

StartleBloom

THE GCU LITERARY REVIEW

VOLUME 6

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TABLE OF *Contents*

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----|
| The Road to Wright | Caterina Zamora | 1 |
| Privation | Kaylor Jones | 2 |
| Stripped | Katie Moore..... | 3 |
| *Catalyst | Kaitlyn Visser | 4 |
| Better Than Music..... | Chantel Kienitz..... | 5 |
| Spirits | Bailey Nelson | 8 |
| Love Letter | Molly Marr | 9 |
| *Fountainhead..... | Kaylor Jones | 10 |
| The Fields Are Laughing..... | Nel Lindblom | 11 |
| Habakkuk 1:5..... | Lexi Hernandez | 12 |
| Woman of Smoke-Mujer de Humo..... | Caterina Zamora | 13 |
| *Monolith..... | Issac Nykamp..... | 14 |
| The Diving Board..... | Tara King..... | 15 |
| Nuclear Family | Lizzy Esparza | 17 |
| Companion Poems | Katie Moore & Bailey Nelson | 18 |
| *Outskirts of Reykjavik..... | Kaylor Jones | 20 |
| Momma Elsie..... | Beverly Shelton Sanchez..... | 21 |
| *Under the Sea..... | Alisa Cnossen | 26 |
| Sandwiches..... | Christopher Johnson | 27 |
| Hands Up, Don't Shoot | Laurie McMillan | 29 |
| *Coral..... | Brittany Sutherland..... | 30 |
| *Opal Dancer | Brittany Sutherland..... | 31 |
| The Orient | Molly Marr | 32 |
| Frostbite..... | Christopher Johnson | 33 |
| Don't Cry Alice..... | Paige Walker | 36 |
| *Weathered Trestle..... | Chelsea Honeycutt | 38 |
| The Dripping Purple Pen..... | Tony Olson | 39 |
| Flat Top Box..... | Eric Swem | 40 |
| *The Longest Ride..... | Alisa Cnossen | 43 |

*Indicates photograph or artwork

TABLE OF *Contents*

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|----|
| Walking Through the Haunted Wood..... | Chanti Gomes..... | 44 |
| She Sits..... | Julia Anne Jones..... | 46 |
| Boot Camp Blues..... | Sarah Eckert..... | 47 |
| *Strange Serenity..... | Emmy Williamson..... | 48 |
| Crimson..... | Marie Angeline Carr..... | 49 |
| What Skittles Say..... | Julia Anne Jones..... | 51 |
| Peace and Quiet..... | Nick Holman..... | 53 |

*Indicates photograph or artwork

The Road to Wright

CATERINA ZAMORA, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

Between the cavalry clouds
And the asphalt and eagle
Crazy people by the road
Desert despair black anchor
Cactus tattoo
Hiding behind the river's dry
Bed of tumbling stones
Polished by whispering tongues
Careless breaths empty cupped
Palms, a cardinal painted on
My face, red aura of warmth
In the icy mirror of the empty
Sky.

If I grind my teeth maybe
The wind will not blow so
Hard.

A crow and a feral dog
Fight for an egg.

Privation

KAYLOR JONES, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2021

I too have scorned an institution,
inhaled smog from the roof of a high-rise
and hacked up that irreverent graffiti.
At this altitude, the end of the week's
like the top of a building, or a place you've
always wanted to visit but never had the gas money.
The city tenses with microscopic days: Eggs and tomatoes
repose, enveloped in the cradle of their coats as people usher
their groceries home after dark, quarters pasted to the bottom of
their dress shoes. They were born with brittle beetle shells, scuttling
in perennial limbo and hiding in the fissures of the metro. Tomorrow,
the city will shed our trauma like fetters onto the pavement
behind us and we'll all be left without an aspiration to
dissolve into gratefully, one quarter at a time.
Perhaps by morning, we will convalesce.
It isn't art, really, if you can
understand how it feels
or why it happened
to you
of all people.

Stripped

KATIE MOORE, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

*“Where can I go to escape Your Spirit?
Where can I flee from Your presence?
If I go up to heaven, You are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there...*

I hesitate (my body aches).
I am afraid of what you may think.
(Need tugs eagerly at me;
freedom yet calling, echoing—)

*If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me,
and the light around me will be night”—
even the darkness is not dark to You.
The night shines like the day;
darkness and light are alike to You.”
— Psalm 139:7-8, 11-12*

I am very small; I crawl
from the shadows to feel
the caress of warm rays on my skin.
(I melt in the sweet relief of the heat.)

Night creeps in,
and the chorus of crickets question
whether I still have any life to give.
Naked, I am curled in a hole made of
dust.

The moon is too big.
Everything, even the rustling of the trees
is too loud. Dangerous. Frightening.

I shudder and shy away
(I don't want you to see
what it is that lurks within me).
I hide from the light.

—

Morning approaches cautiously,
with a sweet, gentle breeze;
and the whistling songbirds say
that it is time I wake up.



Catalyst

KAITLYN VISSER, B.A. IN DIGITAL FILM PRODUCTION, 2021

Better Than Music

CHANTEL KIENITZ, B.A. IN DIGITAL FILM-SCREENWRITING, 2022

Light streams through the blinds in sheets. I open my eyes to watch the dust particles and smoke floating through the sunlight. The smoke spirals up from where he sits in bed beside me, taking long drags while looking over some tea-stained papers. The smell used to make me sick but now it only brings up calming memories from the basements of coffee shops and extra cig stops after shows. I grasp onto this moment, lying beside my best friend, the world sitting still.

I will think back onto these moments in a yellow-tinted montage of my life. Sipping espresso, the tips of our ears frosted with the wind, whispering steam and smoke into the chilled air. The day we both forgot gloves, so we held each other's hands until we found a shop with a fireplace. Coming home in the evening to the strum of a guitar and the smell of chamomile. Sneaking into an underground pub in the matching tweed jackets that a street vendor oversold us. These were the days I would remember, not the days I spent grieving over the love I had that he would not repay.

"Best friends," he gestures between us every time he introduces our band onstage. "The only thing better than music, wouldn't you say?"

I tuck myself further into my covers and further into my mind; the trolley ride where he fell asleep on my shoulder, the time he grabbed my hand as we ran through the street to catch the end of a firework show, and almost every morning, like today, when he would come to sit on my bed next to me, reading poetry over his morning cigarette and coffee. Moments like these make me believe that one day he will take it further, hold my hand longer, sit a little closer, lean in first, but he never does. This friendship has been the best thing he's had—we've had—in a long time.

I hate to admit it, but I wish for more.

At this thought, I rustle myself up into action to rid my mind of impossibility and move my morning to our favorite cafe where I sit, leisurely sifting through sheet music and sipping Americanos. Something about the sunshine changed the song on the radio and everyone around me was bright, but I sat by myself in deep thought.

Seasonal depression grasps me in the most unconventional of ways: I only like the colder weather. In the winter the days are shorter, allowing the nights to last forever, and the snow to fill in everything missing. In the summer glare I had to face the feelings that I struggled to suppress.

The day would soon come where he would write his songs about the way She smiled and the way She said hello and She would not be me. How was I to cope when everything in my life revolves around us? Our songs, our apartment, our guitars and our life. There was no way to escape my head and yet no way to truly assess the thoughts.

He was always there to help; it was a blessing and a curse.

He is doing it now: helping. Without a word from me, he knows I am broken. He steps into the cafe and the warm air rushes in with the thoughts that seem to have called him here. He softly settles on the floor below me, his guitar in hand, ready to lighten my mood. My heart swells at the gesture but my head pounds with complication.

The melody he begins to play was written on one of our late nights spent at the local 24-hour Chinese restaurant; one of our less glamorous workplaces, but the only one with an endless buffet. We spent hours sifting through memories and journal entries until I cracked my fortune cookie and the chorus was born. It told me that sometime soon my days of waiting would be over. It made a well-needed addition to the setlist, but it also provided false hope. I saw it as a sign, he saw it as a song.

My memories supply the idea of fueling my feelings into my song book. He absently strums while the flow of my pen connects with my brain and I am effortlessly filling pages with passion. The music that normally fills my notebook has been repossessed by a sloppy, cursive love letter to the man sitting two feet from me. His presence keeps the emotions constant in my mind, and it is not long before I have my bare heart on the pages of my song book.

