

The Muse

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The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

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“Spark of Hope” by Erin Kline

This issue’s theme of “Hope” was inspired by the 2025 HCC Bauder Lecture Series book, *Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo, and voted upon by students of creative writing.

The Muse is proud to publish for the first time the winning entries for the Don Bauder Student Awards: “A Place I’ve Never Been” by Kelis Drummond and “Acceptance” by Ebene N. Simmons, which placed first in the Essay and Creative Expression categories respectively.

Also for the first time, student writing accepted for publication in this issue of *The Muse* has been provided to *The HCC Times*. The newspaper editors can publish any of these pieces as they choose in their upcoming issues to increase the audience and impact of students’ literary expression.



Hope is a Joke (But I'm Still Telling It)

As a teenager, all I can do in a world that I largely cannot control is hope. I hope that I can get into college. I hope that I can afford a house one day. I can't control the future or the past, but I can hope for change. However, I, like most people, forget to hope for others. When I blow on a dandelion or an eyelash, I wish for myself and for solutions to my own problems. When I find a lucky penny or four-leaf clover, I don't give them to someone else. Instead, I hold on, hoping that those charms will help me achieve my own dreams.

But the one thing I should do in a world that feels out of control is to hope for others. We should learn to invest our hopes in recovery for the victims of wars, plane crashes, and wildfires, in resources for the ill, in comfort and inspiration for the anxious. Maybe artistic expression and creation is how we find our way towards learning how to connect with, think about, and feel for others. When we contribute to a publication like this one, or curiously look through its pages to experience and be moved by the writing and visual arts, we are investing in empathy and hope.

Stories, whether told with words or visual media, matter. We hope that the clown fish can find his son, Nemo, despite not having the outcome affect our own lives in any way, despite not even being fish. We hope, every single time we see it, that Forrest will get Bubba home safe and back to his family. Most people express more emotion about their favorite characters on a daily basis than about real people affected by daily global events; we can choose to be distracted and try to forget that right now there are real fathers losing their sons and soldiers losing their friends. But that doesn't mean we can't learn to let our experiences with art help us empathize more with the real pain and emotions that other people feel. Visual art and stories created by fellow human beings are amazing and accessible windows into other people's minds, letting us walk a little while in someone else's shoes.

Hope can feel hard to find right now, especially for people my age who don't have any memories of particularly positive world events. I don't remember a V-Day, a global triumph, or an inspiring election. It's hard to believe that the people in charge care about my best interests. My generation has proven to be perceptive about the narratives that are fed to us and are able to reframe stories to

expose their angles and biases. However, this knowledge does not make us entirely cynical in facing an uncertain future. Ask anyone in Generation Z about what makes them hopeful: the quickest response will be "nothing." But wait another beat, and you're likely to get a funny, satirical response with clever cultural allusions to both popular and classic art and stories. It's the ceaseless impulse to create, express, and share even under dark circumstances that gives hope to a generation that finds no inspiration in current realities. As Stephen Colbert said, "I've got hope for the future. Mostly because I've run out of ideas for the present."

—Bella Horvath, *dual enrollment student at Wilde Lake High School and Howard Community College and staff writer at The HCC Times.*



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Love's Lament

They placed a veil to sunder us,
stitched of silence, woven in warning.
Yet still, we reach—
not by sight, but by knowing and feeling.

You were the rib I was torn from,
the missing piece that fits.
not by force, but by fate.
Our faces align in unseen symmetry,
every hollow met by a curve,
every crevice furnished by warmth.

They forbade us from proclivity.
plastered our picture on a wall,
writing that love like ours shall never touch.
But what is distance to those
who were carved from the same bone?
What is fate if not a thread
pulling us closer, even unseen?

So we kiss through the fabric,
defiant from their authority.
This is no barrier,
this is a reclamation;
a love not silenced, only rewritten.

Another World

The world is full of noises
loud, sharp, heavy—
but I am not a part of it
I am where the lines take me,
where the graphite speaks
and the paper listens.

My hands move,
curving to the rhythm of the pencil
the noises fade, slowly but surely
they turn from a bustling world,
to one of curves, lines, shapes
a world where only gentle whispers are heard.

Here, everything goes still
a world where everything turns into shadows and strokes,
curves and corners,
where I don't have to think,
where I can only feel the weight of the pencil,
and the smoothness of the paper.

The world still exists,
but I enter into another dimension,
one just for me,
one that will comply with the orders of my hands,
and the thoughts of my mind.

Lullaby

Your love is like a lullaby,
Love of mine.

You linger like a lovely night,
Languid skies.

Evening's gentle glow shines starlight on your face,
Creasing skin forms constellations, soft like outer space.

Finally found a shooting star in endless rings of cold debris.

Melodies, melodies,
Words you say like melodies,

Sing to me, sing to me,
Vowels forming symphonies,

Fall asleep, fall asleep,
Fade away and into me

Shortcake

Found discarded abandoned forgotten in a thrift store bin
Now high on the shelves
Beatific, these baby saints smile down like the Basilica
No longer played with, no longer touched
Strawberry blueberry orange blossom angel cake vanilla lemon
 meringue still linger
Faint, the smell buried in their colored hair.
Who will love you when I forget you?

On Still Being Here

We are still here
 Creating
 Living
 Making love and making mistakes
 We are in action
 Kinetic kin
 Family in motion
 Changing and still
 Here
 In the walls
 In the crust
 Embroidered in America's bloody tapestry
 We - - a "beautiful" in this ugly

We are overworked and overwhelmed
 We are Black and White learning to love our colors
 Finding togetherness in the blues
 We are broke but never broken
 Writing our story one day at a time
 The "great free-write of existence"

Isn't that the point;
 To leave a mark without leaving a trace? To be better while making it
 better?

Be a smile
 Be a simile, something to like
 Be a stranger's adventure and next wrinkled memory
 Time knows our next stop
 The ticket—bought well before we jumped this ride
 See the sights and enjoy every fall
 It will pass
 As will we

Learn the flavor by taking the first bite

How sweet to know this meal won't last?
 How lucky are we to have it together?!
 Let's share breath like an atmosphere
 Dig in the dirt and plant a lifeline
 Wash ourselves with the same water that washed our Grand's hatred
 away
 A timeline blended by choice and circumstance
 Friendly faces—parallel strides in this marathon
 Still in motion
 Still moving
 Still breathing
 Still and yet anything but

We die - - still
 But still - - we live

My great-grandmother lies still
 Moves me to tears
 My uncle lies still
 Moves me to take the body and craft a living
 Monica. Mary. Sylvia. Yvonne. Hydeia -- all lay still
 And I am moved

Be memory in flesh
 A fight to win
 A forever gaze locked

Don't be chains
 Don't be locks or cell or punishment - - retribution

Be justice
 A call and demand for equity
 Be the equity
 Be a book cracked
 A door opened and warm meal served

Be love flooding the unexpected sands
An oasis for the weary “we.”

Be we

For we are still here
Everywhere we have always been
Everywhere we are going to be. Always
In all the tiny places
The subtle instances we pretend not to notice
The micro-perfections in our day-to-day mundane
There we are
In the dust
The eyelash blown -- the inkling to look for the clover
We are the pot of gold and the rainbow
And the rain -- the sunset before
We are the growth

There is always room for growth
And there is always room for us.

Love is Sickly

love is a sickly thing
like a fresh hatched egg, gooey and mewling
it is to be cared for, tended to and cherished
until the time is right
and then it must be killed with a rock
smashed with a single startle of surprise
splat

We Signed Up

19 years old in the desert with a gun.
Greenery and color more abundant than expected.
45 pounds of armor and equipment.
Hashish and tobacco smells accompany us wafting from our Afghani
brothers.
Scanning near and far, head on a swivel.
Every step, every mound of dirt could be your last.
I signed up for this.
“Snap, crack, hiss”
Bullets whizz by kicking up mounds of dirt and “ping” off our truck.
Take cover, shoot back.
If it moves, it will be shot.
As quickly as it began, it’s over.
No one yells “Corpsman!”
Not this time.
Tomorrow we’ll do it again.
And the next day.
And the next.
We signed up for this.

If Not Us

We ride a rock that’s
screaming ‘round a ball of fire.

Without it, the void would be just that,
and who would know existence, if not us?

Acceptance

Winner of the 2025 Don Bauder Student Award for Creative Expression

Let her show you who she is.

Don't yearn to make her more accountable and acceptable.

You must accept how she represents herself.

How she is selective with who she memorializes, who she gives credit
to, who she

dignifies, and who she dehumanizes.

Forcing her people to always try to find a way through and never a
way out, so often

that it is commonplace.

Trying to understand her wild and wicked ways will only make you
mad.

For that is for her to unravel.

For she is all the sins of this world.

The Forest

A

tree

grows.

A rabbit

hops. An

owl turns to

food and takes

off. A deer snorts.

A hunter stalks. A

bird cries when she

takes the shot. A miss,

she hits a tree's bark. And

The tree

grows tall

around

the hole.

Reminiscent of Human Singing

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have spent much of the last four and a half years listening to and re-composing the sounds made by humpback whales, learning and thinking about cetaceans and their culture.

—Dr. Alex South, Zoömusicologist

In their alphabet
a grace note means
This sea of ours is a gift,
is what makes us birds.

A shift to a minor key
signifies the tenderness
of grief, implying that whether
built of glass or clay, hearts
will break.

Of course, their major key
vocalizations are praise songs
not to eternity (which whales,
like us, cannot perceive) but
to unity, which is akin.

Amethyst Cry

(You want Apache tear arrow heads)
I can recall all the times
I remember but can't put into words
I prefer to be gentle so I lose them over
and over and over
like you're never precise
like you'll never know life

Fate

Sometimes I feel like a canary in a coalmine
my survival dependent on those around me
Other times, I am a cockroach
no matter how hard you try, I am
never
truly
gone

Conflicting Tides

How do you rewire your brain,
To see a rainbow?

When you recall learning,
only shades of blue and pink
remembering when it's all you knew
Still stuck reeling from new
colors you now see and *love*.

Pink now blends with blue to make
Purple, Lavender, Navy, and more
do many colors to explore

But every part of your soul
revolts against the mere idea
ripping your morals against hot coals

Spun around you are
realizing your pink has blue hues
terrified about this new world
Means to you.

And how you feel about it
being hunted like rabbits.
Revolting and unfair

Religious hymns play alongside
rebellious loud pop
You cover ears
wishing the raging would stop
Feeling yourself rift

How do you rewire your brain,
To see a rainbow?

You kiss them.

Desire is a Mother

and i'm the bastard born of hunger.
i covet, i creep,
i lust, i long,
She latches my lips
to Her cruel Bosom sweet;
i corrupt, i crave,
i press, i plead!,
thrust from the Nest,
am i drunk? or fin'ly freed...

you know, *satiety's a lie,*
satisfaction but a stasis—
a tomorrow sans a Tension is surely no oasis.
so i bloody my knees as i search and i seek:
Desire's a Mother!
and a motherfucker to wreak.

Piano Lessons

Give me back the piano that my father used.
That is where his sorrow lives
and why it was always out of tune.
He stored his secrets between the keys—
a rim of regret to hold them in place.
The keyboard reeks of pain;
a rhythm of doubt fills the air—
230 songs of fear that never found a way out.

Give me back the piano that my father used.
Maybe then I can catch the teardrops
of the little boy who knew too much,
saw too much, feared too much, too soon.
I will not shame you for letting pride be your therapy.
It was all you could afford.

Give me back the piano my father used.
This time, I will not be too blind to listen.
This time I will dust off the bitterness.
I'm sorry that it was too heavy to carry.
I will shake that piano until it spills
all your forgotten stories.
I will collect them like fireflies in a jar
and send them to the sea.
Did you worry about me resembling you?
You don't have to worry; my piano is in tune.

The Seventh Flavor of Quarks

I've been thinking a lot about quantum lately. I'm not sure if it's me or if I am part of some collective shift in thinking or in behavior. But lately I'm seeing the transfer of energy and light between us. From my microcosm of the world—the grocery store where I work as a clerk—the behavior of customers and my interactions with them are different, possibly as some consequence of quantum.

—Mary Ann D'Urso, "The Grocery Stories: Quantum physics kindness"
The Boston Globe, 22 December 2020

What if we loved each other
on sight, saw the silvery fibers
of every being we encountered,
assumed that strangers & even
nemeses contain chandeliers of
such soft pink blossoms, strands
of such golden carnival beads
within them?

