

The Muse

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The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

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Where Imagination Rules, There Are No Rules

Do you remember when you could fly? When you could slay a dragon? When you, once upon a time, were magical? From the very first stories of our childhoods, we have learned to embrace the fairy tale. We grew up with the Brothers Grimm between the pages but also passed down through the oral tradition of someone beautiful in our lives reading the stories to us. These narratives promise mystery, magic, adventure—and ways to see beyond the obvious. They help us hold up mirrors to our lives and make meaning of our experiences. It's not surprising that given the chance to choose the suggested theme for this year's edition of *The Muse*, our student writers chose the genre of fairy tales.

It could be easy to dismiss them as “kid lit,” but that would be ignoring the obvious richness of these narratives. Fairy tales endure because they are fundamentally human stories of love and loss, desire and death, triumph and tragedy. They are meditations on what motivates human behavior and a common cultural language with familiar, archetypal symbols that let us more easily recognize our humanity in one another.

Because they carry this unconscious resonance, fairy tales help us understand that the things we wished for once upon a time aren't so different from what we wish for now. We all hope for love, for safety and comfort, for a better life for ourselves and our families. To achieve these desires, we understand that we have to overcome the monsters, whatever form they might take, and become the heroes of our own stories.

Perhaps most importantly, fairy tales are rocket fuel for our imaginations. For poets, storytellers, and artists, this is an amazing gift. Wonder is the starting point in these tales, poems, and images, so we are encouraged by their example to look for wonder in our own lives. Fairy tales can be traditional, fractured, retold, remixed, classic and contemporary all at the same time. Where imagination rules, there are no rules.

This genre tells us so much about what it is to be human. The poems, stories, and art inspired by the fairy tale tradition allow us to confront

our fears and traumas through imagery and find our way along our quests toward our happily ever afters. They remind us that strangers can offer kindness and that we should be kind in return. They teach us that we are not alone in our struggles.

The theme for *The Muse* is suggested, not required. There are excellent stories, poems, and artwork that are not directly inspired by fairy tales in this issue, but several of our contributors have embraced the challenge. We hope you enjoy tumbling through the looking glasses.

—Ryna May



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Circle of the Sun

Once upon a time, night falls from the sky, glides off
blue and gold space, where an ensemble of characters fly,
the angels and artists pull her off the ground.

And chandeliers spin, low at first, then high,
and strips of cloth fan out around the stage,
a twisted circle, she hears music
move across her wings.

Air lifts her up like a butterfly,
gathering momentum, and it becomes as simple as that,
the light, the air
and wings to get off the ground.

I'm leaving to join the circle of the sun,
she said,
and the people stopped looking to put her back
in the old chair.

Becoming The Monsters I'm Scared Of

Boo!!
You scared me!
Torn and bruised,
Easily mishandled,
And then purposely dropped.

Ahhhhh!!
You got me jumping from a simple touch!
I much
Rather be getting held than scared when the phone rings,
Seeing the inevitable
It's not you!

Stop!
I scream,
As I clench my chest!
It's a mess and I stayed,
Weighing out opinions that weren't there.
Allowing fear to yet again get the best of me.
I invested me into something that wasn't invested in me.
Then I happen to get mad when I blatantly already saw what's unfolding.

Inside
My heart is molding,
And it's getting cold.
At this present moment,
I don't want that to change.

White Washing

Subjects of amalgamation, assimilation,
 I am, you are, we are
 Chopstick to fork, textiles to hoodies, “Māmā” to “Mom,”
 Stripped, torn, demolished,
 Whiteness eats; it craves the fresh chocolate from Belgium,
 it munches the barbeque pizza like the beggar on 7th Avenue,
 Second, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades pass
 I lose. Forget to tap three times once the tea is poured,
 forget the Chinese dragon, did I forget?
 Dust approaches, I am consumed by pitch blackness, hollowness,
 Whiteness presides, Red is extinct, the rainbow is vanished
 Once red paint exuberating in Chinatown faded, scratched off,
 Dreaming, chopstick unites with fork, and textiles merge with hoodies
 Coexist, Balanced, Yin and Yang

Pots & Kettles

Oh my oh my aren't we just pots and kettles?
 You're calling me a demon while acting like the devil.
 Oh my oh my aren't we just pots and kettles?
 You're saying my heart is hard while yours is made of metal.
 Hypocrites are too much alike.
 I want to crucify you and you want me on a pike.
 To be fair, we both need self-awareness
 You'll call me irresponsible
 and I'll call you careless
 It's easy for the pot to heckle the kettle
 While the pot resides on the same level
 Oh my oh my aren't we just pots and kettles.
 Viewing ourselves as angels but in reality, devils.

Lemon Tart

I was sweet like brown sugar
Mature and naive
You were sweet too but
Now your taste is leaving me

Once upon a time I used to believe
That true love was very simple and not as hard as it seems
But there is more bitter essence in this tart than I thought
I guess my rose-colored glasses are falling off
Now I have to decide
How big of a slice to give you
Do I let you down easy
Or do we try a new recipe
And see if it comes out right this time

I call to tell you about our dessert
And what ingredients I needed
You're worried at first but we get to work
I bought the eggs
I bought the milk
To make this treat with you
And you bought flour and butter
And the two of us had our lemons
That slowly over time
From situation and no proper communication
Made the curd too sour

I realize now that relationships are like dough
It takes a lot of kneading and talking
Rolling and honesty
Resting and receiving
To come to a compromise
Where we both get a slice
Still warm from the conflict
That we're both okay with

That I'm only alone in the kitchen
If I let myself be
If I don't talk it out with a sous-chef
That you need more seasoning than love
And you can't always add in logic
That a great tasting tart takes two to make
That relationships are hard and fun
And that we were both young and still learning how to bake

Agony of a Northern Woman

I am a woman,
Not born to be enslaved,
But to be a wife,
I also have my life,
I have my future,
to keep and nurture,
I might be born,
To work in the kitchen,
But not to spend,
The rest of my life,
In the kitchen,
Please listen,
I have an ambition,
It might not be professional,
But still, be vocational,
Please let me explore the world,
And have a specific word,
To give my unborn child,
About this world,
Don't exclude me,
From this world,
Even though I'm a woman,
Let me be part of this world,
And I promise to listen to,
Whatever you want.

Mimzy

Her nose is the color of rose quartz
She blinks those aventurine eyes
With a warmth glowing just like a sunstone
And an amethyst for a "third eye" ...
Her soul is a summer's day turquoise
Sending out a pearlescent purr
And when I hold her each evening
My moonstone heart becomes full.

Dinner for One

I got a pound for dinner, and that sounded like enough.
But I forgot about the shells, the lungs, the blood,
the heart just under the apron.
Then, after a clumsy excision of all the useless bits,
spoon in hand all covered in mustard,
I looked down at the hollowed chest of chitin
and thought we'd be lucky
for two or three good bites from the whole bucket.
So, reexamining my lot to see what I could muster,
I saw one poke a claw out the top and wave for help,
flailing as another brought her back down,
legs skittering against plastic
like heels down the hallway,
and I wasn't sure which I felt worse for.
The bottom one, trampled and crushed,
breathing in that staled secondhand air
and thinking maybe for once
all that weight overhead might be
a harness; a hand hold; a little purchase—
only to find them beside you one night
as exhausted and desperate as anyone.
Or the struggler,
climbing from the bed like an alpinist
just to summit in my filthy kitchen
with its carcass on the counter,
eggs set aside on a little dish.
So I took off my apron,
lay down on the couch a bit
and sunk deep into it
until you came home asking about the mess and, walking by,
I reached out and grabbed your leg for a little comfort.

ANTHURIUM

The shades drawn
Anticipations permeate an active mind
Fingers possessed with impatience
Long awaited is my horizon
Fulfillment yet to be satiated
Fearless are my daydreams
Carefully I rest upon the sofa
Anthuriums rise from my skin with each touch
My body washed with a brilliant red
Indulgent love doesn't hide
Inhibitions gone underground
Shame isn't meant to be found
The shades arise
A mass of anthuriums

Like This

If anyone asks you

Why loveseats exist
or narrow paths edged with
velveteen ears (in their season)
 hushed blue breaths (in theirs)

Or how the soul can be playful
 amid the day's din & gravel

Tell her of a meadow I know

 Where wood thrushes lift
 from palms of hands to write
 & rewrite shining couplets

 Where the one true script darts
 & whirls in gladness always

Suffering forgotten, you become soft,
 daft from loving all that is

Like this

Meerkat Is Just To Say

I have eaten
the last crunchy millipede
with a thousand legs

and which you
were probably
saving for coffee

Forgive me
It was wiggly
so lively
and so tasty

Radical Portraits in Self-Love

Hanna pierces courage to her skin
gold flecked and sparkling
a flash of armor
She sneaks secret smiles
at her reflection
once covered in black drapes
now no longer hidden in shame

Deidra polishes walls
bulletproof and strong
Her inner child rails
against the glass
A faint hairline crack
glistens seductively
in the upper right corner
letting in the light

Megan teeters
between two worlds
Vigilant and watchful
one foot skating smooth
surfaces of doubt
the other frozen in time
Ice pick in hand
shining like a beacon

Pattie traces outlines
blurred from recognition
myths once told
by her mother
furiously scribbled
in red crayon
as amber boughs
build bridges
for her escape

Jessica stops her ears
to echoing screams
lifting muscled arms
against hurled insults
that bounce off canyon walls
of despair
and drift out to sea
stifled by
the shushing tide

Together they trace
twisted scars
tattooed on
hearts
and line their clay-dusted souls
with sinews of silver,
pierced with strength.

labels

i used to label things
 label them from a to z
 to keep myself organized
 just like my teacher taught me
 in school, i was a square
 had a hard time doing work
 so in class, i used to label things
 just like my teacher taught me
 the 50 states and their capitals
 any annotations on every chapter
 i used to label all those things
 just like my teacher taught me
 the thing about labels, they always stick
 i used to label all the other kids
 i saw them and i labeled them
 just like my teacher taught me

Visions

i don't see me in my future
 there's a kitchen sometimes
 countertops and houseplants
 an apartment full of love
 a special place
 two people are there
 am I one of them?
 do I know them at all?
 perhaps this future is not mine
 it's someone else's
 a dream I stole from a stranger's sleep
 a world I want but cannot have

i'll never be in my future
 i'm barely in my present
 the minutes pass and more of me erodes
 i once was real
 something complete
 a soul to hoist up and inspect
 to discuss with friends and acquaintances
 but now I'm only fragments
 jagged edges should be smoothed
 aren't they supposed to be?
 what else does the downpour do?
 i don't know it well enough
 i should but I do not
 i wither slowly
 i grow weary
 what's left
 won't be
 worth
 your
 time
 .

The Year Winter Never Came

Love was in season

The year winter never came

I am still falling.

Delusions

My hands grow spotted
Like brittle leaves
Stiff and suppliant
But they won't fall off,
Won't grow new
Thick stems
Where is my spring?
I have to make it.
Gather up all the dead
Little shingles
In a pile on the floor
And paint them
And stitch them
Affix on my arms
As mottled feathers
and say behold!
I am changed!
I will fly!
And leap

In, and Out

In,
 There is an ocean inside me
 I feel it in my jaw
 My stomach
 in the corner of my eye.

 I feel it in radiating ribs
 Through muscle, sinew, and bone.

 it crashes in waves
 In, and out
 in and, out

 I am mangled by the
 deep sea pressure of missing you
 already.

 and in hands that grip tight to
 you

and carve out memories into your
 brow with delicate fingertips

and then I:
 I eat good food,
 and speak to you through my
 mouth.

