

# The Muse

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# The Muse

*The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College*

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# contents

## *poetry*

Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows	4	Shaunak Patil
Truth Adjacent	6	John Whelan
Dark	7	Marsha Bailey
God Complex	8	Nina Randall
Three Weeks In	10	Cecelia Wilson
Teenage Years	11	Ben Domenick-Urbansky
Everything in Existence Fully Blooming	12	Jenny Binckes Lee
Experiencing Earth	14	Rina Aschemann
Words From the Home	15	Sabrina Matoff-Stepp
Intermission	16	Ellie Goldberg
Motherless Brooklyn	18	William Lowe
Beethoven's Cello Sonata No. 1 in F major	19	Kris Metzger
She Dreamed	20	Ayesha Wainwright
Cravings	22	Kelli Andrade
Stuck in a Cage	23	Muhammad Anwar Ul Haq
I Am Not Me	24	Molly Rubinstein
The Statue (Olea europea)-Go!	26	Nicholas Andriani
Decatur & 4th Street	27	Nicholas Andriani
Calm Waters	28	Dayrin Jimenez
Addiction	30	Sarah Pettit
The Worth of Birdhouses	32	Pattie Holy-Ilenda
The Fox by the Stream	34	McKenna Keogh
	37	Kris Metzger

## *prose*

Milk Song	38	Jenny Binckes Lee
Broken	39	Travis Davis
In Her Arms	40	Catherine Montague
The Dazzling Dress	42	Kaitlyn Burnett
Refugee at Two	44	Roger Chang
First Meeting	51	Greta Boeringer
Thou Shalt Not!	54	Pattie Holy-Ilenda
From These Honored Dead	58	Keela Daniels
Dogfriend	61	Marie Westhaver
Constance	67	Katherine J. Brawdy
Tiger Stripes	70	McKenna Keogh
The Bottomless Pit	72	Kathryn Najmy
Dream Me	76	Dana Arlene Chin

## *art*

Where the Wonder Went	81	Jennifer Smutek
Illusions	82	Summara Abaid
Minute Sparks	83	Summara Abaid
Effects of Anxiety	84	Casey Boin
Symbol	85	Naw Lilian Tapa
Spring Forward	86	Marie Westhaver
Ren's Mind	87	Ren Song Tabor
Tethered	88	Erin Kline
Roja	89	Erin Kline
Seashells on Wood	90	Molly Rubinstein
Discovery: A Study in Glass	91	Megan D'Andrade
Sea Bear at Rest	92	Matt Korbela
Sunset on the Erie Canal	93	Matt Korbela
Radio City Music Hall	94	Kayla Johnson
Sunrise, Ocean City	95	Jackie Regales
Supernova (Gifted Student Burn-out)	96	Helen Therese Avancena

## **Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows**

Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows

The planes flew overhead, leaving a trail of blood in its path  
We watched atop the hill  
Clasping our hands together we took our last breaths  
Skies greyed  
Lights dimmed

Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows

The delicate leaves lay curled on the ground  
The birds sang songs of love  
The dogs lay peacefully at our feet

Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows

The mechanical cylinder dropped down below  
What once took decades to build, would soon perish in an instant  
We took one last look  
One last smile  
One last touch

Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows

From the darkness above a beam of light shined through  
Erupting into a flash  
The sound of death followed  
The waves of wind flowed through the town  
The cold winter months grew hotter in an instant

Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows

The birds sang their last song  
The dogs lay peacefully one last time  
We felt each other's embrace once more

And then it was gone...all gone...  
The...

Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows



## Truth Adjacent

The whole of my existence  
has holes.

Details forgotten—  
conveniently, carelessly  
or by the dark art  
of omission.

Deception came naturally—  
a sleight of hand,  
misdirection as my accomplice.  
The aim ...to dupe the unwary  
at a game they couldn't win.  
The hole widened.

I even conned myself,  
I thought no one would notice  
the grifter in front of them.  
I treated truth like a prop,  
a new hat to try on—  
a fresh persona  
for the unsuspecting.

These days,  
I tend to remember the good stuff,  
sweet sticky memories  
that ease gravity's approach.  
A Pavlovian response  
to my wonderful, awful, humanness.

## Dark

Once filled with love and light  
now resembles an abandoned home  
no longer with warmth and love  
cold and dark to the core

The smell of fresh pancakes and bacon  
now no scent at all  
Once shining bright perfect beach day  
hopeless and dreary the aftermath of a storm  
Broken trees and branches remain  
like her broken glass  
discarded.

If she sought earlier  
her life  
maybe not this storm.

Fell in love with the representative  
built a life she thought would be forever.

Like any storm  
the sun shines after.  
She picks up the pieces  
vows to make a new.

Once filled with love  
then abandon  
she made the house new.

Light.

## God Complex

The complexity  
Of the concept  
Of confidence  
consumes me  
I want it *oozing*  
out of my skin  
I want to be the  
Epitome  
Of confidence  
The epitome  
Of no fucks given  
I want people to look at me  
And see  
Not one flaw.  
I want people to stare  
And never dare  
To state any of my flaws  
I want to hear  
*"they're perfect"*  
Even though perfection could never lie in the  
Hands of human  
Humbly assuming  
That it's impossible  
I want to be impossibly confident.  
Confidence that is  
Long lasting  
And not one of those serotonin boosts that  
My manic mind makes  
Up.  
Turning it into  
A god complex.  
Yes,  
I want to be god  
but,  
Not God Themself.

But more like  
*"God they've sure have come a long way"*  
I want people to say  
*"They're way more confident today than yesterday"*  
I want the delusion  
Of intrepidity  
Eventually,  
The complexity  
Of confidence  
Won't consume me  
I will consume  
IT.

## Three Weeks In

I load my magazine like a pro.  
Thumb is no longer sore,  
Just swift, and with ease, I push one round down and slide the other  
on in,  
I just kinda pretend that I'm threading a new bracelet,  
Holding one end of the beaded string and sliding another bead onto  
the open end to complete the process,  
I'm processing this as best as I can,  
This is work, not who I am.

## Teenage Years

Is it the truths or the lies we harvest to grow?  
Can a lie take root and break you apart,  
Create a personality that's not you?  
You can only watch from a distance as your life is  
Usurped, Stolen.  
The grief sets first.  
Then the hopelessness and  
The denial of the newborn emotions.  
These lead to problematic feelings,  
Worse than the beginning.  
Anger and jealousy and sadness.  
They live, while happiness dies.  
What happened to  
You?  
Why can't you keep the old?  
To bring happiness and warmth in old age?  
It will never happen.  
The  
You  
You once were is  
Gone.

## Everything in Existence Fully Blooming

for Trayvon Martin

*Your neighbor is your other self dwelling behind a wall.  
In understanding, all walls shall fall down.*

—Kahlil Gibran

There is such a place as a neighborhood in bloom  
The stiller you stand there, the less discrete  
your outlines become, allowing you to see  
how you are in the midst of floating Buddhas,  
soft-spoken samurai, a Holy Family

There is such a person as a man who is a boy  
Snow collects on the surface of his hood,  
his gently cradling arms, even on  
the confetti of colored sweets  
in the palm of his hand

Blushing pink petals  
collect at his feet

There is such a thing as *right view*  
Nearby, there stands a watchman  
(who might on a different day  
have wronged this man who is a boy)  
Now, though, he stares  
in wonder

His eyelids flicker, for perhaps  
it is an angel who stands before him,  
head bent in softest prayer

A benevolent being  
listening for the symphony

of red maple blossoms  
unfurling high above  
the path

A boy who is nourished by  
refracted light &  
kindnesses

A young man who assumes goodness

Dearest God,  
please help him see the angel

If he can't see him, we are all lost,  
as is everything in existence,  
wanting only to bloom  
in full.



## Experiencing Earth

Fog rolls in over the centuries-old churches in Hallstatt, Austria,  
Nestled in the bosom of snowy mountains  
Where every breath is visible,  
Briefly dancing before dissipating.

Pink blossoms decorate the trees of Tokyo, Japan,  
Branches stretching after a long hibernation  
Children laugh with kites in hand,  
Stumbling over each other, watching the sky

Waves crash along the Amalfi Coast  
As the sun sets behind domed buildings of blues, pinks and oranges  
The boats start their slow migration,  
Back toward the soft shore

Balloons spot the sky of Cappadocia, Turkey,  
Rising above the soft sighs of a sleepy Earth  
Floating against the backdrop of canyons,  
That yawn soft browns and reds

Earth gifts such beauty  
In her climate, her colors and her cultures.  
I yearn to see them all through the eyes  
Of those who love her.

## Words From the Home

Five years and long-lasting dreams,  
they come with me from home  
to home, the light now streams in  
from the east and the rooms are sparsely decorated.

As I sit in the middle of the floor  
deep in thought, wondering how time  
went by so quickly, closing  
one door, opening the door to next week  
and a room to write in front  
of a bay window, looking out at trees  
without winter coats,  
and it will all seem very strange, or just very new,  
another place to make a bramble nest  
or a bed of roses.

In every home, I ground,  
in every home, I grieve,  
and in every home, I grow.

**Intermission**

F, E with a squeal of scales  
Practice, practice, practice  
Frustrated mind  
Silence

Heavy tick of metronome  
Lulls:  
Spotlight's fog embraces  
Warming fingertips.  
A virtuoso on stage  
Raised chin, charcoal chin rests beneath  
Bow rising and falling like  
Applause from rows and rows of dollhouse figures  
Corelli whirling from violin.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven chimes,  
Clock's baron conducts city symphony  
Awakening  
French horn of honking cars  
Trumpet of taxis  
Euphonium of bus engines.  
Dog's feet click clack on sidewalk  
Echoing through shaded pencil city.  
Drawn to window,  
She accompanies the concert  
Pizza man scurries like a mouse,  
Zebra lined buildings form a crossword puzzle.  
She searches  
Emptied squares.  
Streetlights show one remaining  
Waiting silhouette,  
Broom's straw waving  
Words skipping across alley  
  
"Bravo, encore!"

One audience member  
Lifts whole girl.

## Motherless Brooklyn

Brooklyn, I beckon you,  
alone in my mother's old haunts—  
sitting in the sun in a Gotham Eden,  
hearing the tide of the wind  
dampen the sirens on Flatbush.

Did she come here as a child,  
when her life was a lilac in bloom  
and her death less than a whisper?  
Brooklyn, can you give me an answer?

I think it likely, but uncertainty  
bores in my brain like a worm—  
so many threads of a life lost  
when her bones turned to ash,  
a whole life compressed, sealed in an urn.

## Beethoven's Cello Sonata No. I in F major

The cellist lifts her bow and  
lifetimes rise and recede  
and I rejoice in the pause before  
meditations emerge as notes  
existing long before  
she played, long before anyone  
knew their names.  
In the sonata I  
shed my skin  
unbound and nameless  
peering into F major with  
familiar regard,  
as if I had been  
here all along.

## She Dreamed

She dreamed of but a simpler time,  
When she was young  
And free of fears and anxiety.  
When opportunity was boundless  
And the feeling of a shattered dream  
Was completely  
Unfamiliar.  
She dreamed of but a wilder time,  
When she had just begun  
To wet her lips upon the chalice of  
Freedom  
While still remaining in the warm  
And comforting waters of youth.  
That time of reckless abandon  
And perceived invincibility and  
Immortality.  
She dreamed of but a braver time.  
When youth begun to settle and  
Calm down.  
When responsibility reared its head again and,  
This time, was embraced.  
A time when she became more of who  
She truly is.

And she dreamed of unknown times.  
With vast and endless outcomes.  
Times that she could only imagine  
And times that she could still create.  
So while she sometimes dreamed of  
Sadder times,  
Or got scared from dreams of  
Badder times,  
The fact that she

Still  
Dreamed  
At all  
Made her smile  
Because she knew that even when  
Life gets hard  
She would still be able  
To dream.



