

The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

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Celebrating 20 Years

The Muse, like many good things in life, was born on a whim.

Back in 2002, when I was a new faculty member at HCC, I took in the lay of the place and noticed that the college didn't have a literary magazine. In a meeting about something else with my division chair, Tara Hart, I tossed out a comment about starting a literary magazine. Tara liked the idea, and off with it we ran. *The Muse* was born of an aside.

The Muse has an ancestor. In an earlier period at the college, there was a literary magazine called *Iron Horse*. One of the original Muse editors, Lee Hartman, had a few copies of the old magazine in his office and passed them on to me. *Iron Horse* consisted of photocopied pages stapled together. In terms of production quality, *The Muse*, the younger sibling, has come a very long way.

The credit for the superb look of *The Muse* goes wholly to design editor Stephanie May. For the past twenty years, Stephanie has handled the layout and design of the magazine, always producing something beautiful and always setting the bar a little higher and finding a way to make the publication's quality soar a little more. Whims and asides need steady and skilled hands to make them wonderfully tangible, and, for *The Muse*, those hands have always been Stephanie's.

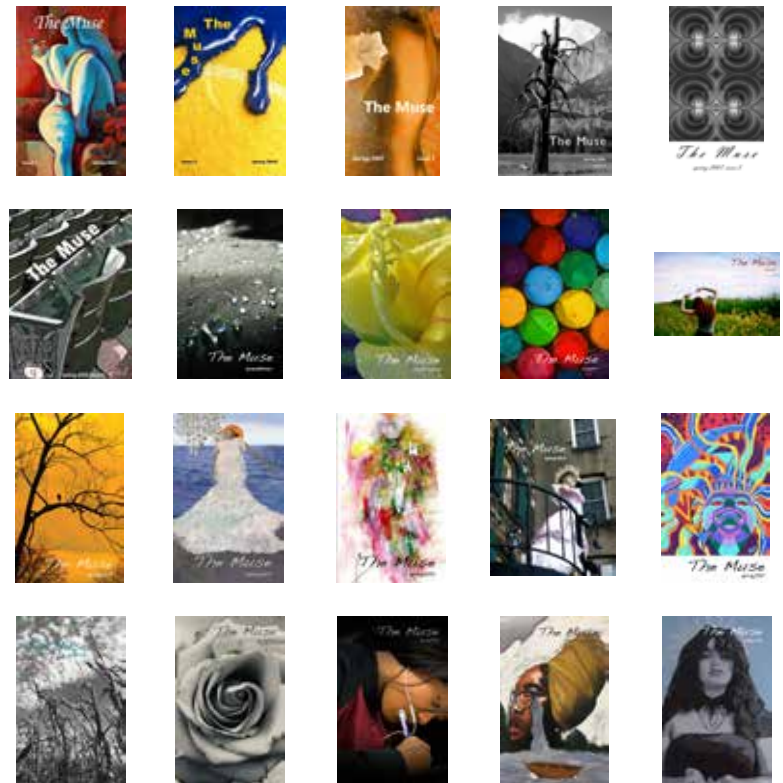
Many people have contributed to making *The Muse* a success over the past twenty years. Faculty members have offered their time and skilled minds to serve as the publication's editors of poetry, prose, and art. Students have served as emcees at the reading each May to celebrate the release of the year's new edition. The deans of the English and World Languages Division and Arts and Humanities Division have consistently and generously provided financial support. However, the brightest stars in our Muse sky are the hundreds and hundreds of writers and visual artists who have graced the magazine's pages with their creations.

The reading event for *The Muse* release each May was once called "A Writer's Celebration," but with a nod to the visual artists, the

reading and the magazine itself have always been more generally a celebration of the creative spirit that helps make our campus community thrive. When I suggested starting the magazine twenty years ago, I sensed there was a deep well of creativity at the college and in the surrounding community from which we could draw. Twenty years later, that well keeps giving. *The Muse* is published each spring in the faith and the conviction that it will never run dry.

Happy 20th anniversary to *The Muse*. May the pages that follow in this edition and all the issues to come remind us that our college is a place where knowledge grows and creative minds follow their muses.

—William Lowe



When I Was Young

When I was young,
the words would spill over like
heavy pours at the local hang
we tasted them between laughter and
playful body language,
sparks of light danced around
our moody heaven, and
our eyes flickered with newness and possibility.

In passing, I hear an older voice say into
a muffled fog, "Relish these times," and another, "Enjoy every
moment,"
but by the time I look up from
my colorful swirl
the fog has floated on, and
I innocently dive back into my conversation.

One night I decided not to go out, and then again,
and soon, the drinks and
the words and
the lights
all moved further and
further towards the horizon.

Now I find myself on this hilltop
looking out at it all
a beautiful landscape for a movie set
and I wonder
When did I make the journey?

For a moment, I feel betrayed and
quietly reckon the ruthlessness of father time
why did nobody
tell me?

I take a deep breath and
close my eyes,
smiling at my memories from the land below
and just for fun,
I take a walk down to the horizon
to say hello to my former self,
enjoy music, poetry, spirits
and perhaps,
speak into the fog for someone else.

A Sun Day Eve

Calamity explained
As thoughts break out
In the most derelict design
like heaves of hives in strains
I close the sound and let the sight leak shouts
with the hopes that dreams exclaim
Until my chest fills with short sore breaths
and there's no one left here to blame
I'd shake my fist at the world
most def
but back at me
the world would do the same
After all it's all mine
this world you see
All sums assumed with claim
I could burn it all in one thought to the 3rd degree
But from the ashes
Remiss exist its flame
Rebirthed from earth as destiny
The sun will rise again
Then submerge more purged into the sea
Its hue imbued un-slain
That peace I heed
So in me that rage may flee
along.... with any hunger to complain
Troubles emptied into the breeze
Stability well sustained
Feels a little like the strength of liberty
Its might grows more insane
Its power was made to elevate
Its halo to exceed its frame
I hang my head to meditate
But.... never this in Shame
My heart, its race decelerates
My mood now soothed is tamed

Before your light soon dissipates
day dreams make love profane
In acts in depths reciprocate.... in sync in space I came
Out of breath out of time out of mind I find
Wildly ravished upon your savage reign
The way you rule the day's dismay
Annnnd lick upon what drains
Honey dew that drips from your thickish rays
And hardens into an amber stain
I pause time flaws so calm may sway
Metaphors all life retain.

Distortion

As a child, I grew up learning
boys wouldn't like it
if you were bigger than them, stronger than them
braver than them.

As a young girl, I learned
boys wouldn't like you
if you were smarter than them, faster than them
taller than them.

As a teenager, I learned
boys wanted you to be thicker, leaner, and prettier.
As an athlete, I learned
the boys' team would always be more important
they were physically adapted for sports,
girls were not.

As a college student, I learned
boys would whistle, yell, touch you
just to get your attention.

Now as a woman,
I know who I am
I know my worth.

CHEERS

So many soured
bottles and crumpled cans heaped—
stinking
in the recycling bin.
Black flies collecting
and the days too—
Still we carry on, nursing ourselves
marking time with empties.

Now again we are free!
Like before. Remember?
When Corona was just the name
of a pale lager. A delicious
time of un-inhibited movement,
tender hugs, firm handshakes,
boisterous crowds all
with the raised accompaniment
of clinking glasses.

The masks come off with startling
speed. Faces again exposed.
Smiles shimmer and pop—
A cacophony of tabs and corks and we run
toward each other, arms wide
and falling into embraces
we'd been so desperately
thirsty for.

I vs 我

The first person singular pronoun, or this very
Writing subject in English is I, an only-letter
Word, standing straight like a pole, always
Capitalized, but in Chinese, it is written with
Lucky seven strokes as 我, with at least 108
Variations, all of which can be the object case
At the same time.

Originally, it's formed from
The character 找, meaning 'pursuing', with one
Stroke added on the top, which may well stand for
Anything you would like to have, such as money
Power, fame, sex, food, or nothing if you prove
Yourself to be a Buddhist practitioner inside out

Homage to My Hair

Look at my curls,
How they shake and twine
Almost like a pendulum moving in and out of time
It has more twists and turns than an amusement ride.
It is stronger than Samson's and my hair has never been shaved.
It is not bright red like Esau's,
But brown is my shade.
I do not have thick and wooly hair like John.
But my hair is my glory song.
It has been anointed by love and courage.
My hair is a covering to the bountiful knowledge passed onto me.
It is preserved as the salt of the earth.

The “Fine”-ness of It All

Prolonged emotional distress
 what do you do about
 how can I put it to rest
 the clock keeps ticking
 It follows
 every second
 The moments move along and there it is
 Holding tight, it's right there next to you
 What is this distress like
 Why is it so hard to make it disappear
 It's because it's rooted
Dug in deep
 It's part of every waking day because its seed was planted early
 The seed was born with you but it grew with every *mistake*
 Every *misstep*
 Every washed away dream crushed by hopes that were built up
 far
 too
 high
 Prolonged emotional distress isn't feeling bad about a game you lost
 Prolonged emotional distress isn't wishing you got the steak instead
 of the chicken
 Because the chicken was dry
 Prolonged emotional distress is
 A deep inhale
 Because air is the only thing keeping it from breaking you apart
 Prolonged emotional distress is
 Stretching your legs because you've lived so long in the closet
 Waiting for a time to pop out
 A time that never came
 So you stayed in there *waiting* and continued scrunching up your legs
 Prolonged emotional distress is
 Clearing your voice because you've masked it so long
 Because you want to be the right fit but you feel you never will
 Not in a world like this

But why did this distress choose to latch on to me
 Why did I have to
 fall
 into
 the
 crack
 And be buried deeper with every fleeting hope
 Sartre had said this stress was greater than physical pain
 Physical pain it's on the exterior
 It's a thing that can be held and molded back into function
 9 times out of 10 can always be healed
 But a mental toll a mental barrier such as this
 It can't be solved with a few stitches and painkillers because it always
 returns
Greater
larger
 New with more baggage dragged in
 New with a revenge because it didn't take you down on its first try
 And this crazy unfixed undiagnosed mental pain
 THAT is prolonged emotional distress

Riverbank

Along the riverbank she walks
Never swayed by the growing frost
Nothing but the sound of her own
Quiet footsteps still she makes haste
Again she has come back to search
For what she cannot seem to find
The snow mixes with earth under
Her feet the river will still flow
Even if she wills it to stop
The closer she gets
The farther it goes
Even if she were to go back
To the comfort of her home
The frost would still persist
It would follow her
Up upon her stairs
And make its dwelling there
In the corner of her room

Ghost on the Pier

I visited South Carolina in 1993
The coast of the town I once lived
The one thing I feared
Was the ghost along the pier
Dragged there by my parents to see everyday
The black abyss that was the sea
All I did was shriek and hide
Hoping that I'd be safe for just
One
More
Day

Now
Grown and old
I see the beauty not the dread
The overwhelming silence from the sea bed
The astonishing rhythm of the waves
And the charming lady of the mist staring back at me

Power

I've been assaulted
Because my ass isn't as big as the word
Assaulted
By cis-het men
Who despise femme bodies
For their size
That we are deserving to be
fetishized
Regardless of gender identity
Transgender
Cisgender
Non-binary
It's time to see
That
Femme bodies
Are criticized
Criticized for
The muscles in our bodies that expand
Naturally
Factually, we know our bodies are natural
Yet, we are not perfect in the eyes of society
Yet, when we alter our bodies
We are fake
And fake is not good enough
Is that our fate?
To be hounded out of our natural being
Maybe the phrase "all men are dogs" hits a little too close to home
But they should know
Their stereotypes, as we know ours
Men think they have the right
To grab, ask, harass, scour
Get mad
Over our bodies that they want to control
They know
We can never be controlled

That we will always have that power
The power over
Their minds
Their bodies
As they have no self-control
They want to own us
But they don't even take ownership
For their own behaviors
They value us like saviors
But we have been tapered
To the bottom
But men aren't the problem
It's their fear
Of our POWER

Strawberries

Our love was like a strawberry,
Sweet and delicate,
Juicy and full of passion as I took it up to view its beauty up close.
I pondered the quaint berry.
However, that delight quickly turned into horror as the once
beautiful strawberry
Began to rot, maggots crawling about as putrid juice seeped out of its
orifices.
I jumped and it slipped from my hands, splattering all over the hot
concrete.
He turned to me and began to shout.
Why did you do that? Why would you ruin this?
I began to cry and believe his grisly words until I realized.
How could I have ruined it when it was always rotten?
No matter how winsome it was, it couldn't hide its foul insides.
How did I ruin it when there was nothing to ruin to begin with.
It was always rotten on the inside.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

I am afraid of Windex, bleach, and detergent.
They touch your hands, you wash them off, scrub scrub.
With one spray of Windex, my skin burns, as if
being scrubbed with sandpaper

My sink knows me well, can recognize my fingertips,
the moment they pull the tap.
It runs and runs, skin turning chapped
under the scorching run of the water.

I need this feeling gone.

The sticky substance seems to coat
my fingers like homemade slime.
Engraving itself beneath my fingertips.
Soaking itself into my skin.

I can still feel it.
The water needs to be hotter.
I need to scrub harder.

I can't die.

What would they say?
Death by Windex.

Oh Hijab

Oh hijab, a ten-year-old first encountered you one morning
when she saw a clear package and, inside, a red hijab
unexpected as it was, her excitement became confusion

Oh hijab, she never thought your friendship would bloom
like a rosebush, so beautifully strong,
yet containing needles that leave scars for so long

Oh hijab, when she looked in the mirror,
she didn't see herself, but rather someone else
she started to question, "Why am I wearing this?"
"Why do I have to cover my hair?"