I write about everything. The night he held me while I was crying and told me everything would be okay. He was unaware that everything would not be okay unless he made it okay. Not just okay. He could make it perfect; make everything complete.

I almost fill the whole book with this raw emotion and those real conversations. My hand stiffens and twitches from being overworked, but I have suppressed enough passion that I could write a book for every day I've known him. These words spell out the heartbreak and it feels vital that everything is detailed.

I write the last few words with a flourish and clutch the book to my chest, never to let it, or him, leave my soul.

I could see the two of us returning to these pages when we were married. We would laugh about my hidden love and how blind he was to not realize it. This would be my future; he would be my future, and it was not too far. It couldn't be. Only a year had gone by, but this time around I thought summer was perfect. The warmth spread through my skin and showed in my smile. I walked through the park fanning myself like a Hollywood star and sipped on chilled lemon tea. Even with all of the butterflies and wildflowers, I decided my favorite part of the season was the clear air. I drew it in deeply. It had become hard to love fresh air while I was living in a fog.

I no longer woke to cigarette smoke. The rise of the sun swept me out of bed and into my self-sufficient life. My coffee table was no longer a stand for ash pans; today it was spread with endless pages, all tear-stained and crumpled. They lay across the table, bare and open for all to see. I hadn't let my mind truly air out until this

moment, seeing every word, every smear of ink, every unrequited note in one place.

Some people would burn them, some would shred them, or some would keep them holed up in their psyche until they would rot into hatred. I did not want to hate him.

At the time I did not think I could feel anything but love, but then the illusion came down like a curtain. I always thought my life revolved around us, when it really revolves around him. His pretty words, his cigarettes, his favorite cafe and his band.

The reality that I soon uncovered was that I had idolized a relationship with him more than I enjoyed the preexisting companionship. I had been running full speed into his heart in my head, but I had actually been furthering myself. The feelings made me fluttery, while friendship would've made me fulfilled, because it was what we needed. I had wanted something different, though, and that was nobody's fault. Whether he had led me on or I had over exaggerated every little moment, no one was to blame. Like this summer, it could be loved or it could be despised, even though we were all under the same sun.

What I did know, while looking at the sheets of paper scattered across my table, is that last year's love songs could be this season's olive branch.

I returned to the cafe I had once called home, and this time, I was solo. Strangely enough, I felt more myself than ever. I was alone onstage, with only my guitar and my songs, but instead of feeling isolated, I was empowered.

It wasn't until I was done with my set that I saw him. He was in the audience, clapping with everyone else. I knew that his eyes would always bring me back to those hazy mornings, but there was something extra inside me today, a feeling besides desire.

It was certainty. I was certain that I had made the right decision to distance myself from him, to heal, and allow myself to breathe.

My songs were about him, and he knew it. I had received my clarity, and now so had he.

He began to approach me, and my mind flashed to him leaping onto the stage, grabbing my waist and doing what I had been waiting for since I met him. What he did, instead, was extend his hand, not to be held lovingly or pulled into a hug, but to shake. He wanted to shake my hand, and although it was no act of passion, it was better than that. I did not need his love or his approval. He did not have to say a word, but a formal shake of the hand, the kind that we began our band with, was how it definitively ended.

I did not watch him walk away; I had already played that part a million times before. This time, it was my turn. I exited the stage to the soundtrack of my own music playing in my head.

Spirits

BAILEY NELSON, B.A. IN CHRISTIAN STUDIES, 2018

Look in the mirror and you won't see the little crow that sits on your shoulder like a ghost. You can't feel how heavy he is, burdening your body with phantom fears. You don't hear his voice, yet his words rattle like bones in your brain: "you will never be loved."

You can't sense the little crow, the raven of death, because you do not look. You cover your eyes and hunch your shoulders into yourself. All the while, his words rot your very soul: "you will never be loved, never, nevermore."

But look! Upon your other shoulder: another spirit—a pure white bird. Light, freeing, lifting your shoulders with promises of hope. His voice, unheard but understood, cradles you: "I love you."

You sense the dove of light and life in your soul, regenerating. You open your eyes and pull out of yourself. He states again and again: "I have always loved you, and I will love you, evermore."

Love Letter

MOLLY MARR, M.S. IN GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, 2021

The script crept dark and thin,
Limping across hills and valleys.
It stood in puddles, then stretched
Painful limbs along the way.

It marked in strides woe and weary
Sung sad songs aloud.
It cursed the lying of sun and storms
And birthed wide wells of sorrow.
It created arches, slowly etched in amber.

Pith and ink gone dry
The desert sunk and sipped
The long ride of veins run wild
Till mapped and wrapped
The parchment tied and muted
Was stampeded and let alone to drift.

A plane, a bird encaged, a nest
Newspaper soon becomes
When a little boy is left alone
To drain the sky of rain,
The earth of all its greenery.
Then the ocean floods the desert,
The moon scorches the night
And all that's gentle, polite,
Leaves in robes of unread letters.



Fountainhead

KAYLOR JONES, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2021

The Fields Are Laughing

NEL LINDBLOM, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2021

The fields are laughing
their bodies are warm
in the fading light of the first good day.
They sway
greeting her,
rattling their bodies together to cry out
hello Friend!

Hello to warm days and
swaying trees and good friends
who throw pebbles at your window.
Hello again to the sights and sounds that have
slowly
grown
unfamiliar.
The birds bickering over
who gets to nest where,
the great oaks creaking
as they stretch the winter out of their bones.
The smell of new life that floats out of the fields
calling you closer.

It smells familiar,
like old leaves and worms
with an undertone of flowers.
She is here.
The fields can feel her.
As can you.
You can see the promise of her embrace
in every inch of melting frost.

Habakkuk 1:5

LEXI HERNANDEZ, B.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2020

Life's tragedies
Continually eclipse each other.
Darkness blots out light,
Liminality bleeds into reality,
And despair scrapes against you.

Watch the same force
That swallows stars
Drag the sun back out again.
Gravity
Will save you.

Remember that
The rhythms of His universe
Beat inside your constellation
Body—

No matter how violently the sun
Comes crashing down
Into the ocean of the west,
He always resurrects in the east.

If you have the courage
To meet the sky's eyes,
Look up and be amazed.
See how your galaxy of a life
Pulses and blinks like the stars.

Woman of Smoke—Mujer de Humo

CATERINA ZAMORA, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

Seagulls calling from above
Carnation flowers don't stop bleeding
No conoces medida, you know no measure
In the flesh, you know my name
Written in bone, swallowed whole
A whale with no spine
A bed of sand
Mujer de humo—woman of smoke
I will slip away, far away into
God's Hands, *ora por mi*—pray for me
That way it will be faster, maybe,
Less painful, could be.
His hand will place a carnation
Flower in my forehead, in my name
Between the fine threads of my head
Hanging from the letters of my name.
Look mother how we are both weeping
—*Yo también sé llorar*
Qué bonita es una mujer que llora
How beautiful a woman who knows
How to cry
Yes, the ancient poets say, yes,
It is an art,
To die is also an art.



Monolith

ISAAC NYKAMP, B.A. IN DIGITAL DESIGN, 2024

The Diving Board

TARA KING, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2022

They looked so small next to the fifty-foot-tall trees. The two of them, almost ant-like underneath the seasons of their many branches.

Few people came to the swimming hole anymore. The lifeguard station had decayed to the point where it was cracked and rickety. Any weight on it would cause it to collapse. The diving board, however, was still intact. Made from metal, it was rusty, and the paint had chipped away from the heat of the sun, but it still stood sturdily over the deep end of the lake. The water was cool and green. The bottom was a mystery—no one knew just how deep it was.

The young girl was already in the water. She stared up at the boy who almost looked like her. He trembled slightly on top of the diving board. His toes hung off the edge, purple and clinging, like the smallest breeze would knock him over.

“Is it cold?” he asked.

“It’s freezing,” she replied. “It chills your very bones.”

“Then I don’t want to go in.”

“But it feels good after a minute. You get used to it, I promise.”

The boy shoved his hands into his light blue swim shorts, then took them out. Shoved them back in, glanced around, then back down at her.

