



The Muse

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The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

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Sunset

Peacock feathers decorate the sky
 The world's greeting to the rising moon
 Light plays on peaks of the mountains
 As if the day has gone too soon

At this time we are at a crossroads
 A threshold of day and night
 The definition of in-between
 A time of dwindling light

As if from stories long forgotten
 The tale of every knight's demise
 A warming heat in the blowing wind
 As if dragons have come to reclaim the skies

If stars could fall from the heavens
 I imagine this is how it would be
 Crafted by the beautiful hands of Gods
 Divinity, diamonds on an open sea

The flames on the horizon surge suddenly
 As if the earth splits straight to the core
 In a blink the whole scene has passed
 The waves are steady on the shore
 And the dragons are seen nevermore

Spiritry-Nature

The liquid abyss stirs,
 Just as the rain splatters
 Lightly on the surface
 Of the shallow blue pool.

A young one stares,
 Watching the moon
 As tall trees sway.
 All breathe as one.

Crickets chirp the song of night.
 A sweet aroma is floating
 Near the trees and above the land;
 Lovely and pure as flowers are.

The night sings peaceful songs.
 Dreams descend from the moon.
 The orb will guard us all,
 So the young ones can sleep.

Green for Good Luck

My wife is the most beautiful woman on Earth. Well, most of the time. See, my wife is an alien, though most of the time you couldn't tell. I sure as hell didn't know when I first met her. She has a human skin. I don't know the specifics on how she puts it on and takes it off, and I certainly don't intend to learn. I've seen her without it on. She doesn't so much look like an alien then a weird dinosaur. She's ugly and scary as all hell.

I met her in Paris, 15 years ago.

My cousin, Ciaran, called me in a panic. He woke sober and without a hangover for the first time in months. Understandable, since he, an Irish Catholic, had recently been forced to move to Belfast for a job. It was that or be fired, so he moved. He woke up in Paris; sober, married, and terrified. In those hazy months he managed to meet a girl, "fall in love", and get married. He was on his honeymoon now. He didn't freak out until she turned over and muttered sweet nothings in a Scottish accent.

So, he called me, because the last he had known I was in Western Europe. Well, I was in Europe, and about as far east as you could get without tripping into Russia. I was tired of watching TV in languages I didn't know. I had only stayed so long because the language barrier meant I didn't have to talk to the women I fucked and it didn't make any difference in the porn.

I switched my ticket to Paris and met my cousin. I let him rant and slam back alcohol until he showed me a picture of the woman. Red hair, cute freckles, and curves in only the right places. She looked fiery and adorable all in one package. There wasn't much any man could ask for.

"Look at her. This woman put up with you, drunk and hung over, for at least a month, and STILL, she wanted to marry you."

I stared at him and, at first, he seemed to see the light, but then he groaned.

"But she's Scottish." I could hear the defeat in the Irish sing song of his voice.

That was when the woman who would be my future wife walked into the room. She took a seat at the bar, leaving one stool between us. My cousin and I stopped and turned to stare at her, along with every

other man in the place. Her eyes skimmed over Ciaran but settled on me and gave me a little smile before turning to the bartender. Ciaran almost threw me over to the next stool towards her. I skipped over to the next seat, and there began the first amazing night of many to come.

Ciaran left sometime. I wasn't paying any attention. I was too focused on the buxom brunette (though her hair was closer to black) sitting next to me. We flirted and drank, a lot, and ended up going to her hotel room. I was very drunk, but I remembered some of it. I remembered that it was amazing, beyond that even. She was flexible, nimble, and had no inhibitions what so ever. She was playful too. That was where I noticed the first weird thing. She was strong. She could flip me over and hold me down, and I couldn't resist it. Not that I would. Why would I? She played helpless too, though more than I pretended not to be.

Then we reached the edge. She got louder, we started to lose our rhythm, and that was when her eyes started to change. They changed slowly from a honey brown to a marigold and finally, as she writhed and bucked as she started to climax, her eyes turned yellow chartreuse and ringed in black, her pupils turning into slits. It freaked me out, and turned me on, finishing me off. When all was said and done, I rolled over to lay next to her, feeling way too good to give a damn about her eyes. It wasn't long until I heard her breathing change and saw she had fallen to sleep. What was not to like about a girl who didn't want to cuddle after sex? I went to go pee, and standing there, leaning against the wall to stay standing, I saw the clock. We had been having sex for six straight hours. Now, I knew something strange was going on.

It took about three seconds after blearily opening my eyes later that morning before I remembered everything that had happened. I vaulted out of bed, stumbling on the ground, before correcting myself up. I turned, frightened the noise had woke her, frozen in place as I stared for any signs. She mumbled a little and turned in her sleep but nothing more. I exhaled heavily in relief and paced the room quietly, trying in vain to figure things out. I got nothing. It was easy to imagine I was crazy.

I crawled on the bed, as stealthily as any full grown man can, and leaned over her. I brushed her hair aside and the moment I did, she moaned and fluttered her eyes, waking up. I froze, too scared or too

something to move. She rolled over and struggled to open her eyes all the way and to keep them open, her brown eyes. For a second, it didn't register, but after a long second I fell onto the bed beside her, so relieved it might have formed a wave in the air, coming off me. I smiled when she rolled onto her side and whispered naughty ideas in my ear. So, me being prepared already, despite my freak out earlier, intercourse ensued. But of course, last night had not been a dream. The yellow chartreuse eyes and vertical slit pupils returned and I was thrown into mental turmoil all over again.

I didn't ask her about it and for the next few months I continued to see her. In fact, after the first few weeks we were officially dating, though she laughed about that when I asked. And boy does she have a cute laugh. She turned out to be more than just a great—no amazing—lay. She's a sweet girl and with a tough side. I learned fast that she doesn't let anyone boss her around. We had gotten separate places after the first month, cheap and tiny places. Rory found a pretty little place, a typical little Parisian apartment. I only lived in a dump. So we went to her place at night. It was a routine by the fourth month, and one night as I reached her door, it opened, and she led out another man.

And I thought that snake eyes were bad enough to allow me the luck of finding a girl like her.

"We aren't married," was all she said in defense before stepping aside to allow me in.

I was mad and all I could think of was punching that guy in the face and reclaiming what was mine. So I did. It lasted even longer than usual, and buddy, that's a long time. When we finished, she laid back, luxuriating in the after-glow and I laid back to catch my breath. I had only one thought on my mind: could she get any weirder?

"Marry me."

"Okay."

She didn't even look at me when she answered and didn't hesitate a second. I turned to look her in the eyes and repeated myself. Her eyes were still chartreuse, slowly turning a golden color that I knew would eventually become a honey brown. She stared back into my eyes and said nothing. I thought, and kind of knew, she was testing to see how long I could stare into those alien eyes of hers. I watched the whole transition and just as I was about to say it again, she spoke.

"Yes."

I finally admitted what I'd long suspected: she was not human. I exhaled the words I was going to say, letting them slip away with worries I didn't know I had. They were replaced with new worries quickly enough though.

"What are your marriage ceremonies like?"

"You must see my true form before we marry. We can have what you consider a normal marriage celebration after that, but we must mix blood."

I just looked at her, picturing a huge transfusion of blood between us. I must have looked scared or worried because she laughed and shook her head.

"No, no. Just a drop on our fingers we do."

She laughed some more and turned to lay on her back again. I watched her for a few moments, thoughts running wild, before I turned back over and went to sleep. I was plagued with nightmares about how she truly looked.

It was a week later when we took a trip to a heavily wooded region of France. I was too worried to notice where exactly we went. She said she needed privacy from any prying eyes and plenty of space. Apparently she would need to stay out of her human skin for a full sun cycle before she could change back. Apparently, there was a certain drink that her kind had concocted to create a human skin. I expressed my worries as gentlemanly as I could about her coming back the way she looked now. She smiled and told me not to worry.

We hiked a long way into the mountains until we were surrounded for miles of forest in every direction. She told me to take a seat but I insisted to stand. She smiled and shook her head and proceeded to change.

... I don't remember all of it and hope to a higher power that I never regain the memories. What I remember in my nightmares is bad enough. Ripping and tearing skin, sometimes flesh flying off from her and exposing the dark green iridescent scales underneath.

I threw up during the process.

I don't know which was worse: watching bits of human pieces slowly and horribly shedding off her in the most grotesque fashion or what was underneath of it. She was a dinosaur. There is no better way to put it. She looked like a strange and scarier version of a velociraptor, no joke. A slow hiss came from her and I fainted.

I woke up a few seconds later, having forgotten at first, wondering why I was laying in puke and what smelled like shit (I had apparently relieved myself sometime when I had fainted). Then my hearing returned and I backpedaled to the tree and tried my best to spidey-crawl up the gigantic thing. I looked first to see that the lowest limb was way higher than I could jump and then turned to the thing making the noise.

Oh, it was just my fiancée.

I had forgotten she was a dinosaur underneath it all. She was on her side, shaking and making hissing and screeching and guttural noises. It took me a very long moment before I realized she was laughing at me. I picked up a rock and threw it at her and instantly regretted it. She made some move and jumped to her two feet with unreal fluidity and stalked towards me, closing the distance quickly. She hissed as she leaned in, our two starkly different faces becoming only inches apart. Unashamedly, I pissed my pants as I stood my ground. We stayed like that, at a Mexican stand-off of sorts, for a few terribly long moments before she lightly touched her snout to my face and jumped backwards, so fast, that I had no idea what had happened until she was already laughing and skipping away. Well, skipping as best a dinosaur can skip.

I really hoped this wasn't going to be a regular occurrence. Liked she had asked me earlier, I set out a bowl with her changing-back-into-a-human drink inside near dawn. It looked like blue raspberry syrup and smelled kind of like strong herbal tea. We had made it to the forest during the early morning, just after dawn. It had been that whole day and whole night and now she was going to drink this and go to sleep. During her sleeping the drink would do its job and somehow fit her back into the human body she had been in when I met her, an identical one at least. I watched her drink the liquid and go to sleep. It was riveted at first and then later frozen in horror as I watched the drink work. There are just not words to describe watching all the little bits of a human body being created and molded and—IT'S JUST FUCKING GROSS. I threw up again and washed up before I went to sleep myself.

On the trip back home, she comforted me, between giggling, by saying that I may never see her like that again. I almost cried in relief.

Our wedding, a few months later in August, was beautiful and completely normal. That is, except for the little finger prick and

rubbing our blood together. Other than that it was so ordinary I laughed through a lot of it, even as she started down the aisle. I tried to nicely cover that up with a cough but it didn't stop a horde of people turning to glare at me. Those who didn't were too busy drooling over Rory.

Till this day, I look back at it all and laugh, well most of it. When I'm alone, and I think back, I still can't decide if I was crazy to do it all. Anyone who sees or knows Rory will think I would have been crazy to not have done it. Even now, as she enters the room, I can smell that beautiful, and probably made up smell, that radiates off her skin. Trust me, I checked all her perfume and it's not that.

... My wife is silent as a snake ...

Suddenly behind me, she said, "The funniest part was I thought you were an alien when I first met you,"

I turned to look at her and see her covering her mouth to keep her laughing quiet. She burst out at seeing the expression on my face. I was speechless though I kept trying to mouth the word 'why'. She nearly fell back to the arm of the sofa near the desk I was sitting at, typing this "story" up. When she controlled herself she answered my question and left me dumbfounded.

"It was my first week on Earth and you had green hair. I thought I had finally met someone as alien as me."