We might also love one another
sight unseen (however bizarre it
might sound), elevating no one,
seeing no trench between anyone.

Perceiving creation with mothering
eyes such as these, we might notice
that no detail of any lifeform is unseemly
or irrelevant, then trace this knowledge
back home to our own bright souls.

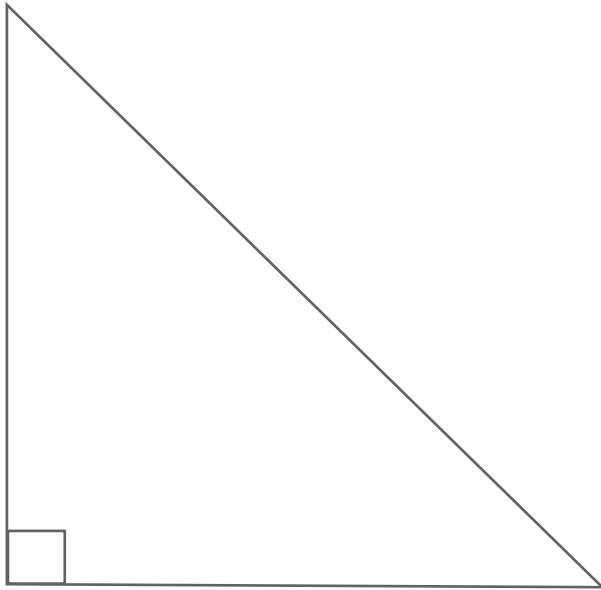
Could we radiate such kindness
as this?

Grief Has an Arc

Grief has an arc
It begins small and feeble and slow
Grows to be a great and terrible agony
And carves into you like so many
Like so much
Hurt
But the pain
It comes and goes
Like waves of broken glass
Until it comes to rest
Like an ache
Constant
soft

The Pythagorean Poem

Hope.



'tis

an untethered gift,

No Time to Get By

I can feel it

They say my system is overloaded (in my head my system is overloaded)

My body is here on earth

But I'm still floating

Disconnected by the world

So sometimes I feel frozen

No time to deny it

Is there such a ladder

To get above this?

Maybe I should ground myself

Where the mud is.

Me, Myself, & We

/when i looked

at the mirror, know what came to mind? not me, not you, not them-

/when i looked

at the mirror, *we* came to mind.

/when i looked

at myself

and then

/when i looked

at you and everyone else, my eyes were painted in the hue of selfish comparison. I couldn't stop my craving for narcotic self-flattery, for forging the highly colored delusions that my mind gave flesh to. My blood rushed past humbleness and instead drained me of modesty, to give a pulse to self-adulation. I was diseased, with a fever allowing me to live in a hallucination of vanity without jealousy, a world where- oh so egoistically- I was not part of the human bodies and experience that form life. No, I was another type of human.

I couldn't stop thinking about you and them and thinking

/when i looked

at you and them and everyone else,

I really couldn't understand why you were complaining or crying or yelling about: What, failing all your classes? Easy answer, start studying and stop complaining. What, in an abusive relationship? Obvious answer, end it and stop crying. What, have a brother with a temper inflamed by addiction? Simple answer, get him help and stop yelling.

But then

/when i looked

at *myself* in the mirror, know what came to mind?

There was the physical evident

a girl with black hair, with slanted eyes and a round moon face, hovering in the "shorter than average" mark, with a perpetual expression of ambiguity with

distaste and consternation resting on her brow, and when she smiled at herself

it wasn't pure, it wasn't natural, not to her subconscious, it was the smile one shows when one is drugged and when thoughts grow mutilated bodies.

And there was the mental, societal evident

a girl who cannot stop doing too much to display her knowledge, a girl who always writes too much, uses too big words, a girl who has already tasted the fruit of "won at life and won over others," but also

(a girl with privilege)

yet sometimes that round moon face and slanted eyes and black hair turned into the face she despised for its asianness, for its broad nose and soft cheeks, its monolid eyes, (a girl with entitlement)

sometimes that ability to be sophisticated and be considered intelligent turned into the factor for her isolation, cutting her off from the municipal fun of others her age, and rendering her someone who hated and could never have real fun,

(a girl with a conflicted duality)

sometimes she wanted to rage and let loose the monsters inside her most resentful

thoughts, and yet...

other times she wanted to cry and ask for forgiveness for what she had become.

and again

/when i thought

about you, you who wanted to upend their end of stability and sanity; because of choices you made landing you in a spot of apathetic stagnation, the sort that I loathed and feared the most, crawling with the maggots drawn to the stench of procrastination, and idleness immediately the dread pierced me,

the *what ifs* and the *suppose thats*,

because what ever did I know about despair and being drunk in

misery? I had never tried the drug
of laziness and of indifference, no, I was on a high from the drug of a
workaholic's dream.

but

/when i thought

about our paths, how astonished was I to discover if I had changed a
few of my thoughts
opinions
words actions-
to a slightly different path,
one that would indulge in the childlike necessities of pleasure and the
desperate want to slacken self-mocking and self-punishment,
I would have likely been in that spot of "apathetic stagnation,"
and if the person had made some of the decisions
that *i* had made in the end,
we would have had reversed roles!

/when i thought

more about this incident and others,
I uncovered the terrifying but humbling truth of it all.
you and *i*, we are not so different in essentiality!
Just a few different choices, a few different looks, a few different
letters that slipped through our lips, a few different signals that
moved our fingertips.
If I had instead set down my self-burden for a single day, if I had
instead chosen a path of that tilted away from gambling my sanity on
getting a 97% and above in every class and stopped trying to put my
self down when I never accomplished what I knew was impossible-
If I had instead lent some of my body heat back to me at 10, when
I was still carefree, stopped thinking all children as impractical and
scoffing at my own useless childhood, If I had instead been delighted
by the smallest things,
If I had instead called *myself* phenomenal and not my ambitions
If you had exploited yourself to the rigorous rubric that I exposed
myself to .

i would have been *you*

and
you would have been *me*
and
we would still have been individualized.

/when i realized

what this meant,
and how embarrassingly indifferent and naively derivative I had been,
in regarding *you* as foolish and banishing all thoughts of grace to folly,
why, it is simply remarkable, the scope of human ignorance and self-
deception,
the mirror came back to mind.

I wondered, I did, about what I would see, when I looked at myself in
the mirror again. I wondered, I did, about what I would see, now that
when I look at you and them and everyone else, I see
myself.

so,
i trudged back to the mirror to see
and

/when i looked

at the reflection can you guess what I saw?

/when i looked

at the mirror, know what came to mind? Not me, not you, not them-

/when i looked

at the mirror, *we* came to mind.

Emerging Now

How I feel about you is something
Something awkward
But yet so beautiful
As though a hundred fields collapse and grow at once
So stop
All at once
And grow

Coming Home

The telephone poles stand tall
like suppliant stance statues
holding up words on wire,
the electric joy, high above the lines,
the airplanes make their final descent,
coming close, we can see wheel wells glisten,
family faces pressed close to the windows, coming home after
a long journey, rain falls pure on green trees.
The telephone poles stand tall for the next time.

My Summer Cookout Mustard Flag

I remember what ‘safe’ feels like. Safe feels green, like the color of relish on my hotdog at a summer cookout, like sitting in summer sun with a full-but-not-too-full belly. I remember I like that feeling. Safe. I remember feeling like that around you ... And lately I remember not feeling like that around you.

I remember almost as soon as we became friends how you would nudge my foot with the toe of your sneaker all the time, and you thought it was cute. I remember how each nudge and tap from you really felt like a question. I remember that question was, “how close to you can I get?”

And I remember the nudges kept coming, and you know it didn’t take long for each nudge to feel like a yellow flag; I guess like the color of mustard.

Did you know, I used to hate mustard? I feel like friends should know that. At a cookout I would never let the mustard bottle get near my hotdog. But you know, as time went by and the more I tried it, and I saw how so many other people had it on their hotdog, I thought you know maybe I could like it a little. And every now and then it would find its way on my plate.

And it wasn’t so bad.

I remember how time grew like a shadow in June. Like when you’re at that summer cookout, and the sun is so warm, and nice, and then the wind blows and that feels even more amazing ... but you know how when the wind blows, the clouds move too; so the sun ends up getting a little covered up. And it’s still warm out because you’re in the middle of June, but things get darkened. Just a little bit.

And just like a shadow in June, I remember your yellow flags darkened. Just a little bit.

I remember the constant texts from you. And I remember them almost never coming from my phone, yet always filling up my phone. And it was always things that were meant to make me smile or laugh or giggle ... but I remember how every now and then you would say something that made me feel like it was not June at all, and all of a sudden I was in the middle of December.

Nobody has cookouts in the middle of December, did you know?

And in December you don’t need clouds to cover up the sun because the sun is just too far away to make a difference; it’s just cold. And remember how, when the breeze blows in December and it feels like a cold knife, it can really steal your breath away?...

But then just like that we were back in June with slightly cloudy skies, and you’d send me another really cute picture of your dog, and even though we’re back in June it still feels like there’s a cold knife at my throat and I don’t feel like smiling or laughing or giggling.

But I know that’s not right, because after June comes July and everyone knows July is sunnier and brighter and even warmer... So why is the breeze colder and why is it getting darker?

I think it must be global warming or some weird weather phenomenon. But soon enough the clouds cast a shadow over your yellow flag and now Chick-fil-A sauce was waving in the wind.

And I’d just gotten used to the taste of mustard.

And, you know, when I think about it I really do like Chick-fil-A sauce anyway; I mean, don’t get me wrong I used to hate the stuff because it kind of tasted like mustard ... but everyone loves Chick-fil-A, right? So I guess I got used to it, and you know it’s pretty good too.

Especially when you put smiles or laughs or giggles over it.

Have you ever seen a flag blowing on a breezy day?

It’s impossible to predict how it will move. Is it gonna ripple slowly? Or twist fast? You don’t know. And all you do know is that it’s going to move and you just don’t know how. But that’s okay, right? A little unpredictability is good.

Oh, and did you know that Chick-fil-A also carries Polynesian sauce? Some people like it even more than Chick-fil-A sauce. Turns out you did too.

If You Saw It All

A patch of skin on my brow felt hot. Not quite uncomfortable but still standing out. The professor dismissed the class, and I gathered my things and made to leave. I began to feel a slight dizziness halfway towards the door and longed to drive home and finally relax. Peering up at the nowadays rare analog clock above the door, I watched that tiny red seconds hand. *Tick*. I faltered. Someone bumped into me from behind. Another *tick* from the hand. I never stopped watching. The dizziness became overwhelming. I heard the person behind me suck in a breath to speak. Another *tick* from the hand.

The classroom was gone. I stood in front of an open grave, surrounded by mourners. I looked up and felt a stiffness to my movement, like the muscles and bones were tired. A hand slotted into my own. I turned to see an older man I did not know gazing down at me, his eyes red from apparent grief. I wanted to release his hand, to back away. This scene was alien. I recognized nothing here. But something in me felt compelled to maintain the grip on his hand, to stand my ground. I turned back to the grave and was finally met with something that I knew. My mother's name was chiseled into the headstone. Another *tick* from the hand.

A ragged, involuntary gasp began in my chest. The person that bumped into me in the classroom began to speak words that I did not register. My head spun, my brow now burned. Though in this confusion, my eyes never left the clock. Another *tick* from the hand.

The TV was loud in front of me. Some kids show was on. My attention was focused solely on the screen. The show seemed familiar, something from my childhood I couldn't remember the name of. My body refused to look away but my mind was reeling. I didn't understand what this was. My panicked fretting was quickly redirected however. My dog came running into the room, coming over to me and licking my leg. The leg of a child. Licked by my dog that died years ago. Another *tick* from the hand.

The gasp exited my chest. I stumbled into the corner of one of the classroom tables. The man behind me made a noise of surprise, I think he reached out to catch me. My vision had been ripped from

the clock by the stumble. But I still knew when another *tick* came from the hand.

I sat at a table, some pasta in front of me. A man was on the other side of the table eating the same. The room was a small kitchen. It somehow felt cozy and my mind paused for this compressed moment of time. The man across from me looked like a younger version of the man from the funeral. Before I could do anything however, the moment was gone. I was in a bedroom. The man was sitting on the bed in front of me. I felt a whirlwind of rage in my body for some reason. The man's face was contorted in a reflection of that same emotion. I felt the strain of yelling deep in my chest. But it all changed once again. I was in a hospital room. My hand was being squeezed by that man—or rather, I was squeezing his. The worst pain I could ever imagine was shooting through my body from somewhere down by my middle. But now I was in my teenage bedroom. And in a grocery store checkout lane. And in the shower under a stream of hot water. And at the bedside of a dying man. And in an office seated in front of a computer. And squinting at headlights on a highway. And on and on. A life flashed before my eyes. My life.