“Couldn’t you come up here? I think it’d be easier for me if you were up here.”

“What would I do up there?”

“I dunno. Push me in? Get it over with?”

“It doesn’t work like that. If *I* shove you in, then *you* weren’t the one who jumped.”

“It’s just as good, isn’t it? I’m still getting in the water.”

The girl shook her head, her brunette hair swishing around in the water like a happy octopus.

“You’d resent me for that,” she promised.

His ears tilted to the sound of the water being taken up by the tree’s roots.

“I want to,” he said, his voice like the leaves in the gentle wind.

“I know you do,” she replied.

“But I don’t think I can.”

“You can.”

“I tried before, you know.”

Her head jerked back to look at him. At his scrawny sunburnt shoulders and his thin, scarred legs. His legs. She hadn’t seen the scars before. She thought they might have just been shadows.

“Where? Here?”

“No, it was somewhere else.”

“What happened?”

“They told me there was water at the bottom. But there wasn’t. I jumped in, fell and my legs broke. I couldn’t use them for a long time.”

A silence settled as another breeze rippled through the water and they both shivered.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“That’s why I’m scared.”

“But you got up the ladder.”

“That’s the easy part though, isn’t it?”

“With your legs as they are? I’d say it’s the hardest part.”

He clenched his fists again. Bit his tongue as one tear rolled off his nose and into the water.

“I’m not ready,” he said.

“I wasn’t either.”

After a moment, from below in the water, looking up, she watched as the boy left the diving board. She couldn’t tell if he fell or stepped off.

With his arms flailing and eyes closed, he plunged underneath the murky emerald water.

Nuclear Family

LIZZY ESPARZA, B.A. IN DIGITAL FILM-PRODUCTION, 2022

The instructions were crystal clear.

Love.

Marriage.

Two and a half kids.

All laid out since high school.

But puppy dog love dissolved
Into foam at the corners of your mouth.
Near the end
It was so hard to love you.

Every meal I eat is laced
With the bitter taste of guilt
7 years of wasted efforts,
Hoping, begging, pleading
You'd pull back the thorns
That infested our picket fence
They even kept me out

Yet somehow there's still

Empty space

In the crevices of my mind
Where our memories used to reside.

I feel evil relief that
We never finished what we started
Bore children to bare witness
To this inevitable
Fallout.

Companion Poems: A Book Worth Reading and Your Quality Time is Like Close Reading

A Book Worth Reading

BAILEY NELSON, B.A. IN CHRISTIAN STUDIES

People are books.
Most, I don't care to read.
I pass the shelves with hardly a look.
I simply turn inwards: an easy deed.

But one will come along
that makes an impression:
one that's quite long.
I stop and I question.

The more I investigate, the deeper it goes.
This is not surely some simple prose.

It's vast and it's different;
but that's not a bad thing.
I turn from indifference
at this strange typing.

The pages are soft, the writing fair;
I read and I learn, taking great care.

"Look at this!" I exclaim;
I'm quite simply endeared.
This book is full—
of love and of fears.

It's real and it's true:
what's revealed is what's penned.
I'm privileged to know you,
and to call you friend.

Your Quality Time is Like Close Reading

KATIE MOORE, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

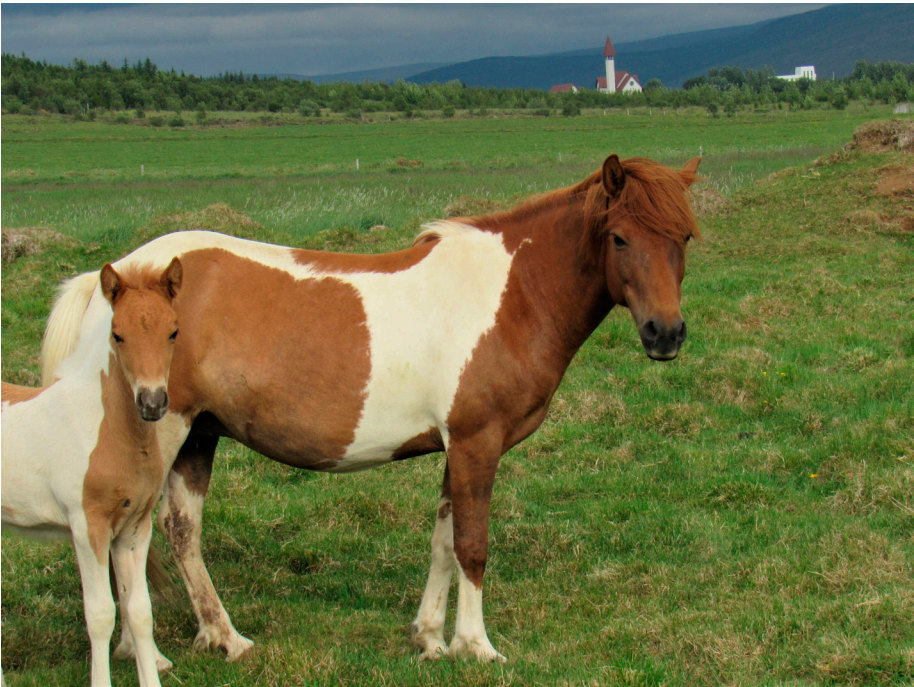
Most skim over these frayed pages—
preferring to view abridged versions,
stinted summaries, likely thinking the rest
(the longer text)
a monotony;
boring.

Their scrawl is absent from these margins;
there is no annotation, no analysis;
they have not taken the time to
cognize with care.

But you—
you are free with your pencil.
(You scribble
and the sound is delightful.)

You think deeply,
interpret and ask questions
of the text, making connections,
eager to unravel the concepts
that will surface next.

You say that
I am like a book
and read me
as though every single page
has value
and meaning.



Outskirts of Reykjavik

KAYLOR JONES, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2021

Momma Elsie

BEVERLY SHELTON SANCHEZ, LIFE COACHING CERTIFICATE PROGRAM, 2021

My mom hated ironing so much that she had a woman named Elsie come in to do it for her. Elsie ironed my father's shirts and handkerchiefs, and my mom's lacy blouses and Donna Reed dresses with the wide starched collars. She ironed all my school outfits, my dress-up and Sunday clothes, and even my pajamas. My mother was particular, so she even ironed our sheets. She also ironed my mom's fancy table linens and I never saw her drop one ash of that cigarette she was always smoking on my mother's delicate linens.

When I was six or seven, I remember how I would see her in a corner of the dining room, a cigarette hanging from her mouth and a glass of beer on the small table near her. Ladies, she told me, could drink beer but only from a glass. It's okay to smoke too so long as you smoke like a lady. She would say this as she pulled the cigarette gracefully from her mouth and set it down in an ashtray at that same reddish-brown table with an eagle carved in the front.

When she finished ironing, Momma Elsie would spray the linens or whatever she was ironing with a wonderful floral scent. Back then I was in grade school and thought this was her way of being nice, but now I think it was to make sure that there was no lingering cigarette or beer smell.

Elsie came to our house primarily to iron, but she would also babysit me, and my parents said that I liked her so much when I was a toddler that I had started calling her Momma Elsie.

She was short. I think she was about four-foot eight. She also told great stories. Some of them were about being young on St. Felix Street and all the parties and dances she, my mother, and my mother's sister Jenny had gone to and how they'd met their relatively well-off husbands.

"Those women were like a magnet for good men," she said, drinking her black coffee with plenty of sugar and tapping her foot to some long-ago tune.

Another story that she told me about was how when she was young she'd had a long thick jet black braid hanging down her back and that she'd ironed for a white family where the children tried to pull her braid and called her, "Elsie the Cow."

"Now, Beverly dear, I ain't no cow! Look how skinny I am! I always was naturally thin," Momma Elsie said. Then jumping up from her chair, she twirled around in a ballerina spin.

"That's terrible, Momma Elsie. What did you do?" my ten-year-old self asked.

She pulled her plastic covered chair closer to mine and in her high-pitched, slightly squeaky voice she said, "I put a curse on them."

Frightened and intrigued at the same time, I asked, “You what?”

“I cursed them kids.” Then she looked at me and laughed. But there was something about her dark brown eyes that weren’t laughing. I felt bad for those kids even though I was almost sure that she was joking.

