Portals Literary and Arts Magazine

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The House in the Garden of Eden

Skylar Cole

In the beginning,
When God came to visit,
Eve set out tea,
And tiny, crustless sandwiches.
Adam sat, comfortably nude
In his BarcaLounger chair.
God smoked cigars
And listened.
Later,
After that business with the snake,
Conversation crawled,
And fig leaves got in the way of everything.
Eve cleared her throat and fanned at the cigar smoke,
Adam shifted from foot to foot,
And God muttered under his breath.
Peanut Butter Kisses
Matthew Maya

Peanut butter and jelly kisses, untied shoes, scraped-up knees, and a red balloon.

Muddy high fives, apple juice, a sticker and a game of duck duck goose.

Knee-high hugs, bubble baths, snack time, and an afternoon nap.

Chocolate-covered smiles, stories goodnight, swingsets, and pillow fights.

Forever love.
Alex Sprecher
Sixty-Six Years

Bronwyn Lane

It weren’t no secret that my ol’ man was a drunk. And believe me, he weren’t no happy drunk neither. That son-a-bitch took his belt to me and my mama every time he had the chance. He was a big ol’ bear of a man, too. Hands as big as dinner plates and a waistline wide as a door frame. But when I came home that night after curfew, the wrath of my ol’ man was the furthest thing from my mind. It didn’t occur to me that he’d be there, up and waitin’ for me, until he was breathin’ right down my neck.

I didn’t look up at him. Just kept starin’ right into his chest, which was only ‘bout two inches from my face. He asked me what I been up to and why I was all cut up. I’d completely forgot ‘bout all the cuts and scratches I had. But I couldn’t tell him. I stood there frozen as a popsicle. He asked me again. I waited for him to take off his belt. I didn’t care no more. I was so numb I wouldn’t feel a thing if that son-a-bitch beat me to death. I waited for it, and that no good son-a-bitch just turned around and walked away.

###

I met a woman when I was twenty-two who said she could see the color of my “okra.” Now, I had not the first clue as to what the heck she meant because I always thought okra was food. I ain’t no cook, mind ya, and I ain’t got no idea how to make the stuff, but I reckoned that it was indeed food. Anyhow, she said that my okra was black. I thought that made good sense because I had right many black shirts, but she said that it was a bad thing, my okra bein’ black and all. She started flappin’ her hands, sayin’ she was cleaning my okra. She followed me around all day flappin’ her little hands at me. Drove me right batty. Every time I turned around and tried to shoo her away, she said she was makin’ progress because my okra was flashin’ purple. She got real excited when a car backfire ‘bout scared
the piss outta me; said my okra started flashin’ all sorts-a bright colors. I told her to shut her face and leave me to my peace, and she looked at me with the greenest eyes I ever saw. She smiled at me and said that my okra wasn’t black no more and that she had done her job. I married her a year later.

###

When Jackie passed her thirtieth birthday she started talkin’ ‘bout her biology clock tickin’. All she talked about was havin’ babies. I told her I ain’t want no babies, and she said that was the most ridiculous thing she’d ever heard. I tried to explain it to her in a way she would understand.

“If you have an okra that’s yella, and I have an okra that’s black, well, then our babies would come out lookin’ like big bruises now, wouldn’t they?” She didn’t buy that. Said my okra weren’t black no more, it were red now.

“Red and yellow make orange, silly.” she said.

“Well I sure as heck ain’t havin’ no fruits.” I said back. Well, she didn’t talk to me for two days after that. When she brought it up again, I told her my answer was still “no”. Told her that kids were mean and stupid and careless and I wanted nothin’ to do with ‘em. She said I was just scared ‘cause my old man was a drunk, but that I had still turned out just fine. Said she wasn’t a bad kid and I wasn’t a bad kid, so our kids weren’t gonna be bad kids. Said I hadn’t turned out like my old man and that meant something.

“I just don’t want no kids that look like bruises, all right!” It was the only time I ever yelled at her.

###

My blood ran cold when I hung up the phone. I ain’t heard Toby’s voice sound like that in over fifty years. Scared, distant, shaken. None of us never came straight out and said it, but I think we all thought that if anyone was goin’ to do it, it woulda been me.

I told Jackie I was goin’ fishin’ that day. She didn’t know Tink, and I didn’t feel like explainin’ anything to her. I pulled
over at the Fillin’ Station and changed into my suit that I had put in the car the night before while Jackie was sleepin’. There was a sign beside the entrance of the funeral parlor that said, “Benjamin Tinker Memorial Service -11:00 a.m. July 13th.” I stared at it a right while, maybe hoping that the letters would rearrange themselves into another name.

