

# The Muse

*The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College*

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## The Birth of Venus

Goddess emerging by depths of sea

A pearl upon its shell,

immaculate beauty.

Ivory skin,

golden siren locks,

blooming, flowers by the wind

and by breath of angels in embrace.

Goddess greeted with earthly treasures

adorned in silk,

divine beauty.

Cloaked in mystery,

passion encased in marble,

knowingly gazing upon the world,

concealing,

a power held within.

## Night Song

3 a.m.

Moonbeams,

elongated

on the mahogany floor.

Dreams linger:

a red macaw

taking flight

from unnamed trees.

Layers of scarlet feathers

opening, revealing

a majestic wingspan.

A feeling of oneness

as arms stretch out across the bed.

The crimson aviator

whispers,

“Wake, write the unwritten.”

## Piggy Blaze

So, I had to attend my co-worker's baby shower on whatever the hell day it was. It was definitely like a Saturday or something, cause I vaguely remember it wasting my entire day. Instead of sleeping in, I had to commute to Christy's Baby Shower! Guest starring her fetus that I had to buy an overpriced pair of "onesies" for.

But that's not the point.

Anyways, I decided to wake up 15 minutes before I had to leave. I dumped my greasy hair under the sink faucet, shoved some toothpaste in my mouth, and put on a pair of my "nice" jeans (conveniently laying on the floor in front of my bed). As I was eating my half-toasted Eggo waffle, I pulled up Christy's invitation conveniently located in my e-mail's junk folder on my iPhone.

I know you're all probably thinking, "Why are you going if you dread it so much?"

Well ya see, I wanted a raise and my boss was gonna be there. She's always bitching about my absence at certain "events," so I decided to go.

Now that I think about it, I'm not sure if I was going for the raise or to get my boss to shut the hell up.

But not the point.

Anyways, I briefly glanced at Christy's address and typed it into MapQuest. After the directions printed out, I climbed into my 1995 Toyota Camry and embarked on this soon-to-be wretched journey.

Now, I can't quite remember the roads or exits in which I wrongly took. But long story short: at the time, I thought I had arrived at Christy's house. I was over two hours late, so in the meantime I was trying to brainstorm possible excuses to explain my late arrival. I decided this was Christy's fault since she claimed she only lived 20 minutes away from my house.

Anyways, I'm driving down this like dirt driveway. In the middle of nowhere. Pebbles pelleted my car. And after, I kid you not, a good 5 minutes of this shit, I reached the house. You would think there would be some pastel pink and blue balloons, maybe a 10-foot tall inflatable rubber duck, but there was nothing.

I pulled up to the house and realized I was the only car there. The house was pretty run down actually. A little bigger than a trailer home, with a window

or six boarded up. I stepped out of my car, grabbed the gift bag, and walked up to the door. As I forced the screen door open, the rusted handle practically unhinged in my hand. I knocked for like 20 minutes, and just assumed they all went out for lunch at like Red Robin or something.

I decided to leave the gift bag on the doorstep and scribble a note to go along with it. It pretty much said something along the lines of, "Hey Christy. Nice place you have. Sorry I came so late and missed your shower. I REALLY wish I could have been there."

And sorry this note was full of shit.

"I hope you like the gift. Shoot me a text when you get this!"

I proceeded to leave my cell number at the bottom, after signing it off with my sloppy "Michael" signature. Before I left, I decided to walk around back to take a piss. It was a long-ass car ride. Don't act like you wouldn't do the same thing. I reached the backyard, whipped out my um "albino cave dweller" and Jesus Christ...

There was I shit-you-not a nearly dead fucking pig right before my own three eyes.

Poor thing. She had stitches in her stomach, perhaps she just had a C-section like the one Christy was about to have.

I zipped up my jeans, got down on one knee, and looked closely at this pig. She must've died pretty recently. Images of bacon paired with Eggo waffles danced in my head, but I shook away those thoughts immediately. As I looked closer, this pig was BREATHING. Barely breathing, but still breathing.

I questioned my sanity at that point. Even my faith.

Anyways, I didn't have much pig experience. I owned a dog, so I figured it's like the same thing. She wasn't too big, I could pick her up with no problem. I decided she needed a name, so I named her Piggy Sue. I pulled out of the driveway, embarked on the dirt path, and left. Poor Piggy Sue.

So, to cut to the chase a little: an hour into my journey my cellphone starts ringing.

God damnit! Christy, I'm pretty sure the note said, "Shoot me a text" but okay. I answered it.

Christy's voice seemed a lot deeper, and she sounded like Liam what's-his-face from Taken. So this man, I named Heraldo pretty much said that I needed to immediately return Piggy Sue to the location in which I "stole" her from. Heraldo hung up after calling me rather vulgar names, and I couldn't even mention to him that there was no way in hell I'm turning this car around. He told me the pig had "very special things inside of her," and he needed her back immediately.

It then dawned on me that Piggy Sue was a fucking drug pig. And I just stole her from a very angry Heraldo. With this newly learned information, I realized I had to trash my cellphone. He could like track it or some shit. I rolled down the windows, chucked the iPhone onto the road, and continued driving.

So, I'm like 30 minutes away from home and this black low-rider hits me from behind. As I'm about to pull over to exchange licenses and insurance information, the bastard hit me again. I looked in my rear view mirror and noticed the driver was a very stern-looking Latino man. Thank God I didn't pull over. This man, who must be Heraldo, would have shot my brains out for stealing his drug pig in my backseat.

I changed a couple lanes, using my turn signal to let Heraldo know right where I was going. (Don't worry, it'll make sense soon.) We dodged in and out of cars, until finally I approached a traffic light. The light was one of those "yield on green" lights, with the option of going straight, of course. I put on my left signal, sped through the intersection, and went straight. By the time Heraldo realized I wasn't turning left, he already made his fatal turn, head on into traffic.

I drove away with my heart beating through my chest and Piggy Sue oinking in the backseat. At the time, I was concerned for the other driver Heraldo's car struck, but within 10 minutes the radio notified me of accidents in the area. The reporter mentioned that there was one fatality....an unidentified man in a low-rider. She mentioned that the man in the Hummer who hit his car was uninjured. But the road would be closed off for the rest of the day. The drive home with Piggy Sue was sort of a blur to me, as I was still trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Long story short, I found an organization that rescues drug smuggling livestock. After undergoing an intense surgery to remove pounds of marijuana from Piggy Sue's system, I decided to legally adopt her. I changed her name

to "Piggy Blaze." I mean, it would only be appropriate. Piggy Blaze now lives in the comfort of my home, eating pizza rolls and Eggo waffles—without the bacon of course. By the way, in case any of you were wondering, I never got a raise, and my boss still won't shut the hell up about my absences at events.

## Silent Things

Vanilla blossom trees,  
A bed of pink and white petals;  
The sweet scent.  
Fall asleep beneath the branches.

The gnarled oak  
Reaching into the sky  
Holding hands with the sunset;  
Orange sherbet and salmon pink.  
The pink clouds fading into a purple bruise,  
An open highway, gasoline rainbows,  
Reach out into the wind  
And pretend we're flying.

The moonlit walk,  
The air heavy with summer and nighttime,  
Fireflies lovingly greet the dark.  
We can run forever.

The grass and earth and pine needles;  
Breathe it in.  
Hide and seek, the night never ends.  
The perfect secret of remaining hidden.

The embers of last night's campfire,  
Smoky smell in your sleepy hair,  
The sun hasn't yet risen;  
Golden tendrils begin to enfold us.

Early morning walks,  
Barefoot on the dirt path  
Dip your toes in the water,  
Waves gently stroke the shore.

The smell of a burgeoning storm,  
The skies weep,  
The pond dances with the tall grasses.  
Fall asleep in the screened in porch  
to the sound of rainfall.

Cotton candy clouds and bursting blue skies,  
The orange sun paints a picture on the ocean's waves.  
Sitting in the sand and listening for  
The ancient magic of healing.

Bushels of dried thistle,  
Pressed flowers in an old notebook,  
The scent of cloves, lavender and thyme,  
A summer breeze, close your eyes,  
Leap barefoot through the tall grasses.

The rush of the wind through my hair  
As I fly down the hill on my bike  
To my house at the end of the cul de sac.  
The sun setting, a chill in the air  
But don't worry; autumn isn't here yet.

Sunlight through a dusty pane of glass,  
A greenhouse bursting with scents,  
Sultry heat beckoning you to the water.  
Walk around the back and whisper  
a greeting to the old chicken.  
Sunrise always knows when to arrive.

## Cheesecake

Candice McLachlan sits on the floor of her bedroom, surrounded by her staff of stuffed-animal nurses. She shakes a curly red hair out of her eyes and wipes her freckled brow with Nurse Teddy's fuzzy arm. "Scalpel," she requests of Nurse Giraffe. A silky stuffed bunny rabbit lay on the operation table: a rectangle of sunlight cast from the window to the pink carpet. Candice's unruly red curls give her shadow a menacing shape when she silhouettes the sunset, then jabs the blade of her safety scissors into the rabbit's chest. She slices a fresh incision in the torso, tufts of cotton stuffing escaping the stomach. Doctor Candice, not taking her eyes off the patient, grabs a sweaty fistful of jelly beans from a bag guarded by Nurse Penguin. Her chubby fingers perform with expert precision as she inserts the candies one by one into the rabbit's body. "Tape," she commands Nurse Giraffe, satisfied with her work. A sharp knock on the operation room door interrupts Candice's concentration and sends the scotch tape out of hand and onto the floor, a loose ribbon of it sticking to the carpet. The bedroom door squeaks open and a yellow-haired, painted-faced woman pokes her head inside.

"Hey hon, playing doctor again?" Her mother coos in a voice as sweet as the wine in her glass. Mrs. McLachlan has grown-up doctors to thank for almost every inch of the body she now leans against the doorframe. With her bleached hair and freckle-free lasered skin, the resemblance between this woman and her daughter is virtually undetectable.

"I'm getting Bunny ready for the first day of school tomorrow." Candice's voice is scratchy and her tone is flat; the anesthetic will be wearing off soon and she must finish the procedure. She scoots her wide body over enough to hide the bag of jelly beans from her mother's sight.

"Isn't second grade just a tad bit old to be taking Bunny to school, hon? Won't your schoolmates tease you?" Candice's sky-blue eyes turn stormy and her head spins sharply around.

"Why should they tease me?" She asks with as much indignation as her seven-year-old larynx allows.

Mrs. McLachlan's mascaraed eyes gaze at her own new magenta manicure for a moment, then at the blue checkered dress laid out on Candice's bedspread before she realizes her daughter had said something.

"Oh, no, hon, they shouldn't. I just don't want you getting any, well, undesired attention, is all." She pauses to take a sip of cheap red wine. "Does your dress fit you alright? I let out a couple seams 'round the middle."

The next morning, Candice walks the school hallway with a twinkle in her eye and a stuffed bunny in her arms. When nobody is looking, she can easily slide a hand into the rabbit's chest cavity and retrieve a handful of jelly beans, enough to satiate her until lunch time. Chewing happily, Candice hums to her herself and rounds a corner, only to be met head-on by a taller, blonder, skinnier schoolmate.

"Hey, Cheesecake! Watch where you're going!" To Candice, it seemed as though this girl had gotten entirely too tan over the summer.

"Hi Tory," mumbles Candice through a mouthful of candy.

"Nice dress, Cheesecake." Tory eyes her up and down. "Isn't it the same one you wore on First Day last year? Only... bigger?" She laughs in a false soprano.

"I grew," Candice mutters to her scuffed shoes.

"Yeah you did, Cheesecake. I grew too, into a fourth grader. My class has a hamster to take care of, and I'm allowed to wear nail polish now." Tory waves her skinny, magenta fingers in Candice's speckled face. "What are you eating?"

Candice halts her chewing immediately, feeling caught. Tory doesn't wait for an answer, but yanks the stuffed bunny violently from her arms, sending a stream of jelly beans into the air.

Candice lets out a scream as her precious candies fly out of her grasp, and all the students in the hallway stop and turn to stare at her, only to be rained on by falling jelly beans. They duck and cover their heads from the sugary hail storm, gawking at Candice who stands at the center of the candy carnage, her bunny rabbit's stuffing strewn unceremoniously across the floor, and at Tory, who is laughing uncontrollably and pointing a magenta fingernail at Candice's reddening face.

"No wonder you grew so much, Cheesecake!"

The thunder in Candice's eyes returns, and a new type of hunger growls in her stomach. Her teeth snap around the bony finger before her, and a metallic

taste blends with the jelly beans still in her mouth. There are screams, but Candice doesn't hear them. She calmly crouches down to pick up the jelly beans, which now have red freckles that look similar to hers. One by one she drops them into the pocket of her old blue checkered dress with new red stripes, humming to herself until adult hands pick her up and guide her into the Principal's Office.

Immediate suspension means Candice gets to go home early today. While waiting for Mrs. McLachlan to pick up her problem-child, the school secretary excused herself from her desk to use the restroom, and Candice seizes this opportune moment. It's recess time and all the teachers and students are outside. She sticks her head into the abandoned hallway, checks both ways, then makes a bee-line for the fourth grade classroom.

Sitting on the window sill, the envied class hamster snoozes innocently in his cage. Candice crosses the room to the window and listens to the sound of her schoolmates on the playground, all of them enjoying their recess except for her and Tory, who was no doubt still in the nurse's office, or better yet, the hospital. Candice fantasizes for a minute about the nurse telling Tory her finger is not worth saving and must be amputated, maybe even the entire hand for good measure. She smiles to herself, then at the fourth grade hamster. With one hand she tenderly scoops the snoring fuzzball into her dress pocket. "My name," she whispers to him, "isn't Cheesecake." and walks quickly back to the Principal's Office to wait for her mother.

The surgical team is in position. Nurse Giraffe is on the right with safety scissors, Nurse Teddy on the left with the scotch tape, and Nurse Penguin is equipped with the blood-splattered jelly beans that had been salvaged from the crime scene. Doctor Candice has just enough sunlight left to perform another outstanding surgery. She reaches into her blue checkered dress pocket and places her new patient on the operating table, then holds out her hand to Nurse Giraffe.

"Scalpel."

## Suspicion

lies

hidden in

layers of lost details

until all that is left

is nothing

but a blue gray blur,

throaty bile,

bees



## they never said 'she' but it winds into the binary

Because when they claim gender inclusive,

and your tired long-winded mind stops and breathes  
cracks into the fissures of a weary, binary reduced soul.  
(Finally.)

And yet, there lies a gap  
of age, orientation, allowance  
slips of the tongue riddled with apology  
amidst the supposed like-minded,  
coals lodge in your throat.  
(No.)

You swallow ash  
choking on 'it's fine'  
long after the burn.  
(I'm not.)

## New Beginnings



## Watercooler Confessions

We were already idling by the water cooler when Jeffrey finally joined us. Kathy always kept him late after the weekly progress meetings. Bob was on his third compulsive paper cup of water, while Jose seemed a second or two away from falling asleep.

“Alright, Dick, you’ve been sitting on this all morning. Gimme something to get me through the rest of this Monday. Kathy has been riding my—”

Bob snorted out a laugh. “Case of the Monday’s, amirite?”

I rolled my eyes. The awkward silence that followed almost threw off the momentum of my story. Almost. “No, this one is ah... it’s good.” With Bob already having interrupted Jeffrey’s bitching about Kathy, I could keep it moving.

Jose blinked his eyes open at me. “Yeah, but you always say that. And it’s always about Gale.”

“Gale? Who’s Gale?” Jeffrey narrowed his eyes at me.

“I’ll get to that in a second, jeez.” I couldn’t help an anticipatory pause as I brought my own cup of water to my lips for a long sip. Putting the cup down, I jumped right into the story.

“So I went to Stanford Grill Saturday for Susan’s birthday. She’d invited me back before Gale and I split. So I was going to miss it, but she called and insisted. You’d think she’d have taken the divorce like a normal person and cut ties.” I glanced down to watch the rest of the water swirl in my cup.

“So I go,” I said, “and you can guess who was there.”

Bob’s grin had too many teeth. “Gale!”

Jose nodded sagely as Jeffrey blinked owlshly. “Yeah, but who’s Gale?”

“Richard’s ex-wife. C’mon, pay attention,” Jose told him then nodded for me to continue. He seemed more interested this time around.

“She was in town for something or other,” I go on. “Susan’s birthday, maybe. I meet them there after they already have a table. And now, I’m surrounded by three women, an ex-wife, an ex-sister-in-law, and her friend. Gale’s wine glass is already empty when I sit down. So, I already know it’s gonna be one of

those nights. She’s nursing her second glass by the time we make our orders. I get one of those uh - what’s it called? - their steak with—”

Jeffrey jumped in. “Was it any good? I was thinking about trying it out with my lady friend.”

Shrugging, I nodded. “It wasn’t the best, but it wasn’t the worst, either.” I eyed him for a moment before continuing. “Anyway, Gale is really throwing them back and she’s getting loud. Susan thinks it’s funny, and the friend doesn’t seem to care.”

“White people,” Jose muttered unintelligibly into his cup.

“So the bill’s been paid and we start to get up to leave. I think Gale has had maybe five or six glasses of this white wine. But she’s not done with the last one. So, she picks it up to stand with and she just falls over to the floor. Breaking the glass and her heel. Everyone’s looking so surprised. I don’t want to be sitting there like the Worst Asshole, so of course I have to get up and help.”