Then she told me about how she worked cleaning the dressing rooms in theaters and how she got to keep anything being thrown out. “But once they found out I could tell fortunes, well, that was it! They wouldn’t leave me alone.” Then Elsie dramatically recounted how Pearl Bailey would try and entice her into giving more frequent readings.

“Show me the cards,” I would beg Elsie, but she would always say I had to ask my parents first. My Dad hated superstition and my Mom who did get readings from Momma Elsie on the down-low didn’t want me around when she was being read. However, my Aunt Jenny was a very different story. If I visited her and Elsie was ironing for her, she would pour Elsie a glass of beer and have her sit with us at a small round table. First Elsie would read my aunt’s tea leaves.

I am sure she was at least middle-aged back then, but her hands were smooth and young-looking with nails shaped to ovals and usually painted crimson or some other shade of red. Her face was oval with an animated red shade of lipstick and she wore a short straightened black bob that she claimed, “all the men went crazy for.” After watching her read the cards for two years, I picked up some tricks of my own which I used to gain popularity in middle school. I realized that she was telling my aunt and her friends what they wanted to hear.

Momma Elsie worked a few nights a week at a club on Fulton Street in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. This was a club where men dressed as women and performed. The audience was mostly men who also came dressed as women. I’m not sure what this kind of club was called in the late sixties, but Momma Elsie ironed the costumes for this mostly Puerto Rican transvestite club. She would tell me how wonderful many of the men looked and describe their outfits in detail. Then she would tell me about Miss Julia, the glamorous owner who could sing like Diana Ross.

Even though my parents wouldn’t let me go to Miss Julia’s club at night, I did go there with Momma Elsie and found out that the Miss Julia she’d told me about for years was a really good-looking man who dressed like a woman. But the day I met him he was dressed in menswear and I was kind of disappointed. He was wearing tan slacks and a white shirt and a tie.

“Had to see my lawyer today.” His voice was really deep. Momma Elsie had shown me a picture of Miss Julia and you could definitely see that this baby-faced ivory skin man was Miss Julia. Momma Elsie hugged Miss Julia. They talked quietly for a while and then we left.

Miss Julia gave me a hug and in that deep voice said, “Stay pretty, sweet.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t you spoil that girl, Julia,” Momma Elsie said.

Julia laughed softly. “Just telling the truth, Elsie.”

“See you later, Julia.”

“See you, Loca! Bye, sweetheart!”

“Bye, Miss Julia,” I said.

After a block of pulling the wagon piled with dirty costumes, Momma Elsie said, “Beverly, dear, can you help me pull the wagon with these dirty clothes? You know my heart, it ain’t so good.”

Momma Elsie was getting disability because she had a heart condition, but my daddy always said there wasn’t nothing wrong with her except she was “allergic to real work.”

“But, Daddy, she works hard. She irons and starches so much for us, and then she irons for Miss Julia at the club.”

Of course my defense of Momma Elsie just led to an argument. “Club? What club? Stelle! Stelle! What’s this about a club?”

“There wasn’t no club, John. Elsie just talk, telling Bea all kinds of stories.”

“Stories, huh? She better not be taking my daughter to no club anywhere or she will get something she don’t want.”

“No, John. No club, honey,” my mother said calmly.

Though even as a kid it was clear that my father really didn’t care for Elsie, he did grudgingly admit that she was one of the best nonprofessional dancers he’d ever seen. One time at a party, Momma Elsie won a limbo contest and Daddy wondered how she didn’t have a heart attack dancing to all that Spanish music that she liked. “Don’t tell me nothing, Stelle. A twenty-year-old would be breathless. She’s a damn liar.”

“No, John, I think she’s really sick.” Noticing I was listening, my mom pointed her head in my direction and my dad stopped talking.

Little by little, I got Elsie to teach me the tarot cards and what they meant. I knew my Mom just thought of it as harmless fun, but my Dad saw it as witchcraft which only added to his dislike of Elsie.

One evening while I was visiting Momma Elsie in her cramped little pale pink-painted apartment, she called me over to the mahogany dresser and showed me her blue velvet box with all her spiritual equipment and fortune telling things. Folded neatly in the dresser drawers were her gypsy outfits and turbans. She unwrapped this skull that was covered in newspaper and I backed away in terror.

“OK, sorry, Beverly dear. It’s okay. Don’t tell your father.” As usual she was afraid of my Dad finding out about our activities. At that time my mom was an invalid slowly dying of brain cancer in the hospital and I was spending more and more time with Momma Elsie, who was treating me like a protege in her con artist endeavors.

“Are you a witch, Momma Elsie?” I asked, some time later.

“I ain’t a witch. I’ve told you before, my sister, Portia, is a witch. I am a spiritualist.”

“What’s that?”

Momma Elsie took a drag on her ever-present cigarette as she crossed her fashion-booted feet. “I can see spirits. Sometimes I can tell fortunes, but it ain’t reliable.”

“What do you mean?”

“Telling the future or prophesying ain’t reliable. Sometimes you know and sometimes you don’t, so learn how to read the people.”

“Read the people?” I asked, hoping I wouldn’t forget to write these instructions down in my diary. It had a lock and key which I hid in my room. I wasn’t too afraid of my parents finding it.

“If a person is evil, they have to make sure they are buried in black. If not, they get devoured.” My eyes must have gotten big or something because Momma Elsie said, “Beverly dear, I hope you’re not feeling scared. It’s my sister, Portia. She’s bad.”

“What?” I asked stupidly because for years I’d heard her talk about her sister and how she was out to get her and had cursed her grandson and her daughter, and was now in the process of giving her heart problems.

“Here,” she said, giving me a key to her apartment. “I can’t trust nobody. Julia’s a scaredy-cat, but you are just tough enough to do it. Go to my apartment if you ever hear that I am hospitalized.”

“What? Tell my mother.”

“Your mamma ain’t the right one for this job. You go get your Aunt Jenny, take her to my apartment and get my things before Portia gets there.” She finished her cigarette, ground the butt into the ashtray and started to take out another one.

“What kind of things?” I asked, but I already knew.

“Ain’t you got good sense? My spiritual things. You know the box I keep them in. Didn’t I make sure that you saw my crystal ball, my knife, and my personal tarot cards? Leave the other. I know how you feel about it. Let Portia get it. There will be a nasty surprise for her.” Momma Elsie puffed on her cigarette.

While my mother was still dying, Momma Elsie was hospitalized with a heart attack. My father and I visited her in the hospital where she was barely able to speak. She mouthed the words, “Get my stuff” and the next day my Aunt Jenny and I went to her small apartment on St. Felix Street. Aunt Jenny wanted to stay and look at all Momma Elsie’s stuff, but I knew we had to hurry. Opening the drawer, I grabbed the box, wrapped it inside a shopping bag and put it inside another one. Then I turned off the lights and we left.

A few weeks later Momma Elsie died and we went to her funeral. My Dad didn’t want to go inside, so he dropped me and my Aunt Jenny off. Sure enough, Momma Elsie was being buried in black. A very thin, sickly looking woman shook

hands with us on the way out. It was Portia. She didn't look like a witch. She just looked ill.

“That woman don't look like she could hex a fly,” was my Aunt Jenny's verdict. “And Elsie was just always telling stories. She was good with the leaves and the cards and she could read people, and that's how she made her living, but I don't believe any of that other old voodoo hoodoo.”

Maybe Momma Elsie didn't have any real powers, but Portia died a few months later, and coincidence or not I heard that it was her who cleaned out Momma Elsie's apartment.



Under the Sea

ALISA CNOSSEN, B.A. IN COMMUNICATIONS, 2023

Sandwiches

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

I start to write a poem in the kitchen. It
is still dark out. I am making a peanut
butter jelly sandwich. The breeze from

the open window wakes me up
and I think of a poem to write. I want
to write a love poem. Not one filled

with clichés nor one that will burn
when hearts finally break. It will have two
characters; me and my daughter.