 I go to the gym,
 and burn you through my pores.

 I take a shower,
 and scrub you off my skin.

 I write this,
 and build a place for the sea
and out

Pink Tourmaline

the sacred geometry between my mother and I is ironic in a divine way

 that's the first clue about what I'm trying to say

 God is real
 despite the way I lie for what I allow
 I study the guess I have for every question
 and in every dimension
 where I go mad, I'm amused...
 I learn I'm still alive...

 is not expecting it keeping me from accepting it?
 what I believe over learning I'm deserving seems to play a role I mind
 too much

 is my soul Faithful?
 I still find myself holding my breath for you
 like I'd interrupt yours
 and I don't trust what my brain suggests at first

 sometimes I don't like it all
 but I'm learning
 to remember
 I love you

A Beast and A Monster

Every fairy tale was the same.

The brave heroic knight defeats a terrible beast that threatens the lives of everyone they cared about and everyone they loved. He always saves the princess from her confines and the two live happily ever after for the rest of time.

But Luna was no hero. They were impulsive and reckless rather than brave, and terribly clumsy with their large talons and lanky figure. Their large, heavy wings could not take flight, their thick plumage was matted and patchy, and their body twisted into a shape more akin to a beast than a man. Their head was the only part that was human, their face was sharp, and their lightly tanned skin was taut, with wispy long strands of black hair framing their face.

Their only redeeming quality was their ability to wield a sword and their iron will, the makings of every fairy tale hero. But they were not human, nor were they a man. They were certainly not well-kept. And instead of a beautiful princess, they met Celeste.

A fellow “monster,” Celeste was once princess of her own kingdom which shone silver in the moonlight and knew only prosperity. She was beloved by all, her hands extending to all her subjects in need, her kindness only rivaled her beauty. Blessed with powerful magic at a young age, she rivaled even the old king but as she grew in power, she fell further from grace.

It started from her isolation in the woods, with a cold tutor who never responded to her questions and never told her when she would get to go home. He taught her everything she needed to know in keeping her emotional state stable and her magic at bay, warning that she had the power to harm others if left unchecked. No matter how gentle she was, how soft she tried to be, she was going to end up hurting someone. No matter the outcome, she was always going to be a monster.

Things got worse when she returned to the royal court, with the watchful eyes of the nobility from afar, patiently waiting for her to slip up; but her gentle eyes held only adoration, and her magic, powerful as it may be, was used to heal the wounds and scars that marred the kingdom she loved, and her beauty only grew with her.

She was compassionate, intelligent, witty, and her strength made her the perfect monarch.

The epitome of the ideal woman.

So why had it been that her story ended in her cast away into the darkness below? Her people who once adored her reviled her as a demon, a monster, the harbinger of the end. Even her own family forsake her, buried her below the earth, kept her in chains in the hopes she would never live to see the surface again.

But she lived. For centuries she lived in darkness until her silver kingdom eroded and crumbled to the ground, its shimmer and shine lost to time and immortalized in rumors and legends.

The only thing that remained of that place was her, buried deep beneath the earth. Though her body never decayed, her soul grew weary and weathered over time.

Luna was the one to help her escape this eternal prison, their scaly, outstretched hand leading her out from her prison. Against their better judgment, they broke her chains and took her hand as the two of them ascended despite the warnings and the potential danger. Their hand, though scaly and cold and rough, gently led her up to the surface. After centuries of waiting in the cold earth below, she finally felt the grass on her feet, the wind in her hair, and the sun on her skin.

And even as Luna was faced with harsh adversity and as their heroic duties pressed in on them, they defended Celeste from those who greeted her with animosity, who threatened her with blades and equally sharp words. And even as she was placed under the watchful eyes of Luna's guild members, Celeste felt a glimmer of hope from the bird-like beast. They were her little bird, her companion, her soulmate; two kindred spirits forced beneath by the watchful eyes of many, but they protected one another and grew to understand one another.

Luna managed to persuade their friends to let Celeste go outside while their guild master was not looking, proving that she was no danger to them. She not only learned how to fend for herself and how to control her magic, but she also got to see people up close rather than from a balcony in the distance. She learned of their

joy, their sorrow, but also their hardships under the hands of the aristocracy and the new royal family.

But her heart also grew as Luna took her by the hand to see the night sky up close. Every night they would both climb up to the tallest summit on the outskirts of the kingdom to see the moon and stars that hung over the sky. On that particular night, a passing comet flew across the sky, the trails of dust beautiful streaks of blue, green, and purple.

Celeste had never seen anything like it in her confinement, and for the first time in centuries she felt her heart flutter in wonderment.

Luna, who had their eyes closed and head hung low in pondering, opened up one eye to look at Celeste who still stared up in awe.

“Did you make a wish yet?” they asked innocently, a small smile gracing their face.

Celeste, who was still in awe at the scenery in front of her, broke away from her stupor. She turned to Luna, her face reddened slightly in embarrassment.

“I didn’t make one yet...”

“You still have time,” Luna reassured her, placing a taloned hand on her bare shoulder, “think it through.”

Celeste had never longed for anything or thought about what she even wanted. Having her every need attended to by servants early in life and being locked away in a glorified sepulcher for centuries meant never having to desire anything.

She eventually let the shooting star pass, as she had her wish of seeing the sun again fulfilled. She now had friends, and a lovely companion whom she considered her soulmate.

But this story would also come to an end.

Though her kingdom had long been torn down by the sands of time, Celeste held onto her grudge against those she thought she could trust. In her vengeance she pursued the descendants of the corrupt nobility who threatened her life in a misguided attempt to avenge herself and those the nobility have crushed under their heels. The kingdom lit with her fury, blood and ash coating the cobblestone roads and trails.

The wrath of an ancient power burned within her, and even as she tried to fight against her instincts she tore into flesh and

bit through bone. Her untamed magic scorched the buildings surrounding her, leaving destruction in her wake. She saw the terrified faces of the masses as they fled from her, she saw the anguish and sorrow of those surviving the lives she had taken. Her heart felt heavy as she took refuge on higher ground on the clifftop that overlooked the entire kingdom as it continued to burn like a bonfire. She smelled the foul smoke that reached her nostrils, and she regretted and lamented and fell to the ground as she watched the destruction she left in her wake.

Maybe she was a monster all along, just waiting for the right moment to lash out.

She was no princess, her dress stained in blood and oil. She lost her crown, her virtue, and any stake she had in this cruel game was lost.

As she stepped over the edge, she felt herself become weightless. Around her waist, two scaly arms with dagger-like talons held her gently, like a precious treasure. Dark black wings stretched out and engulfed her in their embrace, as they both floated like feathers in the wind.

Celeste glanced a peek and saw Luna, who held her as they both fell. In the end, they still took the fall. They still chased after her.

Love of Tomorrow

Evelyn lived in Athens, where the moon sat close enough to hear her whispers. She made her way up to the rooftop of her old cottage every night. It sat sideways on a hill higher than any other house in sight. She would walk over to the corner where her feet were farthest away from the ground, so her feet could dangle and feel like she was floating. Evelyn stored her neatly kept storybooks and a rusty lantern in a box secured to the smokestack by rope. After sitting safely on the ledge, she tugged on the rope until it arrived by her side. She opened it, picked up one of the nine stories in her collection for the night, and grabbed the lantern to place it on her thigh. The flame-like yellow tone contained in the glass on the lantern brought her stories to life. She believed that leaving before she finished the story would be a waste of a peaceful night. So she read until the end and returned to her room for nothing more than to rest her head enough to do the same the following night.

She was never as enthusiastic about the day as the night. Mornings in Athens were busy, and people rushed back and forth on dirt roads carrying bags and chatting with anyone they saw. Everyone seemed lovely, but Evelyn never saw where she could fit in. She loved her own company because she never had that of anyone else.

One night, when the moon was perfectly round, and there was a light pistachio-scented breeze in the air, she grabbed her wool blanket and went up to the roof. As usual, she grabbed her lantern and a book from her stash and began reading. As the end of her story approached, she heard a whisper coming from underneath the fragmented arched doorway. She placed her book down quietly and leaned over to get a better look. One hand was firmly holding onto the rounded stone edge of the roof, and the other held onto the squeaky handle of her lantern. She stuck her head out as far as humanly possible. Or so she thought before she felt the edge slipping out from under her, and her silk pajamas gave up without hesitation. She tried to grab hold of anything on her way down, but it was useless. The tulips mysteriously growing in her poorly maintained yard caught her instead.

She picked her head up and saw two feet wearing freshly polished brown leather sandals. Or at least it looked like it from where she was lying. Her head told her to get up, but her body did not cooperate. A stranger was standing over her, and she wasn't sure if her legs still worked. A man's voice asked, "Can I help you up?" Evelyn nodded her head yes, not knowing what else to do. The man grabbed her hand and gently pulled her up. She stood up on her feet and brushed off the dirt. She said, "Thank you" to the man and proceeded to ask, "What were you doing here anyway?" He replied, "I moved in just down the road and saw your light, so I came to see if anyone needed help." He laughed to himself, realizing she only needed help after he showed up. Evelyn's internal panic started to fade as she heard him speak to her tenderly. She explained how she was up there every night and assured him she was not distressed. Suddenly her hair felt a mess, and her clumsiness embarrassed her. She noticed how his hair overlapped the glasses worn over his hazel eyes, just like the men described in her books. Except he did not wear a crown and have a wicked stepmom plotting against her.

Evelyn invited him inside, but he refused since it was so late, like the gentleman she thought he would be. He walked away without saying another word, and she was left standing on what was left of the tulips. She went inside when she lost sight of him and went straight to bed in her filthy silk pajamas. It was the first night she did not finish her story, but there was nothing wasted about the night.

First Date

It was the anniversary of Freddie Mercury's death on a brisk November in Hongdae, one of Seoul's premier nightlife neighborhoods. Inside the basement level of performing arts venue, Sangsangmadang, a packed crowd of people too old and too young to occupy the same club space defied the odds and found the one thing that bridges class, creed and crippling social anxiety: the need to belt out off-key Queen jams. This communal karaoke takes place every year in memoriam to the legendary Queen front man with a more than capable Korean cover band in full costume. They come, they shred, we wail. I, in my Flash Gordon tee and leather jacket, bridging two Freddie fashion moments, was pleasantly surprised to look onstage and see the bass player on my wavelength with the same tee. I caught his eye during the set and gestured for a picture while fake Freddie bantered with the crowd. He winked and nodded before leaning into the smooth, body-roll jam, "Cool Cat." At any concert back in the States, I'd be delusional to think that in a sea of hundreds of faces, one of the bandmembers was communicating directly with me. But when you're the only chip in the cookie in a racially homogenous culture like Korea, the fairytale is real. They're always looking at you. This is one of the few occasions it worked to my benefit instead of making me feel like an outsider.

When the last note had sailed from the speakers, I casually made my way toward the stage to see if the bass player would make good on our silent agreement. There were high-fives with the management team just off to the side of the stage, hugs and kisses with girlfriends and wives, bows to the production staff. Each band member sidled down the stairs and into the crowd where they were met by more friends and family. Fans more ambitious than myself had already gathered for autographs and selfies, waving their Queen paraphernalia at the captive musicians. The prospect of waiting in line like a groupie made me want that photo a lot less, so I turned on my heel to glide away like a true cool cat.

"Hey, where ya going?"

