



The Muse

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The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

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The Women Gather (for Asantewa)

The stretch and curves of Dogwood Road
 would have us believe we have traveled far
 beyond the line of demarcation.
 Yet, not so far away
 our city sleeps. Hereford snores.
 No one hears us split the night with ancient tongue—
 Mdupe, mdupe Ogun, mdupe;
 No one sees us lace the trail to wooded glen, to lodge.
 None but night hawk, deer, and star will ever know
We are stardust, we are golden, we are billion year old carbon...
 Here below Grandmother Moon's delicious glow,
 it is she who calls us;
 calls us to harvest, fire and wood,
 calls us ritual, story and stone,
 to pray and sing, to cry and sweat
 our earthly Mother's womb.
 We have traveled far, we daughters of Africa,
 descendants of these Turtle Island shores,
 so far to rediscover where we belong.
 Somehow, we remember

we are more than concrete, more than
 where we work and dwell, more than
 statistics, battered, martyr, shrew
*...And we got to get ourselves back to the garden.**
 Somehow,

We recall a river runs through Dickey Hill,
 and so the women gather,
 dripping morningscape with dampened loins,
 with skirts perfumed in smoking ash
 from lodge to hilly bank, then onto Cherry Hill
 in search of water,
 seeding soil with sweat,
 cleansing stream with pure conviction
 and dreams on out to sea
 across this town,
 this Baltimore.

*From "Woodstock" by Joni Mitchell, recorded by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young

Gifts

I bring you...

Berries in the snow

Wine where vines never grew

And

Passage from the land of the dead.

Why do you bring me...

A candle to light the day?

Sympathy for the Devil

My mother has turned into Keith Richards. Gradually, she has tapered off from eating real food and was existing solely on cigarette smoke and morphine (a combination of long-acting and short-acting pills), and the occasional swig of wine. She wasn't always Keith Richards, of course—she spent many years incognito as a housewife and companion for a few trips around the world with husbands number one and two, but lately it appeared that Keith Richards had given up the hassles of hard rock and hot babes in favor of channeling dandelion-headed old ladies.

My role in my mom's rock star life was smuggling in the wine disguised as "apple juice" and other innocent beverages. Once or twice a week, I would show up and stuff the "apple juice" empties into a bag, destined for refills at my house from wine boxes the approximate size and capacity of a gasoline can, all the time wondering if Mom's unspoken plan was to be deliberately eased out of this world on a cloud of pain killers. Pretending it was apple juice was for my uptight sister, so she wouldn't have to face the boxes of wine with the easy-spigots-for-old-ladies.

In my sister's mind, there was no time like the present to turn over a new leaf and stop drinking and smoking. In my mind, there was no point in giving a starving dog a rubber bone. There had been a recent incident where my sister ratted out the wine boxes Mom had in her refrigerator to Nurse Ratched at the assisted living facility, and there had been a stormtrooping incident and the wine was confiscated. I had to call Mom's doctor and tell her that if the problem was Mom's medication and alcohol, that she had to tell them to give her less medication and let her have a few glasses of wine. Which she did. So now we were pretending it was apple juice.

On my walk through the hallway to my mother's room, I always passed a room where the occupant displayed a collage of photos outside her door. The central picture was a high school portrait that was classically my mother's era, with the same hairdos and Peter Pan collars. I made a mental note to tell Mom about it—she would get a

kick out of the similarities. It could have been her best friend from high school, Marilyn Ames.

A good day, to my mother, was one where you went outside and had a cig. Beyond that, a glass of wine. Anything after that was gilding the lily.

A bad day was one where you showed up and Mom was high as a kite.

You never knew what you were going to find—it could be Mom sitting up in bed, naked from the waist down. She might be dressed and ready when I arrived, with an alarmingly bright lipstick on and enormous marshmallow sneakers with Velcro straps on her feet.

She might be sitting in her bathroom, winding her hair around a curling iron, and she would turn around to say that Ashley (my niece) was in the living room. I would say, Ashley? She lives in San Diego.

Never mind, Mom said, only I can see her.

Sometime the place would be a WRECK—underwear and used tissues everywhere, newspapers and papers strewn all over the floor, one of her blankets wet from a wine spill. She wouldn't be wearing her glasses or her oxygen, and who knew how long that had been off? She would rave about how the coming Wednesday was the last day she would be doing secretarial work for the Masons. I said, Mom, you were never a Mason (trying to imagine her with a fez and a secret handshake). She countered that she was so. I said I didn't think they even let women BE Masons and she said, Oh, yeah, they have their own thing now.

I tried to distract her from the newfound obsession with her career with the Masons (don't worry about it, Mom, it's the drugs talking) and convinced her to bring some cookies with her—she was shaky and I knew she hadn't eaten anything. (Okay! Mom crowed, let's bring the cookeroos!)

My mom wanted me to help her shave her legs before we left, which was like running a potato peeler around the jaggedy, nobbly edges of a twig. (My own calves, by no means supermodel quality, looked fabulous by comparison.) I looked at her, a scarecrow propped up against the pieces of a fractured spine, and it made me rethink all those cracks I stepped on as a child.

The only thing I don't like about living here, my mom said, is waiting for a smoke.

I was sitting on one end of the bed with my mother, looking over her knobby knees, drawn up like a folding umbrella and thinking about the people who perished in the hospital during Katrina because they couldn't get out of the building. I estimated that in a crisis, I could get Mom out by carrying her out on my back. She weighed nothing, her bones reduced to wire hangers inside and one broken wing from a fall that nobody witnessed—now bandaged into a cast that was coming off that day.

And the oxygen cords! she continued, they lie in wait and then pounce on you.

She wanted her hair sprayed in the front, so I obliged her with a mist of White Rain on her pouf. (I did not mention that her hair was mashed completely flat from the back view.) You wouldn't think pressing down on an air-pump bottle of hairspray would take such manual dexterity and strength, but it does. We spritzed on Elizabeth Taylor's Passion (on the throat, and a little under her back collar) before she was good to go, and we flew down the ramps for a cigarette (you are never too high to pass up a cig). Feet had not seen this kind of friction since Fred Flintstone started the car. Whenever she wanted to go out for a smoke, it meant going down the ramps to get to the lower level of the building to the outer door, and I always felt like I was either going to a) let go and send the old girl careening down the ramp to crash at the bottom or b) pick up enough speed to kick my heels up and just fly along behind the wheelchair like a giant human streamer. It took some serious isometrics just to hold onto the chair. Not to mention the push uphill on the way back.

(smoke-smoke-smoke)

"The Smoker's Oasis" was printed in that faux "Arabian" style writing on the self-contained ashtrays outside, three-foot high, black, elongated genie bottles, like some trashed out *I Dream of Jeannie* vessel washed up on the shore. There was a hole at the top for you to flick your butt in with the hundreds of others in Jeannie's smoked-out basement.

Just beyond the genie bottle were a couple of benches along a path, and this area attracted a lot of the residents who either wanted to sit outside for a spell, or were about to head off for a walk or resting from one. There were always more men than women at the Oasis, maybe because it was the closest thing to a den of iniquity you could find on the premises, and there were always some regulars among the smoking groupies.

Bob was one of the regulars, always fully tatted out in a wife-beater T-shirt, and cardigan sweater, regardless of the weather. Completely deaf. Didn't stop him from trying to carry on a conversation, even though he needed everything not just repeated, but shouted in his face.

Then there was Gene, the crafty, aware one. He was always trying to catch your eye like he wanted to make sure you realized he was still in possession of all his marbles. It was also the same cunning look you'd get from a pull-my-finger kind of old man, so he always made me wary.

Rocco was there, Rocky the jockey (formerly, for real). Bandy-legged just like a jockey would be and completely with it, he was an aging leprechaun who didn't seem to need any care (not even a cane), so maybe he had moved in here because he wanted to be around people his own age.

There was also an old lady I didn't know among the regulars, wearing a plastic rainhat over her hairdo (85 degrees and sunny outside).

The "Where are you going?" questions were asked. I'm getting my cast off, my mother said from her wheelchair, waving her cast in the air. Getting my cast off. GETTING MY CAST OFF. I tried not to snicker, but I was sitting right next to Bob, and he couldn't hear me

either. Rocky was going to the racetrack. Is that the bus that goes to the racetrack? He asked Bob. Is that our bus? OUR BUS?

You take care of her? Bob asked me, about Mom. I said yes, and he nodded. (Even though we managed to complete this exchange without shouting, he would ask me the same question in about two minutes.)

(smoke-smoke-smoke)

I noticed that Bob had oxygen, and that it was still on, even though he was smoking a cigarette. (Mom's tank was beside me on the bench, off.) After a minute of wondering how to bring it up, I asked him if his tank was still on. WHAT? He asked me. HAH?

Turn the thing off, Rocky shouted at him. The thing. Turn it off. TURN IT OFF. Bob fumbled with the zipper on the oxygen tank. ALLA WAY OFF Rocky bellowed at him. I showed him, turning the knob down from "3" down to "0." Like that. See?

Nobody ever tells me anything, Bob said.

I used to smoke too, Rocky says. Used to drink too. Had to stop that. That's why I'm here today.

Pause. Bob blinked, looked at him. HAH?

Mom and I were still giggling about them when we got in the car. Why doesn't he wear his hearing aid? Mom said.

I put Mom in my car, my hand hovering over her head like a policeman stuffing a perp in the back seat. She told me she had a hair appointment and had missed it, sleeping right through the morning the other day. That she'd woken up once and not known if it was morning or night and had to call the front desk to ask.

We were late for the orthopedist, and when they finally took us back, a technician picked up what looked like a vacuum cleaner with a spinning blade on it and started cutting through Mom's cast, without preamble. The saw was loud and determined, like the soundtrack of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre, and Mom's arm was shaking with the effort of holding it still. I jumped up and held it still for her.

Underneath: a crossword-puzzle-ready arm! Gnarled and misshapen like a wizened tree limb, but free..! The doctor came in and said that the bones in Mom's wrist had collapsed and might heal with some residual stiffness, but he was ready to put a removable splint on it. It sounded like she could resume physical therapy in about three weeks. Then they tried to put the splint on, and Mom almost jumped out of her chair with the pain. The tech wanted her to extend her thumb to wrap the Velcro tab around it and she couldn't do it, her arthritis was too bad. She was all huge blue eyes looking frantically for an escape route from the pain. They put another cast on her instead.

Don't tell your sister, Mom said, but I want to go to lunch and have a glass of wine. I told her that when I was little I got a lollipop at the doctor's and that when you're old, you get a drink instead. We went to China Chefs across the street, a tradition when we visited the orthopedist because she liked their shrimp fried rice and spring rolls. (I am now an expert on all restaurants in Howard County with a valid liquor license.)

(Smoke smoke smoke outside while I loaded the wheelchair and then Mom, parked across at China Chefs, unloaded wheelchair and Mom, and wheeled inside). She was still shaking from the experience at the doctor. We ate shrimp fried rice and talked and Mom only occasionally faded into la-la-land. (*Is there a dog under the table?*) I tried to tell Mom about *Cinderella Man*, a boxing movie I'd seen recently. For a few minutes afterwards, Mom was still trying to puzzle that out. *What's a boxed-in movie?*

Mom told me to put the lunch on her "tab" (wine, cigarettes, other miscellaneous things she had me get for her that she insisted on paying for). I wrote the check out to myself and forged her name. Back outside, smoke, back in the car (load mom, load wheelchair), drive, unload Mom, unload wheelchair, park, wait for her to finish the last smoke (Hi Gene), and take her back upstairs.

On the way up in the elevator I told her I was going to take her around the corner to see the picture that looked like her high school friends. Let's go see Marilyn, I said, and I wheeled her around the corner.

Except...the door was open and new furniture was being moved in and arranged. And the photo outside was gone. Oh, someone else is moving in, Mom said, without missing a beat; I guess Marilyn went back to Watertown.

Of course we both knew what had almost certainly happened to “Marilyn,” but it was less of a shock to Mom, who had no idea who this lady was in the first place. I’d been walking by that picture for weeks—just that morning, in fact.