Oh hijab, the birds were silent that April afternoon
as she walked with the blinding rays of the sun on her back,
the weight of her bag, and the war inside her head,
repeating every word she stammered upon,
catching sight of her hijab in a car rearview mirror,
she didn't recognize herself,
she didn't understand

Oh hijab, she was to discover
that you came in all colors,
you were like an ocean, beautiful on the surface,
yet she hadn't seen the beauty hidden beneath the waves,
but diving deep into its depths, she would uncover,
modesty so precious

Oh hijab, she became a troublesome girl,
she lost her confidence in her hijab,
needed an excuse to take it off
one May night a quarrel with her mother,
became a reason to satisfy her overwhelming urge

Oh hijab, she felt something wrong, deep within her heart,
a shallow spark, a numbing pain
that her worth was measured by her appearance,
rather than her intellect
her soul was a dreamer, and also red,
red like the confidence that glows in her grace,
as she walks on the path less taken by others.

I Found You in the River Mud

I found you in the river mud
Left for dead from a summer flood
Your little head still peeking through
All golden brown from the creek's stew

I grasped you up from your gravelly grip
Then cleaned you off from tip to tip
Hard and heavy laying in my hand
Like the weight of moments never planned

Hunting

Their eyes are watching you,
hunting you down and policing you around,
their eyes don't leave you,
to let you have some peace—
to enjoy the day without feeling like prey.
I'll never understand because I'm not a bandit,
I don't think like a thief, nor do I police like a creep.
Although I reject it, I am subjected.

Words

Sometimes you're complicated and I don't know what you mean
 You get scrambled in my head, sometimes ugly and obscene
 But I can't help but love you and I need you every day
 You help me when I'm frustrated, you tell me what to say

You give me lots of options, choices, and alternates
 But sometimes you give me limits, conflicts, and opposites
 I have to tell you that sometimes you don't make sense
 And I have to rearrange you until what you say fits

Sometimes I'm under your control and I do what you demand
 But then I keep reworking you until you meet my command
 This makes me content, satisfied, and peaceful
 But getting to this point is irritating, bothersome, and fitful

Some try to reinvent you, and I "refudiate"
 Others agitate when they abbreviate
 Weak MC's be tryin' to use you to spit
 But often what they sayin' ain't worth **it

You're so full of variety, and you're versatile
 I don't like it when others cheapen your style
 So I try to share you with those who love you too
 When they respect your pure pleasure
 And see the beauty of you

Monotony

Oh, tiring day, have surpassed the limits
 Remembering the old childhood, peaceful ones.
 When dad came turning on the bedroom's light,
 Shouting my name loudly through the hallway.
 Oh, childhood good old times, you are extinct.
 Ain't no longer pancakes prepared by mom,
 No laughter and bullying from siblings.
 Grey are the days now, is this really life?
 Exhausting every day, drowned into routine,
 Without kids to bother on my own.
 Routine, work, but present unhappiness,
 As the dream to become more just vanished.
 Family's everything but ain't one for me,
 Pride and ego didn't allow it.
 Yes, my fault and misery, you bastard.
 Now, after a life without the dreamed thing,
 I yearn for the past, yet another dream,
 That cannot longer be reality.
 Six decades having passed and still in here,
 Yearning to be teenager and son again.
 Oh, tiring life, you have exhausted me,
 Please go away or set me free from you.

Time Flies: Be the Pilot

A somber autumn evening, she emits light
A gentle breeze in her gait, the thunder roars
As eyes stare in envy, she gleams a smile
A conflict in her heart behind closed doors

A tomorrow in the works, she awaits today's end
At will, dusk obeys her routine
And every second a piece of her puzzle
She discovers in her being

She cries, but only of laughter
She screams, but only from glee
She runs, but only to chase dreams
She stomps, but only when dancing

"Live your best life,
It isn't worth the pain,
Let every ounce fill with happiness
And your spirits pour out like rain."

"A strong heart, a fearless mind prevail
In the face of the world's plagues,
And even when the world may fail,"
She declares, "hold onto your faith."

The day came in seconds
A lifetime to her eyes
She confronted her challenge
With nothing but a smile

In a world parched of hope
She possessed the turn of the tide
To quench her every ambition
To set all her fears aside

A confidence so strong
A rare pea in the pod,
In the blink of an eye
She defied all odds

Compartments

A chifforobe can contain a multitude of things,
 though mostly it holds clothes.
 But it is composed of an assortment of compartments.
 So while it can hold your t-shirts,
 your athleisure wear,
 your socks,
 and even your unmentionables,
 There's also room to secure
 Your secrets.
 Some people are open books,
 Where nothing is concealed from those who ask.
 But I am like a chifforobe,
 Where every segment of my being
 is tucked away in its own little
 alcove, nook, or cubbyhole.
 A series of compartments.
 And while some of my coffers and receptacles
 are left unlocked and
 Easily accessible,
 There are some which scantily any
 will ever be allowed to peruse.
 And that's to be expected, right?
 Not all drawers are meant to be rummaged through
 Casually,
 Heedlessly,
 By just every and anyone.
 But that's the thing about a chifforobe,
 It's made of drawers and doors and cubes that you expect,
 But there can also be
 Hidden,
 Secret,
 Compartments.
 And only I hold the key to those.

Parked

Fat arms
 Back
 Stomach
 Side rolls
 They tend to troll me
 Mock me,
 And taunt me
 Controlling my insecurities
 My mood swings
 My hunger
 Eating more because of who I see in the mirror
 The horror
 Folds flapping in the wind
 Tears running down my face like volcanos erupting
 Leaving nothing but death and destruction
 My eyes hold so much misery and suffering
 So much hatred and disappointment
 Staring continuously at my body
 I can't stop the negative thoughts and the mean names from falling
 from my lips
 I hate to keep repeating the same negative things
 Keep dragging it in vain

The Double Conscious Coin

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

—W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, 1897

Two personalities at war
a black man vs a black American
Two different sides of a coin
Spinning...spinning...spinning
Which side will it land?
Heads or Tails?

Heads

On one side of the coin
I couldn't wear my hood at school
because I'm a threat
I had to speak King's English around those of fair skin
because I'm seen as uneducated

Tails

On one side of the coin
I didn't know how to express my emotions
because black men don't feel
I couldn't ask others for emotional help during a challenge
because vulnerability is feeble

I refuse to continue to look at myself through someone else's eyes
I refuse to be seen as a problem
I refuse to let someone shape my actions; I create the person I would
like to be
I refuse to let someone define my personality with something as
simple as a...
Coin Flip

My Crow

Disguised as a pigeon, you've just had
Enough food
From my palm
(& heart); then, you flap high up
Beginning to circle above me, ready
To flee away only after
Shitting on my head
& heart (again)

A Child's Motif

The stream in the woods
froze
so hard one winter—
its waxy white surface
only creaked
under weight of foot.
Below—
a mysterious trail of icy cold water
snaked along
underneath
the rivulets' frosty glaze—
seeking a path of least resistance.

Childhood memories surface—
slipping by fast
sending me reeling
down on the ice
alone—
waiting for darkness or snow
to fall.

Singing softly now
as daylight fades
stars emerge—poking
piercing the twilight.
Soon—
a full moon climbs
expectantly
glowing above the branches
leading me home
on a frozen stream
through the woods.

Warrior

Before cancer takes over and kills my body, people need to start
listening to my truth
I have been trying to speak but I am being held captive on my lack of
breath
I am trying to fight for my life, but death is in the mirror, and he
wants me to stop trying

It is hard to win a war when I am not beautiful anymore
I look in the mirror and I see a prisoner of war
But I am a warrior, so I force them to wake me up so I can put on the
makeup
The smiling mask that tricks my girlfriends into thinking I am okay

I am a warrior, so tomorrow when you come to wake me, I will be
gone
I'm going to drive to Florida, to my home, to die on my beach
I might not make it and might crash and die on the way but don't
follow me
I am a warrior and need no medicine to set me free
I am dying too young, but don't pity me
I loved my family like a warrior woman, so let me die like one

All I want to do is live my life, but I also want to escape the torture
I just know that I'm a warrior, but even warriors have to surrender
Grieving will be hard but just let me go cause we all know that this is
only the end of a chapter

Admission Surprise

I'm so afraid I chose the wrong school.

My eyes widen as I was given a tour of the school in question.

I looked at the brochure in my hands, the hallways I passed, the brochure once more.

This was supposed to be the dream school, the college life many would just hope to get in a lifetime. Yet here I was thinking the very words I swore would never come to mind when seeing the school.

Art was everywhere, and I mean literally.

Paintings across the walls, splatters of paint across lockers, doorways, and the floor.

What was the crazy thing though, was it *literally* came to life.

Paintings moved, talked, as if the person was but trapped in the wooden frames.

Paint splatters dragged along like snails, talking like regular people as if life suddenly sprang on them.

I could see as I took the school tour, kids everywhere painting along the walls. Their paintbrushes acting like music, going back and forth from stroke to stroke. The art from within their minds spreading across the walls like waves, coming to life the instant the paint dries.

My mind seems to flow just as much, with words from the guide going in one ear, and out the other.

I just couldn't let my eyes go farther beyond the art that bloomed around me.

I dreamt of going to art school, ever since I was little.

Yet here I am at one of the best, yet apparently art is both a work and a fantasy if my eyes don't deceive me.

Just how did they leave this out of the brochure?

How long as this been going on?

Yet no answers to such occurred, probably cause my mouth was too jaw dropped to form a single sentence.

It seems to never end, the hallways getting larger, longer, and even more artsy as I took one step in front of the other.

The endless colors washed over me like a giant sea wave, the light dancing across my eyes.

"So, are you thinking of joining our school?"

I look to the guide, his eyes showing, it seemed, just as much color and brightness as our surroundings.

I look around, seeing the atmosphere become a flurry of excitement and joy, my mind seems to make up already.

I turn to the guide and nod, "But before I do, any chance there's a quiet room I can sit down in? The noise and color seemed to have overwhelmed me greatly."

Sanctuary

It was a typical hot and humid July morning. I was already sweating from the hundred feet it took to reach the church doors. Before me stood a twentieth century monolithic representation of Catholicism. A church with large cement arches and Greek inspired columns framing its entrance, with thick stain glass windows promising sanctuary to all that entered. The sanctuary I sought that morning was the cool rush of air conditioning, greeting me just inside the doors.

Fifteen minutes early, I located my mother sitting in one of the back pews and went over to greet her. "Hi, mom, I'm early for a change."

"Well, you are never too early for salvation," she said.

This was a typical exchange between us; me, the self-proclaimed lapsed catholic and my mom the devout Christian bent on saving souls.

Sitting there, silence descended upon us, mom busy reading the church missalette and me taking in all the beautiful architectural flourishes that framed the ornate hanging lights. Maybe sanctuary was here after all, I thought, as I breathed in that cool musky scent of devotion.

From the front of the church came a rhythmic slap of shoe leather striking marble growing louder and louder. I turned toward the commotion and noticed it was Father O'Connor walking up our aisle, then disappearing into the confessional booth. My mother watching too, immediately urged me to make a confession with the priest. I emphatically told her no, I didn't want to, but mom persisted by using a mixture of catholic guilt and a "do it for your mother" plea. Confused by conflicting emotions, I dutifully left my pew and proceeded "zombie-like" into the dark confines of the confessional booth.

Once inside the booth, I was instantly transported back to Sister Catherine's second grade class, where Sister marched our class over to God's House for confessional booth training. Now I sat there nervous and anxious, waiting for Father O'Conner to slide the wood panel up and start the proceedings.

With the whoosh of a wooden slat, the confessional screen appeared, two souls were staring at each other, wondering what kind of deal they were prepared to make in the eyes of God.

I started, "Forgive me Father for I have sinned, my last confession was, was, umm..." I was stuck, I couldn't remember the last time that I'd went to confession. After a short pause, I said, "Well, Father it's been a long time."

Not completely satisfied with my response, Father probed for more information. "Well, my son, has been months, years?"

I countered with, "Years, maybe as much as ten years."

"Oh, I see," he said, then continued, "that's a long time for a soul to go unprotected. What if you were killed in a car accident during that time, it's possible that you would now be subjected to the hot flames of hell," he said.

At that point, I felt guilty, embarrassed, pissed, and ready to opt out for the hot flames of the Devil's hibachi. Then I thought, "where's the sanctuary in this kind of conditional love and judgment, are we all sinners in eyes of the Lord, or are some his messengers flawed?" I wanted to ask Father how long it had been since he last practiced some love and tolerance; what I did was flee the booth and make a beeline back to my mother's pew. Once back, my mom said that Father O'Connor had left the booth in a huff and appeared to be looking for someone. I immediately slouched down in the pew as far as I could go.

"Now, doesn't it feel better to get all that sin off your chest," mother said.

"Oh yeah, just great," I said sarcastically.

An hour later, I took my mom to the International House of Pancakes, where we ordered coffee and Swedish pancakes. Ah... sanctuary!

I Would Rather Be In Math Class

I hated 7th grade. *Introduction to Algebra* was my last class of the day and I dreaded going. Every time I walked into my math class, I felt a huge weight engulf my body knowing it would be one more day when I felt so little compared to my peers. I made my way to the back of the classroom, weaving in between small spaces of other desks.