## Cravings

We work in the shadows,  
whispering in your ear,  
you answer our call,  
so willingly my dear.

We are yours and you are ours.  
Intertwined and snared  
in our grasp.

When you answer our call  
with your ravenous hunger,  
with your ravenous truth,  
when you beg for something you can reach  
with a simple call  
we step forward.

We are creatures never seen before.  
We are creatures of chaos.  
We are yours  
as much as you are ours.

We are your  
captivating,  
encapsulating,  
all-consuming  
Cravings.

## Stuck in a Cage

Looking at the sky, I dream to fly.  
Closing my eyes and feeling the breaths of air.  
Trying to leave the cage, giving out a cry.  
World closing on me and the end seems near.

I remember the time of freedom.  
To go anywhere, to do anything,  
Making everything of my own in this kingdom.  
Day or night, work or to care about nothing.

How did all this happen? I wonder,  
Wherever I look, all I see are walls.  
And I look for the heavens in search of a thunder,  
That will destroy it all and my agony falls.

Now I pray for the month of July,  
Where we could be our older selves, able to fly.

## I Am Not Me

I used to be an individual  
Independent, self-reliant, and strong  
Now I am weak and must depend on others  
To do even the simplest things for me

I used to be a mother  
Raising and nurturing my son  
Now we have reversed our roles  
And my son takes care of me

I used to be a registered nurse  
Competent, caring, and good enough to be certified in my specialty  
Now I cannot work, or pursue my dream  
To return to school and become a nurse practitioner

I used to be outgoing and active  
I loved to dance, to hike, to camp out  
Now my outings are sedentary, to watch movies and such  
Or I use a wheelchair to visit places where I used to walk

I used to be a friend  
Doing things together, listening to other's concerns  
Now I am a burden  
And can no longer inflict myself on other people

I used to be a woman  
Romantic, passionate, and loving  
Now my fire has gone out and my embers are cold  
I am alone

I used to juggle many roles  
Mother, friend, nurse, homemaker, me  
Now I can hold only one ball at a time  
And often I drop just the one

I used to be human  
But now I have Lupus and Fibromyalgia  
I cannot control my symptoms, my symptoms control me  
I am defined by my pain, fatigue, depression  
I am just the hollow shell of who I used to be  
I am not me.

## The Statue (Olea europea)–

You stand there and weep  
for the muse of sorrows  
hovers about your shoulders  
broken limbs of kalamata

Hiketerias cries as  
Athena's gift  
Fills our nets and casting we fish  
Climbing higher in the rift

I tour the curves of your stunted  
torso  
A path of  
You, totem of bellied desire.  
I venture along the grove of your hips  
Ventriloquist-me  
For i am but a breezy whisper down the  
Marbled smooth  
Small of your back.  
Mohammed gave you Ramadan  
Athena, the Acropolis  
Self sterile  
I will cultivate you  
And harvest for generations to come

What's this?

Broken

Limb.  
Dispatched  
the four corners—

your tetraphobic fate

## Go!

181 white  
180 black  
361 total

The stones have spoken, has your mind-  
'woken?

your move. **It's** time. **Take** it

**Fill** the **spaces** as **they** lie,

**I'll** take **mine**,

Plunging my fingers into the cool black pool of marbled eyes,  
insight into the restless lives

residing below that oh-so mercurial surface of our hides.

The game is simple—

We scatter ourselves across the ten-thousand directions, seekers and  
busy noise-makers but in this moment of solitude that which is  
clear

Oh spirit

Oh moon

Oh myriad,

Oh Things

Oh demons

Oh ghouls

Oh

Oh, but for the grace of GO!

## Decatur & 4th Street

A little nook in a big city  
Tiny houses and those with white picket fences  
Mercedes and construction trucks  
Trapped in a subterranean—  
a conglomeration.

There is a place...  
Where the sidewalk ends...  
And your road halts  
To a split...  
forcing you to choose  
Decatur or  
4th Street.

Amiable in nature—  
A wide plateau betwixt them.

Yet, Decatur...  
Handsome and noble,  
Lines your path with voluptuous castles  
Automobiles galore  
And the local dog walker in roar.

Behind the white-washed stone tombs—  
Behind the potholes sprouting flowers—  
Behind the glory—Decatur himself warns,

“Dead End.  
You mighty cul-de-sac fools.  
Your life ends here,” he drools...

And to your left—an alternative.  
Patchy—a house missing from the line-up  
A narrower road, uphill, and dark.

Your soul longs for Decatur, but he no longer shows.  
A striking backhand he blows.  
The road to Decatur is  
Closed.



## Calm Waters

A flock of birds flies through the orange pink-blue sky.  
The ocean waves crash together in contrast.

The breeze is wet,  
the saltiness settles onto the skin.  
A boat rushes past,  
and the surroundings become clear.

The aged rowboat is rocking,  
fish swimming by  
with no hesitation nor grace.

The water settles out.

Why has the world  
given me such loneliness?  
A moment of fear  
reflecting on my past, present, and future.

I know she will not come back to me. I know I'll never find anyone else.

Her silky blonde hair  
bouncing in the wind  
as she sat in my rowboat.

Her scent blew around in the wind  
setting onto my clothes for eternity.

How I wish I could feel that again

I never saw *her* scared, I only saw her thankful.

One day  
she started to see the better things in life.  
She was losing her worry.

Becoming content with the world,  
and the life she lived.

You could see it as her days got shorter. She knew not to cry.  
Her time in this world,  
with me,  
was enough.

She did live. She traveled. She loved.  
She loved spending time with me on this silly boat.

These waters belong to you, my love.  
I will look after them forever.

**Addiction**

How is it okay  
to suck  
marrow from my bones  
while yours bow beneath  
the muscled weight  
of fine meat and juices  
too expensive to sip  
your belt moving a notch to the left

A cup of plenty  
of nothing and everything altogether  
poisoned shards of crystal  
shine along the glass bottom  
bright green in the smoky light  
glowing from a greasy lighter

And then, in a moment you are gone  
like a mythical creature  
without power  
to overcome  
that which  
withers your soul

No magical sword to pull  
from a stone anvil  
no winged horse  
on which to escape  
no, you are not a fairy  
nor a god  
yet you are  
capricious in your desires  
and cruel in your intentions

The patina of your shield feels rough  
rusted from lies

that spill from your mouth  
like frosted air  
swirling in eddies around my feet  
until I am pulled in  
again  
and again  
and again

## The Worth of Birdhouses

The first time we kissed  
Was in an elevator  
In the state home of the American Goldfinch  
New Jersey

You drove the same reckless way  
Whether I was in the car  
Or not  
My great hopeless romantic  
Love story

Somehow I became  
Infatuated  
With every pore on your body  
Every strand of hair on your head

Our love like a pillowcase  
Ripped open  
Feathers here and there  
Still  
Never fully able to clean up the mess you left behind

The idea  
That we could tell our kids  
In our cookie cutter  
White picket fence house  
That we had loved each other since we were 9

The idea  
That we always knew  
Our wedding day  
Was going to be shared together

This idea  
Was intoxicating

And outweighing  
Of any bad sign I saw

We spent our Fridays  
Painting birdhouses  
You hated it  
But you loved  
How happy it made me  
Was it all an act?  
A game of charades?

I guess it's no coincidence there were never any birds  
In the birdhouses  
Because birds represent  
Love  
And  
Truthfulness

Two weeks  
Two weeks I was in Florida  
And the entire concept of girl code  
Got lost

Only a bird flight away  
She was going to be my maid of honor  
How that wasn't enough  
Still  
Bemuses me  
How she refused to settle for anything less  
Than the bride  
Still  
Bemuses me

And now I am going to be a guest  
At the wedding

That was supposed to be mine  
 Watching her  
 Walk  
 In the dress  
 That should've been  
 Mine  
 Kiss the lips  
 That were mine

My basement is still  
 Cluttered  
 With birdhouses  
 With no birds inside  
 No truthfulness  
 Or love  
 Inside  
 A dark void  
 Filled  
 With dust and paint chippings

Similarly  
 No cookie cutter houses  
 White picket fences  
 A guest at my own wedding  
 Who now prefers a log cabin  
 Coincidentally  
 Located in Florida

## The Fox by the Stream

Who will grieve the fox  
 who has died by the stream?  
 He is not like my friend  
 who, at the last,  
 was covered in prayer.  
 But watch:  
 the soil is a soft shroud  
 and branches are bending toward him  
 in careful witness while  
 the great oaks  
 whisper their gratitude.  
 The cool brook offers a gentle baptism into  
 what comes next.  
 Ah!  
 So now I see:  
 our little fox  
 who has died by the stream  
 is also  
 covered in prayer.



## Milk Song

There is an island not far from here where there is no milk. None at all. A little red-headed girl was born on this island to a mayor & his wife, a woman made deeply lovely by her own kindness. The mayor was named Earth, & his wife, Affection. They named their baby girl Meander. Often, as Meander slept during the wide afternoons of this island, you could hear Earth & Affection laughing. It was a bright sound of tea glasses gently clinking against each other. Because of this glad sound, their island outshone those nearby.

But, as you know there was no milk, & as Meander grew older & was weaned from her mother, she craved milk. When she had no playmates, she would wander her sunny home, crying simply, "Milk, milk." It turned out that Meander was an apt name for this strangely fetching child. Indeed, even at a young age, her parents gave her the freedom to walk the island alone. She was a searching child, & Affection worried that this early deprivation of sweet cow's milk had made her daughter too full of longing. But Earth would stroke his wife's hand, reassuring her.

One day, on a side street near the town mosque, Meander met a man older than her own grandfather sitting on the curb. He blinked up at the warm sun, an empty tea glass cupped in his hands. Meander guessed rightly at his blindness. "Grandfather?" she ventured, though this was not her grandfather. "Granddaughter," he smiled. "Do you need a cup of tea, Grandfather?" "No, child. My elder brother brought me a glass of milk from the mainland this morning, & I've spilt it up to the sky. Tonight, look for it. I've made a whole river, I believe. A beautiful mess."

Meander ran home giggling that same tea-glass laugh of her parents. She grew up to be a poet with milky skin & a spacious heart.

## Broken

You're sitting on your bed scrolling endlessly through various social media apps. From Instagram to Twitter to Facebook. Fingers absentmindedly press that little red heart. You don't *really* like that picture. But the action is so mechanical. So subconscious that it slips your mind completely. You're not absorbing what you're watching; your mind is elsewhere. A notification pops up. The banner coming down on your phone is yellow. Snapchat. You hesitate for a second. Two.. Three... The banner disappears before you've finally made a decision. You swipe out of Facebook. Away from the memes keeping you distracted. Away from the newest dance routine. Snapchat is in the same folder. Not too far to go now. A small red circle sits in the corner. Fourteen messages. Fourteen different people. All asking the same question. "Are you okay?" Obviously not. The little pictures show you who's messaged you. The girl in your math class. A guy you had a project with once. Your best friends. The group chat must be going crazy right now. Your thumb hovers over the small, blue square on the group chat, but you don't press it. You can't bring yourself to. Too embarrassed. Instead another catches your eye. The one with the name 'Cupcake'. A name created after an inside joke. *Cupcake*, for the guy you were dating. Were as in the past subjunctive of be. Not... Currently. Your phone feels like it's shaking in anticipation. It's not. It's you. There's a number next to it. Four hundred twenty seven. It's accompanied by the flame emoji. The day you two started dating you started a Snapchat streak. Four. Hundred. Twenty. Seven. Days. Such a funny concept, time. How you never know when you'll be out of it. When it will run out. When you should cherish those minute little seconds. Funny. As you stare at that small circle your eyes begin to well with tears. In just one hour, it would all be over. The streak would end. Funny. You worked hard to maintain that streak. Making sure it didn't fail. You worked hard to maintain that relationship. Making sure you nurtured it. Well, if Snapchat has taught you anything it's that nothing ever really lasts.