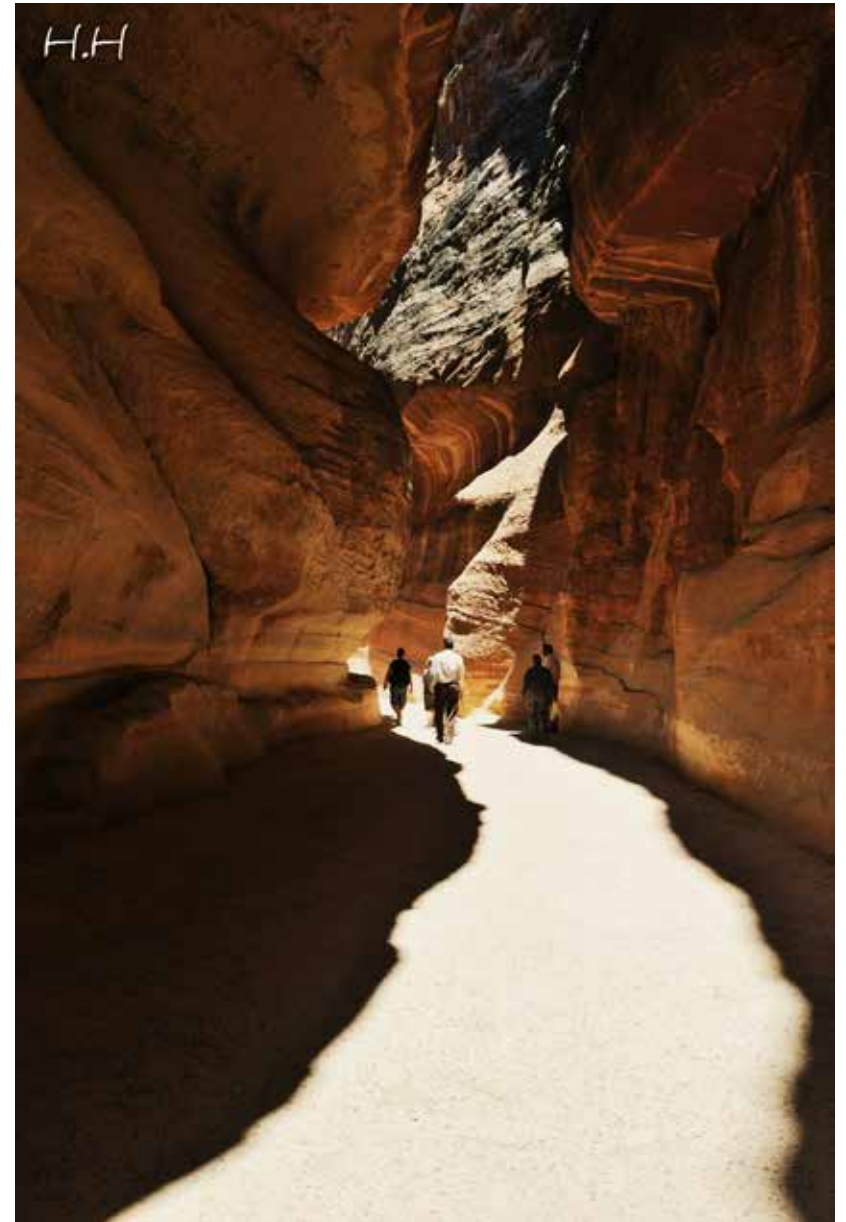
After Keith Richards was snoring away, taking her nap (all that smoking wears you out), and mashing the back half of her hair cloud down in the back, I returned to my non-rock star life.

Left nine new bottles of “apple juice” in the refrigerator, tossed a few things that looked too ancient to eat. Smuggled the empties out in a shopping bag (now rinsed and drying on the counter next to the sink, next to the box of Chablis with FRANZIA stamped across it in giant letters. I always bought that one because it made me think of FRANCE but there is probably nothing French about that cheap-assed wine.

I had plans to return soon, but with no expectations of the next day, the next time I would see her, or any idea what would happen next, just poised to react to the future and deal with the present.

Back to the complete unknown, as the saying went. Like a rolling stone.

Between the Shadows



Your Sunflower

Remember that bright, sunny, day
 at the train tracks?
 You probably don't;
 it was so long ago.
 We sat in a field of dandelions
 Waiting for
 I don't know,
 Our lives to start?
 I wore a white dress and you
 were dapper in
 A light blue button up and khakis.
 How cute.
 Just when I was beginning to enjoy
 bathing in the sun,
 You hit me on the arm and said
 "Tag, you're it!"
 I didn't want to play
 But you made me.
 You ran and ran.
 I chased and chased.
 I almost had you, I did.
 But then I saw it.
 A humongous, vibrant, sunflower laying

in a field of tiny, grey, dandelions
 Now how could that be?
 You soon took notice
 And came back to see just what it was
 that I found to be
 More important than chasing you.
 "Look! Ain't it pretty?"
 My, I never knew you to be breath taken
 by flowers, but this was it.
 You were in complete *awe*;
 don't you remember?
 Ah, you don't remember.
 You tried too hard to forget,
 Embarrassed to be so intrigued by nature's gifts.
 But I know you remember what you did.
 I also know that you remember what you said.
 But if you don't, I do.
 You plucked that flower right from the ground
 And you gave it to me.
 "I don't want it." I told you,
 Guilty of stealing from the earth.
 "Why not?" you said,
 "You two are just alike."

Scene at the Vacant Lot

No tall fescue, nor Kentucky blue.
No delicate ferns, nor finicky roses.
But a tangle of green survival,
an expanse of wild flowers,
in the middle of nowhere.
The blossoming of weeds
in an unrepentant pride
of unpatented, all-natural color.

Rearview

The moon lights the path
to my new beginning.
The engine purrs as it
takes me West.

Thoughts corrupt my
spinning mind as I glance
in the rearview. What she did
was unforgivable and I can
not turn around.

I left in a hurry. My bags, lightly
packed, sit in the passenger seat.
The place she once sat.

I know what lies ahead
is unknown and I am scared.
My body jolts as the sound of the vase
breaking echoes inside my head.

Life is a Playlist

*The music is your special friend. Dance on fire as it intends.
The music is your only friend, until the end.*

—Jim Morrison

To say that music has played a pivotal role in my life would be an understatement. From my earliest memories of growing up under two music lovers, I can't think of a time when music wasn't there for me. Being an only child, music took the place of siblings and often friends in my life.

I was born shortly after the Beatles landed on American soil and took the country by storm. My mother was one of those crazed, screaming, teenage girls who defied her father and proclaimed her love for the Boys from Britain as they landed at JFK Airport in New York and headed to the Ed Sullivan Theater. That's where they performed for the first time in front of an American audience and changed the face of music history. It stood to reason then that I would be born seven months later with a hardwired love for rock music.

My father was a little bit older, and while he liked the Beatles, he had deeper roots in the south. His music appreciation came from the Delta Blues, from guys with names like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Sonny Boy Williamson. I can remember being very young and sitting on the floor flipping through the stack of my dad's vinyl albums. They sat on-edge, against the wall as if in a filing cabinet, and looked like they numbered in the thousands. Albums are a wonderful lost art in their own right, with artwork and liner notes that told stories of the musicians and their writing and recording process. All these old guys on my dad's albums looked like they'd grown up in the cotton fields and had their entire life story written in the wrinkles on their face. I thought that because of their names, they must have been really fun guys to be around, but when I looked at them and listened to their music, I felt their pain and their "blues."

As I got older, my music appreciation continued through the late 60s Motown sound. The Temptations, Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson,

Diana Ross and the Supremes were all huge parts of my childhood soundtrack. The Supremes' hit "Baby Love" was the number one song on the Top 40 chart the day I was born.

And of course, there was the King—Elvis Presley. Later in life, as an expecting father, I wanted desperately to name my boy Elvis. That did not get approval from the other half of the decision making process. Not with my son or my dog!

I remember exactly where I was when I heard the news that Elvis had died. My mother and I were on our way home from the flea market and the news came over the radio. We had just pulled into our driveway. My mother, who would have left the Fab Four only for Elvis, turned off the car, desperately tried to choke back tears, then burst into sobbing. That was the first time I had ever seen anyone break down like that over someone they did not personally know. It may have been at that point that I finally understood how you can have an intimate relationship with your music.

The proliferation of pop music where I grew up in Southern California guided me through much of the early to mid-70s. While I was certainly aware that rock n' roll had transformed into something much heavier and much sexier than it was when the Beatles broke through, it was difficult to find on the radio. Our radios in those days had the most popular stations on the AM dial, and those stations were saturated with Top 40 pop music. Only "dope-smoking, hippie-freaks" dared venture over to the FM side of the radio to lose themselves in the psychedelic rock that infected their souls. To claim fandom of Led Zeppelin and The Who in the early 70s was to admit to being a card-carrying member of the immoral minority and the communist party. I just wasn't that sophisticated and bold yet.

By the mid to late-70s however, I started testing the waters. If I was ever to become a man, I had to venture out into the world and give this rock n' roll thing a real chance. But what good was it for me to latch on to the flower child genre when I was too young to attend

the Woodstock festival. I needed to find my generation's genre. Enter Heavy Metal. By 1980, I was discovering music that my father would distinguish as "crap" each and every time I blasted it through my sound system. My rebellion had begun! Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, the Scorpions, Ozzy Osbourne, AC/DC, it was all exactly what I needed to defy the authority figures in my life. At the time, AC/DC's lyrics in "Highway to Hell" seemed so poignant as Bon Scott wailed, "Don't need reason, don't need rhyme. Ain't nothing I would rather do. Going down, party time. My friends are gonna be there too. I'm on the highway to hell" (AC/DC). Oh, my misspent youth.

It was right around that time that I also discovered rock concerts, which would take my music appreciation career to a whole 'nother level. I lost count a long time ago, but I can easily say that I have been to hundreds of concerts, from the Allman Brothers Band to Green Day to Justin Bieber. Yes, Justin Bieber. Don't judge. My 15-year old daughter will tell you he's my future son-in-law. The boy just needs a little guidance.

After high school, the whole rebellion thing didn't really work out too well for me. Once I got out there on my own, I realized that I had more important things to do than be pissed-off at the world. That didn't really help me find a job, pay my rent, and all the other stuff that adulthood throws at you. So as I matured, so did my music appreciation. I met new people who turned me on to the music I had overlooked in the 70s. What we were now calling "Classic Rock." Man, things move fast around here!

Suddenly, I was learning to appreciate the guitar masters like Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, and Jeff Beck, and really, when I look back on even my heavy metal days, it's obvious that I'd always been turned on by guitar-driven music. Now I was starting to learn why.

Southern Rock started creeping into my repertoire as well. The Allman Brothers Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, The Outlaws, The Marshall Tucker Band, and eventually Derek Trucks, again leaning toward the guitar driven sound that really originated with those Delta Blues my father introduced me to as a child. But I was also learning about more sophisticated lyrics than I was used to.

The Doors became a huge favorite based on the writing of lead singer Jim Morrison. He was poetic and took his music, and his mind, to other dimensions, thanks to the profuse consumption of mind-altering pharmaceuticals. But out of it came deep, meaningful lyrics that profoundly impacted me. I bare a tattoo on my right arm that was inspired by Morrison's lyrics in the song "When the Music's Over." He wrote, "The music is your special friend. Dance on fire as it intends. The music is your only friend, until the end" (Morrison). The tattoo is a yin-yang made of two Kokopellis, the hunched-back, flute-playing character from cave drawings in Southwestern Native American culture, which Morrison studied. Kokopelli is a fertility deity who also represents the spirit of music. Each Kokopelli inside the yin-yang circle in the tattoo is dancing on fire. The yin-yang circle is also a sun, and the entirety of the tattoo represents the special place music holds in my life and the power I gain from it—until the end. After my kids were born, I had both of their names inked just underneath this tattoo.