My eyes always wandered to the clock hanging on the yellow-tinted cinder block wall. I would drown out the voice of my teacher, the clicking of mechanical pencils as students refilled the lead, and the distant laughter of friends meeting up at the water fountain in the hallway. I listened to every tick of the second hand, watching it make full loops until finally, the time was 2:30. As soon as I heard the blaring ring of the bell, I shoved my red binder labeled “Math” and my uncompleted classwork into my backpack and rushed to the bus parked outside.

I walk down the narrow aisle of gray leather seats and sit towards the back. The seat is cold and hard and I start to shiver. I should’ve brought a jacket today. I plug my earphones into my iPod, put my 2014 hits playlist on shuffle, and close my eyes. This was one of my favorite parts of the day, being able to escape that feeling I had inside the middle school math classroom.

One feeling that I didn’t think I needed to escape was how I felt at home. That day I was wrong.

I got off the bus and started the track down my long driveway. The air was crisp with a slight breeze as Thanksgiving was just around the corner. The driveway was wet and I could feel a sprinkling of water hit my forehead. I made my way inside and was greeted by my two fluffy and soft golden-colored dogs. Their wet noses sniffed from my lunchbox the remaining food odors that day.

“Hi Courtney, how was school?” my mom says on the other side of the house as I open the squeaky glass front door.

“It was ok,” I respond. I climb the dark staircase to my brightly lit lavender-colored room. Finally, I see my bed. I crawl under the soft fluffy comforter and get sucked into my Minecraft world, where my only responsibility is to feed my blocked-shaped dogs.

An hour goes by and my sister has now joined me in my intense

efforts to create a farm on Minecraft, when I hear someone start walking up the steps. I know it’s my mom just by the way I can hear each foot being placed on each step.

“Girls, can you please come downstairs. Your father and I have to talk to you.”

I set my iPod down and sigh and walk over to the steps. I look down watching each foot descend to the next until I made it to the main level. Once I walk into the living room, I feel my parent’s eyes follow my body to the very uncomfortable, hard cushioned couch I sit on. My sister sits next to me and I feel my body sink lower into the couch. Something is wrong.

“You might be wondering why dad is home so early,” my mom says. “He had to go to the doctor today.”

“Why?” I ask.

There is hesitation and then my dad speaks. “Well, this is going to be hard to hear, but the doctor found a lump under my arm. They had to do a test to see what it was and they found a cancerous tumor. It’s called Lymphoma.”

My sister stays silent. I don’t know what she is thinking or if she even understands what’s happening because she is only nine. But then I remember I’m only eleven.

“So, you have cancer?” I say as I feel a slow gradation of red form across my face.

“Yeah, there are four stages to this kind of cancer and I have stage 3. I am going to have to start chemo-”

I stopped listening.

I feel my eyes fill with water. My eyes keep filling and filling and soon I feel like my eyes are drowning. I can’t even see because of the tears and everything in front of me is so blurry. Words are still coming out of my dad’s mouth but I don’t even know what they mean. Money, budgeting, exhaustion, praying.

“So that’s what we needed to tell you.” Silence.

I don’t look at anyone and find my way to my room through my fogged vision. My room is not a brightly lit lavender anymore, it’s gray and gloomy. I don’t cry or panic or get angry. My mind is empty. I can’t believe I was complaining about math class. I would rather go back to math class. I want to go back to math class.

All Through Our House

The feeling of tiny, unseen hands smacking against a sleeping person's cheeks would send most people into a panic, but after years of being subjected to rude awakenings, it has simply become a part of my daily routine.

For the past three years, my entire life has revolved around making sure my daughter Eloise grows up in a loving environment. She's a spunky little thing—from the moment I first laid eyes on her, I could see a fiery attitude burning behind those big brown eyes. My little girl knows what she wants, when she wants it, and refuses to take no for an answer. Maybe this is why she had such a long history of temporary placements; most foster parents expect a complacent, obedient child, both of which Ellie has never and will never be. But her self-assured attitude charmed me to bits, and it didn't take long for the then two-year-old to secure herself a permanent place in my heart. Three years later, we have more or less become a happy, healthy family.

There is only one real issue that has, despite all my efforts, continued to persist: for whatever reason, Eloise is unable to sleep through the night. Even at five years of age, she will wake up at *least* once before the sun rises. Melatonin gummies, changing her bedtime routine, more physical activities throughout the day - nothing helps, and some only serve to make her crankier. Her pediatrician assures me she will grow out of it, but at this point I'm not so sure. We now have a routine; if she can't fall back asleep on her own, she will crawl into my bed and wake me up—a cup of warm milk and a half-hour of stories is usually enough to knock her back out. So on that particular night, waking up to the feeling of little hands smacking against my cheeks didn't raise any immediate alarms. The excitement in her voice, however, was unusual.

"Daddy, daddy!" she whispered, and without looking I could tell she was beaming. "It's Christmas!"

At this I paused, forcing my sleep-deprived brain to get into gear. I force my eyes open just enough to see the blurry figure of my daughter.

"Ellie, honey, today is Saturday," possibly Sunday, depending on the time. "And Christmas doesn't come until next Friday, remember?"

At this she pauses, little brow furrowed as she recalls the conversation we've had repeatedly over the past week and a half. She shakes her head before turning back to me, more determined than ever.

"But Santa's here *now*! He didn't wait for Friday."

I pause, confused by her insistence. "Baby, Santa knows when Christmas is, and I promise he won't come until Friday."

She takes a moment, weighing my words against her own beliefs. I begin to settle back into bed. Her next words are spoken in a mousy whisper—a direct contrast to the klaxons blaring in my mind.

"But... who's downstairs?"

Whatever verbal reassurances I had prepared crumbled like ash. It is in that resounding silence that I finally hear what convinced Eloise that Christmas had come early.

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.

Loud, hefty footsteps resound against the living room's hardwood floors, echoing up the stairs and into the master bedroom. While my daughter is almost vibrating in excitement, I can feel my stomach sinking—no one, besides myself, has a key to my house, and none of my friends or family would ever let themselves into my home. An intruder with unknown intent has broken into my house, *and my five-year-old thinks it's Santa*.

Breathe in, breathe out. It isn't the time to consider what would've happened if she ran downstairs without waking me up, or if she had slept through the invasion. There's no time to panic; even now, the sound of boots clunking against wood resounds throughout the house. I pull Eloise into my arms before springing out of bed, shuffling in an attempt to avoid the creaks in the floor. She looks at me, confused, and I know I have to say something to prevent her from speaking too loudly.

"We're gonna play a game with Santa, okay?" I whisper, gently pulling open the door to the closet. "Santa, he... he only comes

before Christmas if he wants to play hide and seek, and it's our turn to hide. So we have to be very, *very* quiet, okay?"

She nods eagerly, curls flying as she tries to contain her excitement. I hate lying to her, but I have no idea how she'd react to a stranger breaking into our home, and keeping her safe has to take priority. Shifting her onto my hip, I use my free hand to pull on a cord hanging from the ceiling of the bedroom closet. The house's "attic" is more of a crawlspace, with barely enough room to stand. I usually only go up here every few months to change the ventilation filter, but right now it's the closest hiding place I can think of. The ladder descends fairly quietly, though I find myself wincing at every miniscule creak and squeak. I allow Eloise to ascend the metal railings on her own, debating if I should attempt to grab my cell phone. But when I hear the distinct *squeak-squeak* of someone stepping on the first stair, I know we're out of time; the intruder must be done searching the first floor, and is beginning to ascend to the second. I scurry up the ladder as fast as I can, taking care not to bump Eloise, and try to pull the ladder up behind me.

It doesn't budge. No matter what part I pull, the metal contraption refuses to lock back into its folded position. I can hear the stairs creaking as those boots slowly make their way to the second floor. In my panic I throw my upper body out of the opening, and with one final tug, I yank the ladder into place. I only have a few seconds to wrench myself back into the attic before it shuts with a resounding *bam!*

I freeze. The footsteps pause, before sprinting into the master bedroom. I can't see the intruder, but I can hear him clearly. Someone with an old, grizzled voice curses as he searches the room, turning over furniture and pulling boxes out from under the bed. Eloise silently clings to my arm—despite my best efforts, she has realized that something is terribly, terribly wrong. We both hold our breath when the closet door is ripped open, slamming into the wall. I can hear clothes being flung around the room and mementos shattering against the floor. The intruder must not see the cord leading to the attic, because the ladder never budges, and he eventually stomps into a different room.

I don't know how long my daughter and I sat in that dusty crawlspace, silently clinging to one another. It isn't until the police,

whose presence was requested by concerned neighbors, are calling our names that I think to emerge. I don't think to check the time until I'm calling my parents from the station. It didn't take much for me to agree on staying with them throughout the winter holiday while I decide what to do with the house; no valuables had been stolen, and there was only minimal property damage, so we *could* move back in immediately.

But the lack of theft means whoever broke into our house had to have been looking for us—for *people*. How am I supposed to explain that to a child who breaks into tears at the mere mention of Santa Claus?

I'll Be Fine

Shoes.

I wasn't wearing shoes.

Should I go back inside and grab them? No, it's fine. I'll be fine.

I was sitting on the top porch step and watching the stars twinkle. It was nearly pitch black out aside from the piercing silhouette of the lit street lamp across the way. I was wearing shorts and the backs of my thighs were exposed to the rough surface of the brick steps. I wiggled my toes and the masonry scratched at the bottoms of them. I know that I shouldn't be sitting on the steps in shorts, let alone barefoot. My Mum doesn't like when I do that. She says I always end up with scratches and rashes after sitting on the jagged bricks without long pants and shoes. Maybe she'll let it slide this time.

If she lets that slide, then she'll definitely let the fact that I'm not wearing a jacket slide. It's a bit chilly out and Mum wouldn't want me to catch a cold. She always says that I rough it more than I should. Apparently I'm a lot like my Dad in that aspect. I like the cold and I can handle it, but sometimes I push myself too far. At least that's what my Mum tells me. I should listen to her this time. It is a bit breezy out. There's a hoodie on the end of the couch.

The couch is in the living room, though. The living room where Mum was lying on the floor not breathing barely fifteen minutes ago. I'd rather not go inside. I can't stop picturing her lying there. I don't want to go right now.

I'll just hold myself and warm up that way. I wrap my arms around myself, pulling my knees closer.

I should breathe. I can't remember if I've been doing that. I'm a tad lightheaded, but I don't know if it's because of the crying or the not-breathing.

Inhale, exhale. I'll be fine.

Will she be fine? Of course she'll be fine, don't think that way. She's my mother and she's strong. She'll be fine.

But what if she won't?

No, stop it. I did everything right. I called 911. I performed CPR. It'll be fine.

I need to close my eyes, they're starting to sting. Blink, blink. The red and blue lights bouncing off of everywhere don't help the headache growing in my temples.

I did everything right.

One of the firefighters said so himself. I like firefighters. I sat in a firetruck once and I swear it's still the happiest moment of my entire life.

Is this the saddest moment of my entire life? No, don't ask that. I don't know that this will turn out badly.

But maybe I do. When has anything gone right in this type of situation?

When your driveway and the road in front of your house is bathed in red and blue, does it seem like it'll have a good outcome? No.

Shit.

It's not going to be fine.

"Hey, do you have someone coming for you?"

My eyes dart up from my bare feet at the muffled sound. There's a police car parked on the road in front of my house. '*QUEEN ANNE'S COUNTY*' dance above the large white '*SHERIFF*' wording on the side of the Dodge Charger. I like Dodge, my mum said they were sturdy cars.

The window is rolled down and I see the occupant's grey uniform. There's a pasty white guy in the driver's seat. He looks like he's having a rough night too. Wait, what did he say... What did he say? I hear ringing. I can't hear anything else. I can't seem to focus on anything. Focus. Say something. Why can't I say something? I swallow.

"Do you want us to stay with you, miss?" I hear his deep voice, enhanced by his thick Eastern Shore accent, this time. He looks so worried. He has kind eyes.

Mum has kind eyes. Beautiful and kind hazel eyes. Everyone says I have her eyes. Answer him

I shake my head slightly side to side. Tears that have streaked down my face fall even further with the movement.

“Are you sure?” He reminds me of Dad. He’s got such a soft voice. “My brother is coming.” I mumble, looking at the policeman.

“We can wait with you until he comes, if you’d like.” His partner pipes up from the passenger seat. I see his head lean forward so he can see me.

“My big brother is coming. I’ll be fine.” I try to say it out loud, since they are across my yard, but it comes out as a whisper.

He still hears me, somehow. His pale face bobs and his lips move. I think he is saying to call them if I change my mind. I nod back. Their patrol car, no longer flashing blue and red, pulls away.

My big brother showed up hours later. It was one or two in the morning, I can’t remember. I was still sitting on the porch steps. No shoes and no jacket. He showed up with my older sister. Their lips were downturned at the edges and their eyes were dim. They didn’t hurry to get to me. They looked like zombies shambling towards our house.

They sat me and our youngest brother down on the godforsaken couch. They gazed at us with tears in their eyes.

It wasn’t going to be fine. Mum died.

I didn’t do anything right. I didn’t do anything right because she died. It wasn’t going to be fine. She wasn’t fine.

I put my shoes on and went to sleep at my brother’s apartment that night.

It’s been four years and I’m not fine. I don’t think I ever will be. That rough night in May was the night my mother had a heart attack and died on our living room floor. It was a daze in the moment but now, years later, it’s vividly shown over and over again in my memory. I can’t handle seeing or hearing emergency vehicles with sirens and lights on, I can’t stand hearing someone counting, etc. I struggle every day with not breaking down at the distant sound of sirens and the occasional sight of red and blue lights. But you know what’s funny?

I got a cold that same week that my mother died. Life is cruel that way. I should’ve grabbed the hoodie.