I walked ‘round back to have a smoke before goin’ in. Somehow I wasn’t surprised to see Toby back there, too. He was just starin’ at the ground, exhalin’ smoke through his nose.

“They can’t even open the casket,” he said. Said ol’ Tink’s wife left him ‘bout a year ago and he’d been livin’ in a houseboat down on the river. Said nobody heard the gunshot over the fireworks. Said his oldest son found him a week later.

There was only ‘bout twenty or so people inside and only one basket-a flowers. The card simply said, “I understand pal. - E.F.” Elliot Fisher moved down to Florida ‘bout fifteen years prior, and it was a relief to see those initials.

Toby and I hung out in the back and listened to what the people had to say ‘bout ol’ Tink. The minister asked everyone to hang their heads in a moment-a silence. I didn’t hang my head. I just sit there, starin’ at Tink’s casket. I imagined ‘ol Tink inside of it… small, young, excited to be hangin’ out with the big kids. I sat there and listened to the silence, and I, too, understood.

###

She was screamin’ and cussin’, even threw a few things. She barked ‘bout how I never wanted her havin’ my babies and how I lied ‘bout goin’ fishin’. Said that old Mrs. Wilkinson had seen me in my suit carryin’ a basket’a flowers and demanded to know what her name was. Said my okra had gone back to black ‘cause I ain’t love her no more. Wanted to know what her name was. I told her there weren’t no “her”, and she started beatin’ my chest with her fists. She put her suitcase by the door and said she’d called a taxi. I told her she was talkin’ nonsense instead of tellin’ her the truth. I couldn’t take the screamin’
and the cussin’, the crashin’ of the things she threw, so I let her leave. I realized somethin’ ‘bout kids that day. They’re mean and stupid and careless, and they never grow out of it.

###

I’ve done a lot in my life. I wish I could tell ya ‘bout the wonderful things I done, but I don’t remember them much. I don’t remember much ‘bout a lotta things. I wish I could tell ya ‘bout summers at the lake jumpin’ off the Miller’s oak tree with Toby and Fish and Tink. I wish I could tell ya the funny story ‘bout how I broke my arm in a toboggan accident and Toby had to drag me like a wounded turtle by the hood of my coat for a quarter mile to get help. I wish I could tell ya how beautiful Jackie looked on our weddin’ day. See, when ya get to be as old as I am, you got a lotta stories, and some of ‘em hold more weight than others. Some of ‘em ya just can’t forget. Some of ‘em, ya regret for the rest of your life.

It was the Fourth of July, and we was only twelve, ‘cept for Tink who was two years younger than we were. The air was hot and sticky, and we was tryin’ to cool off at the narrow bend of the river that curves behind Mulberry Street. Dusk hit and that’s when they came. Bobby Thatcher and his cronies had pulled up in their cars on the bank opposite us. They had a few girls with ‘em, but I ain’t goin’ into detail ‘bout that. See, Bobby Thatcher and his cronies was always bullyin’ us around and, well, we decided to get ‘em back. Toby had his big brother’s pocket knife, and we was gonna slit their tires; maybe carve a few choice words into the vinyl seats.

We went up the bank to the log bridge and crossed over to the other side. By the time we got to where the cars were they was all in the water splashin’ and gigglin’, and we started stabbin’ away at the tires. Right as Fish made his stab to the final tire, I noticed ‘em. In the backseat of Bobby Thatcher’s car was five boxes of fireworks. Without hesitatin’ we each grabbed a box. I grabbed the fifth one, too, and we took off runnin’. Now Tink, bein’ a runt ten year old, couldn’t run as
fast as me, Toby, and Fish. He was also the clumsiest son-a-bitch I ever saw. Well, he tripped and sent his box’a fireworks flyin’. The box musta had some’a them crackers in it, ya know, the ones that snap real loud when ya throw ‘em ‘cause his box started dancin’ and snappin’ and crackin’. That’s what tipped Bobby Thatcher and his cronies off and they started sloshin’ after us like wet, rabid dogs. We ran through the woods like bats outta hell with Bobby Thatcher and ‘em hot on our tails, callin’ out threats. We broke outta the edge of the woods onto the dead end of Mulberry Street, and that’s where we ran into Johnny Pickler.

Now, nobody really liked Pick all that much, see, ‘cause Pick had some kinda condition that made him twitch and scream and cuss. But at that moment, runnin’ for my life and droppin’ that extra box’a firecrackers, I ain’t give a shit who he was. I told him to pick up them firecrackers and run. He did as I said and ‘bout five minutes later me, Toby, Fish, Tink, and Johnny Pickler was huddled together by the dumpster behind old man McAlister’s butcher shop. We was all tryin’ to catch our breath and keep quiet at the same time. We heard Bobby Thatcher and his gang runnin’ up the street. I signaled for everyone to stay still and be quiet. And just like that it happened. Johnny Pickler started twitchin’ and screamin’ and cussin’, and Bobby Thatcher started yellin’ to his cronies that he heard us by the butcher shop. We dropped the fireworks and made another break for it.