Breeze



Dandelion Fluff

A tuft of dandelion fluff,
A weed seed in the wind,
Ready to grasp hold and grow at every opportunity.
Every time a strong wind blows,
Up by the roots but... life strives.

Whittled away and pared down
to that transportable by torrents and tragedy,
bare roots and torn pieces of greenery,
stripped down to the state of a stunted seedling,
layers of life and growth ripped away,
til nothing is left but a ragged bit of determined nature,
grimed with grit and the persistence of dreams
of planting itself in some unlikely locale,
of germinating the spirit and regrowing the soul,
of catching in the crook of some sheltered limb,
and growing into the orchid it was always meant to be.

Soldiers Into the Night

The book cart entered the ward
 pushed by pretty volunteers,
 young, like me,
 but as I used to be,
 I feel old now.

Dressed in compassionate blue outfits
 they offered dog-eared paperbacks,
 and with the kindest of looks,
 creased comic books,
 I feel young now.

I perused the literary donations
 and discovered a collection of words,
 poems I've read,
 by the famous and dead,
 I'm inspired now.

Nighttime with a notebook at a back table
 while dimmed ceiling lights cast an orange glow,
 over the soldiers in beds,
 tranquilized by meds,
 I must write now.

“Do not go gentle into that good night.”
 Thomas wrote it, I read it, but they live it,
 they toss, turn, sit up, lie down,
 sleep in deep water and drown,
 I watch them now.

Not to go gentle into the night, a soldier rises
 and walks, back and forth, whispering to self,
 suddenly gesturing to the ward,
 right arm slashing like a sword,
 I hold my breath now.

Stationed between office and latrine
 A medic sits watching TV, night shift's company,
 no one passes the watchtower,
 on guard for the bogeyman's hour,
 I am grateful now.

But oh, no, our sentry sleeps, a victim of time
 the patient stands over him, face contorted,
 a clenched fist his weapon,
 held only for a second,
 I close my eyes now.

I can't stop him, can't move, I can't yell
 because words on paper are all I've known,
 I was the class oddball,
 I wrote through it all,
 And while others here continue to fight,
 I'll escape ... gentle into the night.
 I'll go inside me now.

Photograph

The loneliest feeling in the world is knowing you lost your husband to this war, even though he is sitting right next to you.

“Let’s go out to dinner, Jacob,” you say, wanting to reach out and touch his arm, but you’re afraid. You remember what happened last time. He sits on your couch, eyes fixed intently at the screen of your television. He ignores you. Sighing, you get up and walk to your desk.

You’re careful not to make too much noise as you open the drawer and take out a photograph. It’s a photo of your wedding day. You brush away the dust resting on it. You were 18, but you look younger in the picture, with long brown hair and a slim figure. You both had these matching brilliant smiles; wrinkles around his eyes like there always were when he was really happy. You haven’t seen him smile like that since...well, you can’t really remember, but you know it was before he left. You walk to the mirror, giving it your best smile, and you see right through it. You wonder if you will ever be that happy again. That girl never would have imagined your life ending up like this, a hollow shell.

Jacob was the sort of person who would risk his life running through traffic on a busy street, shoving his way through a crowd just to hold the door open for a pretty face. That’s precisely how you met. He insisted on walking you home. You rolled your eyes and told him you take the subway. He held your hand the entire ride home. He looked at you, with that same grin on his face, wrinkles around his eyes, as he swept your hair back from your ears, leaned in and whispered “You light up this cold subway train like a fire. I have to see you again.”

Jacob made you feel alive; he brought color into your world like no one else ever had. After a few months, you knew you couldn’t live without him. That’s why when he got down on one knee and said he would do anything for you for the rest of your life, you said “yes.” Your parents said he was too young, that he couldn’t take care of you. He wanted to prove them wrong.

When he enlisted, you felt that bolt of fear run through your body, but he assured you that everything would be alright. He was excited at the prospect of fighting in a war; it was something he thought was honorable, brave. He was fulfilling a lifelong dream, and you supported

that. After he left, it took weeks to get that first letter. Like so many other women with their husbands, boyfriends, and sons enlisted you checked the mail multiple times a day, praying for it.

It seemed like forever, but eventually you were together again. The effect he had on you was stronger than gravity. You couldn’t spend a minute apart. Sure, there were fights, but you couldn’t go to bed angry, not even once. That day you locked him out in the rain, he stood on that front step for an hour, knocking. He didn’t stop until you let him in, and when you did, the first thing he did was grab you and kiss you. You made love, his soaking wet body intertwined with yours, right on the living room floor. You two weren’t just crazy for one another, you were psychotic.

Then you found out, Afghanistan. If he was scared, he didn’t show it. He promised you he would come back in one piece. He reminded you about how you met, when he dodged through traffic, narrowly escaping a taxi. He laughed and jokingly said, “You’ve seen my talents.” You still cried every night after he left, for months. Sometimes you’d get a random sensation, goose bumps on your arms or a sudden memory, which would instantly turn into a feeling of doom. You would stop what you were doing, or rush home, and stare at your front door for hours.

The excitement you had when he first came home died almost as soon as you caught a glimpse of him. At first, he wouldn’t look at you at all. When you finally put your hands on his cheeks and lifted his gaze to meet yours, you knew by the look in his eyes that this wasn’t Jacob. This was a stranger.

You tried to hold him that night, but he turned away from you. You thought that maybe it would just take some time. The next morning, you woke up and he wasn’t there. You found him in the kitchen, making some breakfast. You hugged him from behind, grabbing him tightly, and the next thing you knew, you were on the ground, aching. His face, filled with shock, was frozen for a minute.

“Oh god, I’m sorry, I just, I thought someone was in the house. Don’t sneak up on me like that!” When you began to cry, he left. For the first time in your marriage, he didn’t come home that night.

One night after a particularly bad dream, he woke up screaming, in a cold sweat. You told him you couldn’t take it anymore, that he had to tell you what was wrong. He denied it. You dropped to your knees

in front of him as he sat on the bed, begging him. “You promised me you would do anything for me. I want to know what happened to you in Afghanistan. I need to know, Jacob.”

You listened as he calmly told you about the bodies strewn across roads, pieces of men, women, and children charred and bloodied. Your mind raced, with images from horror movies playing in your head, but you realized that this was worse than any horror movie, because it was real life. He explained how he watched his friend walk away and become nothing more than dust, raining over them after he got too close to an IED. He began to cry then, saying he blames himself for all of it, fallen friends, your failed relationship, his mother’s passing while he was overseas. You wanted so badly to hold him, to take his head and press it against your chest, stroke his hair, and feel his cool tears on your skin. You wanted him to hear your heartbeat and realize that you didn’t care about anything he did, that you still loved him. You thought maybe if you were strong enough, that love could save him. That was five years ago. If only you could have gone back, before the night terrors and flashbacks, before you woke to him screaming inconsolably at 3am, before things like backfiring cars and knocks on the door meant danger.

If only you could read this, if only you could have been stronger, you could have told him not to go. You know he wouldn’t have listened. I wish I could go back and warn you. I’d tell you that beautiful smile on his face, the one that made you fall in love when you first met him, would disappear. But I can’t. The second saddest feeling in the world is knowing that you are in love with a memory. Faded and covered in dust like this picture. All that is left is a carbon copy, a memorial in the form of blood and flesh: residual impulses in a body that for all other purposes is dead.

The Road Not Taken

Going out with the bros
 Don’t care for these hos
 I live my life free...by simply being me
 NO need to pretend
 I got too many friends
 They know who I am...

But I know who I am
 And its tearing me down
 Living life a lie
 But I carry the crown.
 Most popular, Hilarious, ladies man
 Yet curious...

Which path should I take?
 Not knowing my fate.
 Two doors, One choice, No erase, No escape.
 Judgment is all I see
 Acceptance is what I seek
 To start fresh, no boundaries.

I chose to be bold
 An act of bravery
 Facebook, I pushed “Post”
 While shaking nervously
 Comments!...too scared to see
 “Click”
 my life was ruined instantly.

One Hot Summer Day

At the height of summer's quarter,
Looms the smell of water,
That hangs so heavy, like a wet sheet.
I blister dew drops
Bleeding rivulets of vigor scouring my sides—my eyes.
Then the wet net blooms weeping torrents
Washing away the stale breath of an aging day
From behind those tears I mirrored.
The poultice of summer's Lotus festers
A cone of Sherbet blush,
Like god opening his celestial gate.
With gusto, I feel my Nike rush.

Cleansed



No Hands

I pushed myself into a sitting position in the muddy creek water. A lump was stuck at the bottom of my throat which barely allowed air to pass. I gulped in a breath and blinked a stream of tears from my eyes. I felt something digging into the bottom of my thigh and realized that I was sitting on the handlebars of my bicycle. I glanced up and saw my mom and my brother, Bobby, running down the paved hill toward me. Pain radiated from my knees and the palms of my hands, but there was something else that I felt that distracted me from the physical pain: failure.

A few weeks earlier, the training wheels had been taken off of my bike. I stood at the end of the driveway and watched my mom work the wrench around the bolt as the wheels became looser and looser. With every turn, a wave of anxiety coursed through me.

It was my decision to have them taken off after hearing that Bobby was only five when he rode a two-wheeler without difficulty. At six years old, this little nugget of reality acted as a wake up call for me. What had I been doing with my life? Whether I was ready for it or not, it was time to grow up and ditch the training wheels.

My mother wiggled the wheels off, secured the bolts back onto the axle, and stood the bike up. I took in my bike's new appearance and was shocked by the transformation it had made in a matter of minutes. It didn't look like the same bike. It was big, wobbly, and vulnerable, as it relied on my mother's firm grip to keep it from falling.

I approached the bike, grabbed the handles from my mom, and rocked it from side to side. "Thanks Mom. Maybe I'll just wait until after lunch to test it out. I'm kind of hungry," I lied. The truth is, I was terrified to get on that bike. Not only because I was afraid of falling, but because when I got on, I wanted to pedal away just like Bobby had, with ease. The idea had seemed so realistic until then. There was no way I'd be able to ride that thing without falling.

"Really? Why don't we stay out here and practice for a little while before we go inside? I thought you'd be dying to give it a go," she coaxed.

"Fine," I said, "but don't let go of the bike. I just want to get a feel for it first." This small request was torture for me. I was writing

my history in that moment, and for the rest of my life, the story of the first time I rode my bike without training wheels would be an unremarkable one. Worse than that, it would be lame compared to my brother's miraculous tale.

I straddled the bike, reached the tips of my toes to the concrete driveway, and tiptoed my way toward the sidewalk. My mom wrapped her arms around me and enveloped my hands in hers. When I knew it was safe, I placed my feet on the pedals and let her push me forward.

"Pedal slowly," she instructed. I pushed the pedals with the soles of my shoes as we inched forward. The ants on the sidewalk were probably going faster than we were. The more confident I became that my mother wouldn't let go the quicker I began to pump my legs. Soon I felt the wind beating on my face, whipping my long brown hair behind me as my mom jogged beside me.

"I'm going to let go," she announced.

"Don't let go!" I pleaded

"I have to," she said. "Keep the handlebars straight, you can do this," she said encouragingly. And then she let go.

I continued to pedal, faster and faster, using every muscle in my upper body to keep the handlebars straight. I was riding my bike all by myself. **I WAS RIDING MY BIKE ALL BY MYSELF!**

"You're doing it!" my mother squealed behind me. I wanted to turn around to see the excitement that I was sure radiated from her proud smile but I knew I didn't have enough control over my bike for that.

