worship the warm sun
over Baltimore.

Karachi

White stone, blank slate
Dark eyes, jade gate
Clay bowls, brown braids
Marble courtyard, faded paint

Jasmine jewelry, shawls of green
Camel rides, gifted beads
Pink soap, embroidery
Alley cats and daydreams

Bursts of laughter, bubbling beach
Prideful child, morning breeze
Rosewater, palm trees
Spiced milk, and moonbeams

untitled haiku

The warm sun rising
Dew droplets, gleaming sunlight
Steam rising skyward

Early Morning Alert

I stir with a start, utterly flustered.
A threatening siren must be sounding.
The courage couldn't even be mustered
By my eyes to open from their sleep.
I struggle to stand as I blunder
And stagger while I'm dodging the erupting shells
On a battlefield, while I plunder
With my hands, trying to diffuse this bomb.
I run to hide from this blaring noise
I hide in the darkness and as I curl up
In my little hole, I poise
Myself to go through this torture.

Again and again, like one in a coma
I proceed with this torment. After
Forever and ever I pathetically emerge
From my hiding spot
Hours and hours must have gone by,
As I rise into this cold winter blizzard...

Less than five minutes later I'm
Wondering why I complained in my head,
Wondering why I didn't want to leave,
Wondering why I was so lazy
When poor souls actually suffer these terrors,
While all I had to do was
Turn off my alarm and get out of bed.

April Was Death and Hope and Cruel

April was

a smile under a mask.
love through glass.
life across air,
death without touch.

our bodies against us.
civil war.
a country dissolved.
no funeral, no wake, no ritual.
just a box of ashes
aimed at everyone.

April was

emergency,
ambulance,
execution.

a search for a Disney movie
to explain death to a five-year old.

a hunger for the very stuff of life.

liquor,
medication,
and refried beans.

after dinner, a formal thank you
to oxygen.

April was

alone.

April was

surrounded
by color.
flowers,
a crater.

April was

the deep night frenzy
for a bridge to morning.
when sleep was burned
by dreams
and prayer.

a call unanswered.

glory,
canceled.

Eternal

Carmine, the moon bleeds
Dark waters boundlessly flow
consumed by silence

Purple

The color of royalty, luxury, ambition
The summer sky at sunset
Majestic
My daughter's beautiful brown skin and bright smile
Flowers in the spring
The sweet taste of grapes on my tongue

M

I reflect what surrounds me
 nothing more, nothing less.
 I am lined by a hardwood frame,
 I am encased in wood from the Mopane,
 with a copper accent, gifted from my homeland.
 People either adore me
 Or loathe my presence.

People love to look into me,
 But no two people receive the same image.
 Some are met with the image of Straight As,
 something they take pride in
 Even though they did not produce the image.
 Others do not like what they see.
 Within my home, they see flaws.
 They see the exceptional status,
 That of which must be fixed.
 But I cannot be “repaired”

Although I am a seamless screen, with a clear reflection,
 Upon closer inspection, scratches can be seen.
 The dents of reality cut deep beneath the surface.
 These grew from just a scratch
 into marks of resilience,
 and a reminder of my humanity.
 a reminder of my existence.
 a reminder that in life, I am perishable.

a faultless accent piece

in a faulted home.

90's Child

A yellow Sony Discman
 Free to be carried everywhere
 Listening to NSYNC
 Singing “Bye Bye Bye” for the 100th time
 Careful as a surgeon to keep the CD from skipping.

A collection of Beanie Babies
 With TY’s encased in their own protective shield
 Lining the blue inflatable couch
 Won from school’s wrapping paper sales.

Playing with a Tamagotchi
 Feverishly trying to keep it alive
 On the drive to the Friday night visit
 To the local Blockbuster
 Hoping a new release is still on the shelf.

Teaching a Furby to talk
 In between playing Donkey Kong on Super Nintendo
 Watching Double Dare on Nickelodeon
 And playing outside until dark as unsupervised as our laughter.

European Escape

The weighted air. Brown, parallel seats lined the floors. Incoherent voices littered the already heavy atmosphere. One. Two. Three. Four rows of distance between her and me. Two cornrowed braids rested on her shoulders. Her sister, Victoria, sat in front of me. Periodically, I would catch her looking to the back. *Was she looking at me? No, she couldn't be. She could just be looking at her sister.* I was nervous.

Victoria and I began talking about our excitement and plan for the trip. Every so often, I would glance at her in hopes she would hear our conversation and come talk with us.

"My sister Alexis..." After I learned her name, Victoria's words became muddled. *Alexis is a pretty name.*

Four rows of distance became three rows then two rows then one. Her bracelet covered wrists. Her muscular, toned arms. That half-smile she attempted to hide any time I made a joke.

As we arrived at the airport, I found myself wanting to be near her and wanting to hear her voice. *Don't make it obvious.*

The bag check-in. An underwhelmed TSA worker. The sleep-deprived customs agent. Our tour group aimlessly roamed the Dulles airport until we located our gate. Suitcases' indistinct sounds coupled with its carrier's muffled voice saturated the air. Finally, we arrived at Gate B02, wasn't long before we boarded. Before I passed the threshold of the plane, I placed my hand on its exterior and wished for a safe flight.

Where is my seat? I hope I'm sitting next to her. I was seat 23D. Victoria was 23C. Alexis and her mother were a row behind us. *So close.*

Dull dings and flashing signs indicated that all passengers were to secure themselves.

"If in case of an emergency, please use the following exits." The flight attendant motioned towards the exits then proceeded to demonstrate more safety procedures. I reached my hand behind my seat and slapped what I thought was her knee.

"Wh-What the...?" She hit my hand in rebellion.

This slap-off went on for a few minutes. We had to suppress our laughter to not wake up the people in our vicinity.

We're messing with each other! Does this mean she thinks I'm cute?

Countless thoughts and possibilities flooded my mind. The shuffling and squeezing in to use the phonebooth-sized bathroom.

Earth's white cotton balls made up the sky beneath us. The dull dings rang once more. "Will all passengers please return to their seats? We will be landing in Lisbon momentarily." Bumps and screeches shortly followed as the descending tired married the runway.

Busy baggage claim. Two to three different languages spoken over the intercom in intervals. Hand gestures and cheek kisses were exchanged as we were escorted out of the airport and onto the tour bus.

Please... Please sit next to me.

I sat at the window seat and Alexis sat next to me. "I hope this seat isn't taken."

We smiled as she settled in next to me.

"Can you believe we are in Europe? I've never travelled outside of United States. It's beautiful here!" I excitedly proclaimed.

"I went on a tour like this two years ago to the Galapagos. It was an amazing experience," she boasted.

The blurred landscape. Beautiful peaks. Human creation complimenting the land. Architectural styles transforming as we left the bustling urban scene and entered the rural areas.

Instinctively I rested my head on her shoulder. She adjusted her position. "Is that more comfortable?"

I nodded.

We were travelling for what seemed like an hour from the airport to our hotel. We arrived at our hotel, unloaded our luggage, and congregated in the lobby as we waited for the chaperones and tour guide to get the rooms and sleeping arrangements situated.

"Alana, Victoria, and Kaylee. You three are sharing a room."

Great. I'm with my crush's sister and my best-friend. "Alexis, Noemi, and Sasha. You three are sharing a room." *She's roomed with my other best-friend, Sasha.*

Everyone marched up into their respective rooms. Doors closed. The night settled in. The possibilities of tomorrow awaited with the rise of the sun. My soft, matte orange dress cushioned her head. Her 3b locks draped across my lap.

As we rode the tour bus through Lisbon, we shared and swapped songs as if we were kids exchanging school lunch items. Feelings morphing into a yarn ball. Our past strings interlocking, weaving in and out of one another forming into one whole. Our two entities becoming one as we travelled across Europe.

The New Year Hill

Cyrus reached the crest of the hill before his legs couldn't take it anymore. Tossing aside his foldout chair, he collapsed onto the soft grass. He took in the empty night sky for a moment as he let his thoughts wander. *Curse this hill.* It had been almost a year since he first climbed, and his scrawny legs were still no match. The remnants of yesterday's rain also didn't help with the steep ascent. He grabbed a tuft full of grass to confirm his suspicions before returning his eyes to the stars.

What was he doing out here on New Year's Eve? For the past three years of high school, such a night would include him glued to a TV, playing video games. Alone. Yet there he laid on the hill overlooking his neighborhood to watch the fireworks fly with his friend.

Friend. Something that was once so foreign to him had become his everyday life now in the span of the year. It was something that got him out of bed every day, made him smile with just a thought. Something that seemed to have changed him.

It was near the same hill he laid on that he met him, his friend. There, the life of harmony he now lived had begun. It had been like any other morning. Cyrus' family had just moved into the neighborhood but the trucks containing all his games had not arrived yet. So, he went exploring to be in his own world as he often did but then he encountered a burly young man in the nearby forest. Landon.

Landon was his antithesis. The jock-type. He was a star on the field while Cyrus was an awkward kid in the corner of the bleachers. Where Landon could get an entire room to listen to him, shy little Cyrus got heckled to "Speak up!" So, when a guy like Landon asked *him* to be friends that day, it seemed unreal.

As if on cue, a sudden grunt pulled Cyrus from his thoughts. He looked to the edge of the hill just in time to see Landon. One arm gripped the grass while the other hefted a cooler. Slung over his shoulders were several foldout chairs. He quickly found his footing before waving to Cyrus who tried not to frown. This hill had almost killed Cyrus, but Landon hadn't even broken a sweat!

“My man! How long have you been up here?” Landon said with that charming grin of his. “Where’s everyone?”

“Not long and who knows. You know how they are.” Cyrus said. He gestured to the cooler. “Need a hand?”

“Sure!”

Together, the two of them set up the chairs near the edge of the hill to overlook their rowdy neighborhood. As much as he loathed this hill, it held a great sight. The neighborhood, filled with typical suburban looking houses, seemed to glow as people lined the streets to interact. Adults caught up with one another while their kids and neighbors’ kids chased each other down the road. He could see some kids from high school setting up fireworks while smoke from someone’s grill disappeared into the shadows of the sky. This was one of those neighborhoods where everyone knew each other. Everyone was close. A year ago, Cyrus would be in his room, hoping the music in his headphones would drown out any outside noise. The sounds, the smells, and the atmosphere...It was everything. Who would ever look away from such a sight?