Bob blinked. “Wait, how did she fall?”

“Too drunk.” Jeffrey murmured.

“And she just starts these little hiccupping sobs. Getting makeup on my shirt before she stumbles into the ladies’ room with the hostess following her in. She smelled horrible when she came out, and I practically had to carry her to Susan’s car.”

Jeffrey grinned at me before clapping me on the shoulder. “Look, man, you just be happy that you dodged a bullet. Had you still been married, all that shit would’ve been your responsibility. And when she got sober, it would’ve been your fault. Sometimes it’s like that,” he said then headed back to his cubicle.

“Is Gale an alcoholic?” Bob looked around at us.

Jose shrugged then went back. “Great story, Dick.”

“Yeah.” Bob drank the last of his fourth cup of water and started for his desk.

I tossed the rest of my drink into the trash with the rest of them and took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

## The Epitome of Feminine Allure

They'll say, "Women are beautiful like books." And they'll thumb through them, and they'll smell the worn pulp of the pages, and they'll play with the broken and exhausted spine. And they'll say, "Beautiful.. Aren't they beautiful?" before replacing the old, unread books onto the neatly lined shelves on either side of the fireplace. And they'll think, "How elegant my home looks." And it will be elegant, lined with hardcover novels and play scripts. It will be quaint, and all the visitors will say so. And all across America libraries will lose funding, because books are beautiful, because they make a home look full, their pages old and still perfect, no one daring to sit alone with them, these unopened vaults of ideas. Because they are potentially brilliant and bound in untouched beauty. Women are. Beautiful books.

## Recognition

I don't want to admit that I'm gay because I still dream of becoming president. I tell myself this every day as I look in the mirror. I repeat these words every time I look on TV and see Trump or his administration who mock and misunderstand us. I hear these words when I look out the window and see my neighbor washing his car every Sunday and think about how wonderful he looks as the light frames him. I feel these words in my bones as I walk down the street to the store and read the text from my mother, as she explains her interest in our misguided president's words.

As I wake up on Monday again and begin to get ready for work, I remember these words I tell myself. I remember the feeling of dread I have every time I go to work and hope that no one notices my feeble attempts at hiding who I am. I labor all day for this campaign office hoping to make it to senator, to run my own campaign one day and change this country, and I pray to a god I do not believe in that these people I see day in and day out do not learn of my hidden feelings and expose me to a world that is not yet ready to see a president that enjoys the company of another man. Phil, the campaign manager, smiles at me as I walk out on Friday night not knowing that the reason I don't go drinking with the rest of our coworkers is that I fear myself losing control, and I shudder to think of what would happen if they found out, if my mother found out, if the world knew that a gay politician actively worked in their society.

I wake up on Sunday again, and as I make breakfast and look out my window for the all too familiar and enticing sight of my neighbor, but instead of a man washing a car I see my neighbor looking back to me and smiling and suddenly my heart is pounding. He waves and I follow suit he beckons and my knees are trembling. I slowly put my breakfast down and walk out the door down the street a small way and on to my neighbor's lawn. I see him still smiling as he looks at me with the same gaze I give to him. My stomach is doing backflips as I step up to him and he says hello; I find my cheeks growing warmer as I stutter through a response he blushes in turn as we talk. I find myself trying to remember the words that I have repeated to myself since I finished school. I can barely remember the days where I cowered behind the words "I don't want to admit that I'm gay because I still dream of becoming president." I have forgotten that breakfast is still sitting on my counter at home. He is driving me to the local diner, and I hear new words in my head as we enjoy the presence of each other. I want to admit that I'm gay because I dream of becoming a gay president in a world that isn't ready for it.

## Battle Wounds

The first time was when  
 The infection in my chest  
 became unbearable  
 stinging and hollow  
 The knife  
 mated with flesh  
 Opening a gate  
 Offering an outlet.

The second time was when  
 The barrier raised and I was  
 tasting failure and  
 drowning in shame.  
 I desired color—  
 Other than suffocating black  
 And dreary grey  
 And decided red would do nicely.

The third time was when  
 The world told me I needed  
 To show that I was at war  
 Or I was a liar.  
 And so the knife  
 Met flesh once more  
 And my wounds turned to scars  
 And proved the war in my head.

The last time was when  
 The battle overwhelmed  
 And I found myself  
 Contemplating a pillbottle escape.  
 But I was strong  
 Or maybe afraid  
 But either way  
 I'm still here  
 Still breathing  
 Still fighting  
 With the scars to prove my war.

## [Insert Religious Holiday Here]

Stride in  
 hope they notice  
 how good you look.  
 Listen to the choir  
 feel the goose bumps  
 arising at the stirring music  
 like they did at the holocaust museum.  
 Stand on command.

Greet your neighbors,  
 but do not say something  
 you cannot believe.

Sit again.  
 Listen, my child,  
 to the words of The Lord.  
*These words will change your life.*  
 A cellphone chimes a foolish ditty and,  
 blushing,

the owner silences it,  
 as he has silenced  
 the inquisitive minds  
 of his offspring.

## Permanent Ink

It was May of 2014 and I was seventeen years old. The shop smelled of a medical office. This only reassured me further that I had made the right choice. I walked up to the counter, trying hard to steady my hands. Excitement and nervousness filled me as I asked to make an appointment for the next week.

It had been around ten months since the tragic day of my father's suicide. After months of grief and being furious, disappointed, and upset at my dad for what he did, I was finally able to come to terms with his decision enough to be able to remember him and think of memories without it always being painful. It was then that I knew that although I was mad at him, I still loved and missed him. For this reason, it felt right to have a part of him with me forever.

Surprisingly, when I suggested my idea to my mom she responded extremely positively and was completely for it, supporting me entirely.

So, there I was at Lucky Bird tattoo shop, standing at the front counter, about to make an appointment for some time in the next week. I didn't have a specific artist picked out. It didn't have matter. Every artist in the shop was a master at the trade. The appointment was set. I was told to bring any pictures to help the artist achieve my goal/image for the tattoo.

The next week, I showed up with pictures of a deer skull, one that my father and I'd found on a hike years ago, and samples of my father's writing, with specific letters chosen to comprise the word "Stay."

The tattoo was to be located on my left side stomach just up past my hip with the antlers reaching to touch the side of my ribs. I had chosen the word "Stay" for many reasons. I wanted my father to stay in my heart and memory; I wanted my father to stay with me and to have not made the decision he made; and I wanted my memory of the great dad of my childhood to remain, and not the alcoholic I remember him increasingly being as my brother and I got older. I wanted my father to stay and be a part of me.

I imagined it hurting more than it did; however, that's not to say the tattoo didn't hurt like hell. The pain was the worst at my ribs where my bone was. The needle left a sharper feeling than it did on my fleshy stomach. Yet still my pain tolerance is relatively high, and I was easily able to zone out, especially when he worked on the fleshy areas. The worst was the shading on my ribs. A vibrating sensation felt like it shook my ribs cage. Thankfully halfway through,

after my skin had already been broken and opened by the needle, the artist was able to apply "unicorn piss" which essentially numbed the area and made the rest of the tattoo far easier to get through. I believed he called it "unicorn piss" because it had a magical effect on my skin.

After the tattoo was completed, the artist applied some cleaner and some creams. Then, I snapped some pictures in the mirror at my new piece of art. The artist applied a plastic looking layer to the area. This I had to leave on for a few days, moisturizing it with a special tattoo lotion. The lotion was to act as an extra epidermal layer to protect and heal the tattoo properly. Until fully healed, which would be a few months, my tattoo was to be kept out of direct sunlight and bodies of water to prevent soaking. Showers were okay.

It healed beautifully and to this day it was one of the best decisions I have made.

## The Device

*Alright.*

*Three.*

*Two.*

*One.*

Elijah squeezed the trigger as hard as his muscles would let him and everything froze.

All the sound and commotion of Queens County Savings Bank instantly died. His heart was pounding. But there was too much at stake to worry now.

Reaching down, Elijah carefully placed the device in his bag and headed toward the tellers.

“A bank that size roughly holds around \$20 thousand on hand and tellers around \$2 thousand,” Angelo had explained days before. “You’ll have 20 minutes before you run out of fuel” he tossed the device, which looked like a game show buzzer, to Elijah. “Make them count.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Elijah, examining the cold metal device. He rotated it in his hands.

The rod shaped mechanism had a dark red trigger on one side and on the top a green button. Angelo pointed to the red trigger and motioned to squeeze it.

*What the hell!* everything froze around Elijah including Angelo whose mouth was opening to say something.

Elijah walk around the statue that, just a second ago, was his coworker. He picked up a glass of water flipped it so that the water could fall right out. But it didn’t. The water stayed in the glass hanging as if it was still right side up.

He let go of the cup and it just hung in the air. *What the hell!* Placing the cup back on the table, Elijah looked over the strange time controlling device. *Well, if red is stop then green must be go he pushed the green button...* instantly time started again. What was 10 minutes to Elijah was nothing to Angelo.

Quickly Elijah found the bank manager, took the manager’s keys then unlocked the teller’s bank drawers throwing all the money he could in one of the few bags he had. Next the vault.

“You want to be in this gang, right?” Angelo had said.

“Ya man, but that not that much money? With this thing couldn’t we robbed even bigger banks?”

“Don’t worry about that do as I say and it’ll be fine.”

The door for vault was open. A teller and customer were standing inside. Elijah ran inside and checked the time: 10 minutes left. Shoving as much money he could into his garbage bag, he sprinted across the frozen lobby, pushed open the bank doors, ran out to his car, put the money in the trunk and slammed the trunk. As he ran across the street, Elijah felt a sharp pain in his side and head as the world for a second turned upside down and then it was dark.

People were screaming and running toward him as he tried his hardest to get up. *The device*, Elijah looked around frantically. It was there, but inches away but it felt like a mile as Elijah tried to reach out and crawl towards it.

But people were all around, asking things he couldn’t quite make out. A man tried to grab him, but Elijah flung his arm so hard it knocked the man over.

He reached the trigger and squeezed but nothing happened, nothing froze. Everyone was still screaming and pulling at him. He could hear sirens in the distance coming his way. Come on! Come on! Elijah kept squeezing even harder. Then he banged it on the pavement. People were running away from him now as they felt he held a bomb.

*Work please, work!*

The sirens were there now. He could hear the police drawing their guns as they got out of their cars.

*They’ll find out who I really am once I’m dead, and they’ll find they just killed an undercover cop and blow a federal investigation.*

Jake laughed at the thought.

He closed his eyes, waiting for what was to come next.

But nothing came.

He looked up, and everyone was frozen. He tried to stand but his legs would not let him. He rolled over on his back to see that someone was standing over him.

Angelo?

When Jake woke up, he was sitting on what looked to be a privet jet.

“Angelo?” he called out “Angelo!”

Angelo came in with a group of nine men. On the TV in front of him read the caption: “30 major banks robbed in seconds.”

He knelt down next to Jake, patted his shoulder and said, “Welcome to the club Elijah. We’re just getting started.”

## Shadows

She closes her eyes,  
Shadows in her mind.  
Dark thoughts arise,  
She can't leave them behind.

She fears everyone will leave her  
Because she can't control herself.  
The fears festering like a raging cur,  
Piling up like an over stacked shelf.

She desperately clings to a thread of hope,  
But one day it snaps.  
That thread of hope, once a rope  
Is now snapped in half, in her lap.

## Gossamer's Day

Fucking cancer  
 slowly taking  
 another one!  
 Henceforth  
 I shall greedily  
 grab life  
 at its thread  
 I shall remain  
 the needle  
 until  
 I run out of  
 gossamer  
 and then some.  
 Carpe diem

No longer  
 will I deal  
 with difficult  
 people or pests  
 Smiles and  
 spreading  
 a filament  
 in form of  
 my poetry.  
 I cannot  
 give birth  
 any longer  
 only

my thoughts  
 will have  
 happy wings.  
 Note it is  
 out of  
 style to be  
 content to laugh—  
 I shall run  
 a fool's errand  
 but so be it.  
 The clown's  
 fate and face  
 is holy  
 because there  
 is a solemn truth  
 yours or mine.  
 Vita breve est.



## Fin De Siecle

Green Mirrors like absinthe,  
 Show an absent tinted second world  
 And, Green faces, like absinthe,  
 Turn facelessly towards the glow of the dance hall.

The game is the same.  
 Girls with painted faces painting their reflections,  
 Boys with bulging eyes barking across the hall,  
 The dancing is hectic, frantic, manic, and without rhythm.

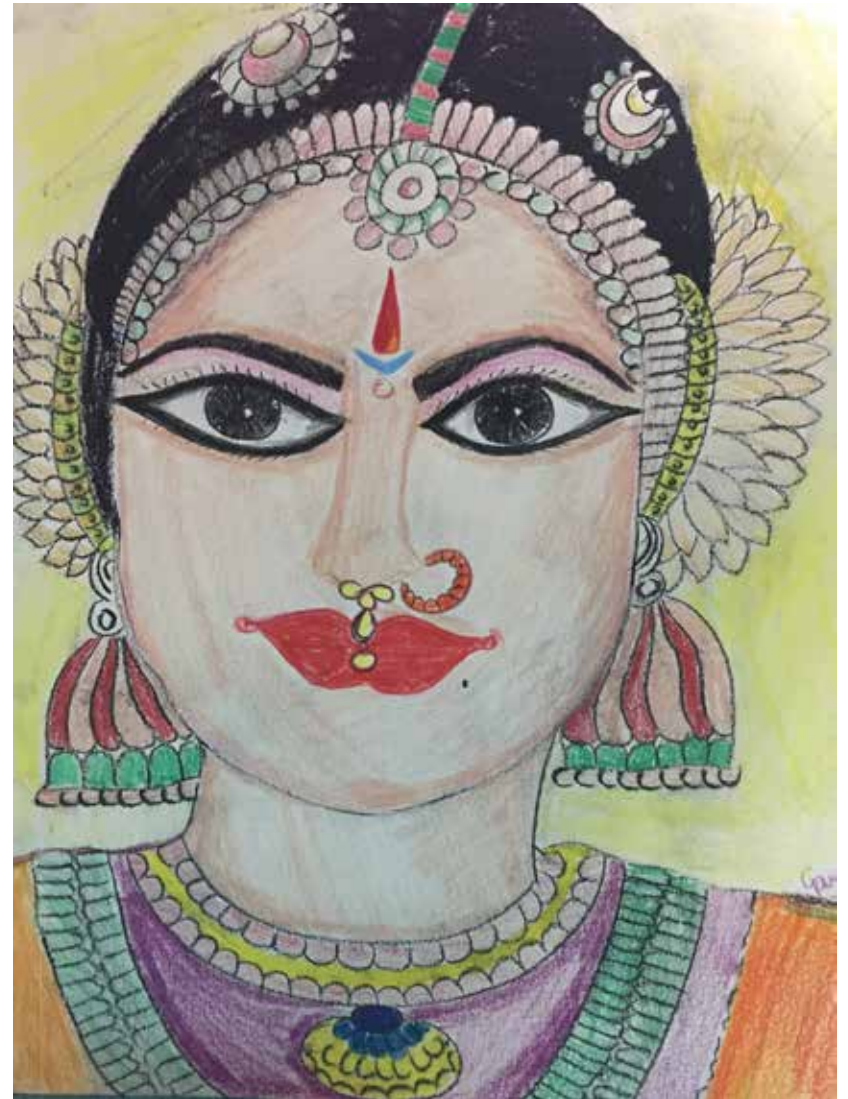
I can laugh at these days because I stepped away,  
 Blitzed boys still cling like sweat  
 And glittering girls can-can catch an eye,  
 But the red mill continues churning out new children of the revolution.

Dark eyes, like ink,  
 Can-Can flicker over faces, noting a name, date, and period,  
 While Red Faces, like love, like history, like prayer,  
 Unrecognizing turn facelessly away.

And I a witness,  
 To the End of the Century

I missed the turn.  
 Only to see the elephant outside the room.

## Indian Classical Dancer



*Charcoal pencil and colored pencils, 2017*

## A Hero's Journey

The dictionary defines a hero as “a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.” Popular culture labels soldiers, firefighters, good Samaritans who pull someone out of a burning car, and strangers who rescue cats from trees, as heroes. Fictional heroes with supernatural powers rescue damsels in distress or slay giants who harm unsuspecting people.

Does heroism have to involve physical strength, or is a hero also someone who overcomes insurmountable obstacles to achieve their dream? I think heroes come in infinite varieties; most of them may not even know that they are heroes. We all know someone who is a hero in his or her own quiet way. My hero is MY DAD. I have wanted to share his inspiring story for so long. This is his story.

Dad was born on March 4, 1921, in Saronda, a small village in the western state of Gujarat in India. Dad loves telling his story. On a recent trip to India, my children got to hear it. Dad told them that his was the second poorest family in the village. His father worked in another state and would come home occasionally. The family had ancestral land, which was given to others to farm. After the death of his first wife, dad's father married his mother. Dad had two stepsisters, in addition to his brother who was a year younger than him. They lived a subsistence life, always depending on the kindness of others.