Over the past few decades, I finally gave Jazz a chance too and now count some of the jazz vocalists of the 50s and 60s some of my favorite artists of any generation. My kids were both born to the music of Billie Holiday filling the nursing room. It was a cool vibe that I was certain would bring my children into the world with the full knowledge and appreciation of music that had taken me 35 years to gain.

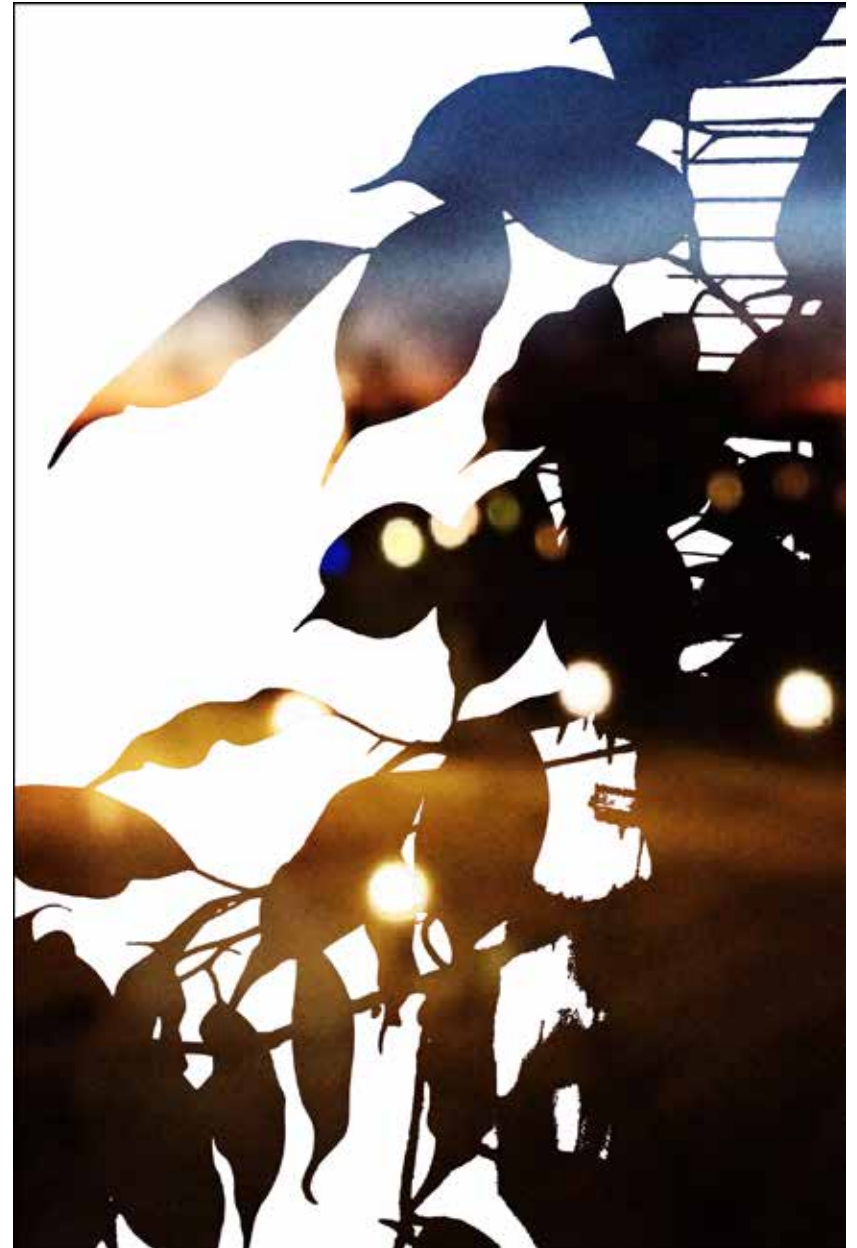
Among that genre, Etta James is perhaps one of the most soulful female vocalists I've ever heard and has become such a favorite in our house that we decided to name our dog in her honor. Our 1-year old mini-Australian Shepherd is always referred to by her full name—Etta James.

Nearing 50-years old now, music continues to play a pivotal role in my life. There are songs from every genre that I can relate to for any particular moment in life. Soulful singers, meaningful lyrics, and crying guitars are at the very heart of what moves and inspires me. It is the soundtrack to life, and without it, life might just be a boring, meaningless conversation that you get sucked into and desperately want to escape. Life is a playlist.

Autumn's Kiss

I love the leaves,
Stained red, yellow, and brown.
I love the smell
Of burning wood and
Hot coffee in the air.
I love the breeze that
Embraces me whole,
And wrestles with the leaves
To create a symphony of Nature.

Ficus



Words

You'll find me under a pile of books,
like I was an old wooden desk.
Stacked haphazardly, threatening to topple,
at the slightest vibration.

Papers stack high around me,
pretending to be like the trees they once were.
Gently swaying back and forth,
due to the slamming of a door.

From the books flow endless amounts of stories,
all variations of twenty-six different letters.
Each as unique as the compilation before it,
leading us on new adventures.

You'll find me with my nose in a book,
and like Pinocchio, I cannot lie.
I read without glasses,
the book mere inches from my face.

Their words come to life in my mind,
just like my mind were a television screen.
Begging to be seen in color,
nearly blinding me with intricate plots.

Now I know that I can't escape this reality,
not completely.
Trust me,
I've tried.

But what if I placed a book or a television
at the end of a slide.
What if, when I slide down,
I disappeared like Alice down the rabbit hole?

Pretzels with French Mustard

“Fear me” Death demands.
Suddenly, I know
packing the acoustic guitar in the pick up
and heading for the Southwind Trail
in Kansas, is doable.
I go to hear the whispers
of the prairie grass.
I recall the sound of someone’s mother
singing “Hush Little Baby.”
Under my feet the earth
is comfortable like an old leather couch.
When the willow is green
I drink Rolling Rocks
and eat pretzels with French mustard.
Beneath the tree
I lie like a contented dog
curled into a circle.
Once again, death reminds me to live.
I continue my adventure,
pack the guitar,
pull the truck out onto the scenic byway
and head in a new direction.

Barrels



Concrete

He knew who the call was from before he bothered to look at his phone. She wanted to know if he was coming to church that morning, but he didn't answer. The conversation was always the same.

"No, I can't make it today, sorry," Ben would say.

His stepmother, Katherine, would sigh on the other line and it would come through sounding like static. He regarded the sound as both a comfort and an enemy. The white noise was better than her admonitions, but he knew that it carried with it the same disappointment. "Are you sure we didn't do something wrong? Is this our fault?"

"No, Kat, it has nothing to do with you."

"Then why don't you come to church anymore?"

"I just have to figure some stuff out for myself."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. It's okay. I've got it." It crossed his mind that all of his sentences started with 'no' those days. *No, I can't come out with you guys, I have work. No, I don't want another drink. No, I don't have enough money.* There was a rock sitting on top of him that was weighing him down. He imagined that it would have to be an igneous rock that came from the explosion that destroyed his life ten years prior, when he was only nine. And after all this time, he was still trapped beneath that rock.

Parts of him that he refused to acknowledge found peace from the rock. The rock was something he could trust to be there when he woke up. It was concrete. It was strong and it made sense to him. There was a reason for its existence that he could understand, and that made it okay.

The phone stopped ringing and after a moment beeped again, signifying that Kat had left him a voicemail. For a long moment Ben pursed his lips, but he wasn't concerned with the content of

the voicemail. Instead, he was thinking about the way information travelled on radio waves to allow her voice to be audible on his cell phone. He was imagining the lines of computer coding behind each message, and then imagining the way that her brain sends signals to her vocal cords to vibrate at the right frequency so that she could speak into her phone. He wondered how the vocal cords worked in collaboration with the voice box and the mouth to form specific sounds. Such was the way Ben's mind worked, always analyzing everything, always full of curiosity and the overwhelming desire to know more.

He had always been this way, a strictly left-brained man. (Though that was merely a figure of speech; MRI scans had proven that analytical and creative personality traits have no correlation to which lateral side of the brain is used more often.) It was why he stopped going to church. His brain was wired to denounce what could not be fully comprehended.

Yet, he had memories, held very dear, that he could not explain with logic.

When Ben was eight, and his world was a very different place, he had gone to church every Sunday with his mother and his older sisters. The church could be characterized by its excitement, by the high energy that poured off of each person. Though he rarely understood what the pastors were saying, he felt like the church was concrete. He could trust it to be there each week, to have the same energy each week.

Despite the laid back atmosphere, when the music began, it changed in some way that Ben could not quite capture with his limited understanding of the way the human brain processes auditory and visual information. He knew that the temporal lobe and the occipital lobe were sorting information and sending it to the amygdala, which would produce emotional responses by releasing different chemicals, therefore altering the energy of a single person. However, he didn't know why these moments felt so intense to him.

When his mother danced, her body was taken over by something outside of herself. He couldn't imagine her brain sending signals that would create such movements. Mysterious powers moved her feet, her arms, the ruffles of her skirt, and the tangled curls of her hair. Each awkward jerk of her body seemed both clumsy and graceful, as though she was an infant taking her first steps.

An intense, all-encompassing passion rocked not only her body, but also the hearts of each person in the room. Eyes fell on her with curt glances of envy and admiration.

"Look at her dance for God," his sister would whisper, slack-jawed, eyes turning red and glossy.

Ben could not look away. The sways of her hips and the quick, nearly imperceptible movements of her lips captivated him. His mind tried to analyze each movement, listing off the names of muscles and bones, trying to piece together and understand the phrases that she was mumbling. However, when he watched his mother dance, he tried to push all of that aside. On that Sunday, there in that church, he didn't want to think about anatomy or the physics behind the way her spinning momentum caused her skirt to cling to her ankles. He just wanted to be her son, and to love her in the way that she loved God. Surely, he thought, this kind of love must be based in something concrete.

When she got sick, it didn't feel so concrete anymore. When she died, he didn't feel peace in believing she was with God. He just reminded himself of what death really was. Heart stops beating. Brain stops transmitting electric signals. Cells begin to die and decompose. Those were reliable; those were real.

"Ben," was how Kat's voicemail began, "I'm sorry I'll never be your mother, and I know you won't come to church because it's something you used to do with her. But I still love you."

He was reminded that even if he couldn't debunk what had possessed his mother's dancing all those years ago, he could make sense of this Sunday. When he went to put on his only remaining collared shirt, his family began to feel concrete again.

Betrayal

You once wanted a rose bush.
Sweetly tending
gently touching
reveling in brilliant color and
inebriating scent.

But you tired of watering
Capriciously abandoning,
Cruelly disparaging
increasingly barren and
brown withered branches.

Don't lament or wonder
how those roses betrayed you
After letting dry
the velvet petals and
leaving only the thorns.

Cannizaro Park

Most of the fallen world is wet and matted
 by morning rain.
 Cannizaro Park is deep in fog.
 Trailing snailprints on winding paths,
 we pause before a statue of a dryad and her dog.
 “More like a fawn,” my companion says.
 “How beautiful.” He bends to stroke it.
 When I don’t see him for a day
 or even half a day, his beauty shocks me.
 Today he’s glass-fragile, more breakable than I,
 though stronger than before. I hold his arm,
 hold him in place. My safety-pin hands.
 Now he wants to amble through the lower gardens.

“So warm for November.” Warm enough
 for antique roses blooming by a pond
 burdened with skeletal leaves and dead
 stems of summer lily pads.
 “Wouldn’t you like to live here?”
 I tell him I dropped my hat on the path.
 Tell him, wait here
 while I trace my steps to find it. A lie.
 Concealed by trees, I watch him through my camera.
 See how he stands with one foot slightly forward,
 hesitant and elegant, the threshold of a waltz.
 The slightest parting of his petal lips.
 He gazes downward, smiling, almost.
 Listening. Planted firmly on his cheek,
 the stolen invisible kiss of my camera lens.