Scene after scene, sensation after sensation, emotion after emotion. In a second, I had witnessed years. Until it stopped. I stood in the embrace of the man I learned was my husband. In the living room of a house I would raise my children in. We swayed to a song from before either of us were born. My body was compelled in a way I had come to realize was the scene playing out. I looked up into his face and felt a small smile form on mine. He stood back half a step and, holding my face, he kissed my brow in the silence of the room as the song ended. His lips felt hot. I felt a warm, dizzy sensation in my mind for a moment. Another *tick* from the hand.

A hand grabbed me before I could completely fall against the desk. I composed myself, or at least tried to. Hyperventilating, my brow hot, and the dizziness starting to abate, I snapped my head to the clock. I watched that tiny red hand *tick* again. And nothing changed. The class continued their departure. I regained my balance. I turned around to see the man that bumped into me. It felt like it

happened years ago. I saw the man that sat at the table in front of me in class, worry painted on his face. The man I saw myself marry, and watch get buried. He opened his mouth to speak, but I sucked in a breath and cut him off before he could get a sound out; “If you saw your life play out before you, if you saw it all, would you still go on?” He looked confused, but I just stared at him. After a few moments, he quietly whispered, “yes,” with truth to his tone.

As we walked out of the classroom, I looked up at the clock and watched as the hand went *tick* again. And again. And again.

The Last \$20

I already knew what was in my wallet before I even checked. One wrinkled twenty-dollar bill, a few dimes, and an old receipt. I pulled out the cash, flattening it in my hand like that would somehow make it feel like more.

The gas station smelled like burnt coffee and something metallic. Half-expecting the clerk to glance up, I pushed the bill across the counter, knowing this was my only option until the following week. But he just took it, punched a few buttons, and handed me back some ones and coins that barely felt like anything in my palm.

My parents used to make twenty dollars stretch like magic. A gallon of milk, a bag of rice, a week’s worth of meals planned down to the last slice of bread. My mom could turn canned beans and a little seasoning into something that tasted like home. My dad knew which gas stations had the cheapest fuel, even if it meant coasting on fumes to get there. They made do, always.

At the pump, I watched the numbers climb. \$5.00. \$10.00. \$15.00. I exhaled slowly, hoping the gas would last longer than it ever actually did. The pump clicked off at \$18.64. That left me with a little over a dollar—not enough to matter, but not nothing, either.

Driving home, I pressed my foot lighter on the gas, as if that could make it last. The needle barely budged. I imagined my dad next to me, nodding at the way I’d learned to drive with just enough pressure, just enough caution. Maybe that was the trick all along—not making the money stretch, but making the space between worry and survival feel wide enough to breathe.

By the time I pulled into my parking spot, my tank wasn’t full, but I wasn’t on empty either. And for now, that had to be enough.

As the Crow Flies

The human did not even see it coming. It was distracted, enjoying its cold food on a triangular item. In one moment, it regarded Remus with little suspicion, and the next it was cursing the skies as Remus took flight. It had a very shiny, very light object in its pocket, perfect for the collection. Humans very rarely looked after their precious little things when birds were around, assuming them simple beasts. Remus was smart for a bird, but not *too* smart, and didn't let his own cleverness make him cocky (in part because roosters were *insufferable*). While the bauble was held in high regard in Remus's flock, it held little esteem in his mind. Remus had his heart set on other trinkets, things he loved: flat and round copper bits.

Remus knew that they were valuable, but not *too* valuable. The humans called them "pennies" or "coins." Humans exchanged them for goods, but didn't fret over losing a few. They were appreciated in small ways, to the humans, and in small ways to his fellow crows. They padded the trove the flock kept. Yet, Remus loved them most of all, not for any utility reason (although they made a fine sound when thrown), but for the joy of finding them. His very first coin was a gift from his mate when they first were courting. It became a game between the two of them to see who could bring the most interesting coins back, coins that carried stories. A most mischievous game that she won all too often. Not that Remus minded, her little hops of triumph inspired little hops of his own.

There were rules when bringing gifts back to the great nest. First, and foremost, items of interest must be shared with the deserving. He could tell by the gleam in his mate's eye and the tender manner she held it in her beak that each little coin mattered to her. Thus, Remus began to save pennies for his most precious friends, as he saved the best for his most precious mate. Remus was particularly fond of a small human that offers bits of its breaded snack to him when it plays outside. It has the same kind eyes his mate did, eyes that look after what was precious to it. The bigger human does not see fit to supervise it much, so Remus and the little human play hide and seek in its little playhouse. The little human loves to pet him, and he enjoys it greatly, but not *too* greatly. He leaves it offerings of pennies

in the little playhouse and on the sides of its sandbox. It is a friend of the crows, and thus showered with the greatest of treasures.

Second, and very important, is that when a surplus is found, they must always be shared through the mischiefs, murders, and conspiracies. The coins are some of the most prolific of treasures, and to add to the hoard is to regale their flock with much deserved riches. Crows and magpies were in a never-ending rivalry to collect the most copper and silver coins. Many standoffs were waged at empty water fountains, but the crows were coming out ahead by just a hair. Magpies were bigger, and thus could carry more coins at a time, but crows were clever. Ravens cared not for the standoffs, and simply cherished their boons when found.

Third, but notable, they were *shiny*. How can any corvid or avian resist something so beautiful? They didn't glint the same way the silver ones did, which was fine, because there were many more of the silver slivers in different sizes and roundness. But the little bronze ones? Perfect for himself and his fellow birds. Rare, unguarded, valuable, but not *too* valuable. This was very important to Remus. You can't steal things that will be missed often. The humans were large and, quite frankly, a little dumb, but not *too* dumb.

Remus returned to his flock's nesting ground, settled within a hole in a building where humans have not saw fit to reside in quite some time. It suits his own just fine, though. He dropped his addition, taken from the man with the cold treat, to the pile of trinkets, some shiny, some an interesting shape, some offered by friends of the crows. To the rafters he flew next, where he hid away the most precious coins he'd collected, nestled in between the down and twigs he and his mate had built many summers ago. They were lucky, they were magic, they were *his*. Although they were cold when he first settled into his nest, they grew warm over time.

One, two, three, four. He kept only the best for himself, and his nest. Not the shiniest, not the roundest, not the flattest. The ones found on sidewalks, on the sides of buildings, in fountains. The ones the humans wished on before flicking into the water, the ones that made them smile when they had just the right amount, the ones that

made them feel lucky to find. The stories behind the coins were what made them special, they were the ones that mattered most to his love. Although his feathers were beginning to dull, and his eyes did not see as far, he had one more perfect coin to collect. One more coin, and he'll have the same number of pennies as he had summers with his mate. Although she had not returned to the flock in two winters, he was sure that when he found the last coin, she would come home with one of her own to add to their nest. It was late autumn, *but it was never too late.*

What's Been Eating You?

There is a sound I hate more than anything at all in the world. It is a dull, metallic cracking sound, ending in a wet thud, and it is the sound of my father making breakfast every morning from 2977 until I moved out in the early noughties. My father was, and perhaps still is, wherever he is, a man of habit and personal conviction. He believed in himself as a man after men down his line and place; back into prehistory he believes. He says there was always a Dour man on that land, even if they never called themselves that, and Dour men tended the fields and killed what they ate.

Nowadays, convictions like those are hard to maintain. With meat ready and able to be processed, produced, printed and copied with your own home printer, few see a point in killing anything, but my father was a man of his convictions and his heritage. He went to some great expense importing freeze dried pork from the earliest terraforms; where the policy was still to unleash cloned pigs or boars on the newborn ecosystems, letting them grow fat and multiply before butchering them back for a surplus of meat and bone. The meat came on refrigi-freighters as they used to call them. Smelled like methane and ice, and we had to haul the vacuum sealed plastic meat slabs back to his truck on a tarp.

Then we would go home, listen to music, and drive fast enough that the meat wouldn't thaw. Then we would haul the tarp back out, dragging it into the shed where he'd got a freezer set up, close the door so the chill didn't escape, then stack meat on the shelf til it's all up there. How long it ended up taking depended on how much money he got at the time. When my father was flush with gig repair work for the nearby threshers, we would stack meat until our noses went numb. Then we'd close the door and go and get warm, and listen to music.

The next day, hours before dawn, dad would go on out to the freezer and grab a brick of frozen meat. He'd set it in a tub of water, "hair and a half warmer than luke" were his exact words, And leave it while he did the day's work. He wouldn't eat breakfast the day after we got meat in. He would go off, typing and clicking and switching worn parts on the irrigators and threshers. He would spend his lunch

watching the meat thaw in its see-through tub. Two soft, pillowy white slices of bread glued together with peanut butter and jelly. He ate it like it was clouds or vapors, insubstantial and unreal. Then he would send me out, give me permissions to the truck and tell me a time to be back by. It changed depending on his whims and the day's work. I was supposed to be working, given a trivial list of tasks across town and given far too much time to do it. I would go see my friends, I would go see girls and sometimes I would do nothing, driving around on those endless farm flanked roads until the sun went down and the automatic lights kicked on.

When I got back in the evening, my father and I would have dinner, and he would break his own rules. He would print steak and potatoes, hot and rich and fresh and steaming, before devouring the day's first real food. The meat was always delicious and chewy, with soft pillowy potatoes flanked with salt and butter. We would not talk, or listen to music, we would eat and then sleep. My father would spend some of the meal glancing at the thawing meat.

Before dawn the next day, I would be expected to be up for breakfast. We would sit, me with my printed food and he with thawed, raw meat. He would soak it in warm water until "it was about the temperature it was alive" were his exact words. Then, from the first aid kit above the sink, he would take a small hand held device and stick the meat with it. I'm not sure what that was for, there were instructions but I'd never cared to read them, but I know it wasn't for this. Then the meat would shift and squish with internal, artificial life. I would watch it, transfixed, as it warped and reshaped, trying to find what form of life it could be. It would often settle on a mammal, slightly hairy and pinkish and shaped like an oval of flesh.

Eventually, the thing would sputter to life, struggling on nubbins of meat and gristle to breathe and wail with lungs of pork. Then it was the worst part, that metallic sound as my father took his coffee spoon and smacked the creature once, hard on its head. With bones frail and brittle, constituted from what little of that tissue remained, the creature would die immediately as its skull fractured and brain caved.

Then he would put it in the cooker, blasting it with heat and searing it to a shining golden brown, turning the sparse thin hairs that covered it to ash, and cooking it to perfection. He would eat it

first with a fork and knife, explaining everyday that this is how real men used to eat, before he would use his hands and teeth to pick around the fragile, edible bones, leaving a carcass desiccated.

Sometimes I dream that I take my first fresh breath of sweet, fresh air, only to hear a squishy crunch. I wake sweating, and my stomach growling.

The Chosen One

Billy was easily the best Quarterback in the state. Standing at 6 foot 5 with a full beard, he was a man against boys. Throwing 60 yard passes to his receivers and almost impossible to sack, a Quarterback like Billy didn't come around often, and Westville High was undefeated heading into the state playoffs. Football was a big deal in their small Texas town, in fact it was everything, and Billy was the most well known guy in town. People of all ages were tuning into Westville's games on the radio and TV, with most people caring way too much about high school football, in Billy's opinion. To Billy, it was just a game, it was almost boring at times. Billy knew he was bigger than Westville, he was going to Texas A&M the next year on a full ride scholarship. Maybe Billy got too comfortable with his scholarship guaranteed. Maybe he was tired of his whole life being planned out for him. His father was a Division 1 Quarterback, and his grandfather before him. Maybe he was tired of getting advice from random old men around town: "Keep your feet set in the pocket son!" or "Shouldn't you be practicing?" Only Billy knows why he began to act that way, why he began to hang out with the wrong people and do the wrong things, why he began to miss practice and disrespect his coach and teammates. Even the police in Billy's town looked the other way when neighbors complained about Billy and his friends causing problems late at night, they were fans of the team and Billy. Billy was eighteen years old and on top of the world. Only he didn't feel like it. Billy's dad was always in his ear about how these were the best days of his life, and to enjoy it while it lasted.