I toast the bread, spreading butter
and watching it melt. This poem,
the one I will write, will have us sitting

on a park bench, perhaps. Or it will take place
in this kitchen. I feel her warmth as I open
the jar of crunchy peanut butter. Her poetry

lining my refrigerator and her ink-covered
notebooks I flip through from time to time
makes me think of this poem

I will write. Her more memorable works,
the ones she will be forever known for, weren't
written on paper, but rather someplace more

permanent and her heart poured out through
her words, onto her paper and onto the bathroom
walls with her poetry ending with

a steady flow down the bathtub drain.
An ambulance could only go so fast.
I am hesitant in opening this jar

of strawberry jelly. Loosening the lid,

I drop it in my moment of grief
and its innards spray me, the countertop,

and both of our poetry. This splatter
and the shattering of glass making me ill
as I try desperately to save her manuscripts,

wiping away the red from her poetry and her
journals yet again. The glass shards scooped
into cloth and thrown into the garbage. My hand

starts to bleed, small cuts etching into my palm,
traveling down to my wrist. I use a paper towel
and this time I successfully stop the words from pouring.

I clean up the jar and I close the peanut butter sandwich.
My poem is nearly complete.
The two of us will be

eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.
We will be looking at a sunrise peek
over the horizon and we will tell jokes

to each other. There will be laughter and
the smell of bleach would be only
a mere afterthought, rather than this intruder

of a memory. We would drink many glasses
of milk as well. This isn't really poetry,
but I don't mind. It brings me comfort

and she will smile and we will walk back inside,
laughing about the day to come.
I eat my sandwich and I start to write my poem,

etching each word. The broken jelly jar
in shambles on the floor. Her, in her jar,
trying to make sense of everything.

I don't want to learn anything from this.
I love you.

Hands Up, Don't Shoot (a Golden Shovel form)

LAURIE McMILLAN, M.S. IN COUNSELING, 2023

Maybe there is an angel Michael
who leaps from tall buildings into brown
nothing, that nothing forms an outline of a body
and you step back and wonder what beauty it has
lying like that in such a position of strangeness a
person might decide was a pose, but look closer: the hole
the way it consumed what Ferguson wouldn't let in
Darren Wilson still hears him saying, *hands up, don't shoot it!*

Maybe there is an eighteen year old angel Michael
who roams the streets looking for black and browns
urging them back before the word murder
could be spoken like slang or everyday have or has
to talk them down to walk them home before a
hand reaches them to make that Black hole
spin and accelerate enunciate the lose faith in
as in common good, right and true-all notion of it.

Maybe there is an older angel Mr. Michael
in a black suit ready to lift the world up the brown
staircase, ladder, mountain, and the 6 o'clock news
will play it as hero worship, bold turnaround coverage
of how they've changed, switched colors, what has
come down must finally go up and Michael wants a
chance, and tries to lift the weight terrible as the hole
now big as ocean, volcano, a mother saying oh no in
Portuguese, or Spanish, and crawls headfirst into it--

hoping to get a glimpse of Michael, his fat cheeks and
little boy smile under a streetlight blinking after they
leave the park and the protests have stopped
maybe running back to her happiness, jumping it
like a high jump, so no one can ever catch up
in the brown she closes her eyes with.



Coral

BRITTANY SUTHERLAND, B.A. IN GRAPHIC DESIGN, 2020



Opal Dancer

BRITTANY SUTHERLAND, B.A. IN GRAPHIC DESIGN, 2020

The Orient

MOLLY MARR, M.S. IN GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, 2021

It wasn't the buildings that led me here,
nor the skies. It wasn't the fountains, the academics, the flagstones.
It wasn't the spices, the dyes, the pottery or tiles.
It wasn't even the seductive spells chanted at moonrise and sunset.

It *was* the colorful, wide-eyed people who spoke in music notes, read poetry aloud and sang in whispers. It *was* the tomes of old that littered their streets like charms dangling in the soft-caught breezes. It *was* the bells that tolled with big bronze bellies, swaying north and south. It *was* the paper beast that set my name on fire, later sent adrift to cool in mint-shade and jasmine. It *was* the milk I met mixed with cinnamon whetting my appetite for more. It *was* my dream that inked the map of my journey, now lost in sands and seas.

It *was* the Orient and her beauty that led me astray, led me here. I will forever wonder, where was it I came from? Will I ever remember my origin or will I never know, just as the lantern swings in the wind with no thought of its fire?

The poppies are bright today and the tea smooth as the river rushing by, like the scarlet dress of my lover, the Orient. My every dream is of her; the night is never over. I am the lantern swinging from the terrace of her house. I sway in the wind of mountains with no thought of my fire.

Frostbite (with thanks to WDS and TSE)

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

I wake up to that familiar sound. She is in the bathroom with the door shut, wakes me from this dream I am living in. I wince at this sound, knowing that it will never grow old. Sunbeams filter through the blinds and stream across our bed, making everything new again. Her glass of water half-full by her bedside, resting on your Bible that lies face-down on her nightstand. I get up and I wait for the sound to stop.

“Make sure to bring our documents,” she says as she walks from the bathroom.

“Yeah, I will. I’m going to eat something first.”

“I probably should, too. It’s going to be a long day.”

We walk downstairs, with me following her, into the kitchen. The peaches sitting in the fruit bowl have started to rot. White fuzz starting to form around the stems of every peach. And indeed there will be a time for rot and decay for the rest of the fruits sitting snugly on this wooden fruit bowl. I start grinding our coffee beans and she sits at the table, staring at the art on the wall. Suns created from crayons, stick figure people holding hands, and watercolor lilies along a pond line and cover the red wallpaper. She fidgets with her hands and picks up one of the more decayed pieces of fruit. Examines it for a moment, setting it back and piercing its skin with her nails.

“What should we do about the mold here?”

I mumble a reply and she doesn’t hear me. Doesn’t bother to ask again and I sit across from her, underneath the crucifix. She grinds her teeth slowly, waiting for one of us to break the silence. The newspaper boy throws his gift against our garage door. I walk to the window, watching him leave. He doesn’t stop at the stop sign.

“Don’t get it. You know what will be on the front page. You’ve seen the milk cartons.” I hear her breathing from the living room and she exclaims, “I can’t take this anymore!” I haven’t read the newspaper in months. Everyday, a child goes missing.

She gets up and goes for the old pack of cigarettes in the kitchen drawer where we keep extra keys, rubber bands, loose screws, and the many coupons saved for rainy days. Today, however, it is snowing. A late snowstorm in the middle of April. Easter will come around again and we’ll both be lonely. Following her, we venture outside. The plum blossoms are falling. Her garden, sitting at our peripherals, lay wasted and frozen. There will be a time to plant anew and a time for harvest. A time for this and a time for that.

“These taste like crap,” she says, throwing the butt into the growing accumulation of snow. The remnants of fall leaves are buried once again. We dug this garden last month, expecting warm sunny days. Birds perched on feeders, pecking at the seeds and bees swarming the many blossoms. We’ve done our best. She clenches

her fists on the railing and I tug at her sleeve. We head back inside. A change of heart occurs, “What if there is good news? Go and get the newspaper.” She returns to her chair, grabbing a mug and filling it with fresh coffee.

I walk out and after nearly slipping on the ice, find the newspaper. Wiping off the snow, I walk back inside, seeing how our petunias and marigolds have become hunched and old with last night’s cold. The foxgloves are fading from purple to white. Clusters have fallen and are now being buried. You’ve always had an affinity towards flowers. I can’t remember which ones were your favorite? Was it the petunias or was it the forget-me-nots? We dug your garden in this yard and we will dig again once this storm passes.

We read the newspaper, drinking coffee and wasting time. I spin my coffee into swirls with my coffee spoon. Our many coffee spoons lay scattered in the sink, needing to be cleaned. We immediately throw the front page away and are left with sport, the funnies, the weather, and stock numbers.

“It looks like we might get some more snow this next weekend,” she mutters. The crucifix hanging on the wall looks down at us. I’ve never liked the thing. It was given to us from her mother as a housewarming gift. The artist took no creative limitations when painting the details of the pain and the suffering that had occurred all those years ago. The blood, bright red, at the many points of his body. His eyes looking upwards towards our ceiling with its many watermarks. The nails in his hands made from copper have started to turn green. He hasn’t been washed for some time now and the years of buildup settle on the wooden arm and in the crevices of his body.