## In Her Arms

Her rich, southern drawl rips through the morning atmosphere. “Well hello, sweetheart,” she taunts as she pulls me in for a squeeze. My five-year-old beaded head fills with joy. She puts me in her golden car, I rustle, rustle, rustle on the cushions. We head off to our destination, and her voice fills the air with stories of phone calls to her friends, her favorite soap opera getting “real good,” and gentle teasing about my quietness.

This voice has been through it all. This voice has been through losing her mother to the city, this voice has been through picking vegetables in humid July in her grandpa’s garden. This voice has been through the fear of sitting in the front of the bus when she knew well to sit in the back. This voice has been through the pain of losing her other half. But she carries on. We finally arrive at our very own Shangri-La, the butterfly garden. I fill with excitement as we inch closer to the doors. I’m finally back, I’m finally at my sanctuary.

I’m pulled into different directions: the giant leaves over here, the monarch’s over there, the red admirals over here, the families feeding the colony with pieces of fruit over there. My 5’0” body gets lost in it all. We go further into the portal and find teal, rusting benches in the shape of wings, one small, one large. I claim the large one, and she snaps and snaps her camera to catch the moment in time. I wasn’t quite ready for my wings yet, but I’d get there.

We approach an indigenous culture exhibit, where we can shuck corn. I strain to pick up the log in my little hands, but I manage to crunch, crunch, crunch the tiny nuggets. She looks at me pleased, as if I learned it all from the best. We head back home, but not before she hunts down our favorite tree. It stands tall, strong, and defiant against the backdrop of a small, gothic manor. It seems as if it’s still growing. Branches reaching the clouds, roots getting deeper into the dirt, making it clear that this land is his, and his alone.

My wide eyes study it from top to bottom, it feels like I caught a flash of it before she jolts right, jolts home. We make it back, and I walk downstairs to the family room, frozen in time with my Dad’s toy cars, the static television from the ’80s, and the love that Grandpa used to fill the couch with. I immerse myself in buttery popcorn,

sweet, ripe lemonade, and flashy, frantic cartoons, as she chatters, chatters, chatters with girlfriends about neighborhood drama, family, and me.

I start to feel empty on the maroon, paisley rug, so I shyly creep out of if so I can sit on her lap. She opens her strong yet soft arms to embrace me, I take in the sweet smell of Elizabeth Taylor perfume, and that peculiar old person smell I can never make out. We sit in silence, and I feel relief. Relief that I don’t have to have my guard up, relief that I can allow my snaggletooth smile to melt onto my face again, relief that I get the one person who I can call safe is my shield from the world’s sharp stares.

But she reminds me that she won’t always be there for me to run to. “This year, we’re gonna say goodbye to shy,” she says, a sing-songy rhythm through each word. I nod in agreement, knowing I’m lying but trying to please her anyway. I’m not ready to share myself with anyone yet, scared they’ll tear me apart with their laughs, their harsh words, their exclusion. But what I know for sure is that when I leave our nest, and her voice booms “Grandma will always love you, ya hear?” she will push me further to blossom, for years to come.

## The Dazzling Dress

A dress hangs in my closet. Its colors glow in the dark; the reds and oranges swirling intensely, yellows and greens dancing cheerfully, blues and purples cascading softly—all blending to create a beautiful rainbow. The dress is enticing. Its seduction is dangerous and makes me scared of myself; The second I put it on, I will become a different person.

I've had the dress for a while now. I knew I liked dresses when I was 16, so I bought one with some extra money. No one knows I have it. I'm not good at lying to people about little things, but big secrets like this? I become fucking Jay Gatsby. Actually, more of a Nick Carraway. I snuck the dress into my closet, and it's been hiding there ever since. I often tiptoe to it at night and hold it up to my body, letting its design align with my figure. It would look perfect on me, I know it would. But I don't put it on. I shouldn't. I can't. That's just not how the world works.

Everyone at my school wears jeans and a simple t-shirt. Everyday. And it's fine, I guess. I mean, it makes everyone fit together. I sorta like the uniformity of it. I wear jeans and a t-shirt, too, so I feel like I belong. That's all I have to do to blend in. The method is easy and never lets me down. Most times, I feel safe in the crowd of denim and cotton. But sometimes, I look around, and it all feels so dreary. So bland. There's no originality. I start to wonder if everyone just wears this outfit because they have to. Well, because society tells them to. It's not an enforced rule, but who the *hell* is going to break social order? Ridiculous, I know, but I'm 18. My whole life is high school. Still, I catch myself thinking about what wearing the dress would be like. I envision the scene I would cause with a few pieces of fabric. Everyone would stop and look. The world would go quiet. The high would be intoxicating. But it would slam me down to an equally intense low. I could never be the first to wear one. So the days go on, and nothing changes.

Getting up, putting on the jeans-and-t-shirt outfit, and going to school is dismal. When I show up at school, I'm the same as everyone else, following the same routine. I wish that there was variety in it, that it felt like... a dance. Like foxtrotting in a West Egg mansion.

Beautiful dresses, music playing, light filling the room! 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2...

**3 PM.** An ear-splitting buzz ends my fantasy. The school day is, somehow, already done. The East Egg building releases its guests. I walk home with a burning in my throat. I can't live like this anymore, but I'm too scared to change. I don't know what to do. I throw my backpack on the ground, slam my bedroom door, rip off the shirt and pants, and collapse onto my bed. Tears streaming down my face, I whisper to no one: "Please, let something, *anything* change."

The next day, my throat burns twice as much. I look around at the cluster of shirts and pants, denim and cotton, lifelessness and dread, and I feel sick. A ringing crescendos in my ears. The outlines of bodies dissolve. Everything blends. I get dizzy. Breathe, Kaitlyn. In. Out. In. Out. Then the school doors fling open. The air gently releases from my lungs as I stare in awe— someone is wearing a dress. They strut to the creaks of the door hinges like entrance music. Their posture aims the dress toward fluorescent ceiling lights, creating an explosion of color in the hallway. For the first time, everything feels vibrant. My body feels alive. I can't help but stare. *No one* can help but stare. It's all happening exactly how I pictured it. It's beautiful. The world is silently screaming. There's a comfortable disturbance in the status quo. The only sounds anyone can hear are the person's footsteps, the confidence of their laugh, the swishing of their dress. This moment, the one I always envisioned would be mine, belonged to them. I've never been prouder of a stranger. The green of their eyes shines in mine. "You look incredible," I beam as they walk by. They flash me a smile that says a thousand words.

I'm going to wear my dress to school tomorrow.

## Refugee at Two

Huge artillery shells cracked the air apart. The roar of World War II proven Russian tanks plowing forward in the distance sent a sudden chill into the hearts of millions of Chinese civilians caught in the crossfire between the Chinese Communist and the Chinese Nationalist armies. At the port city of Shanghai, where my dad had grown up, we had many family members who would be left behind as we would suddenly become fleeing refugees. We escaped with our lives. An infant refugee at two, I was spared from having a bayonet thrust into my little belly and twisted. My mom was spared being attacked for being the American wife of the “enemy” Nationalist Chinese soldier who had fought against the occupying Japanese troops during World War II. Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong wanted revenge against all Nationalist Chinese soldiers. He was the absolute leader of the Chinese Communist nation, where the nation is more important than the individual.

Our escape was in 1949. I can’t quite remember the date being only two years old, only speaking Chinese, and still wearing cloth diapers that had to be washed.

“Wo ai nee (I love you),” said Grandma Popo and Grandpa Nainai, whom I would never ever hug again.

I would never again taste Popo’s dumplings made with fresh wheat flour, hand-rolled into little circles to be filled with chopped pork, shrimp, fresh green scallions, soy sauce, a touch of sugar sweet rice wine, and all pinched together with loving care. These fresh steamed dumplings tasted delicious and there would be no leftovers as no one owned a refrigerator. I would hug my Popo for making the meal that took hours each day.

“Hun how che, Popo (tastes great Grandma),” I blurted out with a mouth full of dumplings.

Cramped like tiny sardines stuffed into the escape ships were over one million Nationalist Chinese. I could smell the stressful pungent sweat and feel the pressing bodies as more and more people boarded the ship escaping to the island of Taiwan. At the dock the ship swayed back and forth until the engines started, and we pulled away leaving my loving grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins,

whom I would never see again. They would be in Communist China, and we would be in Nationalist China on the island of Taiwan. Our ship cut through the waves overcrowded with people leaving many possessions behind, leaving family, leaving homes, leaving friends, leaving their country to escape to an island that had been occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War that only ended in August 1945.

\*\*\*News Flash\*\*\*

The Chinese Communists won the Chinese Civil War of 1949.

As the North Korean Communists attempted to take over the Korean Peninsula in 1950-1953, the United States and the United Nations responded. President Truman recognized after the loss of China to the Communist Chinese that this was not a local civil war.

Struggles in Vietnam from 1954 through 1975 would soon follow that mistaken decision believing the Chinese Civil War to only being local and limited.

Decades later, I would find myself on active duty testing specialized electronic warfare equipment to face the Communist North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong as a graduate of MIT in 1973.

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As part of that historic celebration ending World War II only four years earlier in 1945, my parents met on a blind date in New York City, married in Detroit, and I was born shortly after in 1946 on Manhattan in New, York City. Dad was a dashing Chinese Nationalist Army Colonel with a doctorate in chemical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Mom had a business degree from Wayne State University as an American-born Chinese woman who loved to tap dance, worked as a secretary, and modelled swimsuits. Mom posed in a swimsuit stepping down the stairs into a swimming pool. That framed photograph still hung on the wall next to her bed at age ninety-seven in 2018 when she passed away in her sleep. Mom grew up in Detroit, Michigan during the post 1929 stock market crash Depression and was the second oldest daughter in the family of ten children, but the first child to be born in the United States to hard-working immigrant parents. She

managed the family Chinese laundry storefront for years dealing with customers, taking payments, and giving change. Her parents, grandma Popo and grandpa Gung Pon and ten children, ironed and packed the neatly pressed starched white shirts. Mom spoke English extremely fluently and graduated from college in Business. She could type over 120 words per minute and was hired as a secretary in New York City. Mom had saved her earnings and had a bank account with over \$10,000 in it, which could buy a lot.

Leaving our escape haven in Taiwan in 1952 as a young boy able to walk and speak only Chinese, I would return to New York City, where my sister would be born in 1953 and I had to attend nursery school instead of kindergarten.

“Now Roger, this is a letter A,” explained the patient nursery-school teacher as I struggled to learn English for the first time in my life.

I attended elementary school from first grade through third grade in public school and then left New York City for Taiwan again in 1955, where Dad served as the Chief Engineer at two huge chemical plants he helped get designed and built.

When Dad had to work in the United States and Canada buying equipment for the chemical plants, his pay was much higher and comparable to a Colonel in the United States Army. These trips to the United States had given Dad a chance to marry Mom and for me, my sister, and my brother to be born in the United States as citizens by birth. This helped Mom replenish her critical savings account.

Dad earned a stately equivalent of \$30 US dollars a month as a full Colonel in the Chinese Nationalist Army designing, building, and operating two huge chemical plants. We also received a monthly bag of rice and lived next to the government Guest House with an excellent chef and servants. Our walled house was free, and we had an air conditioner in one window and a new refrigerator Mom bought with her money to be shipped to Taiwan. We were the only family in the entire military compound with an air conditioner and a refrigerator. Everyone else lived in former Japanese military homes with woven straw floors and sliding door frame covered with translucent paper.

We lived in a military compound with a 24 hour submachine gun armed guard within sight of our house right next to the Guest House for visiting dignitaries. Mom and Dad often entertained the visiting

dignitaries by playing Bridge and socializing, while my sister and I stayed home with our servant from the local village. Laundry was done by hand and cooking was on a charcoal stove.