The night before the state championship game against Southern, a far worse team, Billy laid in his bed tossing a football softly up in the air repeatedly, thinking about life and whether he really wanted to win the next day. The people of Westville didn't care about him, they cared about putting another trophy in the trophy case at the school, and having bragging rights with other towns. Billy was just a regular guy before that huge growth spurt turned him into the next Tom Brady, and just now he was getting the attention he thought he always deserved. Billy didn't know what he wanted to do with his

life yet, maybe he was gonna be a football player, maybe not. But he wasn't gonna let it be decided by anyone but himself.

The next night, as the marching band enthusiastically played the school's fight song, the whole town stood up and cheered as their Westville Falcons took the field. A silence fell over the crowd as they realized it was Josh Johnson, the sophomore backup QB, leading the team onto the field. Billy, the town's hero, who was bigger than Westville, Texas, was nowhere to be found. Josh played the game of his life, but he just wasn't Billy. Southern won 31-13, and as they celebrated on the field, the Westville fans were furious. Where was their no-show QB, who just cost them a state title?

Billy cruised down the highway in his F-150, blasting a long playlist with the driver's side window all the way down. "Wonder how the game went today," he thought. Billy pulled over at a gas station and checked his phone. After a couple minutes on his phone, it was clear he had gone from the most loved to most hated man in Westville in just one day. Texts came in from people Billy thought were friends and family "You're a loser Billy" and "Westville hates you." Billy laughed. He didn't care what they thought before and he definitely didn't care now. As Billy pulled out of the gas station and got back on the highway, he turned the volume back up on his car speaker. He didn't know what his future held, but if it didn't involve Westville football he was happy.

A Place I've Never Been

Winner of the 2025 Don Bauder Student Award in the Essay category

Before I was born and when my brother was around the age of one, he had difficulty pronouncing the word *abuelita*. The first half didn't quite push through his lips, and all he could manage was *Ita* – a mispronunciation family still uses to refer to my grandmother today. Ita, who is 72 and Dominican Republic-born and raised, wears this name with pride. She often boasts about how we have made her into something bigger than an old term. Bigger than just a granny, meemaw, or nana– she's Ita. Besides her, I have no one else in my family to call a Spanish name. No one else has ever danced *bachata* with me or made *pasteles*. My brother's story– as sweet and impacting as it is– has always been vilified in my head. I hear it and can't help but think: my disconnect with my culture was created before I even got a chance to leave the womb.

My grandmother raised me on stories of the island. She tells me of warm sun on humid mornings, sharing meals with her 12 siblings, how she'd care for the wildlife she found outside her home. At heart she's always been a nurturer. She became a nurse in the DR and continued to practice once she moved to America. When I read *Clap When You Land*, I see her in Camino. I admire the need they both have to take what they know and use it to help others. Ita often tells me that the women from the Dominican Republic are some of the strongest you'd find. Nothing is ever handed to them, everything they have is what they have earned. I think about how much of a risk she took immigrating to the United States. How do you feel safe yourself while protecting the safety of others?

Ita places her safety in her faith. She thinks that there is nothing you can do to shield yourself from life's cruelty, that it is in the hands of God and that he will spare you. What has not been spared must somehow be your fault. She raised me the same way she was. Do good, and if you did good, good would find its way back to you. With my grandmother's background in mind, I came to think: was Camino not good? Were the women of the island not good enough that they just had to be subjected to their socio-economic circumstances? Even if they somehow were not, no person deserves to live in a world where they are unsafe, to have their wellbeing in the hands of a man,

to be unsure if they can attend school or not, not knowing if they can provide a future for themselves or their family. Like Yahaira, I know that I should be grateful for the world I was raised in. My chances to succeed, access to better opportunities, and the sacrifices made just so I can exist comfortably. But is it a betrayal to yearn for your culture?

What kind of daughter walks into the world her lineage worked so hard to run away from? Can these ideas coexist? Wearing your roots with pride while still acknowledging what has been woven into its fabric? Does my grandmother believe these ideas can coexist? I have never been told that I couldn't step foot on the island, but she has never once offered to take me there with her.

I was 15 the first time I read *Clap When You Land*. I remember reaching the last page and not being able to bring myself to shut the book. It was almost as if the story opened a door to a part of me I never got to look at, and once I closed the cover, the door slammed shut with it. Even today, I find myself flipping back to page 97. Can I really be from a place I've never been? Claim a home that does not know me? When I think about being Dominican, I have this vision of stepping foot on the country's soil and immediately losing my step. I don't fully fall, but the island gives me a backhanded push, reminding me that I don't quite belong. I hang the country's flag on my bedroom ceiling. I fry *tostones* on slow Sunday mornings and even sometimes, on quiet nights, I talk to myself in Spanish, even though I have no certainty that what I am saying holds any truth. It feels like, instead of growing up Dominican, I grew up next to it. When others find out that I am, I can't speak to them in local slang or bond over cultural tradition. On the phone with my extended family, I stumble my way through simplicities and Spanish vocabulary words. All I have is one thing—one person—and all of my culture is carried with her.

Literature, especially young adult literature, gives us a chance to better understand ourselves. Through the lens of someone else, we can feel empowered and seen. *Clap When You Land* has taught me to have pride in my roots, no matter where they stem from. I see myself split between two countries. I see myself gathering strength from the women in my life. I see myself in the avocation of women and

their safety, and I feel safe within the book's covers. I hope that one day I will get to see the Dominican Republic. Maybe one day, Ita and I will suck on mango pits, unbothered by the sticky sweet on our hands. In the island's humidity, we will sit still with the iguanas and listen out for the birds. While the sun beats down my back, I won't ask for much from the island. Even if it expects the most from me, all I'd hope for is to be welcomed. And on my way there, once my plane reaches the soil, I hope I remember to clap when we land.

Surface Tension

My eyes shock open to the dark expanse of my kitchen. My sight—it's skewed, and sleek wood paneling presses cool against my cheek. It happened in the kitchen this time. She grows increasingly restless each day, and now she's left me before I could even make it to bed. It is unmistakably her who stands in the corner, body tucked and curved crookedly against my marble countertops. A feeble whine fills the room. I cannot move and it feels as though I'm not breathing either, but I strain my eyes to look up and find her face. *It's alright, you didn't hurt me.*

She is more of an illusion than a person, yet needs soothing like a child, and whenever I find a face to look at, it morphs into something different. The frogs are loud at this time of night, I hear their strange chirping as she shuffles closer to me. She hasn't even touched me, yet her emotions wash over my body like a crashing wave filled with jagged rocks and sand. They tear me open.

I'm sorry, I was bad, I'm sorry. I hurt you. Don't let me in. I don't know when I began to hear her voice, but it feels like I've always known it. When I was nine, scared, shivering, and alone under the bed, I could feel her there. There's an ache and my lungs are screaming. I close my eyes, and she makes a harsh strangled noise before colliding into me and filling my chest with breath. I am panting on the floor and watching the ceiling spin with inky black spots. Fingers twitch, I can move. I struggle to stand and vomit into a nearby trash can.

"Welcome home."

The Ground

The year is 2092. Technology has well advanced since the age of our late ancestors. They vowed to make a better world for those of us who came after them but did the opposite. We learned in class growing up how our grandparents single handedly destroyed our already dying planet, due to their own selfish wants, and corporate greed. Somehow, money became more important than the safety of their children.

We're underground now. Never have I stepped foot on land outside our bunker. There are others out there; probably living in their own society beneath the radiated desolate earth. It's not safe up there for most. We have heard stories growing up, of the land roamers who take to the ground, with little to no fear of the consequences. There is no story of their return.

We have only had one of our own leave the bunker in hopes of finding a better world out there for the rest of us. His name was Jameson. The year was 2073, and I was just a babe. I never knew him, or what would come of him. As I grew, others would recount endless stories of his bravery and drive, marking him as a brave soul with a kind heart. He gave everything he had in the hope that others would be safe.

We have countless trips to the ground, to look for resources to experiment on, but he was the only one who ever left the border of the land surrounding us. He never came back. I am 19 now, and I will be the first to come back.

I haven't told my parents what I'm planning, but with the resources growing thin, I must do something to save the others. The only person who knows is Dax. Dax and I grew up together in this metal coffin and have spent almost every waking moment together. He is my rock. He is the reason I haven't lost it in a place like this. I've always wanted to explore, and see the world, and he was the one who gave me enough confidence in myself to imagine it to be possible. We made a vow on his 18th birthday, that we would venture off alone, into the unknown.

He had his own selfish reasons for leaving. His mother died when he was born which caused his father to lose all sense of

himself. He started to drink when Dax was barely a year old. How he still manages to find booze, I couldn't tell you, but he is seemingly always drunk. In a way, his wanting to leave isn't as selfish as it is invigorating. A flower cannot bloom without the sun.

Our plan is simple. There is a monthly scouting trip, and since we are both now of age, we are both allowed to go. We packed rations for longer than we needed for simply the mission, and vowed to tell our parents when we said goodbye. I feel guilty for doing this to my loving mother and father, but they are exactly the reason why I am. They deserve a chance at real life, and I want to be the one to give that to them.

The day has finally come upon us, it is time. I make my way to our quarters and find my mother asleep. My loving father doting on her as he always has. She has fallen ill. She's caught the fever that many here have been battling. They said it's a radiation leak, but we all know what it really is. They're running out of resources. We are low on food, and even lower on medicine. This is why scouting trips have become more frequent, and why they are letting so many young people join. The age requirement used to be 25, but with the bodies piling up, there are few left to make the journey. I decided against telling my father while he looked upon my sick mother and decided instead to leave it in a letter. I can't take the sight of his heart breaking.

That night went just as quickly as it had come, and I awoke to the morning lights illuminating our rooms. My parents knew of the scouting trip, and that it would be short, so they didn't wake up to say goodbye. I wish they had. I grabbed my pack stuffed with stolen food and made my way to the hall. I found Dax waiting for me, eager as always. We knew what this day would mean.

The next hour went by in a blur. Safety checks and suit trials. We knew we had only one chance to leave, and we would know it when we were on the ground. After the preparation ceased, we made our way to the elevator. We walked down the long dark tunnel that led to the base of the ancient structure. We were never allowed to go near it as kids. They took us up in groups, with separate team leaders

in charge of four different groups. Our sergeant's name was Natalie, but we all called her Nat. She was the kind of woman that had a calm sense of authority. She never got loud or belittled us, but you knew when she was being stern. As we made our way into the metal enclosure she explained the rules of the trip. Look only for resources that would be beneficial, because there wasn't much room in our packs. Never stray too far from the group, and never go anywhere alone. That is what we were counting on. If Dax and I stayed together there would be no need for them to watch us.

As we approached the top floor of the bunker we began to shake with excitement. Nobody outside of scouts was allowed to this level. We exited the shaft and found the other groups readying the escape hatch. We all had to be inside the room and completely seal it off before we made our way outside. As they started the preparations Dax and I looked at each other with anticipation. This was the first time either one of us would see the ground.

"Are you ready?" he asked me.

"I'm not sure," I said. "But I guess we'll find out." He grabbed my hand and squeezed it hard through my thick glove, giving me a reassuring smile as they opened the bunker door.

We were hit with a wave of dust, completely obstructing our view. We stared through our glass masks in amazement waiting for the dust to settle. Once it did, we laid eyes upon the land for the very first time. It was nothing like I had expected. We were staring out at what looked to be a barren wasteland. It looked like the driest desert that seemed to stretch on for miles. There was nothing out there, save for a few mounds of debris. What did they expect us to find up here?

When watching old movies, they made the ground look so beautiful. Rolling hills covered with green, speckled with gorgeous wildflowers. Trees the size of the tallest buildings. This was nothing like that. This was nothing. Nat rounded us up as we made our way out to the driest piece of earth I could ever imagine. There had to be more out there. She gave us our maps that showed which areas we were to explore. We were set to meet back here at the base in one hour's time. Dax and I looked at each other as we decided to check the farthest point on the map, and we made our way.

Slowly, we trudged along the dirt path. Not knowing what to say, we said nothing at all. I know he was disappointed, as was I. We

quickly found our spot. It looked to be an old, abandoned warehouse, before it was destroyed. The building, while still standing, was blown to bits in previous wars. Only the metal framing kept its stone walls upright. We made quick work of looking for anything that could be salvaged and came up short. No wonder our resources were dwindling; there was nothing out here.