“We should clean this,” I say, picking it up and inspecting it more closely. She looks from the funnies and stares at me while I wipe off the dirt and the grime. “I’ll get you something to eat. We really should be eating again.” I go and grab the leftover pancakes from the fridge. We cut open the peaches and with meticulous cutting, we avoid the rotted parts. With a dollop of butter and a slathering of syrup, we eat. The crucifix now set on the table and I see his eyes looking at me. I turn him away. I won’t say the Lord’s prayer, but she does. These sweet foods make my cavities grow and hot coffee finds where my nerves have started to breathe air. The phone rings.

She picks it up and after a brief conversation followed by a few words I did not pick up on, she hangs up. It is time for us to go and make our visit.

We grab our coats and we wrap our necks in scarves. She puts on a black and white striped scarf. Mine is grey. We walk to the car, a slow buildup of snow piling on the windshield and roof. We find a flower, a lone foxglove, to take with us. It is adorned with some late buds that might still bloom. It will not survive, but I reject nature. I help her into the car and she gets in, one foot at a time. I watch the neighbor’s stare at us from behind their curtains. I wipe this off and we enter, turning on the car and waiting a few minutes for it to warm up.

“What if they are right this time? What if it is him?”

“I’m not sure. Last time they said this, they were wrong.”

“Who was it? Did they ever say?”

“No, you know it’s all about confidentiality. The family has to know first before anybody else.”

I hoped they were wrong. But in short, I was afraid.

We head south, towards town. As we pass by Main Street, I hear her try to speak, but no words exit her lips. Only her breathing, growing heavier and heavier still. Her whole jaw grinding and clenching until something somewhere has to give soon. She chews on some winter mint gum to alleviate her toothache and her bleeding gums. I try to turn on the radio, but am met with your name. Speculations on where you are followed by hockey scores. And like nerves caught in a graph or sprawled on a pin, I cannot turn it off.

“Please, I can’t listen to anything. Just turn it off.”

My hands are plastered on the wheel now and she turns it off, rubbing her head with her fingers, nails chewed to each one of their bases. I, in my absentmindedness, pass the schoolyard. The children play and they are throwing snowballs at each other. There was no telling why there was snow. This March, there was rain and the river rose above its boundaries, flooding our basement as well as many places here. The oak tree, standing above your garden, had fallen and the ground was disturbed. We salvaged what we could and still ended up with less than before. Going through the debris of everything, we find baby starlings dead with mangled wings and broken beaks. The children continue to play with frostbite nipping at their noses. The bell rings and the children go inside. Recess is over.

I continue to drive, neither of us saying any words. We reach our journey’s end and I help her out of our car. I grow numb and though the snow was collecting around my eyelashes, the ground will not hold the few dry swirls of snow. It must not be very cold, but she shivers through her many layers of clothes. We walk inside and are greeted by a man older than this town. He leads us on our way to a room of many metal boxes. Our hands clenching each other’s, we follow him. Our grief radiates from our hearts like a patient etherized on a table. He leads us to a table where we know our time has come. He looks at us and knows without having to say any words.

“Yes, that is our son.”

And you will always be our son.

Don't Cry Alice

PAIGE WALKER, B.S. IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION, 2022

Don't cry little girl,
Don't fall to the ground
Where the dirt and mud
Will intermix with the blood
From your scrapped knees
And torn up knuckles
Don't listen to the cat up in the trees
Don't let the tears fall
And water the flowers
That carry on toxic conversations
Don't have a hope
That life will get better
Or live in a world of your own
It won't.
Don't show your emotions
Don't let them know you're hurt and alone,
Take part in an everlasting party that celebrates nothing
But confusion and controversy
Be brave little girl, stand strong in front of
The hearts and spades.
Stand tall, little girl, but mind your head
My axe is swift when I scream
Off with your...
Don't slouch in my presence
Stand like a proper child,
Be mindful of your height
Don't burst through the roof
Sending the lizards and rabbits
Screaming monster off in the distance
Now, what are you going to do?
Don't cry yourself a hurricane
And drown in the floods that came.
But instead run round and round in circles,
Play your games and speak your rhymes
Of cabbages and kings

Be resilient, don't run like you're late.
Sit for a while in the blue and pink vapors
Spelling out words of no use
Filling your head to the point
You think you can take wing and fly.
As the hunger sets in
Take a bite little girl
Not too much,
Or you'll touch the sky
And not too little
Or you might be crushed under
My boot and die.
Don't cry little girl
Trust me
It's better this way.



Weathered Trestle

Chelsea Honeycutt, B.S. in Sociology, 2023

The Dripping Purple Pen

TONY OLSON, B.A. IN DIGITAL FILM-SCREENWRITING, 2021

structure provides safety
continuing across the mind
as we search,
an element of the self
is lost
to the hangman's rope
and it can never be found again

that's a good one!

just shut up and write.

the compulsion to destroy
creation takes time
bring yourself
closer to me
and realize we are doomed

it says so much, what a talent!

you didn't say anything! focus!

iron walls break down
water rages against our sorrow,
how can you not see
when I can
so clearly

even bukowski would love this!

you don't understand, it's not real.

I will sit here and break this curse
this purple pen that never leaves my
hand,
my mind,
it drips endlessly
without permission,
choked with saturation
I hate it
twisting my own words into nothing
please run dry

*Like a great well that has dried among the
famished!*

No! You never listen!

I'll keep going until this purple
fades to nothing
and leaves me
left grasping at life around me
desperate
for any other color
please run dry
before my passion is permanently stained

Flat Top Box

ERIC SWEM, B.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2021

Some bodies of water are unfit. They are unfit for familial gatherings and do not welcome young ones in search of good fun or relief from sweltering heat. Just as certain people have a heightened proclivity towards violence and evil, some waters run deeper and far too dark. In my hometown, we know of such a river that runs old and true through the center of it. We do not speak of it after dark lest the old things hear their names and come to reap their rewards. You can ask the old men and they will give you warnings to head. You can ask the old women, but they will not speak of it; they have lost too much to the muddy water and the pride of young men. In larger places where traffic builds and artificial light obscures the stars, people disappear for any number of reasons. Here there is one foul mother that keeps demons tied to its bank and if a loved one may go missing after sundown, there can be but one suspect in the matter. There is a river in my hometown, but we do not use it for recreation or for sport. No, we do not go there after darkness falls.

Decades ago, there was a boy. His peers did not take to him due to his silent nature and his family's negligible reputation as ne'er do wells and shifty smugglers of immoral goods and services. He wore hand-me-downs from his older brothers and sisters, drawing unwanted attention when he occasionally wore girls' clothing on Thursdays, the day of the wash. For interests, the boy had few and none of them were aligned with the other boys in his class. His father had a guitar and had taught him to strum when he was young, the noises clunky and his fingers blistered. The boy would sit cross legged on the hardwood floor in his tiny room and surround himself with the hollow noises of the guitar, his mother often yanking it from his grasp before his supper went cold. By the time he was out of primary school, the boy had taught himself how to play well and the flat top box that had become his most prized possession and companion was played most days when he was let out of school. He often traveled down his own beaten path through the woods near his home to the river and sat along its humid edge. He fought off healthy mosquitos while he played for the frogs and turtles. Occasionally a gator would bob its snout and head above the dark green surface to watch the lanky boy sitting against a dead log or leaning against a cedar tree, strumming, and drumming on the guitar in the summer heat.