Dad reported to a General, who was the commander of the operation but not as technically capable. The fertilizer plant helped to feed the island of refugees by making the soil fertile for higher production yields. I would grow up playing in the Taiwan rice paddies fertilized by both chemicals and natural wastes teeming with tiny fish and blood-sucking leeches! The other huge chemical plant produced gunpowder and explosives needed by the military to defend the island from attacks by the Communist Chinese Army.

During that three years in Taiwan, my education became:

Reading-Archie and Veronica comic books purchased on trips to the local town with a little bit of Betty and Jughead thrown in

Writing-calligraphy quality Chinese brush strokes a Peking quality mandarin from a lovely tutor who taught at the local school

Arithmetic-playing “21” with Dad, who was an excellent card player with a highly mathematical mind and a doctorate in engineering.

That was my informal education.

\*\*\*News Flash\*\*\*

The Communist Chinese attempted to invade Taiwan by landing on the intermediate islands of Kinmen (Quemoy) and Matsu (Lienchiang) in 1958. Nationalist Chinese troops defending those islands fought hard and repulsed the invaders. I avoided having a bayonet thrust into my belly for a second time after the United States Fleet intervened to prevent further invasion attempts.

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Dad was ordered to leave without us for the United States. Mom managed to get us back to the United States to join Dad because we were all United States citizens born in the United States. The United States Embassy in Taipei, Taiwan intervened to help us leave Taiwan to join Dad in New York City. “*Gwon shih*,” gratuities or bribes from Mom’s savings account of United States currency, likely helped us to rejoin Dad in New York when the Nationalist Chinese government tried to keep us on Taiwan in 1958 to ensure Dad would return rather than staying in the United States. United States currency was like gold and was worth a lot more than the local currency.



My mom, sister, and I would rejoin Dad in New York City by 1958 to live among many foreigners from all over the world at a community filled with families working at the United Nations. My best friends were a tall Norwegian boy named Per with blonde hair and a taller Nigerian boy with a more complicated name than I can remember today. I was always the shortest boy in class.

I never went to the fourth grade nor most of the fifth grade. Instead of starting in the end of sixth grade and then taking a full year in the seventh grade had we lived in the United States, I dropped back one year and started a full school year of the sixth grade. Our sixth grade tough teacher, Miss Spata, was a Spartan.

“Oh Miss Spata, do we have to have both math and reading homework on the weekend? We are going to Coney Island,” pleaded Billy.

Arithmetic, spelling, reading, writing, science, penmanship and sewing a large work apron by hand became daily practices with a lot of homework. I crafted a neatly hem-stitched apron that would last many years to protect my clothing from the inadvertent spills and mistakes. My overlapping hand stitches were strong and durable. As I stare at my ancient report card filled with pride in achieving “SO” for satisfactory outstanding. Thanks to Miss Spata and her Spartan teaching methods in the sixth grade, I was able to cover three years of elementary school in one year plus advance to high school reading level. My improved study habits from Miss Spata would allow me to have the highest grades later in junior high school, excel in high school, and eventually gain my own admission and graduation from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology like my father.

In junior high school ninth grade, my Algebra teacher was equally rigorous by giving our class a quiz at the beginning of each class before teaching. Mr. Ganz would base the quiz on the assigned homework and test us to evaluate what we understood from the homework every day. He would then grade my test first, so that I could then grade everyone else in the class, while he taught them the lessons.

“Mr. Ganz, my answer to  $y=5(x+2)-6(x-8)$  and  $x+y=58$  is correct,” I protested after my Algebra teacher marked my quiz answer incorrect.

I had checked my answers before submitting them. That was the only daily quiz question Mr. Ganz would miss.

Moving to a brand new house in the suburbs of New York City on Long Island meant going to a new and excellent Baldwin

Senior High School with very dedicated teachers and a wonderful curriculum. I proudly received the Athlete/Scholar trophy being on the varsity wrestling team. I was able to do a ridiculous six hundred push-ups without getting up off my arms in preparation to represent our school in the Marine Corps physical fitness competition among all the high schools in the New York City metropolitan area. Miss Spata had already formed my work habits as I progressed.

Taking the college admissions SAT mathematics achievement tests of an hour long, I would finish and spend the remaining twenty minutes checking my answers to catch a couple of errors. Miss Spata taught me well in the sixth grade. We all make errors.

Dad eventually became a naturalized United States citizen in the 1960s working for a company started by his MIT classmates Ralph Landau, Harry Rehnberg, and Bob Egbert called Scientific Design Company in New York City. He gave up his \$30 per month Chinese Nationalist Colonel's pension.

My journey to learning and surviving on a slow boat to China, a packed refugee ship at the ripe age of two-year-old, to Taiwan during the Chinese Civil War, and reading American comic books to continue reading English helped define my diverse education and growth. As I entered college at MIT during the highly unpopular Vietnam War, during the era of a military draft in the United States, I joined the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program. I was committed to defend democracy against communism.

The irony of our successful escape from Taiwan occurred in 1971 as I was being processed for a security clearance to be qualified to take on the critical mission to answer the President's Key Intelligence Question. My relatives left behind in Communist China could be used to threaten my loyalty to the United States, and I needed a special waiver signed the Army Security Agency Commander, Major General Godding. By 1982, the same, but retired Major General Godding and I served on the Board of Directors together for the professional Electronic Warfare Organization Association of Old Crows, Chesapeake Bay Roost. I had served on this Board of Directors for forty years by 2022 and was presented with an Award in February 2023. This organization also connected me with Dr. John O'Hara, and as I helped prepare his Technology Hall of Fame Award nomination, we realized the connection with his Zuro Flying



Spot Recorder patented invention, and a critical application of that to answering the Key Intelligence Question for the President of the United States.

A Chinese Civil War refugee at two went on to help answer the nation's Key Intelligence Question correctly to help keep the Cold War cold.

## First Meeting

### Characters

**JOHN:** An AA member, 15 years sober, 65 years old.

**MADISON:** 20 years old and at her first AA meeting. Maybe a nose ring, or pink hair, dressed young.

### Setting

A room in a church being set up for an evening AA meeting.

*JOHN is setting up for a meeting. He gets the coffee going. His well-worn Big Book is next to the coffee maker. He is setting chairs in a circle when MADISON walks in.*

*JOHN glances up briefly and continues his work.*

**JOHN:** Girl Scouts is down the hall.

**MADISON:** I was looking for AA?

*JOHN stops. Stares at her.*

**JOHN:** Yeah? Yes, this is the meeting. You looking for your dad here or what?

**MADISON:** No, no. For me. It's my first meeting.

*JOHN who had resumed putting out chairs, stops at this.*

**JOHN:** For you? Where did you even hear of AA?

**MADISON:** "Mom."

**JOHN:** Your mom is in AA?

**MADISON:** No, not my mom. The TV show, "Mom," you know.

**JOHN:** Wait a minute. You're here because of a TV show?

**MADISON:** I'm here because I need to quit drinking. Isn't that why...

**JOHN:** How old are you?

**MADISON:** Twenty.

JOHN: You're not even old enough to drink. How much could you possibly have drunk?

MADISON: Enough. Enough I want to stop. I need to stop.

JOHN: You a druggie? We don't want no druggies in here. You can go elsewhere for that.

MADISON: No. I'm here for alcohol.

JOHN: Well, this is a Big Book meeting. We read from the Big Book. You ever heard of that?

MADISON: Yeah, I have. Hey, is this a real AA Big Book?

JOHN: That's mine.

*Taking it from her.*

Look. I hate it when people come in here before they are really ready to stop. Then they go back out and tell people this program doesn't work. It works. But you have to work it. And this book tells you how. This book. Someone gave me this book the first time I came to AA. 30 years ago. It took me another 15 years to get sober, and I kept it the whole time. That's what I mean.

*He turns back to setting out the chairs, after placing the book carefully on a chair.*

You've got to be ready. I don't think you're ready.

*After a moment MADISON starts helping him.*

MADISON: Sir. I'm ready.

JOHN: What's your name?

MADISON: Madison.

JOHN: Madison? What kind of name is that for a girl? Madison.

JOHN: There aren't any women in this meeting. You should go to a meeting where there are women.

MADISON: Okay. I just need to know where.

JOHN: Stick with the women. Hey, you don't have a boyfriend in AA do you? Is that why you are here?

MADISON: No.

JOHN: And your parents don't go?

MADISON: No. It's me. I need it.

JOHN: You been to one of those fancy treatment centers?

MADISON: No.

JOHN: Are you court ordered? You got a sheet to sign? Because we don't sign sheets. Not in here.

MADISON: No. I don't see why you're so mean to me.

JOHN: Look. My daughter. She's been here, but she's back out. She's, I guess, two years older than you. I can't help her.

MADISON: Maybe you could help me.

*JOHN looks at her again. After a moment he reaches over for his Big Book.*

JOHN: Look. I want you to have this. You'll need it for the meeting. I got another one in the car.

*She takes the book. He starts to leave.*

MADISON: Thank you. Maybe, if I can do this, maybe I can help your daughter.

*They stare at each other for a moment. The noise of other folks coming to the meeting is heard in the hall. JOHN breaks away and walks quickly out. MADISON hugs the book, takes a seat, and opens the book.*

## Thou Shalt Not!

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

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

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

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

Pastor's voice echoed off the sanctuary walls, the windows vibrated, and my stomach rumbled. Eventually, he ran out of breath, and I knew the end was near. Mopping his brow with an embroidered handkerchief, and exhaling loudly, he started singing "All to Jesus, I surrender..." I joined in enthusiastically. It was not that

I liked the hymn, but I knew it signaled the end of the sermon. Our weekly trip to the drugstore would come soon after, meaning lunch at the café counter and milk shakes for dessert. I licked my lips and swung my legs in time with the rhythm of a hundred voices filling the air around me with the familiar calling.

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

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

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

"Nothing."

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

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

"What's that? I didn't hear nothin'," Bobby's face closed in on mine, his breath stinking and his yellow teeth clicking open and shut. A ball of sweat rolled down his slick red hair into his eyes.

"Uhm, okay, I guess. What do you need?" I pressed the dime into my damp palm, thinking I might buy him off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Upon reaching the old Victorian we rented from Mrs. Waznatski, Mother sighed and sat down on a wicker chair on the shared front porch to chat with our elderly landlady. After a hasty hello, I clumsily hopped up the steps and scrambled down the hallway to my bedroom, where I shut the door and locked it tight. Looking down at my feet, I cried silent tears. No amount of polish would cover the grooves made by the unforgiving sidewalks and the toe box was stretched beyond repair. My shoes were new no longer, and there

would be no hiding them from Mother. Soon she would find out, but for the time being I hid them under my bed, behind my box of secret treasures.

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

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

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

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

"Thou shalt not! Thou shalt not!" screamed from within me and I fell to my knees.

## From These Honored Dead

In my bedroom, you may find:

Twenty original Impressionist, landscape paintings. A planter full of stones found in nature that I have been collecting since preschool. Various assortments of dried flowers, sticks, and herbs. One Lightsaber, two wands, and three hanging brooms, one of which was struck by lightning. The leather bound calligraphy journal of my Great Grandmother. Five American Girls dolls, one of which is actually an original Pleasant Company doll. Eight filled journals and one blank one. One set of old Norse Runes etched onto clear quartz crystals. One old Pennsylvania license plate. A pink and purple dragon puppet. The ethically sourced tail of a deceased coyote. Over 100 volumes of assorted fairy tales, fantasy, mythos, classical literature, science fiction, Shakespeare, comics, and manga.