The world whizzed past me, the trees, houses, and cars, all blended together and allowed the scene in front of me to come into sharp focus. I was hurdling toward the end of the sidewalk. Beyond that was the road, a forbidden territory, one that I knew I wasn't allowed to intrude.

I began to panic. I didn't know what would happen if I tried to stop.

"Stop!" my mom yelled.

Trusting her order, I pushed the pedals in the opposite direction. My bike skidded to a hasty halt. I climbed off of my bike and waited as my mom raced toward me. She wrapped her arms around me and spun me around until we both toppled over onto the ground.

I was so pleased with myself. I basked in my glory, gloating about my triumphant first attempt for the rest of the day. Unfortunately,

my celebration was short lived. After a few days, my bicycle riding abilities became less extraordinary. My mother wasn't as impressed as she was on that first attempt. She'd yell out a "nice job" or a "look at you go!" whenever she saw me practicing, but her voice didn't hold the excitement that it once had.

Another week passed and then something awful happened.

I was sitting at the island in the kitchen, eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and watching my mother put away dishes, when my brother burst through the front door and turned my life into shambles.

"MOM!" he bellowed. "I can ride my bike with no hands! Come see!"

Unbelievable. This is un-be-LIEVABLE, I thought.

I followed my mom into the front yard to witness the shenanigans with my own eyes. Bobby hopped on his bike, pedaled for a moment, and then lifted his arms into the air, taking off down the street, whooping and pumping his fists until he was out of sight. I stood there, motionless, staring at the air that my brother had just occupied.

"That was unbelievable!" my mother exclaimed. "Your brother is something else," she said, shaking her head in astonishment.

"Yeah," I agreed, "my thoughts exactly."

My brother had stolen my glory and I wanted it back.

That night, I sat in my bed, plotting a strategy to win back my mother's adoration. When the idea hit me, I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it sooner. I was going to ride my bike with no hands, and being only six years old, it was sure to be the most remarkable thing my mom had ever seen.

It didn't take long before I realized that my newest challenge wasn't going to be easy. My bike wobbled too much when I tried to pedal with my hands hovering over the handlebars. How could I go fast enough without having to pedal? This thought lingered in my mind for the rest of the afternoon, until I remembered the hill that led to the creek in my neighborhood. It was a long paved road that led all the way down to the shore of the creek, allowing easy access for boats to come in and out of the water.

After dinner, I begged my mom and brother to follow me to the hill.

"I have something to show you guys," I had said. "It's a surprise." I wanted them to be blown away when they saw my prodigious abilities.

I rushed to the hill to test out my latest scheme with my mom and Bobby trailing behind me. When I got there, I took in the extreme incline of the hill. From up there it seemed more like standing at the apex of a mountain, than the pocket-sized slope that I remembered. It was then or never. I glanced back at my audience to make sure they were looking, mustered up every ounce of courage that I had, and began to pedal.

I had never gone down a hill before on my bicycle. I had no idea that I would be barreling down the hill faster than the Road Runner being pursued by the Coyote. I cut through the blasting wind, the trees on either side of me, streaking past me, melding into a continuous line of blurred leaves and trunks and branches.

I loosened my grip on the handlebars, knowing what I had to do. My hands slowly ebbed away from the handlebars. I couldn't believe I was doing it. My plan had worked. I flung my hands in the air reveling in my triumph. Without thinking, I turned back to see my spectators with a huge grin plastered to my face, who were now chasing behind me. Instead of the joy that I thought they would be experiencing, however, I saw fear and panic.

"STOP!" my mother screamed, just as she had on that first day when I was heading toward the road.

I turned around, the origin of their fear became clear in an instant. I was rapidly approaching the creek shore.

I rammed the pedals of my bike in the opposite direction with all of my might. The wheels lurched forward on the pavement. I became instantly aware that whatever the outcome of my inevitable finish, it wouldn't be a good one. The front wheel came to an abrupt halt, hurling by body forward. I squeezed my eyes shut and braced myself for impact as I sailed toward the water.

Time lost its fixed, stable flow and slowed, allowing me to fear for my life. I was sure that I was going to drown. I thought of the time my mom warned me about the murky water as we stood hand in hand on the dock as unharmed spectators.

"That water is contaminated," she had said, "you can get sick from it. And if you fall in, it will be really hard to find your way to the surface because you can't see anything under there. Never ever go into the water," she had warned.

And then my body slammed into the water, my palms and knees hitting the concrete that resided at the bottom. I pushed myself up, realizing that the water was only a few feet deep. I didn't want to look at the injuries that I knew were there. Instead I looked up at my mom and my brother who were now standing at the water's edge. I felt like such a failure. I sat there as the tears streamed down my face, knowing that my mom wouldn't dare come into the radioactive water to get me. I wondered what would happen to me. Would they have to amputate my legs and hands where the water seeped into my open wounds? Would I turn green or grow an extra limb? Just as I began to accept my future deformities, I witnessed my mom take her first shaky step into the water, and a smile cracked its way through my worried expression.

The Moon of You

Piercing through the nightly skies, deceiving just like your eyes.
Shining like a white lie between the darkening clouds, dreading every sight.

Life's Oblivious Way

No longer does someone live
 in the room above the kitchen.
 The house is painted in grief.
 A breeze blows through our open wounds.
 Your name is missing
 from the Sunday school attendance sheet.
 Silent cowboy boots
 and all the pretty horses must rest.
 Our wrap-around porch now leans
 a bit off kilter
 to match the oblivious way
 life has of continuing on.
 The school bus stops on our street
 and some children do go home.
 Quietly, the school resides
 with hallowed, hopeless halls.
 Our loss testifies our loss
 and nothing justifies it.
 We know
 all things collapse under pressure.
 We know
 there is no place safe.
 We know
 people are precious.
 Other than that
 we cannot comprehend.

The Bobo Gang

One step at a time, I cautiously sneaked behind my older sister, Mariposa, and her friend up four flights of worn gray, thin marble steps—the sort that normally decorate the threshold of bathrooms—to our fourth floor apartment. At the time, I wondered why my sister appeared ferocious, like a Moor preparing to duel with an enemy. Her two brown-red fox pigtails bounced aggressively as she continued to climb. The friend stared down at her own feet as she hesitantly followed my sister.

Reaching the fourth floor landing and wavering there, I watched her friend timidly knock on our fortress-like door shielding the entrance into our spacious four-room dwelling. My mom opened the door wide expecting to find her ten and eight-year-old daughters arriving at home after an exhausting Friday in Catholic school. Instead, she found a valiant Mariposa bringing forth her prisoner to stand in front of a magistrate while I hid in the background. Mom crossed her arms against her breasts and leaned slightly to one side waiting to hear the new mischief my sister had committed.

“*Bueno, que paso ahora?*” My mother asked, staring directly at my sister’s fierce, full-lashed eyes.

Mariposa gently nudged the girl whose straight, dark hair hid her plump cheeks. The girl inched closer to the door without looking at my mother. Her black Mary Jane shoes scraped jagged black lines on the minuscule, white pentagonal tiles.

“*Señora Garcia,*” the girl said breathlessly, “I called Mariposa a liar during lunch break. But I was just kid-ding. Mariposa was very mad at me. The next thing I feel is her hand smacking the back of my head. Her smack was so hard that my forehead hit the lunch table.” She quickly stepped back.

My mom instantly raised her palm at Mariposa to silence her, instinctively knowing that my sister would spill her tirade. I stared at my sister in disbelief thinking to myself, *wow, I wouldn't dare bring the girl I just hit and stand there looking so proud.*

My mother’s olive face, framed by wisps of short, layered, black hair, contemplated the girl. “*No te preocupe,* go home. I’ll call your mother tonight. Now Mariposa, before Margarita leaves I want you to

apologize. *Ahora!* The edge in her soft voice made my sister and me tremble.

Without hesitation Mariposa answered, “Sorry, Margarita but if you had not...”

“*Silencio!*” The accent on the o surpassed the permissible level noise established by OSHA and the EPA. The three of us cringed.

“Now Margarita, go home. *Niñas* get inside now.” She emphasized every syllable with a tight smile. Running away, Margarita’s shoes clattered noisily and echoed down the steps, through the two entrance doors, past the stoop, and out into the safety of Ten Eyck Street.

The spring evening zephyr separated and levitated the ivory organza panels adorned with translucent daisies in our bedroom. Outside the window, a black iron fire escape disguised the multitude of green shingles decorating the front façade of the apartment building. I sat on the fire escape, looking down at the neighbors quietly chatting on their respective stoops, while my parents scolded my sister in the adjacent living room. Through the mini vinyl blinds, my father’s stocky and lined silhouette paced back and forth. Once again, my parents replayed a familiar scene.

“Mariposita, I know you hate when your friends lie or are unfair to you and your sister. But you can’t change people by hitting them. You have to lead by example and maybe your friends will follow,” said Dad while I imagined my mom nodding in agreement.

“*Papi*, I’m sorry. I’ll really try to keep my hands to myself.”

“*Si, si* you say that all the time. Well, you’ll have to stay inside the entire weekend without watching television or calling your friends. *Por Dios*, can I finally have my dinner after an exhausting day at work.”

I rolled my eyes knowing how lenient my Dad was with his daughters. Hearing my sister close the door to our bedroom, I jumped inside to join her and our pale yellow wallpaper lightly scattered with daisies.

The cooing of several pigeons resting on the fire escape interrupted my Saturday morning sleep. I threw the pillow towards the window. Seconds later the flapping of wings grew distant as the aroma of café slipped underneath the door. Looking at Mariposa sleeping on her twin bed, I slithered quietly from underneath my comforter onto the cool, honey parquet squares. I tiptoed and stepped only on the center of each square, avoiding the lines between, while mouthing silently,

don’t step on the crack or you break your mother’s back. The floor creaked, and a pillow suddenly hit my head.

“Just get out and let me sleep,” implored Mariposa.

After helping my mom dust her porcelain knick knacks, making my bed, and finishing my weekend chores, I headed downstairs towards the girlish voices singing,

*We are going to the country, we are going to the fair
To see a señorita with flowers on her hair
Shake it, shake it, shake it, shake it if you can
Shake it like a milk shake, and do the best you can
Rumba to the bottom, rumba to the top
And turn around and turn around
Until you make a stop.*

I joined the ring of girls circling the chosen one on the sidewalk. Glancing up, my sister sat with her feet dangling between the iron spindles that surrounded the fire escape. I waved teasingly at her tiny and imprisoned figure.

“Isabel, why is Mariposa upstairs?” asked Rosemarie, my sister’s rival both in school and out.

“She’s sitting on the fire escape, why don’t you ask her?” I retorted with false bravado.

The singing stopped and the raucous roar of a modified exhaust on a Harley disrupted the unusual silence on our Brooklyn Street. Rosemarie was wearing her asinine sterling silver chain that had an exaggerated *bobo*—pacifier—charm dangling from it. She pushed me against the group of girls.

“Your sister isn’t here to defend you,” she jabbed her finger repeatedly on my flat chest while several of her twittering friends surrounded me. My stomach churned as Rosemarie and her *Bobo* gang towered over my petite body. One girl stepped on my white Pro Keds, while another pulled on my short dark curls. With all my might, my twig like arms pushed the two older girls.

“I don’t need my sister, understand!” I shouted back while looking up at an empty fire escape. “I can do everything that she or you can do.”

Rosemarie guffawed while rubbing the large pacifier charm with her fingers. “Hmmm, your sister thinks she’s too good for our gang. But...I think I’ll let you join since you don’t need her. The only thing you must do is prove yourself worthy enough to join us.”