The Tree Who Loved a Girl

I once lived in an exquisitely small house near the intersection of five long roads. This house was simply one room placed on top of another. The walls were of paper, & the stairs up to the second floor were steep & slippery. A persimmon tree, some years tentative, some deeply expressive, lived in the house’s small trapezoid of a back yard. In better years, you could lean over the second floor balcony rails & reach into its orange bounty.

In this house, there also lived a husband (not mine) who would often have drunken night time conversations with Tchaikovsky. To emphasize his points, the husband would gesture & punch his fists in the air. As you might imagine, the paper walls had suffered damage here & there. The husband never seemed to notice me, though, & most nights I slept peacefully under a soft blanket embroidered in the dark purple stitches of the Heart Sutra. Now, when I reflect back upon those days, I realize I must have been like that man Hoichi who had been long protected by the sutras inked across his body. Alas, his ears had not been written on, & a dark ghost had seen these & taken them from him.

As for me, curled in deepest sleep on the second floor of the smallest house at the intersection of five long roads, I was safe. Usually, when I awoke & shed my sutra, the husband had already left for his place of work. However, now & then, usually at twilight, he would perceive me, or at least the edges of me, as I read thin volumes of poetry or else wrote long letters home. In these moments, he would cry out in fear, grab for his overcoat & run out into the snow. Later, from my place of furthest slumber, I would hear him enter the small house, talking loudly to his confidant Peter Illyich. Then, I could hear the persimmon tree in the back draw in its breath & wait. I think it was stilling itself, readying itself for that day when I would decide to go home, bringing all my love & quiet with me.

More Than Just Algebra

My algebra teacher taught me how to divide more than just numbers. But that was our little secret, and our secret alone. Most people wouldn't—no... couldn't understand what we did together, when we were all alone. Honestly, sometimes it was hard for me to understand. But he knew what he was doing, and going along with him had been the most life changing experience. The past 5 months with him had been the most exciting in all my 17 years of life.

The sun poured into the classroom, dust flecks floating visibly in the rays of light. It was a surprisingly warm day for mid-March, and even with the windows open, it was stiflingly hot in the classroom. I felt a rivulet of sweat trickle down my chest and undid another button on my uniform blouse. My skin was clammy underneath my wool tights. I couldn't wait to peel these off.

Mr. Barnaby was passing back last week's algebra test, gently placing each packet face-down on the desk in front of the student it belonged to. Whether one had done poorly or well, the others couldn't tell from his demeanor. He was quite new, only having been here for the past 6 months, and one of the younger teachers. He was also one of only 4 male teachers, and extremely handsome. Tall and slim, with wispy dark brown hair and eyes as green as foliage, he always had a kind word and a smile for staff and students alike. Because of this, he was also very popular.

He had just arrived at my desk and placed my test down. I went to reach for it when he stopped me, his long, graceful fingers just barely grazing my wrist. I glanced up into those eyes, almost getting lost in them as one would in an evergreen forest. "Miss Witherspoon," he said softly, casually, "I need you to stay behind after class today." He walked off as nonchalantly as he had uttered that to me, but I still felt a blush rise in my cheeks. The other girls in class giggled and giggled, some in a spiteful manner, assuming I was in trouble, others in a flirtatious way, jealous that I would be allowed extra one on one time with everyone's favorite teacher.

I glanced downwards at the desk, trying to look reproachful, as if I knew I was in some trouble for doing poorly on the last test. However, I was really just hiding the excitement in my eyes. What

others might have taken as a teacher asking a student to stay behind to reprimand for a bad grade, I knew had to do with our little secret.

The bell rang, Mr. Barnaby dismissed the class, and the rest of the girls rushed to leave. A few glanced back at me, some with smug looks, imagining the trouble they assumed I'd be getting into, others with empathetic half smiles. The last girl left the class and closed the door behind her. I looked up to see Mr. Barnaby walking up the aisle, his gaze fixed upon me, a look of determination on his dashing face.

I bit my lip and slowly stood up, "Mr. Barnaby?" I breathed.

"This is it. What we've been waiting for all this time," he replied intensely, grabbing my arm and jerking me up from my desk. I almost fell into his arms, but caught myself at the last minute. "The Sulestrion Nebula is dividing into warring factions as we speak! We have to go now to stop them and save the universe!"

The Dinner That Walked Away

“Chazmookmindyandbria~!” She had this funny way of making our names sound like one really long word whenever she called for us. And she hated repeating herself, but we never really gave her reason to when it came to dinner time. My mom was the Emeril Lagasse of soul food... or dare I say - Salt Bae. “Come on, before it gets cold.” She had one of those voices that carried so well it almost always felt as if she were yelling. My dad always got the first plate, then the kids. Mom was always last to the table.

“You’ve really outdone yourself this time Michelle,” my dad would utter. He never bothered switching up the compliments. Even the intonation was exactly the same. These days I say it to my wife out of humor.

“Don’t you touch that food without saying grace.”

“Yes, ma’am,” we’d reply. We went to church every Sunday and three times a week. My Dad liked to pick on us by asking us if we wanted to stay home this week. As if we actually had a choice. On Wednesdays was bible study and Thursdays were reserved for choir rehearsal/ usher’s practice. You’d think after a year of marching up and down the same aisle collecting tithes that practice would become obsolete. Probably explains my lingering distaste for long Sunday services.

Dinner time was more than just mealtime. It was sort of a sacred space where we came to relate as a family. There were no phones, just good food, and conversation. But all of that changed after my dad left. I know it’s super cliché to say so, but it honestly feels like it happened yesterday. I had just received my 3rd quarter report card as a 10th grader at Clairemont High. I didn’t hate school, I just found it extremely boring. I made it a point to do just enough to pass the class—not an inch more. Unfortunately, that never translated to grades my parents deemed acceptable. It had been this way since elementary school. I wasn’t expecting it to change anytime soon. Still, getting a report card felt like receiving a death sentence. My Dad somehow thought he could beat an appreciation for education into me. It’s all I could think of the entire way home. So much so that even as I watched my father loading his belongings into his work

truck, all I could think of was how safe I felt in that moment. Even as he tried his best to articulate the unsurmountable pain he was carrying, all I felt was indifference. It was the beginning of an entirely new life for me. I still wonder what my life would have been had he chosen to stay.

My Mom picked up a second job and rarely made it home before I went to bed. Grades mattered even less to us now. She had neither time nor mental space to worry about our quarterly progress reports. In our time of suffering, my younger sisters clung to my mother, my brother clung to his friends, and I clung to the desolate feeling of isolation. As for family dinner, we fended for ourselves these days. There was this one time she and the girls (as we referred to our younger sisters) came home with three subs; one for my mom and one for each of my sisters. The fridge was about as barren as the Australian outback, so my excitement at the smell of the food followed by the sound of the front door closing led my body toward the dining room. “Aint nothing for you on this table.” The words left my mother’s lips before I could even part my own to utter a simple “Hi Mom.” She had instructed my sisters not to share their subs with me—even if they were full. The isolation sat in deeper. Family felt more like a word and a lot less like a container for love.

It feels foolish to admit now, but I spent a good portion of my life searching for the family dinner that sprouted legs and walked out of the 3-bedroom house I once called home. Our destiny is in the palms of our hands. If we don’t like the one we’re living, just toss it out and trade it in for a new one. “Why not take the same approach with family,” I thought to myself. I found a girlfriend and decided to borrow hers for the time being. We’d been seeing each other for about two and a half years. I suppose her protrusions lined up perfectly with the cavities in my own life. The souvenirs from my parents’ divorce seemed to finally begin paying dividends. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and every holiday in between was spent with the Hamblins at this point. When “used to be mom” showed resentment towards my decision, I decided it was better to be homeless than to sleep in a place that made you feel as though you

already were. It was less than 24 hours before new family took me in. I sunk deeper into the feeling that this could ever be real.

New family dinner didn't feel like the first one. It was different, better in some ways, yet it still left space for a longing toward the original. Sort of like a lizard's second tail that gets the job done but lacks the elegant color of the original. For all their differences, I'll never forget the similarity between the two. They both met their ends where divorce began.

The Holders

Prologue

When it started, they said it was the only choice. The world had descended into chaos. The threat of war loomed close to home. Crime faced no end. Pollutants plagued the air. Violence filled the streets. News stations spread lies. People were afraid and divided. Maybe there was a time when people were happy, but that time was over. Anxiety. Depression. Fear.

Happiness's been replaced.

They must have wondered, "How do you rid this callous world of its plagues?"

New laws? No, they didn't work before, and they wouldn't work now. New leaders? No, who could guarantee they would have the solution? New medicine? No, billions' worth of antidepressants were sold each year, but still, there was no change. New technology? A promising idea, they must have thought.

In two months' time, The Holder was released. Designed to "hold" unpleasant emotions—the clear, flat, penny-sized machine washed away the sins of the world. Once stuck to the right temple, you never had to deal with those emotions again.

It was simple.

Say someone were to endure a painful emotion, the device would send a small, painless shock, signaling them to look away. A shock lasting a few milliseconds would erase that memory. Out of sight, out of mind. The person never feels that agony again.

It must have sounded like a blessing then, to me at first, too. But pain doesn't arise from painful things. No, the most painful things come to us as beautiful things.

I wish they had realized this then.

§

I was 5 when dad gave me my first Holder. Every morning since then, I'd come down for breakfast and be greeted with, "Dana are you wearing your Holder?" And like a reflex, I'd say I am. This morning is no different.

Dad and I have a routine. He makes breakfast, and I set the table. I get the mail, and he reads it. After we eat, I wash the dishes, and he dries them. We always follow the routine. It's just how we are.

I follow the routine and head for the front door to check the mail. On my way, I look at the calendar. *Zap!* I feel a shock at my temple. There is only one date in the whole year that makes my Holder go off: April 27th. The day mom died. I was three then, so I didn't know her. Actually, I still don't know what she was like. Dad knows, but he never tells. I know he loved her because no matter what happens on April 27th he is sad. I can't change that. The Holder can't change that. A strike of lightning to his brain couldn't change that. And that is why I can't look at the calendar on April 27th. Because I know it will be a painful day, not for me, but for dad.

Most years, I know it's April 27th, before I even look at the calendar. Usually, I can tell by how dreadfully slow and quiet dad is. He just sits with mom's picture. And he tries to look. The Holder won't let him, but he doesn't stop trying. There has never been a year where he hasn't done this. Not until today. I grab the mail and run to the kitchen. Me being there doesn't help much, but at least he won't feel alone. I expect to see him at the table with mom's picture and coffee. But he isn't.

"Dad? Are you okay?" I say, cautiously.

"On a perfect day like this, how could I not be okay?" he says, laughing.

This doesn't make any sense. Dad is never happy on April 27th. I don't get it. Did he forget? It's nice to see him happy today, but I think he will feel worse if he realizes tomorrow that he forgot Mom's death anniversary. Should I remind him? I debate it in my head.

"Do you know what day it is?" I ask slowly.

"April 27th" he says while flipping a pancake.

So, he knows the date. Did he forget what happened? But dad doesn't forget things.

"Isn't today special?" I hint.

"Any day can be a special day. You just have to make it that way."

What is wrong with him!? Is he sick? Sometimes fever impairs your judgment. Yes! That has to be it.

"Dad, are you feeling okay?" I prod.

"Why so many questions today? I feel fine. Can you please set the table?"

Zap! Oh no. Looking at dad must be painful for me because the Holder doesn't want me to look. I don't understand what is happening. How can he be so *happy*? This isn't right. I leave the kitchen and go to the basement. In the very back of the basement is an old wall of peeling plaster. Hidden there is mom's picture. I grab the picture and take it to dad, who is setting the table.

"You can stop hiding Dana, I've set the table myself. Just eat the pancakes I made."

"Dad, look at this!" I shove the picture in front of his eyes, so he has no choice but to look. I expect tears.

"Who is that, Dana? A friend of yours? Pass the syrup please."

That is all he has to say? *Zap!* Again I can't look at dad without feeling something bad. How could he have forgotten her?

"Dad, that's mom," I say in my panic-filled voice.

"Whose mom?" he asks, innocently.

"Dad, don't you feel shocks from your Holder?"

"Well no. The picture doesn't make me feel anything bad."

Now I know the problem. His Holder is broken. It should have shocked him, and it didn't, so dad thinks nothing is wrong. I grab the instruction manual for his Holder and flip to the section titled *Holders that don't shock*.

"A Holder that doesn't shock is most likely broken. It should be recycled and replaced. However, in some cases, a Holder is designed not to shock. If someone is repeatedly exposed to something that causes an unpleasant feeling their Holder will permanently erase it from their memory. The shocks will be unnecessary from that point forward."

Zap! The Holder doesn't want me to look at the manual, I'm guessing because it has made me cry. I wish looking away made me feel any better, but my chest heaves as I continue to cry. The Holder made him forget *mom*!

This can't be right. One day, a *long* time ago, dad told me mom was the "source of his happiness." Now he doesn't even recognize her! Holders are only supposed to get rid of the bad, and Mom was the good. This has to be a glitch. I pick up my phone and call the Holder repair hotline.

"Holder repair, how may I help you today?"

"My dad's Holder erased a memory of his, but it was something good!" I scream.

"This can't be right; Holders don't get rid of the good memories. Can you explain?" he says.

I explained to him how dad always tried to look at mom's picture, even though the Holder didn't let him, and how now he can't remember her at all because the Holder erased his memory.

"Can't you tell? When your dad remembered your mom, it made him feel bad. And now he never has to feel that way ever again," he said, annoyed, and quickly hung up.