My bedroom, which feeds me memories of home. A home that graces me with images when I yearn to remember it. Images of a wide, endless sky painted pink and orange with streaks of white, symbolising the rain to come in later days. Dark pines grace the bottom of the sky and in the trees I can hear birds. Hundreds upon hundreds, thousands upon thousands, beautiful beautiful birds. Cardinals, sparrows, crows, and the like all live in those forests.

My forest is to the right of me, and the Sidhe is to the left. From below the tree tops and onto the Earth, a clearing could be seen. A great moor of long grass within which a dozen Solstice trees dwell, never to be cut down.

Solstice trees in a borough of grasslands, battlefields, and Braucherei. Gettysburg. A town steeped in history and myth. Tales of the brave and those of the wicked all lie in my hometown.

These tales are recited year after year and year after year, for all the tourists who come into town in droves, in anticipation of living in our history.

The tourists who never get to see the Gettysburg lying beneath the eyes of history. They see famous spots; Devil's Den, a mass of incongruous stones rising from the gentle hills, is one of which that comes to mind. It is from the Devil's boulders that one might look up to see a great, wide hill, Little Round Top. And, on that hill, of

wild grasses and delicate flowers, sits my favourite monument: a stone castle made of an anteroom, circle staircase, and a watch tower roof. And along the path is a single small boulder, generally unnoticed by all who pass. They go for monuments, the view, and a superficial ghost story or two. But they have not listened. They have not spent their solstices sitting atop a small boulder as we have, letting the wind rush through our hair, as the memories of the land are profoundly felt. Memories of soldiers fighting, laughing, writing, and crying. We hear the ghost cries of soldiers as they whistle through the rocks and leaves.

You may not hear them, but we do.

We hear the land. The very land which houses the remains of the soldiers. Those who died on the battlefield, and the ones buried there. Buried there and centuries later, exist as a permanent fixture of the land. It is their decay that has given us what we see today. Their decay grew the grasses, the trees, and the flowers that speak. They are the land, they are the dead, and they are all around us.

It is on those dark November nights, that we hear those footsteps on Remembrance Day night. Who else hears their graveside presence but us? Few, I am afraid. Fewer know how one in a graveyard should behave.

The people of *Pennsilfaanisch Deitsch* country know that to enter the graveyard, permission should firstly be asked. It is not asked of the groundskeeper, but from the land itself. Remember, when entering, that one must place their devices on silent. It *is* rude to the ghosts, after all. It is then proper to acknowledge the gatekeeper with a polite nod. Next, offerings to the dead are left. They needn't be anything fancy, the dead are not a picky bunch. A few strands of hair or a marble or two will do. And, if need be, one of the three key local stores will happily supply offerings to you.

It is then on one's hollowed walkabout that it is customary to silently walk along the path, never to make a noise or walk on top of a grave. After all, living or dead, what person wants to be stepped on?

It is on these walks that we do not simply walk past the soldiers, but hear them walk alongside us, listening to us; listening to our stories as we honour their lives. How could so few know what it is to turn your head and see the ghost of a Union man? How can so few

*feel* the dead all around us, walking alongside us, speaking to us, as if it were the truest thing in the world?

This is what I miss. This is why I am homesick. Homesick for the parts of Gettysburg no one but a local sees. The Gettysburg that was not simply the grounds of a great battle, but a Gettysburg steeped in magickal thought: the poppets, the teas, the faeries, the nightshade, the sunflowers, the charms, the hex signs, the sachets, and the land will speak for itself to all that allow it.

My bedroom does not know such a home, but its contents do, and it brings me peace to have carried such a part of Gettysburg with me.

## Dogfriend

It was the same route each time. Up our street, turning onto one of the pathways that loop around the neighborhood behind people's houses, around the first playground, over two bridges, into a clearing that leads to the second playground where you can pick up the path to the street that leads back towards the house. I know this route by heart and so does the dog.

At the other end of the leash is Emma, the neighbors' dog, a caramel sundae blend of chow chow and golden retriever mixed into the basic dog/wolf outline, but the chow peeks out in that black smile of hers, as if she bit into something inky, as if the interior of Emma has been darkened, colored in.

On my end of the leash, I'm just following a lovely, elegant lady in a fur coat going out for a walk. On one side of the path are the backsides of houses on the street (ironically named Sleeping Dog) where backyard decks jut into green space and the occasional ball net, the other side of the path leading to the ends of other cul-de-sacs in the neighborhood, if you wanted to mix up your route by coming back another way. The elementary school bus stop was up in this direction.

At another junction on this walk, you could have gone another way, underneath the highway and to the Walgreens across the street. Emma likes going that way, because she's a dog and doesn't see why a tunnel under the highway seems like a great place to get mugged. Everything is simply Outside, and all of Outside is fair game.

Emma wants to smell everything, but she doesn't strain at the end of her leash to go after people the way a lot of the other dogs do, choking themselves with desperation to knock you backwards with their enormous paws. Emma would never make such a spectacle of herself. She walks by people without needing to nose in on their space or bark at them or hump their legs; but, by the same token, anyone is welcome to pat her on the head without risking her lunging or taking a bite out of them in return. But you don't always know with dogs.

We passed a man in a neck brace, out for a walk.



"Where's the dog?" he said, as we got close enough to him to where he could no longer keep a bead on what was below his range of vision. "Where's the dog? Where's the dog?"

"In front of you, to your left," I said, but he needn't have worried.

Emma just looked on as if to ask, "What dog?"

There are three playgrounds if you go the long way. Emma was good with kids, and great to take to senior centers, where she would let strangers pet her and remind themselves of dogs they used to have. She's probably logged more volunteer hours than most people. I've seen enough dogs on my Meals on Wheels route that I always brought dog biscuits with me to distract them while I handed over the meals to the person at the door: *Look! Snackies!* Almost any dog can be temporarily bought off with food, at least until you get back to your car.

They say that a dog knows whether you tripped over them or kicked them, but dogs don't always know what you have in mind. Like the kid up the street that put on some skates and picked up the dog's leash. The dog took off at a run, and the kid fell and broke her arm. It could either have been the dog thinking, "Yes! I'm a sled dog!" with great enthusiasm, or it could have been a cynical, teachable moment: "I am not a sled dog, dude."

If you decided to go the long way, you could make your way through the Smith farm on your right, or take one of the exit paths to Bluecoat and walk back the route that would pass the most houses on a Halloween night, or you could keep going to the third playground, but once you got to the bamboo trees shading the upcoming house, you would need to brace yourself for the two huge dogs inside who lose their minds inside barking when anyone walks by, two energetic live wires cooped up all day alone. You'd bark your head off, too.

You can't fool a dog. They recognize a fellow animal when they see one, and then size you up, filing away your smell, deciding whether you are part of their pack or not, even as a 2-man pack, like Emma and I were.

Some people actively encourage meanness in dogs. There's a dog on another corner of the street that is usually pent up behind a screen door, growling and scratching to be released because he can smell you walking by. Sometimes the owners will let him out to chase you down the length of their fence, lunging to try to scale it, snapping at

the air, all the time barking and snorting in frustration that you are just out of reach. Even though I know to expect it, because it happens every time I pass that house, my hackles go up and the drumbeat of fear pricks up inside. One of these days that dog is going to scale that fence and bite someone at long last, like he's always dreamed of doing. I avoid walking by that house, if at all possible.

That one is on me. Bark at me once, Cujo, and I'll avoid you forever.

Emma doesn't have that kind of scorekeeping. She doesn't approach that house like, *Oh no, that's the mean dog's house!* and try to cross the street. She just plows ahead, letting the chips fall, as if it has nothing to do with her. She could also walk through a spider web or a sprinkler and do the full-body shake afterwards, but that was beyond my capabilities, so I had to steer.

A dog on your wavelength is always honing in on your scent, finding you outside in your car, joining you at the mailbox to have their head patted. One time, I came back from a follow-up medical procedure that I was worried about, and as soon as I got the car door open, a concerned snoot the color of warm oak paneling was nosing around inside the car with me: *Are you okay?* As if somehow, she knew.

And she was right. There was something about petting the softness of a dog's ears that somehow made everything better.

The chow's wildness slowly unfurled as it traveled along Emma's body—starting out soft on the top of her head and gradually blooming into a sheep's fan tail the white/honey of one of those Cow Tales candy ropes. It's an artistic flourish, but it isn't as soft as it looks. I can't help but return to her head and her velvet ears. So soft, and the undersides of her ears are suede leather triangles beneath my hand as it glides past and leaves her head.

My inner animal soaks up the sun rippling through the trees amidst the cloying syrup of honeysuckle, the mossy funk of mulch, the tick-tick-tick of a sprinkler. Emma has to smell everything, listen for everything, see everything as it goes by, paw at things, and taste everything she can before she runs out of leash. I can just wait at the edge of where I'm willing to go on the path, while Emma fans out to sniff around the edges of the leash's arc—gotta check that p-mail! Every dog that has been out earlier has left messages in bushes, shrubs, and grass that Emma needs to retrieve, ponder, and reply to. She has to stop and sniff every bush and rock and staked plant to see

who's been by and marked their territory, snuffle and snort at some of the missives, and challenge the senders with her replies: *I piss on your comment! Ha! We'll see what you had to say about that later today!*

It's a complete 360 for most of us who see home as the place where you get to go inside and use the bathroom—gotta get home! Gotta get home! For dogs, it's the exact opposite—gotta go out! For a dog, home is the one place where you *can't* go to the bathroom, and anywhere else *but* home is an option. Nature calls, but we're going to pretend we don't see any of that going on, looking off into the distance to create an invisible shield of privacy.

Emma knew that we would pause at the mailbox, but she was never curious about what was inside the box. It was more like she knew to pause at the box with all the boxes, because that's what you did as a 2-man pack. For me, the sight of newspapers at the foot of the driveway meant nothing more sinister than local news and supermarket coupons, but Emma was afraid of newspapers.

Emma was a 9/11 dog—someone found her wandering around the Valencia Motel on September 12<sup>th</sup>, where a few of the terrorists had been staying, leading to speculation that she been abandoned by one of them when they left town. She ended up at the pound, and the first guy who took her on couldn't do anything with her. Emma was afraid of newspapers and wouldn't listen to any commands—including the zap from the stun collar—and she kept taking off after animals in the yard. He finally decided she was either stupid or deaf or didn't understand English and was about to give up on her when my neighbor Cindy offered to take her. Cindy, the dog whisperer, taught Emma the basics with hand signals and cheese. Emma could hear and understand, but she rarely barked.

I knew all about the Valencia. I didn't realize how sleazy it was at the time—straddling Route 1 with motels on one side and efficiency apartments on the other side of the highway. The Valencia was our pit stop when we came back from living overseas. It was a prelude to the worst of times, from which I had eventually escaped. The pool was on the other side of the highway. In those days, you could (and did) simply run across Route 1 in a bathing suit and flip flops and a towel, invincible. Whatever the significance was of having that place in common with Emma, it was like discovering a friend who was

from the same little-known small town, as if you had both lived, at separate times, in Nome, Alaska. Or Gitmo.

Obviously, Emma never told me what really happened, but we project their own emotions onto animals and think we know what they are thinking, so I talked to her as if we had a shared understanding. She couldn't keep up her end of the conversation, even by barking because she wasn't a barker, so if I didn't narrate, we would pass the time in silent companionship. I spoke for both of us, in the royal we, about who was coming around the corner (“We’re aren’t going to bother with those dogs”) I would say out loud for both of us. There was also, “What’s that smell?” “We don’t eat poop,” and of course, the all-encompassing, “Good dog!”

Strangers loved to pat Emma on the head and say, “You are so beautiful!” and Emma let everybody do it, but it’s a gesture she can take in without looking up at anybody. Most of the time, she presents her profile like she’s a movie star, avoiding eye contact, but if you actually look into her face she actually has deep, world-weary eyes that you don’t expect from a dog with such a ladylike, regal bearing. In closeup, Emma’s face has all the confusion of Winnie the Pooh, as if mulling on the past: *I don’t know why these terrible things happened to me.*

I don’t understand it either.