As a child, dad's favorite pastime was playing cricket with the boys in the village. Even now, dad will stay up all night to watch a test match on TV when India plays other teams in one of the commonwealth countries in a different time zone. At 96, he can barely hear the cricket commentary. He does not need to; he could relay the commentary. Dad has three daughters, and none of us is interested in sports. Maybe a son would have shared his passion for cricket!

A precocious child, dad wanted to go to school at the age of three. He tells us his father had to get special permission for him to go to school early, instead of the usual age of five. Dad is the most intelligent person I know. My late husband, his intellectual equal, was the son he never had. Dad would look forward to my husband's visits to India; the two would talk for hours about engineering (my dad's field) and physics (my husband's), and host of other subjects they both shared an interest in.

At three, dad walked a mile to school with the other children from his village in worn out shoes and sometimes barefoot. The school was in a bigger town, well equipped and well-staffed. Dad thrived in school—taking in the knowledge imparted and excelling in all subjects. I have often wondered how such a young child from a small village, in the third decade of the twentieth century, knew he wanted to be an engineer. But then, my dad was a prodigy!

When he was in his teens, his mother died. Dad has never talked about how that felt. It must have been devastating. He focused on school... and cricket! After high school, he was admitted to St. Xavier's College in Bombay, probably on a scholarship or community funding for poor students. Dad talks about not having money for lunch and about relatives in the vicinity who never invited him to their home or helped in any way. After graduating from Xavier's, Dad went to Poona Engineering College and excelled there too.

Dad's life was about to take a turn—a good one! It was the early 1940s, and the British who had ruled India for 200 years were getting ready to hand over power to an independent India on August 15, 1947. They were looking for young, bright Indians to send abroad to study and come back and build the new India. A story I have often heard from dad which really wrenches my heart, is the one where he did not have money for a sleeper coach on the train from Bombay to New Delhi for his scholarship interview to study in USA. Dad stood throughout the twenty-hour train journey.

Dad was one of four young men selected to go to USA on full scholarships. The war was on in Europe so they traveled on a freight ship. I cannot even imagine the conditions. For dad, it was the start of a new life. Nothing else mattered. The ship docked in Boston and the young scholars travelled to the universities they had been assigned. Dad went to the University of Pittsburgh and in a few days decided it was not what he wanted. According to dad, he went over to Carnegie Mellon University; I am sure there was more involved than just going over! He was admitted and was at the top of his class. He graduated early with a double masters in mechanical and electrical engineering. With many job offers, he soon started working. He worked in Cleveland, and Wooster, MA. For the first time in his life, he had money in his pocket and could buy anything. Another favorite story is that he told the scholarship providers that he was earning, so he did not need the scholarship funds. They said he must be a Parsee, our community that is noted for its

honesty and integrity. Later during his career, dad would leave a job because he would not be part of the corruption at the managerial level.

In the late forties, dad returned to India, full of hopes and dreams of building a new nation. Dad worked for several companies and was happiest building things, like the little table and chairs he made for us to play when we were toddlers. My older sister recently related a story which I do not recall hearing before. My parents married in 1952 and lived in a sprawling bungalow on the banks of the Ganges river in Kanpur in the state of Uttar Pradesh, along the border with Nepal and China. My sister relates that she and I were sitting in the garden on the chairs, at the table. You need to understand that in small towns in northern India, monkeys run around freely. I do not know if they are dangerous; they are certainly filthy and will grab food from your hands and your glasses off your face. The story goes that a monkey came and sat on one of the little chairs next to us, and the two of us were blissfully unaware. What could a five-year-old and a two-year-old be so engrossed in that they did not notice “something” sitting right beside them?! Someone from inside the house happened to see this and ran out shouting to scare away the monkey and rescue us—still blissfully unaware.

Dad’s engineering focus has always been machine tools. Dad explains that machine tools are what makes machinery work. Even at 96, he reads voraciously and has a razor sharp mind. He asked my daughter, who lives in Cleveland, to get him a book on machine tools, and told her exactly where to get it. He was thrilled to get the book to add to the many books surrounding his bed, where he spends most of his day reading. Dad told my daughter where the YMCA he lived at in Cleveland is located, which bus he took to work, and about city landmarks, some of which do not exist anymore. When my parents visited in 1998, we went to Carnegie Mellon and were given a tour of the campus. Dad recalled every detail of his time there, including where his dorm was, which is now a 7 Eleven!

In 1960, dad got a job with Union Carbide, and we moved to Calcutta. We lived in an apartment above our grandparents’ restaurant. Those were fun times when you could call down for anything from the restaurant and go down to the kitchen and get freshly made potato chips. These were my mom’s parents; my dad did not have any family besides his brother who passed away in 1989. We grew up surrounded by my mom’s family, a fun-loving group that loves celebrating and traveling together. I often tell my dad how fortunate he is to have Mom’s family love and respect him so much. All the uncles, aunts, and cousins absolutely dote on dad, seek his advice on investing, and would do anything for him.

While at Union Carbide, dad was transferred to Lucknow, a provincial town in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Those were the best two and half years. Dad was the manager of the Eveready batteries factory there. He loved being back in the factory environment where he could create and build. We enjoyed the benefits of his status as the big fish in the little pond. We rented a gorgeous bungalow from an old Parsee couple that lived in the back and were like grandparents to us. Centuries ago, the area around Lucknow was ruled by the Nawab of Awadh (anglicized to Oudh by the British). During the British Raj between 1780 and 1800, The Residency served as the home of the British Resident General who was a representative in the court of the Nawab. I remember picnics at the Residency with a close group of family friends, Dad’s bridge group, and Mom’s rummy group. It was the best of times! While we were in Lucknow, dad had to travel to other Union Carbide factories in India. The 1965 India-Pakistan war was on; the outdoor lights had to be dimmed at night, and mom and her three little girls would gather in an inside room during air raids.

We were transferred back to Calcutta in 1966, and dad was now the little fish in the big pond of the city office with all its politics and corruption. A few years later, dad left Union Carbide and worked for the Tinsplate Company (a Tata subsidiary) and eventually retired at the age of 58 (the retirement age in India) around 1978. Like most men, work meant everything to Dad. He did not have many friends or other interests. Such a great mind and nowhere to use it. Dad loves the United States and enjoyed his many trips to visit my family and me. He would take the bus and metro to DC and visit the places he remembered from the forties. I have a photograph of him standing in front of the Washington monument in the mid-forties with none of the roads and buildings that currently surround it.

Before he left USA in 1947, he had many job offers. However, he went back to India. He jokingly says “who would have married your mother?” Not true—my grandmother would have arranged for another husband. My parents gave us a great childhood, never wanting for anything. Most importantly, the values they instilled in us have made me the person I am today. When I was growing up I did not realize the struggles of Dad’s early life. Life’s experiences have given me an understanding of how much he went through to achieve so much and gave us so much more. Thanks Dad. You are my hero!

## Memoir of a Relapse

Being trusted feels good. It's a warm and promising sensation, like the summer breeze blowing through the open windows of the car my mom let me borrow. This road is familiar and welcomes me back after a two-year absence with open arms. I cruise straight ahead into Baltimore as buildings grow taller and closer together and let myself forget the flat, congested streets of Del Ray Beach that had held me captive just months before.

"Clean and serene living" was the mission, Florida was the cost. Twenty-four months of detox clinics, rehab centers, and halfway houses, connected by a public transit system guaranteed to be late, crowded and steaming with perspiration and bad life choices. I danced for the devil that put me on that bus, chanting his Serenity Prayers and collecting his key tags, each one denoting which circle of Sobriety Hell I had passed through successfully. It was a sweltering, humbling, and trying ordeal, but it was what I had to do in exchange for my family's forgiveness.

The wind quiets on my face as I slow for a red light. How did I get to this part of the city? Better text my mom to reassure her that I'm safe. I'm such a good daughter. She sends one back that says "Thanks, love you." Love you too, Mom. I make a left-hand turn to pay a visit to an old friend.

I open my eyes to a rumbling that vibrates my spine and sounds like an eighteen-wheeler. A florescent light stabs my naked, unadjusted eyes but is too dim to make sense of the shadow floating above me. The shadow makes a sound and gets closer to my face, repeating itself over and over as if trying to communicate. A second light source deliberately tortures my pupils one at a time and the shadow's voice gets louder; then I sit up so quickly that I hit my head on the shadow, which turns out to be another head.

The head has bushy brown hair and a woman's face, and the sounds coming out of her lipsticked mouth morph and shape themselves slowly into words.

"Come on, that's it. Stay here with us."

Suddenly I know exactly what this woman is. She is pure evil; she is the destroyer of paradise. Before this bushy-brown-shadow-woman showed up, everything had been perfect, and I now despise her.

The honey was warm and drinking me. It pooled under my horizontal body and climbed, caressing my skin one pore at a time, seeping into my ears, drowning out the buzzing static of thoughts. It oozed over my body like a

gelatinous blanket and embraced me like a lover before it kissed me good night, and then I was dreaming.

"We've got you, tell me you can hear me now."

Now I'm fighting to remember it enough to get that feeling back, that precious feeling I had chased so earnestly, only to have it snatched away by the venom of this demon crouching next to me. When one is exercising their religious practices, is it not considered rude and disrespectful to interrupt them? One minute I'm meditating in my place of worship, then this blasphemous wench throws open the temple doors, tromps on sacred ground, drags me by the hair into this metal box and expects me to thank her? It goes black and I'm falling onto something plastic and hollow-sounding, rubber gloves are shaking my head.

"Look at me, open those eyes again."

Lady, you must be crazy. Let me shut my eyes and disappear.

"Girl, I'm about to hit you with more Narcan..."

No, not more venom, please.

"There are those beautiful blues. Good girl, that was a close one."

"Ugh, don't patronize me."

My words come out in a hoarse sneer, and I don't regret them. A part of me buried underneath thick layers of heartless resentment knows I was raised with better manners, but I am tired and angry and believe this woman deserves far worse than all of the attitude I can muster.

I hate her; I hate the team of EMTs huddled around me with equipment in their hands and concern in their eyes; I hate the look of shock and disappointment on my mother's face as she hangs limp in my father's arms; I hate that neither of my parents can stand to look back at me. I stare at the cigarette-burn holes in my ripped t-shirt, assign each one to a promise I've just broken, and wonder if I ever meant to keep any of them.

Twenty-four hours later, my conscience returns to me with a vengeance. It carries the realization that this is my third overdose in the short two months I've been home after rehab, and the first one my little brother witnessed first-hand.

My shrine is reduced to rubble. What was once a holy retreat is now a burial ground for my family's trust, a haunted place I cannot visit without being spooked by the ghost of self-loathing.

## Signs of a Nervous Breakdown

Around the building in which I live,  
a forest introduces the farmland and terrain beyond,  
but my property is marked by nightstands and beds.

My view is slashed by a thick wired screen,  
I may open a window,  
I may not go out a window.

The calendar tells me it's autumn,  
when green leaves turn yellow, gold, and brown,  
with an intermittent splash of fiery red.

Overhead a formation of geese,  
a chorus of Canadian visitors,  
sing songs of freedom.

But something is wrong with my eyes.

Color's faded,  
Green gray—  
Red rust—  
Mountains hills—  
Rivers streams—  
My world,  
A bad dream.

And something is wrong with my ears.

Guitar's not tuned,  
Singing off key—  
Rhythm's lost the . . . beat—  
Poetry doesn't rhyme—  
Music's noise—  
Voice in my head,  
seeks to destroy . . .

me.

## Ocean and the Sun

I picked up the sand and poured it over my legs.

Sitting next to you watching the sunset was bitter sweet.

I chose the ocean, because I thought it would be easier if you were looking at  
something beautiful when I left you.

I never was that pretty when I cried.

You see the ocean and the sun look good together, but they can never really be  
together.

The sun looks like it melts into the sea. The colors mixing, touching, and then  
eventually disappearing together into the darkness.

It's an optical illusion.

As close as they seem, they are actually so distant.

No matter how hard we try, we will never be close enough to be good  
together.

We are nice to look at, but once the sun sets, its just dark.

The waves hit against the rocks, sometimes becomes violent, it holds so much  
more than you can see.

In the darkness, the observers can't see what's happening. The charade is over.

Only the next morning it starts all over again.

I chose the ocean because it holds so many secrets from the world.

The sun is beautiful, and you my dear are gorgeous.

But we are from two different worlds, miles apart.

I think we need to stop fighting the distance, and just let it go.

Let the waves carry it away.

## Shadow Silhouettes

My mother kept a likeness of her wedding portrait in our upstairs hallway. It pictured two profiles made of cut paper, black on white, the finer details drawn along the edges in black ink. The man's face was smiling and jaunty, his shoulders leaning slightly forward as if trying to get his face closer to the woman. The woman's profile had no expression at all, as if there were no emotions lingering behind her shadowed outline, nothing inside the paper head in danger of being revealed, no matter how many layers were removed. It must have been hard for the artist to fashion a human profile this empty.

I used to wonder why people would display themselves as cut-out paper, rather than as living portraits or even photographs. Over time, I came to see what the artist had seen in the eager, smiling face on one side, the face devoid of feeling on the other.

Dad was a vibrantly physical man who grabbed at life with both hands. He could do anything manual as if he'd been born knowing how. He could take apart and repair a cistern, build a barn, tame a stallion, or pull a stuck calf from a birthing cow. He was meant to become a master carpenter like his father, but he wanted to be a farmer. The story went that Dad walked off his carpentry job one evening as the sun was setting. He returned to his parents' house where he was living and announced to his young wife and his parents that he was going to find a farm.

"I can't give you money," his father supposedly replied. "You should stay at the furniture factory and save for a house." My father just nodded and there was no further effort to dissuade him, of course. No one would think of interfering. You need to be from an ancient, rural place like this to understand how when a man wants a farm, it's expected he'll go and find one. Even if it was Tidewater land, brackish and only twelve inches deep above thick layers of clay and rock, even though the too-salty topsoil gets scraped away by winds every winter until the land goes back to sea-level. Even though most of the farms were chopped up by stands of loblolly pine and swamp marshes and too little space to provide a living. Every now and then the farms got refashioned, either sold or passed from son to neighbor or grand-daughter. The farm families in Tidewater can all trace their roots to the seventeenth century; somebody's ancestors came over on the Mayflower; somebody else's great-great-grandmother was a Nanticoke Indian.

Dad was youngest of eleven children, so when he chose farming, his family lacked the resources to help him. He owned nothing, not even a place to live. He borrowed money from the town bank to buy a tractor on installments and asked for some extra money for the first year's seed and then, he went looking for land. He made a deal with an old friend of his family to rent 185 acres of bottom land. There were no outbuildings but the farm came with a ramshackle white clapboard house and that was all Dad needed to do the deal.

He moved his wife, his baby son, and a sprinkling of his mother's old furniture into the drafty house on a Friday. On Saturday, he headed out to the fields, leaving my mother with a colicky baby and an insidious wind pressing in to every corner of every room. Dad's days were long and hard but he loved every inch of that farm and he loved his life. Having a miserable soul, our mother wrapped our older brother up in layers of wool flannel, tried to build a home, and made up her mind to never forgive our father for his good humor.

She had a right to hold a grudge. The children that followed were daughters, who could never be enlisted as field help, and so the burden of chores fell to the one son, whose job it became to tend the livestock so that Dad could spend the long daylight hours of summer on his tractor, plowing long furrows, or hewing weeds into bits with the angular blades. Up, down, circling the ends of each field in a wide arc. My sister and I would sit in the dirt gullies, waiting for him, at the end of the field closest to the house. As Dad got closer, we would jump up and bounce around until he could see us.

"Hi, Daddy, wave to us," we'd yell. As he rolled closer, we would dance and wave until he looked our way. Sometimes he'd tip his hat, revealing a dust line across his forehead, his balding skull white and bony beneath the hat that protected it from dust and sun.

The lifted hat was meant as gallantry, but when I saw the defenseless head uncovered, I would hold my breath until he snugged the hat back in place. Somehow I knew that one day he'd die from either the sun or from all that swallowed dust. Even if he'd foreseen this, he would have shrugged his shoulders and jumped back on his tractor. He loved this soil—the way it looked, the way it surrendered under the metal blades. He loved its smell and its taste and how it felt in his hands.

My sister and I loved it too. We drew things in the ground, using straight sticks to dig the outlines of our play houses, sketching in furniture and then walking through the rooms, performing little one-act plays. Dad once refitted a little toolshed to make a wooden playhouse for us but we soon abandoned it and went back to our earth versions, our sprawling ranchers and Victorian mansions drawn in the soft dirt of the driveway. You can't explain to outsiders about how dirt is treasure. Like with horses or alcohol, it's an addiction that defies logic.

Mom was a tiny woman who looked even smaller as she shrunk into the work of a farm wife; cooking, sewing and scrubbing at the never-ending dirt that sifted slowly down onto everything. She became as bound to her world as he was to his, but she was connected by duty, not love. She wouldn't admit that she loved to cook, even after she was an old woman and sneaking into my kitchen so she could concoct a soup or stew.

My sister and I learned early how much our mother hated to be touched. I can't remember her ever hugging any of us, even my brother, whom she adored. Dad, a physically affectionate man, never seemed to recognize her distress. Sometimes after he'd finished his meal, he would notice how her face had softened as she patted the last of the stew in a bowl to put away. He'd reach out to touch her as she picked up the dishes and breezed past, saying, "That was delicious, Mom-mom." If he could, he would add a quick hug or kiss on her cheek, ignoring the torture in her eyes, his smile for her warm and honest. Whenever she felt the touch, Mom would shrink back as if Dad's hands were claws bent on her destruction. Within seconds she'd be shivering, like a raccoon caught in a trap and contemplating chewing off her own arm to get free.