The woods wrapped around and bordered the back of the shops on the left side of Mulberry Street, which was where McAlister’s butcher shop was. The tricky part was, a small hill separated Mulberry Street from the woods and built into the hill was a six foot tall brick wall. Toby tipped over an old metal garbage can to use as a boost. He hoisted himself up, then he and Fish helped Tink. Fish was next and then me. I yelled at Pick to knock the can over as he hoisted himself up. He did as I said and fell when he started twitchin’. He turned the can back over, and I put my hand down to grab him. He knocked over the
can again and started twitchin’, and his hand slipped outta my grip. Bobby Thatcher came outta nowhere and snatched him up off the ground, and I ran. The others asked where Pick was, and I told ‘em to run. We crashed through the thick brambles, getting’ cut up by thorns and stray branches. The Fourth of July fireworks lit up the sky, showin’ us the way. They sounded like thunder. They sounded how my poundin’ heart felt.

Old man McAlister found Johnny Pickler’s body the next mornin’, beaten to a bloody pulp. Doc Myers reckoned he’d been dead ‘bout five hours when he was found. Which meant he was alive ‘bout six after I left him.

###

I only saw Jackie one more time after she walked out on me that day. I had no idea she’d even had the cancer, and all’a sudden there I was, standing in the same room where I’d left ‘ol Tink all them years ago. I waited for everyone else to make their peace before I did. When people stopped hoverin’, I walked slowly up to the casket. I looked down at her, and she was all pasty lookin’ and lifeless. I thought ‘bout how stupid I was for lettin’ her go. How stupid I was for never tellin’ her the truth about me. I wondered if she still woulda loved me had she knew. I wanted her to have my babies. I wanted her to flap her hands and clean my black okra. I wanted to tell her that she was my only “her”. My only person. And I remembered how beautiful she was on our weddin’ day. She wore a white lace dress and white daisies in her hair. She carried yella carnations, and her green eyes sparkled like giant emeralds…the greenest eyes I’d ever saw. Her cheeks were the lightest pink, and she wore pearls and a smile from ear to ear.

I knew then, lookin’ down at Jackie, what Mr. and Mrs. Pickler felt like; what they felt like when they lost Johnny. I wondered if they knew how I felt all these years. Wondered, if they had knew, if it gave them any peace knowin’. Knowin’ that six hours is whole hell of a lot less than sixty-six years.
Tran Ha Thi
The Suit Job That Never Suited Him
Jeremy F. Morris

We crowded around to witness decrepit hands, and long hard breaths.
Breaths that mimicked his days in the cold, doing what he did best –
working every day to the bone.
He was sorry that he couldn’t last two more years, and he made sure we knew it.
Only two more years, and he would have finally reached his fiftieth anniversary of marriage.
But we all saw those calloused hands, and knew, they had been worn way too long.
It was my turn to hold his hand, and I was scared, just as he was.
He grabbed it as tight as a dying man could, eaten away with cancer.
He spoke softly and said, “Listen boy, ya better finish that schoolin’ so ya don’t have to live off them hands.”
In the backwoods “hollers” and sprawling trailer parks of West Virginia, hope is a lost cause. It is almost impossible to imagine a world of wealth, health, and happiness when home is a rusty tin can on wheels. It is equally difficult to have a sense of yourself when your welfare check is ten days away, and the gas tank and cupboards are both empty.

I grew up in that world. Maybe I should say that I survived that world. No one in that type of environment grows up. They grow tired, complacent, and defeated. There is no distinct difference between birth and death in these parts. There is just the beginning and the end of a wasted life. Each time babies are born (and there are always a lot of babies) they start off with a clean slate. Only after years of repeated disappointments and failed attempts to alter history do they turn into exact replicas of the generations before them.

In a place where many people aspire to be a recurring guest on The Jerry Springer Show, dreams are lost in the dysfunctional drama of day-to-day life. Art, culture, and books are considered a waste of time. Why read when all the current events can be highlighted on Entertainment Tonight? For a more local version, a person can either listen to his police scanner or go to the trailer next door to get the scoop from the neighborhood busybody. She always knows the juiciest details about everyone in the poverty circle. She can’t tell you who the Secretary of Defense is, but she can happily recite the many gentlemen callers that Tammy Sue had last week.