Suddenly we heard faint rustling in the ruins nearby.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

I nodded. Not wanting to make any noise, we peered around the side of the wreckage. We saw movement beyond the border of our encampment. As quickly as we saw it, the figure disappeared. It looked to be someone dressed in all black, not bothering with the safety suit. Was he immune to the radiation? Did his line survive the blast?

We took one look at each other and began to follow him. Not bothering to report what we had seen, we made our way into the unknown.

After a short walk hiding behind boulders and ruined buildings, we saw the man disappear behind a collapsed pillar, and then, nothing. We followed him, going around that same pillar. Once we came to the other side, we saw a door. The door was made of stone, not bothering with all the bolts and locks of our bunker, so we pulled it open. On the other side was a long dark stairway, down into total darkness. We held our breath and went inside.

Minutes stretched on to what felt like hours. Down and down we went, into the deep dark unknown. It was cold down here, the air felt almost damp. Suddenly, we realized why. With every step, the sound of running water grew louder. A river. They had built their base around an underground river. They didn't need to do anything to collect rainwater or tap any old water lines. Was this how they were able to survive on the ground? The water had not been altered with safety precautions keeping the radiation out. They were drinking their fill of poisoned water. But was it poison to them, or just us?

We kept making our way down the dark tunnel, guiding ourselves with the jagged walls. I stayed close to Dax, never taking my hand off his arm. Then we heard it, quietly at first: talking. There was a faint chatter somewhere off in the distance. Laughing, singing and conversations going at rapid speeds. There were a lot of them. He

paused in front of me, unsure what to make of our current situation. We rounded the last corner and the darkness disappeared. Suddenly the tunnel opened to an enormous cavern that stretched up to the open sky. We were in the middle of a mountain.

It was amazing. There were stalls all around us selling food and drinks, children were playing on the rocks beside us. People were dancing and smiling, and none of them were wearing suits. They were immune. Their base was no bunker at all. They were all safe, fed, and happy. And exposed. They must have built up immunity through generations. It was extraordinary.

My awe was broken by one of the children letting out a loud scream. I turned to the noise and realized he was looking at me. Fear covered his tiny features as he ran behind his mother. I realized then what we must look like. Coming into their home in suits that made it look like we were raiding their rations.

Quickly, the rest turned to face us, some faces laced with fear and others with intrigue. It must have been a long time since any of them had met someone outside of their own community.

We were surrounded by silence for a long moment before a small, withered woman stepped forward. She looked to be well into her sixties as she examined us both.

"You have come from outside," she presumed. She circled us with a feline grace I have not seen in a woman her age before.

"We did," Dax replied. "We were sent from base to scout for resources."

She looked at us inquisitively. "It must be hard to find many that you can consume, since you have not yet adapted to the earth's conditions."

"We have not," I replied. "We live underground in a bunker and have only heard stories about those who can survive on the land."

"We can all survive on the land, even you," she said.

"Tell us how," I demanded. The woman was growing impatient with me, I could see it in the crease in her brow. "Please. We are slowly dying down there. That's why we left our group behind. We were looking for a way to save our people," I said desperately.

Silence followed as she considered, then she looked to a group of young men and nodded. They quickly left the circle that had formed around us and went off to the back of the cave.

"We have survived for hundreds of years, not by hiding from the land, but by embracing it. My parents, and those of many others here, gave up their lives, in the hopes that we could survive. That is the sacrifice they made to see humans live on. That is the sacrifice you must make if you want to see your family live on. You must expose yourselves to the elements."

"The elements? Are you insane?" Dax exploded. "We've lived underground our whole lives; this is the first time we've ever even left the bunker!"

"That is the only thing you can do to help your people; you must all be willing to adapt to the ground or die trying," she said. "Start with the water. Give it to your people. Some will fall ill, some may die, but those who don't will become stronger because of it."

The boys that left returned with three barrels of water. "My grandsons will accompany you back to your base, bringing water. Give it to your people and see if you survive. If you do not, you were not meant to."

And with that she disappeared back into the crowd. Dax and I turned to face each other. "What do we do?" he asked.

I hesitated for a long moment before I said, "We save our people, or we die trying."

You Can't Stop Us

I gasped for air as I inhaled the thick black smog that surrounded what once was my apartment. This is the fifth building to be toppled this week. I wiped the rubble off of my shoulders and began to stand up in a haze. Citizens passed by the wreckage like it was nothing, without even batting an eye. Those damn sheep, bastards they are, all of them. I hid behind a nearby building and began to plan my next course of action.

I was being hunted by the government. My mother worked for them once, but that all turned south once she began to realize what was really going on inside—all kinds of crimes from the keeping of slaves, blackmail, and the exploitation of those who're less fortunate. Not to mention the onslaught of "mysterious" murders. She was one of the first victims of what has been dubbed "the purity project." It was called that to mask what it really was—the killing of innocent people who dared bat an eye to what was really going on.

I still remember discovering her body when I got home from school. The image still lingers in my mind till this day. On the news there were stories of "suicides" but in my heart I knew that wasn't the case. My mother was a strong woman and it was unlike her to give in to depression. Somebody must've killed her, but who?

Her death was swept under the rug the next day. Nobody bothered to investigate whether she really committed suicide or not. What really did it was that her coworkers acted like she never died. That made me suspicious. Why would our government just ignore this? Then it clicked.

Regular life in this country was relatively simple to those who didn't care to read between the lines. Meals were provided from the government, shelter too, even festivities would occur from time to time, things like Christmas and such. No one would dare question where all this money and food came from. No one would dare except for people like me and my mother.

After some careful thinking I decided to pay my sister a visit. She would provide me with shelter without asking "why." I don't want to get more people roped into this than I have to. If I'm being honest, I don't know what to do. After my mother passed I've just had this

aching need for revenge, but it would be me against a whole system whose roots have already been planted and spread. Could there be more people like me out there?

I began making my way to my sister's house. I was careful not to make eye contact with anyone on my way there. I don't want anyone to get suspicious. After all, I am a random girl covered in debris.

"Psst!" I hear from a distance. I whip my head around. I hear another "Psst!" this time, louder. Finally I see a muscular figure in the distance. "Shit!" I think to myself. The feds must have found me. I break into a sprint. The figure dissipates from sight. Thinking I'm safe, I slow down. My breathing becomes heavy and quick. I close my eyes for just a moment. I open my eyes and see a shadow peering over me. Before I can form a cohesive thought, a rag is shoved under my nose, dosed in some kind of chemical. I struggle for a bit until the light leaves my eyes.

I awake, gasping for air once more. This time I'm not choking on smog, the air is clear, but there is a bit of an odor. As my vision returns, I see three figures surrounding me. "Where the hell am I!? Who are you people?!" I scream as I struggle once more. My hands are tied behind my back. "Be quiet!" the muscular one commands. Shit, the feds are still after me. That's right. I think to myself. "Well you better start explaining yourselves." I say in a more hushed, yet demanding tone.

"You're like us." The muscular one says. He seems to be the leader of whatever group this is. The others nod. I remain silent. I have trouble trusting when it comes to this shit. As far as I know everybody's under the feds spell. "We know about Penelope" I give the muscular one a sharp stare. "How the fuck do you know her name?" That was my mother's name. She never told anyone her full name. She went by "Penny," even during her time with the government. The papers didn't even use her government name when her death rolled around.

"Before she died, she gathered some like-minded people and formed a small rebellion," The muscular one said in a soft, hushed tone. "We're all that's left. Everyone else has either been 'dealt with'

or has gone missing. The name's Alex by the way. This is Ben and Theo." He pointed to the other two boys. "We want revenge just as bad as you do. Your mother was a great leader after all." My mother was a smart woman. It'd be just like her to build a following before openly speaking out against the government.

"Us and your mother have been gathering evidence against the government." My eyes widened. "How? The security in those facilities is unmatched." "We found a way. We'll explain later, but you have to trust us."

"Fine. I believe you." I said reluctantly. "But I need to get to my sister's house. From there we can start talking." Alex nodded and untied the ropes that were restricting my hands. I stood up and headed in the direction of my sister's house. The others followed.

My sister's house was locked with a code I had to enter into a keypad. I entered the house and I was immediately hit with a stench. "Amy?" I exclaimed, my nose covered. "Amy, are you there? What's that smell?" There was no response. I knocked on her bedroom door. The door was unlocked "Amy, I'm coming inside." I opened the door. It was unlike her to leave it unlocked.

On the ground was Amy's body. Her throat slit from ear to ear. I gasped in horror. There was a note on the ground next to her. It wasn't in her handwriting, but instead in a typewriter-like font. The note read: "You can't stop us."

Don't Let Him Go

Layla waited anxiously at the campus coffee shop, glancing at her phone every few minutes. The old, leather, antique watch she kept on her wrist read 5:28. Time was moving slower than she had hoped, and every second felt like an eternity. The drum in her chest beat louder and louder with every controlled breath. She nervously picked up her iced latte and took a sip, her shaky hand causing the liquid to drip onto her face a little. Quickly, she wiped it with her sleeve and put down her cup. *Hopefully no one saw that*, she thought.

Eventually, she decided to survey her surroundings rather than torture herself by watching every tick on the clock. There weren't a lot of people at the cafe at that moment, which was to be expected. Most people had their classes in the morning and early afternoon, Layla concluded. This, she was thankful for. It allowed her time to go home and get ready for her date that night with her old childhood friend, Laurence. Thanks to the low number of people in the cafe, there were more than a few good seating choices. Layla had chosen the one next to the window so she could look out of it when she needed to. That way, when she needed to break eye contact on her date, she could have something interesting to look at. It was also a great subject of conversation. If the date got dry and she couldn't think of something to talk about, she could find something outside. Overall, the specific seat by the window was the optimal place to have her date: interesting and scenic.

Inspecting the people around her, she noted a man sitting across the cafe with his phone and a drink in his hand. The ice was mostly melted, which told her that he'd been sitting there quite some time, and also made her wonder how he had so much time to kill to just be on his phone. At another table nearby, there was a student studying with her textbook and her headphones on. She looked distracted, however, laughing at something on her phone rather than looking at her computer.

"Layla?" A familiar voice ripped her out of her internal world, almost startling her. Looking up, she locked eyes with Laurence, the guy she'd been waiting for. Before she could speak, he pulled out the chair across from Layla and sat down.

“Hey! It’s been a while.” Layla’s voice broke a little and she internally cringed, as well as wondered if her response was too generic.

“That’s an understatement” He replied in a half-chuckle. “It’s been like, what, five years?”

“Well, seven, but close enough.” She wondered if he really even cared about the time that had passed since the two of them had spoken. Both in their Junior year of college, Laurence and Layla’s friendship had been cut off when Laurence got his phone taken for sneaking out to a party, and soon after that moved to a completely different state. They hadn’t spoken since then, until the other week when Layla saw his Instagram account in her “suggested people” and reached out to him. The two agreed to meet at the campus cafe the week after since Laurence had a tight schedule and couldn’t leave campus for very long. Despite Layla hoping for a more romantic reunion, a cafe would have to do.

“Really? Seven? It felt like less time than that. Though, I will say, you’ve changed a lot, and you look great!” Laurence smiled. Layla noticed he put his phone on “Do Not Disturb” and put it away. How considerate of him. It seemed he had changed some as well.

“Thank you...” She said shyly, unsure of what to say back. “You’ve changed a lot, too. Have you been...working out?” She could make out his arms underneath the black long-sleeve shirt he was wearing, and they looked much different than before. Not only that, but his outfit was much more put-together than she was used to seeing. Along with his black shirt, he was wearing black slacks and a nice, high-tech watch. His rectangular glasses were a nice shade of silver and clearly a nice brand.

“Oh, you noticed! Yeah, I have to hit the gym pretty hard to keep up with all the exercise in the army.”

“The army?” She never thought she’d see the day Laurence became a disciplined person. There were plenty of times he had gotten grounded in middle school for acting out. He would constantly argue with teachers, steal copies of tests before they were supposed to be taken, and had even fought a few other kids for different reasons. Layla half expected him to be late to their date, which was why she watched the clock so intently before. Despite his prior issues, he’d been a good friend to her. They met when the

teacher sat Laurence next to Layla and hoped she’d “rub off on him” as a good influence. She had soon after realized that Laurence was almost a prodigy at math after seeing him ace a test he hadn’t studied for, so she enlisted his help as a tutor during class. To return the favor, she would help him write essays for classes that needed long-worded responses. It wasn’t long before they had become friends, and she developed a crush later on. That crush withstood the test of time, all the way up until this date.