I gulped. “What do you want me to do?”

“Ok, meet us after six tonight at the candy store around the corner. Come on girls, we have things to talk about. Just remember Isabel, be there.” Rosemarie’s large frog eyes expressed an implicit threat. Droplets of sweat dripped steadily from the base of my skull and down the curve of my spine as my eyes followed the *Bobo* gang retreat across the street to their side of the block. Glancing once again towards my bedroom window, a lone cumulous cloud obscured the vernal sun as the other young faces searched for warmth and me for reassurance.

Running up the stairs, a waft of *sofrito*—a puree of cilantro, onions, garlic, sweet and bell peppers marinated in a bit of oil and tomato sauce, the traditional Puerto Rican base for stewed beans and meats—greeted me. My mother humming and moving her hips to a salsa tune stirred the contents in a pot. Next to the window, which framed our million-dollar view of a fraction of the Empire State building soaring over Brooklyn’s rooftops and lines of clothing swaying in the late afternoon, Mariposa searched the buffet cabinet for placemats.

“*Hola* Isabel, you’re just on time to help set the dinner table.”

“Ok, *Mami*.” I gathered the silverware from the drawer. My silent sister passed the plates to me. One slipped from my grasp and shattered into tiny sharp pieces.

“Isabel, what’s the matter with you?” asked Mariposa. Her thick straight eyebrows lifted while questioning.

My mom’s full lips disappeared into a thin line. She found the broom and handed it to me. Taking it, I quickly swept the jagged remains of the plate ignoring my sister’s suspicious look.

“*Mami*, after dinner can I go to the candy store around the corner?”

“Only if Mariposa accompanies you,” she answered after tasting the rice.

Mami, *Papi* punished Marisposa, I almost said aloud. I kept my thoughts to myself knowing that I truly needed my sister if I was going to face Rosemarie. Sneaking a peek at my sister through my eyelashes, I noticed a smile emerging.

The purple and deep blue easterly horizon spread slowly towards the zenith following the path of the setting sun. Mariposa and I rapidly descended the four flights of stairs in the tenement, desperately to catch the last minutes of daylight. Most of our friends were inside their apartments. Only the teenagers remained huddling together, smoking their cigarettes and talking at full volume. Mariposa noticed

Margarita standing next to her older sister amidst the teenagers. She waved at her friend.

“Mariposa why don’t you say hello and I’ll run to the candy store,” I said without waiting for a response. I turned away running past several occupied stoops and around the corner.

The store, located on the ground floor of an apartment building, boasted a sign with red, white, and green lettering that read, *Angelo’s Newspaper and Candy Store*. Through the large windows, blue and red neon signs advertised several brands of beer. Underneath, a row of milk crates held neatly stacked New York tabloids, the *Times*, and *El Diaro*. To the side, Rosemarie and the *Bobo* gang leaned against a parked mustard Pinto. I approached the girls.

“Hey Isabel, you’re late.” She blew a huge pink bubble then sucked it back into her mouth. “All the girls have to be initiated. You know what that means.”

“Yeah, yeah, what do I have to do?”

Rosemarie’s eyes protruded unnaturally on her long fallow face. “Okay, you have to steal some candy. We’ll go in and keep Angelo busy. Just tuck the candy inside the waist of your pants. Oh, and if you get caught you better not say a word about us. Understand! If you do, there’ll be a lot of us pounding on your head.” She lifted her fist up and down. “See you at my stoop.”

Rosemarie and four girls walked in with their huge *bobos* bouncing foolishly against their chest. Two minutes later, my heart drummed in my ears while my damp curls tightened around my flushed face. I walked in and the bells hanging loosely from the door announced my arrival. Big Angelo sat his overflowing rear on a barstool behind the cash register. His omniscient eyes focused on me and blinked, then moved back to the noisy girls touching the rows of sweets from Sugar Daddy to Sugar Babies. My legs, heavy with fear, refused to move further down the only aisle and past the girls. Inhaling, I squeezed by and accidentally stepped on Rosemarie’s pink jelly sandal.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. In the background, the bell tinkled. The girls hid my body from view. I looked from Hershey to Nestle then to Chunky, a large chocolate cube.

Hmmm these are my favorite. Oops these have raisins. Yuck not for me. Ah, here are the plain ones. I picked up two Chunkys. As I faced the rear of the store, I tucked the chocolate cubes inside my pants. I touched

the waist band once again. Secured. Heading towards the front of the store, I rushed by the girls. One girl pushed against another.

“Watch it stupid,” someone yelled.

Big Angelo hollered, “Hurry up!”

An electric current surged from the bottom of my stomach through my arms and into my fingers. My hands trembled and I turned around to face Rosemarie. To my surprise, Mariposa appeared and bared her teeth like a true warrior with her arms crossed against her budding breasts as her tousled brown hair with fine strands of copper, highlighted by the long fluorescent lights, fell wildly down her back. Her cinnamon skin, so like our father’s, contrasted against her white sweatshirt. I looked at my sister with awe and thought to myself, *how brave she seems.*

“Don’t you ever pick on my sister,” she said as her fist clenched and unclenched menacingly. Mariposa pulled me next to her and the Chunkys slipped down my pants. I bent forward trying to hold the chocolate in place, right above my groin.

“What’s the matta little girl,” asked Angelo.

“Ah nothing. I have to go to the bathroom,” I answered and walked behind the *Bobo* gang like the hunchback of Notre dame. The girls chirped quietly among themselves.

“See ya later,” Rosemarie peeped as she and her flock escaped my sister and the store.

“Mr. Angelo can my sister use your bathroom,” asked Mariposa.

“You’re Roberto’s daughters.” We both nodded. “Sure it’s at the end of the aisle then the door to your left.”

We walked quickly even through my feigned infirmity. Once in the bathroom, I reached inside my bell bottom pants to pull the semi-melted Chunkys and handed the cubes to my sister. Mariposa shook her head with her lips pressed into a thin line like my mother. We left the bathroom and headed to Big Angelo. I wasn’t sure what would happen. My sister never lied. Standing in front of the judge and next to my accuser, Mariposa, I waited for my sentence. I lowered my head. Mariposa placed the chocolate cubes on the counter.

“You sure you want these? That’s weird they’re soft,” said Big Angelo when he picked up the Chunkys.

“We like them soft,” my sister replied and handed him fifty cents.

Gold, but not yet free

Fish Can Dance

Up Down Sometimes Around

Characteristics Passage Only To Those

Which Control The Pilot

Each One Wants Their Talent

Waiting To See If Anyone Notices

Jump

Flip

Some Have Visitors

But Visiting Hours Are Closed

So They Dance

Breathe

Completely

No Anxiety Here

Fake

To Describe

To Imply

Which Is Here

For Whom

But Why?

The Pilot Looks To The Side

To Find An Empty Beer Mug

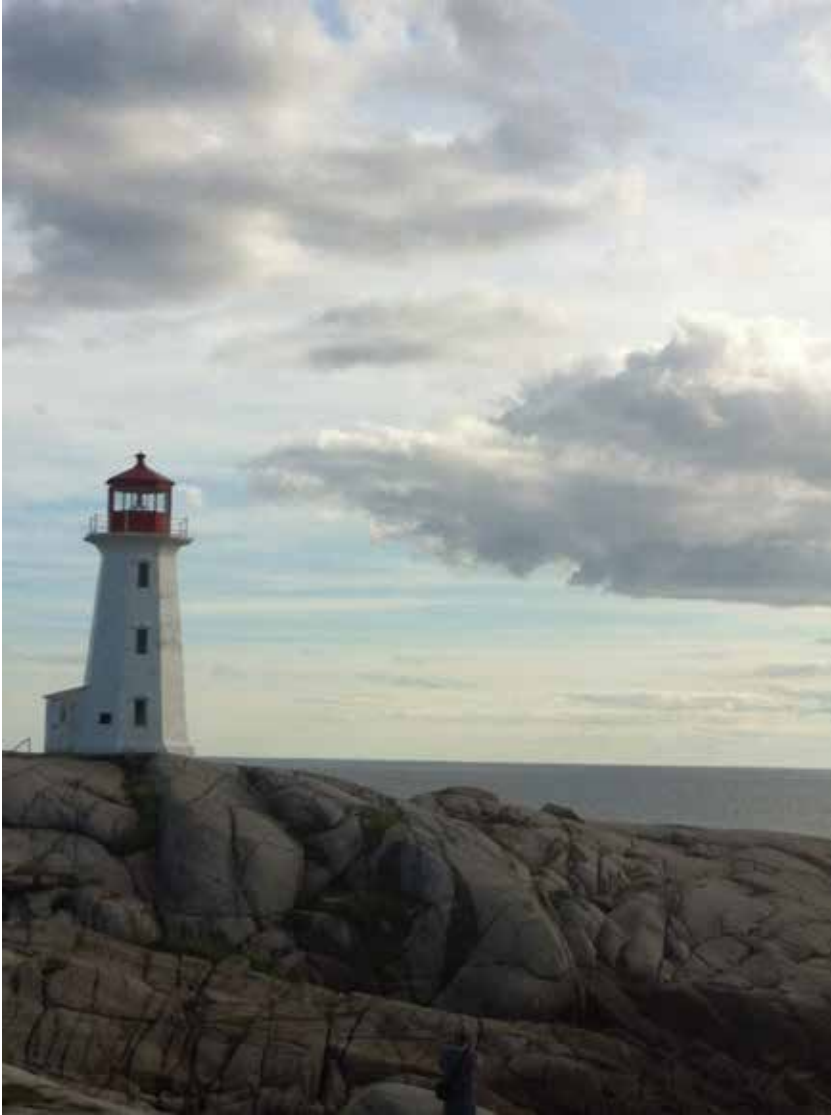
Not Upset

Just Thirsty

That’s When The Fish

Seem Better Off...

Peggy's Cove



Crabs

On the hour I pull the trap up to check the contents of the basket. There is nothing at breakfast, the after breakfast muck romp the after romp shower, after shower swimming lesson, sailing lesson, etiquette lesson, lesson on plaid linens, or the plaiting of my hair.

I run sockfoot out to the dock. A Holly bramble nicks me in the second smallest toe. Walker says I cry too much, so instead I bite down on my thumb and hope Grandmother will not see me and think I am sucking on it. Girls like me do not suck their thumbs.

The floating platform is asking me to come play mermaid on the rock, but I have a mission. It is low tide. I am low to the water. One hand over, one hand under, I pull the rope. Over, under, over, under until the wire cage slices the brackish water and my palms blister.

The chicken neck rot peppers the salt air as the trap comes up; inside are four angry, scuttling bodies. I learn how to crack crabs before I learn my scales on the piano. I know Walker will pinch me again; I'll cry because I do not have blue claws to fight back.

Football

On a yellow afternoon
 dotted by haystacks
 and shaded by cool,
 green footpaths,
 I discover the plot
 of Blue Anchor,
 so small I could cup
 this place in my
 suburban hands.

A graveyard—locked
 A church door—locked

I cannot find the dead
 or the living in
 on this hillside.
 But for unruly
 red haired children
 asking my name,
 mocking my accent
 and cycling past
 like a tribe on
 warhorses,
 I speak with
 no one.
 They round a corner
 shouting still,
 bike chains
 spinning wildly
 with child's control
 zip zip zip.

Gone.

In their
 pronounced
 absence,
 I catch
 the steady thud
 of a ball
 against a grey house.