Holler folks love to see the worst in those around them. If one is down-trodden and weak, they will spread the word to all who will listen. For lack of anything better to do, everyone listens. And may God help the person on
an upward-turn. Success in others brings out a unique form of viciousness seen only in low-income areas. Any success will have the phone lines burning up with malicious fodder spun by the information-hungry circle. By the time the story has made the rounds, it has been changed a dozen times to suit the person telling the story. Little truth remains, and any hope of praise is lost to ashes of a twisted tale.

Even as a young girl, I knew I wasn’t comfortable being part of the circle. I would listen to my mother as she gathered stories and systematically passed them on to other bored women. I always thought of these women like they were running a relay in track. The first takes the baton and runs until she reaches the next runner. She takes it and runs like lightning until she reaches the next one. I believe that if there were an Olympic competition for spreading gossip, Holler Women would easily take the gold. And my mother would have been the team captain. Without her meddling, many women would have lived a more peaceful life. My mother’s unhappiness with her own life leached into the lives of many people who had the audacity to make something of themselves. If my mother had spent her efforts more wisely, she would have realized that she, too, did things that caused the circle to talk. Upon her death, the baton was handed to yet another willing relay runner poised to break the record for spreading gossip.

I was lucky enough to be born with a healthy need to be different. My parents determined early on that school was a giant waste of time. Their high school careers ended as quickly as their disastrous marriage did. Giving up is much easier than trying. Holler folks do not see much point in working hard for something when they already know they will fail.

I wanted very much to see and do things that my fellow holler residents had never seen or done. I looked around and realized that I already knew what this place
looked like. I couldn’t imagine something if I had no idea what was it all about. All I had ever seen was what my environment would allow me to see. The only plausible way for me to escape was to learn about what I didn’t know. As a poor kid in a poor town, I had to rely on my mind to become my guide.

Benjamin Franklin soon became my hero. He made it possible for me to go anywhere and be anyone. His contribution of the free library system opened a world full of hope and possibility that I craved in my corner of Hell. Inside the beautiful, boundless walls, I found liberation from the suffocating grip of white-trash poverty. In that tiny, scruffy library I stepped into worlds that I may never have been blessed to know.

The beautiful prose written by the most gifted of writers soon became part of my soul. The intricate details spun through the pages to give me visions of possibilities I once believed never existed. Tales of whimsy, romance, triumph, and loss were my guides, leading me to faraway lands. I danced on stars. I dined with presidents. I piloted an airplane. I swam the English Channel. I was deaf, blind, and mute. I was the hero, or heroine, of every plot. I had the most amazing life quilted from pieces of stories written by people who had never met me. My mind relived every detail that my eyes read.

The imagination is the single-most amazing gift that we humans have been given. Without the ability to see a life we want instead of the one we have, we are destined to repeat the history that we detest. Only when we are willing to envision a better life will we achieve one. The first step in changing your life is realizing that you can do things differently.

Making a choice to be better than what society expects a person to become is not easy. We tend to gravitate towards what we know. It is far simpler to assimilate than it is to
think outside of the box. I wasn’t fond of the aluminum box. I never felt liked I belonged there. Being a stranger in a strange land causes a person to continuously travel the world to find a place of her own. I embraced the gypsy lifestyle in an effort to find Mecca. My life has been one continuous adventure in search of the experiences and emotions found on those dusty library shelves. I awake each day hopeful that I, too, might be one of the characters in a novel with a happy ending. One day I will be able to stop my journey.

I left Tin Can Holler to look for the life that I dreamed about, the life born from the pages of my favorite books. It is a place to which I can never return because I know there is a world outside unlike that of my youth. There are miracles, and life is more than a repetitious exercise of failure. There are dreams and fantasies that can become reality with only a bit of effort. I can never go back to a place that offers no alternatives. I continue to proceed, remembering the past while anxiously looking to the future. My story is still being written, and the plot is flexible. I am working on the ending every single day. I still have not found the glitz and glamour that some of those fictional characters were experiencing. Then again, they are fictional characters for a reason. Maybe we all just dream about being something we are not. All I know for certain is that through other people’s words, I left that trailer park.
Michelle Brown
**Brainwash**  
*Seth Aaron Rodriguez*

So it begins at a young age,  
Ushered as we are on to the stage.  
Before there is a choice or chance to protest,  
Repeatedly taught things we thought were useless.

This is the way to behave, act, and think,  
Tradition through reiteration becomes instinct.  
A multitude of people with one mind,  
The young must be refined.

Instillation of feeling,  
Blindly act without understanding.  
Incessant bigoted teaching until we fold,  
Our characters merely impressions of a mold.