“Yeah, I’m a squad leader, actually. It involves a lot of planning. On top of that, I work as a teacher’s assistant for my math professor.” Laurence fake grinned, almost as if to say ‘help’ in a humorous way. His joking demeanor relaxed her nerves a little bit, just like back then.

She was shocked, but impressed. “W-wow, that’s a lot. And all of that on top of classes? It must be difficult.” Realizing she had spoken so informally, she went silent for a second. Thinking about it, it didn’t feel as though any time had passed at all. Sure, there were things they had to catch up on, but talking to Laurence felt as it did seven years ago. Relieved the conversation wasn’t as rigid or dry as she had anticipated, Layla let herself relax. Still, her nerves were working overtime since she still had a crush on him. In fact, it was even more prominent now that he was older and more attractive. Not only had he become more disciplined, he was more considerate, more well-spoken than before, and seemed to have lost most of his bad habits. That is, aside from his habit of reading texts and then taking forever to reply. That hadn’t changed. Still, her long lost love had made its way back to her, and for this she was happy.

Over the course of the conversation he divulged what forced him to change: watching his older brother lose a scholarship as well as most of his future job opportunities to a dumb decision, being at a party and drinking while still being underage. After his brother was caught and arrested he lost almost everything, which sent him into a depression. Seeing his brother like that made him realize how serious his own actions could affect his life, and that molded him into a completely different person. On the other side, Layla talked about her social anxiety and how she had gone to a therapist to gain new social skills to try and make new friends. It had been working, and when Layla mentioned her progress she couldn’t help but notice an almost proud-looking smile on Laurence’s face. With the

conversation flowing so well, they both had forgotten about the time, so when Laurence commented on how nice Layla's wristwatch was, he realized he was almost late to an army lab. Suddenly, he got up and grabbed his coat.

"I'm so sorry to have to cut this short, I really have to go. If I'm late I could get in serious trouble." He pushed in his chair, threw out his coffee cup, and started to speed walk to the door. Something rose in Layla's chest, at first fear, then determination mixed with it, and in the spur of the moment, she ran and grabbed his wrist.

"Wait!" Stunned, Laurence stopped in his tracks. She had shocked herself as well. However, she realized that what she said now mattered more than anything. There was no way she was going to lose the man she loved again, this time to a busy schedule. If she said nothing now, there was a chance he would never think of her again. It could have been anxious thoughts, but no matter what, she had to seize the moment.

"Yes? I really have to go, is everything okay?" Even in a rush, he was worried about her. Mentally breaking free from her thoughts, she spoke.

"Same time next week?" She wasn't sure if he could, but she had to ask, to force herself into his schedule wherever she could. At this, Laurence let out a laugh.

"Of course! I'd love to do this again. You had me scared for a moment, grabbing me like that."

"Sorry..." Despite feeling a little embarrassed, she felt triumphant in her achievement of pushing past her anxiety and asking him out.

"It's okay, but I really have to go." He put his hand on Layla's, and as he parted from her, his hand grazed hers, almost as if he didn't want to leave. She watched as Laurence left the cafe, his eyes seemingly looking at her in his peripheral vision as he walked away. While his departure was sudden and unwanted, Layla was beyond happy that she finally had another chance.

Hold Your Breath

Water floods the roads as the city is besieged by fierce rainstorms, tall buildings scaling up to scratch the gloomy skies above. From below, rust-covered cars bob up and down and miniature people wade through the dark waters and retreat to less-rundown buildings like a colony of ants. Glassy tendrils sway in the horizon, signaling The Sea Rising, having taken over the entire downtown for their own. Bulbous, translucent growths consume the wreckage, humanoid forms rising once more as The Sea's polyps take over and integrate people's minds and bodies into their colony: faceless and ravenously hungry.

At night, the city glows in bioluminescent blues and purples, a chillingly beautiful sight many have grown accustomed to.

With tired, sunken eyes and the light drained from her irises, Chithra only lays back on the concrete of a hotel rooftop, her curly, black hair pooling around her head as she searches for the full moon, peeking behind a veil of purple clouds. She reaches out to touch the surface, her ochre fingers stretching out as far as they could. Ultimately, the sky is still so far from reach. The ocean would have a better chance of reaching these heights than she.

Heavy rainfall pools around the quilted glass dome shielding her from the onslaught, whistling winds pushing and pulling each ripple like tides along the shore. The moon is fully obstructed by dark, stormy clouds, a crackle of lightning splitting the sky asunder and leaving Chithra in the dark.

The creak from the rooftop bulkhead signals the arrival of someone new, Chithra sitting upright to look. Mina emerges from the rusted blue door, his bulky, black letterman jacket nearly engulfing him and blue baseball cap leaning forward to obscure his eyes, a hot red mug clasped in his palms. He pushes the door wider with his shoulder, treading carefully over to her side before slowly slumping down to her level.

"You've been up here a while," he comments, casually, "I thought you might be hungry."

He blows the steam rising from the mug slowly, before handing it off to Chithra, the smell of rosemary and tomato drawing her in.

“Minestrone. Your favorite.”

Their hands touch as Mina passes it over to her, the contents sloshing around in it. Chithra could pick out the ingredients of the soup: red tomato broth, white cannellini beans with a thin, slimy film, sweet, caramelized onions, small, lumpy potatoes, elbow macaroni, and wilted spinach leaves float around the mug, enticing her to have a taste.

Chithra brings the mug to her lips and takes a sip, the warm broth soothing her aching, cold body. She slowly chews the vegetables, swallowing tentatively.

“Thank you,” Chithra says, the side of her lip quirking upright as she goes for another sip.

“Least I can do for you.”

Mina exhales as he goes to lay down beside Chithra, tossing his hat aside, allowing thick strands of smooth, black hair to cascade down his back. He lays down on his back, his arms crossed behind his head to prop up his neck. Mina crosses one leg over the other, white socks poking out his holey platformers, the rubber soles worn and tearing. The rain continues to pour over the glass dome shielding the pair from the elements, the dark storm clouds having fully hidden the moon. Lightning takes its place, white light flashing through the sky in short bursts, followed by the harsh crashing of thunder and rolling tidal waves.

The path lights embedded atop the roof light up almost on cue, highlighting the potted flowers and foliage surrounding the two of them.

“You’ve been up here a while. Enjoying the view or?”

Chithra shakes her head, looking out from the glass dome, the cityscape blanketed in darkness save for a few glowing spots of blue and pink signaling The Sea’s ever-growing colony. She sweeps back strands of her curly hair, not meeting Mina’s gaze.

“No,” she murmurs, taking another mouthful of the soup, “I just needed a moment.”

“Don’t we all?” Mina adds, stretching outward and adjusting his position. “Days on the road and we finally have a place to stay. Plenty of food too.”

Chithra hums, sipping more of the tomato broth and chewing on another mouthful of mushy vegetables.

“Sorry I couldn’t get you a spoon or anything,” Mina apologizes, chuckling bashfully, “I just wanted an excuse to see you and forgot about it...”

Chithra’s eyes slightly perk up at the comment, her face brightening with a small smile as she takes another sip of the broth. Mina blushes at her reaction and laughs at his own expense, both relieved and mortified.

“That’s very sweet of you to do,” she says, “I appreciate it, Mina. Really.”

She finishes the last bit of soup before placing the emptied mug to her left. A surge of rain crashes into the glass dome, startling them both, Mina snapping upright from his spot.

“Glad we found a place before the storm started,” he says, sighing in relief. “We finally get a moment of peace for once.”

“Peace, huh?”

“Yeah. About time too, can’t a girl get a moment to himself?”

The Sea Rising continues its rampage outside, quiet and methodical as it slowly consumes any life form left outside, obscured by pitch darkness outside. As Chithra stares out into the glass dome, her mind wanders to old memories, wrapping her head around the last time she knew peace.

Fuzzy childhood memories with Mina, whom she rode to school with on his bike, shared her lunches with, confided in with all her secrets, quiet memories which she now struggled to remember fully.

Scenes of being plunged underwater disrupt her reminiscing. The memories of their tumultuous journey to the hotel infiltrate her mind, Mina at the wheel and Chithra right beside him. How The Sea almost claimed him as it wrapped its slimy, spindly tendril around his arm, nearly causing the car to swerve. The screams and panicked urgings of everyone in their traveling party rang in her ears as The Sea wedged itself in the vehicle and wrecked it, crashing it into the nearby brush. She remembers seeing red as everyone crawled out and tried to help one another, as Mina laid on his side motionless and unresponsive.

Poor Mina doesn’t respond when one friend, Zacharias, slings him over their back. As they all ran as fast as their worn-out, tired feet could carry them to escape the voracious behemoth that encroached upon them.

A flash. A moment of silence. He finally wakes up when they enter a luxurious hotel, now a shelter for human survivors, splayed out on the couch, translucent ichor dripping from his arm inflicted with jagged, deep cuts from The Sea. His tanned face however is pallor from blood loss, ready to drop dead had it not been for staff intervention.

Her body feels like she is sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss, collapsing into her being. Her breath hitches in her throat, the dread stabbing at the pit of her stomach, her limbs going rigid as her mind drowns itself in doubt, morphing quickly into fear.

Peace? Chithra never knew a moment of peace since The Sea Rose, held captive by memories of tragedy she swore she never experienced yet felt with every fiber of her being.

“Chithra?” Mina rolls over to meet his friend, tears forming in the corner of Chithra’s eyes. “Everything okay?”

She mumbles something, her voice cracking as she shakes her head and hugs her knees further into her thin body. Her entire body is wracked with strangled sobs, her cries pure agony to Mina’s ears.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. I’m here, I got you.”

Mina scoots closer to Chithra, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. She hugs her knees closer to her, face buried within her arms as sobs rack her slight form.

“Do you want a hug?”

Chithra snuffles, choking out a quieter sob back as she nods into her arms. Mina wraps his arms around her body, hugging her tightly enough to give her room to move. The rain continues to crash against the dome above them, hammering against it.

“Hey, hey,” Mina consoles, gently rubbing her back, “it’s okay. I’m here—”

“But what if you weren’t?!”

Mina holds Chithra close to him, allowing her to bury herself in his chest.

“That’s ridiculous! I wouldn’t leave you ever!”

“But you almost did! You almost...”

She sobs into his chest, clinging onto his letterman jacket as if he were to disappear at any moment. Mina feels his eyes heat up in response to her distress, guilt racking his heart.

“What if you didn’t make it last night?” Chithra gasps for air, her voice thick with anxiety. “I could have lost you! How am I supposed to find peace in that?”

“That’s not what I meant at all,” Mina counters, “I’m sorry if what I said brought up some bad memories, but I promise that was a one-time thing.”

“You say that, yet you’re always the one we have to bail out!”

Mina bites back a response and glances at the floor, looking away from Chithra, keeping a firm hold on her as she shifts in his arms. She places her chin on his shoulder, his long hair acting as a curtain around her face.

“I’m worried, Mina,” Chithra murmurs, her voice gentler in tone, “we’ve lost friends and loved ones to The Sea. I just don’t want you to be next.”

“I won’t be,” Mina reassures her, his tone solemn, “but you have to promise me you’ll be safe too. We’re all leaving, together.”

Chithra nods and the two embrace one another tightly, a silent moment under the glass dome that melts away most of the tension between them. The heavy rainfall outside mellows out into a gentler shower, but the sound of rolling thunder keeps them both on their guard.

“Let’s turn in for the night,” Chithra suggests, clearing her throat, “we’ll figure out what to do tomorrow.”

As the two lift one another up from the concrete floor, the bulkhead squeaks open again to reveal two familiar faces. One is a tall figure in a white peacoat with long, dark locs cascading down to their chest decorated with silver hair rings, dark eyes framed by square glasses. The other is a taller, towering figure with short, fluffy black hair and a beige bomber jacket dirtied by dried mud and oil stains.

Mina waves over to the two, Chithra meanwhile stares at the two of them by the door.

“What the hell are you two doing up here?” the taller person, Nguyệt asks the pair. “It’s late and everyone’s wondering where you’ve been.”

“We were...” Mina stops mid-sentence to form the words, only for Chithra to intervene.

“We needed a break from everything. We’ll be down in a bit.”

Zacharias, the person in the peacoat, glances at Mina and looks down at the latter's covered-up left arm, the blueish tint of Mina's hand giving away his injury.

"Is your arm doing okay?" Zacharias asks, concern washing over their face.

