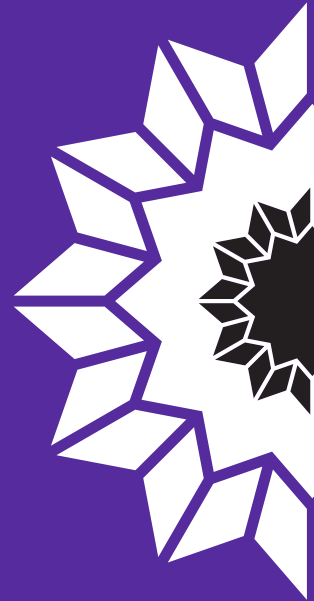


# STARTLEBLOOM

THE GCU LITERARY REVIEW | VOLUME 3



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## TABLE OF *Contents*

September Driver.....	MARINA ALVAREZ .....	1
<i>Life is Sweet*</i> .....	HEATHER ROSS .....	5
Come Home to August.....	JESSALYN JOHNSON.....	6
Gas Station .....	COLE MAIMONE .....	7
The Obsolescence of a Poe.....	CYMELLE LEAH EDWARDS.....	8
<i>Alaskan Nature*</i> .....	KARA LAVERY .....	11
Secrets of Rain .....	SIDNEY RASCON.....	12
Seen.....	BREANNA HACKITT .....	13
Gossamer Thread.....	CHAR TIERNEY .....	14
The Dragonfly Lady .....	JEWELIA TRUJILLO.....	18
The Ribbon in the Birdcage .....	CALEB DAVIDSON.....	19
To the Goddess of the Moon .....	MICHELLE SCHLAVIN.....	20
<i>Hand of the Universe*</i> .....	BO ANDERSON .....	21
Safehouse.....	JESSALYN JOHNSON.....	22
<i>Townsend*</i> .....	JESSALYN JOHNSON.....	27
Adventure Calls.....	KAYLOR JONES .....	28
Last Year, This Year, Next Year.....	JESSICA KARNES .....	29
Nothing on TV .....	MELISSA HARRIS.....	30
<i>Phoenix Rising: The Beginning*</i> .....	MICHELLE LYNN HEYNE.....	37
Passion Awakens Understanding.....	KIM C. SHULER-TEACHOUT.....	38
Raspberry Blackout.....	HOLLY .....	40
Sunrise.....	HANNAH COX.....	45
<i>Sunny Days*</i> .....	ANTHONY P .....	46
Miss Mistress Melody.....	ANTHONY P .....	47
<i>Lost in the Midst of the Winds*</i> .....	MAGALY P. ALANIZ.....	48
Chance Encounters.....	RICK FORRISTALL.....	49
The Cliff.....	JEWELIA TRUJILLO.....	52
<i>Translation*</i> .....	SIDNEY RASCON.....	54
How Could You Neglect a Strawberry?..	NATHAN J. ALBERTS.....	55

\* Indicates photograph or artwork

## TABLE OF *Contents*

Anthony.....	KARISSA HARLOW .....	56
Inhale .....	JUDY BOOZER.....	61
Lonesome Road.....	NICK MCCORMICK .....	62
<i>Winter Soldiers*</i> .....	MARK RICHARDS .....	63
Peralta Trail.....	CYMELLE LEAH EDWARDS.....	64
Up and Over .....	TANNER OREL.....	65
A Farmer's Thanks .....	DONTERRY A. COLOMBEL, JR. ....	69
<i>Send Me, Isaiah 6-8*</i> .....	GABRIELLE MAPES.....	71
Dear Betula .....	NATHAN J. ALBERTS.....	72
Tip-Toe .....	ALII J.....	73
<i>Flower: Self-Portrait*</i> .....	OLIVIA MULLIN.....	75
I Worked for Weeks on this Poem.....	GEORGE ROBINSON IV .....	76
Poema (Workmanship) .....	JESSICA SEALE.....	77

\* Indicates photograph or artwork

# September Driver

MARINA ALVAREZ, CSET, CLASS OF 2018

She swept open the car door and sat down next to me, a flurry of fall colors and sounds. With her she brought the smell of fire smoke and a soft sense of loss.

“Where to?” I asked, starting the car.

“You know.”

Then nothing else.

I’ve never been a fan of silence. I tried to make conversation, “It’s getting colder.”

She seemed to prefer the quiet, looking up to acknowledge that I had spoken and then looking down at her hands in her lap.

Passengers like her never sat in the back like the others. Those were the lovers and friends and bosses.

But there were a special few who always sat in the front without prompting. I knew them all by name.

“You seem more drab this year. Not as many reds and golds.”

Not an insult, not a compliment. Just a fact.

“I miss them,” she said softly, leaning against the window and not making eye contact.

I put her favorite song on the radio; she put in ear buds and listened to a podcast instead.

I shut off the radio. After a while I tried again.

“Will you have them next year?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t feel like it.”

The last one said the same thing.

I tried one last time.

“What’s different?”

“As if you don’t know?”

There was something cold and brisk about her tone, a strong gust of words.

“She’s gone.”

“She is.”

I started to speak again but she cut me off with a look that told me she knew what I was about to say.

Still I blurted it out, “I miss her.”

“So do I. So does everyone. Bad things always happen to the best people.”

I stopped the car and we climbed out. The sky was bright with the orangey red sunset.

I pulled out a watering can from the trunk and walked over to the nearby spigot to fill it before returning to the car. Next to where I had parked, in a patch of grass was a flat stone. It was as shiny as ever as I watered the dirt and flowers around it and cleaned off the leaves that had accumulated on top of it.

She stood and watched me, looking greyer and more distressed by the minute.

“You don’t look well.”

“The reality of it...”

I understood and changed the subject, “Will you stay?”

“No. I’m never here for long. That’s what winter is for.”

“I don’t want winter to come.”

“None of us do.”

I traced the letters on the stone lazily with my fingertips. Birthday, full name, the carving of the angel.

“They keep saying it’ll get easier.”

She shrugged, and I swore I heard the sound of crackling leaves, “I’m not sure. Maybe you just get used to it.”

I didn’t answer her for several minutes, just sat and held back tears until I could speak again, “She was my whole heart and soul. My whole motivation to do better, be better.”

“You had a heart and soul before she was born.”

“I don’t remember that.”

She knelt and put a hand on my shoulder.

“Death isn’t easy, expected or not. You took care of her and loved her as best you could. The final decision was out of your hands. You loved her, and she loved you.”

“I’m never gonna stop missing her.”

“That’s okay.”

I looked over at her and saw a glimpse of the old reds and golds in her smile. She stood to give me my space but after a while the sun dipped below the horizon. She got into the car and I knew it was time to go.

I arranged the flowers neatly and stood, dusting the dirt off my jeans.

“I miss you,” I whispered to the grave before putting the watering can away and getting back into the driver’s seat.

“We’ll see how next year looks.” she said softly, pulling out a scarf from nowhere and wrapping it around her neck.

I dropped her off at the windy corner I had picked her up from and drove away without looking back. I didn't need to. She wouldn't be there.

I turned another corner and parked, so I could lay my seat back. I wouldn't need to find my next passenger. He would find me, he always did.

Even autumn mourned the passing of angels. Perhaps winter would be different.





*Life is Sweet*

**HEATHER ROSS, CCOB, CLASS OF 2019**

# Come Home to August

JESSALYN JOHNSON, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

I walk by the place we used to lay outside  
at night, where we'd stay until the sun came up,  
wondering if the stars were still thinking of us.  
There was something sentimental about it, something  
golden, pure. It's quiet; some silences are difficult to ignore  
completely, though there are ways to turn it into  
white noise. Proving the generosity of time is  
impossible, and I know this by watching it consume  
my blood and cycle through my head. The clarity of the night  
isn't as crisp as it once was, clouds hovering above, looming  
in brooding mysterious agony. The green of the grass seems  
to have faded miserably, where we spoke of foolish youth,  
the brief outline we carved in the ground flattened and dry.  
I think that without any form of brilliance or pattern there is only  
uncertainty, and so this is all that may be certain. This thought  
plays thoroughly, clean and quaint and cruel. I see headlights  
creep past and onward, and I know they are watching me  
in awe of my state, like somehow they knew and they were sorry.  
Much to the unfortunate liabilities of breath there are still  
treasures to be won, or so they say, and if not there is always  
more laundry to fold or weather to prepare for—the weight  
of passing through is heavy but it stopped nothing  
nor did it possess mercy or forgiveness. Now the leaves will  
soon fall, and there will be no one in sight but myself  
in my own company, dreaming of the past and feeling  
the concrete trust that belonged to ignorance, when we promised  
to come home to August, soon, with nothing in mind  
but gentle sweet softness, though it's more like a bitter  
citrus, soaked with disappointment. I walk by the place  
where you now lay outside, alone, and I place a flower  
in between your neck and your chest, where my head used to be,  
dreaming through the spring air of summer's end.

# Gas Station

COLE MAIMONE, CSET, CLASS OF 2019

I walk into the gas station, anger stewing in my mind. I only had fifteen minutes to get to the Starbucks, and it was 20 minutes away. 'It's ok.' I tell myself. I walk down the candy aisle, the brightly colored wrappers each tugging at my attention. Sarah liked Kit-Kat, I remind myself. Connor... Milky Way. Doubt flashes through my mind. "Screw it" I mutter to myself. I snatch the candies from their boxes, and the coolers catch my eye. A beer sat there, calling my name. Against my own desires, I reach for its neighbor, the Pepsi. Wouldn't reflect well to drive up with a beer in my hand. I go to the cashier and strew my purchases on the counter. The employee, with the expediency of a snail, scans each item. "\$8.75" he tells me. 'Kids are expensive' I remind myself. "Add \$10 of gas to pump three" I tell him. Eons stretch by as he punches the numbers in. I hand him my credit card and stuff it away when he hands it back. Finally, I start walking to the door, and the clock above it catches my eye. The minute hand had managed to move ten ticks since I walked in. With a muffled sigh, I notice the hour hand. I was two hours late. My kids and their mother had been to the Starbucks and left an hour ago. I open the Kit-Kat and head to my car.

# The Obsolescence of a Poe

CYMELE LEAH EDWARDS, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

"I've deduced that people who enjoy Hemingway above all other writers are lacking in areas of their lives they themselves are not even quite sure of."

"Please no talk of this until after breakfast."

"I enjoy him quite a bit."

They had shared an English muffin with apricot spread on their walk from the second-floor bakery to the seventeenth floor of their building. They would have to push the reddest button upon entering the elevator and discovering the pressing mechanism for their floor had been unlit. After five minutes of jealous impatience, other riders in the elevator journeying to the eighteenth floor would step off in perturbed haste onto the sixteenth floor and take the stairs.

But they would wait until the operator spoke through the intercom, assuring them they'd be up and running "sooner than later." Known, as of late, as the most charitable floor in the building, the publishing house on the seventeenth floor's pressing mechanism in the west elevator often went unlit. But the east elevator had pagan music that conflicted with their religion, and berry scented air fresheners that conflicted with their apricot muffins. And so they always took the west elevator.

"It is against my religion you know."

"I know."

"The east elevator is damned to bad fortune playing that ungodly Mahler."

The button for the seventeenth floor flickered to complete illumination and the ringing of the operator's service call had ceased. The most charitable floor in the building was known as such because those on their way from floors eighteen through forty-nine would often stop by on their way down the east elevator and drop loose change and bills of lesser value into a tin can someone had nailed into the wall next to the outgoing mailbox. Workers from floors fifty through ninety never stopped by their floor at all. And the top ten floors of the building were never ascended to, but descended from. The helicopter pad being a themeful place for the seventeenth-floor companions to take their smoke breaks. Between the two of them they had successfully smoked a total of fourteen cigarettes in their combined sixty-four years of living. They had wittfully solved the problem of their wanting to smoke but hating the taste by deciding their smoke break location to be the roof of the building, which took a total of ten minutes to reach. Being that their breaks were only of about fifteen minutes, by the time they'd reach the helicopter pad they would light their gars, having enough time for a single inhalation, cough-gag, and then return to their charitable floor.

“It is a filthy habit.”

“Indubitably.”

“Fascinating.”