Ingrained in us is a belief in righteousness,  
Becoming submissive to become efficacious.  
To determine our existence on Earth,  
And it all begins at birth.
“My blood runs deep within the roots of this earth. My malice, my love, my hatred, my triumphs, my failures, my temptations, my lusts, my good will, and my ill-intent course through the veins of the earth. The oceans run red with the blood of my ancestors, and the soil beneath my feet is tainted by the ashes of my enemies. Reaching into the deep places of the earth, I thrive on this coursing blood of mine which lies in waking there. I am Gethin, the Blood-child. Formed from death and life, a union of malice and love, I am darkness, and I am death.”

These were the words spoken to me by Him on the day my childlike innocence vanished, and I became aware of the world of Uathne for the first time. The day when earth and sky collided, and a chasm of blackness filled my soul. I forgot the legends of yesteryear and hearkened no longer to the promises of the future. No longer did I require air to breathe, nor liquids to drink, nor food to eat. I became as a thing without past, future, or present. A machine, created to serve—a servant of darkness.

Torchlight strikes the eyes of those living in Coriander Manor, burning deep into the weakened eyes—bloodshot and weary, shining out from the palest of faces, eyes that may or may not know the light of day. Living ghosts; shells of the people they once were.

Although it is morning, no light is shining down from Aintza, our beautiful Mistress of the Sky. Both moon and sun in one, she changes her garb to suit the needs of Uathne. From her home within the clouds, she weaves her silken gowns of moonlit silver and scintillating gold. It is her only care to light up the world around her, as she has for the last four thousand years.

It has been many-a-year since the light of morn shone through the cobwebbed windows of Coriander. Gethin long ago forbade Lady Sun from removing her nightly cloak, thus leav-
ing us only a Moon with which to light Uathne. Catering to the orders of Darkness, Aintza has accepted her banishment and left our world cold and lightless. A frost has lain itself over the land, hugging the earth with a vice-like grip of ice and darkness.

That is all we have ever known, those of us born to this world of icy darkness, those of us who serve Gethin. There is one, however, who is different. It has been fabled across the land that this one girl, this one servant of Darkness, was born Outside—outside of this realm of darkness and frost, a land where there is sun and warmth and life abundant.

This one girl is known to all here as the Chosen Servant, one not born in Coriander, but brought here by Gethin himself. Her true name is a mystery to us all; but Darkness calls her Calla – his servant.

On this lightless morn, like all other morns, we find ourselves woken by those cursed lights which are called “torches.” The dimmest of light scathes the pupils of Coriander’s residents; anguished moans fill the air. Screams echo from ravaged souls, torn by years of grief and misery.

One voice still is silent, but it does not give us concern. It is she, that Chosen Servant. She, as always, is the silence in the center of our chaotic storm. We are watching her now as she rises from her seat, her long skirts flowing around her, a rustling sound of silk and skin merged as one.

A wave of sweet perfumes spread across the still air as we watch her stride across the floor. The stone floor creates a raspy buffer against her slipper-clad feet, sending light echoes down the damp corridor. It is routine, this morning ritual. She rises, and we watch her as she makes her rounds. From one chamber to another she seems to glide, tending to the weary and the sick. It is her task to do such; He gave it to her. No good sense in letting His servants die in this pit of stench and filth. At least, that was her reckoning; and because of this, it must also be His. For her thoughts are not her own, but His, put there by His own dark arts. Overshadowing her free will, He shows us his awe-inspiring
might and throws us into the tumultuous depths of terror.

But hark! What is this? The maiden Calla...she has opened her mouth. All eyes turn to her as she speaks, her voice so foreign to us that even the most apathetic of our ranks strain to hear that tone which emits now from her being.

“Good morn to all who dwell here at Coriander.” Her eyes are bright, liken to the dark stars of Uathne’s mid-day sky. “It is Milord’s wish to prepare a banquet in this place next fortnight. We are expecting guests of a most unusual nature, and you would all do well to attend to them to the best of your abilities. These are the words spoken by Darkness, and all shall obey.”

With her last words still echoing off the cold stone walls, she closes her mouth and turns away. A frantic murmur ripples throughout the ranks; we servants are unaccustomed to serving anyone other than our Lord. Such a thing is unheard of here.

Even more shocking than the words of Calla is the voice that now calls out from the midst of our populace; a single child, not yet mature in his years, speaking out to the second-in-command with the air of much older man. “Where do these visitors hail from? Why are we to serve them? ‘Tis not our service to attend to anyone other than Gethin!” His words are forceful, and belligerent.

A moment of hushed silence settles across the crowd as she turns back, a look of utter shock in her dark eyes. Never have we spoken directly against orders given to us, and certainly never a child. We are watching her now, her lips parting, and finally she speaks, “Child, you would do well not to question. I will give you your answers, this once. Our visitors are from Diantha—the cloud dwellings. The Lord of that land will be coming.”