Turtle Soup

When Xiaoshu was in her fourth year of college, she took the train to Shiyuan on the last day of September to spend the National Day holiday with her parents. Father met her at the train station and carried her home on his motorcycle, speeding away from the sights and sounds and scents of the town toward the place where the hills were draped in green and the roads cut through the hills like threads of mud.

As soon as Xiaoshu entered the house that she could never bring herself to call home, Mother detected a change in the daughter whom she had suspected for some time of drifting toward a dangerous sea.

It was not just the detachment of the girl. That detachment had been present within her for a long time. Perhaps it was the result of growing up divided between two places that had made her a person never belonging wholly to one.

Whatever the source, to Mother, Xiaoshu appeared stubborn and insufficiently filial. She didn't behave like the other village daughters. She spoke her mind and acted on the basis of her own will. These were dangerous traits in a Chinese girl. Many of Xiaoshu's primary school classmates had already married; some had already borne sons. How would a girl like Xiaoshu ever find a husband? And without a husband, how could a girl be anything but lost?

Xiaoshu refused the bowl of noodles with beef that her mother had made, saying that she had eaten something not long before on the train. She accepted a cup of tea, and, sitting in the living room together, mother and daughter talked. But like most of their conversations of late, the talk soon turned contentious. Why hadn't she secured a job yet, with only nine months to go before graduation? Why hadn't she found a man who could become her husband? Wasn't there a single boy in all of Wuhan whom she found suitable?

"Every time, your questions are the same," Xiaoshu said. "And every time I have the same answer: I don't know."

"Why don't you know?"

"Because life isn't the way you think it is. You can't always plan it out in advance. Sometimes it just has to be lived."

And then Xiaoshu rose from her chair and told Mother that she wanted to go upstairs and read for a while. She picked up her bag and ascended the stairs two steps at a time. Mother heard Xiaoshu's footfalls on the concrete floor above, and the closing of a door behind her.

Impudent girl! What could she with her soft hands and scholar's pale skin tell her own mother about life? Mother looked at her own hands, fingers shifting fitfully in her lap—hands that had known the stain of the soil and the aches of the earth, and within which the pangs of life had become embedded in bone.

She didn't want to think about it anymore, so she rose from her chair and turned on the television in search of distraction. The program was a historical drama in honor of National Day, full of Red Army soldiers who could do no wrong. It was just what she needed—to enter for a while a world where there were no shades of gray. Above the television hung the taped portrait of Chairman Mao. The paper had begun to fray and curl at the edges, and the color had faded to beige from white. Even the features of Mao himself had grown faint, and he stared down from the wall without expression, like a god divided from the world by a screen of fog.

Father came into the house carrying a chicken that he had just killed and plucked for the evening meal. He cradled it in his bloody palms and set the bird down on the kitchen counter and washed his hands.

In the living room, he picked up the remote control and changed the channel. His wife grunted in disapproval but offered no protest beyond that. He scanned through the channels until he found a news program and then sat down as far across the room as he could be from his wife.

Images of people setting themselves on fire flashed across the screen. Along with the images came the voice of the reporter, speaking in harsh tones of Falun Gong, of how it had started by giving false hopes to the old and had now begun to prey on the minds of the young. On the screen, the image slowed in time lapse, almost to a still, as a young woman no older than Xiaoshu knelt down and lit a match and offered her life to flame.

"Where is Xiaoshu?" Father asked. "She should be watching this. I heard last night they're recruiting them now at the universities."

“She’s upstairs in her room, reading.”

“Reading for school?”

“I assume—what else for?”

“You better go check on her.”

Mother rose and walked slowly up the stairs. The images on the screen and her husband’s words had infused the house with an unsettling air. The dangerous sea, which up to now had been too vague to name, began to take on a definite shape. She paused at the door and hesitated, as if afraid of what she might find. At last, taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

On the bed, Xiaoshu lay on her back, holding a book in front of her face. She didn’t move the book or give any sign of recognition that her mother had entered the room. The words on the book’s cover were in English and thus indecipherable to her, but the picture on the cover Xiaoshu’s mother could read well enough. It was of a sad-eyed foreign girl, with long hair the color of turned earth that draped around her pale face. All around the girl were fields that had begun to fade after the fall harvest.

“What are you reading?” Mother asked.

“A novel,” Xiaoshu said, without moving the book from in front of her eyes.

“Is it for one of your classes?”

“No, it’s for myself.”

“What is it about?”

“It’s about a girl named Tess—a girl born at the wrong time.”

“Don’t you have some things you should be reading for your classes?”

“Yes, I do,” Xiaoshu said as she put the book down abruptly on her stomach. “But I like this better.”

Downstairs, Mother told her husband about what she had seen and heard in Xiaoshu’s room. “It could have been worse,” he said. “At least it wasn’t a book about Falun Gong.”

He chuckled when he said this, but it was laughter without mirth—the kind that comes out when one is at least half-serious.

“But it wasn’t even a book for school,” Mother said. “She said she was reading it for herself—whatever that means.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it. Xiaoshu’s always done well at school. She’s got book sense—I’ll give her that. But it’s the only kind of sense she’s got.”

That night at dinner, Mother observed as her daughter took ample helpings of vegetables and tofu and rice but avoided the chicken and even the fish. The chicken she had prepared breaded and fried just the way Xiaoshu had liked it best as a child. Why would she refrain from eating it now?

Mother picked up a piece of chicken with her chopsticks and moved to place it on her daughter’s plate, but Xiaoshu picked up the plate and took it off the table before her mother could reach it.

“So what’s wrong with you now?” she said. “Why won’t you eat the chicken I cooked for you? Or the fish?”

“I haven’t eaten any meat in a month,” Xiaoshu said. “I guess you could say I’m a vegetarian now.”

“You may be a vegetarian down in Wuhan,” Father said, slapping the palm of his hand down hard on the table. “But you’re not one in this house. I killed that bird with my own hands. Your mother cooked it just the way you like it. And now you’re going to do your part and eat it!”

He rose from his chair and picked up the bowl of chicken and carried it to Xiaoshu’s side of the table. He took the plate from her hands and with her chopsticks dropped three pieces of chicken onto her plate.

For several minutes no one spoke. Xiaoshu’s parents continued to eat, but not Xiaoshu. Instead, she stared down at the table—not at her plate but at a spot nearby, as if that spot were a window into a world that only she could see.

“Why did you do it?” Mother asked at last.

“Why did I do what?” Xiaoshu said.

“Stop eating meat. Is it because... I mean it’s not because you’ve joined Falun Gong, is it?”

“What would have given you that idea?”

Xiaoshu’s tone was sharp, but her mother noticed that Xiaoshu hadn’t really answered the question. She had offered one question in response to another, not a denial.

“Then why is it you’ve stopped eating meat?” Father asked.

“It happened one day in Wuhan a month ago. I went to the market and saw a man butchering a chicken. The sight of it made me cry in the street. Since that day I haven’t eaten one bite of meat.”

“But you’ve seen people kill chickens a hundred times, right here in this village,” Father said. “Why do you want to cry about it now?”

“Yes, that’s true. But I’d never really seen it before.”

After dinner, Xiaoshu returned to her room and her book. Her parents turned on the television. There was another report on Falun Gong. This time, on the screen there was a woman whose daughter had set herself aflame. It had all begun with the secrecy, the woman said as she wiped away her tears.

§

The next day passed in much the same way, with contention at the table and Xiaoshu standing firm in her resolve and taking no meat. Between meals, Xiaoshu spent most her time alone in her room, presumably reading the book with the strange words and the sad-eyed girl on the cover. In the afternoon, she took a long walk alone in the fields, leaving with the book tucked under her arm and returning more than two hours later with a few stray pieces of hay in her hair.

While Xiaoshu was gone, Mother slipped into her daughter’s room and rifled through her bag but found nothing but clothes. But as the woman on television had said, the defining trait of a Falun Gong initiate was secrecy, and Mother’s failure to find anything in the bag only deepened her suspicions.

That night Mother made a call to her eldest brother. Xiaoshu had lived with her uncle and his family all through her middle and high school years, and she respected him. He was a man of the world, a businessman, with a wallet fatter than any Xiaoshu would ever own. Maybe Xiaoshu believed she had grown too wise to heed the words of her poor farmer parents. But she could not refuse her uncle so easily.

“I know just how to solve your problem,” Uncle said. “It can be cleared up with a bowl of soup. Not just any soup, but the most special kind. I will come for dinner tomorrow with the ingredients you need. We can eat the meal together before I drive Xiaoshu to the train station.”

§

When Uncle arrived the next evening, he brought with him Xiaoshu’s aunt and two cousins—the boys with whom she had spent

much of her youth and whom she thought of as younger brothers. Uncle had a bag that he brought directly into the kitchen to Xiaoshu’s mother.

“What was in the bag, Uncle?” Xiaoshu asked.

“You will see soon enough,” he said. “It’s a special surprise for you. You can consider this your going-away dinner.”

The mood at dinner was festive, with many toasts back and forth among family members. Uncle took pride in his ability to out-drink everyone at a table, and he made sure that his cup was always filled with *bai jiu* a little closer to the rim than all the rest to accentuate the point. Xiaoshu ate freely from the vegetable and tofu dishes but refrained again from eating the meat.

“When did you become a nun?” Xiaoshu’s cousin teased. “The next time that we see you will you have a bald head?”

“Oh, leave her alone,” Uncle said. “We all know that Xiaoshu is a stubborn girl. She is a girl who stands by her convictions, for as long as they last. I admire her for that. I want to drink to it, in fact. Let’s make that our next toast. To Xiaoshu’s convictions—*gan bei!*”

Soon, nearly all the dishes had been eaten, and all the toasts had made Uncle boisterous and bright, like a lantern with its wick dipped in wine.

“Younger sister, bring on the soup!” he shouted.

Mother rose from the table and returned a moment later with a large bowl of soup. Steam rose from the bowl and clouded her glasses with fog.

“This is not just any soup, Xiaoshu,” Uncle said. “This is turtle soup—the soup of longevity and good health. How many times in your life have you had the chance to try it?”

“Just once before,” Xiaoshu said. “At Grandfather’s eightieth birthday party, remember?”

“Yes, of course,” Uncle said. “And Grandfather will live to see one hundred, I am sure.”

Mother ladled soup into bowls and passed them around. Everyone began to eat the soup eagerly—all except Xiaoshu, who didn’t eat it at all.

“Don’t tell me you are going to refuse the soup, too,” Father said. “Do you know how much turtle soup costs and what an honor it is for

Uncle to bring it for you? Will you bring disgrace on our family by refusing it?”

“I am terribly sorry,” Xiaoshu said, “but I simply cannot eat it.”

Mother served more soup to everyone at the table, except for Xiaoshu, whose bowl remained untouched as it turned cold. They all ate in silence. The sun had set a half-hour before, and dusk slunk into the room and mingled with the silence. Uncle filled his glass with *bai jiu* and drank it down without offering a toast.

“This is for your own good, Xiaoshu,” Uncle said as he rose abruptly. He was unsteady on his feet—something none of them had ever seen before.

Uncle walked around the table to Xiaoshu and grabbed her face with one hand and the bowl of soup with the other. He pried her mouth open with a hard clamp on her cheeks and, as she struggled beneath him, Uncle poured the broth into her mouth. Only a portion reached its target; the rest left a greasy trail down the front of her shirt to her lap. Xiaoshu swallowed and began to sob. Uncle reached for the ladle and refilled the bowl.

“Now I want you to eat it by yourself,” Uncle said.