“Quite.”

Their cubicles were next to one another, both with windows that faced the park.

Though they both faced the same park, they would often have different stories of what they’d seen through their windows at the end of the day.

“I saw an old man in plaid trousers dragging a baby into the gutter.”

“I saw an old woman in a checkered overcoat pulling her dog out of the sewer.”

But the companion who often paid for the English muffin with apricot spread never ate as much of it as the companion who did not pay. And so around one o’clock, the former companion would venture to the vending machine in the gathering lounge. While he did that, the companion left behind would sneak over to the hungry companion’s cubicle, sit down in his chair, put on the cufflinks sitting in the ceramic paperweight atop the desk, and begin making edits to his companion’s stories. He would change all of the pronouns such as “his” to “her” and the “I’s” to “we.” He had become skillful in this over the years and even had time to think of a new title as well, all the while the true owner of the cufflinks was deciding between an Almond Joy and pistachios. And when he’d return he would find his desk just as he left it.

“Her longing for the warmth of the princess’s chamber door as she’d knock before intrusion, left her feeling cold, and without any reason to call off the ceremony.”

“Sounds better does it not? A little Sapphic pleasure for our readers will have the press bugging our cubicles wondering, ‘the nerve!’”

“The one who longs for the princess cannot be a woman for one very simple reason.”

“Why is that?”

“Earlier in the story the one longing for the princess is deemed responsible for having exposed the duke’s emissary as the murderer of his horse Alfred, in order to rig the races.”

“Sounds to me the work of a woman.”

The working day would reach its end and the companions would embark on their voyages home, taking their taxi to the ferry, the ferry to the train, and the train in separate directions where each one’s family of sorts waited. The paying companion would reach his fiancé and Yorkshire terrier named Bisbee. The non-paying companion would arrive to an empty house, all except for the family of rodents that had been self-taxidermized and displayed in an array that depicted a circus. Miniature top hats had been made from dyed broom thistles, and overcoats made from licorice. But before either would make it out of the building, their boss would approach and begin a delightful conversation, one with all the formalities one takes when about to fire one of their workers.

“What will you do?”

“I saw this morning that the bakery is in need of a new baker.”

“You don’t bake.”

“True. But if you remember I wrote once about a baker that fed pastries edged with soot to the town’s children, and made all the neighborhood boys and girls throw fits in their classes, closing down the schools for days and reducing the tax rate.”

“Ah, yes. I believe you called it, ‘Cupcake Comeuppance’”

“Yes! That is right! And well what is a writer if he can write of a thing but not be that thing?”

“Well, a writer.”

“All is the same.”

And so the companion heading south on the train would arrive to his fiancé and pet, joining them both in dinner and wine.

And the companion heading north on his train would take the key from beneath the turtledove on his porch, wedge open his door, and pour onto the table the change he had swiped from the seventeenth-floor tin can. He would think of what to eat for dinner, and decide on the perfect thing he craved the most. The skillet on his stove would be sizzling and popping with grease splashing onto the floor, and he would chop the paper he pulled from his work file into little pieces on the block, a short story he had been writing for *The Atlantic*. He would fry the pieces like chicken bits in the skillet, placing them next to mashed potatoes and cabbage on a plate.

After setting the table but leaving the gas going on the stove and closing the kitchen door, he would pray for his meal and himself, and he would eat to satisfy his craving, taking longer than usual, and washing the whole lot down with aspirins dissolved into a vase of liquor. Then he would light his seventh cigarette.



*Alaskan Nature*

KARA LAVERY, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

# Secrets of Rain

SIDNEY RASCON, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

Still puddles on the road ahead declare  
Where dips and cracks hide from our cautious eyes.  
These pools of warning tell us to beware,  
To go around and take their cool advice,  
Yet something in those waters moves within  
The stirring minds of dampened passersby.  
Curiosity takes control again—  
A subtle splash, despite the likely risk,  
Resounds with pleasure in the doer's ears—  
The ambiguous call to new frontiers.



# Seen

BREANNA HACKITT, CHSS, CLASS OF 2017

It is seen by everyone, yet it does not know that it is seen.  
It continuously grows in its own time; in its own manner.  
A myriad of colors cover its form, but it does not care what it looks like.  
It does not compete with its neighbor,  
It does not choose where it grows;  
It simply grows,  
Not caring who sees it, only caring about the beauty and joy  
It has been ordained to impart upon its undisclosed audience.  
The sun is its nourishment, for it can only grow where there is light.  
Light that will cover the entirety of its neighbors, cousins, brothers and sisters.  
Light that digs through the entwining roots and  
Draws up the life out of the suffocating darkness and all-consuming dirt.  
Seen by everyone, known by everyone,  
Yet it seeks only to rest in the presence of its maker;  
In the peace, perfection, and majesty of its maker.

# Gossamer Thread

CHAR TIERNEY, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

He stood on the edge of the promontory, apparently gazing up and across the vast divide. His hands grasped the rail tightly, his face turned up slightly to soak in the late afternoon's sun-rays. The taut figure didn't move, even after the last of the spectators finished their oohs and aahs and slowly wound their way back down the trail, making their way past the adobe-colored rocks that littered the edges of the well-beaten path. A hawk screeched in the sky and the man reacted as the sound reached his ears.

His tense grip relaxed, and a sigh escaped his lips. He murmured, "Surrounded in measureless oceans of space / musing, venturing, throwing – seeking the spheres to connect them." His body sagged suddenly, its rigid pose loosening. He turned and wearily set out to make his way down to his cabin at the bottom of the mountain. It was only when his back was against the soaring sky that his sightless eyes and red-tipped cane came into view.

He shivered at the sudden gust of wind that swept over the cliff's edge. The moving air felt cool on his skin, so recently warmed from the sun. A small creature skittered on the path ahead of him. He jumped at the voice beside him.

"A gossamer thread pulls me to your soul."

The man laughed delightedly. "A fellow Walt Whitman fan! Well, I have flung that thread out in the void often enough..." he started, when another voice reached them faintly.

"Help! Help!"

The man stopped, immobile for a moment as he sought to identify the source. "Did you hear that?" he asked his unseen companion.

"Yes, it came from down the path."

The two hurried now, the clacking cane finding its way on the familiar route.

"Can you see?" he called a bit ironically to his companion who surged ahead, moving off the path as the blind man could not afford to do.

"Yes, someone has fallen off the path. They are on a ledge down below."

"How far down are they?"

"About six or eight feet. It is a human. She is laying on her back with one leg folded under her."

"Well, I didn't think it was a mountain goat calling for help, so thanks for the clarification," the blind man called testily. "Can you help her?"

"No."

It was silent for a moment. "Is she dead?" the blind man asked.

"No. Maybe unconscious."

"Is there a way down to her?"

"Yes."

"Could you go down and help her up? Could you give her a hand back up to the ledge?"

"No."

"Why not?" he almost screamed in frustration. What a time to be helpless!

"I don't have hands."

An amputee! Visions of the explosion that cost him his eyes and his buddy McKinney's foot outside Kandahar flooded his mind. He saw again the look of horror on his sergeant's face, as clearly as it had leered out at him in heart-stopping nightmares for years afterwards, the last look his eyes were to see before being transported out of the area on a hastily constructed travois.

Bile rose in his throat, and he tasted again the blood and bitterness that filled his mouth long ago in that foxhole, realizing that his life was about to change forever.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" he called.

He had to think. Night was approaching, and the temperature plummeted to freezing lows after dark. He knew what he had to do. His "no man left behind" mantra propelled him to call out sharply, "Can you help me if I help her up?"

There was a pause. "I don't know."

Oh, my God! This was getting worse and worse. For the first time, the blind man regretted his decision to live in the remote area, lacking even basic cell phone coverage. They had maybe an hour to get the unfortunate woman back on the path and heading down to the warmth of her car, or to his cabin where the fire steeped in his wood stove, underneath the ashes.

He took a deep breath. "Can you talk me down?"

"Yes."

Okay. This was it. At least I have a fellow vet, he thought with resignation. Here goes nothing.

"All right. Talk me down then. Describe how many steps exactly, according to the face of a clock. Noon is straight down the path."

"At 9 o'clock, take five steps."

His cane weaving ahead of him, the blind man took five steps, and stopped. The probing cane encountered no ground, and he shuddered slightly.

"Get down on the ground and slither backwards until you drop over the edge," his helper instructed.

He could hear moaning now, faintly rising from near the top of the abyss that he was willingly planning to descend. "It's okay, ma'am," he called down. "We will get you out of there."

He crouched and laid his cane down, his hand even more unwilling to cease its

grasp now than it had on the railing moments before. On his stomach, he propelled himself backwards over the edge, heart pounding, waiting for the voice and further instructions.

"Okay, that's good. Lower yourself further. The ledge is about seven feet wide."

Carefully he lowered himself, stretching as far as possible, as though seeking the ground through sheer will-power. "Watch out, ma'am." He jumped.

Surprising, he stayed on his feet. It wasn't as far as he had feared, far less than the eight feet suggested.

"Help," she said weakly, unnecessarily.

"Yes, ma'am. Can you stand?"

"I think so."

He reached out, his hands encountering hair and an ear. He leaned forward and grasped a shoulder. He smelled her perfume and the shampoo in her hair as he took a firmer hold and fumblingly pulled her to her feet.

She gasped, and fell against him. Instinctively, he wrapped his arms around her. He felt her legs moving tentatively as she stood inside the circle of his arms.

"I'm okay. It's not broken." She sounded relieved.

"Can you climb over the edge if I give you a foot hold," he said.

"Yes."

Edging away from her, he laced his fingers invitingly, creating the classic foothold, ready to shove her up and over the top.

He felt her foot enter his hands, then she shoved his shoulder and scrambled for the hold above. He pushed and she pulled herself up, dirt and rock tumbling onto his uplifted, sightless face.

He almost screamed when he heard the now-familiar voice beside him.

"A gossamer thread pulled me to your soul. Come, where the use of hand or eye or feet is not necessary. Come, you called. Let us go now."

His breath quickening, the blind man realized that this was no veteran, nor even human. A wind swept over him and he felt himself soaring off the ledge and over the vast chasm. He glanced up as an eagle's cry reached him from nearby. He could see! He looked back. He saw the woman stand, and turn to look below. He saw his body, lying on the ledge, a smile on his lips. A scream rose from the woman, then she turned and limped away.

## **A NOISELESS, PATIENT SPIDER**

**By Walt Whitman**

*A noiseless, patient spider,  
I mark'd, where, on a little promontory, it stood, isolated;  
Mark'd how, to explore the vacant, vast surrounding,  
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself;  
Ever unreeling them—ever tirelessly speeding them.*

*And you, O my Soul, where you stand,  
Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, —seeking the spheres, to connect them;  
Till the bridge you will need, be form'd—till the ductile anchor hold;  
Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my Soul.*

# The Dragonfly Lady

JEWELIA TRUJILLO, CHHS, CLASS OF 2019

In the pond, she sits serenely,  
Enjoying her reflection in the quiet ripples.  
A hum, a melody, entrances those nearby:  
The fish swim gracefully with a flutter of fins,  
Cicadas ring a chorus of appreciation.  
She tilts her head in the water's mirror,  
Donning herself with bright lilies and foam,  
To be a fascinator on her dainty head,  
A string of pearls around her neck.  
She smiles dazzlingly at her green skin,  
Preening more lovingly than a swan.  
The dragonflies flit about in their little races,  
And she plucks them one by one,  
To place their wings in a shimmering halo  
Around her devilish reflection.

# The Ribbon in the Birdcage

CALEB DAVIDSON, COFAP, CLASS OF 2020

Dawn broke. Amber rays bounced over the hills and across each blade. A sparrow chirped at the awakening of the day. The sweet song carried out in the crispness of dawn, rustling the late-summer leaves. Swooping out of its new nest, the sparrow glides down towards the back porch of a home in hopes of finding a morsel to satisfy the night's hunger. The few little crumbs the bird found were not enough, so he braved getting closer to the home. At the back door of the house the bird spotted a sparkle from within the home. In between his crumb scavenging, he would occasionally go back to the glass door to admire the sky-blue glimmer from inside.