But Dad was a joyful man and nothing could change that. His good humor burst from him in the form of hugs, dances, and little tunes, which he sang, whistled or hummed. He sang in the church choir, and when he plowed, and as he walked to the barn with his hands swinging our hands, one little girl on each side. He sang at the kitchen table, waiting for his dinner. It was Dad's singing and dancing that moved forward with me as the part of myself that rejoiced in the power of people and what they could do. It was also the part of me that understood how things could go so wrong for them.

Mom made music too, but not by singing, even though her voice was an instrument, or so they said. We never heard her sing because she had been told by a teacher that she lacked perfect pitch. After that, she was unwilling

to chance the unpredictable vibrato of the human voice and so took up the violin. She gave that up when she graduated because there could be no more lessons. She ultimately chose the piano and for years hammered out semi-classical Hal Leonard arrangements because they sounded the same way every time.

I once asked my mom to sing me something Irish and she said she wouldn't because the old country hadn't been good to her.

"All the potatoes turned black and the children had no milk." It took me years to learn that this was a story she learned from her grandparents, not something she had experienced herself. In fact, she had never gone to Ireland and never would. Her Gaelic anguish ran deeper than her own life. She got it from her mother, Grandmom McBride, who spent summers on our farm.

Grandmom McBride would sit in Mom's black painted rocker with the gold decals, its rails creaking against each other as she rocked. She would be fingering a lace handkerchief, pretending she was blind by not ever looking at it or anything else.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph." She would chant, sometimes adding a guttural, anguished sigh. We used to think it was her way of singing. Hers was a scene trapped in a loop, playing over and over. Her eyes never focused; her hands never rested. When she grew tired of rocking or when she was alone, she sometimes smiled, her teeth bared, no longer prisoners of her tight, drawn mouth. She wasn't living with us, though, when she died. It was winter, the time of year she spent with my aunt, who outmaneuvered her by admitting her to a nursing home for the blind. There were no longer any witnesses to Grandmom's rocking or her prayer to the holy trinity. She died holding her rosary beads in her noiseless hospital rocker.

I've forgotten all the faces of my childhood friends but not the face of my grandmother. I can still see her empty gaze, her efforts to seem unseeing while my sister and I darted around the room in a macabre hide and seek, hoping to trick her into following us with her eyes. I remember how we crept up close enough to count the tiny flowers of her dress, how we almost touched her hands as they slipped along the beads of her rosary or fiddled inside the square, pockets, over-stuffed with crumpled hankies. If she'd been really sightless, she'd have asked, "What are you girls up to?"

Perhaps she stared like that out of habit, or so that she could practice her blindness for when adults were present. Maybe we were meant to be witnesses who would remember her blankness, or maybe it was that she had really come to believe she couldn't see us. Maybe she saw only backwards in time to blackened potatoes and starving babies, to children left in the fields to die while nearby, fat British cattle stood grazing, their milk and meat forbidden to the Irish custodians who could be hunted down and hung for stealing their milk. Or maybe she saw the empty houses, abandoned, families coming to America with only ship's passage and not enough food or water to survive the trip.

Whatever it was her eyes had recorded, it was now too big for ordinary words and her prayer to the trinity wasn't as much a request as a warning. Beware of Irish diaspora, beware of banshees. Beware of blight, of fungus that hides in soil all day and comes out at night to rot out the heart of your summer's labor, of the earth that tries to fill your mouth with dust and take the air from your lungs, no matter how much you keen or smile or try to scrub it away. Beware of what your parents' voices can do to you as they reach from the shadows of their unmoving mouths and imitation faces.

## Winter

your clouds laughing haughtily.

Winter,

you gnaw at me.

your

swirling flurries

of frozen leaves.

my chapped lips of

plaster.

my chiseled skin of

porcelain.

forgotten outside

I fall off the world

alone



## Excerpt from ‘The Gray Cost’

1

My brethren, let's fly

I say unto the sinners,  
This is as it's done

So douse our murky feathers  
We shall become the Crowmen

— **inevitable/ winter clings to our skin and/ we are but a breath**

2

Stitch up frequency  
Did you see the news today?  
I'm a heretic

Crows come for me again, so  
I will greet them as old friends

— **it's the residuals you won't believe**

3

I am a deity  
Succumbing to cracked leaves  
Will you try to kiss me?

My mouth is made of Fall  
And I love walking blind  
So won't you hold my hand?

— **xixixixixi: six syllable six line story of a wasted cold day**

## A Gold Encased Truth

i hold You in my hand,  
one tension of my finger  
and the damage is done

i point You at my enemy,  
maybe then at myself.  
looking into Your barrel  
i see your thoughts.

You're cold.  
You don't discriminate.  
You're blatant,  
reality spews from Your mouth  
with unhuman speed

You have no remorse  
leaving that for the beholder.  
i pack your side with  
a case full of love letters signed  
“Yours truly, the grim reaper”

Some will say You're  
behind the gangs,  
behind the hate crimes,  
behind the school shootings.

But is it you or  
is it Me?

## The Secretary

Sassafras yawned, stretching out leisurely, carefully readjusting his position on the overstuffed cushions of the loveseat, his loveseat. The proud alpha male had been enjoying an afternoon nap in the den of his house, the house he shared with two humans. The little Shih Tzu curled into a fetal position, wrapping a full tail around his paws. He snuggled down again. A late September sun beat down heavily over the back of the couch.

After another few moments, his little black button nose began to sniff the air and he cocked one floppy ear...the sound of her voice was distinguishable. She was approaching the front stoop, calling my name, "Aaron!" He squinted through one round chocolate eye, in the direction of the front door. Yes, a key was in the lock, turning it. Immediately, Sassafras was on his feet, racing down the short hallway, screeching to a halt in front of the door, yapping loudly. Momentarily, my wife entered. His tail wagged excitedly; so enthusiastically, in fact, his entire body shook.

"Hey there buddy!" Ari greeted him, reaching down, petting him. He danced around her heels. "Aaron, I need your help with this," she said. I nodded and followed her out the open front door. Sassafras trotted along behind.

"Where should we put it?" I asked.

"Over by the wall, across from the couch; it will just fit and we won't even have to move the picture." Ari said.

"Yes, perfect!"

It took us nearly twenty minutes to unload the antique from the truck, lug it through the house and set it in its place. Finally, the arrangement met with my wife's approval. I smiled. "I'll take the truck back," I said as I started back down the hall toward the front door.

"Ok, pick up some wine for dinner too..." Ari's voice called after me. Now, she stood in the center of the room, inspecting the antique; fussing with it. She had already positioned a little wooden stool in front of it too; one that spun around when she sat on it. She adjusted the height of the stool. "Perfect!" Turning to face Sassafras, she said, "Well, what do you think of my secretary, Sassafras? It is beautiful, isn't it?"

Recognizing his name, he scampered up to her, licking her hand as she reached down for him. She lifted him up, holding him against her with one

arm under his back haunches; stroking his long soft fur as she moved around the desk, viewing it from various angles. "I just love it! When I saw it, I knew it belonged here."

I did not want to believe what I was seeing; I closed my tired eyes and shook my head, inhaling deeply. *Not again!* Rubbing the back of my neck, applying firm pressure with my left hand, I took a second look. *Either I'm imagining this because I've had one too many scotches or I'm sleepwalking. Please let it be the former rather than the latter.* Yet, neither was true and I knew it. The simple fact of the matter was that a long bone-colored quill nib pen was now poised in mid-air above the open desktop of my wife's antique secretary; and it looked as if some invisible hand were getting ready to write.

At that very moment, it began to move. The quill dipping its thin point into an imaginary inkwell on the desk, tapped itself against the side of the invisible well, as if shaking off excess ink, and proceeded to make long flowing movements through air, writing on imaginary paper lying somewhere on the desk's surface. The only audible sounds were that of the quill occasionally scratching and scraping as it glided across the surface of the desk, and of course, Sassafras's curious whining as he sniffed the base of the desk and stool, padding around them, looking perplexed.

This was not the first time I had witnessed these eerie events play themselves out like this. *God knows!* I'd watched this peculiar apparition repeat itself at least three times since purchasing the little desk from a flea market nearly a month ago. It was a charming little oak piece, refinished in a lovely honey glaze. Ari loves antiques and has filled our home with them: antique pieces made from virtually every kind and shade of wood imaginable. At the moment, the newest addition to our collection is a gift to ease the pain of yet another miscarriage. *We'll try again in a few months; we'll just keep trying. It's all we can do.* The desk sat neatly against the far wall of our kitchen-den area. *Ari has witnessed this too; on several occasions... Very hard to explain; how do you admit to guests that you've purchased a haunted antique? Admit it to them and not have them sneer you right through the open gates of a loony farm?*

Once in our home, Ari discovered the quill in the inside drawer of the desk. Just the quill, no inkwell or ink and, of course, no paper either. The first occurrence had been witnessed by both of us, together, three nights later. We had just finished a late dinner, around nine o'clock, when it began. We were

seated at the kitchen table, catty-corner to the desk. Sassafras was curled up on the loveseat on the opposite side of the room.

As we sat finishing the last savory morsels of a pot roast, the creaking sound of the secretary's desktop panel dropping open caused us to turn and look. Ari went over to fold it back up; "Would you look at that...we'll have to have the latch on this checked. Maybe it's not catching properly..." But, before she reached it, the drawer slid open and the pen escaped. She was so startled she jumped back and screamed; both of her hands flew up to cover her mouth and her green eyes widened with shock...no, horror. Then, it just began moving like it is now.

At some point, it will stop, I know. The quill will drop, falling haphazardly. Sometimes it goes on for only a couple of minutes. Once it went on for a full fifteen minutes. The length of time is inconsistent; as is the time when it might begin...seemingly random. There are now tiny scratches in the desktop finish where the quill has pressed against the wood. Ari, being annoyed by that, got the idea that maybe it would stop if she hid the pen. We buried the quill in an upstairs bedroom drawer. Two days later, it had somehow found its way back to the desk and the eerie pantomime began again.

Not giving up, last weekend Ari went shopping and found an ink set complete with Italian ink, quill, inkwell and stationery; *she paid too much for it, fifty-eight dollars*. She switched the quills, placing the new one inside the desk drawer, to see what would happen. Ari thought it might be quill specific. Obviously not!

At that moment, my wife shuffled up behind me wearing a pair of terry slippers; she stood alongside me in the doorway to our kitchen. Ari gazed in total amazement toward the far end of the room, her eyes taking in the wallpaper with its green ivy pattern. Her gaze followed the neat contours of oak finished cabinets and butcher block counter tops. She clutched at her robe, shivering, with her short brown hair brushing against me as her knees weakened. She leaned against my chest for support. I anxiously wrapped my arms around her to steady her. "You ok?"

"I guess...shouldn't we do something? I mean, can a haunted desk be dangerous?"

"I don't know. But, what should we do?" I responded.

"Call somebody?"

"Who?" I asked. Jokingly, "Hello 911 please send someone over to protect my wife and me from our haunted desk with its floating quill...."

Ari jabbed an elbow between my ribs, "It's going to ruin the finish...maybe we should try putting paper on the desk or some kind of blotter..." her words trailed off weakly.

I nodded. We stared silently. When the quill finally fell to the floor, we turned slowly and went to bed. Sassafras hurried after us.

At the very least, we decided we had to try to protect the finish on the desk. So, the next day, I taped a large sheet of drawing paper to the inside of the desk panel and then, we waited. Late in the afternoon, at about a quarter after four, the desk panel slowly creaked as it fell open and the quill began its usual dance. This time, the paper shielded the finish on the inside of the desktop, muffling the scraping sounds of the quill dragging across the wood. But it was evident from the movements of the quill that the invisible hand guiding it was frustrated by the presence of the paper. In fact, when it was finished, the paper had been shredded in places where the quill had touched it. For us, this was a little victory and a small step forward.

After a few more days of shredded drawing paper, an idea occurred to me; *I wonder if the quill is really writing...* "Is it attempting anything meaningful...a message, maybe? Why don't we put ink in that inkwell you bought and leave the inkwell with some stationery on the desktop?"

Ari agreed, "What can it hurt?"

So, after dinner we taped the drawing paper to the desktop as usual and placed a sheet of stationery on top of that, taping it into place. Next, Ari filled the little inkwell with black Italian ink and after consideration, set it in the approximate location where the quill usually dipped itself. All we could do was wait while the minutes ticked by....

It started very late that night, past ten. The pen rose from the desktop and fluttered in the air for a few moments. It paused as if noting the different appearance of the desktop. The quill made a move for the inkwell, but it looked awkward and uncoordinated. The inkwell tipped, spilling some of its contents across the paper. At once the pen dropped to the floor. Ari rushed over to clean away the mess. The experiment hadn't quite gone as planned and yet, oddly, the invisible author seemed to have been trying. I could hardly contain my excitement. My pulse raced and my breathing grew short, shallow. Ari's hands shook as she mopped ink from the drawing paper. No words were necessary; we knew we had to try again.

Several more days went by; each day, we set up the ink and paper as we had the first time. Each night ended in disappointment when the quill didn't write at all. "Maybe it's gone for good and won't be back," Ari said.

"If that's true, we'll never know anything more about it; all we'll have is unanswered questions....What if it doesn't ever do it again?" she asked.

"It will," I insisted. "You know, it is interesting that Sassafras doesn't appear to be too bothered by any of this. He just seems to take it in stride. If it is a ghost haunting that desk, it must be a benign one. If it were bad wouldn't he sense it? I've heard animals can tell these things."

"I've heard that too...maybe you're right. If nothing happens again, it may have just been a fluke or something...."

"Some fluke" I muttered.

We continued to set up the ink, paper, and pen before leaving for work each morning. Ari and I agreed we would do this for another week or so before giving up completely. Most of the week passed without incident. Then one afternoon, as we arrived home from work, we could hear Sassafras whining and crying; his usual frenetic greeting at the front door was completely absent. Frightened by this, we rushed through our house in search of our pet...we found him in the den, in front of the open desk. And, on the desk was a note, exquisitely penned in black Italian ink:

*7<sup>th</sup> day of January 1723*

*Dear Lady,*

*I had such a wonderful time at the Christmas Ball. Meeting you was a true delight and I hope you do not think me too forward for writing. Our mutual friend, the hostess of that lovely affair, advised me to reintroduce myself to you in this manner.*

*As I believe I mentioned to you on the occasion of our meeting, I am finishing my studies and shall complete them this spring. I have already secured a position in my uncle's business which is not more than two or three miles from your family's estate. It would be a great pleasure to see you again. May I call on you?*

*Do write when you can spare the moment and advise me upon this matter.  
Anxiously awaiting reply,*

*Respectfully,  
Ira Hayworth*

We continued to leave paper and ink and new quills as a steady stream of notes appeared:

*21<sup>st</sup> day of January 1723*

*Dear Lady,*

*How happily I received your response to my inquiry! Corresponding with you will give me something to look forward to, until I may see you again in the spring. As for this winter, I find it most bitter. There is now no less than two feet of snow outside my window and no end to it in sight. Some classes have had to be cancelled due to weather conditions. When this happens, it also means that we students do not get hot meals, only bread and cheese. So, you will understand my strong desire to see the storms let up.*

*Your account of your family's celebration was charming. Would that I had been there to witness the fun...It is so good to hear from you and with such cheerful thoughts as well! I urge you to set aside all formality with me.*

*Sincerely,  
Ira*

*13<sup>rd</sup> day of February 1723*

*Dearest Lady,*

*I pray my letter finds you well and in good spirits, as am I. Do I dare to think of spring yet? There is ever so much work to be done as studying can be dreary without words of kindness to look forward to.*

*My best school companion is Henry Crumb and we have passed many well spent hours together. Even now, we quiz one another in our subjects as preparation for exams which must soon come. Though lessons are demanding, we find moments to take some leisure. During which times, I play my violin whilst Henry accompanies me on harpsichord. Many of our fellow classmates hastily leave the room, covering their ears, when we perform. They groan and plead for us to cease, for we are not much good, I must admit.*

*I do hope your young sister recovers quickly and completely. A fall from such a height is serious, no doubt. As for myself, I love children and hope to have many of mine own someday.*

*I have always admired women's gift for needlework. The skill and coordination it requires is amazing. So, I will be most eager to view your handiwork when I am come.*

*For now, as ever yours,  
Ira*

*20<sup>th</sup> day of March 1723*

*Dearest Friend,*

*I have, as of yesterday, spied budding leaves on trees and heard birds singing. It is true! Spring comes! I welcome it!*

*I have been dutifully practicing my violin so as to impress you with it and not insult your ears. It is better that you have never heard me play before or you would not encourage me in it now, as you do. I am certain your own playing will be far better accompaniment.*

*There are but two short months left in the term with so much yet to be done. Henry bids me say hello to you from him. He hopes one day to have the privilege of meeting you. But I have warned him, I guard you jealously,*

*Affectionately,  
Ira*

*6<sup>th</sup> day of May 1723*

*My Dearest Friend,*

*Your description of your preparations did warm my heart. The reaction of your father to the strangeness of your recent habits stirred me to laughter. Do you always perceive things in such a humorous light? If so, count yourself blessed, for so few have such good nature.*

*In one month's time, I shall be with you again. We are already old friends. I await word from you with such eagerness that I have come to count the days between our letters.*

*Soon to be with you again, my dear good friend,*

*Affectionately,  
Ira*

And then, they stopped. Several weeks went by without any more notes. One morning, as Ari passed by the desk, she noticed the note lying on the open panel of the little secretary:

*19<sup>th</sup> day of March 1726*

*Dear Mother Atkins,*

*Your daughter and I will welcome our first child into the world in about three week's time. Please come for a visit, as soon as possible, as she will have great need of you. We would both look forward to your arrival. It has been such a long time since we saw you last and my work has kept me very busy. She often lacks for company. Yet, I am happy in my work and when home, we are quite content with one another. Very soon, she shall have much to keep her occupied but your company would be most welcome and dear. Please come.*

*Your loving son-in-law,  
Ira*

Within days, another note appeared on the desk:

*25<sup>th</sup> day of May 1726*

*Dear Henry,*

*It is with deepest sadness that I pen this letter to you now. My heart is heavy and I know not what to make of it all. I have lost my beloved wife in childbirth and with her our unborn son. To be sure, her family was here to aid her. They, as I, were prepared to celebrate God's blessed gift of life. Little did we anticipate His plan to take it from us. I buried mother and child together yesterday. I have no namesake. I am too overcome with grief for words....*

*Your friend,  
Ira*

§

February 14, 2008

Dear Mr. Ira Hayworth,

Some months ago, I purchased a little secretary desk for my wife, in order to console her for the loss of another baby. You see, we had been trying to have one for over a year and a half; she miscarried four times. When we purchased the little desk, we mysteriously began receiving some letters of yours as well.