Would I like to live here? Among forgotten pale
 as parchment roses, web-strung branches,
 the opal shadows of marble eyes? He and I,
 swimming bittersweetly for a season,
 then mired. melding,
 morphing into coddled flowers or phantom
 fish? No. He tires of waiting, finds me frozen
 in thought, sews my fingers to his own.
 “My skin is slipping from my bones again,”
 he sighs. “We should leave.” I don’t know why
 the way back is always shorter. Maenid statues frown
 as we depart the park. Outside the gates,
 the world’s gone sun-gaudy.
 I melt in my companion’s thornless smile.

The Biggest Ben



Rooted

Nurturing earth, grounds.
Hold me down where I stand
Sheltered by the hanging willow
Adored by the cherry blossom

Tear me down and change me
Grind, cut, shape, polish
Leaving deep roots to die
Carve me to fit the task

Make me a beautiful creation
Shift me at your will
Bend and break me
Embody perfection

String me up with care
Move me as you desire
Speak for me without fault
Painted with eternal smiles

Wish upon a star
Make me believe
That I, too, am
Almost human

Violet

She dyed her hair purple,
though not all of it.
She wanted to keep some of herself.
She didn't want to erase everything.

She dyed her hair purple,
leaving some of that mousy color.
The purple was violets
like her favorite flower.
She was shy,
but now she would look bold.

She would stand out amongst the clover.

She dyed her hair purple
and bought all new clothes.
She donated much of those
childhood remnants
and took a trip to the thrift store.
She searched through the past,
through the castaways
and found her new image.

She chose how she wanted to look.

She dyed her hair purple
and tried new things.
She went on walks through the woods,
laid in the hammock at night
to watch the stars,

to catch lightning bugs
in the summer,
to draw in the sunlight,
to read in the grass,
write down the stories in her head,
and dare to be herself.

She dyed her hair purple
and kids at school thought she was weird.
But she didn't care.

She dyed her hair purple
and her parents didn't like it.
They thought she was going to do bad things.
But she didn't.

She was a flower child,
a child of the night,
and true to herself.

50 shades of Beige

Before me, the burdensome lingering questions, the obstreperous thoughts that the form provokes stand. With all my heart I wish my eyes would read it as a simple way to gather data. Once again, with no hesitation I respond, “Yes” to the question: “Are you Latino/Hispanic” in the ethnicity section of the data form. Once again I need to pause at the next part, yes the one that distinguishes ethnicity from race. As if I were taking a high stakes final examination, I teeter. Suddenly I think I have the answer, then, I stop. Something tells me that I would be “hiding in a closet” at least one of my relatives if I answer yes to this or that. I read over and over to find the word: “mestizo” or “mixed”, but to no avail. It is not there.

Please, allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do, I acknowledge that I am made of flesh and many bloods, I am made of dust, I am made of yarn, I am made of corn.

Allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do I recognize the collective 50 shades of beige in the tapestry that sustains me, the ones that allow me to belong in the pattern.

Allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do, the sudden craves for cinnamon coffee, for chocolate, for butter on top of a croissant next to a freshly made tortilla and an avocado make more sense.

Let me see, last time someone on this side of the Rio Grande saw a picture of my uncles and my mom he made me realize that indeed my family is of those 50 shades or more of beige. Trying to guess the origin of each of my uncles and my Mom, this person said that “for sure” one of them was from India, one of them was North-African, and one of the girls was of European heritage. Of course, how could he know that my Mom’s fair skin, green eyes, and reddish-hair were a sample of variation in the genetic probability of inheritance statistical chart. How could he know that my uncle’s very dark skin, his very dark, very curly hair, which he proudly wears in an Afro-Style, is evidence of dominant genes. Of course, we joked after I finally revealed the identity of the people in the photo, that Mom and my

uncles were possibly the children of the milk-man, the mail-man and the newspaper-delivery man. (Oh, Abuelita please, forgive me. You know it was just una broma!)

Allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do, I celebrate the Asian genes that tía Martha’s DNA has recently confirmed.

Allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do, I recognize not only the linguistic influence of North Africa in our “ojalá” (wa-šā’ allāh), but also the African Diaspora dispersed in our genes, scattered in beliefs and in customs.

Oh, please, allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do, I honor the resistance of who knows how many possible ancestors who boldly disobeyed oppressive laws forbidding them to intermix. In order to free their children—before Yanga, before Morelos, and Guerrero—many of our African ancestors intermarried, mixing their blood to the already mixed blood of more than sixty-eight nations.

Allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do, I remember that old lady someone said might be an aunt, who quietly lit the Sabbath candle each Friday night, and often invited us children to play with the “toma-todo” dreidel.

Allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do, I suddenly remember the smell of the tortillas combined with the smell of the “bolillos” bread that papi often brought home to tell us stories about his French baker’s abuelo and tíos.

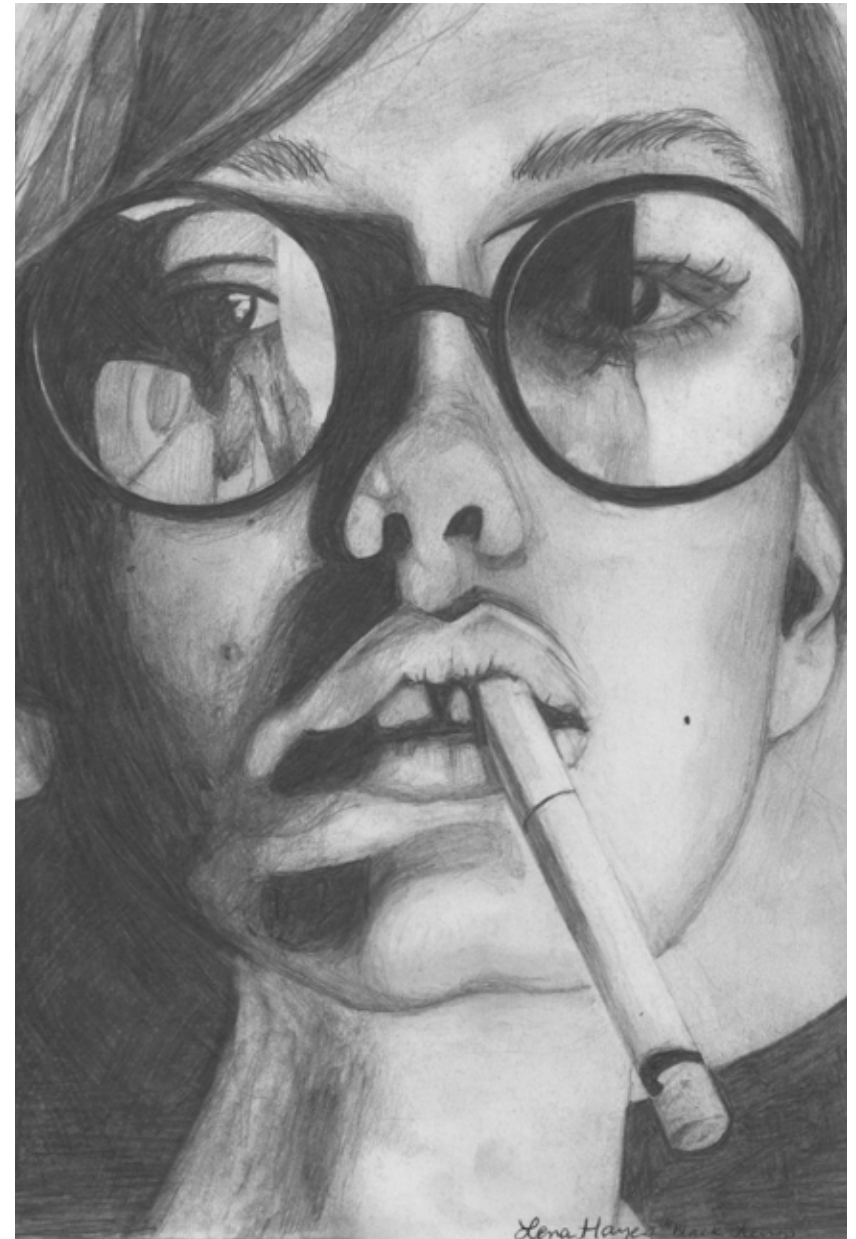
Allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do, part of me can fly along with the condor, to times where I can join the more than sixty indigenous nations of the Americas whose peoples stood in awe contemplating the skies, who loved poetry, sciences, and math. Who often prayed before making the tejidos, that the Almighty will help them find the pattern.

Allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do, part of me finally understands why our catechist forced us to read those boring genealogies.

Allow me to say “mestizo,” for when I do, I sense the throbbing palpitations of my heart provoking me just as much to close my eyes to hear the floating notes of a European violin; as to frantically dance at the African drum rhythms in La Bamba or the flamenco guitars.

In front of this form, as “Tabaré”, the light colored-eyed-Amerindian in Zorrilla’s poem, as the “Two Fridas” I stand, sensing the 50 shades of beige in me, feeling very Mestiza, and begging you to add: “mestizo” or at least “mixed” to the data list.

Beautiful Black Lungs



A Soliloquy for James Gatz

You're all moon diamond eyes
with a voice full of money—
shall I reach for you, then?
Pluck you from that pile of English shirts
and put you in my hair?
I'll whisper across the champagne bottles
that I've yet to hear that money voice
tell me *you should come sometime* and
listen to that organ in green;
make me feel like I'm the money on the moon.
We could drive off like a yellow murder in the sunlight,
oh, but how does one pick a daisy?

Untitled



A Summer Night

“Where were you last night?” Papa’s breath is visible as he expels the question. The harsh lines at the corner of his mouth quiver slightly, just like his voice. What’s unexpected is his tone, though defeated, still contains a hint of preparation. That gleam, however dim it appears now, still lurks in his eyes whenever he’s got salvation on his mind. Whatever he wants to say next, the message will always be the same: a reminder of how quickly I can “damn myself faster than a faggot gets AIDS.” His eyes, two blue orbs normally aflame with a passion of some kind or another, are dim too. They don’t look at my face, either. They stare at my hands.

The renovated, old drive-in theater an hour and a half up route 6—that’s where I was last night. Toni drove us there around five thirty in her little blue coupe, the Mustang with an engine that purrs so pretty. Not as pretty as she looked in her summer dress the color of daffodils, revealing her soft, sun-kissed skin. My white dress was two years older, three inches longer, and only revealed my milky white arms and calves. I forgot all about that though when she kissed me “hello,” meaning we were finally clear of the white picket fence that signaled the beginning of my front yard.

The place was packed, but we never expected anything less on a Saturday night. The absence of a known soul in sight was all we really needed. Toni parked the car not too far from the little walk-up restaurant with the wooden picnic tables in the front.

“Have you told your dad yet?” I was dreading that question, but at least she waited to ask until after we got back in the car with our supper.

“No,” I said before sipping my coke.

“No to only one, or both?”

“Both.”

“Ruth,” she said disappointedly, putting down her burger and staring straight at me with her big brown eyes. “I understand why you can’t

tell him about us, honest I do. But for God’s sakes tell him about the scholarship.”

“I will, I will. I just haven’t found the right time is all.”

“You said the same thing two weeks ago, and a week before that. You’ve already accepted the damn thing. He’s gonna find out sooner or later ain’t he?”

“Yeah, well, I was kinda hopin’ he’d find out after I left.”

“That’s not fair, he’s still your dad.”

“You only say that cause you don’t know him like I do. He may be my dad, but he’s a righteous bigot.”

“What’s the worst that could happen? I already told you to come stay with me. It’s not like he can force you otherwise.”

I didn’t say anything after that. We ate in silence because I couldn’t tell her that if I lived with her then I’d never want to leave. New York was over a thousand miles north of our small town. I loved her, don’t mistake me, but life goes on and no amount of love could’ve kept me from leaving. The truth was: I wasn’t willing to risk it, not even for her.

When *Grease* started, Toni kissed me hard on the lips, tugging at my red ringlets in a fashion I had never felt before. Each time our lips touched a hunger developed that might never be satisfied. I hope I never forget that. She pulled away, stroking my cheek softly with her tan hand. Her dark brown hair was unruffled by the previous affairs unlike my wild red mane, which remained a constant tangle even after I brushed it.