It wasn't until the fourth hour of daylight that the door was slid open allowing the little bird entrance to the home. Breathing his own fabricated confidence, the sparrow glided his way inside to ease the curiosity of what had caught his eye. He stopped short seeing that the blue shone from inside a cage. Weighing the risk, he decided he would brave the cage if what he saw happened to be a ribbon. He hopped close enough to see that brilliant azure silk of a ribbon lying within the birdcage. Entering the cage gave the sparrow a better look at this beautiful example of exquisite handiwork. He knew he couldn't help but to love the ribbon, so he clamped his beak on its linen and flew off to bring it back with him to his nest.

The sparrow noticed some resistance in his flight. Turning his head back to see, he found that the ribbon was snagged on the cage and he had been pulling and unraveling one thread of the band, leaving it three quarters the length it had started at. The bird tugged and tugged at the thread with all the love and longing of its fluttering heart, but with each yank the ribbon shrank. The sparrow knew he had an important decision to make: either pull the ribbon and take home but a thin blue thread, or stay in the cage to love the ribbon in its fuller, more beautiful purity. And so, after eight hours of his enchantment with the ribbon, the sparrow flew back to his nest with neither the ribbon nor the thread, lest the toxicity of his pulling corrupt the ribbon any more.

# To the Goddess of the Moon

MICHELLE SCHLAVIN, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

O Diana, why do you hide your face?  
The pale visage calms my fearful mind.  
I am drawn to you—  
Cover me in your cool beams,  
Guide me on this eternal journey.





*Hand of the Universe*

**BO ANDERSON, COE, CLASS OF 2020**

# Safehouse

JESSALYN JOHNSON, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

Near the mountain side of a small town in Montana, a house stands lonely but crowded in company by fields of grass and bees and sunshine for as far as the eye can see. The brick home is little with only three rooms, yet each was built with love and care and patience, just like Greta. It sits in solitude under a dome of clouds and blue, though sometimes the rain rinses it away and makes room for a fresh new sky, like the sun grew tired and needed to rest just like Greta, too, so she felt the sun was just like her and she was just like the sun.

It seems that, for some, there is trouble wrapped around the mind, like ribbons—knotted instead of bowed and yet loose to allow forgetfulness, though it is that way intentionally, so as not to be pretty at all. Some things always felt this way, persistently catching on trouble, the way Greta's curls sometimes caught on her hairbrush, or in her earrings.

I am small and that's okay, she thinks, in reassurance.

On this quaint hill Greta lives in silence, save the occasional small talk and the heartbeat of the earth, along with her two parents who are both kind and sweet. They barely spoke to one another or even to her, but they smile and hug her day and night, with gentle arms, like two feathers but barely touching her cold skin, just enough to be plenty.

Today is a new day and today is a good day, she thinks.

She feels happy, or tries awfully hard, greeting the flowers and bushes that boarder her home each morning with a kind word or phrase, sometimes a “hello” but others a “good day” or “feel well, sweet earth” if she is feeling chatty or poetic, a smothering adventure almost too lavish, and she knows this, making sure to save it for special occasions, like when father wakes her at sunrise or when mother says the word “love” which she does not do often—this is okay, as just once in a while she lets Greta know that it's true and that she feels it genuinely.

On days it rains she is sure to stay in, watching patiently from the living room window, counting the droplets on the glass and restarting each time she notices more.

She tries not to remember the way things used to be, before they moved so far from the Oregon coast, though it was possible she really didn't remember at all and it just seemed as if there was something more back then, something important. She remembers certain things, like the water, where she would walk into the cold ocean holding her mother's hand, the foam belonging to the unsteady tide licking her small freckled feet. She could hear her father in the background mumbling maybe to himself and shuffling about the thick sand, while she could hear her mother next to her saying "please don't let go Greta, please don't let go" like a song, as if she might disappear the moment their hands slipped apart. She wasn't allowed to go in deeper than her ankles.

Life, as it is typically known, may have been easier back then, or more real. A house in a neighborhood with real bedrooms and a real yard, school friends and stray cats and television. These are more ideas than memories, though the plausibility seems fair enough. Pictures float around her mind and in her dreams, like maybe she has only a wild imagination and none of it was ever true. Her father tells her that sometimes, or more accurately he stares at her with eyes that mirror hers almost exactly, harsh ivy in color, shaking his head just enough to display crushing disapproval without hardly moving at all.

Greta doesn't much care for the nearly muted nature of her existence, as it forces her to feel more alone than she desires, not that there is so much of a choice in that, or in anything. It became a game, doing so little, being part of the earth, closed off and dangerous. A release is needed, a human reminder that she is living, or just alive. She'd sit and talk alone to herself, to her flowers, sure to keep away from her folks to prevent them from noticing her play pretend in an unnatural way, to them a sin, and to her, too, though she doesn't understand why.

I am alive and that's okay, she thinks. I am breathing and that's okay, too. She believes this, truly and with all her might, as if she has to, and she's told she needs to—a curious portion of herself that sometimes keeps her up at night. One night it does, in the most unusual way, and Greta is unable to sleep as she lay wide awake under a quilt handmade by her mother so many years ago, neutral in temperature, staring at the grey space that looms over her bed.

Call it an innate feeling, or call it something else, there is some sort of shift in tone, an unworldly itch of the scalp that makes her blood flow backwards and her heart rate slow. For a moment she thinks there might be someone else in the room with her, someone she does not know. This is clear and crisp, a sour expression that piques her interest, for nothing unusual has happened for years.

She hears what sounds like her mother crying, weeping intensely into a pillow though it isn't muffled well in the slightest. The thin walls drop her secrets like they are made of sand. With a soft click a flood of light splashes under her door frame, illuminating the designs on the wall, the scratches and holes, the chipped paint. Her father stomps quickly into the next room, speaking harshly, a tonality that caused Greta to hesitate for a moment. She can't recall a time where he spoke with such volume and intent.

The crying hushes, but only for a moment, just for a soft voice to wail "I can't do this anymore" and return to some restrained agony. This could mean one of many, many things, none of which Greta wants to think about, even if it is just about trying to fall asleep.

I am safe, I am safe, I am safe, Greta thinks.

She presses her ear up to the wall by her bed, cool to the surface of her ear, listening to the hum of the peculiarity of her parents' voices, mourning something mysterious, hauntingly in sync. Greta could make out a whisper that grew louder as the tears became less audible, a short ballad of comfort, their sounds overlapping one another in brief before silencing completely. There is worry in the face of the thing, something Greta thought to be solely of the past; for as many years as she lived in that home and slept in that room, it was Safehouse, like a title, like a name.

Her mother came up with this, the first day they moved in. The air smelled new and strange, and she had yet to form any sort of solidarity between her and the mountains. Her parents seemed slightly more cautious than usual, too, like they didn't want to be there, either. It was something they all settled into, and Greta wonders if her parents have forgotten anything that occurred before that day like she did, but now she feels they must know something she doesn't, and this holds nothing of curious excitement or beauty, only terror.

A few weeks after they moved to Montana, existing quickly became a simple task for Greta, and the wondering ended, fading like the day into night, smooth and sound. There's never much more than the daffodils now, and the reminder of her body and mind needs to be constant, the feeling of her skin, her hair, the grass against her bare legs, between her toes.

I am real, and that is true, Greta tells herself.

She cannot sleep after this, thinking only of her mother's peculiarity, as if maybe it means something, as if she should worry, despite that she is always told not to. Her mother cracks her door open with barely any sound at all, like a subtleness that follows her, mimics her every movement.

"Greta?" she says, and immediately something is wrong.

"I'm awake."

"I love you," she says softly, closing the door.

Watching the sunrise around the edges of the curtains hanging tightly above the window just barely after this, her heart still pounds quickly, while she sweats in a generous way that makes her think she must be very ill, a way she hasn't felt in a long time. She stares at the ceiling another hour more before getting out of bed and heedfully sitting at the kitchen table for breakfast.

She hopes it will be eggs and toast, since it always is, and thankfully that's what her mother sets down in front of her without a word, as if the previous night was no more than a terrible dream.

I am safe, she thinks.

Her father sits on the couch, sipping black coffee and reading the newspaper, one leg across top the other. He is dressed completely, as if he's prepared to leave for somewhere, though he wouldn't, because he never did. He doesn't need to, or she assumes he doesn't. He wanders about the house each day, just as she and her mother do, or she assumes he does. Greta never questioned this until now, and she tried immediately to forget about the uncertainty.

At exactly seven she goes outside, looking directly up at the sun and welcomes its familiar warmth, a pleasant new day just as they all are, kind and graceful and lush.

"Feel well, sweet earth," she says, brushing her fingertips across the tips of the tall grass as she walks into the field. She decides she'll walk all the way around the house today, just out of curiosity, as it has crawled inside her mind and needs to be exhausted immediately.

When her eyes are set on the lake there is no doubt in her mind that she will escape harmed and disappointed, yet she continues along quite hastily in an almost trot-like manner. Greta is well aware that her mother can see most of her through the kitchen window she is sure was put there for that very reason. The lake is a good distance from home, but it's visible if a great attempt is made to notice it. She isn't supposed to go behind the house, and she never has, until now. Her red hair blows in the wind, asking her kindly to go inside, but there's no use in turning back now.

She can't recall what it feels like to not listen to the sound of the floorboards creaking or the wind rustling the leaves up against her ear. There has always been white noise, consistent, pushing against her thoughts, lacking the sound of humanity. This is wrong, Greta thinks. She keeps walking forward.

Her mother must know now, she must be coming for her, must have cursed at her father for not watching, or for not putting up a fence or building the house much further away. Greta stops suddenly, right at the edge of the lake, her reflection staring her directly in the eye and mocking her every wince. She knows this face, this uncanny resemblance to her own, but it does not belong to her, and it never has. This is the face of a stranger, or maybe someone she knew in the past, maybe better than herself, though it is nearly impossible to tell.

Touching her palm to the palm glistening below her, she feels the water in a way she recognizes, and suddenly she remembers, the ocean flooding the crevasses in her face. Somatically she felt nothing, she was merely watching a distorted version of herself, the same face, the same body, with the same eyes but different hair; the stranger she recognizes now, an extension of her presence, but not the physical boundaries of the thing, an anomalous entity she doesn't quite understand. Greta stands with her calves buried in water, dumbfounded, but she didn't know, and she still doesn't completely. In a swift movement the ribbons are tightened into a final knot, brutal and without grace.

Greta looks to the sky and watches the dome that protected her confess, she could almost hear it apologize, she could finally breathe in the honesty of her own mind. Everything ended in that moment, as quickly as it happened, and her mother still chants in sobbing tears, don't let go, don't let go, don't let go.



*Townsend*

JESSALYN JOHNSON, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

# Adventure Calls

KAYLOR JONES, CHSS, CLASS OF 2021

Stilted plain girl,  
Dusty moth,  
Cover self in  
Rebirth-cloth.

With leaky tap  
Of treasured youth,  
Run far and fast,  
Fight nail and tooth.

Go for me  
And globe explore,  
And while you're gone  
I do implore

That while on shores  
Of lake "don't-visit,"  
You steal a gulp  
Of life exquisite.



# Last Year, This Year, Next Year

JESSICA KARNES, COFAP, CLASS OF 2021

Paradox is when the cold gives me hope  
And a short-lived time can bring pure heartbreak  
It seems my luck rests upon a tightrope  
And showers of distress keep me awake

Yet flowers of nostalgia grow within  
The sun glows inside of my once lost soul  
Fireworks of thrill sear into my skin  
A bright new promise will make me feel whole

But a familiar breeze of doubt appears  
And the colors of my spirit alter  
My delight is dull and gloom interferes  
Tiny flakes of bliss melt into water

I give you last year, this year, and the next  
Same old blues, nothing new, I'm not perplexed

# NOTHING ON TV

MELISSA HARRIS, COE, CLASS OF 2019

I can hear my aunt calling from her room. I turn over and see the digital clock on the night stand gleam the time back at me in neon yellow. It's only 12 am, which means this is going to be a very bad night. This is usually how the bad nights begin... with Aunt Grace calling for me because she needs help getting to the bathroom, and with her being in so much pain from her chemotherapy and radiation treatments, it's nearly impossible for her to get up on her own. I sit up in the bed that is too short for me now, because the room I sleep in hasn't changed since I was a kid. I step onto the floor. I have to sleep shirtless and in my underwear because it's always so hot in this house, but yet the dark hard wood floor always manages to stay cold.