“Think fast!”

Cyrus instinctively raised his hands as if to catch something. Sure enough, a can of soda landed in his hand.

“Thanks,” he said before Landon raised his own open can.

“To new beginnings. Happy new year, brother!”

“Happy new year!” Cyrus bellowed in response. They toasted and took their respective swigs. Cyrus took a seat in a chair near Landon, and they sat like that for a while in silence, watching the neighborhood go.

What would the new year bring? More of the same? Back then, the thought of that would have put a frown on his face. He hadn’t hated his life before his family moved. But it always felt as if he was just going by in life. Where everyone was going places, he felt like a paper bag in the wind. Directionless. Aimless.

But this past year had shown him something, he could change. He could evolve.

When Landon pulled his fourth soda from the cooler, Cyrus finally decided to look at his watch. It was thirty minutes until the new year. He was just about to ask Landon where the rest of their friends were when he heard talking towards the edge of the hill. One

by one, friends and acquaintances from the neighborhood and their school appeared on the hill. Refreshments and snacks were in hand and an energy like that of a party.

Landon immediately mingled with anything that moved. But to his own surprise, Cyrus was right there with him. No longer was he afraid to socialize and interact. It was thanks to his friend he had changed. Cyrus also knew he had brought about such change.

Before they knew it, the new year was near. Everyone gathered around the edge of the hill in anticipation for the fireworks that were sure to come. Someone suddenly clapped his shoulder.

“To new beginnings,” Cyrus said, lightly shoving Landon. Landon smiled and started counting down with the others. Cyrus joined in as he thought about just what ‘new beginnings’ meant. This past year had been his ‘new beginning.’ What new beginning? His life had changed for the better already. Would it continue to do so? Would Landon help with that as well or would he continue through volition?

As they entered the new year to bang of beautiful blue fountain bursts in the night sky, Cyrus settled on his desire.

No matter what life had in store for him, he would continue to evolve.

Diana's Blues

Creak, creak. The basement stairs as I walk up carrying John's laundry.

"Hey honey," he says as he gives me a side hug and a smooch on the cheek.

"Hi," I mumble under my breath.

"Thanks for doing the laundry. The fellas and I needed our clothes to be cleaned before the tour. And did you start dinner because they will be here soon?" he asks.

"Yes, I started dinner. Now, can you put the clothes in the living room while I tend to the food?"

"Yeah. But you have to kiss me first." He peers over me.

I don't want to but reluctantly consent. His breath is like liquor and onions. After the painful smooch, he takes the basket into the living room. Then, there is a knock on the door. It's John's bandmates: Larry, Benjamin, Joseph, and Charles.

"Hey honey come here...the fellas are here!" John yells from the living room.

I walk out of the kitchen trying to smooth out my house dress (I never got a chance to iron it because I was so busy with everything else.) In the living room stands four well-dressed black men, each wearing a black suit with a navy-blue tie. All of them are good-looking, but Charles is *very* handsome. He has bronze skin that shines in the sunlight, deep brown eyes, and dark hair. I shake their hands, but something happens when I shake Charles's. It's almost like I feel an electric current running through my body. His smile mesmerizes me. But I immediately snap out and take my place by John's side.

"Sorry I didn't dress well," I say softly. (I feel embarrassed in the purple house dress that John bought me a decade ago.)

"It's okay. I hear you've been working hard around here. Hey, John! Where can I get a girl like yours? Ya know da cooking-cleaning-give me what I want when I want to type?" asks Joseph in a husky voice.

"Well, my girl is one of a kind," John says as he kisses me on my forehead.

I smile, but I am really tired. I just want to sleep; not play hostess to four men who worship the ground my husband walks on. They don't see the John I see: the crazy, prideful and chauvinistic man who hates when any woman says anything. Or the man who becomes drunken with rage angry so much he uses me as a punching bag.

"Well, aren't you all ready to eat? I got some beef stew and some homemade cornbread waiting in the kitchen," I say gleefully. Then, John puts his hand on my shoulder and instantly I feel severe pain. I must have done something wrong. I take a deep breath and continue to smile.

"That sounds good. Let's eat!" Joseph says, and they all walk into the dining room.

"I'm coming!" yells John as he closes the dining-room door. Suddenly, he smacks me in my face so hard that I stumble backward, almost hitting my head on the living room table. He towers over me like I am a little kid and whispers, "I told you the menu was fried chicken, collard greens, and macaroni and cheese. Then an apple pie for dessert. Why would you defy my orders? How dare you, woman!"

I remain silent even though I want to scream. I know no one can hear me pass the loud raucous in the other room. (Plus, the only reason why I did not make the menu because I did not have enough time.)

"Now get up the stairs and make yourself presentable!" He storms but calms himself enough to pretend as if nothing has happened.

I manage to get myself up even though I feel like the whole room is spinning. I weakly walk upstairs to my room. Exhausted, I just break down and cry. I can't believe I have allowed this man to get away with so much for so long. I let him steal the best days of my life. I could be somewhere happy, but I am not. I should have never married this bastard.

Then there is a knock at the door. I immediately straighten up. (I remember John saying to me, If I see you crying, I'll give you something to cry to for). "Come in," I say between sniffles. The door opens. It is Charles.

"Are you okay?" He examines the bruise on my face.

"I'm fine..."

"I'm not dumb. Don't lie to me. I know this look all too well. My mother had it. My sister had it. For Christ's sake my daughter had it!!" He's almost yelling.

"Hush, I don't want John to hear you." I say nervously.

"I don't care about John. What is he going to do? Hit me?"

I sit in front of my vanity looking at the bruise on my face and begin weeping. "I didn't mean to make you upset. It's just..."

"Go away. Just go away. I don't want to talk about it." I bury my head in my chest.

He walks toward me and gently places his hands on my shoulders. (That feeling comes back again.)

"I know you feel that this is none of my business, but I don't like seeing you like this. I couldn't live with myself working for a man who treats his wife like trash. You had big dreams, Diana. I mean big. You wanted to be the first colored and female surgeon at Johnsonville Hospital. And you let that all go to waste because you spend your time serving a man who doesn't love you one bit."

"You're right, he doesn't love me." I breakdown again. Suddenly, Charles has me in his arms. For the first time in my life, I feel safe and protected. I never want to let go; neither does Charles.

Exposed

Summer 2018

"Congratulations you made it!" The team of my dreams...

The flutter persistent in my chest as my heart was beating in my throat. Waiting for placements to load, I'm sitting next to my best friend/teammate at the lunch table, clenched fists, our legs bouncing up and down shaking the whole table. Finally, it loads. I begin scouring through all the numbers, one after the other, looking, praying to see mine... There it was, #38, on the roster. My dreams are coming true.

Fall 2018

Between my AP classes, high school cheer, and my new team, I'm drowning. No time to think or breathe. Wake up at 6 am, go to school, high school practice 2:10-5:30, club 6-9, shower, eat, then homework. Me being me, I refuse to be anything less than exceptional. By the time I finish my homework, it's between 1-4 am. The coffee flowing through my body barely keeps me awake as I fight the back of my eyelids, each blink longer than the previous. Trying so hard to focus on the paper in front of me, but only seeming to focus on keeping my eyes open, my body aches and begs for rest as each minute/hour passes. The endless loop continues day after day, week after week...

Winter 2018

Competition season has officially begun. We'll be practicing close to every day to perfect every skill, motion, and step of our routine. High school season is ending which will give me more time to focus on school and my team. Finally, I get to compete on the big stage and show how the 8-hour practices with no breaks, the soreness and ache in my bones was all worth it, right?

Spring 2019

My dad finally returns home from his deployment, but I have practice... These are the days I question why I do this. After seeing my dad for 10 minutes, I rush to practice late. Immediately I'm told to jump in and join. I began to warm up with my stunt group, quickly throwing her in the air as we have done 1,000 times each practice.

The first stunt I throw comes spinning down, elbows out—full force, she cracks my jaw. All I feel is the throbbing in my head, and my teeth misaligned. My world now spins upside down. After spending the night in the ER... I have a broken jaw, will be out for three months, and on a liquid diet. Just like that, I'm done.

3 months later

Finally, I'm able to return to practice. Weak and sore, with nothing but discouraging words ordering me to get my tumbling back or I'm off the team... This is what it takes to be the best, right? With all on my plate, my anxiety raging through the roof: "What if you don't throw your one to full?" "What if you don't land it?" "What if you get kicked off the team after all of this?" "What test do I have tomorrow?" "Did I do my homework?" "What if I did horrible on this paper and fail this class?" Thoughts race throughout my day. My brain is on super speed, while my body barely hangs on. There's a feeling that my heart may beat out my throat at any minute. I can't lose this after everything I've been through. Seeing my struggles to be back in shape, my coach pulls me aside yet still in front of everyone says, "Maybe if you lost some weight, your tumbling would be better." Standing there in a sports bra and spandex, I'm exposed.

...

Counting calories, intermittent fasting, keto... starving. The growl and emptiness in my stomach, a constant reminder that I need to be the best. The "ideal" body I chase in my sports bra and spandex for all to see. I need to look the part.

April 2019

I make it. The season is over. No more practice, but every day remains a battle between my mind and body: "Am I losing the weight?" "Can you see my ribs?" "Do I look fit?" "Do I need any new skills for next season?" "Do I want to cheer next season?" "Will they hate me if I quit?" "Will I lose my friends?" There's always something new to worry about, something new to obsess over, the imminent threat of next season, coming soon.

March 2020

Struggling mentally and physically to get through the day, I sit in each period longing for the next, counting the hours, minutes, seconds until I can be home and in my bed. Barely making it to

lunch before I get my mom to call me out or I simply leave. Every minute I'm at school is another minute of exhaustion and misery. I sit in English begging the day to go faster before I decide it's over and leave. What used to be constantly thinking and worrying about practices and competitions turn into one thing... my bed. The little time I cherish between school and practice where I can lay my head against my pillow, shut my eyes, and mentally go to another world, away reality, away from homework, away from my own brain, just isn't enough. I've heard rumors about school closing for coronavirus. I'm not sure what it is, but two weeks off would answer my begging prayers... over the announcements we hear, "Schools will be closed for two weeks." So relieved and thankful for this break, now it is me and my bed.