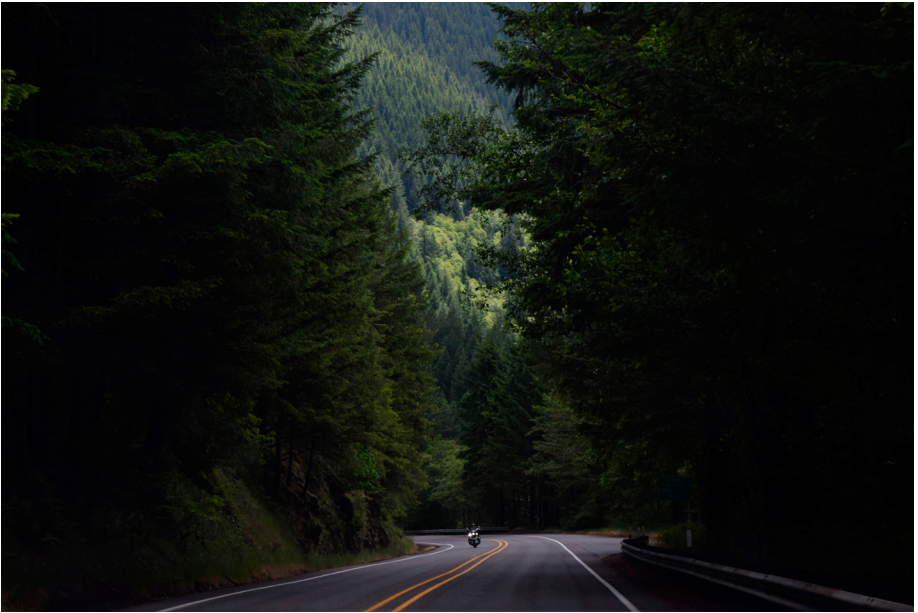
One especially tropical day when the weather was searing and most folks retreated to their box fans and A/C, the boy emerged from his cramped room and bid his mother goodbye. Perhaps he would have told his father goodbye as well if not for his departure some years before when he had gone in search of work, never to return. She barely raised a hand at the kitchen sink as she knew full well where her

son went and how it was one of the few things that brought him joy. He did not do well in school. His teachers fussed at her over his lack of progress and the other kids picked at him like it was their job. She was thankful for the river and the sanctuary it provided her son though she warned him to come home before dark. Finding his favorite spot near a wide oak log nestled between two large rocks, he settled into the pew of his very own church that churned and rippled, the sunshine forming little diamonds on the surface from where he sat with his guitar resting on his lap. And so, he began to pick his instrument and stare out at the expanse of water noticing a fish jump or a blue heron swoop down to land in a stand of tall grass. The familiar nature sounds abounded and joined his performance of gospel and country tunes that he had heard on the small radio his father had left behind. The day began to dissolve like cotton candy in a child's grasp. Before long, the boy's fingers slowed and his head lolled, the afternoon heat and the still water exerting its power over him. All it took was a slightly more comfortable position upon his favorite log for sleep to take him as his heavy eyes closed with his hands resting on the body and neck of his guitar.

Perhaps cricket noise woke the boy. Perhaps it was a disturbance in the water, a fish flopping, or a mallard fluttering on the dead still surface. When his eyes did crack open, he felt a primitive jolt that emanated from the rock bottom of his gut and ran quickly up to his throat. He stammered to his feet and saw the river and woods that had become his haven as if for the first time. The purple haze of night had once again defeated the day while he had slept along the bank. It put a trance on him, keeping his feet still while ancient things stirred. The boy thought of his mother on their screened in porch, smoking a cigarette as she paced to and fro, her bandanna tied around her head, what she must be thinking. This thought was interrupted by a hot, raspy whisper in his right ear. Whatever it was uttered his name.

The boy made for the tree line and the path his loneliness had carved in the undergrowth and rocky soil. He was sure he had never run faster, and he was also certain that he wanted nothing more than to reach the clearing beyond the dense wooded area that led to his backyard fence. The branches whizzed by in a blur, each footstep bringing the clearing closer. The boy began to rehearse what he would say to avoid a thrashing when he felt a cold, rough hand close around his neck, long fingers pressing into his skin with a force that he had never felt before. At once he was on his back, turned around and dragged by his feet as he caught the first glimpse of his attacker from his position on the ground. The creature was made of bone and riverbed and moss atop pale skin. It moaned in the moonlight as it dragged the boy who reached out frantically for some root or rock to save him. Despite his efforts the creature's rage and grasp were too strong and it took the boy beneath the dark muddy river, where he would never be found despite multiple searches by the county and later by far more competent parties.

His mother spent the rest of her days in the house that she had raised the boy in. No one had to guess what became of her. Each night she could be observed until the early morning hours, pacing in her screened in porch, cherry burning bright in the darkness, awaiting her son's return. Nowadays, when dares are made or children linger too long near the river and the sun begins to go down, a faint sound can be heard, riding the breeze when it comes. It reaches those who are in more danger than they may believe, in short reach of things born about before man was known to the world. Just before sundown, a strumming can be detected. Coming across the muddy water and into the trees and back. Nowhere and everywhere at once. The sounds coming from a flat top box from long ago. A warning to heed; a thumping and a plucking from somewhere beyond.



The Longest Ride

Alisa Cnossen, B.A. in Communications, 2023

Walking Through the Haunted Woods

CHANI GOMES, M.S. IN CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING, 2023

As a child, my parents always warned me
“If you walk into the Haunted Woods,
you’ll lose your senses, then your mind.”
For over twenty years
their words reverberated through my head.
No longer a warning, but a promise.

Day by day, I’d pass the lush, green forest
sparkling in the summer dawn
and wonder how something so pure,
almost dreamlike,
could have a name so wicked.

Spring would arrive with a dewy outside edge,
leaving me wondering
what lay waiting
just past the forest line.
Gazing in curiosity as I strolled as close
to the perimeter as possible
grazing my fingers over the leaves,
between the branches,
letting raindrops dampen my skin.

Even as the months chased away the sun
turning the greenery to ashy browns and oranges,
I watched the woods turn spindly
like claws reaching from the earth
in unadulterated fascination.
This is when I most wanted to
venture through those ever changing woods.

Sometimes,
as responsibilities clawed at my mind,
getting lost didn’t seem that bad.
I would saunter in,

beg them to claim my thoughts.
I supposed I might not mind them
taking my senses
if it allowed my mind to momentarily rest.
Losing both direction and time,
taking in nothing,
except the spectacle
of the beauty around me.

She Sits

JULIA ANNE JONES, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

She sits.
She dreams.
Coffees
And creams
To clear
Her head:
Hospital
Beds.

She sits.
She sighs.
She hears
The cries
And stares
With dread:
Hospital
Beds.

She sits.
She waits.
She sees
The fates.
She mourns
The dead:
Hospital
Beds.

Boot Camp Blues

SARAH ECKERT, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2024

I am drinking the ocean,
but the earth won't move.
The weight of the world
hangs on my shoulders,
and I haven't been instructed
to take my seat.
I had to lose it all
to learn that I had something to lose.
The mountain of life tosses around
a ton of boulders,
and I'm writing all of these letters,
admitting my defeat.



Strange Serenity

Emmy Williamson, B.S. in Justice Studies, 2023

Crimson

MARIE ANGELINE CARR, M.S. IN CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING, 2022

Rocky surfaces make for untrusting ankles
My fears teeter with every step towards a resolution
A balancing act on cobblestones
Breath comes out rigid and hot
Full of exhaustion

The rain, the snow, the slosh
Slips between the bricks in the ground and
Becomes tangled within my mind
A red thread has been cut, the string wraps around my throat
An execution by emotions.

The thread is frozen on my skin
Memories of pain produce icicles down my face, stinging my skin
With a fierce and tumultuous cold
Devouring me.
Hands grip the thread, and as I pull it cuts me like razors

The thread burns crimson, the last bit of color in an icy landscape.
I walk with heavy steps, on bricks laid down with sorrow and cement.
The snow and rain continue to pelt down relentlessly,
More devastating and more suffocating than guilt.
I choose not to move on.

Sitting on soaking ground,
Sitting in my own time, the rest of the world begins to move forward
At speeds that only offer me a glimpse of what had been possible
Babies are taking glimpses at the sun now, and their little hands cannot grab the
Thread around my neck
They have no concept of heartbreak.
I pick myself up, and gently with acceptance
The thread becomes softer, and I slip it off around my neck
Cautious fingers trace the caverns in skin
A long-lasting impression, yet not defining

Slowly, and purposefully I will the rain to subside
Cobblestones turn into grass
Still wet from snow and rain
But clinging to hope and to the anxious need to survive
I sit by the grass and look up into the sky
Warmth from blinding light fills my cheeks.

What Skittles Say

JULIA ANNE JONES, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

I'm whisked skyward as I quietly, secretly, hastily slide Skittles into my mouth during class. Whenever Mr. Shope turns his back on us to add another historical date to the chalkboard's endless list, Daniel spins around in his chair to set a few Skittles on my desk behind him.