I write this note to you today to offer some news which I hope will be of comfort to you. My wife gave birth to our first child last night. I am very happy to report that both mother and child are doing well. The messages in your letters touched our hearts so deeply that we have named the baby in your honor. Your namesake, Ira Hayworth Keswick, is alive and well. We will treasure him.

Sincerely,  
Aaron Keswick

I left the note on the secretary and went to bed. The next morning, a simple notation appeared on the bottom of my letter: *Good sir, thank you.* From then on, the quill lay forever silent.

## Portrait of the Artist



*Charcoal & Chalk Pastel*

## Scars

I have heard a lot of metaphors for depression. A black cloud following you, a war raging inside your mind, that sort of thing. Metaphors are helpful because the thing about mental illness is it's not truly describable to those who haven't experienced it. I will do the best I can though. For me, depression was a chisel. It chipped away at me day after day, month after month, slowly but surely. I remember the moment it finally broke me. About a year ago after months of substance abuse and self-harm I fully bottomed-out.

Cutting was my method of choice for hurting myself. I wanted the scars and I wanted to feel something, anything to take away the numb oblivion where my soul used to be. That night was different; I was drunk and careless and I wanted to die. I broke a safety razor (the irony) and made a cut. It didn't hurt, not enough. One word came to me, like a hot iron was branding it into my cortex. *Deeper*. I pushed that tiny blade into my arm and slashed. I saw the pale pink muscles where my skin had opened up. For a few brief moments time seemed to slow as I comprehended what I was seeing. Then it was red, all red. Blood poured out of the wound and soaked my arm. Panic, regret, fear which coils your guts into knots. I didn't know what to do it barely even seemed real. Part of me just wanted to lie down and sleep and pretend everything was okay; luckily the rest of me said that was a terrible idea. Everything from my elbow down was soaked in blood. No pain, though, not even a bit. I was completely numb. I texted then faceted my good friend, Veronica. I was drunk and probably in a little bit of shock during this conversation so I'm remembering it as best I can. The phone rang a couple times and Veronica appeared on the screen; she was visibly worried from my texts.

"Hey, I just fucked up really bad." I said.

"What's going on? Are you alright?"

"I...I cut myself way too deep, I don't know what to do..."

"How bad is it?"

"Is it okay if I show you?"

"Yeah go ahead."

I rolled up my now sopping wet jacket sleeve and pointed the camera at my arm.

"You need to go to the hospital right now."

This stopped me.

"Are you sure?"

"Christian, that needs stitches—you have to go to the hospital."

"I'd have to wake my mom up; I don't wanna get her involved, she doesn't even know I do this to myself."

"Then call an ambulance—you need to go."

"Same thing."

"It doesn't matter, listen none of that matters, I've been in your position. What matters is that you need help and you'll be safe there. It's go-time, man."

She stayed on the line with me as I got my mother awake; she was drunk as well and took convincing but came around when I told her the options were A) she takes me or B) I call an ambulance. I was a little annoyed it came to that; Veronica was absolutely pissed. I barely remember the ride to Montgomery General, I was half-asleep the entire time. When I got checked into the hospital they took me back within a couple minutes to get stitches. At least I thought it was going to be stitches. Then the doctor took out a staple gun.

"Is this gonna hurt?" I asked her.

"No worse than when you did this," she replied.

She was lying through her teeth.

The staple gun made a noise like bubble wrap being popped with a pneumatic piston each time it fired. Each staple sent a jolt of intense, piercing pain up my arm.

I shouted something to the effect of "OW! SHIT! FUCK! THAT! HURTS!" one word for each staple.

No anesthetic—I guess they wanted it closed quick or something; I never asked. By the time I was back in the waiting room my father had arrived and was with my mom and sister. I didn't want to see him; I didn't want to see any of them and I didn't want any of them to see me. I was broken, empty,

defeated; I wanted to be invisible to get these eyes off of me. I wanted them to shut the hell up with their empty reassurances. They knew nothing about the depth of the pain which drove me to this action, the black ocean I was quietly drowning in. I was tired, afraid, and ashamed, most of all ashamed. I dropped this on everyone out of nowhere. None of my family even knew I was depressed before then. I didn't want them to. I had gotten really *really* good at hiding my feelings. There was no hiding now, though, no putting on the fake smile and pretending everything was sunshine and rainbows.

The rest of the night was a blur, a very boring blur. They stuck me in a tiny hospital room for the next eight or so hours without my phone or cigarettes or really anything but the basic cable playing on a TV that looked like it was from 2001. I got a visit from the hospital psychologist at some point who recommended I should be put into psych ward. It wasn't until after five in the morning that I was actually transferred. First thing they put me in a little room with a table and two chairs and set me to signing paperwork. It was a ton of signing and dating papers and filling out questionnaires about my entire medical history because apparently in our great age of the internet they couldn't just email my doctor for half this shit. After an hour or so of this they finally lead me to the room I would be sleeping in for the duration of my stay. I had a roommate who was already asleep and I was beyond exhausted myself. Even this shitty mattress that somebody had probably died in at some point was inviting to me. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

Time and tide wait for no man. Neither do institutional schedules or very loud nurses. All patients had to be awake at 7:00 AM sharp, and I was no exception. They keep everything on such a tight schedule in psych ward the days tend to blur together. Even in my free time my actions became regimented. All my various activities such as pacing the halls, staring out the window, and sitting around doing nothing were done in regular intervals. I couldn't tell you on what specific day I did a specific action, date and time kind of lost their meaning it was just when I had free time, when I had meal time, when they give you medication, when you go to sleep. Everything kind of gets lost while you just go through the motions.

Nearly 40% of people with a mental illness smoke cigarettes. Take a large congregation of people like this and consider that all of them have recently had one of the shittiest days of their lives. Can you imagine how much everyone collectively needed a fucking smoke? It can be from a simple shared craving like this that conversations and friendships can start. Looking back it was amazing how honest and open we all were with each other. Hiding our feelings was a meaningless endeavor. If you're in here it's a given you're going through some shit. When I told my story it was met with true empathy; the

kind you only get from other people who have shared your pain. It was in that lack of judgement and pretense that we all found kinship. As the days passed we all began to laugh more and dread each morning less. Recovery was a group effort, we all helped each other in some small way even if it was just by being a friend.

It really was my friends who saved me. When my family visited it was awkward talk with my parents who were wholly unprepared for this turn of events and had no idea what they were doing. My sister and I got along better but this is the case in general so no surprise there. Every day, though, I used the old hospital landline to call Veronica (they don't let you keep your cell phone when you're admitted). We would talk for as long as they would let me stay on the line about anything and nothing. She always picked up and she always encouraged me and kept me going. When I was at my lowest she told me I would get through it with such compassion that even through my cynicism I believed her. I didn't have a lot of friends at home at the time; most everyone was at college. I was more than a little surprised when Maggie and her mother came during visiting hours. Maggie is one of my closest friends and unlike everyone else I really wanted to see her right about then. I was sitting on the couch in the common room when I saw her. I stood up called out her name and she ran over and wrapped her arms around me. As I reciprocated the embrace it occurred to me just how badly I needed a hug, not too proud to admit that. Without my friends to lean on this place would have been downright unbearable.

Normally people think "clean" doesn't have a smell, but spend an extended period of time in a hospital and you know this is not the case. It's a bitter, chemical odor clinging to the pastel walls and out of date electronic equipment always accompanied by the buzzing of those damn fluorescent lights. Even in my bed the sheets smelled of that artificial disinfectant odor. They like to keep things orderly in the psych ward even down to the smell of the air. Probably one of the reasons they didn't let us have cigarettes in there; they would mess with that aspect of the neatly engineered atmosphere. Everyone agreed it was like being penned up in there, but we couldn't even go outside. None of the windows opened either so that smell was inescapable. It rounded out the uniform nature of everything else in the place and served to keep the days feeling longer and less distinct. It was that smell I remember most about the ward. When I finally got out of there I remember the crisp, fresh winter air. The cold filling my lungs let me know I was free.



## My Wild Camping Trip

So let me tell you about the craziest experience I ever had when I was camping. But before I do, I should preface it by saying that I am an avid camper—I mean I have to be out at least twice a year, and that's at a minimum, that I go out with the same group of friends. We've been doing it for years, ever since we first met each other and formed our little crew, back in our college days. But we are all just trying to get set in our career paths. So being 27 myself, I live and breathe for these times together going camping. Anyway, this was a couple of years ago, but we all met at the usual spot to go camping: out west to the Appalachian Mountains. There's nothing like it: the fresh air, the mountains, all the animals... it's just so tranquil. Then throw in a couple of beers, or whatever other things you're into around a campfire, and it's just a joy you can't put into words. So we got to our spot and set up our tents and gear for the weekend. This was an annual occurrence after all, so we were all quite prepared between the food, the beer, and whatever other goodies Top might bring. Top was notorious for bringing shrooms or something else he felt might bring us closer to nature. So here we are just Christopher, Billy, Top, Tim, and myself, after just finishing dinner sitting around the campfire. Top of course decided to hand out his "mushrooms" that he had brought for anyone that wanted them. I typically shy away from that kind of stuff, just not typically something I've ever thought about. We sat around and talked for what seemed like quite some time, but then everyone just seemed like they were tired, and withdrawn.

So I decided to walk back to my tent and just kind of zone out, maybe listen to some music, and enjoy the sounds of nature. As I lay down though I just kept hearing voices coming from all around me. I don't know if it was from the music, or maybe even the animals outside, it was just freaky. It didn't seem quite like it normally should, and the fact I felt like it was all around the tent was just so disconcerting, so I figured maybe I would feel better to just go out for a walk. It was a gorgeous night too, you could see the moon was full, it was like a lighthouse lighting the way, so bright you didn't even need a flashlight to see the path down to the lake.

Now when you follow the path what happens is it opens up to this huge field surrounded by trees. It's just a really cool place to visit when we come here, and we always visit the area as a group, so it was kind of uncharted territory for me to be down here by myself at what I could only assume was like 1 a.m. I walked down to the water staring down at my own reflection. Something was weird though, as I looked down at my face it looked like I was talking to

myself, but I knew I wasn't even moving my mouth. It was like my reflection was trying to tell me something, but then it started to laugh at me. I freaked out, and I suddenly looked up and into the woods. When I stared out I thought I saw dozens, probably even hundreds of bright white eyes opening up, and staring at me. Scary eyes, bloodshot and creepy, all of them. It was like watching the opening credits of an episode of Scooby Doo, seeing all the eyes staring at Scooby and Shaggy. It was that kind of crazy. All of the sudden something stepped out of the woods. The animal was clearly on all fours, and it was slowly walking towards me. I stopped in my tracks as I began to make out the creature. It looked like a black bear, dark like a chocolate bunny, and then it did something that made my blood run cold—I mean I almost shit myself! The bear let out a growl and started chasing after me. I did the only thing my mind told me to do. I ran like I stole something; I mean I don't even remember the last time I ran like that. I mean I'm not going to say I'm out of shape, but the last time I saw a gym, it was next to the electronics store as I was purchasing a new PlayStation game. I ran so hard my lungs hurt, they were on fire hurt, what would you expect from a man running for his life? I could hear it right behind me, its breath heavy, and rancid, with whatever it had eaten earlier. Every time I looked back behind me I saw its fat body, jiggling like jello. It looked like it was just trotting after me, but that was clearly faster than he needed to as he kept closing on me. Out of nowhere I felt something swipe at my jacket, making contact, and then the ripping sound it made of my coat, with a slight tugging against it. But that only made me run faster, and I was getting close to the campsite. I took one last look behind me, and when I looked back there was suddenly nothing there, like anywhere. Did I just imagine what had happened? I took a minute to catch my breath before I walked back to the safety of our campsite.

When I got back the rest of the guys just looked at me, all disheveled, and laughed at me. Said I looked some kind of crazy, and they hope I didn't run into any other campers, because I would have scared them looking as crazy as I did. I'm not sure if I was really chased by a bear, or not. I just know my coat to this day has a rip in it that looks a lot like claws went through it. By the way, did I mention after that trip, I never did mushrooms again!?!

## Lucid; A Dream in Five Parts

The gold of a waxing gibbous summer moon sits heavy on my parietal lobe,  
 regardless of the time the blue rectangle that is a screen and a love letter and a  
   firing synapse  
 outshines the hydrogen/helium stars below,  
 while the soft pings of sent messages overpower screaming *Cicadidae Magicicada*  
 This is the part where i forget if i'm dreaming

It started in Science class during a lecture on the limbic system  
 when we showed up to class with the same library copy \$2 paperback fantasy  
   novel  
 To hide under our desks in eclipsed close kept secret  
 like your stories and poems  
 i edited in the dead of night  
 In glorious technicolor gradation  
 as you gradually became the spectrum of whatever synaptic wavelengths  
 my 3(4) cones could perceive

I adored you  
 in the way  
 you love a dream at 5:37AM  
 almost too long after the alarm has gone off  
 to recapture any of the glitch toned rapid eye movement  
 And frontal cortex electrical oscillations,  
 I adored you  
 In the way  
 you love a bed and hypnagogia  
 the brief eternal moment before/after sleep  
 when all is calm and objects at rest stay at rest

this was before a series of suppressed neurotransmitters  
 norepinephrine, serotonin and histamine,  
 burying yourself in your own self perceived dreamy grandeur  
 Only to ask through a blue rectangle screen for help when convenient  
 when you needed company  
 Until all 207 bones of you disappeared

You showed up again,  
 Just as you used to  
 a day before you got back in town,  
 how fitting when the autumn perigee-syzygy of the Earth/Moon/Sun System  
 Weighs heavy on my parietal lobe,  
 you hide yourself in crowds between id and ego  
 dodging apologies and excuses  
 lucky that my sleep paralysis/obstructive sleep apnea  
 My habit of never letting go  
 keeps my unfortunate self-aware self from moving on without you  
 However lucid i may be

## Catching Van Gogh's Eye

I don't even know you, we've never met  
 But this look says contempt  
 for me and all I know  
 The sunken eyes  
 Gaunt cheekbones that your beard won't even touch  
 Even your hairline is running away from you  
 The air dully shimmers around this sullen gaze  
 in your silent outrage  
 But this is a look not given, but received in return  
 For some slight  
 A minor inconvenience maybe  
 Or the gravest of all sins  
 This animosity is the kind  
 that makes a man mutilate his own ear  
 and awake covered in blood  
 half wishing that he had bled out  
 One hundred and thirty years later  
 Vincent Van Gogh is still glaring at me  
 Because I'm glaring at him.

## Catharsis



## Doctor, Doctor

I walk onto the stage in front of a crowd of doctors. I turn on the projector allowing a presentation title to show on the screen. *How to Choose Your Specialty* was written in big, bold letters.