I whirled around to see my tee twin walking toward me. I pointed to the exit. He pointed at the phone in my hand.

"No picture?"

"Oh. You seem busy."

"Wait," he said and grabbed my phone out of my hand.

"Hey!" I yelled after him, unconvincingly.

With the half-empty basement resembling the end of an 8th grade dance, I trailed after him and my phone. His bandmates were gathered for a group photo and after a few press snaps, the bass player gestured for me to join them. Too excited to play coy, I slid next to him and tried to shrink down to not block fake Freddie and back-alley Brian May. They all whacked me on my arms to make me stand up straight. I don't know why short people take offense when you try to help them out.

We did our cutest *aegyo* poses for the group shot and then discount Deakey shooed his bandmates away for our long-awaited Flash flash. We both leaned in accidentally brushing each other's cheeks. We shyly pulled away before embracing the coziness and leaned in once again as if crammed into a photo booth. Failing to read the room or unwilling to acknowledge it, he summoned a nearby female fan giving us death glares to take our final picture. She grudgingly dragged herself over as he handed her my phone to get the shot.

"Run DMC," he ordered.

I crossed my arms into my best b-girl stance while he dropped into a half squat with his arms outstretched toward the camera. We wear the same tee and he knows one of my favorite poses? "Do not get excited," I tell myself. "There is no way this would happen."

"You want to eat?"

Okay, this is happening.

"Now? Me?"

"You hungry?"

"Yeah, but don't you have to go with..."

I gestured weakly to his bandmates and the miscellaneous hangers-on nearby.

"*Chae mi upso* [no fun]," he said, crinkling his nose at the idea.

"Okay, let's do it!"

“*Kaja* [let’s go]!”

Turns out he had a leather jacket after all and threw it on as he ushered me across the floor and up the stairs. I had always quietly clowned the couples I’d seen heading out to Sunday brunch in coordinating neutrals or matching Converse sneakers, but now that I was one of them, at least for one night, it was not only acceptable, but exceedingly cute. We were 2 Freddie fans fading into the darkness looking for noodles. Or in his case, meat.

The first restaurant we stopped at was pure Korean BBQ. He seemed to tear up as he eyed all the pictures of meat platters taped to the window. He breathed in the smoked meat from the doorway, while I squirmed.

“So much food for 2 people,” I said, trying to deter him from entering.

“*Kwaenchana* [it’s okay]! I eat a lot!”

As he stood in the doorway, a group of young college-aged men exited, brusquely pushing him aside. He snorted at the insult.

“*Mwa* [what]?” one of the young men asked indignantly. His pinkish hue told me he’d had one bottle of soju too many and was ready to pick a fight.

“How old are you?” the bass player asked, sticking his bird chest out. “You’re younger than me, so don’t say anything, okay?”

The young guy stumbled back toward him and spit.

“*Mwa-ah?*!”

He charged toward the bass player, but was held back by his slightly less drunk friends.

“Look at how old he is,” one whispered.

“He’s so small. You’ll kill him,” admonished another.

They said this quietly from their souls, not as loud insults. They really felt walking away would be the charitable action toward this micro man. This agitated the bass player more than the act of aggression.

“Come back here, you piece of trash!”

This outburst was met by more head shaking and incoherent grumbling by the young men, but they continued walking up the street away from any beef with the aging musician.

“You better run!” the bass player yelled, flinging his leather jacket off and beating it against the sidewalk.

He returned to the doorway of the BBQ restaurant and was met with polite smiles and sorrowful eyes from those waiting in line and the host at the door.

“*Aish!* Let’s get outta here!”

We headed around the opposite corner from the young men in search of a warm meal. I knew there was a ramen place I liked nearby, but it was super cozy, almost too romantic for 2 strangers on an impromptu date. Still, it was close and for some reason, the bass player refused to put his jacket back on even though he was clearly freezing. The sooner we went into a place, the sooner he’d be released from his self-imposed torment.

“Oh! Down there!”

I pointed at a neon sign of a bowl with chopsticks holding noodles above it. We descended the stairs into the quaint hole-in-the-wall.

“*Absosaeyo* [Welcome]!” the bartender/manager/server greeted with faux sincerity. His tune changed when he bothered to look at us.

“Oh! New York *chingu* [friend]!”

“What up!” I said. “You working late again?”

“I live here,” he said, shaking his head.

Before we could continue chatting, I felt a tug on my arm. The bass player was guiding me toward a table in the back. I gestured toward the table, asking my bartender friend if it was okay to sit there. He nodded.

We took our seats at the little square table with a tealight candle flickering between us. Every time I come here, I feel the need to soak it all in. The pre-Kpop album covers adorning the wall. The thick wooden tables that look like they should be greasy, but never are. The décor that can’t decide if it wants to be kitsch, classic or tiki, so it straddles all. Random is a vibe. The dim glow illuminates the bass player’s grumpy demeanor.

“I came here with friends before and I guess he remembers me,” I explained.

“You eat *odeng* [fishcake]?”

“No.”

“Dumpling?”

“What’s in it?”

He looks at me blankly.

“Like pork, shrimp...”
 “Oh oh, all kind.”
 “Yeah I could eat that, but I mean, are we sharing? I kinda want my own food. I’m pretty hungry.”
 “Ahh okay, okay.”
 He put the menu down and waved the manager over. He seemed to have a few tables ahead of us, so we waited.
 “So,” he said with a smile. “Are you Christian?”
 I was speechless for a moment, then burst out laughing.
 “Why would you ask me that?”
 “I wanna know.”
 Every time I think I’m used to the Korean lack of etiquette we consider standard in the States, I get an unexpected surprise.
 “Um, yeah, I am.”
 “Oh no.”
 I don’t even want to go down this road before appetizers have hit the table, but I sensed I was being left with no choice.
 “Is that a problem? Do I need to leave?”
 “No, no, no! Don’t say that! It’s just...Christians are so judgmental.”
 “That’s a judgmental thing to say,” I say with a smile. “I take it you’re not Christian.”
 “Hell no! Never.”
 “Okay.”
 “They do some of the worst things.”
 “Okay.”
 “You know, I love music. And they ruin music.”
 “You don’t like gospel?”
 “I used to play the organ when I was young boy, but my grandmother church lady made me stop. Said in the Bible, the Devil plays the organ.”
 I couldn’t tell if it was the hunger or the ridiculous childhood memory, but I got dizzy all of a sudden. I looked around to see if the manager was any closer to taking our order. Our eyes met and I gave him a desperation head nod, so he came right over.
 “Sorry about that.”
 “No worries. Can I do the mushroom karaage and curry ramen?”
 “Nice. And you?”

“Shrimp gyoza and Cass.”
 “That’s it?” the manager asked.
 “Cass big size.”
 He looked at me with a smirk as he walked off. Then I felt his hand on my arm.
 “You want okonomiyaki this time? Service!”
 “Ooh! But I don’t think I have room,” I said sadly.
 “I make it small, like uh- uh- appetizer size.”
 I felt my eyebrow rising like The Rock.
 “Ohhh that sounds perfect. Okay then, yes, please,” I said with my hands quietly clapping together.
 “I got you.”
 I can’t quite describe the look on the bass player’s face when the manager walked away. Not exactly jealous, but the way I look at people who FaceTime with no earbuds. Like “Are you really doing this in public? Are you the rudest thing ever?” He never really said anything and I wasn’t sure what to apologize for, so we both moved on.
 “So you Christians think the organ is from the Devil.”
 “No, your grandmama does. I read the Bible. I’ve never seen anything like that in there.”
 He seemed momentarily taken aback, but of course that didn’t mean he would make room for the possibility that he misunderstood something about a religion he doesn’t follow.
 “That’s why I’m a Satan worshiper.”
 “Oh. Well there’s a leap.”
 “I don’t want anybody telling me how I should look or what to play or how to play,” he said passionately.
 “I hear you. But from what I know of Satan, there must be a cost.”
 He stares at me blankly.
 “Every relationship is transactional, even spiritual ones. So you’re telling me Satan is giving you all this freedom and asks nothing in return?”
 “That’s the problem with you Christians.”
 “I’m just trying to understand.”
 “Look at this.”
 He places a brochure on the table. I rolled my eyes thinking Satan had a publishing company. He flips it around and I see images from the “Bohemian Rhapsody” film surrounded by Kanji.

"Ohh what's this?"

"I saw BoRhap in Tokyo and got this swag," he said proudly.

"Yooo, this is dope!"

I flipped it open taking in each glossy page like scripture. Japan doesn't do anything halfway. What would be a throwaway program at an American cinema is a shiny collectible item filled with behind-the-scenes shots from the film and classic Queen concert images. I smiled like a dork as I closed the last page of the booklet.

"It's yours."

"What do you mean?"

"You can have it."

"For real?"

He nodded happily.

"Thank you. This is so cool!"

It was handy as a fan, too, because between Satan, Queen and hunger pains, I'd become overheated.

"It's been a long time since I've been with a woman."

On some level, the beauty of a language barrier is the lack of pretense. I silently prepared for another conversation I didn't want to have.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. So to see a beautiful Black girl at our show, I got really excited. I don't know what's wrong with me. Why do you think women don't like me?"

"Well you talk about the wrong things and you're kind of aggressive and all over the place."

The manager brings the gyoza, karaage and okonomiyaki to the table. I do a little happy chair dance. The bass player joins in and we laugh.

"Try one," he says, putting one of his gyoza on my plate.

"Oh, I don't eat shrimp."

"You're not a vegetarian, are you?"

"Sure am."

"Oh my God!"

I felt myself become frozen to my chair. What now?

"I think I can forgive a lot, but Christian *and* vegetarian? It'll never work."

He started to get up from the table, but thought better of it and slid back into his chair. But as he bit into his appetizer, he looked at me eating my fried mushroom snack and seemed unable to enjoy his food for some reason.

"Nothing's wrong with eating meat!"

"I didn't say there was."

He sat still for a second, but I knew it wouldn't last. In a huff, he leapt up from the table with a breathless "I'm sorry," threw his leather jacket on and headed toward the bar. I dipped my karaage in the spicy sauce and turned my head to watch him pay and exit. When I returned my gaze forward and saw the extra large beer across from me, the manager slid into the bass player's abandoned seat.

"Good. I sneezed all over it."

I laughed as he took the chopsticks and sliced the okonomiyaki into small pieces and placed it on my plate.

Dead on Sight

All I could hear was screaming.

Screaming so loud it could wake the dead.

I bolted straight up in my bed after hearing something in my backyard. I uneasily looked over to where my window was, to try and see what was going on. My unfocused eyes locked onto something just beyond the tree in my backyard. I tried to rub my eyes for my vision to clear, but the image of the man just kept getting hazier and hazier.

Then I blinked and he wasn't there anymore.

I peered for a moment longer before shrugging and laying back down to sleep. I started drifting but then there was nothing.

All I could hear was silence. A silence so still, I was scared to even breathe. It was like being underwater, I just had the rushing of my blood to keep me company. I couldn't figure out what caused me to awaken this time. The silence was deafening, not allowing me to fall deeper into my dreamworld, forcing me to stay in a semiconscious state. It was like the silence itself was a presence in my room, watching me, waiting for me to show any sign of acknowledging it.

I tried to stay so still as to not let whatever was in my room know I knew it was there. My eyes stayed firmly shut, my mouth in a thin line, and my ears perked up waiting for any sign of movement within the room. It was a prison unlike anything I had ever experienced, so all consuming, that my breath could cause me death. The thing that is meant to keep us alive was the thing that was causing my life to hang in the balance. I don't know how long I stayed like that, in a state between living and fear. It wasn't until I heard a very faint scrape on the door did I move.