3 months later...

I wish so hard to get out, to be free, to end the tortuous cycle, but now I stare at my sports bra and spandex, a shell of a human. "Is it really over?" The sport I loved dearly, but dreaded as much, the fame, the stage, the competitions, the uniform, all of it... gone? The coaches nevertheless make us practice over Zoom and remind us constantly to stay in shape; so far yet close enough to remain in the back of my head. Now it's just me and my thoughts, starving, constantly working out, running, HIIT, weights, sprints, anything to make me shrink. What I thought would solve my problems is only making them worse. Isolated with myself, my brain tells me to skip breakfast and add an extra run. The irony: as I train to come back stronger and ready, I kill my body in the process. What does skinny mean if I'm too weak to get out of bed? What does skinny mean if I walk through life a shell of a human? What does skinny mean if there's no more of me to even wear the sports bra and spandex...?

The Parable of the Master Weightsman

There is a far-away land where weight works a bit differently. In this land, objects have an inherent unit in which their weight can be measured. If someone tries to weigh an egg using the standard Scales of the land, they will find out that the egg weighs two units of weight. The Scales, however, do not say what unit the egg weighs two *of*. In this instance, the individual in question can probably surmise that the egg weighs two *ounces*—but it is not always so simple. Why, the Wizard of Nom Fals once discovered a cow that weighed six hundred eighty thousand four hundred units of weight, and the natives of Illa build statues that sometimes weigh in tons and sometimes weigh in a *very-slightly different* type of tons.

Needless to say, the Scales are useful, but not quite useful enough to outweigh the confusion that they cause. Engineering and technology have been held back, but thankfully people are rather resourceful—and stubborn—so they did manage to get to that Enlightenment thing and whatnot, and eventually the Industrial Revolution. Anyway.

In this land there lived a fellow who was known far and wide as the Master Weightsman. Alone in the world, he was able to consistently tell the difference between the inherent units of the weights of objects. Once, the Master Weightsman was able to determine that a certain horse weighed in liters! This made sense to no one, save the Master Weightsman. He lived on a miniscule island off in the middle of the sea, in a massive laboratory. Though everyone of course knew of the Master Weightsman and his skill in differentiating weights—he was quite legendary, in the sense of being the subject of quite a few legends—not a soul actually knew how he did what he did.

A curious young woman, fresh from The University and hungry for adventure, decided to travel to the Master Weightsman's island and figure out how his incredible skill worked. Did he have magical powers? Did he confer with dark beings better left alone? She had to know.

Her journey was exciting and eventful, she faced many a trial and even one or two tribulations, and at long last she arrived upon the shores of the island.

As she approached the steel doors of the impressive laboratory, she could hear ominous sounds of something being set up inside. *Whatever it is, it must be enormous*, she thought, as the sounds echoed up to the very top of the domed roof. She pressed the button beside the doors, and a *gong* went off within the building.

Not a minute passed before the doors slid open, and a bearded face poked out. *He doesn't look all that weighty*, the girl thought.

“Can I help you?” said the mouth upon the bearded face, voice like a pile of wood planks tumbling against each other.

The girl was nervous—this being the first time she was confronting a famous figure—but her curiosity would not let her back down. “I want to know how you do it.”

The Master Weightsman smiled ruefully, and his eyes twinkled like bright, polished clichés reflecting the light of yesterday's creativity. “Come inside,” he said, opening the door wide.

She followed him through dozens of halls and rooms, each more bizarre than the last. Finally, they came to what could only be his main laboratory—the high dome overhead reminded her of what she'd heard outside, and she looked to the back of the expansive room. An enormous tarp covered some manner of device, whose nature she could not divine—mainly due to the fact it was covered by an enormous tarp. Upon the tarp was printed, in bold red letters, *P Device*.

“What...what is it?”

The Master Weightsman smiled again and held up a finger. “It is not yet finished being set up. Soon, though.”

It must be a very precise machine to require so much setup. I bet this is what he uses to do his work. “It looks like it takes quite a while to set up,” she remarked.

“The setup is always worth it,” he replied with a cryptic expression.

"When it's finished...can you show me what it does?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. "First, you must come with me on a short journey."

The girl was tired, having recently completed a journey of her own. "Is it quite necessary?" she asked, painfully aware of her aching feet, as those were the only type of feet she currently had.

"This journey is indeed necessary, if you wish to truly appreciate and understand my work," said the Master Weightsman, his solemn expression lending his words a certain weight.

"Very well," said the determined girl. Her curiosity would not allow her to give up now.

The Master Weightsman walked over to the tarp-covered device, lifted the edge of the tarp, and dragged out something that looked like a cross between a radio and a barrel. Which parts were which, she could not have said. He heaved the contraption into the air, then walked past her and out through the laboratory doors.

They traveled back through the dozens of halls and rooms, and, inexplicably, each was still more bizarre than the last.

It's like a single path that takes you uphill both there and back!

Once outside, the Master Weightsman led her around the back, down a rocky set of rough-hewn stairs set in the side of the cliff, and across the beach. They stood before a beautiful ship, mast tall and strong, sails filled with wind, yet not moving the ship an inch. *Ah, he must have placed some of his perfect weights in the perfect places*, the girl realized. *Truly, he is a Master Weightsman in all ways.*

Once aboard the ship, the Master Weightsman threw a couple levers and they surged forward into open sea.

All day they sailed upon his great ship, and the curious girl began to lose patience. "How long must we sail?" she asked him as he stood next to the motionless wheel, staring off into the distance.

"We have waited long enough," he murmured to himself, the murmur accompanied by the slightest of nods.

"Weighted?"

He didn't answer, instead turning to the radio-barrel contraption on the deck beside him. "The setup is complete," he announced.

Finally, I'm going to witness the secret to differentiating weights! Her excitement mounted as the Master Weightsman began calibrating the contraption by way of some knobs on its side.

I'm about to be the first person to learn his secret. If I can recreate it... so many possibilities. With the ability to tell the weights apart, I could finally-

Her thoughts were interrupted by a string of loud, purposeful, *BEEP BEEEEP BEEEEP BEEP BEEEEPs* that continued for the next few minutes, as the Master Weightsman tapped away at the contraption.

When the air finally went still, the *BEEP BEEEEP BEEEEP BEEP BEEEEPs* a thing of the past, she dropped her hands from her ears. There followed a sudden *FWIP*, quite different from the *BEEP BEEEEP BEEEEP BEEP BEEEEPs*, and a blur shot up from the top of the contraption before quickly disappearing into the sky.

"It is done." The Master Weightsman stood triumphantly next to his now-silent contraption, nodding to himself in satisfaction.

What was that? "What did it do? Did it divine the unit of weight of the ship? Of the sea?" If it could tell the unit of even the sea, then-

"Divine the whatsit of the what?" said the Master Weightsman, brow furrowed.

"The...the unit," she replied, more than somewhat lost. "The unit of weight."

"You must be mistaken, lass," said the Master Weightsman. "This here is my most famous invention, an unbounded communication device!"

What is going on here? Were all the stories made up? What of his unit-divining abilities? What of his legacy? What about that time he differentiated between an ounce and a dram? Or between a ton and a tonne? Baffled, she tried to find some sense in what had happened. "Then what did you take me out here for?" she cried. "What did you just show me?"

The Master Weightsman smiled proudly at his most famous invention. "That, lass, is how you telegram from a galleon."

The Meeting

I have always been a hard worker; my company means everything to me. My best friend Macklin and I worked day and night out of his parents' dusty garage to get this company started. Little by little our company grew; I became CEO and Macklin was the President. Silly titles never changed our relationship; we always valued what the other thought. Little did I know that one snowy December morning was going to be so important for the company.

I could hear Macklin screaming from across the room,

"Druvesh, I just got Maryland Packaging to meet with us for bottling our drinks!"

I could feel my heart beating fast, and I had never smiled so hard in my life. Our company sells CBD infused drinks, but we needed a third party to bottle the beverages for us. Macklin just got us a meeting with the largest packaging company on the East Coast! They're called Maryland Packaging and they pack for Nestle, Splenda Sugar, Walmart, and many other companies too! And now maybe even us!

When I heard the news, my palms were sweating like crazy, but that didn't stop me from quickly drafting an email to Maryland Packaging. I expressed my gratitude and asked what exactly they would like to get out of this meeting. When I was driving home, I knew exactly what I was going to do and say at this meeting that was now happening in two days! From the subtle jokes I was going to make to our company's statistics, I had it planned to the T.

Two days crept past me like that, but I was over-prepared for this meeting and was ready to seal the deal. I got to their office at 9 am, even though the meeting was going to start at 9:30. I sat eagerly in the waiting room while practicing the entire meeting in my head over and over.

I heard my phone ring; it was Macklin.

"This is the biggest day of our lives. Are you prepared for this? Our company is finally taking off, and we need to sell this," he said.

"I know, man, don't worry, I got it," I replied. As the Chief Executive Officer, I knew the title came with responsibilities.

Carrying the entire company on my back meant that many people were relying on me, and I just couldn't let them down.

A young, professional-looking lady called out my name and snapped me from my trance.

"Mr. Patel, they are ready for you," she announced. I followed her through the quiet halls until ultimately entering an unexpectedly large room. I was intimidated yet confident about the meeting that was soon to follow.

One of the three men stood up from the oval table. "Mr. Patel! It is so nice to have you here, please have a seat."

The man who spoke was tall and had a thin figure. I was not intimidated by his figure, but his eyes were piercing like a hawk. With a hesitant smile on my face I scanned the other two men at the desk as quickly as I could. The heavier one had the most welcoming smile on his face and the other one was too busy typing on his laptop.

"The room doesn't seem too bad, you got this," I thought.

"I am thrilled to be here, thank you for inviting me," I responded. I began to go into detail about what my company needed and what we hoped to get out of this deal. The three men seemed impressed, especially the one with the welcoming smile. He was laughing at all the jokes I cracked! We took turns speaking, and I could tell they liked my energy. Every single detail was discussed, from what the packaging would look like to how much they wanted to charge, to what color the bottle caps would be. It was going just as planned.

"So where are those sample products you had promised us?" one of the men asked.

I froze. At that moment, my soul left my body, and I was standing there speechless.