"Matty!"

"I'm coming Aunt Grace!" I yell, as I stumble to the door. I can hear her wailing for me all the way down the hall. As I make my way down to her room, I hear her cry out my name again.

"Matty..." Aunt Grace whines.

I turn on the lamp that sits on her bedside table, tripping over all the unworn clothes piled around the room.

"I'm here Aunt Grace. Hold on, I've got you." I pick her up and cradle her. I have to take my aunt to the bathroom quickly, as I know she is going to be sick. I flick the light on in the bathroom and set her on the floor in front of the toilet. My aunt starts to throw up what little food she ate for dinner, mostly consisting of bland protein drinks, as she's not able to digest much else. I hold her up, so she doesn't hit her head on the toilet.

"Oh Matty, I can't throw up anymore. This is killing me!" Aunt Grace is saying as her voice echoes into the toilet bowl.

"I know, I know," I say softly as I touch the back of her head. I can feel the stubble under my fingers where her hair used to be, as I try to soothe her. "You don't have to do this anymore. I'm calling your doctors in the morning to tell 'em you aren't going to the hospital anymore. That's it."

Aunt Grace lifts her head out of the toilet bowl, and leans back on me. I scoot backwards to steady myself against the tub. I reach for a towel off the rack above my head. Floral peach towels are the only ones hanging on the rack, as I haven't gotten caught up with the laundry for this week yet. So, I have to use the "good" towels. I hand the towel to my aunt. She wipes her face, and clutches the towel in her hand. Maybe this night won't be so bad, I think to myself. I start to close my eyes as Aunt Grace is quiet now.

"Matty!" she screams and leans forward clutching her stomach. Aunt Grace throws herself forward and just barely makes it over the toilet. She is dry heaving now, with twinges of blood mixed in it. Unfortunately, blood is not an unusual thing to come out with the rest of it, so I have learned not to immediately panic when I see it. "It's okay, it's okay," I say. After that, we both lean back against the tub. I grab the bright peach bathroom rug and pull it up alongside me to give Aunt Grace some padding to lie down on. It seems like only minutes have gone by when the light shines in my face as it comes through the bathroom window. Apparently, we stayed in the bathroom a lot longer this time, even though it doesn't feel like the whole night has passed. I look down, and Aunt Grace is curled up next to me on the rug. I try to stand up, but my legs are stiff, and my feet are asleep. I fall back a little and hit my head on the towel rack behind me. "Dangit!" I shout.

Aunt Grace looks up at me and says, "What time is it, honey?"

"I don't know. I'm gonna put you back to bed," I say as I bend down and pick my aunt up off the floor.

"No Matty, I want to go to the living room. My shows are on. You know I won't go back to sleep anyway."

"Okay. You're the boss," I say. I walk down the hallway carrying my aunt like a baby again and set her down on the recliner in the living room.

"Turn it to channel 102," she says.

I pick up the remote from her chair side table, and press the buttons in. "There it is." I set the remote back down on her table, and walk to the kitchen. I open the cupboard and grab the green can with the freeze-dried coffee grounds in it. I am struggling to keep my eyes open, so I don't spill instant coffee all over myself. I have to lean against the kitchen counter for support while trying to make the coffee. When I

look at my reflection in the window I can see purple under my eyes, my skin looking more pale than usual, and I realize that it has been some time since I had my hair cut. And because Aunt Grace likes to keep the heat up in the house, my shaggy black hair has dried from sweat, and is sticking to my face and neck. My shorts and tank top are now wrinkled and hanging to the side of my body from me lying on the bathroom floor all night. “Coffee is good enough. You don’t need anything else. You’re clean and that’s it,” I whisper to my reflection in the window. I shake my head to get the old me under control.

“Has this ever happened to you?” came blaring from a male voice in the living room. “How many times have you been walking through the forest minding your own business when a deer jumps out of nowhere and attacks you for no good reason? Well, never again! Now there is new wildlife repellent!”

“What?” I ask as I walk from the kitchen into the doorway, and peer into the living room. I am still holding the instant coffee can in my hand as I stare at the television. The man in the commercial is wearing a fluffy red and black flannel hat, with a matching shirt, and has a deer sneaking up behind him. He has a rifle in his hand, so I am pretty sure he isn’t just strolling through the forest on a nature walk. This man looks like a hunter. I wonder if they did that on purpose. I thought I had seen all the ridiculous products over the years that companies try to sell people on TV, but this one is by far the craziest, and quite possibly the most entertaining.

Aunt Grace loves her infomercials. These days they are pretty much the only thing that seem to satisfy her. I guess it’s not so much the commercial itself, but the fact that she loves to buy the stuff she sees on television, as the house started to fill up about ten years ago with the junk that my aunt buys off TV. Aunt Grace really loves the home shopping channel. Every closet and room in this house is filled to the ceiling with clothes, figurines, and jewelry that are all still in the original packaging. When I moved in with her a few months ago, I had to start hiding the credit cards and monitor her phone use. She barely has any social security money to live off as it is, so she shouldn’t be buying anything off TV anyway.

I walk back to the kitchen to finish brewing the coffee. I grab the instant oatmeal out of the cabinet and open the fridge to find the milk. I have to make her sloppy oatmeal because that is the way she prefers it. I mix it all into a bowl and put it in the microwave. As I am waiting for her breakfast to be done, I pour the coffee into her favorite mug that I have to wash every night because she refuses to drink out of anything else, then pour the coffee into my own cup. I’m not sure if she even wants to

have anything this morning after how sick she was last night, but I decide to make it all anyway. I know I need the coffee.

As I turn to walk back to the living room, I grab the paper off Aunt Grace's faded lime green kitchen table. The curtains match the rest of the outdated green and flower-patterned kitchen décor, but it's all in fantastic shape. I walk carefully to the living room with the paper under one arm, and the two coffee mugs in my hands, trying not to spill them.

"Here's your coffee. The oatmeal isn't quite done yet."

"Matty, I don't want to eat right now."

"I know, but I'm making it anyway, so you can eat it when you feel like it. If you don't eat anything, you will feel even worse," I say. "Then you'll end up having to drink that crappy protein stuff."

"Are you gonna call the doctor like you said, so I don't have to go in for treatments anymore?" Aunt Grace asks me.

"I'm gonna call, I promise. But you have to promise to at least drink that protein crap if you're not gonna eat what I make for you, so you can have some energy," I tell her.

She doesn't turn to look at me right away. I bend down and set the coffee on her side table that has stacks of magazines on it.

"You just need to let me die. I'm old, and no one cares about me except you anyway, kid," she says with anger in her voice.

"Oh, stop it. Quit feeling sorry for yourself, and drink the stupid coffee."

Aunt Grace acts like she can't hear me, but then shouts to get her point across. She does have hearing aids in both ears now, but I suppose her lack of hearing could be a product of old age and cancer, even though it does tend to act selectively. She's taking both radiation and chemo treatments now, but her doctors aren't very optimistic because it's just simply holding her cancer at bay. With her being so old, she isn't exactly a prime candidate for brain surgery.

Our nightly routine can consist of her sleeping through the night, which is the best-case scenario, or it can be like last night with her screaming in pain and me holding her on the bathroom floor while she throws up. She is nothing like the aunt I grew up with. When I was a kid, Aunt Grace was my favorite person. Every time my dad got drunk and abused my mother, she would come and take me from my house and keep me with her for days at a time. We would play at the park in the fall, or ride the roller coaster at Macadam's Amusement Park. She is the oldest sibling in her family, but she never married or had any kids. And even into her fifties, she still had long blonde hair, shadowy blue eyes, and long slender legs. Don't know why nobody ever snatched her up. Her laugh is my favorite thing about her, although I don't hear it much anymore. She would cackle with a high pitch squeal, then snort until she'd cry if something was really, really funny.

Aunt Grace watches TV most of the time now, not feeling well enough to go out, so she sits in her old pink recliner for most of the day, wearing the same floral night gown and blue robe. She has lost so much weight that she resembles a small child trying to sit in an oversized chair made for a grown up. Now completely bald, she doesn't bother to wear a hat because she never goes out, and no one ever visits. She quit going to church when she couldn't walk around by herself anymore, so now she watches the old Billy Graham crusades on channel 22 every Sunday morning to still feel connected to God.

I lean back on the couch covered with orange spots and plastic, and sip my coffee. Aunt Grace has all the furniture in the living room covered in plastic, except for her recliner, and the wooden rocking chair in the corner. I can barely make out the fact that this is the living room anymore because there isn't a whole lot of space left to get around, as it's taken me quite some time just to keep a path clear to the kitchen and the bathroom to do what little cleaning and cooking that is needed since evidence of her TV shopping has now bled into the front living room.

The telephone rings and as I reach over the side table to answer it, I knock over the picture frames covering the table that the phone is sitting on. None of the picture frames in Aunt Grace's house have actual snap shots of family or friends in them. The frames aren't empty; they just still have the stock pictures inside them of the fake families that come in each one when they were purchased, like models that pretend to be happy, all dressed in white, jumping around in a meadow covered with daisies. The phone isn't cordless, so I can only go a short distance around the corner to hear who is on the other end of the line, while trying to tune out the TV. At least this phone has buttons on it, since the one in the kitchen is still a rotary.

“Hello,” I say as I stand up looking at the floor with the broken glass from the picture frame I broke, wanting to clean it up, instead of talking on the phone.

“Matthew? It’s your mother.”

“Yeah, what do you need?”

My mother hardly ever calls, but when she did, it was just to tell me what I’m doing wrong, and not really to check up on my aunt.

“Where did you sleep last night?” she said.

“Here with Aunt Grace, like always. Why?” I answer.

“No reason,” my mother says to me, no doubt to try and get me to tell her what she thinks is actually the truth.

“Well anyway... Your father is here. Do you want to talk to him?” she asks.

“Uh no, I’m good. I don’t really need to get an earful from him today. Mother, I need to go. Last night wasn’t the best, and I’m really tired,” I say.

“Matthew?” my mother asks.

“Yeah, what?” I say.

There is a nice long pause before she answers.

“Oh, never mind,” she says. “I will let you go now. Stay out of trouble okay? You know what I mean.”