“I love you,” she said. “Do what you want and I’ll support it.” She leaned towards the radio to tune into the movie, raising the volume just in time to hear “Summer Nights.”

“Thank you,” I breathed.

I took my last sip of soda and stepped out of the car to go throw our trash away. Unfortunately, I realized I had to pee when I caught a glimpse of my hair in the side-mirror and decided that a trip to the restroom wouldn't be such a bad idea. So I grabbed my purse. The woman's room was on the far side of the restaurant, facing away from the lot and the large screen. I ran my brush through my hair in an attempt to tame some of the loose curls, but found myself failing with very little patience to spare.

I never noticed the group of men loitering by the picnic tables until my return trip from the bathroom. They whistled as I approached, three of them crunching beer cans in their fists the way men do when they feel that they've accomplished something. I ignored them, and would have never made eye contact if one of them hadn't said: "Hey darlin', can we watch?"

I didn't say anything. Perhaps if I had just told them "no" they would've bothered someone else. Instead, I looked the paunchy hick in the face, laughed and gave him the finger like a good preacher's daughter, then continued to walk. I was swarmed then, like a lamb to the slaughter. Honestly, everything happened so fast. I only remember screaming and then everything going black.

Now I'm here with my father in a morgue and he won't look at me with those blue eyes that I inherited eighteen years ago. He just stares at my hands because he doesn't recognize my face.

"Why did you even go out last night?" His voice grows sharper almost sharp enough to bite. When he screams "WHY" at the top of his lungs I'm not sure if it's really me he's asking this time. If I could I would scream back that he's asking the wrong question. He's always asking the wrong damn questions. Instead I hug him with my ethereal arms. He can't feel me, but I feel him completely. It's easier for the dead to forgive the living.

Bullet

The hammer is pulled back.

There is a rumor flying around.

The gun is taken off safety.

But why.

Sticks and stones may break my bones,

But the second part is a lie.

If they don't hurt why do people kill themselves because of it.

If they don't how come it gives others confidence to strike me.

They fly like bullets.

Once the bullet hits one then the bullet multiplies

It turns a pistol to a machine gun.

Target Locked

Sticks and stones may break my bones

But words kill

Bang.

My Religion?

Candles lit on Friday nights. Prayers for ancestors before us. Challah bread and gefilte fish. Warm kugel from the oven. Laughter and kosher wine. Running from death, my heritage lost in the war. Grandma is a Catholic now.

Incense wafting through the air. Prayers to the Mother and the Father. Rosaries blessed by the Pope. Skin pressed hard from kneeling. Sun streaming through stained glass panels across my upturned face.

“Jumpin’ Mechanical Christ!” Grandpa yells as the glass ashtray breaks to smithereens on the linoleum kitchen floor.

“Jumpin’ Mechanical Christ!” I repeat giddily, only to be propelled to the dark corner with a stern look from my mother where she sprinkles my tongue full of red pepper to remind me of my manners.

Wearing a white kerchief and matching shift my mother made. Staring in wonder at Father Donovan, as he puts his gentle hand upon my head and prays. Accepting the body and blood of Christ for the first time, warmth seeps through my stomach.

A small garter snake lies still at the bottom of the driveway, flattened from the tires of the family’s Dodge Dart. We decide to hold a funeral. Since I am the oldest, I get to be the Priest. A discarded tuna can holds the Holy Water scooped from the creek next to our fort in the woods. We bury the squashed remains in an empty milk carton, sprinkling it with our tuna water and chanting long, mournful prayers to Heaven.

Nice men on bicycles visit us and play Uno on Wednesdays after supper, wearing long-sleeved white shirts and ties every week, even in the Houston humidity that I have grown to hate. They are Mormons, but I still don’t understand why they call themselves that. This doesn’t last long, and we move, yet again, to a strange city with another church. I am bored with Uno anyway.

Visiting my youngest sister’s school, Plano Christian Academy, I stare in fascination at the mothers...hair dyed blonde and teased to the sky,

skin tanned from the Dallas sun, make-up like clowns. There’s even a pool behind the altar. What kind of church is this?

Fire and brimstone rain upon my head. I shiver from the heat of it. Fingers pull at my skirt hem, as littlest sister makes a face from beneath the pew. I giggle. Then, SLAP. All is silent, except the scary man down front, screaming about sin, face reddened from exertion.

Who is this Tammy Faye Baker? Why is she wearing those awful eyelashes and singing on TV, asking for money for Jesus? I’m beginning to get an odd feeling about Baptists.

Dad cries on his knees in front of the whole church, and I wish for lightning to strike me down this very moment. Thirteen is painful enough, without Jesus messing it up, too.

One Sunday morning in June, my family gets dunked in the glass pool by the one they all call pastor. Covered in red choir robes. Hair streaming flat against their foreheads. Smiling broadly. I sit alone in the last row, hoping no one will notice me.

Confirmation. Wrapped in scarves decorated with grapes. Walking with my classmates in unison to the altar.

Laying on of hands.

Coming of age...

Alone.

Say the Romans Road and you will be saved, the clown-faced women chorus.

Saved from what? I wonder aloud.

Saved from sin.

What sin? I ask.

Yours.

I blush and stare at my lap, hands twisting in agony. They know about that? Suddenly, shame burns my cheeks.

No more Catholic church. No more incense. No more Father this or that. No more. No more. No more. We are Evangelicals now. I hate my life.

Summers sweating in Southern Baptist camps, separated from the boys. Endless sermons with tearful calls to surrender to the pulpit. Hymns with words I don't understand. Long skirts cover my legs from view and heavy bathing suits smother my new breasts. I long for my friends at home and shorts.

Pope John Paul II bows his head in greeting, as I shake his hand. The photographer captured the moment on Kodak film, and Grandma winks at me from behind her glasses as she studies the picture framed in silver, "We all have a special place in heaven now, Dear." I smile back, a bit less sure, and wonder if Grandma knows the family has defected to a new church.

Trudging from door to door with heavy bibles and something the youth minister calls tracts. Telling strangers about the salvation of Jesus. Dying inside every time someone answers. "It's good for your self-esteem," my mother argues when I protest after an eternal Sunday. Wishing she had let me stick to selling Avon, instead.

"Are you going to be a nun when you grow up?" the girl asks.

"Why?" I answer warily.

"Because your last name is Holy."

"That's just my last name, stupid!" I stare back at her hotly, daring her to say more.

"The Holy Sisters will sing a hymn for you now," the minister announces. The congregation chuckles. Stockings itch and sweat drips behind my knees. All is hushed, except for our young voices, ending in harmony. Amens resound throughout the sanctuary. Mom and Dad beam at us from the front pew.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Grandpa swears under his breath at something on the television.

"What does the H stand for?" I ask as I swing my legs off the sofa.

"WHAT?" Grandpa bellows.

"The H. What does it mean?" I repeat.

"WHAT? You're not making any sense."

"The H! The H!" I yell in his direction.

"WHAT? WHAT? WHAT? Speak UP!"

"Never mind," I whisper, watching him from the corner of my eye.

"Hmmp," he grumbles and gets up to switch the channel to Lawrence Welk.

All my closest friends are Jewish, even here in Texas, in this place my parents call the Bible Belt. Alice, my lab partner in seventh grade science, uses all sorts of cool words her Bubbe teaches her. My favorite is bubkes. It means goat shit in Yiddish and is now our secret name for Danny Iverson, the smelly boy who talks too loud in English class.

"Goddamnit!" Dad explodes as pulls the burnt bacon from the oven.

"Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain!" my littlest sister protests loudly and slams her dimpled hand on the olive-green kitchen counter. Personally, I don't mind a good Goddamnit now and then, especially if the food has turned to charcoal, but not my sister. That school has taught her plenty of new things, along with bible verses to keep everyone in line.

Grandma is lying in the hospital bed making awful wheezing sounds. Years of smoking have worn out her lungs. The white pearl rosary from the Pope wraps around her shriveled hands, and my Dad gets up from his knees beside her bed, exhaustion settling in lines across his face. The Priest comes into the room and anoints Grandma with oils, praying for Jesus to take her soul. I hope He comes soon.

Secretly, I plan to quit church when I turn eighteen, but I can't tell my parents. They wouldn't understand. If God was that worried about it, I would know deep inside, like I know it is wrong to steal, or hit my sisters, or lie. Adults have made things complicated, but God and I have an understanding. I pray to Him, eat my vegetables, and do my homework, and He protects my family.

Budgie



Leaves

No one can rein in the wind
from a tree
When the rain

falls

Your sparkle is your purpose

You fall from a cloud,
the gleam,
leaves your nature falling forth,

Descending

to

the

ground

From a cloud

The gleam of wonder

Understand your sparkle is
of the way
you are falling

Diamond-like drops,
Oh, how beautiful,
You imitate the glorious
nature

The Calm and the Storm

I am a hairline crack in someone's mug, absently brushed by a thin pointer finger as cold hands curl around the china.

I am Murder, silently collapsing into myself again and again, becoming creases in the night's velvet.

I am silent at breakfast this morning, tasting metaphors instead of the hazelnut creamer he pours into my coffee. He sits across from me with a sleep-drunk smile and pillow-soft hands, brushing back my bed-head hair and murmuring sleep-drunk-pillow-talk.

"You are vines," he said, "you are wrapped around my torso and my mind."

He is a house, steady foundation and inviting spaces, fireplace shoulders and hand-laid bricks; someplace you walk into and long to call home forever, except I've never been able to uproot the weeds that grow around those two words. He wants me to plant myself in his yard, to thrive along the sides of his stoic exterior, to be his beautiful captor. But if he was built to last, I was built to be his challenger.

I let him be the calm before my storm as I wait in still water. Eyes blinking lightning, words booming thunder, currents gathering while I sit at his kitchen table.

He is autumn and I peel him to the core of winter, the layers of gold and red and orange sliding gracefully to the tiled floor where they lie in clumps. And when my gaze finds his face again it is white and noiseless, a sky promising snow.

Afterward, I wake up alone and make my bed and drink my coffee black. I play jazz music in my car and read books in quiet rooms, but inside every sentence I am still screaming, and when I lay down to sleep at night I still feel riots instead of peace.

Sometimes I dream that we are at the ocean, me and him and waves that belong to the Atlantic instead of my mind. I dream that we are lying barefoot in the sand, bodies touching and motionless beneath

some beautiful sunset. The calm returned, the storm apologizing and promising to forget itself.

Sometimes I dream that as he watches the horizon I begin to sink with the last pieces of the day, downward to be buried in the sand. And then I resurface in the darkened water, while he stands, waiting, on the shore, and when I find him I lift a hand to wave him into the water by my side, but then I notice the vines snaking around my feet and up my calves, and above me the clouds begin to gather, the flashes and the rumbling stir calm into chaos and I realize that I was brought here to be trapped inside the storm, and that for him to follow would be to drown with me, so I drop my arm back under and suddenly the water is ice, the waves are gnawing teeth, my vines are blades and he is gone.

What a Dancer Wants

A response to "What Do Women Want?" By Kim Addonizio

I want a large stage.
 I want it sturdy but soft,
 I want it laid with marley, I want it tall
 enough to be seen from New York.
 I want it in the round
 this stage, so I can be seen
 from all angles. I want to waltz onto
 the platform past the glowing faces of expectation
 comparing me to all they've seen dance before,
 past the young and the old alike,
 past the jealous minds of those without
 my skill, wanting and wishing to be in my bare feet
 with their calloused bottoms and countless floor burns
 I want to turn like records under needles
 projecting messages that touch the depths of a soul.
 I want that stage bad.
 I want it to deny
 your worst perceptions about me,
 to show you a glimpse of the journal I keep
 or the insecurities I try
 to hide. When I leap above it and the lights
 warm my skin from above like the sun's rays
 that beckon a flower to open on
 a sunny day, you will have seen more
 than a woman's frame gliding across this stage,
 but the heart of a little girl
 set free from its cage.

Golden

The Mirror turns, look into yourself,
 The face that aged years in an hour,
 Hands trembling, its rises from the past,
 The Alcohol bites, hard and clean.