"The samples," I said quietly to myself.

I had forgotten all about the samples, the most important part of my presentation! Just two days before, I had explicitly stated in my email that I would have them for everyone to try. I pictured them in my head because I knew exactly where they were: the room next to the front door so I would remember to grab them on my way

out. These samples were going to finalize our deal with Maryland Packaging, and I knew Macklin was going to freak.

My eyes wandered the room, as if the samples were going to appear before me. My heart was racing fast. Was I really this careless? Each second I didn't present the samples, I was losing credibility in their eyes.

I knew I had to say something.

"I know I said I was going to bring them today, but we ran into a problem at the warehouse, and unfortunately, I don't have them here with me today," I replied embarrassedly. The room went silent.

"I can bring them to you tomorrow! Or the day after! Whenever works best for you all," I quickly added.

Those few seconds that it took for the men to reply felt like decades. Finally, one of them said,

"We were expecting the samples today. How can we finalize a deal without seeing the product? This is highly unprofessional."

Another added, "We are tremendously sorry Mr. Patel...but we can't work with a company that is underprepared."

I offered my sincerest apologies; I knew at that moment I had let everyone down: my team, Maryland Packaging, and myself.

The drive home was different than the one two days ago. For once I had no idea what I was going to say. How was I going to walk back into the warehouse and face Macklin? To make matters worse, I spoke with such utter confidence when he called to make sure I was prepared. Some mistakes you just can't afford as a new company, and this was one of them.

I sluggishly walked into the warehouse and there was Macklin, waiting for me with the most genuine grin on his face.

"Hit me with the good news bro," he exclaimed as he pulled me into a tight hug.

I was silent. When he noticed my lack of response, he jerked away.

"What's wrong Druvesh? Tell me how did the meeting go? Does Maryland Packaging want us?"

All the possible ways I could have responded left my mind. I could only manage to get out one sentence.

"Macklin, I left the drink samples at home."

He just stared at me. Not a word left either of our mouths, we were just exchanging the same disappointed look. Except his was more intense. I could tell he was not only disappointed in me but also himself for putting his faith in me.

We didn't speak the rest of the workday, and he went home without saying anything as well. I had let him down immensely. I would be lucky if he ever even spoke to me again. I also went home with the same sluggish posture; I was ready for this day to be over.

I woke up the next morning in hopes that the sleep would press restart on the feelings of yesterday. It didn't.

I laid there picturing what today would be like since Macklin wasn't talking to me and a million questions filled my head. Does everyone in the warehouse know what I did? Did Macklin tell them? Was anyone going to talk to me? A sudden phone call pulled me from my thoughts. It was Maryland Packaging.

One of the men I had met with yesterday was on the phone.

"Good morning Mr. Patel," the man said.

I greeted him back. "Good morning to you as well! To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I'll tell you what," he began to say. "If you get those samples to me by the end of the day today, we have a solid deal."

A laugh of relief left my body, and all I could say was thank you.

I jumped in my car and drove to the warehouse; I had to tell Macklin. On my drive, I hoped there was a chance he would forgive me.

Maryland Style Blue Crabs

Native Marylanders possess a certain degree of enthusiasm for all things perceived as quintessential to our state. We are known for wearing our flag proudly on everything from hats to beer Koozies and for our rivalry over the beltway's legendary sports teams. Families spend their summers exploring the state's geographical gems, plentiful and diverse thanks to a unique landscape of natural parks, pristine mountain ranges and charming seaside towns. This combination of outdoor amenities and historical significance fuels an unmistakably rich culture enjoyed by both locals and tourists from around the world. Maryland also boasts a range of iconic culinary options, but none are as significant to Chesapeake culture, nor to my own upbringing, as the steamed blue crab.

The crustacean itself is a remarkable sight. Imagine a sharp, eight-clawed scavenger who walks and swims from side to side, eats its young as a way of regulating population, and requires a mallet just to consume. Picture a family crowded around a newspaper-covered patio table picking delicate bits of sweet white meat from cavities comprising its hard shell. You may picture a hideous monster: a terrifying beast from another world and wonder why I would ever choose to write about one. However, if you are a proud Marylander like me, your mouth may already be watering at the mere thought of our state's beloved blue crab. Its scientific name *Callinectes sapidus* translates to "savory beautiful swimmer" which refers to the way its paddle-like legs traverse the sea floor. This name could not be any truer, even despite the critter's unsightly attributes.

Blue crabs have quite a storied history in salty, coastal lagoons along the east coast. Native Americans in the Delmarva Peninsula introduced the crustacean to European settlers in the early 17th century. There is evidence to indicate that those living in the Chesapeake Bay area have considered them a bountiful and valuable source of protein, much like oysters and Rockfish, for hundreds of years. Quirky regional lore has it that George Washington once claimed he saw crabs "the size of whiskey barrels" crossing the Potomac. Unlikely, but this *could* be true. Scientists agree that yesterday's crabs were likely much larger than today's, a fact

attributed to the commercial fishing industry which continues to be integral to Maryland's economy. Perhaps that is why the blue crab is celebrated as the state's official crustacean.

The best crabs come from Maryland because they are born here, caught here, and served fresh. The most common technique to catch one is by using a simple bait and net secured to a buoy or dock. Other times, watermen submerge large pots into the water to lure and trap the crustaceans inside, leaving them to accumulate for a day or two before harvesting. The crabs are then transported from docks and boats to local seafood markets to either be steamed or sold live by the dozen up to a "bushel," a unit of 6-7 dozen. My family has always preferred buying large males for their sweet clumps of meat—steamed and always seasoned. Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't mention Maryland's unofficial state seasoning: Old Bay. Nearly all crab houses toss it on liberally, each shell coated in a mouthwatering, reddish-brown spicy salt. This signature blend of herbs and spices has inspired an array of Chesapeake-centric snacks.

For me, Maryland blue crabs are part of a ritualistic celebration of summer. They mark birthdays, holidays, and frankly, any excuse to stop by the seafood shack to grab a half-bushel. My dearest friends and family gather in my father's back yard with one goal in mind: to spend the full day laughing with one another while devouring crabs. We crowd around a table stocked with beer, paper towels, butter knives, and a garbage bag nearby to dispose of mounds of empty shells. We pass around platters of hush puppies—delicious deep-fried corn fritters—steamed jumbo shrimp, and usually, grilled corn on the cob. Melted butter serves as a luscious dipping sauce for everything. In the center of the table, our delectable main course: a dozen crabs, replenished time and time again until everyone has had their fill.

I wish I could recall the first time I cracked open a claw and unveiled a perfect fin all by myself. The truth, however, is that blue crabs have been a part of my life from the very beginning. They represent humid, eventful summers in Maryland and the bond that comes with celebrating life's frivolities among fellow "crab lovers." I do have the memories of the past twenty Father's Day feasts; the

crab dip I paired with an Orange Crush at my first trip to the bar; the bewilderment on my toddler's face when he had his first taste last summer; and the sound of my Grandma's jubilation over the phone upon finding a dozen crab cakes on her Montana doorstep. My fondness for blue crabs will forever be part of my identity as a proud Marylander.

Give Me Your Money

At the ripe age of 66, Jim had a pretty younger girl friend, Anne, who was a college coed. She studied at the University of Maryland Dental School in Baltimore, Maryland. He met Anne while getting his teeth cleaned thoroughly all morning long and taking a lunch break only to return for more treatment after every single crevice in his mouth had been scraped and polished. In the afternoon, Anne continued to finish the cleaning as her Dental School Evaluator examined her work before applying the tooth sealant and fluoride treatment to create a barrier against any future tooth decay. After hours of staring into Jim's mouth without exchanging a single word except the periodic "rinse" command, they must have developed a wonderful rapport. Either that or Jim had unbelievably attractive teeth that drove pretty young women wild. One tooth is chipped from wrestling in high school like one ear that nearly got crumpled into a cauliflower after his protective wrestling headgear got torn from his head in a headlock move. Jim was definitely not a pretty boy, so Anne must have been attracted to his teeth or hypnotized by his total lack of movement as she scraped, polished, and picked at his teeth and gums. Hypnosis must be the answer.

As Jim walked out after paying for the hours of cleaning and close physical contact with Anne, she gave him a smile, as she knew that he would return to her. Jim had a follow-up appointment to continue treating his gums, to prevent him from losing his teeth like his father. Jim's father never used dental floss, resulting in an upper and lower set of false teeth requiring nightly soaking and cleaning.

"Thanks for the great cleaning, Anne."

"You are very welcome, Jim. I will see you next month."

"Yes, I have my appointment."

Now Jim drove to downtown Baltimore regularly to get his teeth cleaned and polished by a pretty young student, Anne.

"Would you care to go to dinner with me? There is live entertainment and music at Germano's in Little Italy."

"Sure. That sounds great, Jim. I am really hungry after a full day here at the dental hospital."

"You can call me at this cell phone number."

"Sure, Jim. I like your smile. It must be your very clean teeth. You realize that I work extra hard on them."

"Thanks, Anne. I'll remember that when I still have my teeth at 105."

As they sat down to enjoy veal Parmesan, Brussels sprouts with bacon and baked cheese with a glass of robust Italian red pinot noir, the band started playing and people started dancing. The veal melted in their mouths, while the baked Brussels sprouts burst with the rich flavor of crunchy pancetta surrounded by melted Parmesan cheese from Italy. How could Jim leave such a delicious meal to dance?

"Would you care to dance?"

"Let's finish our meal first."

"Okay. That sounds reasonable."

Anne has the long trim body of a ballerina, having taught ballet and swimming previously. She had been divorced and returned to school to get a job skill. They would grow to share so much more in time. As they finished their last bite of the delicious meal and sipped the vintage pinot noir wine, the music continued to play and the dance floor was completely full of people.

"Shall we dance before the band stops for the night?"

"All right. Let's dance."

As Anne and Jim found this tiny corner at the very edge of the packed dance floor, Jim had plenty of room to trip the light fantastic as he kicked his leg high into the air, landed and jumped up touching both toes in the air. Anne couldn't stop laughing.

"I have never laughed so hard in my life. You are totally uninhibited."

"Yes, this was a lot of fun. That was just a sampling of my fifty years of martial arts training."