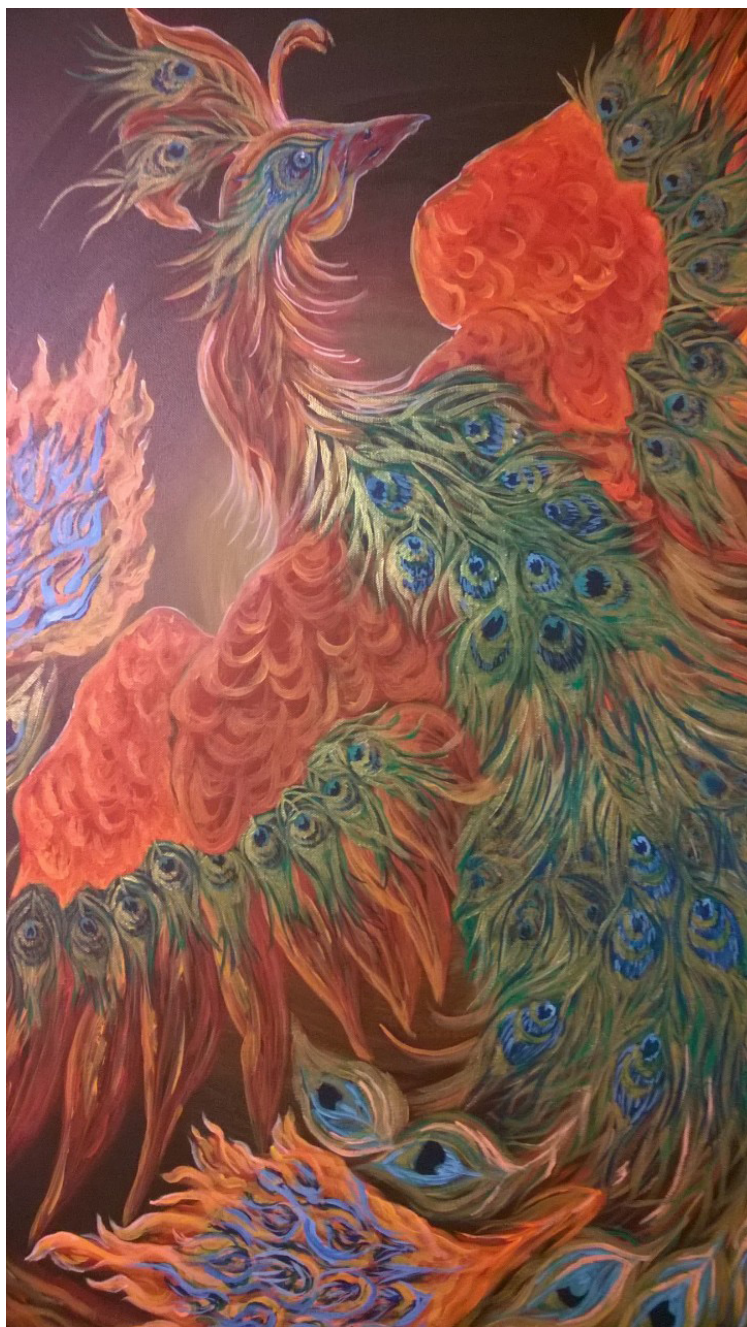
I can hear my mother talking to my father as I hang up the phone. The whole time we were on the phone, I could hear my father in the background giving her instructions on what to say to me. My mother still can’t do anything without that man controlling everything she does. God, I hate him so much. I look up at Aunt Grace. Her head is facing the TV, completely oblivious to my phone conversation, as her eyes are closed. I think she is finally giving in to the exhaustion she feels from last night’s little episode. I walk passed the glass on the floor from the broken frame, and go to the kitchen.

I reach under the kitchen sink to get the small broom and dust pan to clean up the broken glass in the living room, when I realize the oatmeal is still in the microwave. I pull the bowl out, and I can see that it's hardened. "She wasn't gonna eat it anyway," I tell myself. When I go back into the living room, I don't say my aunt's name, because I don't want to wake her, but I need to put her back to bed. I bend down to pick her up. I get a whiff of her clothes. The robe that she is wearing really needs to be washed. It smells like sweat and throw up.

Aunt Grace doesn't wake up, even when I tuck her into the covers. I put her heating pad next to her, because her body feels cold. I sit down on the bed next to my aunt. I can't believe the life she's lived and the pain she has endured. It makes my crap seem so stupid and irrelevant. Aunt Grace is the only person who ever understood me. I wonder if she feels the same way about me. I reach for her hand, which feels cold too. I can see that Aunt Grace hasn't really moved since I put her in bed. "Aunt Grace?" I say. No response. "Aunt Grace?" I say a little louder. "Are you okay?" I'm shouting at her now, but she doesn't move. "No! No!" I am screaming. I pick up the phone to call for help, but my mind goes blank, and the buttons look all mixed up. Who do I call? If I call the police they will think her screwed up, drug addict nephew did something to her. I drop the phone, slump to the floor beside my aunt's bed, and begin to sob. "This can't be happening. Not now! How can you leave me?" I scream. My head is spinning, and I feel so sick now.

After I sit next to her bed for a while, to try and figure out what to do, I finally stand up with my legs stiff as they were last night from being stuck on the bathroom floor, then sit on the bed next to my aunt. I see the collection of medications she's had to take these last few months on her bedside table. I have tried so hard to resist the temptation of stealing them, but this time, I won't be feeling guilty about taking them. I struggle to open the child proof lids with my shaking hands, spill some on the floor, but manage to take a few pills from each of the bottles. The one medication I know very well is oxy, because I am no stranger to it. I take a drink of water from the glass sitting on the bed side table next to all the other pill bottles, swallow a handful of yellow and white pills, and lie down next to my beautiful Aunt Grace. I feel my heart slow down. I am calm now. I breathe in and close my eyes.





*Phoenix Rising: The Beginning*

MICHELLE LYNN HEYNE, CHSS, CLASS OF 2020

# Passion Awakens Understanding

KIM C. SHULER-TEACHOUT, CHSS, CLASS OF 2019

I.

Her spirit bursts forth in a frenzy of *faith*,  
lauding essences of many a grace.  
Each ethos pouring forth, an understanding with empathy.

*Connection;*

Her heart and pen guided through a forceful beatific, seeming  
an unidentified gift of purpose and being.

II.

Her mind contemplates transformations, changes uneasy,  
beneath the canopy, many grounds of fragmented, humanities.  
A grasping of compassions,

*a journaling soul's toiled teachings.*

Wisdoms, absorbing an almost unquenchable, saddening thirst,  
transfixing her nature with newly born mirth.

III.

An empowered vision, unclasps the hidden  
principles entailed within the long forbidden.  
Copious treasures of humility and worth,

*awakening;*

a silent force of awe and wonder,  
engaging her mind with inspirations without ponder.

IV.

She encounters a new step *in reason*,  
as she inscribes imagined creations,  
giving forth found breath to broken,

*life*

She chronicles worded ladders to form equations,  
to answer the proclaimed determination.

V.

She writes in relentless interpretations, *through veils*,  
giving unsettled scripting, transitions of variant trails.  
She prays for spiritual fortitude to take hold,

*fearing unweaving new thought.*

She attempts to embrace an *innovation unfolding*,  
frustrations amending, she asks, am I not seeing?

VI.

Applauding reverence for *nature and divinity*,  
unclouded through inner light sanctuary.  
Her gift of new insights into living

*confronting her mirrored image of self;*

each a spiritual identity, contemplated meanings *in devotion*,  
of words, trainings, disciplines and inspired salvations.

VII.

Losing fluidity to gain a direction, a course *of entrenched belief*,  
forming a steadfast envisioned destination,  
away from tormenting unawares.

*Her spirit bursts forth as a frenzy through faith,*

*weaving new thought;*

as passion awakens understanding.

# Raspberry Blackout

HOLLY, CCOB, CLASS OF 2018

Have you ever driven alone through the desert at night? It's one thing when you're a kid in the backseat, and you press your greasy nose to the backseat window to the loud chagrin of the driver, but you don't care; you just want to look at the stars, because out here you can see the Milky Way. It pulls at you, a little, just a tug, but then your fingers feel the cold from the window and the radio announcer tells you what to buy for your dad for Christmas, and you're back in the car, and your world ends where the headlights do. You'll think about that milky way for the rest of the year, though, and when you return later that week in the afternoon, you'll look into the hot sun and wonder if the blue sky really is a roof, because things just aren't the same when it's there. Back home in the city, the sky is always closed. There are so many lights and walls and roofs. The sky has been closed for years.

It's another thing entirely when it happens again, and this time you're alone. Those desert drives haunt you, a little bit. Never quite stop tugging. And even when it's been ten years and the sky has been closed since, you remember. This time, if you're alone, you can roll down the window until your fingers freeze, and turn off the radio and listen to the wind and the coyotes. This time there won't be anybody to tell you that no, those weren't glowing eyes you just saw. And since you're driving, this time you won't see the stars. But you can turn off your headlights, just for a second. The world ends inches from your nose and then it never ends. For that second, there is a true blackout. And then the headlights are back on and you jerk the wheel back into your lane while you let out the breath you were holding and your heart returns to its pace. The windows are rolled up, and the car heater and the voice on the radio work together to coax you out of the blackness.

The biggest wonder of a desert drive, though, is the tiny train car diners that emerge out of the night like pink neon will o' the whisps promising HOT COFFEE, GOOD FOOD, 24 HOURS. My advice: don't pass up that offer. I never do. So when I spied a sign advertising "Starlight Diner, left at the next exit," I tapped on the turn signal and headed for the offramp.

The gravel under my tires crunched loudly as I parked outside the gleaming tin diner. When I turned off the headlights this time, I pulled my cardigan closer and headed inside as quickly as I dared, because as much as I like transcendent nighttime stargazing, only so much darkness can be good for a lonely driver. I shivered as I

opened the door and stepped into waves of light and boiled coffee-scented steam. These diners are something else. I swear they rise up out of another world to nab lonely travelers like me. I had always thought so, but at the moment, I'd had enough of the darkness. And whatever fate it sealed for me, I needed a coffee if I was going to make it the six hours home.

A waitress greeted me with a nod and I slid into the booth closest to the door, picking up the menu. Flipping through, my eyes fell across the daily dessert special: Raspberry Blackout Cake. "Blackout." The eerie darkness of the desert crossed my mind's eye for just a second, and I still don't know why I thought that I should continue the theme of darkness that I had come to the diner to escape, but I felt that I just had to, you know, so I ordered the blackout cake and a cup of black coffee.

For the record, it was the best chocolate cake I ever had. The frosting was rich, like it had been made with real cocoa powder and confectioner's sugar, not foamy and gummy like the cheap cakes you get most places. The cake itself wasn't too sweet, and the raspberry filling was tangy and not too thick, and the overall effect was so comforting that the loneliness of the night melted away as I wrapped my hands around the mug and curled up in the corner of the booth to soak up the warmth.

That's when the train car started to move. I was surprised at first, since it wasn't on tracks, and didn't have wheels, and hadn't been attached to a train engine. But it was a fitting end to the day, I guess, and as it lurched away from its perch in the sand dunes and my car faded into the distance, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. I had always said there was dangerous magic in those diners, and I ate the food anyway. I knew better, I know you can end up trapped if you eat the food, but I went and ate the food. But I'm not all that sorry. It was a darn good cake. Better than I can cook, and hey, if I spend Christmas break on one long night drive instead of fighting with the folks, I guess I won't complain. The fog faded from the windows as the train pushed onwards through the dunes, and I watched the stars come closer and closer until the sun started to make noises about coming up, and I guess I fell asleep at some point because when the waitress nudged me awake to ask for my check, the train car was back where I had first seen it. Nice of them to drop me off at my car. I paid the check and stepped outside to call my parents and tell them I would be a few hours late.

The sun was up and the sky was closed as I finished the drive home. My stomach did the usual flop of nostalgia as I opened the door. Either the house was smaller than I remembered or I was bigger, and given my late night cake habits and the tendency of buildings to remain the same size, it was probably the latter.

My mom appeared in the door frame to welcome me: “You’re finally home! I wish you could have gotten here sooner, you could have helped put lights on the house yesterday.” I promise I hadn’t come a day late on purpose to avoid that. “It’s ok, though, you can help us put lights on the tree.” My dad walked in, arms full of boxes of tree decorations, and set them down with more force than seemed necessary. I sensed that they had already been getting in some heated words in preparation for my arrival. “Here,” he greeted me. “See if you can unravel this spool of ribbon.”

We each worked in silence on the tree while a crooner on the radio waxed romantic about chestnuts. “Wish you had been here a day earlier,” my dad started in.

“You could have helped with the lights on the house.”

“Yeah. Mom said so.” I wasn’t going to pretend that I wasn’t avoiding the house. Or the state, for that matter.

“We would have liked your help.” Well. I would have liked yours, when I needed it. Just not with Christmas lights. Let a quarter-lifer alone to be angry with the past, will ya? And only home for five minutes yet. We continued decorating, and the radio crooner kept crooning.

“Are you avoiding coming home?” My mom interjected with a trembling voice. “Because it sure seems like it.”

I was silent.

“Answer your mom.”

Tree decorating had shut down and so had my ability to answer.

“Did you hear what I said?”

I nodded.

“Then why aren’t you answering?”

“I don’t know what I can say that won’t make it worse.”

“Tell us you aren’t avoiding coming home. Because when you say nothing, it sure feels like you are.”

“I’m not.”

“Are you just saying that because I told you to answer?”

I choked on my unformed words.

“I had a really good cake at a cafe today-“ I had to stop and compose my breathing. “I’m gonna try to make one. I think you would like it-- ” I made my escape into the kitchen.

I baked for comfort and I baked for catharsis. I slammed each ingredient onto the counter. I was baking like a person possessed, and I think more cake batter ended up strewn across the kitchen than in the pan, but by the time I had finished I had at least managed to take some of my anger out on the poor scapegoat cake. I set the timer and steeled myself up to resume tree decoration.