*"Push one of epi and one of atropine," I shouted urgently to my assistant, "He's coding. Move him down on my count. Three, two, one—lift!" We transferred the admitted patient onto the gurney and raced him up to surgery. "Get him to O.R. three! How's his B.P.?"*

*"One-eighty over one-ten, Doctor," said a nurse guiding the front of the gurney. I needed to operate immediately. We rushed towards the nearest elevator that took us up to the third floor. Sprinted down the halls and into the operating room, my team got him prepared while I scrubbed in. I dried my hands with an individually packed towel, placed my unicorn scrub cap over my hair, and a blue mask over my nose and mouth. I took in a deep breath and exhaled before entering the operating room. The head attending of the Cardio Department, Doctor Walsh, was sitting in the corner reading a magazine. It was my second time attempting a specialty surgery and he was patiently waiting to step in.*

*"Scalpel," I said sticking my right hand out. I readjusted my shoulders, rolled my neck and began to cut into my patient. The silver edge sliced through his skin allowing blood to seep onto the surface. "Retractor," I say as I pulled his flesh apart to allow visualization of the thoracic cavity. His lungs looked healthy but I proceeded to run my hands along to check them. No discoloration or tumors; It ran clear. I moved along to the heart. I checked its overall look and placement. No tumors, discoloration, or murmurs; it too ran clear. I needed a non-invasive way to see what I was dealing with.*

*"I need an ultrasound," I said to one of the nurses. I placed the scope over the left atrium— nothing. I slowly moved down to the left ventricle. I repeated this motion between the two before moving onto the right chamber. Both atriums and ventricles were fine. I closed my eyes to go over all the different types of diseases; Rheumatic, Ischemic— Beep, Beep, Beep!*

*"Doctor, he's in v-fib. Would you like to defibrillate?" asked nurse Duncan. His stats showed that he was hypotensive. The room got quiet as the monitor grew louder. I could tell they thought I was unworthy. It was my fourth year being a resident and I chose my specialty three weeks ago. I don't know what made me choose Cardio surgery. I liked kids. I could have chosen to be a pediatric—No, neonatal surgeon*

*but the heart was too delicate. The clipping of a single valve could end a life right before your eyes. I reached my hand inside his heart to feel for any abnormalities.*

*"What are you doing?" yelled Walsh as I continued to search, "Doctor, step away from the patient," he insists as I ignore him, "Doctor Amaro, put the scalpel down and—"*

*"Shut the hell up," I shouted at him causing a wave a silence to brush over the room, "You do not get to talk in my O.R., you do not get to pull rank in my O.R.; I am the lead surgeon, do you understand? If you had been paying attention instead of chewing my head off you would have noticed this man has a rupture in his tricuspid valve. Now, do us all a favor and get out." I said with my hand deep within the patient's chest. He pulled off his gloves and threw them in the disposal container by the door and exited. I would suffer the consequences later but right then I had a life to save. "Put him on bypass, I need to replace the valve." A commissurotomy was his best option. I've seen Dr. Walsh perform it a few times before.*

*"I am going to perform a commissurotomy. I will need a valve ring—size is unknown, pickups, suturing needle and thread," I say to my team. They disbursed and returned with my supplies. I measured the valve in accordance to the different ring sizes. I found one that was a perfect fit and proceed with suturing it to the tricuspid.*

*"Let's take him off bypass and see how he does," I said to the anesthesiologist. She turned off the machine and began ventilating him with an oxygen mask. The monitor showed a constant and strong heartbeat, "Okay, let's close him up? Johnson, do you mind?" I asked my assistant. He nodded and stepped towards the table with the suturing kit. The room went into celebration as I felt my eyes start to tear up. I backed away, pulled off my gloves, disposed of them and then exited into the scrub room. I covered my face and let out the tears I was holding back. I sighed, wiped my eyes, and exited into the hallway.*

*"... And that is how I knew my specialty was the right one," I say concluding my presentation to the students.*

*"What happened after with Dr. Walsh?" shouted an intern from the crowd. I chuckle and sigh.*

*"I married him."*

## Begin to Untangle

*I won't wear the apron*

—Dorothy Chan

I want you to know that the gates have always been closed, but they are  
beginning to open.

There have been angels protecting these castle's walls;

Thorny vines wrapped around each little stone.

As they begin to untangle, I stand in front of you with a huge stack of books.

Each of them contain chapters of the things I will and will not do

As well as my expectations of you.

I've never wanted to bow down to a master;

I'm looking for a friend, a lover, a partner.

My fingers probe a foreign nose, ear, neck;

My eyes attempt to pry past hidden intentions of face expressions.

I can tell you're nervous because you keep looking away

When my hands try to crack open the door.

Is there something grisly on the other side?

Who knows?

There might be something strong,

A tree with roots buried deep.

Kiss me, I'm ready.

## Apparition

Another life, in some other space or time we could have seen the leaves  
change color and fall over and over, year after year.

Perhaps if circumstances were different you would not have left and gone so  
far away.

Please know I miss you every day; so I pour my heart out to you as ink flows  
from the pen to the journal, full of things I know you will never read.

“Are you finally happy? Have you reached peace? Can you now rest?” I write  
with no reply.

Rain drops of tears start to fall from eyes too tired to hold them back any  
longer.

I know you had your own demons, and I know you dealt with your own  
misery; but was this really fair?

To just transfer that pain to us, the ones you left behind, without a choice;  
did you even think of us?

In the end I guess thinking of us would not have mattered much; your  
judgement had been too consumed and shaded by a dark cloud for so long.

Often I remember good memories, which only saddens me more as all that is  
left of you are my thoughts.

Nothing else remains, except the haunting apparition of you.

## Hidden Tattoo

I remember. Every family holiday I saw him. My parents, sisters and I would stuff ourselves into mom's minivan and journey out to Charleston, West Virginia for a gathering.

I remember. It was the type of house you'd see in a Traditional Home magazine—with decorative boulders leaned up against one another beside the mailbox, a front lawn that displayed an impeccable checkerboard pattern and lacey curtains which hardly hid the house's interior, hung with grace behind the windows. The people who inhabited this house always invited me in with open, nourishing arms. I couldn't have possibly trusted these relatives more. Little did I know how much my unfaltering acceptance blinded me.

I remember. My uncle was a character. For a while I considered his smile to be welcoming and his humor pleasant, but with time I began to realize that a smile like his always carried something more beneath it: something forbidden. His eyes were an unforgettably dark color—so dark that if you looked into them for long enough, the world around you would begin to eclipse as if to helplessly match their pigment.

I remember. I was seven years old the first time it happened. He had suggested a walk through the woods which crowded their backyard. I approved with confidence. Further and further we snaked through the trees, until he eventually decided to rest on a large rock. "Why don't you have a seat on my lap, sweetheart?" he prodded. I obliged without a second thought. Soon after, I felt a warm hand pressing against the top of my thigh. He persisted. I was too naive to recognize his wandering fingers as dangerous, inappropriate, or abnormal, yet my body still reacted with a racing heart and sweat.

I remember. I remember the way I froze. It's amazing, truly, how quickly I forgot these occurrences as a kid—how promptly I shoved them under the rug and ignored any discomfort I had felt.

This routine, with minor alterations, continued with every visit. At the age of eleven, I learned about sexual abuse in school. That same year, my uncle stopped engaging with me. I figured it was because of my older age. I figured it was over forever. I was wrong.

I remember. Three years forward and I am preparing for my sophomore year in high school. One day, I arrived home to a familiar car parked in the

driveway: my uncle's. Apparently him and his wife were going to spend the weekend at my house.

I didn't think much of it at first, truthfully. After all, I shared a home with my parents. The thought of being alone with my uncle crossed my mind not once. I planned on keeping myself locked safely in my room for as long as possible. I remember. It was Saturday evening and I had just gotten out of the shower. I could hear chattering through the floorboards beneath me—everyone, to my knowledge, was downstairs socializing. Wrapped in only a flimsy towel, I applied lotion to my face and arms. I was ready to have a normal night. I was ready to go to sleep.

Then, a knock on the door beside me:

"Can I come in to brush my teeth?", he asks.

My skin turned to fire.

In my throat was something hard, lodged securely, choking me. I remember the way it felt, knowing he would enter whether I wanted him to or not.

Before I had a chance to let out a syllable, the door was opened.

The 56 year old man stepped foot into my claustrophobic bathroom and closed the door behind him.

I stood, numb: unable to speak, unable to move. Everything that I ever was, or ever wanted to be, did not exist in this space. The towel, which hung loosely around my unsettled body, felt as though it shrunk with each passing second. I held it tightly, so tightly that if I gripped any harder, my fingernails would have ripped through the fabric as well as my skin.

I sat on the closed toilet to gain stability.

My uncle brushed his teeth.

Every breath he took, every noise he made, every minuscule movement of his body, suffocated me.

He spat.

He turned to face me.

He kneeled directly in front of me,

“You know I’d never do anything to hurt you, right?”

He forced his hands underneath my towel.

And the nightmares, I still get them sometimes. His inflections, which sound of lies and deceit and everything evil, are sharply tattooed to the inside of my mind, forever.

I haven’t seen my uncle in years. The detectives told me I will never see him again. But I remember.

## Awaiting



## First Date Gone Wrong

Well, I was 18 and I never had a boyfriend before. I was super awkward back then. I met this guy, Chris, when I went to this party with my friends the night we graduated. He was staring at me from across the room, and after like 20 minutes he starting coming toward me and I got super nervous, like I almost puked right there. The only thing I talked about was lacrosse, of course, and I knew I blew it. But then like a week later, some random ass dude hit me up on Instagram asking for my number! After I creeped on his page, I realized it was the kid, Chris. I was like, "What the heck?!" cause I never ever thought that would happen, but did let him get my digits cause he was pretty cute. And by pretty cute, I mean drop dead gorgeous! He texted me right away and for the next couple weeks we got to know each other. Sending emojis and dumb pictures on SnapChat.

We finally made some plans to go see a scary movie but, just my luck, when we got to the theater everything was sold out but *50 Shades of Grey* for the next two hours! I think he knew I was uncomfortable and said we could go get food while we waited to see the next showing of *Paranormal Activity*. I was like "Phew! Dodged that bullet!" I was not trying to see basically a porno with this guy I barely knew. How awkward would that be?! So I let him pick where we were gonna eat even though he insisted that I should pick, which was cool and sweet and all, but I didn't know where to go. So, he picked "Five Guys." Kill me, right? Literally the worst place for a date. I'm sure he loved how fat I looked eating a burger and fries and the ketchup stain on my white jeans. The movie started at like 10, and now that I was full I got sleepy. Chris loved the movie but I fell asleep 10 minutes in. When it was over he shook me awake, and I slapped him thinking it was my brother waking me up for school. Whoops! I felt so bad but he laughed it off and took it like a man.

On the way home he was making fun of me for snoring while I was sleeping, and I just could not wait to be home. This date went horribly. I'm sure he probably regretted taking me out at all. We pulled up at my house and I just said bye and got out. He got out too and followed me to the door, which I thought was weird. I thought he was gonna speed off as soon as he got rid of me. When we got to the door I turned around and asked what he was doing, and all he said was "this," and before I could even think he kissed me! It was so weird because it was my first kiss! I waved all awkwardly and then walked inside afterwards without saying a word. Still, to this day, I hate that I had onion breath and was caught totally off guard for my first ever kiss.

Me and Chris have been married for two years now, and I still seem to be clumsy and mess things up, but for some reason he still wants to be with me. I think he may have been dropped on his head as a baby. Through all of this, I learned that I should be super awkward and eat like a pig so that I can have my fairy tale and live happily ever after.



## Midnight—A Memoir Part II

When I was a kid, probably like most kids, I seldom got in trouble, nothing to get in trouble for. I went to school, did most of my homework, helped in my father's grocery store and around the house, worked in the yard, played sports, went to the movies, went swimming and fishing, and only griped a little about going to church on Sundays. And I took care of Midnight.

Midnight was my dog. And I mean mine. I had picked him out of a litter of pups when I was seven-years-old. He was a gift from my dad for being a good boy and helping in his store. The name tells you Midnight's color, black as coal.

When I caught the school bus in the morning, Midnight would scurry along and bark, "goodbye, see you later," as the bus drove off. That's what I told the other school kids he was barking. Sure enough, later when the bus brought us home, there was Midnight waiting in the yard to lead me down the gravel lane to our home.

That's when I would sing the latest hits I'd learned from the radio.

When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie,  
That's amore.

I crooned like I was Dean Martin, at least I thought I did. I loved pizza.

When the world seems to shine like you've had too much wine,  
That's amore.

As for wine, I had only tasted a spoonful during communions when the priest said, "blood of Christ." Yuuuk blood.

For four years Midnight grew along with me. I was happy, and happiness lasted throughout my summers and elementary school days. But the grocery store was losing money, bankrupt. Dad took a job offer in a big city, hundreds of miles away, to manage a restaurant for a highly successful Greek businessman. My father would no longer be his own boss. The way I saw it my dad had failed but I was the one being punished. I was eleven-years-old, just finished the fifth grade, and my family was moving.

I said goodbyes to Eddie, my human best friend, and to the neighborhood boys, and to classmates, Frank, Robert, and Spanky, and Diane, who I liked in a different way than the other girls. Goodbye to Mr. Shepard, my gym

teacher, and Mrs. Brown and the glee club, and then there was one more goodbye.

The lamp from the picture window of our home cast light mixed with shadows across the front lawn. I stood in the darkness of the apple tree. My chest was tight like something was in there and wanted to break through and scream, THIS IS NOT FAIR!

I watched my dad lift Midnight awkwardly in his arms and hand him up to the farmer in the back of a pick-up truck. Both men were strong and lifting Midnight they needed to be. I turned and looked back to the house and there was mom on the porch, watching; one hand gripped the porch railing, the other covered her mouth. She looked like she was holding tight to the railing to keep from coming forward, and she had covered her mouth so as not to say something to stop this.

It had only been an hour ago that they had told me. Our family was moving three hundred miles away and Midnight wasn't coming with us.

"We wanted to make it easier for you," Mom said. Then, dad, with that firmness in his voice that it's already decided, no discussion, "Son, this is for the best."

They leaned closer to me from across the kitchen table. I stared and their faces transformed, grotesque, as their mouths and lips moved and shaped words with voices that came from somewhere in a tunnel. "Your dog was bred and raised for the outdoors," Dad said, "Fields, woods, not some small fenced-in backyard in the city." Spittle sprayed from my father's mouth, each word louder as if he were arguing with himself. "He's not a city dog!"

Then another voice. "Your father and I have discussed this and we are both in agreement." I looked at the woman who was talking, her lips cracked and dry with flecks of yesterday's pink lipstick at the corners of her mouth; she was ugly. She couldn't be my mother.

I struck back. "Oh yeah, well this may be the first time you've been in agreement about anything. Ever!" Dad stiffened; mom looked away. I rushed outside, stood under the darkness of the tree, and did the only thing I could do: watch.

Midnight moved around in a circle in the back of the truck while the farmer shook dad's hand. The man got in the truck, started the engine, and Midnight began barking. The dog kept looking to the house, I knew he was searching for me. The light from the house caught the gold of Midnight's eyes. The truck's gears shifted; the truck pulled away slowly. Midnight barked, yipped, and whimpered, barked and whimpered. It didn't sound at all like when Midnight wanted me to run with him through the woods; or throw a ball and play fetch, when Midnight would run a few steps, turn and comeback, take off, comeback, bark with that higher pitch, almost saying, "Please, please let's play." No, the sound I heard was a plaintive one, the last I heard from Midnight.

That night I learned that eleven-year-olds had little say in life-changing events. Parents made the decisions and validated their choices with hackneyed expressions.

"It's part of growing-up."

"Disappointment is part of life."

"You'll get over it. Trust us. You'll get over it."

My first year in our new home in the big city; new neighborhood; new school; and new friends didn't go as my parents expected. My grades suffered and I failed; the friends I chose were the type good parents would want a son to stay away from. And what my parents had told me, they were wrong. I didn't get over it.

## Traffic Haiku

choreographed cars  
undulate like dancing waves  
riding the black stream

merging the river  
with forced cooperation  
crash at fatal speeds

rush hour brings the tide  
pressure builds behind the dam  
the rapids churning

unnatural fishes  
contend the everflowing  
current of traffic

## Shadowed Memories: A Memoir

“Don’t you realize? Nobody wants a fuck-up,” a malicious, inhuman voice whispered softly into my ear.

I flipped through a violet spiral bound notebook I recently came across, one that you would often buy in a grocery store or in a back to school sale at Wal-Mart. A third of the book was a set of journal entries from back when I was going through Partial Hospitalization, where I would join a group of people in a room in a hospital and we would have multiple therapy sessions going from eight in the morning to three in the afternoon.

One of the journal entries particularly stood out, mainly because it was one of the longest. But upon reading it, I quickly flashed back to the night that it happened, that horrible night that I don’t think I’ll ever forget. It reminded me of the terrors of my own mind, and what it can do to me if I’m left alone with it for too long.

§

The words echoed through my mind. Tears rushed down my cheeks as I stared down at my phone screen. The white background of the message box softly illuminated my face in the semi-dark dining room of the apartment that I previously lived in, my eyes glazed over as my thoughts had crossed over into my subconscious mind.

“Shadow, this really isn’t the best time-”

“Oh, but Arielle this is CLEARLY the best time!” Shadow laughed seeing me visibly cringe at the name that I had rejected years ago.

“Shut up, Shadow, you know I hate that name,” I growled, clenching my teeth internally.

Since it first reared its ugly head to me, it follows me around, whispering constantly in my ear, terrible things about me, terrible things that it thinks my friends think of me, and whenever I turn around to face it, I always see myself, but distorted in horrible ways, blood dripping from every hole in my face; the voice coming from it is inhuman, it’s like a combination of a rasp and a screech.

Everything started in middle school. I remember breaking down in the middle of English class, in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I don’t remember why, I just remember

internal pain, lots of it, and tears. I only broke down twice that year, and not much since. That first day though, I met a creature; it dubbed itself as my “Shadow” and it showed me the world it lives in, the world that it created in my head.