He grabbed a spoon and forced it between her fingers. Slowly, Xiaoshu dipped the spoon into the bowl and guided it toward her mouth. Her hand was shaking, and the broth swayed back and forth over the rim of the spoon and onto the table. Only a little of the soup remained when the spoon reached her lips. She closed her eyes and put it inside and swallowed hard.

“There,” Uncle said as he returned to his chair and sat down. “You can consider her cured.”

A Book about Love

You shuffle toward an oversized armchair
With a book in hand, cozying up to a nearby crackling fire and
Sever your way into the story of this book about love.

This book about love that begins in a place
That is not unlike the very place you are at in your own life.
In a wasteland of imperfections
With untamable hair, a gawky silhouette,
Hands that can never seem to pour a glass of milk without spilling it,
A malfunctioning voice that never says what it's supposed to,
And an uncanny ability to make any situation feel awkward.

And then, right before your eyes, you witness this person,
This person who could easily be you,
Stumble their way into the welcoming arms
Of the most perfect companion imaginable, and behold them transform
Into someone who has become miraculously dexterous,
With bountiful wit pouring out of every uttered sentence,
And a vocabulary that must be linked to the Webster dictionary.

But this is the forty-seventh book you've read
That is just like this one
And you still can't seem to pour a glass of milk without spilling it.

Spring Cleaning

I
a frigid solstice
twisting my neck towards the sun
a wan daffodil

II
woman found strangled
tricked by tentacled embrace
diabolical vacuum

Just a bit more

The silken spires hang from the ceiling
and can almost touch the ground.
If only they were slightly longer,
just a bit more.

As if spiders were let loose for a year,
but could not find the strength
to continue the weaving of their thread,
just a bit more.

The glowing points are like the spiders young,
waiting to hatch, so that they can continue.
Continue to sew what their parents had started,
just a bit more.

The young ones hatch and start their work
weaving down to the ground
They know they can, so they push on
just a bit more.

Hands

Hands, wrinkled from 50 odd years of hard life and work, sat purposeless on whiter-than-white thin cotton sheets, and for the first time in their life, were still.

White skin darkened with years toiling under a hot sun, scars lacing flesh and other scars. They were so distinctive, so clear, and not the hands of any other.

A round, deep scar where a nail penetrated the skin through to the light of day—long, thin scars were thanks to countless litters of kittens who found a playmate in them. Thick scars where knives slipped and ripped—too many scars, too layered, to pinpoint just one.

These hands lay down for the last time, after working so hard, never stopping. These hands have seen it all, have graced so many, these hands have healed boo-boos, created magic, and killed men.

These hands, lain on a whiter-than-white thin cotton sheet, without purpose or hope or even life. These hands had lived a full life, made a great deal of money, gave a lot of pain and had given a lot of love.

These hands, for the first time in their life, were still.

Factory



David

David knew he was dying. He was a daily witness to the thinning of his arms, chest, stomach, legs—even his toes, fingers and pads of his hands. The few times David looked at his reflection in a mirror he saw that his mop of dusty brown hair was gone. His skin transparent, blue veins mapped his nineteen-year-old body and showed through the sparse fuzz on his white egg-shaped head.

And when the medic-in-training, the same age as David, lowered the soldier's pajama bottom so the patient could empty his bladder into a metal bed pan, David saw he had lost much of his pubic hair. It was as if every part of David's body had stopped growing, including his now limp and shriveled penis. No more morning erections; no erections anytime.

David watched and listened as the Army doctors came by for rounds in the morning. They stopped and read his chart while the patient's caretaker stood by. The doctors spoke loudly so the group of interns could hear the patient's prognosis. Loud enough for David to hear what his body had in store for him.

"The shrapnel perforated his intestines and the patient can no longer hold or pass food, and . . ." David heard the blah, blah, blah, and because his vocal chords had taken an early retirement, he responded in his newly acquired high tenor vocalization, "I'm here; I hear you; I can fucking hear you." And the professorial doctors' apologized in a superior tone as if David were a small child.

Eventually, the patient, a soldier still, won this battle and the doctors stopped using him as a chalkboard. Instead, they would pass through the ward stopping briefly to glance at his chart, initialize their approval of whatever inconsequential treatment was in order and move on without comment. And David who more and more had given up on niceties would call after them "I'm here! I'm still here!"

Weeks later, David, still here, entered a windowless room crowded with a multiplicity of wounds and illness. When the medic wheeled David into the room, the soldiers saw the wheelchair first, then the patient, slumped sideways, strapped in, an emaciated body like pipe cleaners knotted to make arms and legs. The soldiers returned their attention to magazines, stared at the ceiling, at the floor, at their

fingernails, at the backs of their hands, anywhere but at David.

A nurse entered from an office door. She wore a severely starched white uniform; her expression as sterile as the room's décor. She called a name, and David called out in high-pitched monotone: "I got to shit!"

Startled, the audience looked at David.

"I got to shit!"

They looked away.

The caretaker wheeled him from the room and raced down the corridor. David's head bobbed like a plastic doll in the back window of a Chevy.

"I got to shit!"

In a latrine, the medic untied David's blue pajama, lifted him from the chair, and lowered his skeleton to the seat.

"No, not on the seat, no it hurts. Hold me—hold me—hold me," David whimpered in a voice of someone not yet grown into puberty.

"Not so tight, it hurts. Not so tight it hurts, no, no, no."

And that night the medic woke abruptly when he heard David's bones snapping, cracking, and splintering as he held him. For the medic, a dream; the rest was real. David died.

All I Want

A response to “What Do Women Want” by Kim Addonizio

I want a cotton dress.
 I want it white and flowy,
 I want it delicate, I want to
 wear it everywhere I go.
 I want it simple and modest,
 this dress, because you already
 know my flesh, and it is
 only for you. I want to walk down
 the street past the lit-up movie theatre
 with all those fancied people
 sparkling in the moonlight,
 past the towering buildings and
 the sculptures of re-imagined
 imperfection.
 I want to walk like I belong
 with that, like a mannequin girl,
 all dressed up, with no past.
 I want that dress bad.
 I want it to cast away
 all your doubts about me,
 to show you that I have no impurities
 and have never desired another
 but you. When I find it, I'll take that dress
 from its hanger and it will become me
 and I will no longer be, or have been.
 For you, to you, I'll be a woven angel,
 who is only good, and beautiful,
 and perfect. And when I pass away,
 all you will remember of me
 is this dress.

Love Poem for Chemistry

If everything lives forever
 than we should be able to mass the past
 on a triple beam balance.

Take the half-life of nuclear fallout—you're breathing it now and when is
 the last time
 you thought about how fragile you are? You are, you are, you are
 little more than a weak human of oxygen and carbon and nitrogen.

“I love you like plutonium,” was meant to be ironic, to which you responded
 “That isn't even a planet anymore.”

I think lovers understood the nucleic heart before Rutherford turned it into science
 {If there was no mass we would not be made of anything, and how sad would
 that be for the romantics?}

I don't even like chemistry let alone understand
 the consistency of matter. No one has ever seen
 an electron, but its effects can be measured.

The Glass

My glass sat half empty before me, my fingers drawing lines through the wet rings it had left on the bar. I stared at nothing, letting the chatter from other people wash over me. A group of women were gathered around a table behind me, talking about work and co-workers and the little stresses in their lives. They complained, oh did they complain, but their complaints were about inconsequential trifles. The office was too cold, so-and-so had sent out an irritating memo, someone's cat shed all over the blouse she had planned to wear. Their troubles were nothing like my own, their reason for coming to the bar nothing like my own.

I took another swallow of my drink, put the glass down, and began to doodle in the new ring of condensation. I contemplated my glass. Half empty. Definitely not half full. No, that was for the women behind me. They had glasses that were half full. They had promising futures. I didn't.

A new voice joined the group, and there was a round of greetings and introductions. After a moment, their conversation seemed to stop. I felt a tingling on the back of my neck, a feeling of anticipation. Then the new voice said, "Jason? Jason Alecson?" She was right next to me, bent over slightly to look at my face in the dim light of the bar. Unwillingly, I glanced at her.

The woman looked vaguely familiar. Brownish hair, pushed back behind her ears, light brown eyes, and a smattering of freckles. I stared at her as she waited for me to respond. She began to look uncertain, and straightened up, her hair falling partially in front of her face. "I'm sorry, I thought..."

"Sarah!" I exclaimed, as her features shifted in my mind, younger, always partially hidden behind a wave of hair. "From around the block!"

Sarah laughed. "Is that how you think of me, still? We moved when we were fifteen!"

I reddened at her laughter, but it was dim enough in the bar that she might not have noticed. She had moved, sure, but only to the next town, and we had stayed in the same high school. We'd drifted apart, though, after graduation, gone our own ways. I wasn't sure what she'd

done. Gone on to college somewhere, I supposed. I'd gone away to university, become an architect. I'd traveled abroad; gone to France, met Martine.

Almost as if she followed my thoughts, Sarah asked, "I had heard you were married?"

There it was, the thing I was trying to forget, my reason for being here, the reason my glass was half empty. Stiffly, holding in my emotions, I said shortly, "I was."

"Oh!" I could see Sarah's embarrassment. Her cheeks flushed as she apologized. "I didn't mean... I'm sorry it didn't work out for you." Her voice was truly sympathetic; not that false sympathy that you get from strangers. Sarah and I had grown up together, been in diapers together, slept over each other's houses as kids. We'd comforted each other over breakups, offered revenge or just a shoulder to cry on. It was that kind of sympathy. It was almost more than I could bear, but I held myself together, even though I felt like I was falling to pieces.

"It wasn't like that," I said hoarsely, and it wasn't. We weren't just another divorce statistic like it seemed so many of my school buddies were now. We had loved each other; we'd been in love. Martine had been on the way home from a doctor's appointment; she was pregnant with our first child. Then the accident happened. A kid on a bicycle rode into the street. Cars swerved. Drivers slammed on the brakes. I pictured it over and over in my head, thinking of different ways Martine could have saved herself, or of ways I could have saved her, if only I had been there. I hadn't been there, though, and Martine had gotten caught in the wreck. She'd miscarried in the hospital, lingered on, comatose, for days before she finally succumbed. I struggled to banish the images from my mind, focus on the present. "Martine... she passed away," I told Sarah. "An accident." Those words, so bland, so distant, couldn't capture what had actually happened, but maybe some of it came through in my voice.

Sarah glanced behind us, at the group of women that were still talking about their daily annoyances. Then she slid onto the stool next to me, reached out and held my hand between hers. "I'm here," she said, simply. She didn't need to say more. It was as if the years that had separated us were gone; we were two teens, closer than siblings, best friends. We shared everything with each other, our triumphs and our failures, our loves and our heartaches. I realized that I had

been missing not only Martine, but the closeness we had shared. I had drifted away from all my old friends, not really made any new ones. Martine had been all that I cared about and focused on, to the exclusion of all other companionship. My co-workers had sent condolences, polite messages of sympathy, but Martine's death hadn't mattered to them. They were like the group behind us. What mattered was the cat hair, or the memo, or the irate customer.

I looked at Sarah through new eyes. She hadn't known Martine, but she knew me. She saw my pain and it did matter to her. She, perhaps, had her own pain, and I realized that it mattered to me. I squeezed her hand. "So am I," I responded, and that was enough, too. Slowly, I picked up my half full glass and took a sip.

Ebb



Writing Free Verse

Write a poem I'm told and do it in free verse
 But how is verse free when it's enslaved by dicta regarding diction
 And will be criticized for sins in syntax
 When metonyms and metaphors (which are like similes)
 Are semi-required and will be graded on cleverness.
 I may not be trite nor use clichés
 Adjectives and adverbs are disallowed
 I must find the *exact* words, employ synecdoche
 Mimic Frost or Stevens
 But not too closely.
 Verse that is free it seems to me
 Like free lunch is trussed and shackled
 Like free will is illusory, an appealing construct
 But not a reality
 So I play along.