Somehow, instead of retreating within herself or compensating with aggression, Emma is a gentle soul with inner fears, but with animosity towards none. If she’s a jumble of broken toys inside, she keeps it to herself. Sometimes, Emma will sit in a sphinx pose outside on her driveway, guarding the neighborhood like one of the lions outside the New York Public Library, simply observing without keeping score or holding grudges.

We come to an intricate Hopscotch pattern in neon chalk, taking up half a block of sidewalk. It starts off like the standard stacked ten squares you are supposed hop through from 1-10. This is all I remember from hopscotch. Back in my day, you then turned around and hopped back from 10-1, moving the rock marker to another square that you had to avoid on your next pass. Today’s version continues on after the 10<sup>th</sup> block, where you have to hop along a zig zag, jump through “the shark pit” circles as if they were tires, jump with both feet across a ladder of four lines, spin two times, hop on



buttons ABC and 123 to avoid the deadly lava, zip right then left, then around the sewer grates, clap five times, hop into the middle of a sun drawn on the sidewalk, hop into a giant heart, hop into a giant smiley face, and jump over the finish line. Hopscotch has changed since I was a kid—now it's Dance Dance Revolution. I marvel at it, but the marks on the sidewalk mean nothing to Emma.

The sight of the goldenrod bushes coming up make me sneeze, and Emma turns around at the sound as if to laugh, giving me that funny black smile. You have to grab those moments when they happen and file them away in your mind, because Emma goes all Garbo when you try to take a posed picture with a camera.

We loop around to head home, following the path that leads to Sleeping Dog—it's two blocks to home where any sleeping gets done, but not now, not when we're walking in the ruffling wind with the sun on our backs. Emma's ears flap when she walks, dainty and predictable on her head in front of me, but her shadow shows them flapping wildly on the ground to her side.

The sidewalks have buckled in several places near the curbs where the trees have forced them upwards, and there is always at least one car parked blocking the sidewalk, so we stroll down the middle of the quiet street, a scene out of the Old West, the streets empty and the saloons quiet, just a couple of tumbleweeds blowing past, Emma's loping gait the metronome and her ears flapping with the beat, we're a couple of wolves heading home after the showdown at the OK Corral.

## Constance

"Constance—"

"Don't," she said. She needed to think. She pressed her eyes shut and breathed into the mic of the phone, trying to drown out the gentle chatter of the other visitors around her. She could feel the ghost of his fingers on hers through the glass. In all their years together, his hands were the thing she loved most about him. They were smooth, surprisingly soft, and utterly lovely, with faint freckles dusted on his knuckles. Her Andrew wasn't a man of hard labor. He had always preferred his books and his birdwatching. It was his gentle nature that had attracted her to him in the first place, so unlike anything she had ever known.

*"How silly" a younger her had thought, "to get so worked up about a boy's hands. What was so special about hands, for goodness sake?"*

How silly she had been, indeed. Dizzied by girlish fantasy and young love. It had strung her up by her ankles and gutted her like one of the hogs at her uncle's butcher shop, and now she was empty; Scraped out.

She couldn't think.

"Connie, please," Andrew's voice broke, and along with it, her heart. "You know me. How could I ever—"

"I know. I know you didn't," her voice teetered on the knife's edge of a sob, thick with guilt and sorrow.

"You believe me?" he said.

"Yes, I believe you." Of course, she believed him. Of course. How could she not? His shoulders dropped, and a whimper broke free from her sweet, foolish man. His head collapsed into his arms, and his shoulders shook.

"Thank god, thank god," he said, fat tears running down his stubbled cheeks. "I was so worried I'd lose you too. That I—" All the time she'd known him he'd always been so clean-shaven with neat, meticulously managed razor cuts. Now his hair was longer, growing around his ears at awkward, uneven angles. He told her once that he kept it short for practical reasons. At the time, he'd been joking about needing a haircut. Leaning over the couch with his elbow over the side, knuckles pressed into the soft skin of his cheek. He had looked

at her with so much more love than she ever deserved. He'd said it looked like he walked through windstorms for pleasure. Constance had laughed at the time, running a hand through his graying, wispy locks. She thought he had looked like a rumbled baby bird.

He looked more and more like the convict they thought he was as the months passed. His already thin face had hollowed out, carving deep shadows around his eyes and cheeks.

*What had she done?*

"I love you so much," he said, pressing his hand to the glass. Her hand rose to meet his, hovering slightly over where his palm flattened against the shield between them. The space between them felt like a chasm, and she was glad for it. Without it she feared she would come crashing down, burning up in the atmosphere.

"I love you too," she said wetly, choking on the hollow words. They echoed when she screamed into them. What were words in the face of the wrongs she'd done her dear Andrew? A sob broke free from her chest, one after another. The dam was cracking, threatening to down them both.

Constance bowed over the table, weeping huge, full-bellied sobs. This was the kind of grief that pressed down into your ribcage and into your face and bones until it crushed you.

"I'm so sorry," she said. How could she have done this? How could she? How could she? "I'm so sorry, it's all my fault."

All her fault.

She hadn't meant to kill the man. Or at least, she hadn't planned it out. He'd been a coworker of Andrew's. Some big, burly accountant. Wealthy, with all the pomp and arrogance of his class. Richard Laurier, though his associates knew him as Mr. Laurier. One dinner at their house was all Constance needed to dislike him. Every dinner after that only solidified her hatred for the man.

But they needed money, he had it, and he had eyes for her. Watching her cross the room with those looming, lustful eyes. She tried so hard not to shrink under it.

Richard had paid her well for her services. And a sparse few times turned into every week; then twice a week.

Eventually, he took it too far. He claimed to love her. He had wanted to run away with her, make their 'affair' known. He was going

to tell Andrew, unravel all her lies and ruin the only gentle thing that had ever happened to her. He had said he loved her.

And she had wanted him dead.

All that blood on her nice dress had been a hassle to clean out.

"Constance," her husband soothed through the phone, his sweet voice laced with the static of the line, "Love, this isn't your fault. You didn't kill Mr. Laurier. It was just a bunch of bad luck."

Constance shook her head.

After, Constance had justified planting the evidence with post-murder panic. But she hadn't confessed. She had dug in her heels and solidified her own alibi. Then, she had sat silently in that courtroom while her sweet, soft, bird-loving husband was charged with first-degree murder. Now she was sitting here, in the visiting booth, far too cowardly to look at him.

"Love, what's wrong?" he asked, and she finally forced herself to look into his eyes.

The look in his eyes made her feel like she was free-falling.

She should tell him. She should.

She *had* to tell him. It was the right thing to do. It was what Andrew would do.

And yet—

With a gulp, Constance forced herself to smile waveringly at him, brushing the tears off her cheeks. She shook her head and held it high.

"No, dear. I'm quite alright. Don't you worry about me."

## Tiger Stripes

She must have given him the wrong impression, she must have been wearing something provocative, practically asking him to pursue her.

So, when 6 months pass by and her friends ask her, “What happened to your legs?” “Your arms?” Well, she had been in bed for 6 months, never ate, and never heard from any of her friends. Her silence said everything her words could not. No matter what she said, they would never understand. She was better off alone. Similarly, tigers hunt alone. Tigers are described as Noble.

Fearless.

Courageous.

Yet, she was described as a whore.

A slut.

A drunkard.

A sinner.

“What happened to your legs?”

“Your arms?”

Every stripe on her arms and legs set as reminders of everything she did not deserve. The stripes on a tiger are necessary for survival, they help the tiger blend in the act of catching their prey. So, while their friend was alone with her thoughts for 6 months, she made a friend in the drawer of her bedside table, in the drawers underneath the bathroom sinks, hidden in the air vents, in her backpack, in the center console of her car. That was her only source of survival. Her skin sewn so tight the only way to escape is to poke holes in the mason jars for the fireflies to breathe. Her skin is itching, crawling, folding inside out, with no other outlets to express herself other than carving out parts of her body that had been touched figuratively and literally by far too many people.

She could sit in the shower forever, but she will not scrub his touch off, the regret off her, the judgment of the grown men, the scars, the superficial looks of pity from her friends. Whenever her friends did see her, her eyes were bloodshot swollen from the nights of endless tears, black and blue around the edges from the lack of sleep, her ribs poking out the side of her because she could not keep a single meal down, and the amount of tiger stripes increasing by the day.

She accepts everyone’s apologies, even from the people who aren’t sorry. She will forgive, and she will forgive again, but she will not forget. Especially not when she is a mother with children of her own and must answer the question, “mommy what happened to your arms and legs?”

## The Bottomless Pit

Uneven rock scraped against Loan as he tumbled into a cavern deep beneath Castle Indomitable. Finally rolling to a stop, he scrambled to his feet and desperately cast his gaze toward the trapdoor's opening now far above his head. The two silhouettes of the guards made way for the King's stately form.

"Your fate has been sealed," he declared, "a fate brought about by your own misdeeds. Pray Crotalin gives you a swift end."

Loan's hoarse shout was drowned out by the crash of the iron trapdoor falling into place. The cavern went dark. The clang of the lock echoed through the air. The King's phantom afterimage danced in front of Loan's eyes as he collapsed to his knees.

Loan had seen many dragged to the trapdoor and thrown down. Noblemen, servants, assassins, prisoners—anyone who had inconvenienced the King. Some would struggle; others would weep or go limp with shock. Many would do as Loan had and throw themselves at the King's feet, begging for mercy. However, no tears, threats, or pleas ever cracked the King's stone heart. Nothing would change their death sentence to "The Chasm of Cleansing," as the King had christened the network of tunnels and caves. Everyone else called it the Bottomless Pit; those who went down never came back. Loan thought he would only find himself there in his nightmares.

The ground quavered as a low rumble filled the cavern, reminding him of the monster that was all too real. Loan's heart skipped a beat, then began to race with a frantic rhythm that pounded in his ears.

Crotalin was coming for him.

Scanning the cavern, Loan tried to make out the jagged walls and branching tunnels he'd caught a glimpse of as he fell, but there was nothing but blackness. Escape was impossible, and he couldn't have fought the guards—let alone a monster.

The rumbling grew louder.

Loan reached a decision. If he was going to die in the Bottomless Pit, he would show courage for once in his life. There was nothing left to do but stand. On trembling legs, Loan rose.

A sharp hiss cut through the air, and a faint light to Loan's right caught his eye. He turned just as a hulking form covered in glowing

scales slithered into the cavern from an unseen tunnel. The monster's body was over twice as thick as Loan was tall; its back half remained hidden in the tunnel though it stretched its head high. A forked tongue flicked out between spear-like fangs.

Loan held his ground even as terror flashed through him, hardening in the pit of his stomach with inescapable certainty. *He was going to die.*

After considering its meal a moment, Crotalin lunged.

Pain exploded.

Loan screamed.

And darkness fell.

### §

For an eternal moment, Loan was certain he had died. For an eternal moment, he hovered in the swirling shadows between dreams. Then something shifted, and he drifted down, down, down, until he once again rested in his body.

Loan found himself lying on a hard surface that seemed to shake beneath him, although that could have just been his imagination. He felt oddly disconnected from his limbs, which seemed weighed down with a lead-like heaviness. A flickering light shone through his eyelids, giving him the resolve to force them open. Indistinct blobs greeted him; Loan blinked, but his vision remained blurry. After squinting for a minute, he made out the source of the light. A simple lantern sat by his left knee; next to it crouched a lean figure in a patched, worn cloak. When the figure moved closer to Loan's leg, he finally noticed the deep gash running down his shin. As if woken by Loan's gaze, hot pain began to crawl out from the wound.

Humming quietly, the figure leaned closer still before gently blowing on the mess of blood and skin. The breath billowed in a shimmering mist that surrounded the gash before sinking into it. In a heartbeat, the torn flesh had healed until only a jagged scar remained.