Fortunately, we had reached an unspoken agreement that silence and Frank Sinatra was our best option. We continued that way until he decided to start back in, “Why are you avoiding my questions?” Finally, I whispered back. “You know why.”

Just then, the lights on the tree blinked out- followed by the rest of the lights in the house- and the rest of the neighborhood. From how dark it got, I guessed power was out for a decent area. I groaned and ran to the oven. “My cake still has a half hour left to cook! Now it’s all half cooked and gross and it’ll be ruined by the time the power is back on.”

From the other room I heard the front door shut forcefully and my mom sigh. We had a brief telepathic conversation asking each other if we should go after him, but we opted to stew in the tension instead. I think tension is electricity- like static, because it makes your heart beat funny and your hair stands up and it hurts if someone touches you. Gotta be electric. That’s probably what caused this blackout. Electrical Tension Overload.

I offered Mom a raspberry and she laughed a little. We sat in the dark, handing raspberries back and forth. “You think I should light a candle?” She wondered aloud. “I’ll do it, Mom. Stay here.” I was rummaging around for candles and a lighter when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, coming from the back window.

I pulled back the curtain to see my dad lighting a fire. So that’s where the lighter went. I watched as he arranged small pieces of wood and lowered a cast iron pan into the coals, then came back inside and removed my cake from the oven. I followed him silently, and together we transferred the half-cooked batter from the oven pan to the Dutch oven nestled in the fire. Mom followed a moment later with a saucepan, her arms full of sugar, butter, and cocoa powder. We took turns melting butter and sifting the powdered sugar into the saucepan as the cake batter bubbled and the pine branches crackled. We had to take turns because the smoke kept getting in the cook’s eyes, and someone would have to run off to cough and blink tears out while someone else took the spoon. The night air was freezing and we huddled as close as we dared, and the electric tension kept shocking us at first if we brushed up against one another, but slowly the warmth of the fire seeped in. In a while the cake had firmed up, and we spread the frosting over it, and I retrieved forks from the kitchen.

This raspberry blackout cake was nothing like the one in the diner. Cakes are not meant to be cooked on campfires. It was an insult to chocolate. It was chewy and dense, and not at all sweet enough, and the frosting was still runny and stuck mostly to the cast iron. But we laughed at each other’s valiant attempts to eat a whole piece, and we scraped out whatever raspberries seemed most likely to remain edible, and the overall effect was so comforting that the loneliness of the night melted away as we propped our feet up on the fireplace to soak up the warmth.

My eyes followed a spark up to the desert sky. With the city in blackout, the night was darker than it had been in years, even darker than back when our house was on the edge of town, even darker than a chewy and burned chocolate cake. You could see more stars than I ever remembered. If you looked long and hard enough, you could even catch a faint line of the Milky Way.



# Sunrise

HANNAH COX, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

In isolation thoughts drift in reverse,  
A fog descends eclipsing the moonbeams.  
Darkness delivers a past riddled curse  
The reminder that death happens to dreams.

Assumptions are ample in the without,  
Shattered pieces make confused comforting.  
What could have been, only a running spout  
Of lies that water the seed, ruin spring.

Up comes the fear only to claim my tears  
The bile encompasses the dried spaces.  
Heartbreak cultivates the fragmented years  
Wired together in correction braces.

Yet, the moon surrenders to the sunbeams  
The keeper of days will call me redeemed.



*Sunny Days*  
**ANTHONY P, COT, CLASS OF 2020**

# Miss Mistress Melody

ANTHONY P, COT, CLASS OF 2020

Music is the causeway in which the spirit flows,  
Weaving and winding with every bow.  
Ethereal and cold, she is the greatest mystery,  
Bringing to light even the deepest misery.  
Through the minor fall and the major lift,  
My soul it seems to come adrift.  
Though my words be sweet and my face be bright,  
By her my spirit comes to light.  
My deepest secret and my darkest fear,  
Sweetly succumb to her calling cheer.  
As I drift into this trance,  
I surely doubt it is by chance  
That you find me here across my fear,  
It of which on my heart is seared.  
It's peculiar as to what happens to me,  
When I waltz with Miss Melody.  
How my heart it starts to break its walls  
Whenever it hears my mistress call.



*Lost in the Midst of the Winds*  
MAGALY P. ALANIZ, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

# Chance Encounters

RICK FORRISTALL, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

“Attention airport guests! US Airways flight 129 is now in its final boarding process. Please proceed to Gate 45 for immediate boarding,” he heard, frustrated that he overslept. Looking down at his boarding pass, nearly running now, he sensed the intrusion and impending collision. Raising his eyes he realized it was too late to avoid impact. “Damn,” as the contents of her Starbucks cup painted her crisply ironed white shirt tan. The cup bounced onto the floor, dotting the rug with the remaining liquid. He forgot about his flight when he saw the look of stunned disbelief on her face.

“What the hell is wrong with you!” she said, breaking the eternal silence. Racing through his mind for the appropriately apologetic response, he whispered, simply, “I’m so sorry.”

“What am I supposed to do now?” she thought aloud, attempting to squeegee the dripping tan stain from her shirt with the heel of her left hand.

“Listen, I always pack a second shirt in my carry-on. Why don’t you change into it?” he offered.

“This is a \$500 shirt,” she returned.

“I know of a 1-hour dry cleaner just a few miles from the airport,” he said, suddenly realizing her stunning beauty. “It’s only fair that I pay to have it cleaned for you – before it becomes a permanent stain,” he added, hopeful of a positive reply. “John, John Stevenson,” he said, offering his right hand in truce.

“I’m Jaycene and I certainly can’t go to my appointment looking like this,” she said accepting his hand. “I’ll need to reschedule my appointment and change my flight reservations.”

“I insist on paying for the reservation change fee,” John said, holding out his folded, pale green shirt to her.

Jaycene took the shirt and told John that would not be necessary. She headed for the women’s restroom while thumbing a number into her cell phone. As he watched her disappear into the bathroom, John became aware he was standing in the middle

of a human traffic jam. He snaked through the crowd to a nearby bench and slowly sat, ruminating over the encounter. Picturing her face, he allowed himself to imagine how nicely this might just work out for him. A reminder on his iPhone vibrated, getting his attention, and he remembered he still had to rebook his own flight for early tomorrow morning. He tapped out the number to the airline's reservation desk. After booking a new flight and calling for a taxi, he surveyed the area for Jayceene. Several minutes later, she emerged from the bathroom wearing his green shirt. As she approached, he realized she had no luggage. "Damn it," he thought, searching the crowd, wondering if her luggage was stolen in all the commotion.

"You travel light," he said, not really asking – hoping that there was no luggage. Tapping her Coach Madison Op Art Sateen Maggie with her left hand, "just this," she indicated.

"That's a relief," he admitted, explaining that he was worried her luggage was stolen. They continued together toward baggage claim and ground transportation to meet the taxi – it was waiting for them.

He held the door and, as she slid into the back seat, she brushed against his left elbow. His face turned high school red and he tried to hide his blush as he took the seat next to her. She grinned – slightly – as she peered out the window at the sun drifting toward the horizon. She turned to John, "I'm hungry. I know a great sushi place about 10 miles down the road. Let's eat while we wait for my shirt to be cleaned – my treat."

"Things were looking up," John thought. The dry cleaners accepted the challenge and advised of the extra fee for the 1-hour service. John shrugged it off as he gave himself permission to imagine the outcome of the next few hours. The taxi took them to the restaurant 5 miles down the road.

"Two please," John replied to the hostess' question. John and Jayceene were seated near the full-wall fireplace. "This is cozy," Jayceene said coyly. Their waiter was prompt, offering the specials of the day and two menus. Jayceene ordered a water with a lime twist; John a Shochu. The waiter returned with their drinks with enough of a delay for Jayceene and John to choose their meals. Jayceene ordered the spicy tuna roll and John asked for the shrimp tempura roll. As he and Jayceene made small talk about their jobs and families, John learned Jayceene was single. He could barely contain his school boy excitement – rescued only by the arrival of the food.

They forgot how hungry they had grown so the small talk was unexpectedly suspended as they ate, except for the exclamation of how much each liked their, and the other's menu choices. Jayceene stood and excused herself. "Sorry, I need to use the powder room." As she headed to the ladies restroom, John couldn't help but steal a look over his right shoulder at her. He noticed the ornate wall clock – 7:12 – as he took a sip of his drink. He picked up the last roll with his finger and thumb – "the chopsticks are a pain," he thought – only to be interrupted.

"Couldn't wait for me?" Jayceene asked. The clock told John only 1 minute had elapsed. "That's a first," John smart-assed to himself. "Oops you caught me," he said, stuffing the roll in his mouth. They finished dinner. John snatched and paid the bill. "Sorry," he said to Jayceene. "I can't let you pay the bill. It's the least I can do after crashing into you like that."

Jayceene smiled. "I feel like walking a bit," she suggested. John obliged.

Darkness had just fallen and John noticed, about 5 minutes into their walk, Jayceene nervously checking over her shoulders. "It's OK, I can handle myself pretty well," he said. She slid her right hand into his left, palmed her Maggie with her left hand and guided him across the street. Once on the other side, she slowed to a stop and turned to face John. She leaned towards John's face. His adolescent-like excitement was interrupted by the popping sound and sharp pain in his stomach. He stumbled two steps back, still holding Jayceene's right hand with his left. His other hand investigated for the pain's source and found it – his blood. The last thing he saw, raising his gaze to her eyes, was the flash of the gun's barrel. Jayceene let go and grabbed her phone while the body slumped to the pavement.

She thumbed the redial button. "It's done."

"Your payment will be deposited in the usual manner," the voice on the other end said while Jayceene disappeared into the night.



# The Cliff

JEWELIA TRUJILLO, CHSS, CLASS OF 2019

It stood as a memorial jutting out from the sea. Sand and minerals had compacted over thousands of years to form the dark slab, worn and weathered from the constant crashing of the waves. Rivers of white stone carved through the structure like thin leaf veins. It was a complex, unique craft of Mother Nature.

Compared to it, he was a speck on the earth. A meager mass that stared in awe of its beauty as it withstood the test of time, far longer than he could ever dream of lasting. He respected it for attaining the one thing that humans could not: immortality.

His humble shack near the bottom of the cliff, rooted in a small patch of beach overrun with plants and rocks and water, was his shrine to it. He watched and revered it, far from the polluting waves of cars and people. He spent his days fishing in the small, rickety boat of his, admiring the ocean as it continued its assault on the cliff.

He tended to his meager garden in his spare time. A small patch of grass, broken up by daisies and other persistent flowers, had struggled to grow against the wind that ravaged the coast. The plants' persistence inspired him, and he began to tend to it. Still small and meager, the flowers grew stronger with his attention. Despite the wind's attempt to blow them down, they brightly complemented the somber slopes of grey stone beside them.

The clouds were especially beautiful, hauntingly so, as he pruned the weeds from the little patch. His eyes strayed to watch the clouds, dark and serenely stormy, waltz slowly across the backdrop of the sky. The small silhouette of a person appeared atop the cliff.

He watched with interest. The point was secluded, yet impressive enough to attract nature lovers. The figure stepped dangerously close to the edge. The wind whipped teasingly at their clothes. A foot edged forward, and the barest trace of loose rocks could be seen tumbling over the edge. He had seen this before: people lost in their own vortex of pain seeking solace in the sweet song of the sea. He tried to call out. The ocean swallowed his warnings up with her waves. He watched in despair as the person, arms crossed over themselves as if prepared to lay in a coffin, tipped over the edge.



His heart plummeted with them. Taking one last look at the unmarked gravestones laying nestled beside the daisies and grass, he hoped he would not have to add to their company. He scrambled about to get into his boat, delving vainly into the sea. She laughed and churned about him as he defied her course. The cliff towered over him, mocking darkly.



*Translation*

**SIDNEY RASCON, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018**

# How Could You Neglect a Strawberry?

NATHAN J. ALBERTS, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

Peering forth in a clear mystique cage,  
Just like that, I fell upon concrete  
On the fore of my head whence they cut,  
My sage diadem, an inanimate eat.