Boy, I really wish I hadn't.

My eyes flew open to see what was causing this faint yet extremely loud disturbance to the silence.

I looked straight into the eyes of myself.

It was so strange to see myself without the help of a mirror. It was uncanny, eerie.

I blinked and rubbed my eyes, thinking that it was an illusion, a trick of the mind. It was like something I will never forget. Everything looked the same, yet different.

My eyes were the same electric blue, just without the light in it. My hair was still raven black, yet not as shiny. My skin still had that olive tan but looked as though I was sick. This thing had taken my body. The fear of what this creature wanted was so palpable, it bordered on suffocating.

As I raised my arm, so did my lookalike. I froze and so did they. Arm suspended in the air, locked in what seemed like an eternal staring contest. The silence remained while we both stared the other down.

They say the eyes are the window to the soul, but their eyes looked lifeless. They held no emotion, it was like they had no soul, no will to live. Then suddenly, without notice, I blink. I don't know why I did, but in that next moment, I couldn't breathe. It was like all the air had been trapped in my lungs fighting to escape the confines of my body.

My eyes started to lose focus again, and my doppelganger tilted their head at my visible distress. It was like they were doing it to me. Then they smiled. Within seconds, my vision started to darken on the edges, and I knew I was going to pass out.

My doppelganger slowly made their way over to me, their feet gliding above the floor. Closer and closer they moved, until they were at my bedside.

They leaned down and whispered in my ear, "Now it's my turn."
Everything went black.

I must have been asleep for hours before waking up to my alarm. When I tried to stretch my arm, I no longer had a body. It was like I was darkness personified. I looked down on my bed to see myself sleeping peacefully, content in my dreams. As I was about to look away, their eyes opened, and they smiled.

I watched for days as this creature pretended to be me. It would water the garden, cook meals, tend to the housework, it even talked to my neighbors every morning like I used to. I was beginning to lose my grip on my sanity. I started to question if I existed or not. Whether I was always the darkness I had become or was I once something more. I don't remember how long I stayed like that for. Time is subjective when you are the thing that terrifies even the manliest of men.

My doppelganger just lived my life as if it was their own. That's when I started to notice the chunks of time missing from my memory. It was like I was blacking out for long stretches of time. I almost felt like I was being drugged, but that wouldn't have been possible as I was incorporeal. I couldn't even speak to anyone.

Life had been a different type of prison. A prison that wasn't physical but mental, and I was slowly succumbing to the effects of such mentalities. I had read once in my previous life that if you see your doppelganger, you die. They take your life and make it their own. They become you and there isn't anything you can do about it.

Is that what my life has become? Being damned to watch someone live the life I was supposed to live?

Sea Mammal

I think a piece of my heart has always belonged to the sea. From the age of pink floaties and splash grounds, to sleek navy swimming gear and swim caps sporting dolphins. My body glided through the water with a twist of my hips and a pull of my arms. Other kids splashed and played, I dipped my head below the surface and reveled in its existence. I liked the way the water seemed to cradle me, and the way the world beneath the mirrored surface seemed a different world than the one above it. Light and sound didn't quite reach that place the same way, and the world outside faded to a gentle hum.

§

I was the fish of my family, always out of water. When I was young I daydreamed about mermaids and happy endings. I swam at the bottom of swimming pools warmed by the summer sun, fingers tracing the grout between the smooth tiles. I put my legs together and swam like I had fins; I was a dolphin. I put shells in a purse made of shark egg shell leather; I would sing like a whale and imagine my voice carried, like I'd heard fellow mammals born to the sea were bound to do. The whale's voice can travel 10,000 miles beneath the waves. Sometimes still, I would open my mouth, and breathe in 'til the water hit the back of my throat, and exhale. If I let my imagination run wild, I could imagine my lungs expanding with oxygen.

As I've grown, I have grown less enchanted by the mermaid. The beautiful songstress. Coming to land is a choice. Humanity to a mermaid is their dream. Instead, I am enchanted by the tragedy of the Selkie.

In Scottish, Irish, and generally Celtic folklore, the selkie is both woman and seal, but always a seal first. The selkies shed their skin to enjoy the land and the beach, but always return to the ocean. The skin of the Selkie is her weakness. The stories told of sailors who stole the Selkie's seal skin cloaks, and forced her to a marriage on land, forever robbing her of her home. The Selkie was born to the ocean, and plagued with the desire to return to it.

Childhood fantasies would wonder if I was secretly born to the ocean. If I was secretly a mermaid, or a child of Poseidon. The power that I longed for the most was his ability to breathe underwater. To

shapeshift. The change would be my escape. If only I had his gift to take to the water and never have to return. If only I had my selkie skin.

§

I will never forget the Disney trip when I got to snorkel in the tank at the Disney park. The experience is now baffling to me. Somewhere between snorkeling and scuba diving. My family affectionately calls it snuba diving. We were all fitted with air tanks and breathing machines, though the kind we used meant we were confined to the surface of the water. We would not be allowed to swim below the surface or touch any of the animals. It was merely a taste of the real thing.

I remember being so excited for the trip. It was something of a birthday present, and it's one of the grandest gifts I've ever received. My family didn't know if I'd be able to do it. My sensory issues were at their worst, and the idea of a tight wetsuit and heavy gear gave my parents pause.

But I remember the way it felt to put my head in the water for the first time, and the feeling of freedom as I took in my first few breaths and then took off into the water.

I would find out later that it took the other people in my group several minutes, especially my mother, to adjust to their breathing devices. She struggled to breathe properly in hers. But I took to it like a natural. As if I was given something I was always meant to have. Like the only thing holding me back from the water was my need for air. I didn't notice the others who lingered behind because I had disappeared into my own world. At that moment there was nothing but me and the view of the tank below. My only longing then was to swim deeper. To reach the bottom, or swim alongside the schools of colorful fish I could see from my aerial view.

I've only ever gotten the chance to do anything like that once since then. This time an upgrade. They took us out into the water on a boat and fit us with scuba gear, but this time instead of an air tank, we were attached to tubes on a boat. But this time, gloriously, we'd be able to dive as far below the water as our human bodies and our tubes allowed. The instructor taught us the signals and how to communicate under water and how to clear our ears, and how some people need an adjustment period.

But once again, I took to it like the selkie I was.

Though I don't know much about either of their experiences, Both my parents gave up halfway through their dives. My mother got tired and struggled with the breathing device, and my father got seasick.

I dove deeper and stayed under longer than either of them. The trouble was often getting me to return to the surface. It was like I had been given back something I longed for, and still I longed to go deeper. To disappear into the ocean depths and the silence and never return.

§

Evolution teaches us that everything comes from heated hydrothermal vents deep beneath the sea. And since then life always seems to find its way back to the water. Even as life strays away from it, everything organic on earth needs water to survive.

A small subset of mammals have found their way back to the ocean somehow. Seals, whales, manatees, dolphins, orcas, and the walrus have reshaped themselves over millions of years to return fully to the sea, and still all they can do is hold their breath for just long enough to swim.

I don't know what this says about me. But maybe the secret of the selkie was never in her skin, but in the breath she held and the sea in her heart.

The Resurrection of Luna Luna

The sun hung low in the sky, casting a golden glow over the bustling streets of downtown Los Angeles. Among the hustle and activity of the city, a sense of excitement rippled through the air as people lined up outside the gates of Luna Luna, the long-lost art amusement park resurrected after decades of waiting. Among the crowd was an upcoming young artist, Tyla, who liked the unusual and unreal. She had heard rumors of Luna Luna's revival and couldn't resist the attraction of experiencing firsthand the interactive artworks created by some of the greatest artists of the 20th century.

As the gates swung open, Tyla stepped inside, her heart pounding with anticipation. Everywhere she looked, vibrant colors and surreal shapes greeted her, each ride and attraction a masterpiece in its own right. She wondered at the towering sculptures by Jean-Michel Basquiat, their bold strokes and vibrant designs capturing the spirit of urban life. "Can you believe this?" Tyla exclaimed, turning to her friend Alex, who stood beside her, eyes wide with wonder. "It's like stepping into a dream," Alex replied, a smile spreading across his face. Together, they wandered through the park, exploring each ride and exhibit with pure wonder. They rode on Salvador Dalí's surreal carousel, where melting clocks and fantastic creatures twirled in a dizzying rotation. After that ride, they marveled at Joseph Beuys' mystical forest, where trees whispered secrets.

But in all the joy and wonder, there was a physical sense of downheartedness, a reminder of the years that Luna Luna had sunk in doubt, its treasures hidden away from the world. Tyla couldn't help but wonder about the artists who had poured their hearts and souls into creating these magnificent works, only to see them forgotten and neglected. As the day wore on and the sun dipped below the horizon, Tyla was drawn to a particularly enchanting reveal, an interactive installation by Sonia Delaunay, where colorful shapes danced and twirled in a mesmerizing display of light and motion. This beautiful piece of art was like nothing she had ever seen. As she stepped into the exhibit, a sense of nostalgia washed over her, associated with a profound appreciation for the beauty and creativity that surrounded her. She thought of all the years since Luna Luna was conceived, the

changes that had swept through the world, and the artists who had left their permanent mark on history. And yet, despite the passage of time, Luna Luna remained as vibrant and alive as ever, a testament to the enduring power of art to inspire and uplift. As Tyla watched the swirling colors and listened to the soft hum of the machinery, she felt a sense of gratitude wash over her, appreciation for the artists who had created these wonders and for the chance to experience their brilliance firsthand.

In the middle of all this, because it was the grand opening of Luna Luna, the owners decided to invite a well-renowned African musician named Burna Boy, known worldwide as he performed in the NBA All-Star game the previous year and had won a couple of Grammys. When Tyla heard the announcement that Burna Boy would perform at the end of the day, she was utterly shocked, as Burna Boy was her favorite artist. She thought that if she could get an autograph from Burna Boy, it would be the best day of her life. When he performed, she ran to the front of the line to be in the show. Tyla still could not believe what was happening in front of her eyes as Burna Boy took to the stage and performed some of his best songs like Last Last, Plenty, and Location. At the end of his performance, he did a meet and greet and signed a t-shirt. Tyla was lucky to get an autograph from her favorite artist. She hugged him and made Alex take a picture of them.

As she emerged from the exhibit, Tyla blinked back tears and soon started crying as she was filled with joy, overcome by the utter beauty and magic of Luna Luna and getting a picture with Burna Boy. Beside her, Alex squeezed her hand as they both were shining with emotion. "This is incredible," he whispered, his voice barely audible above the crowd's murmurs. Tyla nodded, her heart overflowing with joy and wonder. "It truly is," she replied, her voice filled with reverence. "And to think, it was all just waiting to be rediscovered."

The Day Nick Rode into Town

Orph took a long draw of his cigarette, before finally setting the flowers down. Eleanor's grave stood below him, adorned in flowers, mostly wilted from his previous weekly visits. He let out a breath of smoke as he turned around, mounting his horse once more. It hurt him too much to linger at the tomb for any longer than 10 minutes, a rule he had developed and adhered to since its implementation four months ago.

As he rode his horse back into town, and away from his own sorrow, he watched the sun begin to set. Orph pushed his 10 gallon hat above his sweat covered brow as he found his way to the saloon, pulling his horse into a neighboring stall for the night. He made his way past through the crowded floor area to the bar, where his usual stool sat. Billy stood behind the counter, as he did every night, pouring Orph his favorite drink, the bar's worst Bourbon.