Loan gasped.

The figure turned to face him, revealing wide-set eyes the color of opals that matched the braid circling her head. The pale features shone out dramatically against her dark, rough-looking skin.

"Welcome back to the waking world," she said with a small smile. "What's your name?"

With surprising effort, he grunted, "Loan."

"Although these aren't the best circumstances, it's still nice to meet you, Loan. You can call me Mage; I'm sure you can guess why."

Loan's still-leadened tongue refused to move again, so he scrunched his eyebrows.

"I know, I know," Mage said. "You have a lot of questions. Let me explain." The ground's odd shaking continued as she began her tale.

A few years ago, the King had sentenced her to the Bottomless Pit as he had Loan. Once Mage had found herself face-to-face with Crotalin, her previously-undiscovered powers had surged awake, saving her life. Since that day, the monster had never killed again; Mage had remained in the tunnels beneath Castle Indomitable to rescue whoever the King sent down there to die.

"We're quite the group now," she remarked. "We've even managed to dig out to the surface and secure some supply lines."

His heaviness lifting slightly, Loan managed to ask, "How do you avoid Crotalin?"

"We don't," Mage said slowly. She tilted her head. "How do you think you've been traveling this whole time?"

Loan's eyes at last focused as Mage gestured to their surroundings. To the craggy tunnel walls sliding past them. To the pearlescent scales beneath them that glowed softly even in the lanternlight. To Crotalin's massive head just a few yards in front of them. Eyes wild, Loan jerked to a sit and drew his knees to his chest. A faint whimper slipped through his lips.

Mage held out her hands. "It's okay, it's okay! Crotalin is on our side."

Petrified, Loan could only point to the scar on his leg.

"Sorry about that. We had to make it believable for everyone upstairs that Crotalin had gotten you. The King can't know what's going on down here." Mage made sure Loan met her gaze before murmuring, "I promise Crotalin will not hurt you again, Loan."

The conviction in her eyes made him relax slightly, although his breath still came in shallow rasps.

"I know it takes some time to get used to this," Mage reassured. "We've all got a scar like yours. But now some call it their 'Freedom Mark,'" she added with a chuckle.

"If you're free, why haven't you left?"

A dark glint lit Mage's eyes. "What better place to plan a revolution than right underneath the King's nose." She shifted closer to Loan. "We're going to need all the help we can get."

Fight the King? Overtake Castle Indomitable? All with a self-trained Mage and her band of cast-offs? The idea was almost unthinkable. But then Loan remembered that he was riding on the back of death itself. Slowly, he reached down to press his palm against a smooth scale and exhaled. How could anyone who faced a monster such as this fear the King? Nothing would be impossible for those who emerged from the Bottomless Pit.

Looking up, Loan locked eyes with Mage. "When do we start?"



## Dream Me

Blinded by the pillows of the sky and stunned by the harsh, stale air, she struggles to breathe at the high altitude. Emerging out of the clouds though, a sense of freedom fills her as she notices a flock of migrating birds down below. A setting sun kisses her with beams of warm light. She is finally at peace.

A voice echoes throughout the sky. "Gaby! Gaby!" She awakens with a sore neck, covered in sweat and gasps for air, the hairs on her arms standing tall. She glares at her little brother in the seat next to her. "Mom asked if you wanted to order some food before we land. I hear the peanuts in this place are delectable." Ignoring Aaron, she sits back in her seat and tries to relax for a moment as she brings herself back into her own reality. Reflecting on the pieces of the dream that she can remember, she seems to only feel a sense of dread and confusion. Gaby gives up on going back to sleep as she continues to adjust her posture and pop her ears. Curious as to where they are in the sky, she glances out of the window, expecting to see mountains and patches of green. Instead, she is greeted with a true sense of shock. A blurry figure in the shape of a human soars alongside the plane, staring directly at Gaby. In a panic, Gaby squints and rubs her eyes in total disbelief. "*Is that me?*" she thinks to herself. Unable to form words to alert her family, she is frozen in fear and can't help but think she is present in another surreal dream.

As soon as she is able, Gaby gets Aaron's attention to tell him what she saw, but by the time they look outside the window, her twin has disappeared. Aaron scoffs, thinking that Gaby was playing a trick on him. Deep down she wishes it was only a joke. The plane finally lands and it's time to start their long-awaited vacation. *Welcome to Machu Picchu, Peru.*

Gaby arrives at her hotel room and decides that she will nap while the rest of her family unpacks their things. She continues trying to convince herself that what she saw on the plane was a figment of her imagination, but to no avail. Her anxiety is overbearing, and she prays that she can just sleep it off. Gaby gently hears from her mom as she falls into a deep slumber. "Let the fun begin!"

Immediately placed in view of a forest set ablaze on a foggy, humid summer morning, Gaby sees a headless horse gallop in the distance without a jockey. An isolated home crumbles to ash along with the memories of the family that lived there. Struggling to breathe amongst the smoke and escape the woods, she stumbles down a hill that leads to a bottomless pit. Gaby wakes up from her dreadful dream and realizes that the nightmares only continue. She finds herself standing at a table in her room with a splitting headache and a pen and paper in front of her. Feeling confused and without a sense of how much time has passed, she also notices her family is gone and the darkness from outside bleeds into the room. The paper, signed by her mom, reads, "Went on a quick walk with Aaron and Dad. Tried to wake you up, but you weren't budging. We'll be back soon!" She sighs and wishes they had tried a little harder to wake her. On the verge of crumpling the note and throwing it away, Gaby notices that there's more writing on the back of the paper. This time the handwriting is eerily recognizable. Overwhelmed with a sense of unease, she reads the message.

*"Do you see me in your dreams?"* All she can feel is her racing heart.

The next morning Gaby is relieved as her father plans a family hike. She thinks to herself that it would be best to get some fresh air after last night's discovery. *How could I have written that so clearly yet not remember at all? I haven't sleepwalked since I was a child.*

Deep within the mountains, a cool breeze flows through the ancient trees. Her family stops for a moment to catch their breath. Gaby inhales slowly and adjusts her breathing with the altitude change as they scale the forest. She notices that there are others on this trail as well and greets them with a friendly smile. That changes when she notices a figure in the far back of the crowd staring directly into her eyes, burning a hole in her body. *It's her again.* Trying her best to suppress the dread, Gaby lets her family know that she is going to explore her surroundings. It was time to confront the look-alike. "Don't go too far!" Dad shouts out to her. Waving back to them to let them know she is okay, she turns back in the direction of her twin and marches forward. Gaby navigates through the other

tourists and intently looks for her other self but is unable to locate her. “Where did you go?” she mutters under her breath. Suddenly, as Gaby finds herself separated from the trail, she is pulled behind the trees where no one can see them, finally face to face with her doppelgänger.

“Who are you? Why are you following me? And why are you... me?”

The other Gaby takes a moment to explain herself. “I am from the *Omegaverse*. You can call me Omega Gaby. I am you, but from an entirely separate realm. Quite like your world, but I am here because I need your help.” Her tone is quite serious, and Gaby can’t help but think that this must be a facade but cannot deny the fact as she is facing her spitting image.

“Were you the one who wrote that message on the back of my mom’s note?” Omega Gaby reluctantly nods and gives her a second to collect her thoughts as she understands how overwhelming this sounds.

“How are you able to contact me? What gives you the ability?” Gaby questions.

“My research and studies revolve around the multiverse theory. I’d been studying and conducting trials for years until one day, I was finally able to jump to other universes, after realizing that I can transport to the other worlds by hijacking their—I mean our dreams.” Gaby, still unable to comprehend the situation, dashes and checks back on her family back on the trail. She sees that they are distracted talking with another family.

Distraught and beyond confused, Gaby is intercepted by Omega once more. “Listen, I don’t have a lot of time. Once I wake up, I will be back in my universe. We’re in trouble. There is someone, not of human form, trying to play God and manipulate all of the universes, rupturing time and space as we are accustomed to it. All of life as we know it will end if they have their way. We need your help to fight this evil off and with some training, I believe we can defeat this being.” Gaby doesn’t say anything, but attentively listens to Omega. Doubts are filling the air as she begins to question her own existence.

“You may not know it, but you were the one that originally found me. You have the ability to travel universes through your dreams. Those recent dreams of yours are tuned to my reality. Like I said, our worlds are not far off. I too am on a trip in Peru with my family, and this evil being has made its way to my world, causing chaos and

dismantling our reality. The burning forest you saw in your dream, the headless horse, were all actually real. We are connected. Come with me, help me save my world for all our other selves and families.”

After taking all of this in, Gaby responds. “Ok, this is a lot... but what about *my* family? Shouldn’t I stay with them? Maybe this demon or whatever just wants you. After all, it sounds like you’re the one who messed with multiverse travel in the first place with your research.”

Omega counters, “I promise, by the time we evacuate my family... *your* family, the being will have moved on to all of the other worlds, and I’m afraid that this one as you know it will be one of the next targets.”

“How can I trust you?”

“I’m standing here, aren’t I? You have no choice but to trust me,” Omega responds.

“How will you know that me helping you will work?”

“I don’t know for certain, but a few of our versions are some of the only beings in the multiverse that can access other worlds. Many have come and gone, but at this point you are our only option left. Take my hand if you’re in.” Omega reaches out for Gaby’s hand as the time counts down on her watch before she travels back to her universe. After some thought and flashbacks to the true terror that filled her most recent dream, Gaby returns her hand, closes her eyes, and they both vanish.