Shadow called it the Domain of Darkness; it sounds like a really lame name, but it is called that for a reason. It is a terrifying world filled with nothing but judgement and darkness. The sky is filled with eyes large and small, watching my every movement. There is very little light in the world, only illuminating the long, dreary hallways and the rooms that I visit. None of the little creatures of the world manning said rooms attack me physically; however they know how to get under my skin quite effectively. Even a single sentence can send me into a flying rage in the conscious world.

Shadow and the Domain that he lives in have stayed with me since that first day, and if I stay there for too long, I begin to go insane. Sometimes, even after I wake up, my body goes on autopilot, but my mind remains in the subconscious. It’s a scary feeling; it feels like a black sludge is slowly dripping over my heart, you know, the one you often think of when you think of your emotions. Some days it feels like my heart is covered in more sludge than other days.

I sat next to my best friend Dylan; he had come over to help me talk with Nathan, my ex, about his recent actions. And suddenly it had erupted into something much worse. I had left the group chat that we were all, dare I say, “conversing” in. It was one of my old friends accusing me of manipulation, which is not within my character to do such a thing; at least I didn’t think so.

It was at this point that things had started to blend and mush together becoming a tangled mess of fractured memories.

“The bathroom is just down the hall,” Shadow said, gesturing to the yellow light coming from the open door of the bathroom, “You just need to fill up the bathtub and let all of the air out...”

I was about to get up, my mind set on a warm, watery grave, until I felt my phone slipping away from my hand, pulling me back to reality.

“He really shouldn’t have said that,” Dylan said, displeased at the conversation happening in the group chat that I had left some time ago in an attempt to

free myself from any more pain, until I saw a message on Dylan's phone, from Nathan, "I need to stay away from Lucas, tell him I'm sorry."

More tears welled up; I immediately broke, my heart broken once again by the same person within a week. How dare him.

"Why does everyone want to leave me?" I cried out between heaving sobs.

"Didn't you hear me the first time, Arielle? No one wants a fuck up, not even Nathan. We both knew it was going to happen eventually, but you had to go and get attached, now didn't you? It's your fault; you were the one to drag him into this relationship! And now you're paying the price," Shadow sneered, chuckling as he paced to and fro waiting for something else to happen.

"Just...shut up Shadow..." I said, exhaustedly after ten or fifteen minutes of crying later.

But not much else happened that night. Dylan stayed over, sleeping on the couch to make sure I was safe for the night, and my thoughts on suicide passed, despite Shadow's many attempts; however even he gave up, as disgruntled as he was.

As soon as my head hit my pillow, I was already in the Domain of Darkness, and the first thing I noticed was water, water was flooding the ground of the Domain. My feet didn't feel wet at all, they felt quite dry, but there was definitely water. Shadow was already there, still annoyed about his earlier attempts being in vain once again. Nevertheless he still followed as I walked down the never ending hallway; eventually coming to a room filled with file cabinets, and near the front was a small grey creature with large round glasses and a somber expression pulling a large file out of one of the cabinets. Beside the creature was a paper shredder. The file was seemingly filled with what looked like photos; I grew curious.

"Hey, wait, what's that...?" I asked before instant realization kicked in, seeing the name on the file, "Nathan."

The little monster didn't seem to hear me as it inched the file closer to the blades of the shredder. I snatched it away, tears filling my eyes; the grey creature pushed up its lopsided glasses as I had accidentally knocked them askew in my efforts to gain back the file. Shadow sighed irritably, reaching over to take back the file.

"Why are you still so hung up with him? You saw what he said, he doesn't want you. Get rid of him." He tried reaching for the files again, but I refused.

"You just don't understand," I said, clutching them tighter to my chest, "I don't care if he doesn't want me romantically, but he's still my friend. I can't forget him just like that...."

Shadow groaned before snatching away the file, papers and photos falling down into the watery abyss below, leaving only a single photo behind.

He sharply turned to me, "Trust me sweetie, it's better without him," he said before cackling maniacally, "It's better without everyone. It's better to be dead."

Before he led me back to my personal room that I often "slept" in while I was conscious in the day, I quickly picked up the remaining photo from the ground. Once in my room I looked at the photo, our smiling faces beaming with joy. I flashed a quick, somber smile which was quickly interrupted at the loud tune of my phone alarm, sending me back into the world of consciousness.

## §

The horrid memory ended, and I turned away from the notebook to see my phone, a name popping up on the screen. Nathan was calling. He probably wondered when I was heading over to his house so we could play a session of Dungeons and Dragons with the rest of our friends.

"Hey, what's up?" I asked after answering the buzzing phone, my voice shaking slightly. I had barely begun crying.

"Are you still coming over?" came the warm and welcoming voice; he was curious at first until it became laced with worry, "Are you okay?" Nathan asked.

"Yeah...yeah, I just remembered a bad memory."

There was a pause, I wiped my eyes and attempted to sound normal.

"I'll be over in a bit-"

"Alright, do you need me to spot you some gas money?"

"No! ...No, save your money, I have some..." I said, counting out approximately \$5 in half change and half cash as I gathered my keys and wallet.

## Three-Fold Mirror

When I am lost  
I find myself;  
when I am found,  
I lose the world.  
The screen of ice  
before my eyes  
like mirrored glass  
hides and reveals—

Narcissus in the lake  
drowning in the love  
he makes unto himself.

I'm disinclined  
to stand my ground  
when the earth  
beneath my feet unfurls.  
I set my sights  
upon the star  
shining a light  
that warms and blinds—

Icarus in the sky  
floating in his dream  
to fly—and die—alone.

I hold the meaning  
in my palm—  
a shaft of light,  
a shadowed line,  
the voice of silence  
in the night,  
the light that burns  
black in the dark—

Sisyphus and the stone  
moving up and down the slope  
to no point known.

## Midnight Stars

If a time machine was ever invented  
Lord knows I will be the first to travel back.  
Travel back to midnight days with mom.  
Mom and I lying on the black Toyota  
The black Toyota that has been in the family for years  
Years? what about counting the stars?  
That will definitely take years.  
Yes, indeed stars, we tried counting.  
Counting was impossible, yet we still tried.  
The cool breezy blowing in all directions  
Brushing against my skin  
As the little hair on my skin rise up  
The little noises you hear at night gave me chills.  
Chills? it was more like peace.  
Peace at midnight, laying on the front hood of the car.  
We stared calmly at the midnight stars.  
My mouth moving up and down,  
Closing and opening.  
*Twinkle twinkle little stars* I sang.

## A Winter Wood

It was dusk, the air hanging still in the dark shadows of the trees, momentarily frozen like the ground it covered. The last ribbons of light were barely visible, caught in the towering tops of the trees this deep in the woods. Snow covered the ground in deep swells and drifts, tinged with a shimmering pink glow from the last of the sunset, making the world look faintly magical and otherworldly. Its gentle light contrasted sharply with the dark shadows of the trees which hid the unevenness of the ground ahead, making her path increasingly treacherous as night settled in. The air was so cold it seemed to freeze the back of her throat when she took gasping breathes and burned in her lungs just as sharply as running had moments before. The wind was inspired by her echoing breathe as resumed its own race through the Woods, pulling precious heat from her flesh and dispersing it uselessly through the air. She pulled at her cloak with ice numbed fingers, trying to hold it tighter across her chest against the next gust. She leaned one shoulder forward and pushed into the wind and snow in an effort to keep moving, the tree branches behind her tangling in her long dark hair in what seemed to be an effort to pull her back, towards her pursuers.

The black shadows of the ancient trunks around her flickered in the wind, moving across the landscape like slowly lumbering monsters only to surge forward like winter-hungry wolves in the next sudden gust. In her fear the dark shape of every tree ahead seemed to take the form of the ancient demon said to inhabit these deep woods. How distant the tales of the beast had seemed, warm before a village hearth! How more immediate indeed were the other problems plaguing the last village before the Wood. The land had always been as poor as those who lived on it, but lately it had seemed cursed. Crops failed for years on end, and frequently what grew was off, and made its eater sicker than hunger would have. Instead of aid from the distant king to the South the villagers faced yet more taxes, to pay off the civil war the king had won a few years before, a war they had already paid for in the blood of their men. Resentment and fear make excellent companions for anger, and the Other, like her, was the perfect target for all three.

She should have known her presence would arouse suspicion. She should have been prepared for the worst, but ignorant hope drove her to believe it would all work out. A woman travelling alone, who had arrived without explanation just as the worst winter in memory set in? Of course the general atmosphere of rumors turned against her. Wolves and bears strayed farther from the dark Wood than ever before, aroused from their slumber by something stirring

deep within. Food was tight, and she was seen as both too aloof and trying too hard to blend in, forgetting her place as a visitor amongst the locals with roots as old as the stones they walked on. Tales of a demon made from the fires of Hell, the Ancient god from a time so long past not even the oldest of grandparents could remember when it has been worshipped in blood at an altar in these woods might be easily written off, but not so for tales of witches. Witches were every child's greatest fear, and few grew out of it as adults. Tales of curses being laid in neighboring towns, began, rumors of a wasting disease that left its victims pale and bloodless circulated in hushed tones. Men who had walked the deepest paths too many times to be lost were disappearing in the woods, their tracks halting in the snow in the middle of a trail and never picking back up, as though they'd ceased to exist as they were raising their leg to take their next step. Children who had been warned to stay inside hidden from the cold were being drawn from their homes into the night as though by witch's siren calls. Rumors were becoming far more common, as if drawn from lips by the same force that summoned the wolves. Accusations swirled that she'd been travelling in winter to avoid trial for witchcraft in another town, that she was the one drawing the beasts from the forest, that she was behind the bad winter and mysterious illness. This afternoon, which already seemed so long ago as though it was another lifetime, the events as distant as if they had happened to someone else entirely, the animosity had come to a boiling point.

Standing on cobblestones laid in better times, angry villagers had surrounded her. The mayor had announced that formal accusations of witchcraft were to be brought against her. Another girl her age had started the shift from rumors swirling like smoke to accusations burning bright as coals. Driven by jealousy when the baker's apprentice, whom the other girl fancied, had baked her a cake for the Wintermoon celebration instead. And now she was surrounded by fear and anger as hard and palpable as the iron the mob held, clutched like their lives depended on it while they shouted too loudly to pick out individual voices. Alone they had each whispered and shivered for weeks. Together, resentment could build enough momentum to flashover into action, protected by the anonymity of a mob and the strength of iron against enchantment.

Her blood had run hot then cold, her emotions shifting as rapidly as the weather when a storm front is moving in. She was paralyzed in a vital moment of indecision, leaving too long a pause before her response for anyone to believe her denial. So she ran. Away from the community she'd

tried so hard to fit into, alone into the Woods as cold as her accuser's eyes. Praying she could outrun anger. Outpace fear itself, which flew silently through the trees like its very concept had been created by the trembling shadows branches cast on the snow.

Shaking free of memories that would only slow her down she stepped forward. Her foot cracked through a layer of ice, the sound as loud as a musket shot to her straining ears. Gasping breath caught in her throat she paused again, listening for sounds of pursuit. They were behind her still and gaining. She stubbornly squared her shoulders and pushed through the trees ahead, fruitlessly trying to avoid leaving a trail in the snow. It seemed nature itself conspired against her. Deep drifts slowed her progress, and branches pulled back on her hair and cloak like grasping fingers. The full moon was edging over the horizon, providing enough light for her pursuers to hunt all night, but not enough for her to truly run without fear of obscured obstacles ahead. The wind numbed her face and ears, whispering hints of her approaching doom as sweetly as a lover in her ears before screaming back into the night "Here she is! Here!" for all to hear. A crow cloaked in shadows suddenly called out, a sharp cry warning of death to come.

All the combined forces of man and nature had never been enough to stop her before, and she wasn't about to let them now. She stumbled forward through the trees, cursing the superstitious old villagers and jealous women. People had always feared and envied her in equal parts, a combination that could earn one temporary allies but not longtime friends. She had wandered this world alone, shunned and forgotten for so long! She took one more step, revealing a clearing in the dark wood, and froze. Her heart stopped and her blood ran cold, becoming one with the ice around her.

Her pursuers were gaining, but it no longer mattered. She'd left behind the Woods they so feared and entered a fairytale. Ahead the trees were the oldest she'd ever seen, trunks as thick as a house towering high above in a perfect circle as though planted by long gone hands. There was an altar of polished black basalt, reflecting the emerging stars above like a continuation of the night sky. Once this ancient stone from stories held the pooled blood of sacrifices. Once it reflected roaring bonfires, tiny fragments of the fiery hell of lava it had emerged from like the demon it was devoted to. Once the villagers had danced around it under the light of the stars alone, on sacred nights so cursed the moon itself was dark. Long before rumors of magic as weak as witches scared them true power had made them tremble on their knees before this altar. The power of the old god could still be felt here, heat fed with blood deep in the Earth warming her through the snow.

With a cry of victory the hunters arrived behind her in the clearing, and she turned to finally look them in the eye. Satisfaction replaced terror, and a smirk stretched across her lips in place of chattering teeth. Foolish men, who believed rumors of witchcraft and discounted the wisdom of old. Their death was approaching as quickly as an owl, her fear dispersing as theirs truly registered for the first time. Yes, she thought, her eyes glowing with her poorly concealed power, she would prove the mob right to fear her. Once more the heat of fresh blood would melt the snow. Never again would they try to cast out a god.

## The Date for Laughs

Not very often do you score a date with your crush. I mean, it can happen, but the chances of it actually happening are extraordinarily low. I had never actually been on a first date before last night, and it was not what I expected. My first date experience was not how you'd presume a first date to go. In fact, it was a complete joke.

\*24 hours earlier\*

Moments before I am wide awake, the alarm on my phone is vibrating vigorously, millimeters away from falling off my mahogany side table, and I sit up in my bed chucking my phone to the floor.

"Rise and shine sunshine," my Mom says, when I force myself up out of bed. "That's my girl."

I'm getting really sick of this getting up at 6:30 AM for school every single day routine. It's the same things every day. Kate's going to be here any minute, and I am struggling to find the perfect outfit to wear. It shouldn't even matter what I wear to school because the same people see me every single day and they should know my style by now. I fantasize about wearing the most expensive outfits, becoming the most popular girl, and landing a date with the hottest guy at Ridgevalley High: Jake Reynolds.

I think about what I'll do to get through all of the hundreds of days that will be just like this one. I start coming up with a plan: I'll work hard, make a lot of money, and walk in a completely different person. Maybe Jake will notice me more if I make myself more appealing and wear nicer clothes. I grab the latest outfit that I bought with Kate last weekend at Nordstrom and throw on some mascara and eyeliner just to make myself a little bit more conspicuous.

"Hey girl! Woah, you look nice," Kate says to me when I hop into her Ford Fusion.

"Thanks," I smile at her as she pulls out of my narrow driveway.

We finally get to school, and I grab my Michael Kors purse out of the backseat into the warm weather. The moment I'm out of the car I get a few whistles from some of the football players across the parking lot. I start walking in the right side lane, staying as close to the parked cars as possible. It takes a few extra minutes for me to make it to my homeroom on time since the shoes I chose are 3 inches high. I finally take my seat and people in my homeroom are all staring at me. Suddenly, a tall, dark and beautiful boy takes

his seat and plants it right next to mine. It was Jake Reynolds. His big brown eyes lock eyes with mine coercing half a grin. For a moment I look away, but as soon as he says something he fetches back my attention.

"Damn, you look nice. What's your name?" He asks, smiling at me.

"Uh, Amber. Amber Skyes." I stutter. I turn away to stick a piece of wintergreen gum in my mouth. I almost hope someone will pinch me to wake me up from this dream that I feel myself in. I can't believe that Jake actually noticed me for once in my life. He smiles at me, turns his back and rips out a piece of paper from his notebook and begins writing in it. He slides it over to my desk and then goes back to his seat. As always, the ceiling light reflects the chain on his neck, and I let myself think about wrapping my fingers around it, slowly pulling on it towards my face, and planting a kiss on his freshly shaven face. His lips are the perfect shape: just the right amount of surface area to plant the perfect kiss. I look down at the piece of paper he slid onto my desk and it says, *want to get dinner tonight?* And in smaller letters towards the bottom: *There was a movie I wanted to see at 4:00. I'll pick you up at 3:30 then we'll get dinner after. Text your address to 301-658-4513.* I look back and shoot him a wide smile showing all of my teeth. I can't believe I have a date with Jake tonight.

It's finally lunchtime and I see Kate across the cafeteria. Sprinting towards her, I wave the piece of paper in front of her face and she reads it. I have to admit: Jake's the reason I'm always so excited to come to class. Kate and I sit down and discuss possible outfit ideas and totally forget to eat our lunches. I see Jake wave at me from across the room signaling to text him. As usual, my stomach is filled with butterflies and I can't stop smiling.

My phone is buzzing in my butt pocket, and before I walk in the doors to my house I open the text. There's one text from Jake.

*Can't wait for tonight.*

I jump up and down for a moment, squealing like a little girl after she wins a stuffed animal from one of those carnival games. My mom is standing at the kitchen counter holding a pile of today's mail. "Mom, guess what! I have a date with Jake Reynolds tonight," I say.

"Jake who?" My mom responds, opening a letter she got in the mail.