I was torn in half. My dad is *happy* today, but he can never remember mom again. Which is better? Which is more important? Is it worth it? And what about all his good memories with mom? Are they lost now too? I go back into the kitchen where dad is reading the mail, as always and take my seat next to him.

"What is your source of happiness? I ask.

"You are," he says, smiling.

"Would you ever forget me?"

"Never, ever!" he says as he grabs my hand.

I know *he* would never forget me. Not by himself, anyway. But, if he was wearing his Holder he could, and this enrages me.

How could that stupid machine just take something so precious from my dad without even asking him? What if he didn't want to forget mom? What if I forgot him? I could never forgive myself. I could never be happy if I didn't remember him!

Without a word I rip dad's holder off and do the same with mine. I place them on the table and reach for the pan on the stove. It's still warm from breakfast. I smash. Over and over again, I smash.

"Dana! What are you doing?" he screams.

I bet his holder wouldn't let him watch me right now.

"That woman is your wife and you loved her, but you forgot her because of *this*!" I yell, completely disgusted.

I point at mom's picture then the Holders, but dad just looks confused.

"Holders hold away the bad to leave room for the good" he says, reciting an ad from the Holder company.

"Dad, you can't keep the good and get rid of the bad! You don't get to choose! You either keep them both or nothing at all!" I say.

Atticus

It was an unusually hot Sunday for the beginning of June. All living things, except for the omnipresent cicadas, were hiding in the shade conserving energy. But Atticus, as usual, was too adventurous, too curious, and too fearless to hide from anything. He was outside in the backyard exploring and enjoying being one with nature as he usually did. There were no signs that there was anything wrong with him. In just a few hours, a shocking event brought our entire family together to try to save his life.

He was stunningly beautiful, jet black, a young cat with mink-like, lush, shiny fur and expressive citrine eyes. It was a pleasant sunset, and the air was cooling down, when we noticed him crawling towards the door, dragging his rear paws that seemed paralyzed.

My first thought was that he had gotten bit by a venomous snake or spider. My next fear was that he got attacked by a fox that sometimes trespasses into our backyard. But there were no external signs of injury. We called the emergency vet, and they said that our vivacious, full-of-energy pet had a heart defect that led to a blood clot in his lower body that blocked circulation to his legs. The prognosis was grim, but we refused to give up on him and euthanize him. For two days we insisted that the vets fight for his life.

During the three years we had him, he became like a full member of the family, changing my sister's lukewarm attitude towards cats to deep affection. Different animals have different personalities. We loved his beauty, his unique character, and his love for life and optimism. Not a single time during these three years did he give us a reason to suspect his congenital heart hypertrophy. To us, this was a sign of his bravery and strong spirit.

I remember the first day we met him. I was sitting on the couch in the living room, browsing the internet on my laptop. I heard the excited bark of our little dog and the menacing growl and hissing of our Tonkinese cat, Simba, who usually has the sweetest disposition. I saw a little, black fluffy ball standing in the middle of the hallway, with his tiny back arched, looking defiantly at Simba, who was three times his size, and our dog. He was scared and slightly trembling, but he held his ground and didn't move.

My mom said that's how he'd acted in the shelter. There were several cats let loose in an enclosed area. Most were adult cats who hissed to establish their hierarchy. But he was unphased by them. People liked him but were too superstitious to get a black kitten with Halloween coming soon. Luckily for us, my mom had no competition getting him.

After that, he'd ride with my sister everywhere she went. At first, on the dashboard near the windshield, then later as he grew, patiently on the passenger seat staring out the window and observing information about the passing scenery. Everything about the world induced his curiosity and he seemed to enjoy playing with different living creatures, from centipedes to the recent addition to our family, a rambunctious golden doodle puppy who quickly grew to be 4 times bigger than him and often confused him for a chew toy. But he in his kind wisdom understood the novelty of the world for a puppy and was incredibly patient.

I remember his unusually melodic voice. He had so many intonations, tunes, and inflections that it seemed like he had a different meow to express different emotions and sometimes tried to talk to us. At night, he would come and cuddle with me or my sisters, at first trying to sleep on our faces, thinking the face is the essence of a human being and trying to be as close to us as possible.

We couldn't keep him inside, he was too fascinated with outdoor life and if we insisted on keeping him indoors, he would come to one of the fancy chairs and sink his claws into the fabric, looking at us as if to say "if you don't let me out, I'll scratch it to shreds", which on a few occasions he did, but we forgave him. We did have to put duct tape over the chairs to keep him from manipulating us. But other than that, he was incredibly good-natured, full of life, and had the ability to bring comfort and joy to every member of our family, including the other pets who learned to love him.

Like every cat, he had so many funny moments. I remember him sleeping on top of a warm tray of lasagna, enjoying the smell and the heat, sneaking in bed with us by crawling from the foot of the bed under the blankets in the hopes that we wouldn't notice, sleeping inside the flowerpot, stealing socks from the laundry basket and playing with them or stealing and eating a pizza crust from my sister's plate. There were cute memories that are meaningful to us.

But life is so fragile. On June 7th, his heart suddenly stopped beating despite all our efforts. We were not ready to say goodbye, shocked by how quickly and unexpectedly life can end. Everybody in the family felt that his death left a void that will be hard to fill. But luckily, we have good memories, pictures, and videos that will help us to remember a pet we all loved. His sudden demise taught us to cherish every day and each other because nothing should be taken for granted.

Essential Worker When COVID First Started

“When’s the toilet paper and Lysol going to be restocked, there’s none over there?”

“Sorry ma’am but there is no way of knowing, the store orders what we need, and whatever shows up in the truck is what we have.”

“Are you sure, is there some in the back, can’t you ask a manager?”

“Yes, I’m sure, what we have is on the shelves.”

“Call your manager, this is unacceptable, the store is empty. There are barely any canned goods, all the cleaning supplies are gone, and there are no more cases of water back there. I came in here with a list and didn’t get anything I was looking for. You have to have something in the back.”

Internally I scream— Sorry KAREN! But did you NOT JUST HEAR WHAT I SAID!

You are not the only person who has asked this same question. And you surely won’t be the last. I will continue to give the same answer, and my manager will too. Who works here, me or you? If you want to sneak off into the back loading area, feel free to look for yourself. You will find nothing but towers of empty boxes, broken down rusty shopping carts, and stock employees gloating about how they don’t have to deal with customers like you.

Let me remind you, we are in a pandemic, and people are buying essential items like there is no tomorrow. Didn’t you notice the lines of about 20 people with carts overflowing with cans, produce, frozen goods, and the last of the toilet paper?

Maybe you shouldn’t have waited last minute thinking things wouldn’t have escalated.

Please, let me check out your TV dinners, frozen vegetables, club crackers, and tubs of ice cream without being bombarded with your nasty attitude and silly questions.

“Sure, let me go grab them.”

I’m considered an “essential worker” and believe me when I say, I want out. I started working here in February, if I knew a pandemic

was coming a month later and everyone, including Karens, and their spawns, would flock to the grocery store in fear of the world ending, I might’ve chosen a different occupation.

The first month of the pandemic I spent so much time in the store I couldn’t sleep at night without dreaming about ringing people up or hearing the ‘boop boop boop’ of the cash register. My hours went from 24 to 38 a week. I know how to do almost everything on the floor too; self-checkout, the register, stocking, shop backs, training, you name it, I’ve probably done it.

The inside of the store has become such a dreary sight. The pale, yellow tiles, matching dimmed lighting, 19 lengthy aisles stretched to the back, the sounds of outdated low volume pop music playing over the intercom, shopping cartwheels clanking around, and the ‘boops’ from various registers are what greet me almost every day I walk through those sliding doors.

It’s now September and while the store’s atmosphere is less chaotic, I’m still recovering from the first months of chaos.

Lost

I hadn't expected to find the edge of the world. I certainly had never expected to find it right in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. But when I stumbled upon the abrupt end of the sea, I had expected to die—two inches away from the edge of the Earth is generally not a good prognosis. But, by the grace of God or Fate or science or sheer luck, I didn't die. Instead, I plummeted into a sea of tiny metal objects.

I didn't feel particularly lucky at the time. Within moments, I found myself flailing like a fish out of water, frantically struggling to keep afloat as ruthless waves of sloshing steel and iron attacked. But I was failing, gagging as the taste of cool metallic forced its way through my lips. I really thought I'd die that way—that the metal sea would simply swallow me whole. But then, the world disintegrated.

I awoke, perhaps hours later, gagging and retching until metal spilled from my throat and onto my palms. Bobby pins. I had nearly drowned in a sea of bobby pins.

"Where am I?" I mumbled.

The world was submerged in darkness. I could vaguely sense the presence of some figure looming over me, but could hear nothing other than the clattering rhythm of metal sloshing against metal.

Until, suddenly, the figure leaned closer. "Welcome," she whispered. "To the Land of Lost Things. Follow me."

Too overwhelmed to speak, I tentatively stood, then followed.

"Let me explain," the figure began. "Every pencil, hair tie, bobby pin, and mask you have ever lost ends up here, on the other side of the world. Your earbuds, phone, and keys fluctuate in and out of the universe—but most losses are either inconsequential or permanent and thus remain here forever."

"And what about you?" I asked.

"I'm an entity. We entities represent concepts that can be lost.

My name is Appetite. Though you're welcome to pronounce it 'App-e-tight-y,' like Aphrodite. I've been trying to sell the others on that for the last 3,000 years—but Virginity says if anyone should be associated with Aphrodite, it's her."

We soon found ourselves walking along a dimly lit pathway constructed entirely of interwoven hair ties, with the sporadic flashlight dangling from an umbrella. Lining the walkway were piles upon piles of things—from socks, to math homework worksheets, to stuffed animals.

"We're on our way to meet Mind," Appetite explained. "Our president. She resides in the Palace of Entities."

"Can Mind help me figure out how to get back to Earth?" I asked, hopefully. "I'm an explorer, back there. I need to tell the world about this place."

Appetite bit her lip. She simply replied with, "I'm hungry. Let's hurry up."

After traversing 42 piles of lost things, the Palace of Entities came into view. It was constructed entirely of passports—countless shades of reds, blues, greens, and blacks, each embossed with golden emblems that seemed to dance in the glow of the flashlights. There were no gates—no doors, even. Appetite and I simply walked through an archway and found ourselves in the presence of Mind, who sat regally on a throne of what appeared to be melted keys.

"Hello, human," she said smoothly. "I am Mind, the entity for the rationality of all the humans that have lost theirs. Welcome to the Land of Lost Things."

"Uh... Hi, Mind." I stammered. "Nice to meet you. I accidentally fell off the edge of the Earth, and ended up here. I was wondering how to get back to the right side of the world."

"There is," Mind said coolly, "literally no way out. This isn't *The Wizard of Oz*. Though we do have plenty of copies, if you'd like to re-read it. But you aren't dreaming, and clicking your heels three times will not send you home."

"What?" I stammered, alarmed. "No way out? I've got a life to live! I don't want to spend it wasting away down here. I- I'm an explorer! I'm changing the world. I'm not lost."

Mind's stoic, collected expression did not shift. As panic rose within me, I fled the palace. Tears welled in my eyes, the colors of

hair tie pathways beneath my feet growing blurrier and blurrier, until at last, I collapsed against some sort of column, exhausted.

I awoke from what had apparently turned into a nap under a dizzyingly tall ceiling, lined with limestone columns and at least nine marble busts staring nobly down at me. The air smelled strongly of papyrus and slightly-charred parchment. But above all, the walls were lined with countless books. Appetite sat curled in a corner, by a bust of Socrates, immersed in a burgundy hardcover, “The First Man,” printed across the spine in gold font.

She glanced upwards as she saw me rise. “I see you’ve discovered the lost Library of Alexandria. We keep every literary work that has ever existed here—so long as a copy has been lost on the other side of Earth.”

Astonishment, then disbelief crossed my face.

“*The First Man* isn’t supposed to be so long. Camus hardly finished writing it before he died,” I tried, in a desperate attempt to regain some footing in reality.

“It’s a lost idea,” Appetite said, somewhat wistfully. “Every mere thought he planned to include in the book is cataloged here.”

And that was when it fully hit me. I stood in the midst of the world’s greatest library, surrounded by works lost to time, circumstance, and death. I wanted to stay—to pore over every one, for eternity. Not to change the world, not to make a difference, not to matter. Just to learn. Just to discover.

“I need to talk to Mind” I murmured, dazed, then dashed across the hair tie streets, back to the Palace of Entities.

I burst through the unguarded archway. Mind was sitting atop her throne, gazing at me, expectant.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathed.

She nodded.

“But here, everything I do is for nothing. We’re all lost, anyway. No matter how much I explore—no matter how much I discover, what does it matter?”

Mind looked at me, smiling slightly, as the answer tumbled into my mind.

“It’s not so different here, is it? From the other side of Earth?” I whispered. “I am lost. We’re all lost, aren’t we? Back on the other side, we’ve erected beautiful facades depicting grand purposes, all to

believe that we aren’t. But in a disinterested universe that offers no answers, lost is our nature.”

“Here, we’ve simply come to terms with reality,” I murmured.

I turned away from Mind, tears glistening in my eyes, as facades disintegrated. It almost terrified me, but it was far too beautiful.