From a kingdom below your knees,  
Dare you press against my elegant pith,  
Detain my precious petiole all aloof,  
Imprison me as in part and not wholly with?

How much more dead the grass than I;  
I am *Fragaria Ananassa*, born  
Among gardeners and raised as runners,  
Rooting for the crown wherewith we were torn.

Though all so commonly in class we were bred,  
Heed not such cultivation to surmise our origin;  
Our family bears the sweet nectar of life,  
Our kingdom regards man, exudes oxygen.

How amazing your hands still tremble a strawberry,  
And upon sidewalk drop us, for to genus neglect.

Were you to treasure or pluck us still, I say to you: genuflect.

# Anthony

KARISSA HARLOW, CHSS, CLASS OF 2017

Given the clarity I possess, I have known for a while that I would die at the age of seventeen.

It was the pride: it had always been my weakness. It had warped all my passions into lusts. It is the reason I, unlike most others who have met my same fate, sought out the sphinx rather than encountering one by chance.

It had been a long time since Oedipus solved the original sphinx's riddle – so long ago that the once most difficult riddle had become a cliché: man walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three at night. Perhaps I was expecting my own intelligence to rival that of Oedipus's. To be fair, it did. What I did not expect were the rules. The sphinxes had evolved since that original riddle, warped their own creativity with rules that bound them to specific territories across my country and scapegoated their anger onto those unfortunate enough to cross their paths.

My sister was a Cassandra, an unlucky soul who could see the future, though never her own. She often misinterpreted things, attempting to twist them to reflect herself and, therefore, I didn't believe her when she predicted my death. I promised her I would be careful on my travels, but it was a blatant lie.

In the middle of the wilderness, I wandered. It only took a few days before a bright light singed the sand and I stumbled into a wide and cavernous sphinx territory, dark and damp and deep underground. I didn't know much about this sphinx I had discovered – there were seventeen now, and I knew only this one's name – but I heard the hiss and snicker of my foe as I descended. He confronted me only a few steps in.

"You're lost, traveler," he said, his grin malicious and shadowed in the light of his cave. "You have stumbled onto my territory. How unfortunate."

I almost smirked as I took a matchbox out of my pocket. There were torches lining the hallway so I lit one, pushing it close to the sphinx's face. His brown eyes were too big for his human face, his feline paws marred by manicured fingers, his body sculpted in the shape of a too-large lion. His tail was the monstrous part, sharpened to a scorpion point, metallic and silver, flickering in my torch's light. He chuckled when the fear must have crossed my expression, but I remained calm.

"I've come here to solve a riddle," I announced. There was surprise in his eyes then, but also excitement. "And in exchange, I want you to grant a wish."

"I am no genie," the sphinx said, a growl in his voice. He paused. "But we can build that into the rules of our deal. What wish do you want granted?"

In retrospect, I suppose it doesn't particularly matter what I wanted, since I forfeited our deal upon my death, but at the time it had seemed of utter importance to me. Only a sphinx had the power to give me what I wanted and the morality (or lack thereof) to tolerate the granting of it. He was right; he was no genie. And I had no desire for more wishes or any need to waste a sphinx's power on manipulating romantic love. This was a different kind of love I was after:

"When I win this deal, you will bring my brother back to life."

The sphinx cocked his head, inspecting me. "You've come to beg me for your brother's life? What makes you think I can do this?"

"I've come to earn my brother's life," I corrected. I tossed a coin at him, not for payment but for him to scent; it had been my brother's prized possession, the last gift remaining from our father, and the only thing sent back to us after my brother's death. This sphinx would recognize the smell. "And I've come to you because you're the one who killed him. That, if the rumors are true, gives you the ability to bring him back."

This seemed to only amuse him. He batted the coin on the ground a few times like a cat with a string, then tossed it back to me with extraordinary precision; I caught it. He paced the tunnel, flicking his russet mane in the dying light. "I will grant you this," he finally allowed, "if you can solve a single riddle I give you. You will have an hour before you must announce your answer." Time was slippery around sphinxes, especially with the natural fear they inspired; now, in the shadow of my pride, I was feeling that anxiety build in my chest and rupture my heart. I kept a firm resolve, though, and nodded in agreement. "If you lose the riddle, you forfeit your life."

"Fine," I said, voice cracking. "But if I win, I live." He bowed his head. "And you're to grant me safe passage through this territory for the rest of my life."

He narrowed his eyes at that, but ultimately agreed. "As you say," he replied.

I was no fool. Sphinxes, especially this one, were known for the fine print of their deals. I would not make the mistakes of characters in *The Monkey's Paw* or other such stories. We spent the next several minutes defining specifics: I clarified that my brother would be brought back to life fully in tact, as though not a moment had passed since the time of his death. The sphinx clarified that the moment I answered incorrectly, I would be killed immediately. We agreed to each other's conditions. When the deal was made, he smiled. "I am Anthony," he finally announced. I shivered. "And your riddle is as follows:

'Never a resident, always a guest,  
White-clad soldiers do their best.  
I live in darkness, feel your strife,  
I suck all dry then take my own life.  
Unwanted and unwelcome, I always die:  
Tell me this: What am I?'"

My mind spun. I was always good at riddles and I could tell that, within an hour, I could easily solve this one. It was simple and well-stated. That wasn't the issue; the issue was the smile that plagued Anthony's face at the final word, the smile that screamed of inevitable victory. His confidence sapped at my own.

I had no way to time myself, and Anthony would not do it for me, so I thought fast, through my doubts. I began with the white-clad soldiers, which puzzled me. My country was brewing with a war, but the sides outfitted their armies in gray and gold, and navy and silver: no white.

I then thought about what object would commit suicide in order to harm others, what type of creature could be affected by a person's pain and yet kill anyway.

I moved on to the idea of the riddle's subject being a guest, always a foreigner, without any semblance of a home. As I thought about it deeper, I came to the metaphorical conclusion and felt my face split with a smile, I announced my answer: "You are a parasite."

"Is that your final answer?"

"Yes," I said, doubtless.

Anthony smirked. "Correct." My stomach flipped with joy, my heart pulsing out of control. It all stopped when he added, "But you are not on time."

My heart plunged into my somersaulting stomach and I choked. “What? No! I solved it in plenty of time!” It had taken, maximum, twenty minutes for me to solve. An hour couldn’t possibly have passed.

Anthony’s tail twitched. “You did not. I have already waited long enough for my prize.” His jaw widened and he crouched to pounce at me.

“Wait, wait!” I called, putting up my hands. He paused, mostly out of humor. “That’s not fair. You’re cheating.” Sphinxes never cheated; it was part of the rules that bound them to their territories. He had no right to do this, not without self-destructing. “It has not been an hour.”

“You’re right,” Anthony said. “It hasn’t been. But I told you that you must solve the riddle on the hour, not within the hour. You answered too early.”

I gaped. That couldn’t be the twist. I knew sphinxes were tricky, but that was just ridiculous. “No!”

“My exact words were ‘You will have an hour before you must announce your answer,’” Anthony said. “To me, this means you must answer exactly an hour after I pronounced the riddle.”

“That wasn’t clear!”

“It was clear to me.”

“I had no way of knowing when the hour was up!”

He smirked. “True. But you could have specified a way to tell time in your bargain and you did not.”

To be honest, the moment he said that, I knew I was lost. His logic was sound, even if it was unfair. This was the crux of the sphinx cruelty: trickery and fine print. Specifics mattered to them more than the bigger picture, and it was despicable. It was my own fault for letting my pride get the best of me and assuming his wording meant the same to him as it did to me. This is why it was nearly impossible to beat a sphinx. Their rules were binding, to themselves and to me. I had no other option but to die.

Still, I argued. I tried to find every loophole within the threadbare rules we'd established. There was nothing available. I couldn't believe it – after all my training, all my confidence, all my promises, I had failed my brother. I had failed to bring him back. Not only had I failed, but chasing after him had also cost me my own life in the process. My selfish sister would be left with no one.

But even as Anthony descended on me, I thought the chance had been worth the risk. I had gone up against the devil and lost, but at least I had tried.



# Inhale

JUDY BOOZER, CODS, CLASS OF 2019

You are my home.  
Invite me closer;  
Hold open Your arms  
And welcome me.  
Let me inhale Your presence  
And exhale the dust that I am.

# Lonesome Road

NICK McCORMICK, CSET, CLASS OF 2019

The sands whirl behind me,  
The wind erasing where I've travelled.  
Gusts carry my tracks  
Forever behind me  
All but forgotten.  
I press on down an unpaved road  
No footprints here  
No memories remain  
Carried off by those same winds  
And I ponder,  
How long before the winds carry me away,  
And no memories of my journey remain?



*Winter Soldiers*

**MARK RICHARDS, CHSS, CLASS OF 2019**

# Peralta Trail

CYMELLE LEAH EDWARDS, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

Walking off the marked path, he was always two steps ahead of me. We hiked the Peralta rocks to the cave overlooking the back of the city. The shade was cool enough but the sun crept around corners of large boulders, hiding its contempt of our getting lost and delaying the anticipated trail time. The cave was deep and thick with sand, empty of other hikers, just us beneath the edge of a mountain. The dust rearranged itself among the clouds and we listened while gathering our packs and enjoying the last glimpses of corners we never made it to. I watched where he stepped, then stepped into his footprint, I never knew exactly where to go. The slim wedge and creeping aspects met us with the same expectancy we encountered on our journey up, but this time left room for error, a first-timer's adrenaline frenzy. But he had been here before, slipping hands and a slight reach for me to grab before realizing I'd only follow suit. And the sound I now think of as cereal filling a bowl was deafened by the grains of sand splitting my skin and my sunglasses. The dust was coming in hard from the direction I always thought was west, but he'd convinced me I was often wrong about directions long before. He was always two steps ahead of me, even now as I trace down the mountain.

# Up and Over

TANNER OREL, COT, CLASS OF 2018

“Let him go!” Sarah screeched.

“Don’t you ever quit, Sarah?” Rob hollered back in annoyance as he drug his younger brother through the dirt.

“You can’t make him do this!” Spit sprayed from Sarah’s lips and tears swelled in her hazel eyes as she shook her head in disbelief.

“He’s the only one that can!” Rob growled as he tore his brother’s shirt collar in a vicious tug. Jimmy, the unlucky chap in the shirt, winced in agony as Rob forced him towards the gate.

“I heard Sam Finster never made it back over! Please don’t make him go!” Sarah cried as she desperately tried to pull Jimmy away from his brother. The rest of their party watched from a distance, too frightened to move any closer towards the gate. Sarah looked back in a panic and waved for help, they averted their eyes or looked down in shame.

“Sam was slow!” Rob rebutted as he knocked Sarah to the ground, still choking Jimmy by the collar. “Jimmy will make it... He’s gotta make it,” he said as he pulled his younger brother to his feet. Rob pushed Jimmy’s straight raven hair out of his face so he could properly see; he grabbed him by the shoulders and gave him a good shake. “You can do this, Jim.” Rob reassured his frantic sibling shaking before him.

Jimmy looked up at the wooden gate before him. His stomach churned and his heart pounded as if it were going to rip straight from his thin sweaty chest. Sweat gushed from every pore of his body and soaked his already filthy and torn shirt. His dark eyes shook as he studied the barricade that towered over him; he knew all too well that he may not ever crawl back over. He knew the moment he dropped to the other side, he would have to face the horrors that awaited him on his own.

“Don’t do it, Jimmy!” Sarah pleaded as she fumbled back to her feet. “Don’t listen to her!” Rob hissed as he held up a hand to silence her. “You’re the only one who can do this,” Rob said with confidence, staring deep into Jimmy’s eyes. “Here, take this.” Rob slyly slid a small object into his brother’s shaking hand and gestured

for him to put it in his pocket. “But only use it if you absolutely have to, it’s the last one we got.” Jimmy nodded hesitantly.

Jimmy cleared his throat and stood up straight as he turned and faced the gate. Rob crouched down to give his brother a boost; Jimmy placed his dust covered shoes in Rob’s cupped hands.

“Up and over,” Rob whispered as the brothers exchanged a reassuring glance. “And Jimmy...” Rob said softly as he pushed Jimmy towards the top of the gate. “Whatever you do...” His voice was shaking, “don’t let them catch you.”