The bottle pours cinnamon gold,
 The Promise of nothing and everything,
 Drinking deep, the snake awakens,
 The Reels spin, furiously unleashing Heaven and Hell.

Silken sheets, flesh rolling over waves of lust,
 Blinded by sweat, the face slowly clears,
 Chest rising and falling, A firestorm of life,
 The hair parts, then falls away to reveal your love.

Golden eyes peer up out of the dark,
 The perfect teeth, inflictors of the mark of love,
 Pale skin so tight it has no faults, no lines for her,
 The face turns to the light and is not a face at all.

Hands that burn with coldfire, fingers ripping the skin,
 The Face laughs, liquid fires ignite the stomach.
 The Snake awakens, ripped back to reality,
 Nothing is real anymore, not with death at your back.

Thou Shalt Not!

Pastor's face gleamed purple like a shiny eggplant and his voice bellowed from the pulpit, "And God spake all these words, saying..." What God was *spaking* about, I wasn't really sure, something to do with the land of Egypt and the house of bondage. It didn't make sense to my nine-year old mind, but Pastor was pretty put out by it all. Confused by his yelling, I picked up a hymnal and flipped the pages noisily, until Mother stopped me in mid-turn. *Pay attention!* her eyebrows warned. I knew that look all too well and returned the red-covered songbook to its rightful cubby.

Kicking my legs back and forth, I stared at my shiny, black patent leather shoes, as pastor warned, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." I loved my new shoes, had wanted them for months, and Mother finally gave in, since it was close to Easter.

"Okay, Delores, these shoes are special. You need to wear them with care," and I did, proudly, every chance I could get. The fact that they were a half size too big didn't matter. I knew Mother always bought my shoes big, since I was growing faster than she could pay for new things. Still, I didn't mind. The tissue in the toes hardly peeked through the top at all.

Pastor's voice once again invaded my thoughts, and I felt as if my ears would burst, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image..." What a graven image was, I could not tell, but his next words confused me even more, "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God..." *What did God have to be jealous about?* I thought as I kicked my legs higher, hitting the pew in front of me. Mother's hand came down sharply on my right thigh, so I sat still, head alert, shoes hanging slightly above the carpeted sanctuary floor.

"Thou shalt not steal!" Pastor's voice rang out an octave higher. At least I knew what that meant. People who steal go to hell. I was sure of it.

Pastor's voice echoed off the sanctuary walls, the windows vibrated, and my stomach rumbled. Eventually, he ran out of breath, and I

knew the end was near. Mopping his brow with an embroidered handkerchief, and exhaling loudly, he started singing "All to Jesus, I surrender..." I joined in enthusiastically. It was not that I liked the hymn, but I knew it meant the end to the sermon. Our weekly trip to the drugstore would come soon after, meaning lunch at the café counter and milk shakes for dessert. I licked my lips and swung my legs in time with the rhythm of a hundred voices filling the air around me with the familiar calling.

At the final amen, Mother took my hand and led me down the aisle and out the front door into the spring afternoon. In the bright sunshine, my shoes shone black as juicy olives served on a holiday dinner table. I felt proud and kicked up my feet, careful not to scuff them.

Mother's heels pushed off the sidewalk with purpose on our stroll into town, and my new shoes kept up a quickened pace with her stride. Reaching the drug store, Mother let go of my hand, "Delores, I have some shopping to do before lunch. Look around, but meet me at the counter in fifteen minutes. Here's a dime for some candy that you can save for later." I skipped off down the makeup aisle, happy to be free for a few minutes. I would first visit the toys and then buy some cherry licorice for Mother and me, our favorite.

As I turned the corner, Bobby Thomas suddenly jerked in front of my face, and I shrieked involuntarily, surprised by his snarl of a grin, "Watcha doin', Delores?"

"Nothing."

"Then you won't mind helpin' a friend out then, would ya?"

With Mother nowhere in sight, I had no means of escape. I nodded in response.

"What's that? I didn't hear nothin'," Bobby's face closed in on mine, his breath stinking and his yellow teeth clicking open and shut.

"Uhm, okay, I guess. What do you need?" I fingered the dime in my sweaty hand, thinking I might buy him off.

"You see, it's my brother's birthday, and I need to get him a present, but I have no money."

"Here. Here's a dime. You can have it," I offered, turning my body away as I stretched out my arm.

"Not so fast, Delores!" Bobby snatched the dime.

"This here super-bounce ball costs twenty-five cents, so your money won't do at all," Bobby snapped as he shoved the dime into the bib of his grimy overalls.

Forcing the super-bounce ball into my hand, he growled, "Hide it now, before someone comes along!"

I shrugged at Bobby and whined, "Where? I have no pockets!" the ball nearly sliding out of my slippery fingers.

"Shove it in your shoes. They're wide enough. No one will see it."

My shoes? My new shoes? I couldn't!

"Now! Do it now!" Bobby commanded as footsteps approached.

Quickly, I tore out the tissue, kicked it under the shelves, and pushed the ball into the front of my Mary Janes, squeezing my foot in and curling my toes up tight. A bump stretched the leather and tears welled up in my eyes. "Thou shalt not!" echoed in my head over and over again.

Mother's voice broke the refrain, "Delores, there you are. Well, hello, Bobby. Nice to see you, young man. Have you been looking at the toys together? Maybe, if you are good, the Easter Bunny will bring you something in your basket next week. Come along, Delores. Time for lunch."

I wiped my hand on the front of my best dress and took hers reluctantly, limping toward the counter.

Bobby called out eerily, "See you later, Delores." I shivered in response.

After lunch, Mother and I made our way back home along the sidewalks of town, but all the joy of our weekly outing drained from my body as I felt the weight of the ball along the top of my toes. My left foot dragged along, and the concrete scratched a groove into the patent leather. I hoped Mother wouldn't notice, so I looked ahead stoically, pretending nothing was amiss, trying to silence the ever-present "Thou shalt not!" that reverberated in my head.

Upon reaching the old Victorian we rented from Mrs. Whimple, Mother sighed and sat down on a whicker chair on the shared front porch to chat with our elderly landlady. After a hasty hello, I clumsily hopped up the steps and scrambled down the hallway to my bedroom, where I shut the door and locked it tight. Looking down at my feet, I cried silent tears. No amount of polish would cover the grooves made by the unforgiving sidewalks and the toe box was stretched beyond repair. My shoes were new no longer, and there would be no hiding them from Mother, either. Soon she would find out, but for the time being I hid them under my bed, behind my box of secret treasures.

Later that evening Bobby Thomas came calling, "Hello, Ma'am. May I speak with Delores, please?" his teeth flashed yellow as he gave my mother his best syrupy smile.

"Certainly, Bobby. She'll be along presently. Have a seat on the porch," Mother replied. "Delores, you've got a friend to see you."

With the super-bounce ball hidden in the pocket of my denim smock, I opened the front door with a forceful thrust. Bobby recoiled at the sight of my face. I grabbed the ball and threw it at him with all my might. It ricocheted off the porch, across the lawn, and into the street, Bobby running along behind as fast as his bare feet could carry him.

Without warning, a yellow taxi turned the corner just as Bobby Thomas reached the ball. With a loud thud, Bobby's body collided with the taxi, bounced onto the windshield, and flew onto the asphalt with a super-bounce, like the ball that he held tightly in his hand.

All I could think of as I watched him twitch in the road was, "Thou shalt not! Thou shalt not!"

Blue Infinities

Blue
Like the sky
Pale in the morning,
Tinted sun-kissed, Starburst hues.
Dawning warmth that lands
On her face,
Filling her with new life.
And bright near midday
The rays of a
Glaring sun
Bouncing off of the
Clouds.
The cotton ball kings, the
Down-feather dukes,
Those marshmallow majesties
Towering above her,
Proving she is but an
Underling.
Upon our blue planet.
And dark approaching midnight,
Black creeps into the dome
Of blue
Above her head.
Blue
Like the ocean,
That kisses the shore.
That carries secret-scarred
Bottles and
Slave-bracelets of

Shame.
That carries laughter and
Shell-shocked life
Across endless depths.
Seven depths and seven shores and
Countless dangers and
Her unrelenting joy.
The seas never end, a
Horizon that touches infinity.
And at infinity
It meets
Her.

Love's Wicked Cousin Dressed as a Twin

My dear, I was mistaken to pick you.
 Fruit needs time for green to fade.
 We hung on each other's arm, as fans of our day's exotic fashions.

We were lonely travelers seeking to open the same doors.
 I chose love's wicked cousin dressed as a twin,
 Mistaken to think you were like a past love not to forego a second
 time.

Young as we were—I never stop to eat oxygen,
 Hurry, hurry while our youthful burst of hormones inflamed.
 We drenched fires where on hot blood vampires quenched.

Infatuation bleeds like love, wherein we see light found in a blind
 man's sight.
 Our blanket of bubbles gathered rises to a narcotic head.
 Circus clowns clambering over each other as clouded dopes.

Inevitably, cold air came to our hive,
 Silence prevailed in a space of darkness.
 Bees that kill their buzz make no honey,

Despite the absence of mead, we still managed spoons under a wintry
 white sheet,
 Where we stirred our tacit dance,
 While our labor ferments two combs of honey.

For two pairs of sweet sticky lips,
 The ante raises as hot tea steepes,
 Too strong for sugar where only honey can keep.

Dabbling wasps kill for such kisses,
 ...Poker played with cheats.
 My dear, it's a wonder your slick dagger didn't kill me!

Memorial



This Pen for Hire

It's a good living, even in the Great Recession. It will remain so as long as politicians want to appear as benefactors when they're actually predators. That's where I come in. I sugarcoat politicians' desires so that the hoi polloi will be tricked into thinking that's the same as their interest. No one would vote for any politician if they knew the unvarnished truth.

I'm working on a short position paper for Governor Richman on economics. Show that less taxes on his rich backers benefits our society. It's child's play to sprinkle pixie dust over the fact that less taxes on the rich mean more taxes on the rest. Oh, my juices are starting to flow. I look forward to distracting the foolish masses with sleights of word. It's so nice to have power and to get paid well for it. My sound bite logic will praise Richman, attract independents, and destroy President Outsider.

Every occupation has its heroes, even mine. Pietro Aretino, a 16th century Italian, is the patron saint of pens for hire. My hero. I follow the tools of the trade he developed so well. To start with, forget all my personal beliefs. Take the assumptions of my patron as gospel. Interpret all facts as supporting his positions and as undermining his opponent's views. Ignore all mitigating factors—why clutter a winning argument with facts that'll just confuse a voter who needs to be told what he thinks?

Most 21st century Americans are just like those ancient Italians. So busy living that they pay as little attention to politics as possible. You have to hit them over the head to get their attention, make an argument that can be understood over the noise of the marketplace and their family.

Simple and powerful is the ticket. Truth and depth are not even on my dance card. Let the insiders find holes in my argument. What do I care? Insiders are like flies on the ears of a racehorse. Yes, a bother, but not worth wasting energy on. Six-pack buddies and soccer moms only have time for catch phrases that grab them. That's my job. End

the pitch with a sound bite they just can't forget. My last broadside—perhaps you saw it quoted on Fox News last night—was my best yet for Richman.

The deficit problem must be solved. We must cut wasteful government. When I am president, I will balance the budget by the end of my first term.

President Outsider's record shows he can only make the economy worse. Are you better off today than when he came to office?

I will lower taxes. More money in free enterprises means more money for new hires and more money for new businesses. That's the way forward for America. That's the way the country will grow. We must get off President Outsider's wayward path, where everyone ends up equally poor.

My 25 years of business experience make me uniquely qualified to help straighten out the economic mess this President has made.

President Outsider's never had to make a payroll in his life. Do you want a President who thinks that government should take money from hard-working taxpayers to give it to those who won't work?

Taxes should not be the penalty for doing well.

I was so proud of how well it came off that I couldn't wait to get to Governor Richman's office this morning. Richman's political adviser told me they loved the sound bite, "taxes should not be the penalty for doing well." He congratulated me for having swept the economic argument. President Outsider would be afraid to speak on economics again. Then he continued, "Thanks for the great work. Now that's won and done. As in business, your job's over. You're no longer needed. You're fired."