Fruits of Our Labor

Alan woke up this morning wondering what the weather outside was going to be like. Would the head sticking up out of the soil of his lawn prefer a sunny day, or a cloudy and rainy day? It was all so new to him; there weren't many people at the Garden Center across town that could offer him advice. What do you feed a head that grows in your lawn? Do you cut their hair, brush their teeth, or even make them spaghetti? Alan wasn't even sure he had enough pasta left in the pantry for his own dinner, much less the talking bulb staring at the lemon tree in the lawn. He would have to run to the store and pick up some things if they were both to eat. So Alan decided he'd make them both a good dinner; maybe it would speak to him if he did. As Alan walked to his car, he couldn't help but lock eyes with the stranger poking their deep green eyes out over the blades of grass at him. The face almost looked familiar, like an old friend from high school or an actor he watched as a kid. He felt a chill run up his spine and his head went cold as the eyes tracked him all the way down the driveway to his car. Even as Alan put the car in reverse and backed up into the street, the eyes never stopped staring at him. Were its eyes always exposed like that?

As Alan pulled into the grocery store parking lot in his beaten up Toyota Corolla, he noticed a speck of dirt on his floor, in the passenger seat where nobody ever sat. Alan had very few friends and even fewer social interactions with them. He grabbed a tissue and wiped at the dirt, but it didn't budge. He wiped harder and it only seemed to smear the dirt even further into the seat. Alan spit into the tissue and wiped. And he wiped. And he wiped. But the stain just kept growing and growing, seemingly taking on a life of its own, wrapping around the headrest and down the back of the seat like a parasite. Alan let out a guttural scream as the dirt sprung onto his finger, inching up his thumb at first before spreading to the index. He tried to pull his hand away but the stain held him fast, quickly working its way up his arm now towards his neck. Alan screamed for help but the stain quickly covered his mouth, coating his throat in earth. It tasted like blood and lemons. Just as it was beginning to cover his eyes, Alan heard a knock at his window. He quickly opened

his eyes and took a deep breath. He could breathe and he could see. The stain was gone. As Alan unlocked the door he looked up and saw a frightened looking woman standing there outside the window.

"Are you okay?" she said while cupping her hands around her eyes to see inside. As Alan stepped out of the car he scratched his arm.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm fine, I just saw a uhh a bee."

"Oh, okay. Well I'm allergic to those so I can understand the fright. Nature sure can be scary!" the woman said as she laughed. Alan nervously shut the door behind him as he waved goodbye and walked away without a word.

When Alan returned home a few hours later, the head was still there, still staring. It felt like the eyes were looking into his soul and searching for something. The hair on his arms shot up and his feet felt cold. It was almost as if Alan was in a trance as his body moved up the driveway and onto the lawn. He felt the cold, damp grass sink beneath the soles of his shoes as he approached the head. Were its shoulders always poking out of the grass? Alan peered into the eyes of the sprouting head and felt fear. A fear so deep he felt as if he was falling from a plane, quickly approaching the ground. His skin felt like ice, as if he was a steak thrown in the freezer to be preserved. Unmoving and silent. As soon as it began to flood his body, it stopped. Alan's body trembled for a moment before he felt the blood continue to flow, and his feet held sturdy on the ground. He marched up to his door and went inside. It was almost dinner time. Did it always have teeth?

Dinner that night was spaghetti with meatballs, Alan's go-to dish. It's the only meal he learned to make on his own since he moved away. He carefully piled the pasta onto two plates and set one aside. He picked up the first plate and headed towards the front door. He stepped outside and felt a cool breeze run under his shirt, sending an icy chill up his back. His eyes darted towards where the head should be, but there was nothing but a shallow hole left. He dropped the plate on the steps and ran over to the hole. It was completely empty, save for a few worms writhing on the dirt. As he ran his hands over the ground, a sickly sweet smell emerged. It smelled like blood.

Did it always smell like blood here? As soon as this thought crossed Alan's mind, a face appeared from the dirt and its jaws snapped around Alan's hand. He tried to let out a scream but before he could, his head was already encased in the soil. Within seconds his whole body was pulled under and the hole was covered in grass, as if there was never any hole at all.

The following week one of Alan's neighbors who hadn't seen him for a while notified the police. A search was conducted in the area for three weeks, but eventually it was determined that he had taken it upon himself to run away and the case was closed. As the neighbor was taking his evening walk, he noticed something peculiar poking out of the grass. Was there always an orange tree there?

Dia de Los Muertos

"Tomorrow is a big day Martin. Día de los muertos is upon us. Why can't you be here, you selfish idiot?" I look down at the grave of Martin, with tears forming in my eyes. The anger, the sadness, the despair all boiling inside me, like a kettle about to burst. It's already dark out here, and with the tears slowly encasing my eyes, I feel dizzy.

"What is this, Martin? Why am I speaking to a corpse?"

My knees have given out, and I fall to the ground, my heart feeling heavy from the loss of my friend. The invincible Martin Menendez, the man who swore to get us out of these slums, reduced to nothing but a coffin, with a little stone on top of it. Shot by a junkie, some lowlife who couldn't get his fix. I grab a flask that he gave me when I turned 16, and proceed to pour us both a drink.

"Why did you leave us?" My voice is getting louder. "Why did you have to care so much you idiot? WHY COULDN'T YOU HAVE JUST THOUGHT ABOUT YOURSELF FOR ONCE!?" I scream at the top of my lungs, cursing the world for the cruel fate gifted to my friend. My body has given out, and I fall to the side of the grave. "Martin, I don't know what to do without you."

I awake from my deep slumber. It's morning now, November 1st, and the two day long festival has begun. My head is pounding, and my eyes are puffy. I'm struggling to recall the night, as I look over and see the flask lying on the ground. My body rejects the stench from the flask, and decides to cleanse itself of the previous night's poison. I place the flask by the side of Martin's grave, as I am able to conjure up a final "Goodbye." It's time.

"I have to leave now Martin. Everyone is waiting for us—I mean me. I'll be back soon I promise. I swear, I won't let your life be forgotten."

Arriving at our tiny brick house, I'm obnoxiously greeted by my mother.

"Angelo, where have you been? You had me worry—is that liquor on your breath?" Upon further examination, and a deep glance into my eyes, she begins to put the pieces of the puzzle together, and all is further cemented by more tears flowing out of my eyes.

“Mama, I miss him so much. He’s just gone.” I break down in her arms, and enjoy the long, warm, embrace that only a mother could give. “What was it all for Mama? He tried so hard for us. All he wanted was to give us a better life. I don’t know what to do.”

Mama pauses for a long time, comforting me as I continue to release my pent up frustration. I can tell she knows what to say, but she wants me to let go of my emotions first. Finally, after a long silence, she whispers “Hijo, Martin made some bad choices. He knew the risks of the trade. It was stupid. But he did it for you, your friends, our family, his family. He was a good boy, and to not live a good life, would be a disservice to your friend and his sacrifices. Martin is gone, we can’t bring him back. But you are still here. You have to live for him.” She holds me up for a little while longer, before starting her duties for the day. “I have to start doing the girls’ makeup, and start the feast for the deceased. I will be very busy today, but remember, I love you always.” I’m alone again.

I think back to the times that my friends and I had as children. We all came from very different backgrounds. Me, a lost child, with a widowed mother, Manuel Alpirez, the son of a local butcher, Antonio Salazar, whose father was in construction, and Gabriel Garcia, son of a local priest. The one that always led us though, was Martin, an older orphan boy who would roam around Sinaloa, always terrorizing the local shops with his mischievous antics, and building a name for himself as the local troublemaker. We all were told to avoid him, but we didn’t care. He was fun, and would always find a way to make a bad day good. We all grew as time went on, and by the time we all were teenagers, we were starting to figure out our plans for life. Martin, being himself, had gotten wrapped up in some sort of drug trade, where he was making a lot of money, sometimes more than the residents in our town. He wasn’t selfish with his money, as he would often give money to us, telling us to save it, or go out with him. Knowing our families were poor, he would even give a lot of money to our families to keep utilities running, or for us to afford luxuries. We had the best years of our lives back then. Martin knew that these good times wouldn’t last forever, and one day in the hot summer, he invited us all out to a party on the beach. The influence of Martin was strong, and was shown by just how many people he had brought

out to the beach. Towards the end of the night, the five of us were the last ones standing, and Martin called us over to look at the ocean.

“You see that boys? That’s our world out there. In this world, we can do anything with our lives.”

Antonio spoke out to Martin, “But we don’t have any money. We’re all poor boys, and we’re probably gonna stay that way for a while.”

Martin smirked. “That will change. Wherever you guys go, just know that if you come back, I’ll have money for you. I’m gonna work so hard, and buy you guys a new life. We’re gonna be kings.”

The other three laughed hysterically. “Somebody’s had too much tequila!” shouted Gabriel, before laying down and falling asleep on the beachfront.

Martin brushed them off, turned around and looked me in the eyes. “Hey Angelo? You see all the beauty of the world? Cherish it. It’s yours, no matter what happens.” I grinned ear to ear, and promised him to be the best I could be. I’m in the present again, and somehow, that smile from all those years ago has returned to my face.

Midnight, November 2nd. The four of us have returned to Martin’s grave. We place the food offerings, and say a prayer for our lost brother. Gabriel just kind of stands there with his hands in his pockets. Manuel is crying. Antonio is pouring a drink for Martin. I saw him the day before, so I stood there motionless for a while. After a few long minutes of silence we leave to return to the festivities. They are ahead of me.

“Hey guys!” I suddenly blurted out, not even knowing what I was going to say next. “Martin sacrificed a lot for us. He’s our brother. He’s gone now, and there is no bringing him back. But we are here. We’re alive. And to not live a long happy life, would be a disservice to our brother.” They all smile, before returning to our long walk home.

“Cherish it”

I turn around hoping to see Martin. Nothing. I’ve got a lot of plans for my future. Whatever comes next, I just hope that it would have made him proud.

Static

The crackling sound of static buzzed over the radio. Some strange band from years ago made a resurgence lately. Although most of their fans from back in their heyday seem to have died somewhere along the way, the remaining ones became old and forgot, a few holdouts moved away to live in the countryside like civilized animals. Perhaps they heard it again. That band returned with a new song playing on the radio.

The song caught on like madness. It topped the charts in mania. People were raving. "I feel like I just went to space." "All of the universe collapsed in the blink of an eye." "I really felt it." "I don't know what the fuck just happened to me." "That was It." Certain music journals were writing reviews, "This work harkens back to the Musique concrete movement of whatever and whoever, in fact it has symbolism arching all the way back to the Epic of Gilgamesh (and for that matter, even further back! Who knows what stories they told before writing?). Of course, it's a biblical song too. With a zen feeling, a buddhist core, and a touch of pagan aesthetics. But naturally, the song is modernist, postmodernist, post-postmodernist! Psychological and scientific, without a doubt! Words words words words!" And the article would continue saying words upon words upon words upon words upon words. Food for rabbits. No one read the reviews. They tried to explain away the unexplainable. What's the point of them? Tell them to be silent! Lord, silence, please!

But the song remained topping the charts. The articles that tried to explain away the unexplainable, pointing out the so-called "genius historical references" in a work entirely original, pointing out the "genius originality" in a work entirely derivative. Everything anyone had to say about it was wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! The song topped the charts.

Some people couldn't hear a note of it, too. They turned on the radio and heard the crackling sound of static buzzing through. They said to themselves, "What is this? Just some kind of noise?" Silly enough as it sounds, maybe one or two of them, excited to hear this splendid sound, the marvelous music for the first time, turned on

their radio and heard the song and (by God!) they thought their radios were broken!

They couldn't understand the ravings of the people who heard the rhythm in the static, the songs in white noise (Did you know, some pretended they could when they couldn't?). And who could understand something so strange, after all? Isn't that just the normal reaction?

Yet the song topped the charts still, it never went out of fashion. In fact, the mania gradually heightened.

It was weird. Seeing people listen to the song. Sometimes they broke out in tears. Sometimes they stared at nothing, as if an arm reached from the deepest depths within and dragged the soul that slept at the surface all the way into the darkness below. Some people laughed, smiled. Some lay and relaxed, awash with a sense of peace, drowning in an ocean of sublime and blessed comfort. Some were carved serene like an ancient tree, some became a great flowing river. Some trembled like the blades of grass.

Like a pebble at the basin of a canyon chiseled from years of flowing water, the pebble is the same as the great rock surrounding it. A drop in the river was the same as the whole body of water. The canyon is the river and the rock.

Like a cell in the human body, one. But not separate from the body, one. And body not separate from the soul, one. And the human not separate from the whole of humankind, one.

The man observing the canyon becomes part of the canyon once again. Perhaps the canyon becomes part of him. There is no difference. One.

This is why the song reached the top of the charts. This is why the music to the song was music so many couldn't hear.

And honestly, sometimes the song was scary.

Some people, listening to the song, got lost. Some feared turning an ear too long would drive them mad. Maybe it would. And some feared if they heard it truly they would die (or that only the dead can truly hear it). Some feared that they'd be spirited away, they'd

vanish from the face of the earth, nevermore to be seen. Nevermore. Nevermore.

And maybe it would be that way. Was it bad? Was it death or was it enlightenment?

Once you dreamed that a still mind could open the door to the past. Do you remember?

They, the fans of the music, once found a live recording of the song from decades ago. One of those rare few who chose to stay around when the ascension fell upon them gave it to the rest. Everyone watched it. The song was the same as now, just in the past. Exactly the same. Newspapers were found from then, headlines eerily rhymed. Some people started saying “I’m getting a weird sense of déjà vu.” It happened before, there was evidence right there. Newspapers, film reels, old vinyl that hadn’t yet decayed. Oh God, it happened all before. Every generation wishes for its own demise, it doesn’t wish it but it feels it looming upon like the scent of storm in still air. And then the song comes back.