Murmurings fill the air now, for the Lord of that land is truly a man filled with Light, and thus the enemy of Darkness. He is called Uros, and Gethin once served under His father. Such discord rose up between them that it drove Gethin away until he came to dwell here in Uathne. Truly to have this foreign Lord now visiting Coriander Manor is surely an omen of ill will.
Discontentment fills the air; the never-ceasing wailings of Coriander rise once more, filling the deepest corridors in mourning of the torment yet to come.

Feet in Coriander Manor have learned to run quickly, tread lightly, and avoid all obstacles. Hands here have learned to move nimbly, work rapidly, and serve with precision. Eyes here have learned to betray no defiance, to remain on the floor at all times, and avoid all traces of light. These traits have come to truly manifest during the fortnight’s preparation for our Lord’s banquet, in which all who toil in Darkness’ service find themselves ill at ease, and stumbling on tasks done daily.

Every floor has been scrubbed, furniture has been oiled, and every cutlery item has been polished to a sheen. Countless dishes of food have been prepared, and many more laced with poison for the unsuspecting lips of enemies. We have come to understand that this banquet is not about treaties and peace talks, but to do away with the enemies of Darkness; and so we shall.

There is jostling among the servants as they gather within the great hall, anticipation and anxiety filling the air. Though having been born and raised within the walls of Coriander, there are many servants who have never lain eyes on our Lord. Now is the time at which He is to be revealed to them, and eyes that have not seen will be opened.

Pungent fumes of a sickly-sweet nature fill the air, followed by an icy breath of air. Icy fingers wrap around us, pulling us down to our knees in one collective bow of submission. Those who dare lift tentative glances to see our Lord.

Tall, imposing, and broad-shouldered, He is most truly one to be feared. He sports a fine mane of black hair, and eyes as black as death. There is no emotion in His eyes, but only apathetic disinterest. He gives us one brief nod of acknowledgement before taking Calla’s hand and leading her forward. As His highest servant, she has this awe-inspiring honor.

Uros has long-since arrived and been seated, along with
his many servants. Such splendid folk they are! Clad in shining clothes of the finest quality, with shoes and cloaks. Things unheard of to the servants of Coriander; but the most amazing thing is their faces. These servants of Light...they are smiling.

Standing to the sides of the room, we servants watch with careful anticipation should our Lord require our services. Confusion fills us as we see the servants of Uros not standing to attention as we are, but sitting with their Lord at the table of Honor. Such things are foreign to us and inspire confusion within our ravaged souls.

Uros himself is one to be awed. He is tall, slender, with fine hair shining like Aintza’s golden garb. His eyes are light-colored, and tinted with a light of compassion. There is a soft smile on his face as He speaks to His servants, His voice soft and well-tempered.

“Uros, Coriander welcomes you to its finest seats,” comes Gethin’s taunting voice, resounding against the echoing walls of the great hall. “We bid you sit, eat, and make merry. All is ready, and the food lays in waiting there at the table.”

With these words spoken, our Lord seats himself by Calla, a malicious smile on his face, a smile that fades as Uros speaks for the first time.

“Gethin, I do not wish to start off this evening on a bad note, but I must speak of a matter which troubles me,” he pauses, waits for acknowledgment from Gethin, then continues, “You have within Coriander a servant which does not belong to you. Born in the land of Light, and not in Darkness. You have no claim to her soul.”

A collective murmur fills the air and is quickly silenced by Darkness. There is only one servant within these walls who comes from Outside: Calla herself, the high-chosen.

“She came to me willingly, to taste the sweet rivers of our land. Light is only so wonderful for a while, my brethren. Calla’s heart was made for Uathne, not for Diantha. She belongs here; she belongs to me.” Gethin’s voice is cool and even, his eyes
still void of emotion.

“She belongs to no one, Gethin. D’evas is her true name, and you know this. She was born in the land of Light.”

Intrepid fear fills the air as we servants cower back away from our Lord, feeling his rage reverberating throughout Coriander.

“I care not what you say, Uros. She is my servant. If you wish to buy her, then you may, but do not bring these fanciful words to me when you know what the price for her soul is. Cease this senseless prattle, and let us go on with our banquet.” Gethin’s jaw is now clenched tightly, a flash of anger in his eyes.

“Truly, I do know the price for her soul, but you underestimate me, Gethin. I am willing to pay the price.”

A collective gasp rises from the lips of the servants of Light, shock on their faces. Calla herself has now lifted her eyes, those dark eyes which always before have felt the things Gethin has put into her heart. There is now a look of realization in her eyes and wonderment. We servants are thinking to ourselves that she has finally realized she does not truly belong here.