"It's fine! I'll be fine!"

Zacharias nods cautiously, Nguyệt's face stoic and skeptical at the pair up on the roof.

"Come on, you two," Nguyệt says, "we have a long day ahead of us."

As the four leave the rooftop, Chithra's breath begins to steady with each step they take down. She looks behind her shoulder, relieved to see Mina keep up with her at a steady pace.

Perhaps, for this moment in time, everything will be okay. They'll all figure something out when the morning comes.

Letters to Memory

A Child's Sobriety:

for my contumacious pleasure in watching you suffer;

A father's hands causing bloated blooms of lividity and of scarlet-hued violet, and of heavy bruised skies blossoming to painterly life on your malleable body, cold water, sloshing tears, closing over your head, the tide; a nightmare for your pillow. Weeping wounds and weeping eyes. Not from fear but from cruelty's distracting veneer.

Your salvation, the only thing accorded to you by divinity—your mind— and even that not without a price. He didn't even glance at you after that— after you saved yourself from him.

Bitter disappointment in your anger. You tasted violence, just like your father, but you chose life.

A father should not try to drown his child.

A dance of teeth and smiles, venom in that sugary wet-cloth gaze. You shuddered in shame and stood there as she kissed your father. The visage of permanence. At your feet, rain that felt like blood.

From realms beyond but right under your faltering step, that woman of lurid horror, the embodiment of your suffocating stagnation under the tyrannical rule of truant adulthood.

A union of fiduciary obligation and certainty, abashedly shattered, the man who was to give you your mirror—but already with his reflection— no longer was he your father—no, **he was desecration.**

Remember when you ran, unable to bear what you did not know, you ran from your evening, that night— and it was fortunate that you cut it from the fabric of your life. Is that why that despicable man became your father again? For what is forgotten, even if it is not forgiven, is like something that never existed. You never forgave, but you **were absolved.**

Hempstocks;

(friend, mother, guardian)

When you took her hand you were grounded even when your worn feet trod the skies—

When you received her care and motherly kindness the salt came from your tears, the polluted rain from your skin—

When they let you shape the world, you learned to revel in and for the sake of profound frivolity. I remember your laughter. I remember your eyes as you found anomalous acceptance. Were you a happy child, then? You told me yourself that you were never a happy child, merely content at times. But with them, were you happy?

I cannot recall; enlighten me of my boyhood, I implore.

I remember this: Old Mrs. Hempstock; timeless, waiting, for you or for me, we never yet may know. This was after death came by like an old friend. Do you remember? Or, did you forget this to preserve your childhood?

We were born a boy of an elderly frown, yet here we stand— is it you or me in the end, truly, is there a difference— **a man-child**, what matters is that at our feet is rain, again. A familiar shore of a pond that we knew once flourished like the ocean. Does it still?

(The oceans linger, playhouses for dreams, do you remember what we paid for wonder?

Wonder is where the world for us began, when memory breathed its last and from its torn seams flew a tempest— a storm of childhood conception. **I bequeath upon you evocation.**)

When you realized trepidation could evolve into pain, I was proud of you, I admit—

—for what could you have amounted to if not for their violent exploitation Forgive me, yet duly I tongued an eloquent discordancy and gave you the bruises that you so admired because of their realness, because of your capacity for change. Take my position into consideration— you must have been grateful, for

your agony was your modulation.

Do you know why that familiarity was so palatable,

A temptation in your breast for I wonder who your despising gaze is for— that woman or me for now I know she and I and you were the same in the end.

You prayed for freedom from your confinement, you upheld escape as ecstatic joy, away from the father whose marks spell “aberration” on your neck, away from the mother who never held your hand with actual understanding, away from the sister who tormented you from her own narrow mind— and the lack of limit on yours, from

the walls of the house that now draped with that gray cloth and the scent of abuse, disloyalty, oppression.

You could not live with your family whose mundaneness they wielded like a cleaver and wielded on you in fury because you could not fit into their box and lines. Could not fit into their lies.

No, you could not— I could have, but the boy was who suffered then, not the man.

You still had the remnants of your boyhood dreams and of a pure awe of the remarkable.

I envy you, child.

I envy you like I could not ever envy my own children, not with their listless eyes, meek minds.

I envy and I yearn for you, child, for now I realize the true worth of childhood.

I *mourn* us.

A Human's Afflatus:

for my perverse satisfaction in watching you wander, lost, alone; to what lengths could humanity rise if we stopped gambling on extraordinary? do you recall your disappointment when you saw the blandness and commonness of narcissi?

you thought tragedy was an absolution of comeliness, of loveliness, of beauty, then.

did you truly think the stench of unwashed salt from tears and of artificial prayers that define ‘erode’

could turn into the decadent perfume, sugary from memory, silk from the throat of a siren?

our mother, our father— they were the scenes of martyrdom in your stories of myth and the wildness of a circus full

a hidden reflection of intellectual poverty's heavy load.

my father, oh my father

you always despised the intrinsic truth in your very being— an adult is always a child, just in a different world. To stay as an adult-child, they must make the children feel the difference, no matter how faked.

did you hate our softness and the thinness of our skin because you saw in us a mirror?

would you loathe me so if I said that you appear in the mirror
 now that time has etched grayness upon my face?
 do you remember when we asked our father
 “does it make you feel big to make a little boy cry?”
 I pity our father, your father.
 before you knew of Ursula, before you woke to a coin in your
 throat, a cumbersome reminder of metallic flavorment, before the
 world turned on its axis for all the weight of money and drew Ursula
 down—
 were you scared of a link between the abstract, the absurd, and
 the logical? oh, but Lettie showed you the way, I remember how we
 looked for storms and the Language of Shaping that she sang for
 you— oh I still dream about that song, those words, that day—
 once that hole appeared in your foot and a hole sprang up in your
 heart, all your fears came alive—
 you held the doorway, you *were* the doorway for monsters like
 her (but now I know she was merely fitting her nature; all she wanted
 was to help us, paradoxical)
 and **THIS**;
 remember the Ocean? Lettie brought it to us, no stopping her
 from bringing the ocean to us, even if it did not want to come to us.
 oh, I knew everything then. I knew everything when I was a
 child.
but you died, didn't you? you died— I died.
 Lettie died. (*did we kill her?*)
 An Adult's Birth:
 for my self-mutinous cruelty in watching us in self-denial;
 Wasn't death always beguiling for us?
 We didn't know it then, not clearly, not harshly and with
 florescent scars that we still trace, like now.
 Anatomy.
 Wasn't death always beautiful for us?
 Remember his marred, rock face, those teeth that had smiled at
 us— “no, it was an *it*, the thing we were looking at, not a *him*.”
 Wax.
 Wasn't death always kind to us?
 Apologies for having seen a statue, a green garden hose for
 a necklace, for a noose— the knife was always there, if you recall,

warning us. The wielder was the only thing that changed, but we
 never looked up from the knife, did we?
 Corpse.
 I never questioned it, and neither did you.
 Death was what brought us together, you and me and her. Death
 was what led us to the ocean, you and me and her. Blue lips and
 pallid skin. Hues of rain, not water.
 Were they a predecessor of the slate-surface and sluggish honey
 of our ocean?
 Have you ever realized our ocean was rain, rain cut in the
 image of practicalism as to lose its fleshy hue? (only humans may be
 idealistic)
 Wasn't death always there for us?
 A whisper, a path, a glinting smile of precious secrecy— leading
 us somewhere, to someone—
 Death was what brought me back to you,
 The Hempstock House, where the moon winked its molten ash
 eyes at its twin,
 The Hempstock House, where the lovers of winter and spring
 could reunite, unburdened, The Hempstock House, where dwelled
 the Ocean at the end of the lane.
 Are you there, child?
 I left you here, for fear you would shatter into obscurity in the
 real world.
 I left you here, with them, the Hempstock women, but why is it
 that I am remembering, only now— They are gone, aren't they?
 Only the old one remains, like a ever-waning candle.
 Where did you go, child?
 Did you follow the youngest Hempstock into the tide, your first
 and last and only anchor? Did you follow comfort down the shore,
 the middle Hempstock, to a quiet place between eccentricity?
 They are gone, aren't they?
 Only the old one remains, to remind me and rekindle those
 glimmers of youth.
 Sentiment.
 Glory is in decay, beauty in the past, for you and I both know
 happiness is more fleeting than contentment— yet were we ever
 content?

Can we boast with candor and can we laugh with frankness
through our self-placed restraints? I lost you and now I am lost. I
have become a man but you were always just a boy.

I have become a man unmade.

Sentiment.

Wasn't death always what we wanted in the end?

Not out of despair, just childlike curiosity? And we experienced
it, we did.

But not even that could be perpetual, not even that could be true.
Not for us.

Sentiment.

Where have you been, child?

I see you at last, on the edge of the waves, on the edge of
possibility, on the edge of memory.

Why won't you come back, child?

I see us at last, stepping into the tide, into the past, into the
bygone.

Will I find you again, child?

I see myself at last, sinking beneath the Ocean, beneath the truth,
beneath the lost.

Reunion.

Escape.

The Choice

I am certain you have never treasured all the hues of green in
nature until you've seen Selva Raj.

Imagine limes, pines, shining emeralds, faded fatigues, and neon
hues, all sharing the stage- begging for your eyes and appreciation
all at once. Leaves that are long, sharp, soft, or limp, poking out
at your shins and also covering high above your head. High as the
skyscrapers back at home, in the city.

One might have fixed their gaze toward the ocean if they hadn't
just been tossed here in its rage, as I had. The jungle set before me
struck my heart with a simultaneous warmth and reverential terror. It
extended the promise of salvation from the sea, and yet, begged the
question of what these marvelous layers of green were enclosing.

I didn't ponder long, because as my gaze slowly gained focus on a
tree about eight feet in front of me, I saw the figure of a man hiding
in plain sight. Then, more. 3 men...8...maybe 20. Some were women.
Were there 50 people standing, kneeling, and sitting amongst the
lushness of this jungle watching me marvel? And high up, children,
masked with green paint on their faces, so still, just peering down at me.

I turned back and was instantly reminded of the sea, which
seemed calmer than before, but not enough for me to consider
moving towards it. And then my knees were powerless, the sky and
the treetops swirled about wildly before my balance had completely
abandoned me, and everything was black.

Quiet whispers from many unfamiliar voices slowly filtered
into my mind, in another second I could make out words, but not
their meaning. I opened my eyes and remembered the figures I saw
amongst the trees. They were more obvious now, sitting around me
and speaking to one another with breathy sounds. It made them all
seem polite and considerate of my need for rest. But before I could
drift back to sleep, a young girl pointed in my direction and said,
"cha kuwat."

Just then, a man with a large bowl of water stepped carefully
through the crowd of people until he was at my side. He sat the bowl
of water beside me and signaled for me to sit up. I sat up and looked

down into the water and saw myself. I was lying down peacefully in my apartment, wearing my favorite pajamas.

Why did I love those pajamas so much back then?

They were easy, I guess.

Light grey cotton blended material with white pinstripes. Easy. Comfortable. Washed and worn 200 times a year.

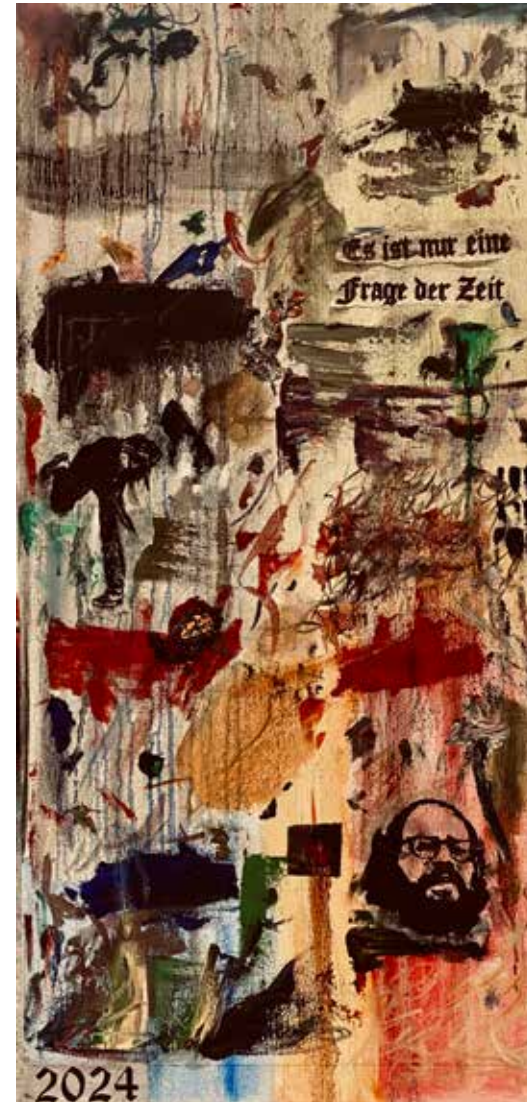
I saw my alarm clock on the left nightstand next to a vase of white hydrangea. In 6 minutes, it would go off. Just then it hit me, I could wake up!