But isn’t it a little bit too soon? How often do the echoes of history come back? How loud should they be? The song is back again, they’re realizing, it’s back again! And soon people will die. They will die like they died last time.

Of course, they had already died. So many of them.

The least we could do is tell ourselves that it wasn’t an evil thing. The song, after all, sounded the same as TV static. It wasn’t a song at all. It was one long note, or an uncountable amount of small ones, with no rests, or one long silence. A song with no rhythm, or a rhythm so complex that no mind could ever decipher it. It was simply One.

It was not an evil thing. An evil thing could not bring such wonder, could not be so sublime. To have the ear for it, what glory!

Has anyone heard the rhythm in the static yet?

The Other Me

Moments ago, I awoke in a bright room. Well, there were no walls so maybe it is not a room? I decided to walk to see where I could find an exit. I kept walking and walking but it felt like I was not getting anywhere. All I could see was pure white. It was empty from what I could tell, except for one object in the distance. I decided to go check it out. I approached the object, it was tall, and it was draped in a blanket. I uncovered the object, and I was greeted by a tall male figure. He was a bit on the round side with a decent amount of facial hair wearing a dark colored t-shirt.

“It’s... a mirror.” I said in disbelief. “Not exactly the door I was looking for.”

The image I saw was of myself. I never really enjoyed mirrors, I never liked what I saw. I wanted to pull the drape back over, but a hand grabbed my arm.

“AH! WHAT THE-” I shouted as I fell back and landed on the ground.

“Why... are you so afraid?” said a mysterious voice. The voice sounded groggy or irritated rather.

After picking myself up, I stood and stared at what I thought was impossible. I was staring at myself but not from the mirror. I was face to face with myself.

“Why should I have to hide? I love to be the one to always be the hero.” he said sarcastically.

“What is this?” I asked. “What are you supposed to be?”

“Is it this hard to get noticed? Why oh why am I simply not memorable?”

“I don’t have time for this.” I say as I turn to walk away.

“Why do you run away from your problems...such a coward.”

Trying to keep a cool head I turn in response.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” I said in frustration. This “thing” does not know anything. He could not be me...could it?

“Of course, I am...” he responded. I stared in disbelief because he knew what I had been thinking.

“How are you...doing that?” I asked. He then let out a light chuckle.

“I am you. It’s only fitting that we share the same thoughts.”
 “And why are you talking about me that way. What have I done?”
 I say while confused.
 “It’s what you have not done. Why don’t you show the world who we are?” it questioned.
 “I don’t know” I murmured
 “Oh don’t play dumb. We both know the reason. You hate being left out and worse you hate the thought of being forgotten.”
 “That’s not true at all. I love who I am.” I countered.
 “Yeah right, then why the happy go lucky façade. The tough but lovable guy ‘routine’ huh?”
 It was like being questioned in an interrogation room. The questions kept going and going until I shouted and fell to my knees.
 “I’m sorry. I hurt sometimes okay. I hate what the world has made me into.” I said in defeat.
 “Why?” It asked. I said nothing “Why!”
 “Because I’m afraid. Afraid of what people think of the real me. Of what flaws there may be. I... don’t want to be alone.”
 He then walked up to me and rested his hand on my shoulder. I look up to his eyes.
 “Stand up.” I stood and we made eye contact. “You will never be alone.”
 He reached his hand out for a handshake.
 “I... accept you. I am happy for who I became.”

Wee Hours



Adobe



Digital Photography

Blue Heart



Digital Art

Midnight Dance



Digital Art

What If the Sun Was Blue?