"I'm going to get ready! Bye!" I yell back rushing up the stairs. Normally, I would stay and chat with my mother about what to do and discuss the proper first date etiquette, but I am running out of time before Jake shows. I'm standing in the front of the mirror practicing how I should talk to him. It occurs to me for the very first time I'm unsure as to why Jake Reynolds asked me on a date in the first place, but I think nothing of it and check my phone.

*Here.* My phone reads.

I walk out to his Mustang Shelby GT350 and open the passenger door, and Jake turns his head and looks at me. "Hey Ashley! Wow, you look terrible," he says.

"Uh, my name is Amber, and um, thanks?" I respond hesitantly. As rude as his comment was, I really wanted to give him a chance. Maybe he was just joking.

"That's what I said," Jake responds with slurred speech. I could smell the fresh alcohol coming from his breath. I think nothing of it, thinking if he's sober enough to get to my house in one piece, then he's sober enough to drive to the movie theatre. He drives 88 MPH down the highway, and I clutch hard onto the door handles.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Is this some kind of joke?" I ask, shooting him a concerned glare. Jake doesn't respond; instead, he drives faster.

"Sorry Amelia," he responds not giving me any eye contact. I'm too nice to correct him from the wrong name he called me and to turn around and go back home. I give him the benefit out the doubt hoping something good will come of this. I think back earlier today when we were in class, and he was being so nice to me. Then I think about what could have possibly gone wrong. We finally make it into the movie theater, and he sits next to these two girls who are sitting beside one another.

"Why hello ladies," Jake says, winking at them. I look at them and they're checking him out front and back. I keep my mouth shut and take a seat beside him. The movie has finally started, and he stretches his arms, and I infer he's about to put his arm around me. Instead, he puts his arm around one of the girls who sat beside him instead. I stand up in the middle of the theatre and call him out.

"What is wrong with you? Why did you take me on this date? To think I actually had a shot with you, and now I'm sitting here watching you put your arm around another girl. Is this some kind of sick joke?"

"Alright maybe I should tell her, even though it's a little bit too early," Jake says to one of the girls.

"Tell me what?" I ask him, looking at him with a serious face.

"Amber, I want you to look straight into that camera. You're on a reality T.V show," Jake whispered into my ear while pointing at the hidden cameras in the theatre. And that was the moment I knew it *was* indeed a real joke.

## A New House

Waking up in another new house is weird. Considering a new place your home is something that I had never gotten used to. I moved to a new house in Ellicott City because my parents asked me to watch the property while they prepared the old house to be sold. I was the changing of the guard so to speak. Nevertheless, this was better than my previous living arrangement where my water came from a cave and the doors didn't lock. This was in West Virginia, the one place I figured I'd be far enough away from home but still able to come back if I needed to. Only after three months, I needed to come home because I realized I should not have been there.

I traded living on a futon in a hobbit hole for a townhouse in a newly built development. A little tired of adventure, not knowing the area and having mostly no desire to explore, I became very bored. This was the first day I was in a new place and I remember getting out of bed and just standing there in my underwear. We hadn't painted yet so I just kind of stared at the white walls of my new room and looked around waiting for a path to light up in front of me. I felt the room expand and it became overwhelming. I needed to accomplish something. No longer able to just stand there almost naked, I began to get dressed. My room started to feel normal again.

Still had to figure out what I was going to do with my time. With no excuses or distractions, I went out to smoke a cigarette. I did a lot of my best thinking that way and I did just wake up so if you know that feeling, I wouldn't really have been able to do anything else anyway. I went out back to the concrete slab that was the patio. It was a warm March day considering Maryland weather can be so unpredictable. There was a gentle breeze that with the three exterior walls that surrounded my new smoking area, created a small sound barrier that left me with only my thoughts and the hum of the AC fans that were behind the house. This also made an attempt to light my cigarette more difficult since I couldn't shield all the sides of my lighter. Don't worry though, I beat the wind and got that sucker lit and took the first drag.

I told myself that I need to get a bench, noticing I was rocking back and forth, almost dancing around. From where I was standing, with those three walls and the forth being the rest of the world, I could focus my direction and not have to wait for answers if I saw what was before me. That was one thing figured out so far but being more comfortable while I gave myself cancer was not exactly the step in the right direction I needed. Now that I was back in my home state, further education had to be on the agenda. I had dabbled with

the idea of video production and found a program at technical school that was close to where I live. I had time before the program started so I settled with at least finishing my smoke before I did anything else. This decision immediately set me off balance. Being the kind of person that let the world happen around me, I told myself that today would be the first time I just went for it. No more waiting around. The ground felt steady again as I secured my cigarette between my lips and wrestled the brochure from my back pocket.

The idea of carrying the literature around with me was so that I would expedite the process of making a commitment to actually calling the school. Holding me back was the idea of how much it cost to actually go to this school. It might be important to mention that this was just a certificate program but it carried the name of Johns Hopkins. I was nervous, afraid that they would not accept me. I read the content for the hundredth time, said screw it, stowed the brochure and pulled out my phone. The number was already saved in my contacts for this exact "Just Do It" moment. The phone began to ring and I noticed I had not asked for a minute. The phone continued to ring as I flicked the excess ash away. Reflex took over and I started to inhale more smoke. Mid drag, I heard a voice on the other side of the line. Not ready to respond, I choked on the smoke and coughed.

"Are you okay?"

The sound of a seasoned receptionist, confident and secure, ready to answer any question or direct any call at a moment's notice came through speaker of my phone. Trying to catch my breath and regain composure, I respond with a struggled: "Yes and sorry about that, my name is Patrick Talbott and I am calling in regards to gaining admission to this school."

"One moment please."

The hold message information started halfway through its recording. I wasn't listening to it. I dropped my butt and stepped on it and giving this phone call all of my attention. Laser focused, I waited for the click of the hold music to stop and my future to start.

"How can I help you today Mr. Talbott?"

A deep, slightly southern voice picked up the phone. This man sounded huge and for a moment, even though I am also quite large, I was intimidated.

Not wanting to anger this voice, I quickly explained my situation and asked about setting up a meeting to learn more about the school. I told them that I am really into movies and want to learn more about video production. The advisor asked when I was available and I told him that I had nothing going on, so anytime would have worked for me. The date was set and I was moving forward in life. Whatever happened next was tomorrow's problem. I lit another cigarette as a celebration of that day's victory. Time had passed more quickly than I perceived as I gagged again on my second cigarette. I had burned my cigarette down to the filter.

The importance of the meeting and the time spent at the school would ultimately become worthless to tell. The politics of what happened next is really the culmination of information gathered from varied sources. The school lost its name and with it the only reason I went to the school. I had completed the program but now had zero contacts and when potential employers searched information on my place of learning, they found nothing. Even the time at the school had made me lose all interest in what I thought I would enjoy. Four years later, again on the back patio smoking a cigarette, I had to figure out, again, what I was going to do and why I had not gotten a bench yet. This time it was dark out with no moon or stars visible through the clouds. I had a new brochure in my pocket. It slid from my pocket as I thought to myself, "Have to do something, why not this?" I connected with a new pre-programmed number and waited this time for the call to connect. There was a gruff/zero bullshit "Hello?" on the other side of the line.

"Staff Sergeant Rodriguez, I want to join the Marine Corps."

## Reflection



*Oil on canvas, 18x24 inches*

## What Science Has Taught Me

Biology says  
there are billions of living things  
fighting every day  
to keep me alive.

Geology says  
the Earth won't remember  
if I fail that quiz  
or embarrass myself.

Chemistry says  
everyone feels the same feelings  
I am not alone  
even if I am lonely.

Physics says  
things live by the same rules  
no one is special  
in the eyes of gravity.

Everyone says  
science is a cold profession,  
unconnected and unfeeling.

But I know better.

## Spring 2016

The night air pure  
Does reverse the years  
With darkness hopeful: I am sure.

What years the wine of  
The stars touch, while hands are held,  
Sway, fingertips dance.

Starry is the laughter near—  
Clear infinite night, bestow all mystery and love  
That creationism cannot smear.

Look at the stars: old  
Downloads, late with light beauti-  
full—I see with wine.

Warm wine in my eyes, be the landing dove.  
Wild wine my blood, lets fill playful whim.  
Deep wine of my years, blend a sip wide with starry complexity above.

May the Universe near, in night so clear,  
Iambic between darkness and stars,  
Reconcile my journey between death and life.  
That all turning again to the Sun,  
My sense of mortality new,  
Should seek no sorrow dead.

# Contributors' Notes

spring 2017

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For more than twenty years **Carol Baldwin (CB Anslie)** has written non-fiction. Her experience spans virtually all forms of writing, from business to technical writing, from newsletters to scripts, from manuals to instructional materials, and more. While working as a tutor in the LAC, her love for creative writing bubbled over, and she began dabbling in fiction. Carol and her husband, James, are the proud parents of three grown daughters and one lovable fur beastie, Ruckus.

**Anthony Bent** is a student at Howard Community College majoring in Government and Politics.

**Jane Eliza Bittner** is a part-time student and a full-time corporate drone. She has hopes for a literary future and is currently working towards that by making her first attempts at a novel. She is grateful for the opportunity to be published by *The Muse* and is eager to continue her pursuit of literary development at Howard Community College.

**Torie Costa** is currently attending Howard Community College, with an interest in creative writing. She performed an original prose piece in "W.I.G Nition: Actors and Writers Fire it Up" presented by Howard Community College's Arts Collective's What Improv Group?, Howard Community College's creative writers, and Howard County Poetry and Literature Society (HoCoPoLitSo).

**Eliza Crawford** is a Howard Community College student trying to find the path in this world that allows her to learn and love as much as she desires (she very much so desires).

**C'yana Denby** is a Howard Community College student. She graduated from Centennial High School in 2015 and is an aspiring dancer and future doctor. She plans to transfer to University of Maryland College Park for her spring semester in 2017.

**Jacob Dugan** is a Social Science major, focusing on Psychology, hoping to eventually work as a social worker primarily to help LGBT youth and/or their families. Jacob has enjoyed reading and writing ever since reading the first Harry Potter book in 1st grade. Since high school, he has grown into himself more and now focuses his writing more on expressing, whether through fiction or otherwise, the emotional struggles that anyone within the LGBT community can face.

**Shawn Duggan** is a Hospitality Major looking to dive into the world of storytelling and poetry.

A graduate of Atholton High School, **Glory Ebinama** is currently a student and Track and Field athlete at Howard Community College. She is a resident of Columbia, Maryland. She is in her last semester at HCC, soon to be graduating with an associate's degree. Glory will be attending Salisbury University in the upcoming fall semester.

**Mary H. Fox** is a retired organizational psychologist and University professor. She has published a textbook and many articles in psychology journals and has been a part-time textbook editor for Cengage Learning. As an undergraduate at University of Maryland Baltimore County, she minored in Poetry and Literature. Currently, she is becoming a Master Naturalist and has published several short stories in anthologies and journals.

**Eva Granzow** has been writing poetry on her blog since 2006 and you can find almost 2,000 poems in different languages.

**Chris Grossarth** is an artist at Howard Community College. His work is about the experience of being in the postmodern world. For him, art is catharsis.

**Farida Guzdar** has worked at Howard Community College for over 30 years; she enjoys the educational environment. Farida loves to write and is thrilled that her prose honoring her dad has been published in *The Muse*. Farida recently named a student study space in the science, engineering, and technology building in honor of her father, whose entire education was funded by scholarships. Farida is paying it forward, funding student scholarships at Howard Community College.

**Peggie Hale**, an alumni of Howard Community College, enjoys art in many forms. Her current lifestyle as a full-time RVer provides opportunity for travel and endless inspiration. She is content with rambling, but thinks of Maryland as home.

**Elizabeth Hansen** is an avid cat lover and nature enthusiast. Her poetry is part rant, part therapy session, and entirely a commentary on society.

**Isa Hanssen** is an 18-year-old from Ellicott City. Part-time art student at Howard Community College, part-time freelance artist/designer/painter, part-time creative writer, and part-time lucid dreamer. Hoping to eventually move to California and away from 20 degree weather.

**Emily Hobby** has been a student at Howard Community College for a year. She has had a passion for writing since she was in middle school, and she plans to carry on that drive throughout her life.

**Victoria Magdalene Holthaus**, since birth nicknamed and exclusively called Maggie, is an experimenter in all forms of art (story-writing, painting, poetry, culinary, photography, etc). The author, although currently in her second year of pursuing a psychology degree, has future aspirations to one day become a published novelist.

**Christian Hwang** is a student at Howard Community College. He writes about issues he cares about through narrative and memoir. He believes that by sharing experiences through writing complex and sometimes painful topics can be explored with nuance and care.

**Maren Kamischke** is a sophomore at Howard Community College. She aspires to be an Ultrasound Sonographer. She was accepted into the Rad Tech program and currently awaits her acceptance into the sonography program. Maren enjoys playing the guitar, solving Rubik's cubes, and creative writing. A few years ago, Maren won first place for a speech contest advocating her own voice to make a change in homework load for students. Since then, Maren has continued to write creatively on her own free time.

**Jim Karantonis** was a medic and psychiatric specialist during the Vietnam War. He took his first creative writing class from Lee Hartman at Howard Community College in 2009. Since then he has taken writing classes from other Howard Community College professors including Ryna May and Tara Hart. Several of his stories and poems have appeared in issues of *The Muse*. His wife, Mary Lou, is his muse.

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

**Michelle Kreiner** is a preschool teacher at the Children's Learning Center on the campus of Howard Community College. She is working on her Bachelor's Degree in English.

**Lucas Larsen** is a writer/artist at Howard Community College. He has been creating Japanese Anime styled art for eight years, and writing creatively for seven. He's always looking to create new worlds and new characters. He has fluffy pink hair and runs the FireWitch Art page on Facebook.

**Benjamin Law** is a student at Howard Community College, who is majoring in communications. He also works for the student newspaper as advertising manager and works part-time as a seafood sales associate at Weis Markets. He plans on transferring to Salisbury University after he completes his associate's degree.

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

**Matthew McLaughlin** is married to Natalie and has a son Conner. Matthew had always been interested in writing and decided to go back to school to get his associate's degree. Attending Howard Community College, Matthew decided to explore creative writing as a potential career path. He will be graduating this Spring.

**Eva Miller** is a freshman at Howard Community College who is working on an A.A. in Social Sciences.

**Brittany Nixon** is a sophomore at Howard Community College. She is 20 years old and has lived in Columbia for almost 3 years. She is an engineering major. Brittany loves literature, art, music and spending time in nature. Brittany's poem, "What sets my teeth on Edge?" was published in last year's edition of *The Muse*.

**Ingrid Nuttle** is an artist, writer, epicurean and dog-lover born in Columbia, MD. She will attend Drexel University in the fall to study product design; in the meantime you can find her either painting, talking to herself, inventing new ways to eat kale, or chasing her insane puppy.

**Sail Park** is a hapa: of mixed creativity. Sail Park is a non-traditional student, who has returned to school after many years. He has lived a long and wandering life. He is rich with stories. He is a film major, who plans to write and direct movies in verse form. He still ponders the stars.

**Lindsey Sanders** is a Criminal Justice major at Howard Community College and will be graduating in May 2017. She currently works as a dance instructor and choreographer, but hopes to become a Computer Forensics specialist. Lindsey will be transferring to University of Baltimore in Fall 2017 to pursue her career.

**Hayley Skaggs** is a freshman at Howard Community College. She entered Howard Community College as a psychology major, but knows this is subject to change because of her adventurous personality. She is very appreciative of art in all forms, and believes that everyone has a desire to express themselves in some way.

answers to **søren** and occasionally j. he/they. witchy boy looks and runes. a bit of an insomniac with a penchant for melodic death metal. often sighted with a stainless steel mug of tea tucked into calf high boots.

**Jenny Stidham** is currently a freshman at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, majoring in psychology. She spent last semester developing her poetry portfolio at Howard Community College and continues to grow as a writer at UMBC. Besides writing, Jenny enjoys hiking, reading and exploring new places and opportunities. With these adventures by her side, Jenny uses writing as a tool to express her views and experiences for others to enjoy.

**Gayatri Suresh** is a Biology and Chemistry tutor in Howard Community College who believes in sharing her knowledge. Apart from tutoring, she also teaches Indian classical and fusion art. Gayatri's other interests include music and cooking.

**Patrick Talbott** has written not only for his classes but in his free time. All of his work is honest, blunt and usually based on a true story.

**Elena Taylor** is currently a sophomore here at Howard Community College. She is studying Social Sciences and hopes to use her skills to benefit the military. In her free time she enjoys reading and writing poetry. She hopes that one day she will be a published poet.

**Sence Turner** is halfway finished a bachelor's degree in Information Technology to match her associate's in Cybersecurity. She is a writer by night, and a mostly secret one at that. Maybe it's in the stars that one day she'll take her stories to the next level to share with a larger audience.

**Varada (Vivi) Vaidya** works in Learning Outcomes Assessment office of Howard Community College. She is a self-trained artist and enjoys experimenting with oil and acrylic paints and gel ink. Her other interests include singing, popular science articles and culinary experiments.

**Clark Watts** has struggled with depression and self harm for quite a while. Despite this, they keep moving forward, taking each day one at a time.



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

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

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# Submit to issue.16

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Email submissions to [themuse@howardcc.edu](mailto:themuse@howardcc.edu)  
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