"Even the people at the other table asked what kind of dance that was. I told them it was you trying out to become a Shaolin monk."

With the sweat pouring down Jim's face, the two felt like they already knew each other forever. Laughing at the totally uninhibited exhibition from Jim, they walked out together.

Two days later, Anne had car trouble.

"Jim, would you please take me to the Dental School this morning?"

"Sure, I'll be right over to get you."

After dropping Anne off by the entrance, Jim circled the area in downtown Baltimore to find a parking space. Jim had offered to take Anne to get her car after the morning session at the Dental School. Passing two young men up the street hovering over a parked car, Jim luckily found a space and parallel parked into the opening between two cars across the street from the Police Station. As Jim was putting his credit card into the parking meter, he noticed one young man approaching him, while the other was walking away waving "no" and no one else was around. Even the Security Guard Station for University of Maryland Hospital at the corner was empty for a lunch break. Jim and this young man he passed earlier were alone together on the empty quiet street.

"I just got out of prison. You see my release papers. Can you spare fifty cents?"

Jim put his credit card back into his right front pocket, which you should never do because you can't protect yourself with your hand inside your pocket except Jim had a Kubotan in that pocket with a concealed knife inside it. He held the Kubotan in his right hand with the glass breaking point protruding beyond his thumb in his closed fist. Jim's instincts kicked in. The young man had neat shoes and pants. Unlike panhandlers on the street corner happy to get a fruit bar or bag of potato chips from Jim, this young man didn't need fifty cents. He walked much too fast. Fifty cents was simply a distraction. The wave off of his friend leaving the scene was also inconsistent. All these doubts passed through Jim's mind in an instant as he weighed the possible confrontation. Reaching into the parked car for fifty cents in change would also be a distraction. Jim would not become distracted. This fast talking young man did not need fifty cents for any reason.

"You're going to fight me, aren't you?"

Without answering, Jim was totally focused on the shoulders and distance between them. The slightest movement would trigger a flash defense reaction, conditioned by decades of practice and training. The silence felt like an eternity and was deafening. Only the pulsing of Jim's heart speeding up could break the silence.

Remaining silent, Jim focused on the soft spot right behind the accoster's left eye. After 10,000 practice strikes to speed break a wooden board thrown in the air, Jim was fully confident that he could strike his target before being blocked. If not, his left hand would be equally fast to grab the windpipe in the target throat with a grip fast enough to sound like a clap using only one hand and a wrist twist to remove the vital air passage nestled between the two neck muscles.

"You're going to get yourself shot acting like that."

As the frustrated young man or would be robber turned away and left Jim alone by quickly walking away, Jim could now pay his parking fee. Jim could safely walk into the University of Maryland Hospital Dental School building with two armed guards sitting at the front desk inside the entrance that kept the young man, who just wanted "fifty cents," away from a helpless little short older man who had the confidence and self-control to simply say nothing while being ready to act. At least Anne appreciated Jim's fancy dancing.

The Lost Year

Spring 2020

In the beginning it was fun. I took long walks, cleaned and organized everything, spent time with my family and my cats. I found new shows to binge-watch and watched all the movies I could. I wondered daily what was to come, but I was enjoying the time off to re-charge. Slowly it began to sink in. My friends were gone. I wasn't allowed to see them. I was alone. Sadly, my support system became a Google Meet Happy Hour once a week. I have a great family, but I'm the only female and they just don't get my need for time with the ladies. The 125 kids that I worked with every day were reduced to 25 squares on a monitor. Instead of reading with them, helping them write, teaching them math facts and giving them food when they were hungry, I was reduced to participating in a morning greeting and a check-in for 30 minutes a day. Instead of being someone they could count on and confide in, I became a square on the screen.

Summer 2020

The school year ended without goodbyes, without clapping out the 5th graders, and without the promises of I'll see you next year. Most of the students were being redistricted, and I would never see them again. In the fall, they would report to a different school and I had no opportunity to tell them how much I enjoyed teaching them and learning from them. Some of those students I had worked with for three years. I knew everything about them—I celebrated loose teeth, sports games, dance recitals, their art, their siblings, learning to ride a bike, and getting a new pet. They were as important to me as my own children, and I protected them the same. My heart broke more each day.

Summer progressed, and Vegas closed, concerts were cancelled, parks closed, we couldn't fish, and we couldn't have gatherings. We were told to STAY HOME, alone. We waited in line to shop, and we ran from aisle to aisle in stores to grab the Lysol disinfectant and wipes and sanitizer, oh and yes...the toilet paper. We spent every single day at home staring at the same walls, getting on each other's nerves. We followed the rules, we didn't go out, and we stayed away

from family and friends. We began snapping at each other, and we soon realized that while we once thought we had a big house, it was suddenly quite small. We said things we wouldn't normally say to each other.

Fall 2020

September came and we were told we would not return to school buildings until January. My daily life that was once full of laughter, jokes, loose teeth, stories, jokes, drawings and flowers was once again reduced to me sitting in a room alone every day trying to connect with children through a screen, pretending that they are learning, and pretending that all of this was okay. My daily encouragement that was once, *I know you can do it, write some more, just sound it out, I know you can spell it*; and *how can I help you with this* was now, *please mute, raise your hand; turn off your background; and log out and back in again, hopefully that will fix it*.

We made it through Thanksgiving and looked forward to the holidays. Even though we were informed that we were remaining virtual until April, I was feeling pretty settled with my daily schedule. I was surprised that some of the students sent me gift cards and wrote me letters thanking me for being a great teacher. I began to think that I just may survive this fiasco.

Winter 2020/21

It all started with one runny nose, then another, then the cough. Then came the tests and the endless wait for the results. For one month, my entire household was turned upside down. Each of us locked in separate rooms, either sick or trying to stay well. I walked around the house in a mask with a Clorox wipe in one hand and a can of Lysol in the other. Cooking for them all. Running up and down the steps, bringing them everything they needed because they couldn't leave their rooms. Then it happened, I noticed when I was frying onions and I could not smell them. I frantically went around the kitchen smelling every nasty strong odor I could find. NOPE! I tested the next day and got my positive result two days later. Fortunately, other than the smell, I was asymptomatic. Then it was my turn in the room.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, we were told we were going back to the buildings and students would be returning to school in person.

Now, I await the students' return on March 1st. New schedules, Chromebooks, masks, distance, sanitizer, wipes, and gloves are the new school supplies. I must learn to smile with my eyes, offer words of encouragement from six feet away, make sure they don't share recess equipment, talk in the cafeteria, hug us, remain distant, and use the bathroom one at a time. There will be tape on the floors, signs in the hall, and constant reminders about what is and isn't allowed. I cannot socialize with my co-workers; I can't eat lunch with them or have meetings with them. Is this better than sitting in a room alone? Will these students be able to handle the changes? Will they or I recover from this lost year?

The Reaper's Song

"Je t'aime, I love you, Je te déteste, I hate you, Go away."

Three bells tolled as everyone awaited their fates. Ava leapt from her bed, ragged breaths on her tongue, as she dreaded her doomed future.

La Fête de la Faucheuse, the Festival of the Grim Reaper, happens on Halloween night when a blood moon bleeds through the sky.

On this night, in St. Cata, a town on the outskirts of Québec, the Grim Reaper rises, deciding who gains a new life and who has to lose a life. There needs to be a balance between the dead and the living. So, for the dead to become the living, someone in the town has to die and lay in their graves.

The townspeople never knew who was chosen, but the dead always knew. Once they had risen, there was no escape. They scattered across lawns, burst through doors, smashed through walls. The dead did not care who was taken because all they wanted was to live again and they would do *anything* to make that happen.

Ava didn't know if she was chosen, but the shattering of glass downstairs and her mother's blood-curdling screams told her a different story.

"La, La, La, La, La," she heard something sing from the hallway with a raspy voice.

Ava was nineteen years old, *nineteen*. She just started her freshman year in college, had a stable job, and was finally learning to love herself. She thought that if she ignored the chills and the foreboding woes then she would be fine. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

I need more time! Her thoughts scrambled and merged as someone started to bang on her bedroom door. Ava barricaded her door with her bookcase, but as the slams got louder and stronger, it fell.

"Je t'aime, I love you, Je te déteste, I hate you, Go away."

Ava froze as her books spread across the room. Her panic rising as the banging continued, the doorknob simultaneously rattling. She knew it was too late, it was too late for her.

The thing on the other side punched through her door, "Ava, it's *so* nice to see you again."

There stood Bella, Ava's former childhood friend of thirteen years. Bella had a smile slashed over her mouth, bloodshot eyes, rotting fluorescent skin with a blue hue, her last outfit now torn up and dirty, her hair was messy and full of worms, and her wound was still fresh.

Ava trembled as Bella stalked towards her.

"You know, I find it ironic that we're in this situation now, *Aves*," she cackled mockingly. "But, I guess it's payback. I mean, you did watch me die and even helped my murderer stab me to death, so no wonder your life will be mine now."

It hurt to talk, it hurt to talk so much. Ava was just so overwhelmed because she was just trying to stay alive. She gave up everything for Bella and she just wanted to be selfish for one night...

Last Halloween, a person of the dead charged into Bella's house while they were having a sleepover. However, Ava wasn't the target, Bella was. Even as she heard Bella's screams of pain and mercy, even as Bella called to her for help, even as Bella cried, Ava did nothing and soon she had enough.

She grabbed a knife from the kitchen cabinet and stabbed Bella. Once, twice, then she slashed a smile through her mouth.

"S'il vous plaît, Please, Please, For you and me."

"La, La, La, La, La."

Ava believed her actions were right, but never thought about the consequences. She just wanted to stay alive and if that meant killing her closest friend, then so be it. *She was offering Bella the mercy of being killed by someone close. What she did was right*, Ava tried to convince herself.

As Ava looked at Bella with tears dripping down her face, she realized that there was nothing she could say to fix her mistakes. Her throat felt dry as she let out the loudest sob she could muster.

Ava expected Bella to drag her, stab her, or slap her, but none of that happened. Bella pitied her old friend, but the betrayal still burned.

Instead of apologizing, Ava simply stopped crying and took a deep breath.

"I'm ready," she said, her eyes not wavering from Bella's stare.

"Il était temps, It's time, It's time for you to die my dear, The blood moon is here."

A trail of blood lead outside the front door.