I could avoid the uncertainty of this place and ride the D train near Prospect Park to work in 44 minutes. Then I would carry on through another passionless day at the firm, to ensure that I can still afford that 671 sq ft apartment of mine. And then of course, I would meet up with Jameson after work and hear all about his day while silently wondering if a proposal would come this year, on our 8th anniversary. I wondered about that every summer for the last 3 years. Not because I am too old-fashioned to pop the question myself, but because deep down, I wondered if he also knew something was missing between us. Maybe that's why neither of us would ever ask.

No. Before I could question reality and physics to decide what was rational or fantasy, I abruptly pushed the bowl away. I didn't know who these people were, or how or why I ended up on this jungle island, but I decided it would be my paradise. This would be my best life- adventurous, unpredictable, possibly difficult at times, and filled with wonder. I would later come to know that "cha kuwat" means, "choose now." And if I could send a postcard back to the world I once knew, I would tell them all to do the same. Choose now, how you want to live and who you want to be. For me, the choice was sudden and simple.

After all, I am certain I had never appreciated all the hues of green in nature until I miraculously washed up on the shores of Salva Raj.

1962



Oil and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2024

California Dreaming



Digital Photography

Parking Lot Stairway



Digital Photography

His Hope and Joy



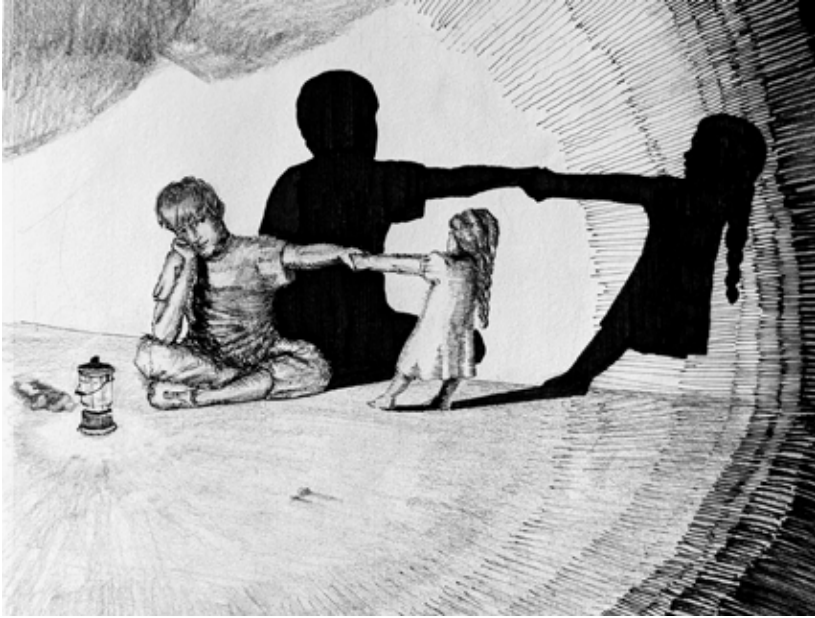
Digital Art

Look for Beauty Long Enough and You Will Find it in the Dust



Watercolor and Ink Pen on Paper

Firmly



Ink and Graphite on Paper

Tranquility



Pen and Ink

The Reality We Don't See on Glass

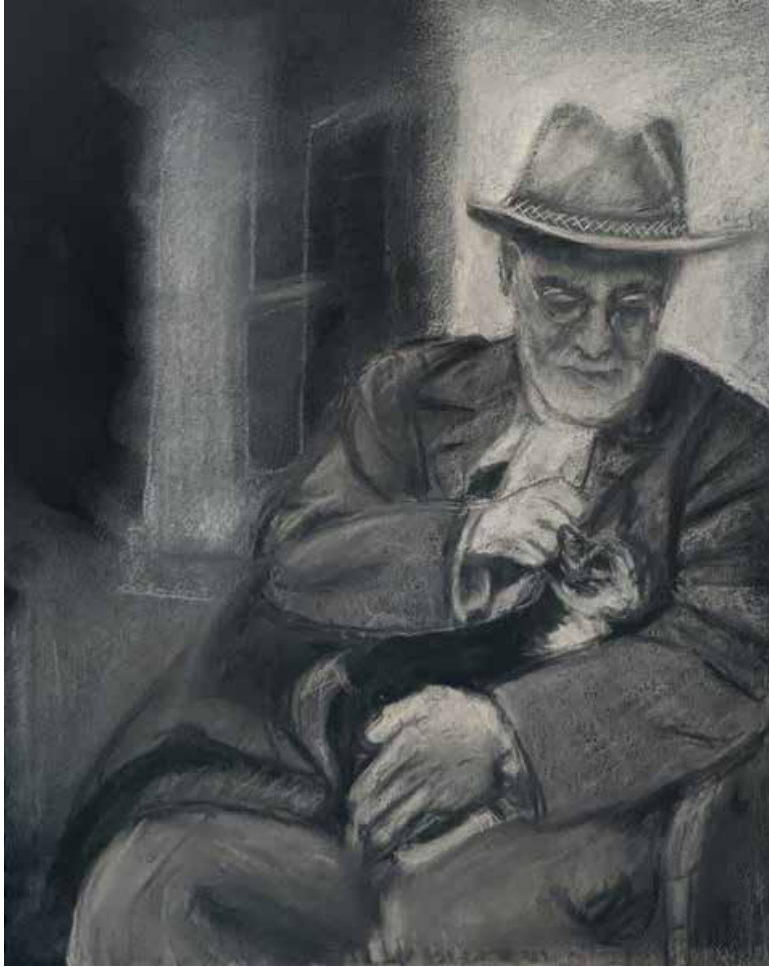


Capricorn



2024, Watercolor Monotype, 14 ½" x 10 ¾"

Henri Matisse



Henri Matisse would
paint on paper, then he'd cut
into the color

Charcoal Pencil on Paper

Hope in the Holy Spirit



Liminality



Digital Photography

Vines of Confinement



Digital Photography

A Grave Authenti(city)



Soft Pastel on Paper

Forest of Life



Acrylic Markers on Canvas

Hope in Pain



contributors' notes

Gabriel Albano is a local illustrator who graduated from VCU Arts with a BFA in Communication Arts. He is inspired by moody, thoughtful stories and environments to create digital and mixed media art.

Tala Alhabashi has been using drawing as their form of expression since they were a kid. They have always taken strong value to the long hours they spent drawing.

Nashmise (Amy) Altona is a 23-year-old ambitious Communications Studies student at Howard Community College with aspirations to work in digital marketing.

Howard Community College student **Maria Annarelli** enjoys exploring themes of queerness and desire across creative mediums. Her short story "On Hunger" can be found in the Spring 2024 issue of *The Muse*.

Deborah Araujo is a Communications major with a focus on photojournalism. Her passion for visual storytelling is rooted in her desire to connect with others and express the world around her.

Sebastian Arias is a Howard Community College student who majors in Visual Arts. Through their photography, they hope to demonstrate overlooked and mundane scenes from urban life with a new perspective.

Emily Barros is a Visual Arts major at Howard Community College. They love creating and sharing their art, even if that means not a lot of people see it.

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.

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.

Kait Burnett (she/her) is a writer from Clarksville, MD. She would like to thank her family for their endless support and the readers for keeping local art alive!

Writer and soon-to-be genre-defying author **Shay Carter** takes pride in her work and hopes to share and inspire others through storytelling.

Kelis Drummond is a second year student at Howard Community College studying Social Science. She loves concerts, reading, and hanging out with her friends. Her favorite books to read are essay collections and fiction.

Jon Eric is an Ellicott City native, creative mostly focusing on poetry but also branching out into other mediums such as painting and 3D works.

Ariana Fernandez is a student at Howard Community College who currently majors in Music, specifically voice. She enjoys gaming, writing, song-writing, and playing instruments like the guitar and piano.

K. Fernandez is a passionate student who loves and appreciates life. This is her first published work.

River Fox is an undiscovered non-binary icon currently attending Howard Community College. When they are not dreaming of dragons and phylacteries, they are pestering their wife to read their stories.

Vix Franks is a Howard Community College student who loves writing fictional romance and fantasy stories. They are a novice writer, and hope to build a career on their love for creative writing.

Aero Fry likes to collect hobbies. They enjoy reading, writing, building LEGO sets, cooking, cross-stitching, and playing cozy video games. However, there never seems to be enough time for everything.

Joe Hall is a student at Howard Community College. He loves playing sports and spending time with friends and family.

Bianca Hockensmith is a student, currently exploring her passion of writing.

Sydney Jacobs is a student with disabilities studying for an Art Associates degree. Through pain, Sydney is able to make art, find community, and thrive in Howard Community College.

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

Dwayne Lawson-Brown is the author of three poetry collections; *One Color Kaleidoscope* (2019), *Twenty:21* (2021), and *Breaking the Blank* (co-authored with Rebecca Bishophall, 2022).

Minh Le is a current pastry student and aspiring writer who focuses on stories that examines different aspects of love and friendship. In their free time, they pick apart movies and stories they like.

Mikayl Lee, 25, had a keen interest for both art and planets her whole life. She was inspired to make art by her father, who also had skills in drawing and she grew to make art her greatest hobby.

Cassie Litchfield is a Life Sciences major at Howard Community College, going into her sophomore year. She is a casual writer who draws inspiration from the world around her. She hopes you enjoy the short poem.

Corey Lyman is a 33-year-old Marine Corps infantry veteran who served from 2010-2014 right after graduating high school. Corey deployed to Afghanistan in July of 2011 with 1st Battalion 6th Marine Regiment.

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.

With a thorough enjoyment of the arts, **Paige Miller** (attending Howard Community College) hopes to continue developing her interests, while keeping an eye on the not-so-far horizon for new opportunities and adventures.

Amanda Minino is General Studies major in her second year at Howard Community College. She hopes to work towards a career in mathematics and continue to pursue her creative passions, such as drawing, writing

Oyinkan Olaniyan is a Nursing major in her first year at Howard Community College who enjoys reading novels and singing. This is also her first time taking creative writing class.

Bianka Padilla is an artist that loves expressing her creativity through reiki healing, music, and poetry. She loves God, her family, and nature.

Henry Pilon is a first-year student who has an interest in visual art. He is not known for his sarcasm.

Forever in a reverie, **Claire Rhee** travels the eternally complicated but charming paths of words and imagery, armed with her trusty pencil and eraser. She delights in states of ambedo and anemoia.

Michael Roy is a student at Howard Community College who believes hope provides strength and encouragement.

Molly Rubinstein started painting last year at the age of 73, transferring her visions for peace, unity, and equality onto canvas.

Willow Schools is a traditional illustrator who incorporates traditional Asian art inspired visuals in her work. From Ellicott City, Maryland, her work is feminine, chaotic, with many floral designs.

Jocelyn Shiber is just a woman in the world desiring to be noticed. She loves to write, to create, and to read. She is most certainly suitable to write her poetry and to be noticed by it.

Ebene N. Simmons is the winner of the 2025 Don Bauder Student Award for Creative Expression.

Benjamin Smith-Rowland is a student at Howard Community College.

Nadajeyh Stephen is a dreamer and a writer. At 22, she's still coming up with stories her mouth, wrist, and friends have to keep up with. She wishes to share her inner world with others.

Lindsay Sweitzer is an eternal student by choice, eternal optimist by necessity.

Ian Tyrrell is a student at Howard Community College majoring in Humanities. He enjoys all things nature and philosophical, as well writing!

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

Leilanni Williams-Day is a drawing artist and painter from Columbia, Maryland. She is a student at Howard Community college who is studying to get her associate's degree.

From growing an immense fascination for modern art in his hometown of Chicago, **Richard Wright** blends contemporary art with modern culture in a portfolio that spans over eight years.



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.24

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Visit HowardCC.edu/TheMuse for submission guidelines.