Jimmy landed on the other side of the gate with an empty thud.

“It’s like a war zone,” Jimmy whispered to himself as he looked around frantically. He dove behind an old abandoned and stripped car, coated in a thick layer of copper rust. Tires, scrap metal, wooden planks, and a wide variety of junk covered the desolate dirt lot. Jimmy laid motionless as he struggled to regain his breath from his hiding spot. Quick sharp breathes grew quicker as anxiety and fear consumed his mind. His limbs felt as if they were made of cement and his mouth was drier than the sandy dust he knelt in. Everything in his head told him to stay where he was or to scurry back over the gate before it was too late. As strong as those urges were, he remembered all the people who anxiously awaited his return. All those people who were counting on him back on the other side of that towering wooden gate. He knew he was their last hope. A new confidence stirred in his chest.

Jimmy was scrawny. Not the average scrawny, but the type of scrawny that would make a man stop and say, “Well, somebody get that little weasel a steak!” Or a woman might stop and say, “Oh you poor thing, let me bake you a pie! Now how come nobody is ever feedin’ you?” But Jimmy’s figure never bothered him much, because Jimmy did not rely on his strength, but his speed. A skill that was perfect for a treacherous mission such as this.

The shaking in his knees steadied, the pounding of his chest simmered back down to a healthy rhythmic thumping, and his breaths were slow and controlled. He rose from his hiding spot behind the car and slowly surveyed the yard. Jimmy shimmed his way around every obstacle without a sound, careful to not alert the monsters that rested nearby.

Suddenly, Jimmy spotted his prize, and that familiar raging heart beat returned. Of course the object sat inconveniently in the middle of the dusty old yard, away from any cover or hiding spot. This would be harder than he thought. Without warning, every horror story and nightmarish tale Jimmy had heard about this place came rushing back to him. Wide eyed, he stood paralyzed as he heard an uneasy creaking behind him. A terrible heat rolled over Jimmy's body as he realized he had been caught.

"You sneaky little worthless, no good trespassin', scrawny little swine!" A grimy and lifeless grumble came from about thirty yards behind Jimmy. From a beaten down little shack at the front of the yard, a crusty and hunched over old man slung open the door to his home. For Jimmy was not in some war ravaged battle field, he was in a far worse place—the yard of old man Junkins, the local hoarder, lunatic, and grump.

Eleven year old Jimmy struggled to keep his balance as he whipped back his head to see the creature behind him. Black chewing tobacco sprayed from the gaps of what little teeth the old man had left as he screamed a collection of insults that should never be repeated. The tobacco rolled over his grimy cracked lips and down a fuzzy chin. The greasy white hair that sprouted up in patches all across the liver spotted cranium of the madman was combed back slick. His beady bloodshot eyes sat at the center of two wrinkly leather eye lids and the excess skin of his flabby neck shook wildly as he yelled. This once white shirt had a combination of stains from both tobacco and bourbon.

Jimmy spun around and scrambled for the other direction; dust and debris shot up from under his tightly strapped converse as he jolted away. There, in the center of the yard, was a football that had been inadvertently kicked over the fence by Jimmy and his friends, and Jimmy could not leave without it.

As Jimmy closed in on the ball, old man Junkins yelled out with a grin, "Get him, Mr. Biscuits!" Jimmy had thought he would only hear those words in his most gruesome nightmares, the hunt was on. Like a phantom ripping from the darkness, a Jack Russell terrier came flying from the old man's home. The dog shot across the messy yard like a rouge missile, a savage and wild fire in its eyes. Its messy white fur stood up straight on its back as it closed in on its target with deadly focus.

Jimmy slid through the dirt as he grabbed the football then scrambled back to his feet, moving at impossible speeds for an eleven year old. With the prize in hand, now he simply needed to make it over the gate. An easy task if a twelve inch demon wasn't hot on his trail. Mr. Biscuits was only a few yards away now, snarling like a ravenous wolf with a lust for human flesh. Jimmy looked back at his hunter and took his eyes off his path. His foot slammed into a spare tire and sent Jimmy flailing to the ground, his thin body sliding through the dirt. The defenseless eleven year old rolled to his back and watched helplessly as Mr. Biscuits prepared to strike.

Jimmy closed his eyes in terror, all he could hear was the deep and scratchy laughter of old man Junkins echoing through the yard. Suddenly, Jimmy remembered what his brother Rob had given him just before he had scaled the gate. Frantically Jimmy jammed his hand into his pocket and fumbled about for the item. In a dramatic revealing, Jimmy removed a thick cut of beef jerky just before Mr. Biscuits attacked. To everyone's surprise, the dog stopped in his tracks and slid through the dirt. Jimmy held the jerky straight out in front of him with his arm shaking, panting heavily. Mr. Biscuits sat happily at Jimmy's feet and cocked his head to one side. Jimmy blinked his eyes wide in disbelief, then he threw the jerky to the far side of the yard. The dog tore off after the meat and left Jimmy sitting alone in the dirt.

Old man Junkins watched in frustration as his vicious attack dog skipped after the treat. He hollered a few absentees towards the young trespasser and threw his hands in the air as he made his way down the porch. Jimmy, grinning from ear to ear, sprung to his feet and spastically crawled over the gate. His friends watched in glee as Jimmy emerged over the fence, the football in hand.



# A Farmer's Thanks

DONTERRY A. COLOMBEL, JR., CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

The morning sun is reflecting off the dewy grass. There is a slight sweet smell of honeysuckle drifting in the gentle breeze. I take a deep breath and thank the Lord for the day.

The fields of lavender are blooming with vibrant flowers. I can hear the bees buzzing through them, collecting their gifts to return and fill up their hives with golden honey. The rooster crows raising the alarm of the new day and reminding me of the fresh eggs his hens have laid. In the back field there is a doe leading her fawn to the creek bed for a fresh cool drink. I take a deep breath and thank the Lord for what he has provided.

In the pasture, my sons are on horseback with the dog following close behind. Riding slowly side by side I can see them talking to one another with their hats tilted slightly back on their heads. I begin to wonder what their conversation is about; girls, hunting, fishing, or the next course of mischief they plan on getting into. I can't help but to chuckle and reflect on my own childhood days riding beside my best friend, doing the exact same thing and probably having the exact same conversation. I take a deep breath and thank the Lord for brotherhood.

Running in the garden with small white flowers shaped into a crown, barefooted in her sun dress, not a care in the world is my little girl. She can melt the heart with a simple glance and smile. With her mother's beauty and my stubbornness, I think of all the hearts she will one day break. If only I could slow down time and distance the day when I walk her down the aisle to place her hand in the hands of another man. I take a deep breath and thank the Lord for fatherhood.

On the porch with a cup of coffee in one hand and a book in the other laying out on the swing is my wife, my closest friend, the one who will be by my side through thick and thin, the one who will kick me in the butt when I need it, she is my future and all my desire. I know every curve, every wrinkle and every expression on her face. She is deep in thought and living in another world, one page at a time. She places down the cup of coffee sweetened by our honey. On her hand is a ring bearing the birthstones of our children. With the same hand, she slowly pushes the hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. And as if she could hear the racing beats of my heart and the thoughts of my mind calling her back into this world, she closes the book, lifts her

head staring right back at me and smiles. I take a deep breath and thank the Lord for allowing me to love and be loved.

There in the morning sun I see all that I am, all that I have, and all that I wish for. So I take a deep breath and thank the Lord for the day.



*Send Me: Isaiah 6-8*

**GABRIELLE MAPES, CHSS, CLASS OF 2020**

# Dear Betula

NATHAN J. ALBERTS, CHSS, CLASS OF 2018

On our soil you may be  
By water to scape the land,  
To fall and fumble about,  
Belong in our family.  
Branch out in newfound types  
When soil slowly moistens,  
Long arms to longing reach,  
Grip and pip the plumbing pipes.  
Be wild around the bog,  
Resound your beautiful bark,  
Terrace the ground with colored leaves,  
Come fill the wetland fog.  
Be Downy, Dwarf, White or Weep,  
Be Asian, American, Black or Red,  
Be Water, be River, be Arctic, Canoe,  
You're Cherry, Yellow, Silver, Sweet.

# Tip-Toe

ALII J, COFAP, CLASS OF 2018

I know where you're at right now. Looking at your feet, slowing down. Your brain is spinning and your intentions are committing, the fight is thinning and your demons are winning. I know where you sit, and I admit I almost quit too. I feel for you. But before you do anything you won't live to regret, before you pay your debt, let me tell you a story, one I wish I'd forget, and if you feel the same at the end of your last cigarette, then I will hold you while your cold sweat cools and your regrets dissipate.

I hit a bump, some time ago. I didn't know how to grow. There wasn't a way to cope. I let the voices in my head pull apart my brain and watched as all the work I'd done went to waste. What a shame. All I had wanted back then was for someone to know my name. I wanted someone to care. I plotted, planned, and my odds were fair. See what I figured out, there was a perfect recipe, just enough humor, plenty of heart, a dash of relatability and a pinch of smarts. You had to be charming. Quirky. You had to be friendly and a bit nerdy. You had to be accessible but not questionable.

There was power in vulnerability but so was humility. They took from me. The first theft was brilliantly, miserably, and viciously an attack on my dignity. Lied to, manipulated, used, and spit out. Sometimes I wonder where they're at now. Oh how I'd do things differently. Ambitiously, simplistically, and efficiently I would bring them to their knees, make them bleed for me. Irresistibly, make them sing for me, religiously make them burn for me.

But I knew that the morbidity and delinquency was a course to repetition. They wouldn't learn if I couldn't get them to listen. Timidly, one night I reached a conclusion. It was time to end the sadness and the confusion.

We fought, my brain and I, until the sun had set, leaving me blind, and risen again, only to struggle with the decision deep in my mind. I knew I was running out of time and that night, when I had written my goodbyes and reached the end of my line, I thought. I imagined those finding me, bloody and beaten. Sweaty and not breathing. And I stopped.

I burned everything, even my lungs while I was heaving. I couldn't leave yet. There had to be something left within me.

And so it goes, six times over or so and God knows how close I've been to saying and signing "The End." I nearly did it too. More than I'm proud of but still, only a few.

I had insufficiently fought and unofficially lost. I spiraled some more and almost never woke up. Suddenly I realized what was at stake and how irrationally my demons had influenced my mistakes. It wasn't easy, and I have relapsed, but the point of the story is that you have to figure out how to adapt, and perhaps that is the beauty in tip-toeing on the line. You may have broken, nearly drowned in the backslide, but you have chosen to fight. Why throw that all away tonight?

Yes the darkness is horrid, disgusting and morbid. But it is not something you should be ashamed to embrace. Sometimes it's the only comforting place. So please let your story end differently. Call off the infantry and say hello to your new identity.

Today you are reborn. Let you love yourself like I love you, for now and evermore.



*Flower: Self-Portrait*

**OLIVIA MULLIN, COFAP, CLASS OF 2021**

# I Worked for Weeks on This Poem

GEORGE ROBINSON IV, COFAP, CLASS OF 2018

I worked for weeks on this poem  
When I came over you weren't home,  
So I folded it into an airplane  
And threw it three feet into a drain,  
Believe me I was hoping for a longer flight,  
But it just didn't seem to be my night,  
I'm sure it will be in an ocean soon,  
Choking a dolphin until it's blue,  
Yes, I'm bitter and getting bitterer  
Cause now I'm a quitter and a litterer.

All I see at night are angry dolphins  
Squeaking at me because of my sins.  
Tell them please, I wanna be their friend,  
And will never eat tuna fish again.



# Poema (Workmanship)

JESSICA SEALE, CHSS, CLASS OF 2019

I tried to write it on my own  
This poem I call my life  
The words flowed easily from my pen  
Till I found myself struggling to survive

When my hand opened wide  
Trading pen for peace  
I found that as I lost control  
I gained great relief

Words can have power we don't understand  
Many poems I have to let go  
When I do, I receive from Your hand  
More grace and strength than I have ever known

And the greatest poem I will ever write  
doesn't need rhyme or even words  
Only me- hands feet, mind, self  
A living poem for you, my Lord