I lifted my chin and said, "You have no heart, only a cash register."

The look on his face said, "Don't let the door hit you in the ass as you leave."

I still have bills, alimony, and child support to pay. Damn! Since the Republicans have the money, I've only worked for them. I'm really only familiar with their mindset.

Well, perhaps President Outsider will be interested in my talents now that his economic message is in such a pickle. Let's see. Approach this like I did with Governor Richman. Build a sound bite story that carries thought along the path the client desires. Ignore the arguments I made for Governor Richman. Real voters will be pulled by a vivid argument like children by the Pied Piper.

I'd better anchor my thinking with President Outsider's thoughts and weed out the reflexive threads I've used over the past years, before I write a sample for my perspective patron.

Deficit is a big deal, but Democrats can't admit that now. Must convince the Independent voters that growth now, with balance later, is only logical path. When the government shrinks, it'll take years, before the real economy, the free market economy can create new jobs to replace the lost governmental jobs. And the new jobs won't take the same skills as the lost jobs, but I can't mention that now. When it happens, that'll be soon enough.

A few hours later, I send this email to President Outsider's economic advisor.

President Outsider has been assailed by naysayers bought and paid for by the moneyed interests since he came to office. These are the same people who laid our economy low. Now they fight against our President's every attempt to right the economic ship. Do you recall the Senate Minority leader's first words when the President was elected? "My goal is to make Outsider fail." Not whether actions are good or bad for America, but whether they are good or bad for the President. The Republicans have shown that to them politics is more important than country.

President Outsider believes in the free market, but the deregulation of the preceding administration must be reversed. We are still paying for the reckless practices Wall Street used.

Richman's experience in the Unwinding Hedge Fund colors his judgment and is contrary to the country's interest. The US needs building, not dismantling. Where would our military be, if the auto industry and all the suppliers had gone under? At the mercy of foreign suppliers and foreign interests. That's all right with Richman. Outsourcing saves money and that's all that counts to him. Is that all that counts to you? To America?

The 1% prospers when society works, but not merely by their own efforts. Everyone will need to pay their fair share, including the rich who have gained the most.

Taxes are not the penalty for success. They are the price of civilization.

A day later, President Outsider's camp replies. They're happy I've finally seen the true cast of reality. They offer me a contract through the November vote. I insist on a doubled rate.

A week later, I run into Governor Richman's political adviser on the campaign trail, he's not so generous. He welcomes me with a sly grin and his chin higher than mine. "Where are your scruples, man? When you're bought, you're supposed to stay bought."

Awakening

Yoric knows the names of each person in their group of twenty-one. He knows that in total they have lost three women to a bear attack and have gained three more who were left behind by their clan. Yoric's own mother had been one of those lost.

Knowing their names, however, does not mean Yoric *knows* them. The three women that joined them only this passing summer are large for their sex and have more hair. Their faces slope outward whereas the original members of the group have much smaller heads and lighter skin. Yoric has met enough of the Old Ones (whom his father calls "slow") to know they are different. Almost beasts in appearance, but human in every other way.

After Yoric's sixteenth winter, when his mother was still alive, he had been proud to hunt with the rest of the men. He had soon become the most skilled; he could throw a spear the farthest and with the most precision. He had become friends with the other hunters and risen to the top of their ranks. He only notices now—at age twenty-two—that not all the men hunt.

He's registered the fact somewhat; he knows the fish do not willingly walk on the land and into their camp. But he's never stopped to consider from where it is they come, not until he spots a man—Dag, his memory supplies—harpooning for fish by the river.

Dag's hair is dark, almost night-colored, unlike Yoric's own muddy locks. His body is not large like the other men, but lean, and his face is one of the more angular ones, his nose straight like a bird's beak. Yoric notices the muscles in the man's arms and legs, how his legs strain from crouching, and his arms work as he brings the harpoon down to impale a fish. Dag may be slight of frame, but he is no less skilled.

There is a woven basket beside him already filled nearly to the brim with fish. For moments at a time, the only sound is that of singing birds and the rush of water as it flows downstream. The tip of the harpoon follows an unsuspecting victim and then, in a smooth, quick

motion, Dag plunges it downward to claim nature's bounty. Yoric is mesmerized. Fishing seems to be an art unto itself, as that of hunting.

Suddenly inspired to get to know this member of his clan better, while also learning a new skill, Yoric steps forward and grunts to make his presence known.

Dag looks up immediately, startled, then tilts his head and furrows his brow in confusion. "Yoric?"

Yoric approaches in what he hopes to be a friendly manner and crouches beside him. "Teach?"

Dag's brows push together even further, causing deeper lines in his forehead. He points to Yoric. "Hunter."

Yoric points to the basket of fish. "Hunt fish."

Dag shakes his head and frowns. "No hunter."

Yoric thinks he understands. Dag, for some reason, doesn't believe himself good enough to hunt with the other men.

Yoric reaches out to grip Dag's arm and Dag tenses, his muscles flexing instinctively. Yoric squeezes meaningfully, curling his fingers tighter until Dag raises his gaze from Yoric's hand to Yoric's eyes.

"Hunter," Yoric says. "Strong."

Dag half-heartedly tugs his arm free and Yoric releases him. He holds the harpoon out for Yoric to take. "Learn," he says.

Yoric takes it. It's almost the same as a spear, only on a smaller scale. The tip isn't large, but long and sharp, for more precise piercing. Yoric runs a thumb over it, admiring the weapon with some awe. The craftsmanship is remarkable.

"Hold," Dag instructs and lifts his arm to demonstrate. He doesn't lift his arm as high as he was before, but low and closer to the water. Yoric

figures it is easier for beginners to start like that, and that is why Dag is teaching him this way.

Dag points to a sparkle of silver in the water upstream. “Look,” he says. “Look. Follow.”

Yoric keeps the tip of the harpoon trained on the flash of silver making its way towards them. When it finally passes, Yoric strikes just a second too late and ends up simply splashing water.

Dag gently takes the harpoon from Yoric. He moves his left hand some distance away and mocks the swimming of the fish.

“Yoric,” he says. Just as his hand reaches where the harpoon is pointed, he plunges it downward, and it narrowly grazes his hand.

He moves his hand to the far left again, and mocks the fish once more.

“Best.” Seconds before his hand reaches the target, Dag brings the harpoon down and the tip hits the flesh, but Dag doesn’t use enough force to hurt himself.

“Oh!” Yoric exclaims. He sees now. To strike at the right moment, he has to move *before* the fish reaches where he plans to act. It really was just like hunting, then. The same concept applied to throwing spears at bears or wolves.

Dag gives him back the harpoon and nods. Yoric searches the water for another flash of silver, his arm raised.

But there is no silver. Only the sun on the waves.

“Ah,” Dag sighs. “Fish done. No more.”

Yoric sighs as well, lowering the harpoon. He doesn’t want to wait until tomorrow to try again, but the basket beside Dag has more than enough, and it seems the fish have wisened up, at least for now. He hands Dag the harpoon and gets to his feet, pushing down the feeling of restlessness in his warrior bones.

Dag stands as well, hoisting the basket onto his hip. Yoric has seen women do the same motion with small children, and the act is

strangely feminine. He would feel foolish carrying a basket in such a way; he would instead hold it in front of him with both his arms, but Dag does it proudly.

There is already meat roasting above the fire when they return to camp. Yoric glances sideways at Dag, wondering how this display affects him. After all, fish goes bad faster than wolf. Does it bother him that hunters like Yoric bring in so much game, undermining his efforts?

As Dag sets the basket down by the fire, it seems that this is not the case. Nela thanks him with a smile, the expression so warm and friendly that Yoric wonders if she’s his mate. Dag offers a smile of his own, not quite as broad but enough to cause a sparkle in his eyes, then walks off beyond the treeline.

Yoric frowns. Dag isn’t staying to eat with them? Where is he going?

A few men push past Yoric making loud sniffing sounds with their noses and *mmm*-ing as they approach the fire. Nela swats one of their hands as they try to pick a piece of meat, and she glares meaningfully at them. Yoric knows them—he knows the names of each person in their group of twenty-one—and they wave him over. They are laughing, and as more people leave their tents, he sees they are about to start eating.

But not Dag.

These people Yoric knows—hunters and mothers and children. However, he has always been curious to learn about the things he does *not* know, and that’s what makes him follow Dag’s footsteps into the trees. Even though he knows the names of each person in their group of twenty-one, he does not *know* Dag.

It isn’t hard to follow the sound of something larger than a small animal moving through the leaves. He can even just make out Dag’s skin amongst the leaf and dirt colors. He’s lucky the sun is still in the sky.

Dag’s destination is not far from the camp. There’s a bit of a climb up some rocks and then an opening into a cave. Yoric remembers it from

when they first arrived in this region during the winter. There'd been a bear living there that Yoric killed, spurred into action by flashbacks of his mother's death. Everyone praised him for his quick instincts. He still has the bear pelt as a trophy. What does Dag want with the cave now?

It's dark when Yoric goes inside, and he places his feet carefully to avoid kicking any rocks and making noise. He stills abruptly when fire flares not far ahead of him and quickly slinks into the shadow.

He sees Dag holding a torch, but that is not all he sees. There are markings on the cave walls that weren't there before, symbols and colors and lines that depict scenes Yoric is familiar with. There are animals and men hunting them, mountains with the sun rising overhead, women and men in a loving embrace. Somehow the walls show life.

Yoric can't help himself. The sight pulls him in, and he steps out of his hiding place. The light from Dag's torch casts his shadow on the wall, and Dag spins around at seeing the second figure next to his own.

Emotions flicker over Dag's face: surprise, confusion, anger, and then embarrassment as he moves to hide the images behind him. But more than one wall is covered with Dag's efforts, and he cannot possibly prevent Yoric from seeing them all.

Yoric takes a hesitant step forward, trying to convey with his eyes what he feels. *There is no need for shame*, he wants to say. *It's beautiful. It's amazing. It's breathtaking.* He doesn't have the words.

Instead, he raises his hand and places his palm over the picture of a man kneeling by water, holding a spear. "Good," he says.

Dag looks hopeful, as though he wants to believe he has Yoric's approval but isn't quite convinced yet. Yoric uses his other hand to gesture to the rest of the images encompassing the entire cave and repeats himself.

"Good."

A second passes, and then another, but finally Dag smiles. He steps aside, revealing the portion of his work hidden by his body, and stands next to Yoric facing the wall. Yoric scans it more closely now that he feels he has the creator's permission.

He wonders how Dag did it. How did he get life onto this bleak rock? He had to have used some kind of tool, or perhaps he only used his hands if the swipe of fingers was any indication. But what about the colors? Night and blood, Yoric can guess, but grass and sun and sky and cloud?

Yoric stops when he gets to a scene that is obviously a group of men around a fire. It is not the scene itself that makes Yoric pause but the way in which one of the men is depicted. The man is wearing a fur cloak of some sort. A bear pelt.

Yoric gasps and points, looking at Dag with wide eyes. "Me!"

Dag smiles. "Yoric."

Yoric isn't sure how to feel. Seeing himself portrayed on the stone makes his chest swell with pride. He feels a bit like the way he did when he fell ill and one of the other hunters offered him the use of a cloak, before Yoric had his own bear pelt. He cannot believe that Dag did something like this for him.

Dag places his hand over the other men around the depicted fire, suddenly quite serious. He looks at Yoric with piercing eyes and shakes his head. "No tell," he says.

Yoric glances from Dag to the cave wall and back again. Why does Dag not want him to tell the others? Why shouldn't everyone else see the beauty Dag has captured here with just a few lines and colours?

Yoric pushes his brows together, showing Dag he doesn't understand. Dag takes a few steps to the right, sets the torch on the ground and puts his other hand on the picture of the man kneeling by water.

"Dag," he says, patting the wall under his right hand. "Hunters," he says, indicating the men under his left.