After a few rounds, filled with conversation between the regular and his server, Orph was feeling real tired. His hat was feeling droopier, and his conversation wasn't proving interesting enough to keep his eyes from closing. Orph knew it was time to retire for the night, finding his bed just a block down from the saloon. But as he stood up and readjusted his brim, as he did every night, the piano, which had been playing so jovially the whole night, screeched to a stop, letting out a final high note. Orph sat straight up and turned around, his fatigue quickly wearing off. Next to the piano stood a tall, lean man, adorned in a crimson get-up, complete with shining red spurs.

"Howdy y'all, I hope y'all don't mind that interruption, but the name's Nick. And I seem to find myself quite lost at the moment. So here I am, standing before ye, in search of a kind Samaritan who would be able to offer me a spot to sleep for the night, seeing as it is awfully dark out there. My horse can't tell north from south in this visibility, and I promise I'll make it worth your while!"

The saloon-goers exchanged worried glances as Nick looked around, a giant grin across his face.

Orph stood up and collected his things, leaving a quarter for Billy on the counter. He began to walk out of the bar, too tired to

deal with this flashy stranger. He reckoned Nick was a common swindler, making out with anything that wasn't nailed down in the house. Orph made his way through the tables, and was just about to exit when Nick pulled him aside.

"How's about you sir? It's just one night, no fuss at all! I think you'll come to find you and me can help each other, in fact, I *guarantee* it!" Nick's eyes gleamed as he said it, reaching out his hand to Orph.

Orph sighed, looking the stranger in the eyes. *He was an odd fella, but he was well meaning* Orph figured. He kept a rifle in his bed side table, if this man was to try anything funny.

Orph pursed his lips and shook the man's hand.

"I thank you kindly sir!"

The two began walking out the door, heading to Orph's house. As they left, Nick looked down at Orph, beaming.

"Eleanor was her name, right?"

Orph stopped in his tracks and looked up at Nick, stunned.

"And how would you know something like that?"

"I like to stay informed, partner. Now, I told you back there I could help you out, yeah?"

Orph nodded as he opened the door to his house and Nick stepped through.

"Well, I come to you with a proposition, a business deal of sorts. I know she meant a lot to you, and I intend to help you out with that."

Orph stared in silence, stunned by the stranger he had let into his house.

"How's about you ride out of town tomorrow, and we go back to my city, it's only half an hour on horseback. Then, I give you your Eleanor back, and you ride back into town with the love of your life. However, you just can't look back. No matter what you do, good sir, you just cannot turn around to look at her. I'll provide her with a horse, I promise, but you cannot see it. Just know it's there, bring her to town, and you'll have your Eleanor back."

Orph nodded silently, before forcing out a few words. "Wh- wh- who are y-y-you?"

Nick laughed and took his hat off, holding it over his heart. "I'm just a friend."

§

Morning came soon enough, and the two found their way riding into town, Orph riding faster than he had ever before. Nick followed in close pursuit, his black stallion sending quakes through the plains with every step it took.

When the two finally reached the city's limits, Nick stopped his horse, letting it rear in the noon sun. He jumped off his horse and stood behind Orph, who had already positioned himself away from the city, staring over a vast flatland.

"Now just stay there sir, I'm fetching your wife a beautiful mustang as you wait. In just a minute she'll be- Oh! She's a quick learner partner, she's ready to go!" Nick walked before Orph slowly. "She is good to go sir, and I really do appreciate you opening your home to me for the night. Now, just make sure to follow what we discussed earlier, and you should be good to go! Go on and mosey back to your town, I'm sure you've been waiting for this all night!"

Nick's eyes glowed under the shadow of his hat as he stood aside, allowing Orph and Eleanor to go on. Orph nodded and began to ride off, thankful to never have to see that man again.

He held his reins tighter as he leaned forward, already impatient and hoping to make it back home in half the time it had taken to get there. As he rode, he watched only the dirt below his horse's feet, each hoof creating an imprint in the cracked ground.

After a while, Orph was growing weary, his stomach still in knots from the anticipation. He had spent the entire trip silent, attempting to hear Eleanor's horse behind him. But for the life of him, he couldn't hear them whatsoever. Troubled, Orph just leaned harder into his own horse, hoping to drown out his anxieties in the sounds he *could* produce.

Eventually, the town that had stood so small in the distance began to grow larger and larger, and he could see the finish line. Despite his excitement, he was still nervous over the silence behind him. The breakneck speed the two had been traveling at was enough to have his horse huffing, yet he couldn't hear Eleanor's horse doing anything, let alone breath.

Orph furrowed his brow as he watched the town draw nearer and nearer, worried the trip had been for nothing. *Maybe that son of a gun had stolen something*, he pondered. Orph reckoned he better clear his head of these doubts and turn around. Surely a man as devious as Nick had lied to him about this, what man could bring the dead back? Had Orph been blinded by his passion and grief, blind to the lies of that smooth talking man? He shook his head to clear his thoughts and turned around, awaiting his answer to Nick's deception.

Low and behold, behind him sat Eleanor, atop a white mustang, silently riding. Orph let out a sigh of relief as the two rode on, his eyes locking with Eleanor's. He felt pure bliss, a feeling of contentment he hadn't felt in months.

But as he stared in amazement at his wife, her smile began to quickly turn to a silent scream, tears welling up in her eyes. Orph watched in horror as her cream colored dress began to turn crimson, stained by the same gunshot that had taken her once. Orph stared as the mustang began to slow down, and Eleanor's pale face stared at him, a silent scream escaping her lips, fading as the wind carried her away.

Orph felt hot tears run down his face, a lump in his throat appearing. He sat in silence as his horse stood still, the two watching all that was left of Eleanor disappear into thin air.

Orph rode right to the graveyard, returning to her grave. He stayed there from noon to night, finally allowing emotion to wash over him. He held the head stone for hours, until he could not cry anymore, his eyes dry and his throat sore.

Shifting

The day I had to stand up in third grade for “Show and Tell” was the day I learned to maneuver light. It’s no easy trick and at eight years old it took great effort. Yet, nearly forty years of practice have enabled me to perfect the skill until I am all but invisible. Sometimes, when I am in full sun, I look around and cannot find my shadow. Like Peter Pan, I am lost to time.

Aunt Louise taught me without saying a word.

I’d watch her disappear into the wallpaper at family gatherings. No one seemed worried that she got lost in the hubbub of the dinner table. With a super power that let her slip away unnoticed, while the dishes were done and the table cleared, she held fast against the light from street lamps sneaking in through the curtains, revealing only the whites of her eyes between slow, measured blinks. Shadow dancing became a survival skill when mom and her siblings, the babushkas, cleared out the local diner, a Friday-night ritual. They stormed The Riverside, and one by one, tables emptied, as the more gregarious laughed and recounted family tales. Whispering to myself in the farthest corner, away from the neon and glare of the fluorescents overhead, I’d move just so, refracting the chaos around me. When it was time to leave, I’d slip back into the fold and hold onto Aunt Louise’s hand, both of us sharing a secret smile.

Most convenient were the times I used my new-found power in the Southern-Baptist church, a place of pure terror to a young, Catholic girl. Though I had just been confirmed by the local priest, my dad felt called to the nearby Baptist chapel, as a result of my youngest sister’s participation in their pre-school. She was too young to attend the public kindergarten. From the minute she enrolled, Baptists began showing up on our doorstep. They beckoned us to their house of worship, and being only thirteen, I had to go where the family went.

No glimpses of stained glass fell upon my face in that place, nor the glow from soft candles warmed my soul. Rather, chilling condemnation filled the recesses of the sanctuary as the pastor raged at the congregation each Sunday. Closing my eyes at the height of his condemnation, I willed myself away and became one with the dust

particles that floated upon the sunbeams filtering through the high windows. Worst of all, when father slumped in the front row crying his sins out to Jesus, I wrapped the light around me tightly, fearing what might come out of father’s mouth.

For years I morphed the dust and light, enduring the Baptists and their whispers of salvation. Many a Sunday I spent face pressed to the red-letter Bible, pretending to pray, but letting my mind run away with itself at the speed of light. I knew better than to believe the pastor. I had found my own salvation and it was not within the confines of the Southern Baptist sanctuary.

At seventeen, I learned that sunglasses assist with shifting light. Sitting atop a red-painted lifeguard chair, I stared down at the lake, light merging with each pore and hair upon my body. I became one with the land and sky, and the ease of being it afforded me steeled me against what came next.

My father and his mistress from five houses up the block made a habit of spreading out a small, white blanket on the sand to share in plain view of all the neighbors. With light bouncing around me, I willed myself invisible, again and again and again. The Smiths, Johnsons, and Richardsons watched on, while my mother hid herself in the house, blocks away. It was never spoken of until years later, and today I slip my sunglasses on with the weight that comes from unspoken realizations.

This is the me that no one knows, but one I acknowledge intimately. Shifting light is more than a game to play; it is my truth, and I guard it jealously. As a safeguard, I wear my shadow in public but have yet to feel the fit of it just so. Now and again, I tug and pull at the figure I cast in full light, and I look around sheepishly, wondering if anyone notices these minor adjustments.

Carnival Creature

If it wasn't for the Tilt-a-Whirl, I think I could have handled the chicken fried bacon just fine. But all that spinning around had stirred up my innards real bad.

"Come on, Tad. I wanna see the Freak Show."

My guts were roiling, and I couldn't speak but that sure sounded a lot better than another carnival ride so I just nodded at Jesse and followed.

"This way," he urged.

I was holding the money Ma had given us that morning.

Ma didn't trust Jesse. Not after he had lost her sand dollar. That was years ago but Ma had never forgotten it. That sand dollar had meant a lot to her. It was a memento from the one and only time she had ever gone to the ocean. She had always told us that she had been plumbing the depths when a man had come along and had saved her that day. Had given her another chance is what she had said. Whatever that meant.

"Can't you go any faster?" Jesse was anxious for me to hurry up and buy our tickets. Course, as soon as I got them, he bolted into the tent.

I sighed. It didn't take much to get Jesse excited. The so-called "freaks" inside could have been wearing plastic appendages and Jesse would have believed it was all real.

Gullible is what I'd call him. But I didn't want to ruin his fun so I went along with it. I wasn't about to chase after Jesse, not with chicken fried bacon, the sequel, threatening to raise its ugly head.

So, I was dragging behind when someone whispered, "That's right. Take your time."

"Who said that?" I looked around and from the inky darkness appeared a man walking towards me. As he drew closer, I noticed that his skin was covered in scales. I shivered. "Are you Aquaman?"

The creature laughed. "That's a comic book character. I'm Fishman and I'm pleased to finally meet you." He held out a finned hand for me to shake but I stepped back, unnerved.

"Huh? *Finally*? What do you mean?" I managed to ask.

"I knew your mother wouldn't have had you miss the carnival when it came to town."

"You know my mother?"

"From long ago. Has she learned how to swim yet?"

"Gosh, I don't know. She always comes to my races at the pool, but I've never seen her in the water myself."

"I'm glad to hear that she's encouraged your swimming," said Fishman. "Life is remarkable. Remember that. Savor it. Don't throw it away. Nothing is worth drowning over."

"Well, uh, sure." I didn't know what else to say.

"Aaaa . . ." Fishman drew a raspy breath.

"Are you o.k.?"

"Sorry," gasped Fishman. "I need to get back in my tank. But meeting you has been worth the effort. Before I go . . ." Fishman wheezed again. "There's something on that bench. It's for your mother."