That's probably Mom's blood, Ava thought with a sense of horror mixed with grief.

As they walked on the gravel, Ava observed the chaos in their town.

Windows were broken, front doors on the ground, cars were crushed, possessions were tossed all over, townspeople were being dragged against the ground, and the dead did it all with smiles on their faces.

Ava looked down, not being able to bear the chaos anymore.

"Just one slit on your throat, The flooding of your blood, Your bodies in our graves, Your lives are ours."

"La, La, La, La, La."

At the cemetery, the throats of the living are cut and their blood is spread into the ground.

Ava knows the ritual by heart as the first people are buried, but she still shivers at the sight of it. Bella smirked at Ava's discomfort.

"You have made me suffer so much. I *hate* you. You took everything away from me and now I'm going to take everything away from you," Bella declared, a malicious glint in her eyes.

Ava wanted to fight or run, but somehow, she couldn't. She let Bella drag her to her grave and watched as Bella slit her throat in a quick motion. Ava didn't feel the pain until she started coughing up her blood. She didn't feel the loneliness until Bella sealed her in the coffin. Ava didn't feel anything until the darkness swallowed her whole except for the vision of the girl she would rise to kill on the next All Hallows Eve.

To Rescue a Princess

Princess Cassandra neatly stacked her accounting ledgers, her long elegant fingers carefully squaring the corners. *That is enough work for now,* she thought, rolling her shoulders back and turning to gaze out the window, *especially on a day like today.* Soft, white clouds lazily drifted in a bright blue sky, while songbirds filled the air with twitters, chirps, and warbles. Her soft grey eyes took on a faraway look as she mused to herself, *If the accounts maintain their current profit level, I will be able to purchase that merchant ship within the year.* She blinked and shook her head, reminding herself that it was time for a break.

The princess padded on slippered feet to the window and looked down her tower. The dragon curled around its base, her jewel toned scales scintillating in the bright sunshine. Smoke coiled from her nostrils with each rumbling breath. Cassandra unlatched the window and called down, "Phoebe." One slit-pupiled eye opened. "Would you like tea?"

The other eye opened. The dragon rolled onto her side, stretching out her full length like a contented cat. She rolled back onto her stomach then rose, extending her neck to bring her head level with the window.

"I would," Phoebe replied in a deep, sibilant voice. "Are you taking a break?"

"No, I am finished working for the day."

The dragon's ears pricked up and swiveled forward. "Then will you read to me?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes," Cassandra huffed with a laugh, "but you must serve as a back-warmer."

"Deal."

The last of winter's chill lingered in the air, and icy patches stubbornly clung in the shady spots but snuggled against Phoebe, Cassandra felt almost too warm. She turned the page and drew breath to begin another chapter when the dragon suddenly lifted her head.

"I hear hoof beats."

Cassandra scrambled up the dragon's side and onto her shoulder, bracing against a neck the size of a small tree. The princess shaded her eyes and stared in the direction the dragon faced.

"Is it Micah? But he and the other servants aren't due back for another day at least."

A figure topped the rise and reflected light slashed the eyes of the watchers.

"No!" both shouted.

"Not another one," groaned the princess.

"Perhaps this one will listen to reason," the dragon suggested hopefully.

"Oh, like the last three?" came the sarcastic response.

They anxiously watched the figure canter purposefully toward them, the sunlight glaring against his armor. Within shouting distance, he reigned in his steed and raised his visor.

"Fear not, fair maiden," the knight bellowed. "I have come to rescue you from this foul monster."

"No!" the princess yelled back. "Go away! I do NOT need to be rescued."

"Poor thing. Despair has clouded your judgement."

A bowstring twanged. A line of pain scored Cassandra's cheek before the arrow thunked into the soft webbing between the talons of Phoebe's rear foot. The dragon yelped with pain, releasing a spurt of flame and tumbling the princess to the ground. The flames engulfed the roof of the outhouse. Phoebe grabbed the nearest rain barrel and emptied it onto the fire then turned to find another one.

Cassandra picked herself up and hurried to the barn for a bucket. A flash caught her eye. The knight lowered his lance and spurred his horse into a charge. Waving her arms, the princess ran to intercept him.

"Stop!" she shouted, then dove out of the way to avoid being trampled.

The lance thudded into the dragon's side, knocking her into the greenhouse with a tremendous crash. Her wildly failing tail knocked the knight off his horse into the freshly hoed vegetable garden. The stallion galloped away, dislodging the neatly stacked wood pile and cracking open the chicken pen. Upset hens scattered in all directions, clucking nervously.

Cassandra reached the knight just as he struggled to his feet. She braced both hands against his breastplate.

"Please, listen to me," she said urgently, trying to meet his eyes behind the visor.

"My lady, you are injured. You must be more careful," he commanded.

"Sir whoever-you-are-"

"Prince," he interrupted. "Prince Priapus, at your service madam."

"Prince Priapus. I am NOT a prisoner. That dragon-"

"Lady, you are obviously hysterical," the prince stated. "It must be the beginning of your moon days. Rest and be at ease while I dispatch the fiend."

He grabbed her wrists and pushed her away with such force that she fell backward with a painful thud. He turned, drew his sword and strode toward the dragon. Cassandra rolled into a kneeling position, grabbed the nearest rock and threw it at the prince. It struck his helmet with a loud clang.

He turned and said, "Madam, while I appreciate that you wish to avenge yourself, leave the dragon-slaying to the professional."

Fuck! Cassandra rose and ran toward her tower.

The prince approached Phoebe as she balanced on her hind feet to pour water from a horse trough onto the outhouse. He charged with sword held ready, twisted, swung, struck with such force that both tumbled down the incline behind the small structure. There was a confusion of wings and claws, armor and gauntlets. They landed in a depression with the prince on top. He scrambled up and placed a heavy knee on the dragon's neck just behind her head. He drew his dagger for a killing blow aimed at her vulnerable eye.

An arrow sprouted from his neck, nestled in the small chink between his helmet and breastplate. He tumbled over with a spurt of blood. Phoebe gasped and shook him off. She gently raised herself, slowly climbed up the hill and joined the princess in surveying the damage.

"I won't be purchasing that merchant ship after all," muttered the princess, noting the blackened outhouse, demolished greenhouse, and trampled vegetable plot. She turned to her companion, "Where should we start?"

"With the prince."

Gram's Room

I walk into Gram's room, looking around at everything I can see there, and comparing it to my memory. The bed is still there, along with its pillows. The window is still in the corner of the room, and the various drawers containing our clothes still sit on the red-carpet floor. Everything, at first glance, looks the same. But to someone that grew up when the room was still occupied, to me, the place feels utterly hollow. It looks like a room someone sleeps in, but it doesn't feel like that. It feels dead and empty, like a ruin in the middle of the desert.

I still remember what Gram was like when she was around. She tended to lay around most of the time, but she was always there to talk to. Orange was her favorite color, and I always found it nice to talk with her. There was something about her that was just calming. Even though she was really old, her mind was still there. She could still see us, talk with us, and actually live with us. And then, when we came home that fateful day, Gram couldn't even tell that a door was open right in front of her face. She was taken out of our house and transferred to a nursing home soon after.

Life went on despite Gram's absence. I kept going to school, mom kept helping me organize everything, Gram adapted to life at the nursing home, and we just kept living. As I look back on these memories, I find that the moments where Gram was out of our home were missing something. I didn't notice it at the time, tricking myself into believing that Gram would get better. Even when mom said that it was unlikely that she would, a part of me refused to give up on her. I deluded myself into thinking that one day, she would return to our house and everything would be normal again.

Then one day, while I was at school, Gram died. Unable to see the world around her, with my mom holding her hand.

I still hate myself for not being there for her. For being unable to hold her tightly in her last moments, to tell her that I would never forget her.

And yet, despite that irrevocable loss, life moved on. The funeral passed with grief and sorrow and platitudes like most funerals do. Gram's room slowly became a storage room for our house, becoming

filled with various things that we didn't want to get rid of yet couldn't keep in our rooms. The red carpet, covered up with clothes, pieces of paper from older days, and toys that would just lie there, ignored and forgotten. It became a place of what was lost, things that we simply didn't use anymore.

And then, just yesterday, mom finally cleaned out Gram's room. I was astonished at its return to a place of organization. I was happy to see it as it once was, but there was something off about it. It is only now, when I think back on the room and actually look at it, do I see the problem. I see the fact that it doesn't feel like a bedroom anymore, but just a room. I don't see signs of it being lived in, a place where someone slept, read, and laughed. All I see is a tomb, a ruin that holds the remains of someone loved.

I hate it. I hate it so damn much and I want Gram back.

Two Kachina Dolls

Today

Two Kachina dolls sit on either side of the little mirror on my desk. They watch me as I do my makeup, fix my hair, and change my outfit half a dozen times. Two Kachina dolls that once had a cozy spot on the mantle of a home I grew up in.

2008

My older sister was sick. My memory has blurred the time between what seemed to be just a fever and what soon turned into many nights in the hospital. It would be three weeks until she recovered. I was only 5. She was only 9. I stayed at my grandparent's house. My grandma made me warm soup and read me bedtime stories. My Pop-Pop sang me songs and danced with me around the living room where the Kachina dolls watched over from their cozy spot on the mantle.

2011

Pop-Pop drove on the wrong side of the road again. Everyone was okay, but his memory was getting worse. When my sister told my mother, it was the last straw. My mother told him he needed to see someone; it wasn't safe for him to be driving. There was an argument in the kitchen. Pop-Pop's yelling voice was hard to decipher from his regular speaking voice, both filled the room and echoed throughout the house. My sister and I played in the library to pretend we weren't listening from upstairs. Then we left, went to our home down the street, and we never returned to the house we had spent almost every afternoon in since Grandma passed. We never returned to the house where we did our homework after school, had Oreos eating contests, danced to ABBA, planted peach trees in the backyard. We never returned to the house where the Kachina dolls watched over from their cozy spot on the mantle.

2016

Pop-Pop and my mother were finally on speaking terms again. The relationship would never be the same, but they could at least be civil. He was allowed to come over for dinners or meet us out to restaurants, but we were *not* under any circumstances allowed to get

in the car with him. It wasn't surprising he continued to drive. It wasn't surprising he never saw help about his memory, even when you could see him two days in a row and he would ask you all the same questions. Most of all it wasn't surprising when he told us all he was doing fantastic on his own, which takes us to...