## Where the Wonder Went





## Illusions



Digital Photography

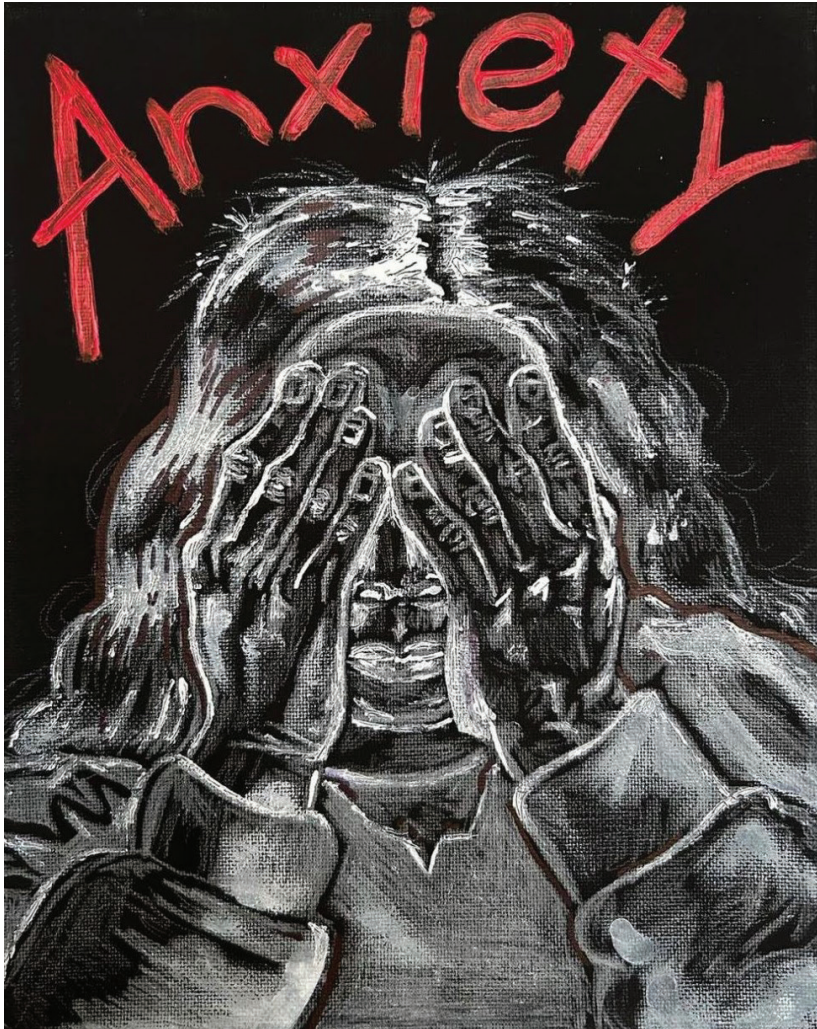
## Minute Sparks



Digital Photography



## Effects of Anxiety



Acrylic on Canvas

## Symbol



Acrylic on Canvas



## Spring Forward



Spring forward, fall back  
the saggy, soggy snowman melts,  
Teddy stands guard

Watercolor on Canvas

## Ren's Mind



Digital Photography



## Tethered



Digital Photography

## Roja



Digital Photography



## Seashells on Wood



Mixed Media

## Discovery: A Study in Glass



Blown Glass



## Sea Bear at Rest



Digital Photography

## Sunset on the Erie Canal



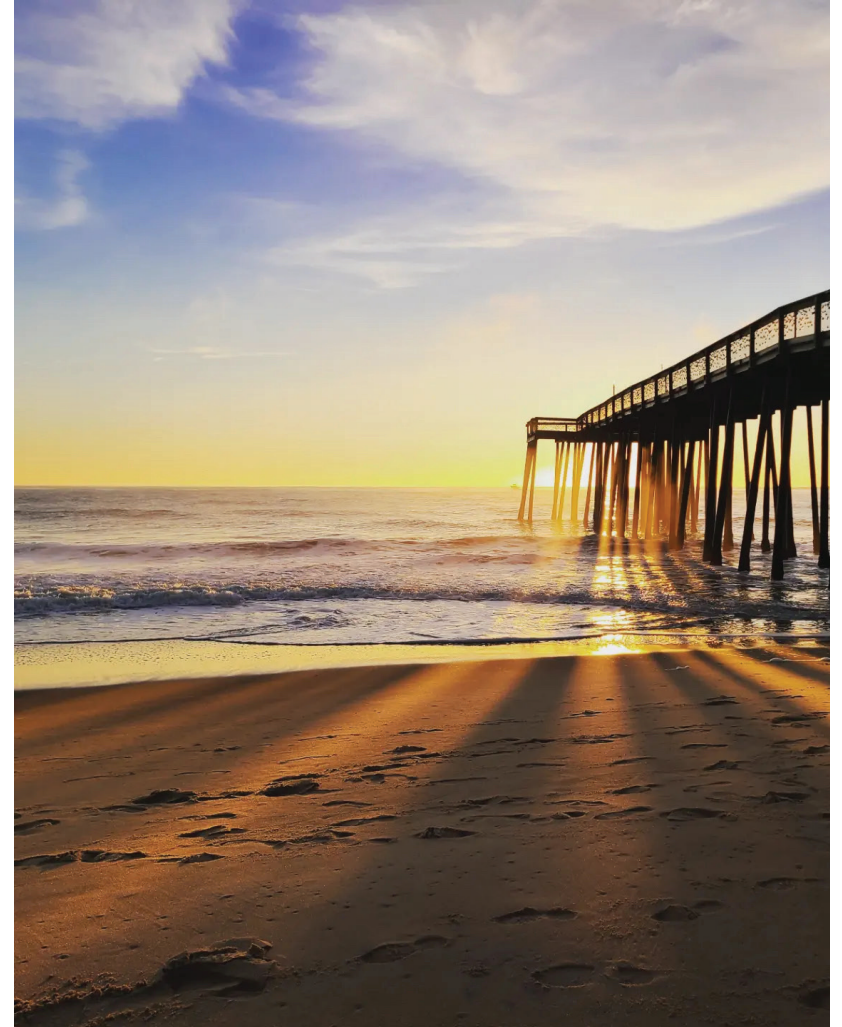
Digital Photography

## Radio City Music Hall



Photography

## Sunrise, Ocean City



Digital Photography



## Supernova (Gifted Student Burnout)



Digital Media

## contributors' notes

**Summara Abaid** is a student with a love for poetry and photography, which they use to express their inner thoughts and love of nature.

**Kelli Andrade** explored her creative mind when she was introduced to Bookshare. A student at Howard Community College studying English and the creative writing process, she was introduced to poetry and short stories when attending Project Access and loved it. Her first poetry publication was "The Deep Abyss," in 2018.

**Nicholas Andriani** is a writer, poet, and narrative designer with a background in Japanese linguistics and video game studies.

**Rina Aschemann** is a student at Howard Community College pursuing a degree in psychology. Born and raised in Minnesota, she now lives in Columbia, MD. In her free time, she loves to read and be outside.

**Helen Therese "Ren" Avancena** is a first-year electrical engineering major and a former artist for the video game and film industry. She loves to create art that is layered and open to interpretation.

**Marsha Bailey** is a 34-year-old mother of four children. She is an entrepreneur and owner of Paulette's Legacy, a small permanent makeup and waxing business. She is working towards a degree in business management.

**Casey Boin** is a sophomore at Howard Community College. She is a visual arts major and hopes to continue studying art at her next four year university.

**Greta Boeringer** is happily studying theater, dance, and music at Howard Community College. She lives in Ellicott City and is an actor in the Baltimore area, focusing on Shakespeare. She is delighted to be published in *The Muse*. This is her first published piece of fiction and her first play.

**Katherine J. Brawdy** is an Howard Community College student currently majoring in Liberal Arts. She fell in love with writing in her 7<sup>th</sup> grade English class when she discovered that one day,



just maybe, somebody else might have an interest in all the wild daydreams she kept cooking inside her head.

**Kaitlyn Burnett** is a 19-year-old author from Clarksville, MD. She recently began writing original works through her creative writing class at Howard Community College.

**Roger Chang** is working on a memoir, *Helping Keep the Cold War Cold*, which is approaching a complete first draft. Sharing a bit of history as a retired Army Colonel sheds a glimmer into the secret world of intelligence.

**Dana Arlene Chin** is a Registered Nurse in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the University of Maryland Medical Center and a student at Howard Community College. When she's not writing, she can be found exercising at the gym and spending time with friends and family.

**Megan D'Andrade** is the Youth Programs Manager at Howard Community College. Megan's love of art began during her freshman year of college when she took an art appreciation class, which led to a minor in art with a heavy focus on two and three dimensional works. This is her first time working with glass, having been inspired the show "Blown Away" on Netflix.

**Keela Daniels** is a Jumpstart student graduating in Spring 2023 with an AA in General Studies. She enjoys essay writing, painting, baking, reading from every genre, and spending time with her three cats. This is her first publication, and she hopes it will not be her last.

**Travis Davis** has been writing since she was 13 years old, however, that spark died as she got older. In the past couple of years, that motivation to write has been sparked once more. She's currently trying to write a novel.

**Ben Domenick-Urbansky**, a dual-enrollment student, enjoys the simple things in life: reading, origami, talking with his friends, playing card games, and trying to always extend his talents.

**Ellie Goldberg** is a high school senior from Maryland. When she's not daydreaming from the car window on road trips, she's playing soccer on the field. She has kept a journal for her writing since age two and has had her poetry published in literary magazines.

**Muhammad Anwar Ul Haq** is a student at Howard Community College majoring in engineering who wants to change the world by his work in avionics industry. He is an immigrant who had to learn a new language to express his feelings. Now he is living with his family in Baltimore and love to write poems about his feelings once in a while.

**Pattie Holy-Ilanda** is a lover of the arts. She paints and writes in her spare time and listens to her husband, Pete, play guitar in the home they share with their twenty-year-old kitty named Maggie Mae.

**Dayrin Jimenez** is a current student at Howard Community College for a Life Sciences degree. Originally born in Guatemala, Dayrin loves to challenge immigration and cultural norms through her poetry.

**Kayla Johnson** is a student at Howard Community College.

**McKenna Keogh**, 18, is a first-year student at Howard Community College majoring in psychology. She has always enjoyed reading and writing in her free time, but this is the first year she has submitted her work, as well as the first year anyone has read her work. McKenna hopes to be a therapist in her future, specializing in children, but her dream of becoming an author still stands.

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

**Matt Korbelak** recently completed a solo journey around America's Great Loop in his 26-foot motor-sailer "Sea Bear." During this 5300 mile trip around the eastern half of the United States, Matt utilized four cameras to document his trip—a digital SLR, an iPhone 13, a GoPro, and a drone. Matt is a retired federal law enforcement officer who currently resides in Annapolis with his wife Stacy, a former Howard Community College professor, and his bichoodle Caesar.

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

**William Lowe** teaches courses in literature, writing, and Asian studies at Howard Community College.

**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.

**Kris Metzger** is a 2013 graduate of Howard Community College who loves her work as a hospice RN. She is also an adjunct of the Nursing Education program as a clinical instructor.

**Cat Montague** is a first year student at Howard Community College. In her free time, she enjoys reading, listening to music, going on walks, and spending money on things they don't need. She has always enjoyed writing in school, they saw it as an escape where they can create an entire world and not feel judgement from others. They hope you enjoy her work!

**Kathryn Najmy** grew up homeschooled and is currently a freshman at Howard Community College. She has always loved the spell of storytelling and is excited for the opportunity to share a tale of her own.

**Shaunak Patil's** poem "Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows" is intended to bring light to the effects war has on people. Shaunak wanted to show how everything can change in an instant, how life can be taken in a matter of seconds.

**Sarah Pettit** is an Howard Community College student majoring in general studies through the JumpStart program.

**Nina Randall** is a poet from Chicago. She moved here in 2019 to pursue her educational career. She wants to pursue a major in education, specializing in sociological research. She has a passion for writing, specifically poetry, and hopes to publish her own anthology.

**Jackie Regales** works in the Center for Civic and Community Engagement here at Howard Community College. She loves the outdoors and taking pictures to capture everyday beauty.

**Molly Rubinstein** is a 72-year-old retired nurse who has discovered that you are never too old to learn new things, which is why they really enjoy taking college courses, especially courses that challenge their abilities.

**Jennifer Smutek** is a photographer, wife, mother, and wannabe writer, living in Baltimore, MD.

**Ren Song Tabor** is an author and visual artist who specializes in connecting the world of entertainment. Xe has autism, which makes it difficult to understand social cues. Xe is passionate in seeking knowledge.

**Naw Lilian Tapa** (Lilian) is currently studying visual arts at Howard Community College and loves to create graphic design and digital drawing. She is from Myanmar and currently living in Maryland, US.

**Ayesha Wainwright** comes from Queens NY, but grew up in Columbia MD. After studying interior design at The Art Institute of York Pennsylvania, she moved to Miami FL briefly, before returning to Columbia.

**Marie Westhaver** is a professor of humanities, coordinator of film studies, and director of film festivals at Howard Community College.

**John Whelan** considers himself a lifelong learner who dabbled in writing most his life, but decided to strengthen his skills a few years ago by taking writing and liberal arts classes at Howard Community College. John is currently taking a 200 level creative writing course, studying creative nonfiction, prose, and poetry. John was published in the Spring 2022 issue of *The Muse*.

**Cecelia Wilson** is a student at Howard Community College.



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

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

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# Submit to issue.22

Deadline: March 1, 2024

Visit [howardcc.edu/themuse](http://howardcc.edu/themuse) for submission guidelines.

From the darkness above a beam of light shined through  
Erupting into a flash  
The sound of death followed  
The waves of wind flowed through the town  
The cold winter months grew hotter in an instant

Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows

The birds sang their last song  
The dogs lay peacefully one last time  
We felt each other's embrace once more  
And then it was gone...all gone...  
The...

Solemn whispers traveled across the hollows

—Shaunak Patil, from “Solemn  
whispers traveled across the hollows”