Will Uros truly pay the price for the soul of a servant of Darkness? It is hard to fathom, for that price is blood, and the Lord’s own. Will he truly give His own life so that Calla can live in Light? It seems that we servants of Darkness are not the only ones shocked by this proclamation, for the servants of Light are now murmuring amongst themselves.

Both Lords have now risen, and Gethin’s face is a picture of malicious joy, taking pleasure in this sadistic turn of events. Such rapid events they are, these things that are flashing past us!

Within moments we servants find ourselves left behind to clear away the banquet as our Lords move deeper within the manor to complete the payment. We are watching our fellow servants, Uros’ servants. Worry and trepidation is in their eyes, even tears. Such a thing causes us wonder; to be that affectionate towards your Lord. Is such a thing possible?
Hours have passed as we clean and commiserate. Will there be a Kingly death in this manor today? Or shall Uros decide His life is worth more than the soul of a simple servant girl?

We have to ponder no longer as a sudden collective wail rises up from the servants of Light, and the entire manor shakes. Such a brilliant roar is heard from the depths of Coriander, as to cause us to drop to the ground. We know now. It has been done; Uros is dead.

It has been nearly three days since the banquet. With the Lord of Light gone, our lives at Coriander quickly return to normal, but for one exception. Calla has lost her position as high-chosen, and now resides in the outer chambers of Coriander, waiting for the day when sweet death shall take her. The servants of Light, with no Lord to watch over them, are now added to our ranks.

The might of our Lord has struck terror into our hearts once more, that he can keep both Calla and the servants of Light here within Coriander – against the ancient laws of Uathne. To defy even these ancient laws, set down by the greatest of Kings ’tis true might indeed.

On this morning however, something is not quite right. As the servants of Coriander awaken, we find our chambers much warmer, and the scathing light of the torches is drowned out by the brilliant light of Day, streaming through the windows. True screams of agony fill the air as eyes are burned mercilessly by the shining sun. Many of the servants of Darkness have not seen Aintza’s light in decades. Many have never seen this light at all.

A cry rises up from the ranks, “It is Lady Aintza! She has returned from her banishment! Does she dare defy our Lord?”

Another voice is heard from behind the first. A voice all too familiar to us. “Aintza has been allowed to return by the order of a Higher power than your Lord. She has been banished far too long. Uathne needs the light of day.”
Uros is alive! Such shock reverberates throughout the manor, even through the ranks of the servants of Light. He stands before us now in His splendid silk robe; dyed a brilliant royal purple. There are scars on His body, scars of His death.

Surely this power is greater than our Lord’s by far! To defy even Death itself! It is a mighty thing indeed and causes wonderment within us.

Standing by his side is a woman who is familiar and yet foreign. A mane of rich brown hair flows around her slender waist, and a light twinkles in her dark eyes. There is a smile on her lips, and a name is whispered throughout the chamber. Calla. No. Not Calla. This is her true self. This is Lucina, the one born of Light.

“My heart beats with the reverberating of this earth. My love, my joy, my triumphs, my peace, my patience, my gentleness, and my good will coursing through the veins of the earth. The mountains stand tall with my power, and the sun shines with my Light. My enemies are blinded by the brilliance they do not understand. I am Uros, the Light. Formed from power and goodwill, a union of joy and love; I am Light, and I am Life.”

These were the words spoken to me by Him on the day my childlike faith was given to me, and I became aware of the world of Diantha for the first time. The day when darkness and light shattered, and my heart became filled with understanding. I remembered the legends of yesteryear and hearkened to the promises of the future. I breathed the sweet air of the heavens, drank the rivers of sweet nectar which flowed through my Lord’s land, and feasted on the bounties He provided. I became as a new person, one to learn and absorb everything around me. I became a willing servant to the one who redeemed my soul and returned me to my home in the land of Light; a servant of Light.
Homecoming
Teo Ninkovic

I’m a dirty piece of shit,
On the wrong side of town.
A dirty little Serb,
In a Muslim part of town.

Once upon a time,
It made no difference.
Once upon a time,
Things were different.

Now I sit at a café
Surrounded by stares,
Everyone wanting to know
What I’m doing there.

This was my town once,
But that was long ago.
Now it belongs to those of the hills,
Those that forced us out,
Those who took our homes,
Along with our lives.

As I get up to leave
I feel their stares upon my back.
No need to worry,
The thorn is gone,
And he won’t be coming back.
Melina Reed
Traveler’s Tale
Cathy Stafford

We were told there would be guards standing ready with guns at the airport. By the time the plane landed, my heart was already hammering in my chest. I felt dizzy. I managed to find all of my documents, despite my shaking hands - ticket, passport, visa, and the little card they requested us to fill out requiring the address of where we’d be staying. Where were we staying? That was a good question. We had to make something up.