"What is it?" I asked as I felt along the seat. My hands circled around an object as I heard footsteps running towards me.

"Come on, Tad. I was searching all over for you." Jesse seemed to come out of nowhere. "The show is about to start."

"I was just talking to . . ." I stopped mid-sentence. I realized that Fishman had disappeared.

"Hurry!" Jesse insisted, impatiently.

It wasn't until the bus ride home that I reached in my pocket and examined Fishman's gift. I turned it over in my hands.

"Hey! Where'd you get that sand dollar?" asked Jesse, scooching next to me..

"From Fishman," I told him.

"Who?" asked Jesse.

"The merman," I said..

"You mean the guy who had his legs stuffed inside the fishtail?"

I stared at Jesse, surprised at his response. I had underestimated him. But then I focused my attention back on the sand dollar.

"It's for Ma," I shared.

Jesse froze in place. It was the first time he had been still all day. For a while, we sat there in silence fixated on that sand dollar. Then Jesse exhaled audibly.

“Yeah,” he said. “Maybe she’ll give me a second chance.”

That’s when I passed Jesse the sand dollar and said, “You should give it to Ma when we get home.”

I watched as Jesse carefully took the treasure from my palm and clutched it tightly in his fist. “Thanks for trusting me, Tad,” he whispered. “I hope Ma can too.”

The bus lurched forward then and we both looked out the window, the carnival illuminated behind us, casting its bright lights on the road ahead.

The Death of Creativity

“Life imitates art,” I thought as I searched for a seat in the dull and crowded waiting room. I sat down in between two expecting couples. To my left, mom wore a dusty blue set of scrubs, her eyes watering from the monstrous yawn that had just seized her. Dad was leaning impatiently on the armrest beside him, wrinkling the expensive-looking suit he likely owned in all fifty shades of gray. *His* eyes glued to his Rolex. To my *right*, mom was preoccupied with her “first” who wore a pink cable-knit sweater with matching pink pigtails, she looked no older than four. *Dad* seemed to be preoccupied with *dementia*. Not because he was old, he wasn’t; but because of the mindless look on his face as his daughter squirmed around the room.

My text messages turned green; I took this as a sign to keep my preconceived notions about complete strangers to myself. The wifi seemed to be spotty for everyone, explaining the boredom that filled the air. I watched with the rest of the onlookers as the entertainment continued. The little girl had swatted her mom’s phone to the ground, now, more times than I could count. For being in the top ten on Netflix, Cocomelon sure wasn’t doing what it’s been said to do. I looked over at the corner once designated to bead mazes and slinkies, the corner that I’d spent all *my* time in when *my* mom was expecting. A miniature table and chairs now took their place. It was bare, leaving the creativity of staying occupied up to the imagination of the children and parents waiting. I wondered if bead mazes were “canceled” for some ambiguous reason, or if perhaps they were just no longer in business alongside *Toys-R-Us* and *Kellogg’s Yogo Bits*.

Another expecting mother walked in; *her* little girl ran to the corner with intention. *She* was a veteran in a waiting room full of novices. As her mom sat down, she flipped her phone shut before replacing it with the crossword puzzle she pulled from her sack of a purse. It was as if they had walked in circa 2006, the same way I once had when my baby brother was in-utero. I figured that without the bead maze waiting for her, the little girl would pointlessly take a turn sitting in every miniature chair before interrupting her mom’s crossword puzzle out of boredom. But when I looked over, she was elbow-deep in a potted plant. She had sourced various twigs

and leaves to build a hut off the stem of the plant, good enough to jumpstart her architectural career. The pieces of mulch that resided in the leaf hut doubled as the main course in her tea party of one, the leaves and branches doubling as table settings. I admired her creativity, as I would've likely done the same at her age, and wondered why the fidgety little girl next to me didn't join in.

A nurse finally called my name and I followed her out of the waiting room with a newfound hope for the future of humanity, perhaps the world had lost its color, but its creativity was not yet doomed. When I turned to the kid's corner to admire the little girl once more, she was gone. The potted plant was untouched and the crumbs of dirt on the table vanished. I looked around for her mother, but she, too, was nowhere to be found. My newfound hope quickly diminished as the little girl in all pink bounced aimlessly in her mother's lap. It was *my* creativity. *My* imagination.

As I sat uncomfortably through my pelvic exam, I thought of the list of baby names in my notes app. The list I'd been curating since I was old enough to push a stroller could now be generated by technology in seconds.

"Now you're going to feel a little pinch," it wasn't just a little pinch.

But instead, I worried about the fetuses in the waiting room. The dullness, a medium of their inevitable futures. All they'd ever grow up to know is gray waiting rooms filled with zombies disguised as the working class. All they'd ever grow up to do is scroll desperately through their parents' phones looking for games they couldn't fathom devising, listening to the mind-numbing drone of an overplayed nursery rhyme. And all they'd ever grow up to be is cogs in the machine designed to keep our world running rather than worth living in. And as I sat up, I realized how thankful I was to be here for birth control.

Beatta's Stream

Beatta was the sleepest meditator of the thirteen who had made their way to a certain humid, green hollow. Although she had been to this monastery several times over the years, it was only the clear-eyed monks who remembered her. Most others assumed each visit was her first, for she was clumsy and often fidgeted during meditation. Likewise, she bowed and placed her palms together at all the wrong times, though none suspected this: she had come up with her very own solar system of gratitudes.

It was now mid-August, and the warm moonless night Beatta arrived for eight days of sitting, she came upon a fat and elderly toad blinking in the darkness of the walkway. She shooed him into the woods, fearing a later-arriving retreatant might unwittingly harm him.

On the third morning of the retreat, she wondered why she had come at all. (This usually happened.) Beatta was by this time riddled with what the Buddha described as "sloth and torpor." And even though, little by little, she had worked through the pain of sitting half-lotus at home, these recent longer periods of sitting meditation filled her with fear, slight nausea, and vague feathery pains. Beatta wondered what it was that she feared. The ruination of her knees? An unendurable grief? A vast acreage of boredom and plainness? She knew only that she could not be still here any longer than she could at home. Beatta had always gravitated towards coziness and delight. Indeed, she did *not* enjoy meditating, felt quite sure she would never experience the blissful jhānas of the scriptures. Nevertheless, she continued a rickety sort of practice, realizing that after sitting, the world would shine up around her more poignantly. In these times, she became a cool breeze to her husband and would say to any passing creature, even the lowliest junebug or possum, *Well, I love you. Yes, I love you. See how beautiful you are?* Such was her own little practice.

Already, she had revealed her forgetful nature. On the first evening, she had introduced herself to Joy in the parking lot. The next day, she heard mention of a German meditator named Sabine. A German meditator? Come all this way to sit? Not realizing she

was even doing so, Beatta renamed Joy “Sabine” and from a distance appreciated her European posture, her German way of smiling, her no-nonsense cotton wardrobe. Guessing Sabine might be homesick, or a touch lonely, she beamed to her on the stairs, *You’re Sabine, right? I’m Beatta*. The woman had smiled back wide and American. *I’m Joy, honey. Don’t you remember? We met the other night*. Ah, yes. She did remember now.

This particular third morning, Beatta traveled through the grey pine-wood to the first sitting of the day. In so many ways she was an ever-growing-up child, and today she did a spirited and occasional little gallop as she moved. In her quick joy, she nearly stumbled upon Madhu, the honey-white temple cat, who had placed himself on the dark and narrow path. *Well, it’s wide enough for two who love*, breathed Beatta, deeply pleased with herself for matching a sliver of Dickinson to an apt occasion.

Knowing Madhu to be an especially temperamental and aloof being, on past visits she had usually let the cat pick and choose how to show her his love and observations. But this third morning, Beatta must have radiated an extra bit of searchingness, a brighter than usual wish for affection. As she reached forward, Madhu jumped and scratched at her, and so she began the third morning’s meditation with two bright beads of blood on her left wrist. *It’s a sign*, she mused to herself. *The cat knows I won’t move forward correctly without drastic measures on his part. He was waiting for me, wasn’t he?*

For Beatta, far more challenging than the sitting sessions (in which she endlessly shifted her weight, discomfort, and worry from side to side) were the daily Dhamma talks. They occurred during the napping part of her day, and she felt a captive audience. A teacher herself, she hated the thought that she might daily be lassoing her young charges with her lessons, forcing them to passively accept the questionable truisms of adults. And yet, Beatta had begun this particular retreat with a sort of hope, buoyed by these dozen other late-summer meditators. They were kind and serious people who had traveled from far-away mountains and coasts to study with the revered and aging abbot of this monastery.

He had been ordained as a child, and by now, Beatta was quite sure he must be clairvoyant. Each time the beloved abbot walked softly to his cushion, weird unbidden thoughts would arise in her

mind, apparently in order to test his true sight. Would he glance at her in a certain way today, perhaps with added mirth or caution? Would he know what Beatta was up to? That it was out of her control? That all of this must surely drain her?

She did feel sorry that she could not gather the teachings more closely to her chest, could not line her notebook with neat wood-bundles of causes and conditions. Instead, as soon as she heard, *Bhikkus, as to the source through which perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset a man...*, her head would tilt in dream. The abbot’s voice was lilting, marked by the gentle cadences of Pali and Sinhalese. To Beatta, it was a lullaby of sorts, and in no matter what position she sat, nor however much sleep she had enjoyed the night before, within moments, she was a blinking toad herself.

Not only that; her quirky sense of humor surfaced in dangerous ways in this sleepy state. In college, this had happened in her late-night calculus studies. Fogged by drowsiness, she was actually *quite* certain she was enjoying a rare, delicious clarity. Studying for a morning exam, she would laugh aloud into the night, seeing somehow a humor in the equations and mathematical truths, especially in the authors’ commentary on them. In these small hours, Beatta felt a sure allegiance with these coy mathematicians, knew that she and they would be fast friends if ever placed together.

Likewise, in the abbot’s Dhamma talks, she would drift off into a netherworld where certain karmic laws would pierce her heart, urging her to applaud or call out a resounding “Yes!” or “Huzzah!” Luckily, a thin rim of wakefulness kept such impulses at bay. But Beatta *would* smile and chuckle quietly to herself when the Buddha’s metaphors struck her as ironic or especially delightful. Sometimes, too, the abbot’s Pali recitations seemed interstitched with the poetry of other times and places. Early on in yesterday’s talk, she had somehow heard him begin, *Polly put the kettle on*. In a lopsided hand, Beatta had scribbled this into her notebook before resting her forehead on her knees.

Now and again, she felt herself privy to certain high, mystical teachings. Later on in yesterday’s talk, for instance, the abbot had spoken of such strange things. Apparently, the Buddha had had 555 birds. *As pets?*, she wondered. There was a book of these birds somewhere, with or without illustrations, she did not know. And

more! Foul play! The Buddha's death was full of intrigue. Had someone slipped him poisonous squirrel mushrooms? It seemed so. There were also tales of children who stepped lightly into clear streams, stepping out blue and luminous with wisdom. Beatta could not hear enough of these curiosities, longed to be alert enough to not miss a single one.