2020

Wednesday, September 23, 6:04pm; I received a text from Pop-Pop asking what classes I was taking that semester. I responded with a list and his reply was a sweet, "good background for a future job. I'm proud of you" followed by a rose emoji, the only emoji I ever saw him use. I thanked him and asked how he was holding up, fully aware he hadn't left his house in months. He responded, as I knew he would, "Great. I work out twice a day, I have great books to read, listen to music, and call friends on the phone. Miss socializing and taking you to dinner. Someday we'll get a vaccine. Great to hear from you." We go back and forth joking about our circumstances. I thank him for checking in.

Thursday, October 22, 10:09 AM: "I just heard from mom that you're not doing too well. Sending my prayers your way and hoping the procedure today goes perfect! If u get to see this when you're feeling better just know I'm thinking of u! Much love <3"

A week later, I returned to the house where my sister and I's Monopoly pieces were saved neatly in an envelope alongside the exact amount of money we had in the last game we played with Grandma. He had saved it for us. In his will, my sister and I were given various pieces of art, books from the library, and a few other little mementos. The final thing we were each bequeathed: two Kachina dolls that once watched over us from their cozy spot on the mantle.

Lifted

No matter which way you walk, it takes five hundred breaths to get there. Make as few turns or as many as possible: somehow, the distance is always the same. Today, you zigzag the neighborhood, passing houses owned by your friends' parents, until you reach the scraggly path cutting from the back of your old elementary school—which is new, now that they've torn out all the parts you cared about—across the street to the middle school you should have attended. Turn right. Split schoolhouse brick from tennis courts adjacent. Caress the fence around the dilapidated courts. Arrive.

Inside, you flash your pass and try not to meet the eyes of the man at the desk; conversation is for leaving. On the way out you might notice his hair is suddenly gray, remember he has kids your age and he once asked you to meet his wife—she's sick, real sick, and I love her, I started talking to this younger woman, she's a doctor, should I tell her? Maybe you'd come with me?

Oh, Charles.

You can't remember those things now. You slip into the bathroom; it's almost clean, and almost smells it. You wait for the urinal behind a spike of a man with a badminton racquet tucked under his arm like a bouquet. He leaves whistling, not washing. You step forward, straddling the thin puddle discoloring the floor, trying not to imagine gray Charles stooping down to replace the purple antiseptic block, trying not to picture the allocation for urinal blocks on the county budget, in red ink between toilet paper and urinal repairs. You wash your hands. Your fingernails need trimming. You exit.

The weight room is empty, but the TV is on; it's always on when you're not here. You turn it off, and then the fan, so you're the only wind, the only breath, the only noise, and you are being absorbed by the hollow walls, the discs of iron, the cracking mirrors, until all at once all things outside this room seem very far away.

You sit on a box in the corner, unlacing and balancing your shoes on a pile of thick rope; through your socks, the floor accepts you, compressing ever so slightly as you rise on your toes, firming as you descend and lie to stretch, the first of many rituals to prepare you for

the meditative act of harnessing neuron and muscle to move iron, of bending flesh and sinew to uncomplicated desires, to overcome, for a while, a perfectly tangible obstacle, an obstacle placed here solely for the purpose of being overcome. For this, you come.

Later, when the bar has released your fingers from its pincers, when your lungs have finished trucking air, when your heart has ceased exploding, your legs will be sacks of quivering stones, your hands will be cramped in unbreakable fists, your face will be painted with chalk and sweat, and you will be clean.

You will force your shoes on, and fumble with the laces. You will pause, listening to silence, noticing the hollow walls, the discs of iron, the cracking mirrors have each given you small parts of themselves in exchange for the bits of you they keep. Perhaps now, if ever, you will smile.

And you will leave. You will look Charles in the eye and shake his hand, thank him, and bless his wife.

You will step out into December, the glass door clicking shut behind; you will feel the antiseptic burn of winter peeling heat from your shaven, sweating skull, spinning wraiths of steam into the sky like prayers; your nose will be pierced by the slow molecular essence of the night, and you will shiver, warm inside your skin, perfectly attuned to the mystique of a path you have walked a thousand times alone. No matter which way you walk, it takes five hundred breaths to get home.

The Soldier

Calvin Schmitt watched wet snow fall bleakly from the sky and disintegrate on the pavement outside through the windows of the airport. Civilians rushed around him, late for flights or eager to see loved ones after an absence and the bustle was strangely foreign to his senses. Calvin toyed with the dog tag hanging from his neck as he waited for his wife, checking and re-checking the worn photograph of her face that he kept in the pocket of his coat. She smiled prettily at him, her blonde hair haloed by Christmas lights. He still remembered the day that picture was taken, the happiness he had felt when Lucy agreed to marry him despite his approaching enlistment. The wedding had been short and sweet, and their goodbye was even shorter, yet laced with bitterness. He had promised Lucy a quick return, a promise he ended up breaking due to the eruption of conflict in the Middle East.

Now, seven years later, Calvin was eager to reunite with his wife and unpack the heavy burden of war that still weighed on his shoulders. As a young boy, Cal had been driven by a single desire: to serve his country as a soldier in the military. This fantasy occupied his every waking moment; in school, he'd practically shout the "Pledge of Allegiance," and at home he devoured books about war history and tactics. His mother fretted about his commitment to this dream, as a mother rationally would, but nothing deterred him from enlisting one year out of high school. The elation of fulfilling his desire quickly subsided when he was introduced to the hardships of the Army, especially being a new recruit. Calvin was taught to never quit and he dutifully followed orders and trained drills, but his mind was at home. A period of leave brought him closer to his old high school sweetheart, and his dream of being a soldier was replaced with dreams of children, white picket fences, a dog, and a loving spouse.

Once, when he was about eleven years old, his father pulled him aside and sat him down for a serious talk. Calvin had been nervous, fearing the worst, like a scolding for breaking the upstairs window with a foul baseball; instead, his father had given him a beautiful diamond ring and told him not to lose it.

"One day, son, you're going to meet someone who becomes your purpose in life, you hear me?" his father said. "Your mother? She's my purpose, always has been. Once you find that special someone, you hold tight to them and you never let go. Being a soldier is going to be hard work, son, and you're going to hurt when you come home, but if you've got a purpose, you can overcome anything."

At the time, Calvin crinkled his nose and rolled his eyes at his father's words, dropping the ring onto his mother's vanity and forgetting about it. Eight years down the road, the ring glinted on Lucy's finger and Calvin felt like the luckiest man on earth. He secretly dreaded his imminent service, but the war in Iraq demanded United States troops, and he resumed his position as Private First Class on a tour in Iraq. Calvin had heard stories about what war was like. His grandfather served in WWII as a fighter pilot and returned with half a leg missing and a thousand-yard stare, but nothing could have prepared him for the absolute hell which he witnessed in Iraq. The worst part was coming across abandoned or orphaned children because how could you explain to them what was going on? How could you explain that they may never feel safe or loved again? Peculiarly, the one thing Calvin remembered with clear distinction from his time overseas was the image of a child's burnt doll lying amidst rubble and ruin. He had picked it up and thought of the children he so desperately wanted to have with Lucy and had broken down into tears so forceful he couldn't breathe. Calvin failed to remember the last time he got a full night's rest without nightmares of his dead buddies or nameless Iraqi citizens. His hands shook every day from shell shock, a symptom which aggravated him to the point of despair and overcomplicated simple tasks.

He scanned unfamiliar faces in the terminal once more and had the sudden irrational fear that he might have completely overlooked his wife; it had been that long since their last connection. His fear was diminished, however, when he spotted a young woman pushing her way through the crowds with an unmistakable scowl on her face. Lucy stopped short when she saw him, then broke composure and gathered him into her arms. Cal inhaled the fresh

scent of her perfume and buried his face in her short blonde hair, feeling as though his heart might burst from joy. This had been the thing he wanted most in the entire world: to return to his wife and start their family fresh, leaving the horrors of his time in Iraq behind. When he pulled back from the embrace to greet Lucy properly, he was taken aback by the look on her face. Tears were collected at the corners of her eyes, but he had the strangest feeling that they were not for him.

“Oh Calvin,” Lucy sniffled, wiping tears from her cheeks. “I thought you were dead, my darling.”

He forced a smile onto his face, grabbing her small hands in his larger ones and giving them an encouraging squeeze. “Luce, I’m right here. I’ve counted every second that I’ve been away from you, but I’m home now. You know I never wanted my enlistment to last so long, and I would have returned sooner if I had been able.” He searched her face for signs of relief, possibly even happiness, but her expression only slipped further into regret.

She pulled her hands from his and wrung them guiltily, then glanced behind at a man who was leaning against one of the walls near the coffee station. Calvin followed her gaze as the stranger approached them, taking immediate notice of the man’s clean, black shoes and neat, brown hair. Calvin squared his shoulders and took a military stance, fixing the man with a glare that could boil eggs.

“Who is this, Lucy?” he questioned, because the man had thrown a protective arm across his wife’s shoulders, and Calvin already knew the answer deep inside his heart, but he needed to hear it from her.

Lucy avoided his eyes, instead focusing on the faint scar on his cheek when she said, “Cal, there was no way of knowing if you had even survived. The government-or Army-or whatever it is-” she became indignant, cheeks flushed, “they sent out *no* notice, *no* update, nothing!” Her eyes were pleading then as they searched his, as if hoping he would put two and two together and spare her from telling the truth. “I thought you were dead,” she repeated quietly. “I remarried, Cal. This is my husband, Josh.”

The man beside her extended his hand in greeting and Calvin resisted the strong urge to crush the bones in his well-manicured hand. His heart was beating very loudly in his ears, which reminded him of the steady *rat-tat-tat* of gunfire.

Winter Berries 2



Digital Photography

Color Girl



Digital Photography

Sea Tangles



Digital Photography

Sundrenched



Digital Photography

Window to the World



Digital Photography

Monoprint 2



Printmaking

Phyllis



Phyllis will fill this
minky space with dainty paws
curled around a dream.