On Writing a Poem

You sit, telling me
 What you like, or don't
 And my breath catches
 Vision blurs
 Brow sweats
 You laugh, and I wonder,
 Do you ever toil?
 Or is yours a lazy river of thought
 Meandering across the page
 With clearness of mind
 That often finds itself in the young
 The new
 The unfettered
 Imagining
 Possibilities
 Lines of metaphor so clean
 'Til I am weakened
 By the whole of it
 The guileless language
 And simplicity of form
 While I shape my verse in shadows
 Stifling hoarse cries
 Swallowing salty tears
 Fingers bent from the weight of my pen
 As smudged lines
 Awkwardly fashioned
 Give life to this poem

Desiccated

At the wake, after they had knelt before my grandmother and lowered their heads in a moment of solitary remembrance or absolute silence from their own hectic lives, after they had nodded and acknowledged other distant relatives, the ones whom you only see at events like this or know artificially from letters or photographs, they'd find their way to a corner, sip bitter or overly sweetened coffee, and wash their hands in the cold bathroom of the funeral home; after all that, they'd sometimes come over to me. I was young and dressed inappropriately, in the same little stiff white suit I'd just had my first communion in. I had never seen so many adults before, people who, as I was told, were many relatives of my grandmother and, legally, to me, though they mostly looked nothing like her or me. Their comments, when they did talk, were always spoken in the same kind of lethargic tone: "You've certainly grown up" and "I haven't been back here in so long."

For most of them, I was told by my mother, this was only the second or third time meeting me, the first time being when I had arrived in this country, adopted at the age of five, seemingly plucked from some place most of the people present knew little about or could locate swiftly on a map, but would nod and say, "Yes, I've heard their economy is doing much better." Or, "Isn't that where we fought a war?" "Didn't so-and-so visit there last year?"

Now, my adoptive mother said I was going to hell. She said, "Little boys who don't cry at their grandmother's funeral are bad. Don't you feel anything for your grandmother!" My uncle, the one who had married in and had taught me how to fish one summer when my adoptive parents were working things out, took my mother aside—it was her mother after all. The room was crowded and I could barely see my grandmother's open coffin. I thought she wouldn't want all these people to make such a fuss over her. When my grandmother had been alive, she'd often tell me how crowds scared her, how, even though it was only a few seconds, she had lost my mother's hand amidst a crowd when they were both very young and unaware.

My uncle, all six-feet three inches of him, came back to explain her behavior, how she didn't have control over her emotions, and, hence, her words. As he spoke, my mother looked at me with her large

eyes and apologized wordlessly in only a way a mother can. But I'd seen that look before, had it filed away in my mind from another time when someone I knew had made her cry. Then, as she tried to come over, he put a hand to silently tell her to stop, as if her next step might be the end for us both. Despite his size, my uncle was calm and kind and, though he and my aunt didn't have children of their own, he was surprisingly communicative to an eight year old. As he knelt down, so he could look me in the eyes when he spoke, his knees creaked some. He was older for sure, but in all the years I'd known him, spent time with him, talked with him, I'd never really seen how old he was. I don't remember everything he said that day, and his words, though comforting and explanatory, proved unmemorable.

It would be a few years later when the bullying became bad, when they'd hit me harder, craving some form of moistness around my eyes to signal the job complete. But no matter how hard I'd wanted to cry, for the deluge of past emotions to emerge, to give them what they wanted, to release me of something that needed releasing, it would not come. And so they'd hit harder, believing my inability to produce tears was an affront.

After school, I'd shut myself off from the world and sit in my closet, recalling the fairytales I'd internalized when I was younger. I thought the realness of my situation—my heart, that I felt beating in my chest and ears, my lungs, that I felt burn after I had run as fast and as far as I could, my nose, when it bled unexpectedly, its brightness almost shocking, could be alleviated, if only I could cry.

I thought of Pinocchio, and I thought if only I could transform back, become wood, then it wouldn't hurt as much: a creak, a piece of bark, maybe just a snap. Then, perhaps, they'd get what they'd wanted: sap. Or, they'd at least have proof of their destruction: a shard, a splinter, a scintilla. And that's what everyone wanted: proof. It's why so many had come to my grandmother's funeral years ago. Many more years later, as an adult, after many, many tests, did the doctor tell me why I couldn't cry. And even though there was a medical reason—a term even—for me, at least, it still suggested that I wasn't real.

Roses for Elizabeth Rose



Protean Portraits

A pane of slick silver ice,
With a portrait to fill.
Empty from dried paints,
Unlike the Mona Lisa,
Just full of light,
In wait of a new rose,
Eyes to polish faces,
The oasis where vanity embraces egos.
Nothing of history to record.
A new line of text,
A line of wash,
Oh wait! More text.
The lipstick,
Fingers pick,
The hand brush,
Such a rush,
Whoops! Gone.
Remains a pane of sun polished ice,
A Portrait in wait of a new state.

Judgment Day

Stiffly here I lay,
 For the world to see,
 Bare flesh and skin,
 Crystal colored bones,
 And deep red bones.

Into my open parts they stare,
 The whispers cut so deep,
 I bleed and I bleed,
 My organs spill out,
 They spill onto the table.

For they judge me,
 They judge and take all,
 All of the ugliness,
 Their eyes pierce my soul,
 To live in judgment, please take me whole.

I have nothing left,
 Nothing left to give,
 Bury me six feet under,
 Where at least the insects,
 The insects will love me.

Eye of the Tiger

His dynasty began in ancient days,
 His kingdom shared with emperors of men.
 Ferocity and prowess won their praise;
 His majesty was wealth enough back then.

His presence in their art displayed his grace,
 His power painted in with every stroke.
 The same dark lines that traced his noble face
 Came streaking down his honey amber cloak.

But passing years have seen his colors fade;
 The light behind his golden gaze now dims.
 His soldiers have retreated to the shade
 Of crippled walls composed of bamboo stems.

Today man takes the tiger's stripes as prize,
 Forsaking treasure found behind his eyes.

Hotel California

The first time I heard “Hotel California” by The Eagles was on the last day that I used. I guess my parents had found out about my habit a few months back but had not yet realized the severity of it; although anyone who has experimented with heroin will tell you that the drug will eviscerate your life like dynamite to an abandoned building if you let it. It’s hard not to let it. However, I kept my parents in the dark about many aspects of my life, so it wasn’t until they were forced to bail me out of jail for the second time in two months that they made the decision to take me to Ironwood Health and Rehabilitation Center in South Bend, Indiana. An hour before my parents and I left for the airport I was sitting on the floor of my room holding a syringe packed with euphoria. After applying a tight tourniquet to my left bicep using an old leather belt, I slowly pierced my skin with the point of the needle, which began making its way to the same blue vein that it had targeted for almost three years now. When I saw waves of red shoot into the syringe, I knew it was ready, and without hesitating, pressed the pump down until it wouldn’t go any further.

I was still high when my parents came to pick me up from my dingy, sparse, dump of an apartment where I had been living for the past two years. The place itself is located in a rough part of Baltimore City, next to an old liquor store which I frequent. Violence is not a problem if you are a local, but there are a few residents who take to unfortunate wanderers like hyenas to a water buffalo. Being white, I was a bit unnerved when I first moved in, however it was only a matter of time before I realized ethnicity wasn’t an issue, as all of my neighbors, myself included, were in pretty similar situations. The best part: I only had to pay \$300 a month. For what it’s worth, my home isn’t the worst that I have seen. I sold most of my things to support my habit, so the place is excruciatingly bare. The PlayStation was the first to go, followed by other unnecessary items: television, telephone, VCR, laptop, most of my furniture, and almost all of my clothes. In the only bedroom sat a lumpy, old, stained with god-knows-what mattress that served as a bed. At least I had a bed. I never really had many material possessions. I’ve only had one job: a pizza delivery man when I was eighteen, so I never really had much money until I started

receiving welfare checks about a year ago. I like to think that all of the rich snobs I pass on the street are giving me \$500 a month to spend on food and smack. It’s basically true, and it feels fucking good.

My parents didn’t want to get out of their car so instead they called my cellphone to let me know they were here. Even though my ringer was set to “loud” it still took two missed calls for me to feel conscious enough to answer. I sat up, groggily, and spoke into the receiver like a drunk trying to order pizza. After hanging up, I threw a jacket on, and made my way down to the ground floor of the apartment complex. I knew my parents could tell that I was high from the moment I got in the car; they didn’t say a word to me. “Hotel California” came on as we were driving along the beltway. Fitting. In my twenty-five years I had never really taken the time to listen to the lyrics, but since my Dad wasn’t changing the station, and the car was silent otherwise, I figured, “Why not?”

Being an addict and going through withdrawal teaches you a lot about yourself. You discover the people who really care about you, the ones who actually try to help get you out of the hellish pit of despair you got yourself into. And you learn that the only person who you truly care about is yourself. I have seen a lot and have done worse in my years as an addict. I built up a tough exterior and a cold, heartless interior. I have stolen money, purses, clothes, televisions, car radios, and I even robbed an elderly woman of her groceries to keep from going my fourth night in a row without food. Heroin turned me into a malicious human being, with complete disregard for everything besides the next fix. So when I began to really listen to the words coming out of Don Henley’s mouth on that glorious track, the fact that I began to cry surprised me. To be honest, it scared the shit out of me. I couldn’t remember the last time I cried. For so long I had felt incapable of the slightest emotion. It was probably the heroin that was making me do it, but it was as if I had no choice but to cry; to let my fleeting emotions finally take over and wreak havoc on the heartless soul inside of me. “Hotel California” left such a profound image in my head of an innocent young man going through what had happened to me. Being pressured into trying heroin and actually loving it, shooting up twice in that same weekend, and then casually making a point to shoot some more smack for the next few weekends, slowly degrading in health and character until reaching full-blown addiction. The song

is right: “You can checkout any time you like, but you can never leave.” I realized that what I was about to go through at rehab would likely be unimaginable, and that there was a high chance of it being all in vain. I thought about my parents and what they would think if I couldn’t get it right this time. Would they even care? This would probably be the last straw. “It’s certainly the last straw for me,” I thought. “I can leave this life that I have grown to know and love. And it’s going to be scary and uncertain and difficult. But I know for sure that I’ll love it, and I will love myself for it. And if I don’t make it, if I can’t promise myself that I will be clean from this point on, if I ever touch another syringe again, I’m going to buy a gun, load it right there in the store, put the barrel in my mouth, and pull the trigger without hesitating.”

Attic

At the top of the house
A window lets the sun shine through
The dust dances in the puddles of light
While even the shadows are pushed away

A window lets the sun shine through
Into the attic filled with cardboard boxes
While even the shadows are pushed away
And an old record player sits silently

Into the attic filled with cardboard boxes
The mice scuttle back to their homes in the wall
And an old record player sits silently
As though time had forgotten it

The mice scuttle back to their homes in the wall
The dust dances in puddles of light
As though time had forgotten it
At the top of the house

The Loss

What happens when we die?
She asks the missile silo
What is the meaning of life?
She stands at the shopping mall crying
So sick of empty explanations,
Synthetic fibers, and sprawling pavement

It seems like we think we're at war with the Earth
Our acts leaving craters, far too many to absorb
In dreams I see an old tree's roots buckle the sidewalk
Cracks full of weeds separating the asphalt

The Perfect Companions



The Other Woman

People always write stories about what it's like to be cheated on. To be betrayed, cast aside, heartbroken. But they never tell you the story of what it's like to be the other woman. We are always painted as the bad people...the home-wreckers, the skanks. But what if what she has was mine first? What if it was all the perfect crime of passion, two lovers destined for one another...and she's the other woman, not me. She came into my happy home and took what was mine. Now I am wrong for taking back what is mine.