Muddled or not, she knew everything she received was a gift. Indeed, Beatta had never known what to do with tangible objects given to her. Sometimes she imagined herself walking the Earth, forward-stretched arms stacked with the picture books, skillets, fragrant hand creams, and fireside throws of a lifetime, greeting cards and handwritten letters tucked in here and there. It was a great puzzle to her how to receive so *much* graciously, how not to be burdened by it all. Once, Beatta had given her hairdresser a whimsical storybook describing different qualities of hair: *little black rosettes, stiff ashen brooms, sleek otter strands.*^[i] On her next visit, her hairdresser had thanked her, mentioned how much the friend she'd passed it on to was enjoying it. This had slightly hurt but mostly *intrigued* Beatta. You could so freely give away a gift. She had not known that.

After lunch on this third day of the meditation retreat, she went to the Sangha Hall, made a cup of sweet Dilmah tea and nestled herself into talk of heartwood, elephant footprints, and Dhamma rafts. She sat next to Henry because he smiled a young boy's smile. And because this was not a silent retreat, he turned and spoke to her of Jataka tales, Sanskrit grammar, and – with deep fondness – his wife.

Her name is Beatta.

Beatta?

Yes, from the Latin.

What does it mean?

Well, a sort of happy.

Like the Beatitudes, called Joy from across the room. I once knew a Beatta. Not a common name here in the States.

And in that small handful of moments, Beatta felt herself lighten. In her quietest inside part, she asked Henry permission to borrow his wife's name. As he nodded, perhaps to something Joy was saying, an unseen thumb pressed upon Beatta's third eye. It seemed so, at any rate.

Later, in the afternoon Dhamma talk, Beatta was awake. Beatta was writing. There was the beginning of a necessary story in her little spiral notebook: *Beatta was the sleepest meditator of the thirteen who had made their way...* And as she wrote, the abbot's words reached her in bemusing colors, arranged themselves over her head in bright Tinkertoys, in perfect organic molecules, in aurora borealis. And she wrote, and she wrote...

That evening, Beatta entered the meditation hall with a pale green light about her that only the abbot could see. At once, she folded herself into mindful prayer and continued her writing in the sky of her mind. Soon, her legs began to ache, and architect that she now was, she started a second story at sea-level: Was she a sylph of sorts? She walked to the edge of a brook and sat. She *was* the bilva sapling behind her own back. And there were no pains, only water creatures. That burning sensation in the arch of her left foot was a painted tortoise, actually. The throbbing in her left calf? A great grey trout. And, oh! Shimmering blue minnows were gathering at her right knee. She watched the water with mild interest and deepening love, and when the waters stilled themselves a bit, she returned to Beatta's third day. In this way, she wrote for nearly an hour, without a pen.

Ten minutes before the gong signaled the end of the meditation session, a dog barked on a nearby farm's horizon. Beatta unfolded herself without remorse and peered into the darkness that held her still, breathing friends. She tenderly considered each one, winking impishly at Sabine (who *was* German), Joy (who was not), her namesake's smiling husband, and the tired yet shining abbot. And she said in a hush, *Well, I love you. Yes, I love you. See how beautiful you are?* Then she cried a little, but this was not suffering.

^[i]Cisneros, Sandra, *Hairs/Pelitos*, 1997.

On Hunger

Hala was hungry, insatiably hungry.

The hunger had always resided in her, demanding and all-consuming as it thundered in her belly. It ate away at her body, rumbled through her caverns even as her teeth dug into velvet figs, even as rivulets of kavarma's thick broth dripped down her chins. She stuffed herself with finely cured lukanka, stained her lips orange with generous smears of lyutenitsa atop thick slices of rustic bread, and still her hunger persisted. At all hours it knelled, so in the cloak of night, Hala took crescent bites out of the moon, the celestial snack briny and slightly crumbly like the land's finest sirene. But nothing of the Earth nor the Heavens could fulfill Hala.

Perpetually famished, Hala was prone to impatient fits, bursts of angry desperation. With sharp movements, she beckoned the wind, sent gusts whipping through the fields until they delivered her bountiful harvests of plump squash and twenty orchards' worth of sun-yellow apricots. She sent floods upon the valleys, then tipped the Earth so the elixir and all of the juice-engorged berries it carried would flow directly into her open mouth. When she found herself particularly ravenous, she threw piercing shards of hail upon the livestock; as she gazed upon her slaughter, she told herself for the nth time that this meat would finally be enough, that this pinch of cumin and this sprinkle of sumac would finally taste like enough.

She understood, of course, why the farm men invoked magic against her, why they resorted to shouts and superstition. But *they* didn't understand *her*—no, a woman was not permitted fat or folds or flesh. They condemned her corpulence as a mark of overindulgence, growled disgustedly at her perceived greed and gluttony. They thought themselves the authority on *her* body, *her* morality, *her* hunger, and if she did not make herself small and easy and palatable, they believed it should be *their* hand that withheld the life-giving food, *their* eye that determined if she should be so lucky as to be graced with sustenance. (If Hala weren't so famished, she might've had the energy to laugh at the absurd notion that her size was her choice, anyone's choice—that even if it was, she would choose to be anything less than the fullness of herself.)

So it happened: the Earth cycled through its seasons. So it happened: the hunger, the despair, the attempts to assuage it. So it happened: the resistance, the futility, the arrogance in thinking that their vain chants could vanquish the ferocity of her hunger.

One particular morning, a village dispatched a vračara at the first sight of Hala's thick clouds. Hala sighed, exhaling a defeated breeze, as she examined her. She'd always felt bad for these women, always felt only hungrier when she saw their narrow bodies parade outside at their husbands' bidding. The men trained the vračara, fed them words to regurgitate as meaningless little spells that always proved fruitless in the face of Hala's need. But the women still came, still sang, still exhausted themselves.

This vračara was different. Her eyes, dark as kalamata olives, held life. Her figure, full and round as an overripe pear, held assuredness. Her very being, abundant as a celebratory feast, held spirit, confidently and distinctly *hers*. She didn't bother with ritual or hymn, simply opened herself up to the sky, bared her passion and her desire and the wholeness of her self. All laid out for Hala to see. And Hala...

Hala saw.

She let the wind carry her down to the Earth, tentative but oh so eager, and realized her hunger was different now. It still singed against her skin, but it was less draining now. More... inviting. It moved like a tug, drawing her to the vračara; moved into the longing in her chest, the sudden dryness of her mouth, the curiosity in her gaze, the bloom of heat between her thighs.

The woman regarded Hala with the weight of intention as she nibbled the plum-like flesh of her lower lip. Her body, flushed and eager, seemed to mirror Hala's own enraptured state.

"*Hala*," she greeted, voice low and honey-rich.

Hala longed to taste it, to lean in and intimately savor its decadence. She wanted to get close enough to run her fingers along the peach fuzz on the vračara's jaw, close enough to drown in the perfumed wine that stained her now slightly swollen lips.

"My love, you're starving," the vračara said, extending a hand to meet Hala's pink cheek. The touch was craving, promising. *Delicious*.

And Hala was hungry, insatiably hungry.

"Come, let me feed you."

Define, Me.

“SPELL DUPLICITOUS.”

“Duplicitous... D - U - P - L ...»

(“...why did I get that word...?”)

“- I - C - I - T ...”

(“...Duplicitous, Meaning: **Deceitful**. Used to describe someone who *Intentionally Misleads People*...”)

“- O - U - S... Duplicitous.”

“THAT’S CORRECT.”

[Applause]

(...why did i get that word...? was that suppose to be me...? am i... a bad person...?)

I remember

When I was a little girl I would be sneaky, and try to get what I want.

I was 8 at the time when I tricked my best friend to give me her favorite toy.

It was a rare one, and I wanted it, so I told her that the one I had was more special.

She didn’t know though that you can find them a dime a dozen in Walmart.

I had her actually believe in that crappy thing. That stupid, repulsive, ugly, thing.

At the end, I got what I wanted because I lied.

I told my sister about it, feeling proud of myself.

She told me that I did a bad thing.

I felt wrong about it ever since.

...I never forgot what I did...

“SPELL NEGLIGIBLE.”

(“...another one...”)

“Negligible... N - E - G ...

(“...Negligible, Meaning: So Small or Unimportant as to be *Not Worth Considering*; **Insignificant**...”)

“- L - I - G ...”

(...am i someone who’s...)

“- I - B - L - E... Negligible.”

(...worthless ...?)

“THAT’S CORRECT.”

[APPLAUSE]

(“...why am i so worthless...? ...i don’t want that to be me...”)

I remember

When I was a teenager I never had a firm belief in myself.

I was 14 when I really started feeling the weight of rejection. I feared being alone, so I did whatever I could to escape the feeling of loneliness.

I always looked to everyone else, and made myself disappear in the process.

They say if you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.

I wonder if that’s why I’m a hopeless romantic.

...I never forgot this fear...

“SPELL ADMIRABLE.”

(“...it’s a good one this time...”)

“Admirable... A - D - M ...

(...but...)

“- I - R - A ...”

(“...I don’t believe it...”)

“- B - L - E... Admirable.”

(“...i don’t believe that’s actually me...”)

“THAT’S CORRECT.”

[APPLAUSE]

(“...I want to cry ... why should i even try anymore...?”)

I remember

Back in high school, when I was 17,

I felt like the third wheel in every relationship I was in.

Even if it was just two people. Even if it was just Me and Them.
 I saw that everyone had their own special talents.
 Everyone was good at something, or had something to contribute.
 As for me, I never knew what I was good at or wanted to be.
 That's why I started competing in spelling bees.
 I thought maybe this way I'll feel like I'm worth something.
 Who knows, maybe I could become the best...
 ...I would never forget this dream...

“YOUR NEXT WORD...”
 (“...maybe i should quit...”)
 “SPELL PERSEVERANCE.”
 (“...huh...?”)
 (“...Perseverance, Meaning: Persistence in doing something Despite
 Difficulty or Delay in Achieving Success....”
 “Perseverance... P - E - R ...”
 (“...I want to be better...”)
 “- S - E - V ...”
 (“...I don't want to keep living this way...”)
 “- E - R - A - N ...”
 (“...There has to be more to life than just this...”)
 “- C - E... Perseverance.”
 (“...Right...?”)
 “THAT’S CORRECT.”
 [APPLAUSE]
 (...Who am I...?)

I remember
 When I was 18 I finally fell in Love with someone.
 I was so happy not to be alone anymore.
 There were so many fun memories.
 Eventually it came to an end.
 It hurt so bad to let go of someone.
 I cried for days.
 I heard that whenever the house burns down,
 those are our most transformative moments.
 Then I decided that I would become someone new.

...I never forgot that decision...

“YOUR FINAL WORD.”
 (“...here it comes...”)
 (SPELL REDEMPTION.)
 (“...”)
 “Redemption... R - E - D - E - M - P - T - I - O - N...
 Redemption.”
 “THAT’S CORRECT!”
 [APPLAUSE]
 “CONGRATULATIONS!! YOU ARE THE WINNER OF THIS
 YEAR’S SPELLING BEE!!”

I remember that life is a fucking mess.
 People make decisions all the time that they can't take back.
 I've also seen people try to make amends for what they've done.
 I always thought maybe that's what religion is there for...
 Whatever it is...
 At least I always have a choice...
 in who I want to be and who I will become.
 At the very least,
 ...I'll never forget, that I can at least try...

(“Redemption, Meaning: The act of Redeeming or Atoning for a
 Fault or Mistake.”)
 (“I'll Try.”)