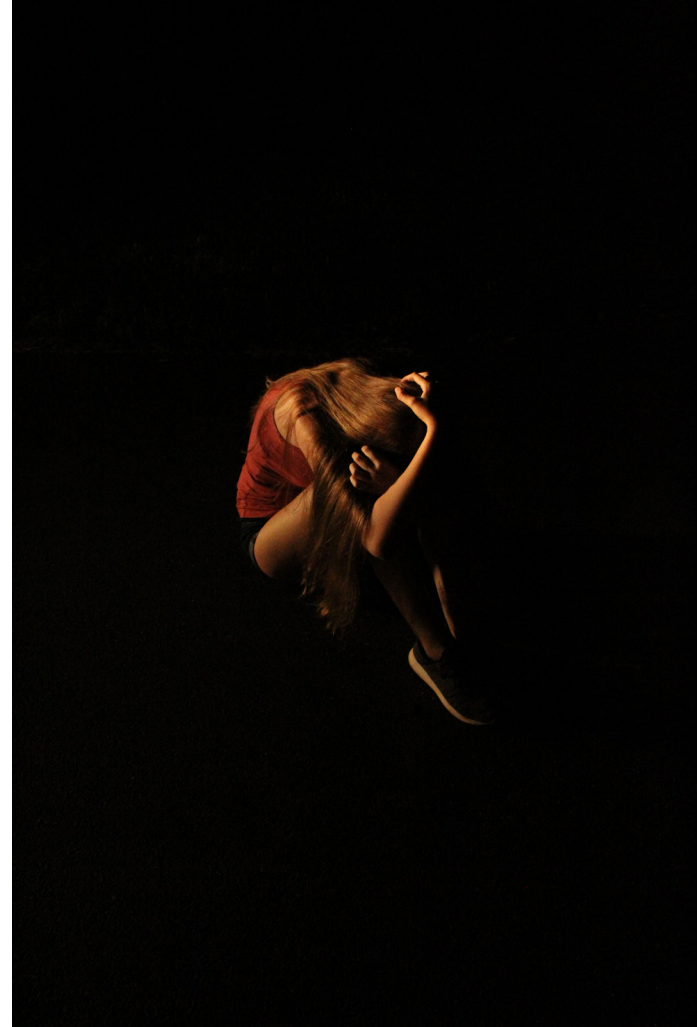
Water Color on board

Loss



Digital Photography

Isolation



Digital Photography

The Blinding Lights



Digital Photography

Umbra I



Porcelain

Blossomed



Digital Collage

Walk by the Lake



Digital Photography

Sun Love



Digital Photography

Rock and The Bay



Digital Photography

Colorshine



Digital Art

contributor's notes

Jazz Akuru is currently studying general education at Howard Community College. He plans to transfer to a four year college to study photography in the Fall of 2021. His work was showcased in two HCC student art exhibitions in Fall 2018 and Spring 2019.

Ingrid Arellano has been a wedding photographer since 2015. She is from Brazil and is currently living in Maryland. She is currently working on her AA in Visual Arts in Howard Community College. Ingrid has been creating dreamy and creative photographs that reflect the essence of her clients, capturing authentic instances and emotions with the highest quality.

Rebecca Bafford is a Professor of Ceramics and Coordinator of Ceramics at Howard Community College.

Gabrielle Barquin is a freshman student at Howard Community College, currently undecided on a major. Her fascination with the written word has manifested itself in countless works of poetry and fiction, usually scribbled on scraps of paper and forgotten. She enjoys maintaining a healthy lifestyle and taking long walks in nature each day, accompanied by her music. She hopes to explore the many future career options that HCC has to offer and continue to create art and literature to entertain the ideas inside her mind.

As an artist, **Jeremy Bomberg** relies heavily on his experiences with both the fine and commercial arts—pulling inspiration from printmaking, painting, illustration, and traditional design methodologies.

Lisa Brown is a new student to Howard Community College still deciding on a major. Lisa has worked in the education field for many years and loves to share her experiences working with elementary children. Lisa likes to write true short stories that focus on her past and current experiences.

Roger Chang is a retired Army Colonel. His career as a professional stripper ended as his short crooked legs failed to attract unwanted attention. He has been working on a memoir *Helping Keep the Cold War Cold*.

Joshua Clinton is a Visual Arts major at Howard Community College. He is a digital artist with a foundation in traditional 2D and 3D art and design, and his pieces are meant to evoke thought in self and the world.

Tryniece Comegys was born and raised in the city of Baltimore, in the beautiful state of Maryland. Tryniece is a single mom and considers her daughter to be most important to her. She now lives in Howard County, where she attends Howard Community College majoring in Human Services. Tryniece has always been an avid reader starting with “Junie B Jones” and “Amelia Bedelia” books all the way up to any book she can get her hands on. Family is extremely important to her so if she’s not out with her family or friends you can catch her at home, curled up with her iPad, reading the latest novel.

Amira Cooper is a sophomore at Howard Community College. She is studying for a degree in General Studies and Secondary Education in English. Amira loves to write and hopes to improve her writing skills with everything she experiences.

Callyn DeBlasio is in her final year at HCC. She is still searching for the perfect field of study, but enjoying the time it’s taking her to figure it out. Although she has never considered herself a strong writer, please enjoy her story anyway.

Ousmane Diop is a current student at Howard Community College and hopes to transfer to either UMBC or Amherst College.

Hunter Dobson has created numerous sculptures and photographs. He is currently pursuing a Visual Arts Degree. Later in his education he will receive a Bachelors of Arts and a Masters of Fine Arts from Towson University.

Elizabeth Enos is a new author. Prior to writing, she grew up in Florida, earned two engineering degrees and lived and worked in several different states. She currently lives in Maryland with her beloved husband and their two cats.

Deja Grissom is a first-year English major and dreams of owning her TV production studio. She desires to create safe spaces for marginalized groups to share their experiences freely. Her hobbies include designing clothes, songwriting, and photography.

Peggie Hale is a Howard Community College alum and a long-time contributor to *The Muse*. She currently lives in a land where spring comes unmarked by dandelions or robins, but still calls Maryland home.

Sara Harmon is a Certified Special Events Professional and first year Howard Community College student majoring in Communication Studies. When she’s not busy planning [virtual] events or studying, she is enjoying the great outdoors with her two rambunctious toddlers.

Steven Hollies is a human being.

Amber Jackson is a student at Howard Community College who is a secondary education major with a concentration in English. She is originally from a small, rural town in southeast Virginia. Amber enjoys creative writing, as well as other creative outlets that allow her to express herself. She hopes to teach middle or high school one day and open the doors for other students to learn how to use creative writing to express themselves.

Journi T. Jones is a student at Howard Community College.

Nehaal Khan is a current student of the Social Sciences and future expert on the pastimes during Covid-19.

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

Presently, **Michelle Kreiner** is virtually teaching GED prep courses for the Adult Learning Center at Strong City Baltimore. She has a bachelor’s degree in English. Previous publications include *The Bay to Ocean Anthology*, *Life As An [insert label here]*, and *The Muse*.

Liav R. Lewitt is an aspiring writer. He enjoys reading, puns, and playing with language like a slinky.

Diego Majano is a student at Howard Community College.

Tishia Matthews spent her winter, which was full of snow and ice, taking beautiful pictures of berries.

Jabril Mclean is a student at Howard Community College, currently majoring in Communication Studies. Born in Maryland, he has always loved reading the works of others, which eventually led to him wanting to write himself. He has found a welcome home on online sites such as Royal Road, where he can receive feedback on his writing and enjoy the stories of people from around the world who share his interests and passion for reading.

Mutinta Njapau is an aspiring psychology major at Howard Community College. She is first generation African American, and got a headstart in college through the JumpStart program. Her goal is to be a pediatric psychologist, and she has currently completed her first year of college by the age of 17.

Madison Parris is a student at Howard Community College. She began painting in high school, and her concentration is mainly afro femininity told through hair. Her painting, “She is Home,” is featured on this year’s cover and is based on the journeys African American women have underwent. The mountains represent the strengths, the waves represent the depth and great affect they have like the ocean. Madison plans to continue painting and to own her own gallery one day.

Druvesh S. Patel is a General Studies student at Howard Community College. Since he was little, he has always been interested in reading and writing stories. Although he enjoys all genres, fiction is his favorite to read and write. His favorite childhood book is “The Giving Tree” and his favorite book now is “The House On Mango Street.”

Hareem Shahar Qureshi is an aspiring writer and first year computer science student at Howard Community College. She draws inspiration from pakistani, afghani, and iranian poetry and dreams of one day going on a road trip all over Maryland.

Chris R is a freshman at Howard Community College and graduated a year early to do so in the pandemic. Coming from a seven person family, they have always enjoyed writing as a form of self expression and coping through the daily struggles that life brings.

H Roh is a hobbyist writer and freelance illustrator based in Maryland. Currently enrolled at Howard Community college for a major in English, H hopes to continue on to university and enter Education. H’s end goal is to teach English overseas in Eastern Asia in or around their birth country, Korea. H’s primary interest is in the graphic novelization and short story format and wishes to pursue these avenues as channels for their personal creative form.

Zahra Shamrez is a freshman at Howard Community College currently majoring in Psychology. Born in Elkridge, Maryland with an aspiration to write. She fights for minority rights along with gender equality using a notepad and pen. Zahra focuses on fiction as her main literary genre and occasionally enjoys writing poetry.

Natalie Sharpe is a student at Howard Community College. She enjoys writing and has a very active imagination, which is why she chose to take a creative writing course. She has been enjoying it a lot and hopes to continue to do well in her class.

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, creative writing, and an interest in drawing.

Tim Singleton is an adjunct instructor at Howard Community College where he teaches philosophy and creative writing. A marketing consultant by trade, he lives in Columbia, Maryland, with his wife and three cats. He serves as co-chair of the Howard County Poetry and Literature Society.

Alana Smith is a dual enrollment student who has a passion for writing and storytelling. This story is about how she and her girlfriend fell for one another while travelling through Europe.

Trent Tabor is an autistic freshman at Howard Community College, majoring in Communications. He currently writes horoscopes for the HCC newspaper. He is also looking forward to starting a geocaching club.

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

Born in a small Pennsylvanian town, **Jimmy Yin** loves calm and comfortable atmospheres. His love for video games came at a very young age and stands as one of his inspirations to write and tell stories.



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