I still remember the day exactly. A new place, a new start...Hell, even a new us. We weren't together...actually, we had broken up five months prior after dating for a year. But exes can still be friends, right? Then again, we started off as just friends, too, I helped you unpack in your apartment, being a good friend. When unpacking in your room, I found all the embarrassing things you tried to hide from me, even when we had first dated.

We laughed and reminisced about everything and, suddenly, we both stopped and looked at one another. Funny how a single glance can make your heart stop, make your blood run cold, make your skin tingle. How with just one look, you can make the decision to do something that you know is wrong...but you do it anyway and call it the 'heat of the moment'.

You made the choice to kiss me, and I made the choice to kiss you back. It takes two tongues to tango...or something like that. Storybooks and morals would say that we should have stopped there, apologized, walked away, pretended it never happened...and maybe we should have. But there are a lot of 'should've, would've, could've's' in this life.

This went on for a month or two, and after one exceptionally sensual encounter, you got quiet...eerily so. The kind of quiet that holds a thousand questions and no hope for an answer, the kind of quiet where you can practically hear the blood rushing in your ears and draining from your face. Suddenly you asked, "How do you tell someone you're dating that you don't love them anymore?"

Three weeks passed and it was New Years Eve. 12:12 AM, January 1, 2012. Your name pops up on my phone screen and you tell me you

have left her: the other woman. You broke up with her not fifteen minutes ago and you are spewing confessions and promises of your undying love for me. Like a loyal dog, you always return. By 2:00 p.m., January 1, 2012, I was your girlfriend once more.

I have never loved you more than I did in those few months that passed, you were my everything. We shared every aspect of ourselves with each other, and loved each other in our entirety. We had never been happier. We were that couple. The power couple. The ones that would always last and I honestly saw us as forever.

But then came some time around November, we got into a little spat...nothing major, but emotions ran a bit high. I didn't think much of it, couples have disagreements. I do not believe in going to bed mad, so I called you and said that regardless of what had happened, I still loved you. We sat in silence for a moment. A moment too long, I suppose. In a rush, you said you think it'd be better if we just went back to being friends. I was in distress, it couldn't be...we were so perfect together, why would you leave?

We went back and forth but you kept telling me to stop making this hard...that it was over. I had never cried so hard in my life than I did on that night. Uncontrollable sobs escaped without my consent...my body collapsed on itself. I was left broken...only a shell of me remained. Heartbreak has never had such a delicious bite to it.

You had tore my heart out, ripped it to shreds, and threw it back in my face...I was shattered and you left me to pick up the pieces. I felt idiotic for loving you. For giving you everything one person could possibly give another and having it all for nothing. But mostly, I felt stupid for allowing you in completely, seeing me and every raw aspect there is to me.

People never tell you about what it's like being the other woman. We are just like all other women. We are unethical lovers. We derive more from passion than thoughts. And just like all other women, we have heartache too.

Pygmalion and Galatea

Mama showed him her favorite painting
At the fancy museum
And it has spoiled him of girls ever since

He's taken to fashioning figures out of clay
Scraped from the creek bed behind the barn
Twisted, grotesque forms
With breasts the size of cantaloupes
While I must sweep away the dust
He leaves behind
On the wooden back porch steps
And scour the pots and pans after dinner
And shell peas until my fingers ache

Sometimes, in the middle of the night,
I hear him weeping and wonder
Why does a mother give a son so much
That he longs no more for this life
But for some elusive love
Beyond his reach?

And what am I, a ghost
Made to swelter in the heat
That bubbles up from the macadam
'Til eyes hurt from squinting
All but unseen,
Even to myself?

Summer

Bumping over cobblestones
Wobbling down the rocky lane
Sun kissing neck and nose

Pumping the pedals
Knees working: up, down, up, down
Taking another lap around

Bandage peeling off her knee
Pigtails flying behind her
Mouth wide open in a laugh

Dust sticks to sweaty skin
Thoughts of popsicles tempt
They do not slow her down

Last time she flew past the house
A waving towel signaled
The end of her ride

Wash dust off trusty bike
Take a drink from the hose
Slide garage door closed

Supper time, bath time
Tucking in, windows wide
Moon resting on velvet sky

Contributors' Notes

spring 2013

Sarah Bildner is a student at Howard Community College working towards an English degree.

Garrett Blom is a student at Howard Community College.

Ian Brown is typically a quiet person, but when he does talk, he is a kind and humerus person. Although he usually is at home on his computer, he also greatly enjoys the outdoors.

Lindsey Burd is an accelerated nursing student at Howard Community College. When she is not caring for patients or studying for her next exam, Lindsey enjoys photography, creative writing, cooking, and connecting with nature. Her motivation for her writing and photography comes from an appreciation for the beauty that is all around us but so often overlooked.

Cynthia Chaves is a part-time student at HCC and will be graduating this spring with Associates in English Literature. Cynthia has a passion for literature and has been writing poems and prose since 2007. Cynthia's goals for pursuing a literature career include obtaining a bachelor's degree from a 4-year institute by 2015 and publishing her first novel by 2020.

Katy Day is an English major at Howard Community College. She is an avid reader and has recently taken up writing. She believes that the possibilities are endless so long as she has a pen in her hand. She hopes to transfer to the University of Maryland in the fall and dreams to, someday, publish a book.

Sam Dixon is a general studies student at Howard Community College with an emphasis in philosophy and religion. He is interested in the emergence of planetary consciousness and enjoys playing music.

Marcel Fanara is a teacher in the ELC at Howard Community College. She has, in recent years, enjoyed wonderful opportunities to travel, explore various nooks and crannies of the world, and write. These experiences continue to inspire her even as she rediscovers her home state of Maryland.

Kyle Frost has been writing poetry and prose since she was 14, when she had a poem published in her high school literary magazine. Since then, she has worked as a freelance editor on several books. Kyle is currently in her last semester at Howard Community College, majoring in Business Administration.

Marilu Garcia-Yellin is a Howard County resident and graduate of Howard Community College and the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) where she majored in English. Marilu is an avid writer, photographer, and amateur astronomer.

Hebah Haddad is a Howard Community College graduate and also works as an Arabic tutor at Howard Community College. He also works as a Physical Therapy Aide. Hebah is working on his BA in Psychology and then plans to get his DPT to become a Physical Therapist. He loves all forms of art, including his hobby, photography.

A 2011 graduate of Howard Community College, **Peggie Hale** is completing a BA in English at UMUC and hopes to continue as a graduate student at Ohio University. Previously published in *The Muse* and *The Tidal Basin Review*, she enjoys writing about the interesting aspects of average life.

Pattie Holy-Ilenda has lived and taught in Howard County for over twenty years. Currently, she spends her days as a G/T Resource Teacher at Elkridge Landing Middle. She loves her job and her students. In her free time, she writes, dotes on her cats, or plays music with her husband, Pete Ilenda, also a teacher in the Howard County Public School System.

Ethan Jollie is a 21-year-old photographer and student at Howard Community College. He has been shooting since he was fifteen and hopes to graduate next semester and move to Texas to continue his education.

Jim Karantonis served as a medic and a psychiatric technician at a stateside Army hospital during the Vietnam War. Following the war, he obtained his graduate degree from Howard University in African American History. After a career in civil rights work, he retired and now spends his time writing and taking courses at Howard Community College. He wants to become a better writer so as to tell the stories of those unforgettable soldiers he served on the psych wards. He is married to his muse, Mary Lou Hobbs.

Mark L. Keats earned his MFA from the University of Maryland. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Clockhouse Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The Dying Goose*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Subliminal Interiors*, among others. He currently teaches at Montgomery and Howard Community College.

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

Kaaren Kozlow has gone back to college to try to figure out what she'd like to be when she grows up. Her two sons are attending university, and her goal is to have her degree (in she knows not what) by June of 2015, when her youngest graduates.

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

Ashlee Lester is a photography major at Howard Community College. Between her studies, she enjoys exploring new scenes and techniques with her camera.

William Lowe teaches writing and literature at Howard Community College. He lived and taught in China for two years, and the story "Turtle Soup" is based on people and places encountered during those two years. Some details in the story are fictionalized, but the frayed portrait of Chairman Mao hanging over the television is real.

Emma Kate Marmen is a sophomore at Howard Community College and majoring in Journalism. Creativity plays a very important role in her life. For her, life doesn't make sense without art.

Mary Newman is a 21 year old from Ohio. She works as a server, and enjoys writing as a hobby.

Ajah Perry is from Lake Arbor, Prince George's county, Maryland. She is an enthusiastic student at Howard Community College, currently studying media arts. With hopes of pursuing a future career in song writing, Ajah's writing style is aimed at creating a universal feel amongst her readers/listeners and creating a strong feel of reality from a different perspective. Ajah holds a strong passion for reaching out to others through her words and hopes to soon incorporate this skill into music production for all to hear.

Erin Pontius is a general studies major at Howard Community College. She graduated a year early from River Hill High School. One day, she hopes to major in psychology and become a therapist. Her interest in writing began at a young age, and now she can barely bear to put down her pen.

Allysha Romero is an enthusiastic young writer at Howard Community College. In her creative writing, she draws inspiration from her Native American heritage, focusing on the beliefs and values held by the aboriginal people. She hopes to transfer to the University of North Carolina: Chapel Hill next spring as a Communications major to someday become a journalist.

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

Hal Sigall is a social psychologist and Professor Emeritus at the University of Maryland, College Park and a long time resident of Columbia, Maryland.

Mallory Smith is a junior at Howard High School. She sits on the Board of Directors of the Howard County Poetry and Literature Society. She has attended the Iowa Young Writers' Studio, Sewanee Young Writer's Conference, and the Pomfret School's Broken Bridge Summer Writers' Workshop.

Mollie Rose Trail is a student at Howard Community College and one day hopes to publish the novels she's been writing since she was thirteen. Words are more than the letters that spell them but contain all the beauty and ugliness of life. Writing is my art, what's yours?

Rachel Tuchman is a student at Howard Community College.

Patricia Jakovich VanAmburg teaches literature and creative writing at Howard Community College.

Lauren Visnic graduated from Howard Community College in 2012 and currently attends Towson University as an English major. She enjoys reading historical fiction and writing form poetry, such as sonnets.

Sarah Weithoner is a photography major currently in her third semester at Howard Community College. Sarah favors black and white film photography and the creativity it allows when printing her photographs in the darkroom. Fashion photography and portraiture are her primary focuses.

Lisa A. Wilde is the Director of Theatre at Howard Community College and the Resident Dramaturg for Rep Stage. She holds a doctorate in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism from the Yale School of Drama. She has worked at Center Stage and for Young Playwrights Inc. and serves as the Chair of Dramaturgy for the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Region Two.

Takeria Woodrum is a nursing major at Howard Community College. She is a full time student, employee, and mother. Not only does she enjoy the medical field, but she loves creative writing, dancing, and reading. Her favorite genre is poetry, but she is currently working on a book.

Submit to issue.12

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Email submissions to
themuse@howardcc.edu

See *www.howardcc.edu/themuse* for more information.

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