Daniel is quiet and kind of short. He is very thin, but strong because he likes riding bikes and doing tricks. I think he called it "BMX." His cheeks are always flushed, and he squints a lot because he never wears his glasses. But Daniel is not shy. He just has nothing to say to people who do not like him.

Though in his second year at this small Christian school, Daniel still does not fit in with most of us, nor is he very popular with the school faculty. Teachers expect 9th graders to accept entering high school as an indication of greater responsibility, since the younger students look up to us. Most of us follow this, but Daniel seems to like fighting it. He just came back this week from his suspension for slashing a few bus tires. Several months ago, he made some kind of small explosive and blew up a school toilet. He was suspended for that, too. No one else here does that sort of stuff.

History is interesting, but not when I am being choked by a ceaseless outpouring of facts. There is just no time to digest them, especially when I already have a rainbow of Skittle flavors in my mouth. It is interesting how Daniel's black hair has so much gel in it that it never moves, even when I tap it with a pencil while Mr. Shope writes on. Though it does not move, he must still feel it because he turns around again and gives me two green Skittles. He always asks questions with his thick black eyebrows that contort above his dark brown eyes. I am pretty sure that time he was asking if that was what I wanted.

Most people here stay away from Daniel. Many of us have been together since elementary school, and none of us dare disappoint faculty members. They have watched and helped us grow. They expect the best from us, so we give it to them. They do not like Daniel, so most of us do not like him either. But I do.

My hand hurts from writing down all of these dates. Mr. Shope has already filled the board four times, erasing history almost as fast as he writes it. I am pretty sure Daniel is drawing. I hear him scribbling. He never cares about tests. I think he only cares about what cares about him.

Some people think the red Skittles are the best, but I like the purple ones. Daniel and I had a long discussion about Skittles the other day. I hate orange; he hates green. I love purple; he loves red. Yellow is neutral territory. So I get his hates and he gets mine. The rest we share.

As the bell signals the end of class, Mr. Shope scribbles a few more dates on the board, as always. Daniel was not taking notes, as I suspected; he is the only one standing up to leave. The rest of us are making scribble copies of Mr. Shope's scribbles. I get so nervous when people watch me, which Daniel is doing, but I have to get these notes.

Finally done, I look up at Daniel, who appears to have been waiting for me. He is grinning. His eyebrows are slightly raised, letting the light reflect from his endless prism eyes in a mischievous way. He holds out his closed hand, palm down, to me. I hold out my open hand, confused but trusting, and he fills it with purple Skittles.

Peace and Quiet

NICK HOLMAN, B.A. IN DIGITAL FILM-SCREENWRITING, 2020

Finally, I thought to myself, easing my tired body into the warm lavender-scented bubble bath: peace and quiet. I love my husband, and I love my kids, but I'm not ashamed to also admit I love that they're at the movies for the next two hours. So alas, it's finally just me, my quiet thoughts, a lone flickering candle dancing on the drafty window seal, a guilt-free glass of white wine, and most of all: peace and quiet. And my iPhone, of course. My iPhone that I will not let distract me for once. My iPhone that I will put on Do Not Disturb mode right now. Right after I check Facebook. It's right here, so I might as well. I'll only be a minute. Within seconds I find myself scrolling through the news feed, immediately regretting my impulsive decision.

Oh, well, it looks like the Cantrells are in Disney for the week. With two fingers, I commence zooming in on the photo of the apparently joyous family standing in the shadow of Cinderella's Castle. Nobody's that happy, I think, as I hit the 'like' button, continuing to scroll down through my newsfeed. Wait, I think again, suddenly catching myself. I need to get a grip! Determined to relax, I place my phone on the side of the tub with a steadfast resolve. I call the shots, not my iPhone!

Easing into the bubbles, I try desperately to purge my mind of the now haunting image of the overly excited Cantrell family and all of the other distractions knocking on the door of my mind. Peace and quiet, I repeat to myself as if in the style of some sort of meditative incantation. Peace and quiet.

The incantation is working, I think, releasing a series of deep inhalations. A few more deep breaths later, I can feel my shoulders start to drop, and my jaw unclench. Maybe there is something to this meditation thing. I guess it's not all man-buns and chai lattes after all. Closing my eyes, I slide down further under the bubbly surface of the bath, thankful the incantations have worked their sedative magic.

That's a funny word. Incantation. I wonder where it comes from, my mind beginning to wander. Maybe the Incas? I mean, that makes linguistic sense anyway. That reminds me! I love that movie with Daniel Day-Lewis. *The Last of the Incas*. I should watch that after I get out of the bath. Wait, that's not right. I think it's Mel Gibson. I should just let it go. It doesn't matter. I didn't really care for the film anyway. Peace and quiet, I think yet again, drawing in a deep diaphragmatic breath. Peace and quiet.

I just have to check to see who it is, I rationalize, easing my shoulders back out of the water, quickly grabbing my iPhone. Then I can relax. The search results come up instantly, *The Last of the Mohicans* starring Daniel Day-Lewis. That makes sense. I suppose I was half right. But wait a minute then. My thumbs dance across the keyboard before my mind can even process my follow-up question, though

my subconscious is already somehow fully briefed. That's it! Now I feel like a fool. *Braveheart* is the Mel Gibson movie. A warm satiated feeling surges through my body—anyway, peace and quiet time. Reaching over the side of the tub, I gingerly place my phone down on the padded bath mat. Out of sight, out of mind, I think, submerging everything up to my chin in the water.

Oh foot! I think, using one of several fake curse words I've since adopted upon becoming a Mom, promptly sitting up in the bath. I forgot to put gas in the car. I hope Tim remembers. I don't want him and the kids to get stranded. On second thought, I would have more time to myself. No, that's terrible. I better text him. I hope he took his phone. One quick text later, I set my phone back on the bath mat outside of the tub for the last time—finally, peace and quiet.

I hope he took the card. Wait, have I paid the balance for this month? Son of a biscuit! I think, again dipping into my vat of fake curses. Without wasting a second, I pick up my iPhone again, signing into my bank app to check the account balance. Okay, that was close, I think, laying my phone back down.

It's so hard to relax with that stupid iPhone sitting outside of the tub. I wish I had some sort of electronics tray for inside the bath. That's a good idea. No, wait, peace and quiet. Well, I thought. I should probably check Etsy to see if they make one so that I'll know for the future. Across my illuminated screen, my pruning fingers dance once more without noticing that the water is slowly losing its warm bubbly lure. They don't, oh well. Back to peace and quiet.

Then another thought jumps to the forefront of my mind, then another. Another follows after. Suddenly, it happens. Deep in the recesses of my mind, I feel the damn break. Without warning, my susceptible, dopamine-thirsty brain becomes inundated with any and every useless question one could ever hope to type into the Safari search bar. My sense of time, self-discipline, all but gone. My fingers, powerless, type like mad as my mind surrenders.

How hard is it to learn Russian? What does appendicitis feel like? How often should you change the oil in your car? Is hang-gliding dangerous? Is Betty White still alive? Can you go to prison for jaywalking? What is Jeff Bezos's net worth? Is it hard to start a business? Do aliens exist? What is the NASDAQ? What is the average retirement age? Is natural sugar worse than artificial? Do birthmarks go away? Are there any Blockbuster stores left? How do you know if you're addicted to technology? The questions compound one after the next, as I feel myself falling deep into a bottomless chasm of useless information, helpless, with no end in sight.

"Mom!"

"Ahh!" I scream, startled at my daughter's voice coming from the other side of the bathroom door.

"Are you okay?" She hesitantly inquires.

“Yes, sweetie, I’m fine!” I say, catching my breath. “How was the movie?”

“Well, the car ran out of gas on the way, so we had to stop and didn’t get there in time,” she continues. “But Dad took us for ice cream instead, so it’s okay. Love you, Mommy!”

I sink into the now tepid bath water for one last time, listening to the pitter-patter of my sugar-crazed little daughter’s feet skipping down the hallway, fading out of earshot. Then it hits me. The last of the bubbles melting into the cooling water, my iPhone in my peripheral vision on the tub’s edge, the candle in the window barely flickering. I can’t believe it. Ice cream after ten on a school night. Way to go, Tim. The kids will be up for hours now... So much for my peace and quiet.

A student publication of the
GRAND CANYON
UNIVERSITY*

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES

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20CHSS0067