Oh. Yoric thinks perhaps he understands now. Dag doesn't want the others to know because he still feels as though he isn't a hunter. Even though Yoric told him that he is, that he is strong and just as valuable as everyone else.

But it's true that Dag is not like the others. They might look at these walls and see what Yoric sees, or they might laugh. They might ask why Dag is wasting time doing silly things. They might say he isn't good for anything useful, that these pictures don't have a purpose.

"No tell," Yoric says. Dag lets out an exhale in relief and smiles.

There's a small bowl by their feet that has the color of the sun in it. Yoric picks it up, runs two of his fingers through the viscous liquid inside, and looks back at Dag, raising a brow.

"Teach?"

Dag's grin widens and he takes the bowl from Yoric's hand. "Learn."

Hunger

You stare at me
As I wait in line with my food stamps
"Why does she need that?"
You shake your head and ask your friend
Loud enough so my children and I can hear you

"Look at that! So many kids!
It's a waste of government resources,
Having babies, just so she can get money!"
Your voice carries
Everyone at the register turns to look

My cheeks burn with shame
Little ones pull at my sleeve
Confused by my silence
Crying for candy I cannot afford
As I fumble for the change in my purse
Hands shaking
Because I have gone over my allotment

Yes, we need this food
And help from welfare
But yours is a different kind of hunger
That nothing can curb

You gnaw at the essence of my soul
And keep me down
While you stand on top
Triumphant over your tax dollars
Just so you can say
It isn't fair

But, the truth is,
I'd rather miss a meal
Than be hungry like you

Rebirth



Fairy Dust



Captured

Captured
between the brink of shadow
and the rebirth of light
Your face comes into view
with such melodic color
sound worships texture
as song pays homage to sight
Your smile pulsates in octaves suspended in flight
All facets of your brown jewel eyes
enhanced
enchant
invite

I get so overwhelmed
I just can't get it right
I just can't seem to write
Spiraling, spiraling, spiraling
deep down into the pit of your being
You would have to be more than a poet to feel it
You would have to be
the feeling itself
expanding and seeing
these...
emotions
I recite

These intensities
you "do" ignite
Your glow orchestrates a symphony
of spectrums that electrify goose bumps
harmonizing in hymns that exult
concepts that excite
building blocks
of creative shocks
evolving into intellectual electrolytes

I get so overwhelmed...
inspiration
meets penetration
and begins to clear
my mental stratosphere
your elegance illuminates
the atmosphere of this amazing new height

I'm captured
like a full moon snared in the starry net of night.

Seeing Circles

Early last spring, my family and I took notice of a strange phenomenon in our yard. A circular pattern appeared in the grass, darker in color and exhibiting more vigorous growth than its surroundings. This occurrence, I thought, was unmistakable. It must be extra-terrestrial in origin, akin to those ubiquitous crop circles we have heard so much about.

My skeptical, non-mystic-thinking wife astutely observed the interesting but otherwise unrelated fact that the circle's radius corresponds exactly to the length of our dog's rope which is anchored at its center. She theorizes that this otherworldly apparition is nothing more than the product of nature's (read "pet") fertilizer. The process, according to her reasoning, is no different than farmers spreading manure on their fields to enhance crop yield. She insists that a uniform application of nitrogen-rich weed & feed on the lawn would make the object of my fertile, though misguided imagination, fade away.

I'm not so sure. The idea of an extraterrestrial visitation is much more satisfying, explaining any number of strange happenings around our house. Toys, snack wrappers, and assorted footwear are routinely scattered throughout the house, all for which none of our children are responsible. Items get inexplicably misplaced or broken and no one knows anything about it. Those aliens must also indulge in channel surfing because I can never seem to find the TV remote. Clearly, my kids will agree, that circle provides a perfectly rational alternative explanation.

If my suspicions are true, entrepreneurial opportunities abound. Popularizing this site could be a bonanza for commercial development in our area. Space junkies might come to think of Central Maryland as the eastern equivalent of Roswell, New Mexico. Jobs would flourish as we make and sell celestial souvenirs to our fellow earthlings. Townsfolk could don costumes with masks sporting large, almond-shaped eyes to welcome paranormal devotees in their avid quest for ET.

A comedian once inquired in feigned earnestness why aliens only choose to make contact with the weirdos of this world. That enigmatic circle, right there in the front yard, might just be my long awaited ticket to intergalactic travel and adventure. The dog surely knows something, but at least for now, she's not talking.



For Ginsberg

Saying “is about” is about breaking open the caramelized sugar with a resounding tree-branch crack and having a waterfall gush out without a moment’s hesitation and you dive in because you reading, you writing is about dragging a sharp pen down the spine of the book of consciousness, which is about how we decided which is the moon and which is the sun and if the distinction matters; how we learn and remember and finally know to say things like, “the moon is about a mystery that still wants to be solved after everyone has given up on doing so, the sun is about a hand that can never be held but sits outstretched and waiting, anyway, without complaining.” And staying up late is about sliding these into conversation, tips for living, when the conversation is about pouring espresso directly into your heartbeat and contesting the caliber of other’s derangement. Sitting up all night long by the window is about waiting for one thing to disappear and something else to take its place, waiting the way you wait for Santa Claus full of anticipation and whispers and sugar cookies underneath blankets on the couch.

Being home is about not needing to sit by the window, being able to relax in artificial light without a clock, trusting that the order of the universe will remain intact without even noticing that trust. Not having any place to call “home” is about your shoulders shaking inside a pretty suit jacket while in your mind’s eye your ribcage glows through the entire spectrum of the color purple before turning to dust. The mind, of course, is about incessantly scurrying creatures with furry talons who refuse to let you find yourself a home until you’ve successfully written the Great American Novel at age 20.

Contributors' Notes

spring 2014

Alexa Abee is working on finishing her fourth semester at Howard Community College. She's an English major and wants to be a writer. Alexa is currently working on two different manuscripts that she hopes to get published.

Nsikan Akpan is a freshman at Howard Community college. She enjoys writing short stories, essays, and poetry. Nsikan is currently working on her first memoir.

Lisa Fox Arbareri grew up in Columbia and returned years later to raise kids in her old stomping grounds. She is an adjunct instructor of French and ESOL at Howard Community College.

Emily Elizabeth Bellor is a young writer of the Howard County community. She has interned with *Girls' Life* magazine where her work was published online and in print and currently interns with the Howard County Poetry and Literature Society (HoCoPoLitSo).

Kalen Breland is a part-time student at Howard Community College as well as a senior in high school and plans to attend a four-year university in the fall to pursue a degree in English with a minor in Studio Art, concentrating in photography.

Barbara Brickman has worked at Howard Community College for 30 years teaching speech and fine arts; she will begin teaching acting in fall 2014. She's appeared professionally in theatres around the Baltimore/Washington area and at HCC's own Rep Stage. Barbara is an advocate of the arts and promotes lifelong learning.

Rick Brown is a student at Howard Community College and a retired Army veteran. He is a big classic rock music fan and a little bit of a fantasy football geek. He also enjoys spending time outdoors with his wife, two teenagers, and two dogs.

Bill Davis is the assistant director of public safety for Howard Community College. He graduated from Tennessee Temple University with a bachelor of science degree in 1979 and served as an officer with the United States Park Police for 28 years, retiring at the rank of captain in 2012.

Claudia Dugan, or "Profe Dugan," as her students know her, is an associate professor of Spanish language and cultures. Claudia loves to spend time with her family in Maryland which includes a Maltese dog and a very curious cat. She loves to dance flamenco and to eat chocolate, but never at the same time.

Sarah English is a graphic artist in the public relations and marketing department at Howard Community College. She is an alum of Howard Community College and Towson University, and currently resides in Howard County.

Chelsea Nicole Green is a graduate of the Rouse Scholar's program at Howard Community College. She is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree with a major in dance and a minor in communications. She is excited to pursue a career that she is absolutely passionate towards!

Hebah Haddad graduated from Howard Community College in 2012 and is currently working on her bachelor's degree. Arabic is her native language and she enjoys outdoor activities, sports, and volunteering. She likes reading and working on photography.

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

Robert Hamill is retired and is currently taking Concept and Story Development at Howard Community College. "This Pen for Hire" was inspired by a political science course. He has been published in *Every Day Fiction* and the *Mensa Bulletin*.

Dominick Hardy to date is a Public Safety Supervisor at Howard Community College. Dominick has been interested in the arts since he was a young child with the access to crayons. He comes from a very creative and a tented lineage. His interests include reading, writing, leading creative writing workshops for an institute in Washington D.C., painting, drawing, crafts, and landscaping.

E. Hayes, sophomore at Howard Community College, is a dedicated artist with a lot more than drawing on her mind. She is currently working on starting her own business, selling her own handmade clothes and jewelry. Follow her work at: www.undecidedvenue.com.

Kevin Hughes is an aspiring author born and raised in Silver Spring, Maryland where he resides with his family. For the past six years his career has been in healthcare, particularly in Geriatrics. Most of his inspiration comes from his work experience. He is a current English major at Howard Community College.

Pattie Holy-Ilenda is a teacher by trade at the best middle school in Howard County, Elkridge Landing Middle. In fact, she calls ELMS her second home. In her spare time, Pattie likes to write and spend afternoons listening to her husband, Pete Ilenda, play guitar. To keep them company, Pete and Pattie have three kitties that make their house a home.

Nick Jones is a student at Howard Community College. He has loved reading and writing since he was very young, and plans on majoring in English after transferring to a 4-year university in the hopes of becoming an author.

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

Stacy Korbela is an assistant professor of English at Howard Community College. She would like to thank Donna Jones, her digital photography professor from HCC, who taught her how to do more than just point and shoot. When she's not in the classroom or grading papers, Stacy enjoys seeing plays, trying new restaurants, and traveling.

K. J. Kovacs is an adjunct assistant writing instructor at Howard Community College. She is also a freelance writer, editor, and fine artist whose work has been published and exhibited in the U.S. and U.K.

Michelle Kreiner is a preschool teacher at The Children's Learning Center at Howard Community College. Presently, she is working on a bachelor's degree in English.

Alexa MacNaught is an Early Childhood Education major at Howard Community College. She is a gymnastics instructor and a teacher's aide for the after school program at Fairland Sports and Aquatics Complex.

Marina Kovacs-McCaney is 18 years old, studying to be some kind of revolutionary artist.

Lenett Partlow-Myrick is a visual artist, poet, and teacher at Howard Community College. She combines visual, literary, and musical elements in compositions that explore themes of spirituality and cultural identity. Her work has been featured in the award-winning video documentary "Mbele Ache" and the CSN-TV special "Voices of Our Past."

Michael Pileggi is an aspiring writer who attends Howard Community College and enjoys playing chess, being outdoors, and spending time with his daughter.

Allysha Romero is a second-year student majoring in English. She is an enthusiastic writer who looks to capture the odd and intriguing of everyday situations. She looks to transfer to Marymount Manhattan University in the fall, double-majoring in communications and English.

Ji Hyun Ryu is a first year student at Howard Community College. She works as the assistant editor of HCC Times, and is an aspiring journalism major in the hopes of working in the editorial field in a book publishing firm.

Anna Sandacz is an English major at Howard Community College and will transfer to Goucher College this fall. She hopes to become a high school English teacher where she can share her love for literature.

Torsten Schulz is a student at Howard Community College who loves taking writing classes.

Debra-Ann Smith is a student at Howard Community College. She enjoys studying the sciences and loves the arts. She paints and sculpts using acrylic, oils and various elements to produce mixed media artwork. Over the years her artwork has been featured locally at Montpelier Arts Center exhibitions.

Mollie Rose Trail is a writer, through an through. She goes to Howard Community College, is the editor of the HCC Times, and tries to get her writing published on the side. So far, she has published two short stories. Her biggest project is the book that she finished writing in Spring 2012 and is in the process of editing now. One day soon, she hopes to self publish. In the mean time, love and light to all those hard working writers out there! Keep fighting!

Marie Westhaver is an associate professor of arts and humanities and the acting chair of film, humanities, and interdisciplinary arts at Howard Community College.



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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