The Mimes



Oil on Canvas, 350cm x 250cm

Birds in Silhouette



Digital Photography

Splash



Watercolor on Paper, 12" x 16", 2024

Identity



Charcoal and Pastel

Layers



Digital Photography

Dragon



Photography

The Little Tea Pot



Acrylic on Canvas

Bloodeye



Digital Art

Red



That redhead down the
street with her hair on fire in
the last blast of bloom

Oil on Canvas

Mom and Appa



Digital Painting

Erratic Stillness



Artisans Craft



Magical Wanderings by Moonlight



Digital Photography

Harvest Queen



Pencil and Marker on Paper

New Beginnings



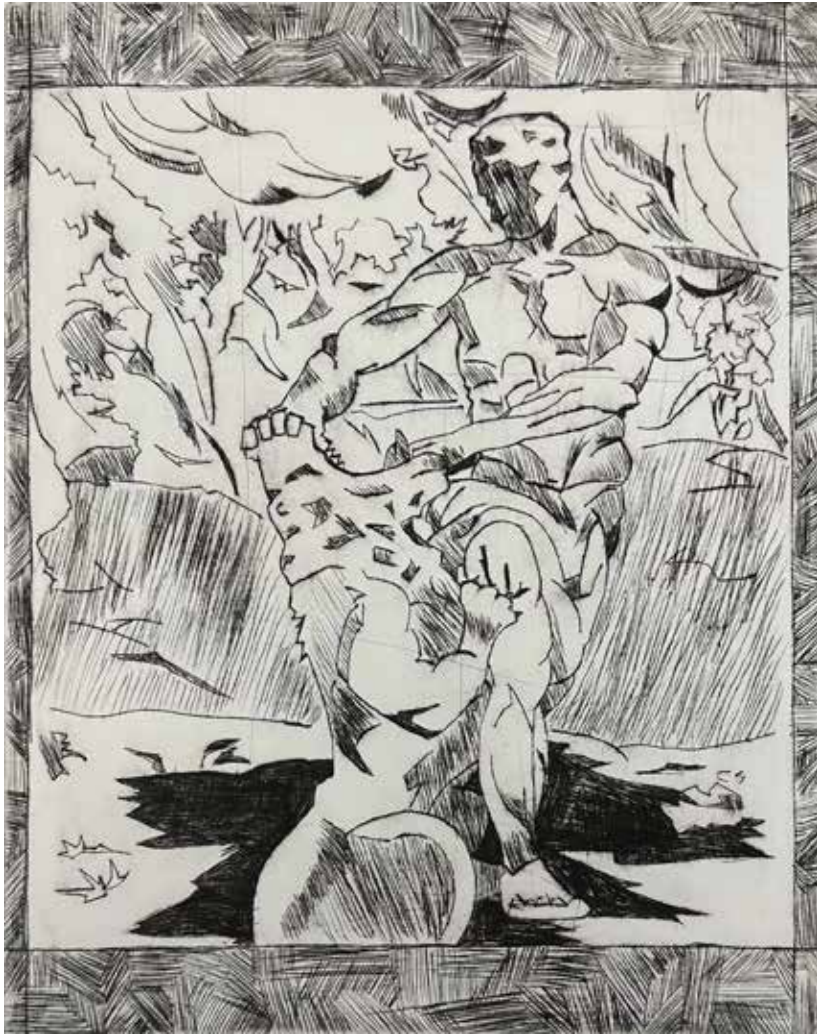
Digital Photography

Fairy Row Houses



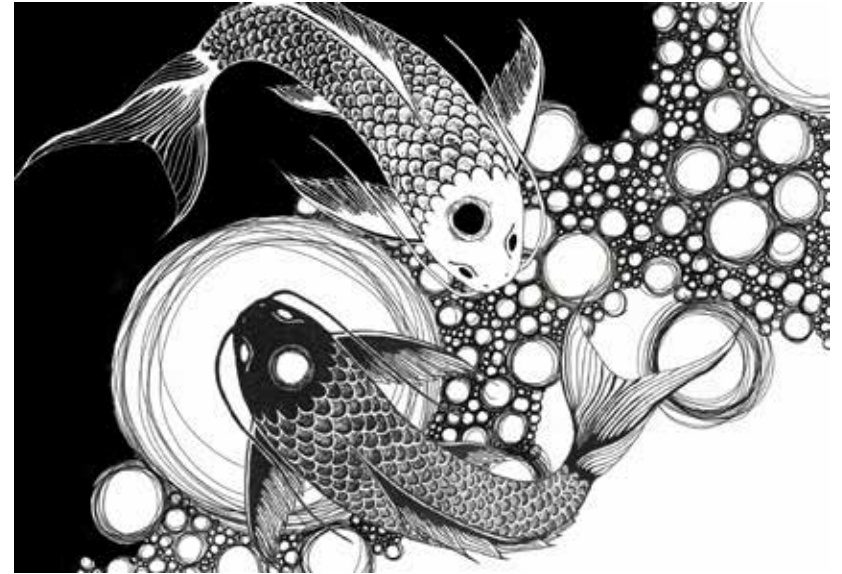
Mixed Media and Acrylic Paint 8" x 12"

Strength vs. the Lion



Etched Monotype

Harmony



Ballpoint Pen, Digital

contributors' notes

Mykie Allen is a 22-year-old living in Phoenix, Arizona. She is studying the Korean language in university.

ApriLove, a lifelong educator and advocate for the underrepresented, resides in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. An accomplished poet and voice-over artist, ApriLove finds inspiration in everyday life.

Deborah Araujo is a full-time student at Howard Community College, where she is pursuing a degree in communications. She is an artist, writer, photographer, and environmental enthusiast.

Carolyn Arney, the Food Pantry Manager at HCC, also teaches horseback riding at Morningside Stables at the Columbia Horse Center. She loves photographing horses and their humans.

Ashleigh Ashburn is a VisualArts major at Howard Community College. Through her art, she invites viewers to peer into the overlooked corners of life, to look from the outside in, to illuminate the beauty of the mundane.

Mohamed Bah is a student at Howard Community College who is currently majoring in General Studies STEM. As he navigates through his college years, Mohamed's love for writing knows no bound.

Maia Barrett is a writer and student at Howard Community College. Her major is undecided for she is a lifelong learner—and a Gemini.

Bronwyn E. A. Bates 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.

Robin Blasberg's stories often make connections in unanticipated ways. Expect the unexpected because clever twists and surprise endings are trademarks of her work.

Katherine Brawdy is an Howard Community College student currently majoring in Liberal Arts. She fell in love with writing in 7th grade English class and hopes to write and publish books one day

William Brown is currently enrolled at Howard College working towards a general studies degree. He has a long background in art, as well as an extensive background in commercial printing.

Ari Cardoza is a mixed-media artist who emphasizes anti-establishment themes and street culture and wants to push the boundaries set in the art world.

Roger Chang is a retired US Army Colonel writing a memoir *Helping Keep the Cold War Cold*, which addresses the President's Key Intelligence Question that led to the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty.

Imaan Walker is an artist of any and all art forms. There will never be enough time to experience all of life's paths so Imaan Walker writes so that his readers can live through all of life.

Rosemary Fitzgerald is a retired technical writer; she took her first creative writing class in the Fall 2023 semester. Rosemary enjoys writing poetry, art, and photography.

Amber Floyd is a dual enrollment student at Howard Community College. Their art takes a deep dive into the language of self-concept and allows the viewer to connect with their pieces.

Yifei Gan is a Professor of Art at Howard Community College, Independent Artist, and a Curator.

Derson Gilson is a 20-year-old student at Howard Community College majoring in Communications.

Pattie Holy-Ilanda is a warm-hearted person, loyal and loving. She has a heart for animals and gets a kick out of teaching middle schoolers. She lives in Glenwood with her husband and favorite musician, Pete.

Meang Jang is a part-time visual arts student and a retired nurse. She returned to the campus to live her new chapter in life as an artist who could bring joy to herself and others through her art.

Ricky Jones is passionate about the human experience. Much of the work they've been inspired by has always tapped into how to define and conduct themselves in the world and finding meaning. They enjoy absurdism too.

Amanda Joseph is 19 years old and enjoys writing and other creative works. She is currently a mathematics major in college and hopes to pursue business in the future.

Griffin Karkowski is a 1st-year student at Howard Community College. He plans on majoring in illustration to create works similar to the graphic novels that have inspired him since childhood.

Amirat Khalid hails from northern Nigeria and began her entrepreneurial journey at the age of four, overcoming cultural challenges. She is a proponent of gender equality.

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

Nikki Kreizel is a student at Howard Community College majoring in social sciences, with hopes of becoming a licensed therapist.

Minh Le is an aspiring author and pastry chef who has been writing since they were a child. They specialize in fantasy and horror, all queer in theme. This will be the first time they share a work.

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

Writer and educator, **Candace Lunn** has lived and worked in Baltimore, NYC, and Seoul. Each place she travels to leaves an indelible print on her worldview and the people who inhabit her stories.

Sabrina Matoff-Stepp has been writing poetry for many years. Her poems reflect the integration of nature and life experiences. She is a public health professional and loves to spend time outdoors.

Annika McCormick lives and works in Maryland. In school, teachers pushed her to explore different media and she began making in pen. Her work mostly deals with mental health and human connection.

Kitty Morgan is a student in the visual arts program at Howard Community College and Towson and was recently accepted to Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). Kitty's "soulmate" is beloved Scottish Fold cat, Mimzy.

Bianka Padilla is a student at Howard Community College. She has a passion for writing poetry, singing, and producing music. She is always learning Reiki Healing and is an artist at Bentley Records.

Shaunak Patil is an aspiring director and writer who also dabbles in photography here and there.

Taylor Peppers has been an occasional student at Howard Community College on and off for the last 10 years. He is pleased to be so again, pursuing his passions of acting and writing.

An English major at Howard Community College, **Maria Rew** enjoys writing stories about queerness and desire. Maria lives in Howard County with two fur babies/partners in crime, Schuyler and Guido.

Felix Rivers enjoys creating in every way, from writing, to art, to film.

Zoë Robinson is a digital artist majoring in general education, but she also dabbles in traditional media. She often depicts characters either experiencing intense emotions, or in a calmer setting.

Josie Skiles is a visual arts student at Howard Community College with an interest in a wide spread of mediums—primarily collage, printmaking, animation, and poetry.

Known for her creative personality and talents, **Nadajeyh Stephen** enjoys writing as a way to express her emotions and capture important moments in her life.

Naw Lilian Tapa is a Maryland based artist and currently planning to transfer to UMBC. Originally from Myanmar, Lilian likes to work with graphic design tools mixed with traditional art style.

Jenn Todd is a process-oriented miniature mixed media artist who is visually impaired. Works are bold, bright and textured little bits of whimsy and motion. Clemson Univ. '92, Artfully Yours, Just Jenn Todd

Josh Wallace is a current student at Howard Community College. Josh is a social science major who plans to study psychology in the future. Josh enjoys creative writing.

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

Cecelia Wilson is an African American female who resides in Maryland. She lives with her daughter and four cats. Writing is her passion; she has two eBooks published on Amazon.

Edwin Wu is a multidisciplinary writer and student born in Brooklyn, New York, and grew up in suburban Maryland. In his works, he aims to explore topics pertaining to identity, sexuality, and race. Authors like Eckhart Tolle and Octavia E. Butler heavily influence the narrative behind his work along with his thoughts on cultural heritage. He is presently pursuing his social science associate's degree at Howard Community College.



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

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

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Submit to issue.23

Deadline: March 1, 2025

Visit HowardCC.edu/TheMuse for submission guidelines.

Once upon a time, night falls from the sky, glides off
blue and gold space, where an ensemble of characters fly,
the angels and artists pull her off the ground.

—Sabrina Matoff-Stepp, from “Circle of the Sun”