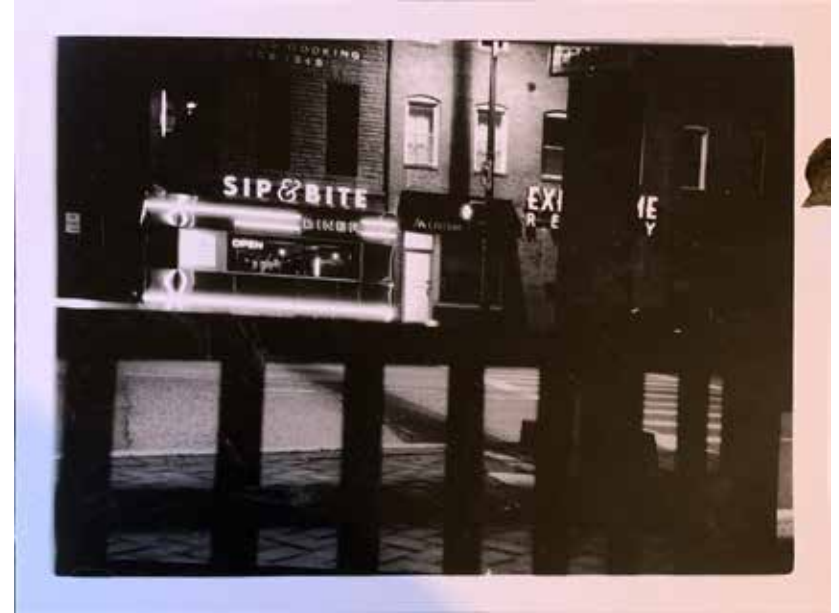


Acrylic Paint

Lavender Farm



City After Dark



Salad Bowl



Oil

Point of View



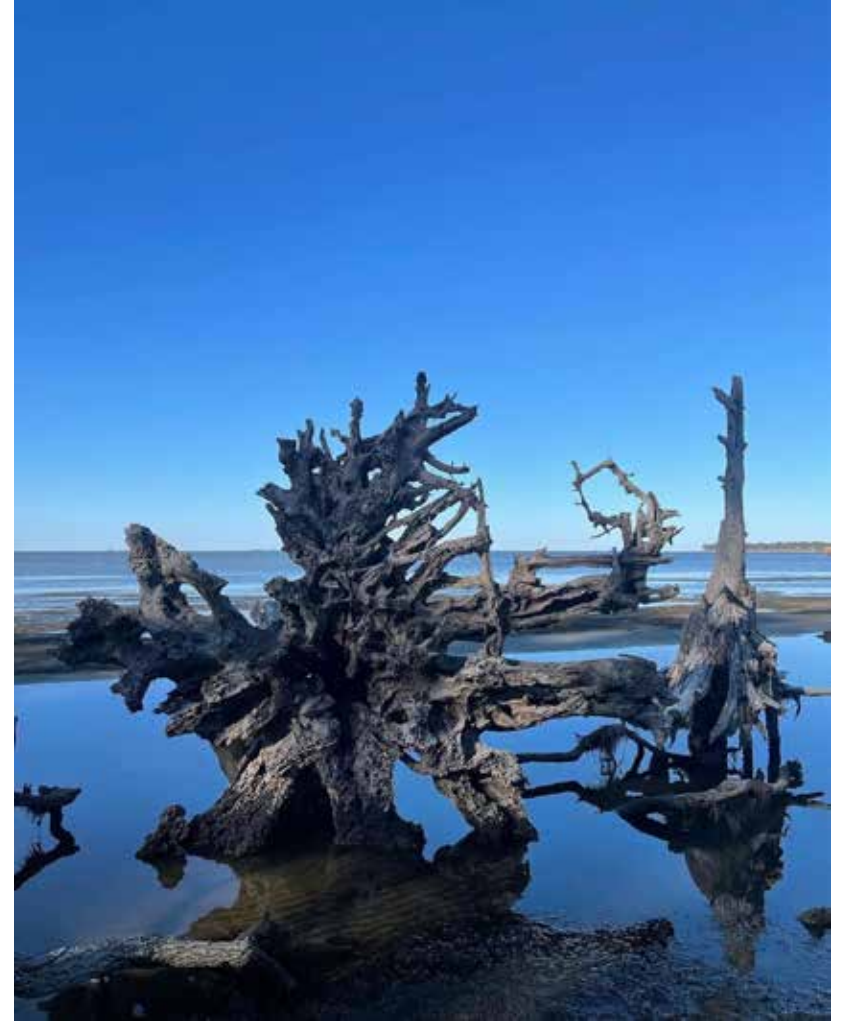
Scratchboard

Hiking in Orange



Digital Photography

Rooted



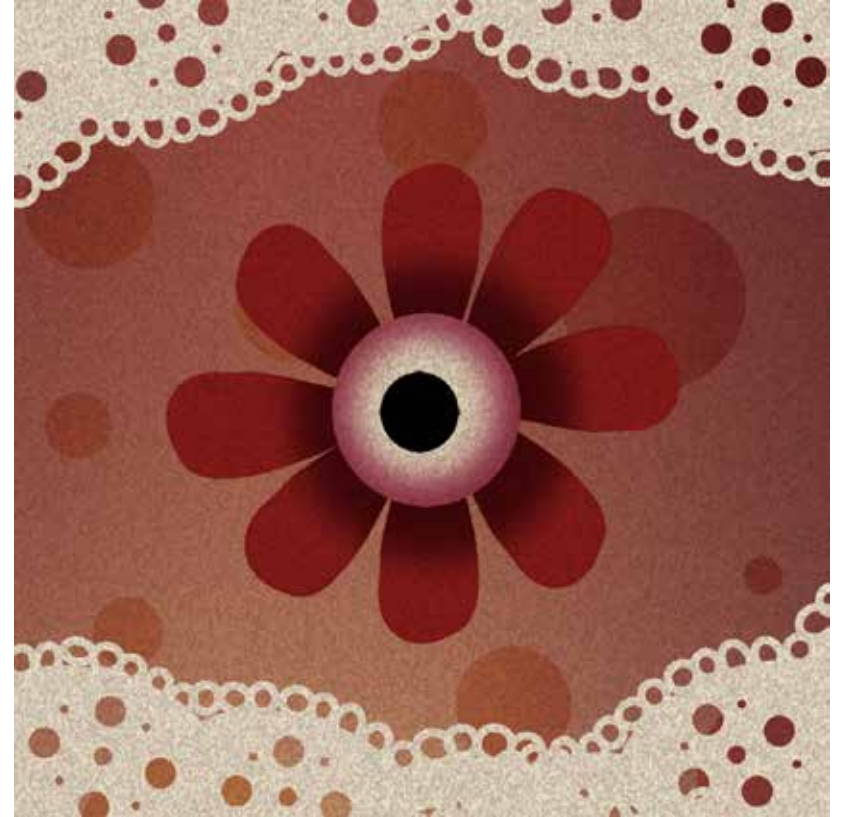
Digital Photography

A Foggy Morning



Acrylic Paint

Eye Flower



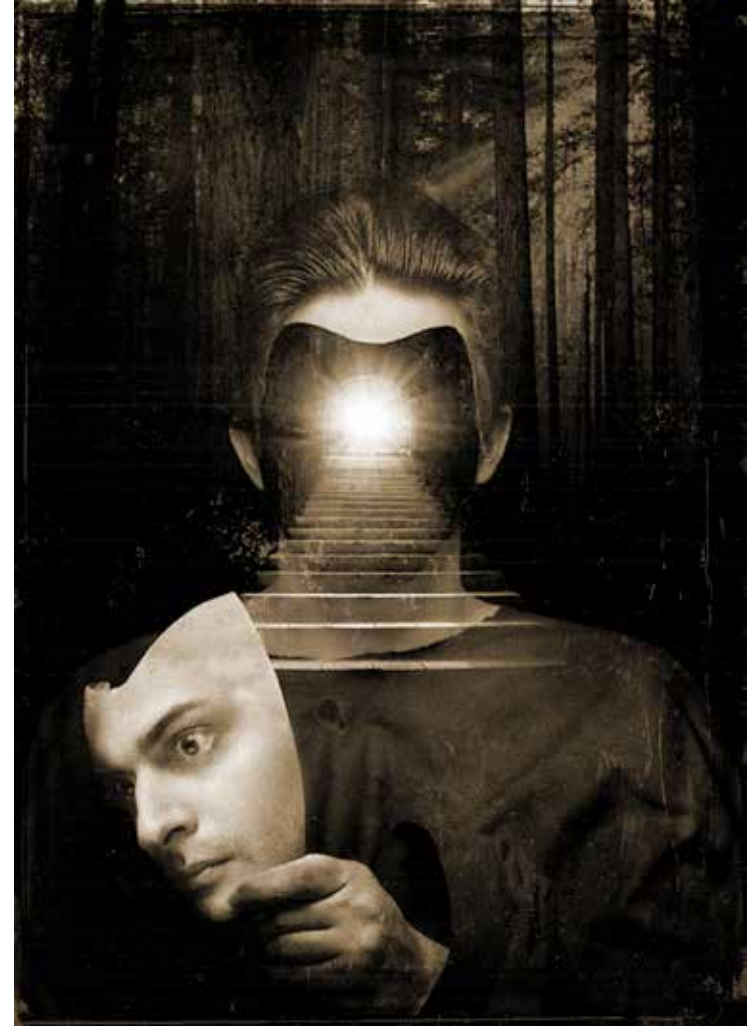
Digital Art

The Angel



Photoshop

The Innermost Light



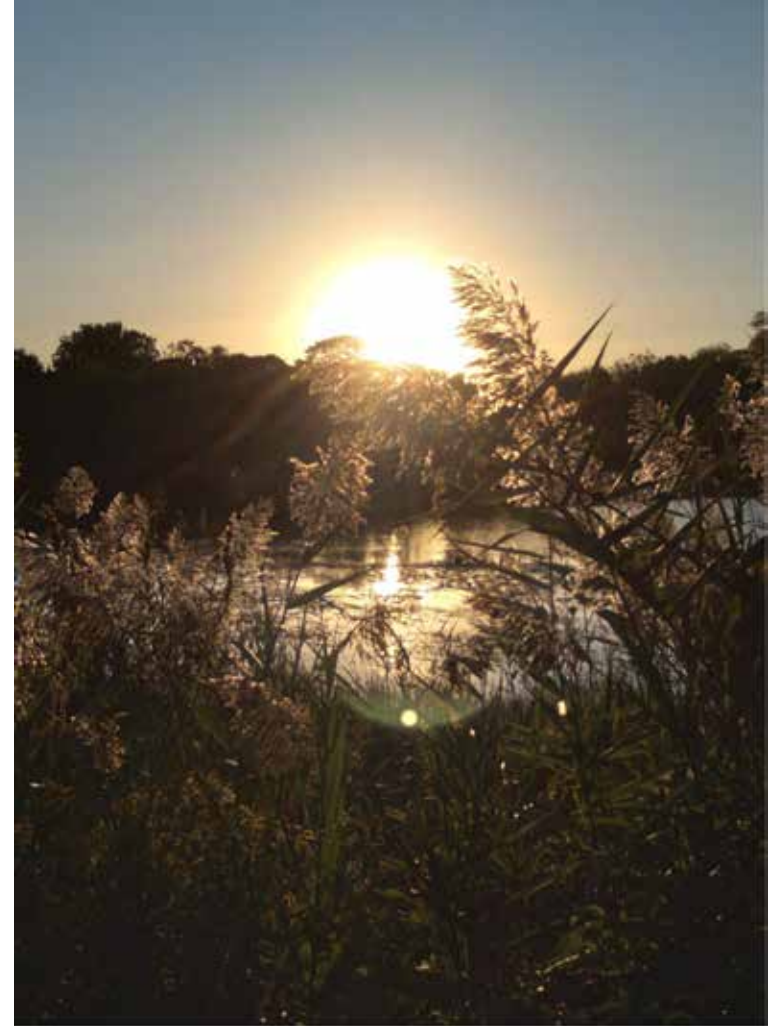
Photoshop

Difference



Digital Art

A Sun Day Eve



Digital Photography

Gold Sparkler



Digital Photography

contributor's notes

Peace Adegbesan is an eighteen-year-old college freshman. She likes to draw and is currently studying to become an animator and illustrator. In her free time, Peace likes to watch anime like Attack on Titan.

Margia Ahmed is a part-time student of Howard Community College and majors in Health Science. She has been passionate about visual arts and photography since childhood, and has been practicing art for 22 years. She dreams of having an art studio someday.

Nick Allen is a business administration major at Howard Community College. He graduated from Atholton High School and plans to attend Towson University next fall. He is passionate about creating works of writing and photography that show emotion and tell a story. One of his favorite courses was photography where he developed unique pieces.

Matthew “Zhenya” Anderschat is a photographer and artist hailing from Silver Spring, Maryland. His work explores metaphysical concepts including spirituality, consciousness, and identity. Matthew often employs a variety of experimental techniques such as solarization, multiple exposures, and photomontage to give his work a dream-like effect.

Pakeeza Awan is a full-time student at Howard Community College who is pursuing an Associates in Social Sciences. After earning her Associate's this Spring, she plans to study Political Science at UMBC. She was born in Pakistan and has lived most of her life in Maryland. When she isn't reading or writing stories, Pakeeza is probably helping her mom out in the kitchen, binge-watching series on Netflix, or online shopping. She writes for fun as it's a great time pass.

Bronwyn E. A. Bates is the Business & Technical Training Coordinator for the Division of Continuing Education & Workforce Development at HCC. Bronwyn is an avid hiker who loves capturing small beautiful moments in nature. She lives in Catonsville with her husband, 2 beautiful children, and her cat, Salem.

Calista Brigham has loved reading all her life. Inspired by masterful storytelling in books and movies, she began writing her first story at a young age. Since then, she has completed several short stories for homeschooling assignments and for family members. Currently, she is working on a full novel.

Ashley Brown is a student at Howard Community College. Ashley took a class where students were tasked with writing a poem about something personal to them. Ashley chose to write about something she faces every day, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. To Ashley, her poem is about how she feels and what she is afraid of.

Yuan Changming hails with Allen Yuan from POETRY PACIFIC (poetrypacific.blogspot.ca). Credits include 12 Pushcart nominations & chapbooks (most recently LIMERENCE) besides appearances in Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17), BestNewPoemsOnline & Poetry Daily, among others across forty-eight countries. Yuan was nominated for and served on the Jury for Canada's National Magazine Awards (poetry category).

Kervin "Swerve" Cunanan was born in the Philippines, raised in Qatar, and blossomed in Maryland. He grew up discovering his love for music, art, and film and taught himself how to express himself through his creativity. He teeters between abstract concepts and reliving meaningful moments by painting portraits. As an aim to pursue a career change and assist with the national nursing shortage problem, he continued his education to pursue nursing to offer a helping hand.

Cam Davis is a dual-enrollment student at Howard Community College planning to major in broadcast journalism. After writing for 3 years, their biggest influence is their own personal experiences so you will find that many of their pieces represent feelings and/or events, good and bad, that they have gone through.

Megan Davis is in her second year at Howard Community College. Megan has a love for poetry and has grown as a creative writer since the eighth grade. She's taken creative writing courses all four years of high school, and she has a great passion for poetry and song lyrics.

Cynthia Dillard is a pianist, songwriter, & teacher with a background in classical, jazz, blues, and folk music. She is a recipient of the

Maryland State Arts Council Independent Artist Award. She enjoys living, teaching, and creating in Columbia, Maryland.

Christi Ewing works in the Planning, Research, and Organizational Development department at Howard Community College and has had a long time love of photography.

Deidre Nava Renee Graham was born and raised on the island of St. Croix, US Virgin Islands. The Brooklyn inspired and self-taught Afro Caribbean Jewish Artist goes by her Hebrew name Nava.

Deja Grissom is an English major at Howard Community College and hopes to transfer to Hampton University. Deja began writing stories at the age of six. When she is not writing, Deja likes reading and spending time with family and friends.

Ania Grodsky is a senior at River Hill High School who is currently enrolled at Howard Community College through Jumpstart. In her free time, she enjoys reading (usually fantasy), writing, and composing music.

Anindita "Chloe" Gupta is currently a Howard Community College student. Her photograph, "The Gold Sparkler" was taken on one of her favorite holidays, Diwali, the Festival of Lights. She enjoys celebrating Diwali with colorful fireworks and sparklers.

Dominick L. Hardy is a weekend Public Safety Supervisor going on 11 years now. I enjoy painting pictures, drawing, writing, craft, photography, and subjects related to history, culture, and health sciences. One of my favorite buildings on Campus is the Horowitz Performing Arts Center.

Katarina Haupt is a dually enrolled student attending Howard Community College and Howard High School. They have always enjoyed stories and the simplicity that they can hold. In almost all their creative outlets they pick abstract or smaller artworks to try and convey a quaint yet interesting idea.

Dominic Hernandez is a student attending Howard Community College, and is currently looking to transfer to a university in hopes of majoring in Kinesiology. Born half-Mexican and half-Irish, Hernandez spent most of his days growing up in Howard County with his mother and four cats. Hernandez cites having a love for literature at an early age as a main driver in his journey as

a young author. In hopes to provide entertaining stories to his fans, Hernandez thoroughly enjoys writing speculative fiction stories that make the reader feel and stay on their toes.

Yugo Hines is a student at Howard Community College, currently majoring in English. They are in their last semester at HCC and spend whatever free time they have indulging in either classical horror or trashy romance novels.

Nellie Jayalatharachchi is a senior at River Hill high school who is dually enrolled at Howard Community College and believes that words are humanity's greatest gift. She writes with passion because she feels that everyone has a special idea to share with the world, and she is trying to share her own.

Jessica Johnson has stepped back into school at Howard Community College to explore creative writing. It was in one of her classes that she penned her poem, "CHEERS."

Valentine Kamil is a writer, musician, artist, and student at Howard Community College. She has enjoyed writing from a very young age and has written short stories of various genres, both for academic and personal reasons. She's published multiple stories to various independent writing websites. As of right now, she's focused on pursuing a computer science degree.

Anna Kil was born in Je-Cheon, South Korea in 1986. She grew up in Maryland and has obtained a BFA in Illustration, worked as an art teacher where she discovered the rewarding experiences of therapy. She is a nursing student and Howard Community College to learn and deliver care for those who are in need of healing.

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

Samuel Kohnen is a graduating AVMP student at Howard Community College. An avid writer, most often writing scripts and screenplays based on fiction pieces he has written in his past. Samuel has a passion for horror, and strives to unnerve and terrify his audience with eerie atmosphere and blood-curdling scenarios.

Jessica Kumor is a creative writer who likes to in her spare time read and write fanfiction.

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

Makayla Laurents is a full time student at Howard Community College majoring in life sciences, with hopes of becoming a veterinarian. Besides writing little stories, she also enjoys collecting various knick knacks, looking at the constellations, and loves to cook and bake. Along with eating the food, preferably without bugs.

Jessica Ma is a student at Howard Community college, and the major at Howard Community College is a General Major. She is still unsure of what field she wants to study in, but she is trying out different objectives to find out which field is good for her.

Yvonne Marie, M.Ed. is an author, poet, speaker, educator, and associate professor of English at Howard Community College.

Kinzey McHale is a native Marylander with a penchant for writing fiction and nonfiction. McHale is currently a sophomore student at Howard Community College and is working towards an AAS degree in Diagnostic Medical Sonography. She greatly appreciates you taking the time to read her work.

Jermaine Miyagi-Bishop is a Baltimore native, United States Army veteran, and a current student of finance at the Howard Community College. His fondness of words is rooted in his passion for reading the life stories of late American figures. In his spare time, he loves traveling, supporting local eateries, and indoor climbing with his wife Yuka. He hopes to become a writer that inspires his readers to join hands in building the harmonious world of peace we all deserve to live in.

Courtney Ott is a student at Howard Community College majoring in General Studies. She is also a staff writer for *The HCC Times* and enjoys writing articles. She plans to pursue a degree in Mass Communications with a focus on journalism as she transfers to Towson University in the fall of 2022.

Diego Pessoa is a Howard Community College Student, majoring in Social Science. In his last semester, he took the opportunity to pursue a Creative Writing class in his final semester after years of

running away from any type of that kind of writing. He tries now, to encourage others to do the same.

Niailah Quinones was born and raised in Maryland. She is an older sister to one brother and younger sister to 2 brothers and one sister. She's attended Howard Community College for 3 years and hopes to graduate during the summer. Aside from writing, her passions include cooking, and being with her family. Writing is a way Niailah expresses herself and relate to people.

Nina Randall is a poet originally from Chicago. She moved to Maryland about three years ago to pursue her higher education. She is majoring in political science, in hopes to become political journalist. She uses creative writing and poetry as her outlet to express the controversies of this world that she feels essential to express.

Katerina Rice has been taking classes at Howard Community College on and off since high school. She appreciates the learning opportunities HCC provides and has taken classes in a variety of subjects, from languages to pre-medicine to computer science. She has her undergraduate degree from Johns Hopkins in Public Health and Psychology.

Jessica Schmidt, born and raised in Central Maryland, is a first year attendee of Howard Community College, where she majors in visual art. She has been a self-taught painter since 2018 and is currently working on a series of paintings that reference the existence of light outside our sun.

Christopher Schuyler, an undergraduate, artist, and a part-time writer. Ever since he was young, he believed that the ability to create was the greatest wonder of the world. He felt that it was his duty to show others how art can help others no matter how simple. Currently attending Howard Community College in pursuit of a Bachelor's in Fine Arts, but his second favorite passion is writing. From stories to tell his sister at bedtime to character design, Chris takes an approach that tends to need of the audience with hopes that the piece will be adored.

Alia Siddiqui studied at Howard Community College in 2018.

Ebenē Simmons is a voracious reader and a lover of words - poetry & prose in particular. The way writing has a deep intrinsic and personal connection with the reader is what Ebenē loves most about writing in all its genres, but no genre where this shines more is poetry. Ebene is excited to share her works with the Howard Community College Community.

Wesley Stephens is an overly-aspirational English major who claims to have been born. He has been spotted on numerous occasions being and very proudly represents anyone among the student body who is. Clearly, he has much to say about himself.

Kate Stevens is currently a Freshman at Howard Community College, pursuing her Communications degree, which she hopes to acquire from a University in Rome after transferring. She's always loved reading Fantasy, Fiction, and Thrillers, and tries to do so whenever she has the time.

Dhriti Vadlakonda is a senior at River Hill High School in Clarksville, Maryland. An avid poet, Dhriti is thrilled to be submitting her work to Howard Community College Muse.

Xavier Wabara is a recent Nigerian graduate from Rutgers University. They want to create art that people who have had similar experiences can relate to and empathize with.

Ayesha Wainwright comes from Queens NY, but grew up in Columbia MD. After studying interior design at The Art Institute of York Pennsylvania, she moved to Ft. Lauderdale FL briefly, before returning to Columbia MD. She currently works in finance, but her passion has always been story telling.

John Whelan grew up in Columbia, Graduated from Howard High School and is graduating from Howard Community College this summer with an Associate's Degree in Human Services. John has been writing informally most of his life and is interested learning the craft behind writing modern poetry and memoirs and short stories.

Cecelia Wilson is an African American poet. She has been writing since elementary school. Her writing helps her express herself to others—it's her voice. She has two eBooks on Amazon titled *My Muse* and *Him, My Husband, and Me*.



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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