“Just put the name of this hotel there,” a man said in an Irish accent. He handed us a small piece of paper with the scribbling of the hotel’s name and address. “I use this address whenever I come here. Nobody will check it. They just need it for their records.”

I guessed it would have to do.

As we shuffled down the airplane’s stairs to the concrete, the sweltering heat of Africa hit me like a freight train. Hot, sticky, and humid, I was drenched with sweat before we arrived to the check-in point. I was still dizzy, my heart still pounding. I thought I might pass out. This all seemed so surreal, like a dream. Being the pessimist that I am, I just knew something would go wrong. Perhaps the customs officials would know that we weren’t actually staying at the address we wrote down. They would peg us as liars. This would surely raise suspicion, and then they would be forced to rummage through all of our baggage, interrogate us, and throw us into prison. My mind was getting the worst of me now.

As we moved our way up the line of foreigners, I began to feel a sense of calm and peace. I noticed that I was humming along with music that was coming from the overhead speakers. Where had I heard this music before? It was American worship music!

The line seemed to move too slowly, but too quickly at the same time. Finally, it was our turn at the counter. My husband had to go ahead of me. Fear took over. I can’t do this. I can’t be
left alone. What if they took me away and not my husband? Or what if they took him and not me? What if they took my passport and didn’t give it back? My heart was pounding again.

“Your papers, please.”

I reluctantly, but obediently, handed them over. He stamped them, and I walked over to where my husband was waiting for me.

“Follow me, please,” said another man.

Here it was. Time to take us into the interrogation room, strip us of all our clothing, and burn us with cigarettes.

“Your party is waiting for you over there.”

“Oh, thank you,” we said nervously, surprised that we were being released so soon. We made our way through the crowd of Nigerians, having been directed to a man and a woman standing against the doors in the front to the building.

“Brother Willie and Sista Catty! Welcome! You are welcome!”

Dan and Zipporah Kashibu, the two people we would be spending the next month with, had driven twelve hours to meet us at the airport. Dan was a happy man. His bright smile could light up a room. He had an incredible amount of love bubbling out of his short frame. His hair was grey, but he confessed to using some sort of shoe polish to make it look black, all except for the temples. He wanted those to remain grey so people would honor him as an elder. Dan was dressed all in black, other than the white collar around his neck. This attire gave him the appearance of a priest.

Zipporah was slightly overweight, but she carried herself well. Her skin was the color of dark chocolate mocha. She was covered from head to toe in a beautiful bright blue African dress consisting of a wrap-around skirt, matching puffy-sleeved shirt, and head-wrap. She had an air of quiet wisdom, giving off a smile, but not so much as to seem immature or overly excited. She took my hand and led me to the car.

From the moment we stepped onto Nigerian soil, our lives were no longer our own. We were at the mercy of the people, culture, and weather. There would be no couch to lounge on, no
television, no shower, no phone, and no air conditioning.

“So, you traveled on Lufthansa Airlines, Brother Willie? This is a good airline!”

“All except for the landing!” I said, with my usual sarcastic tone.

“Yeah, when the plane hit the ground it bounced back in the air and then down again. It was pretty intense,” Will explained.

This brought on a hint of laughter from our hosts.

“We arrived here yesterday and have a long drive ahead of us back to our village. Night is the best time to drive so we can make good time.” Brother Dan spoke, making it clear we would not be getting a place to rest after our already long journey from the U.S.

“We must tell you why we are so grateful that you have come.” This time it was Zipporah speaking. Her deep, soft tone demanded quiet attention.

“We had to flee our village of Takum. This is the place where we lived and built our church for the past twenty years. We fled for our lives with only the clothes on our backs. There was a civil war one-and-a-half years ago amongst the two tribes. People were bringing reports of young boys carrying heads of other people, and then they would eat the bodies. They ransacked the homes and businesses of whoever was not a part of their tribe. When we found out they were going to kill us, I took the three children and some others, and we ran away. Dan did not have time to escape, so he hid in our house and, thank God, they didn’t see him. Dan was finally able to catch up to us in the next village, and we made our way across the mountains into Cameroon. My nephew, Karutsie, developed appendicitis, and we had to give him the snake fat. This healed him, and we moved forward. We were without a home for seven months total. We came back into Nigeria, to the village of Gboko, and we started a church there. Now God has sent you to help us. But first, we must take you to Takum. The people there are
waiting for encouragement.”

We were exhausted from the already thirty-seven hours of travel, but Zipporah’s story was intriguing enough to keep us awake. We had been invited to encourage these people who had lost everything. Now, eighteen months later, we were on our way to visit the same village where cannibalism had taken place.

There would be little sleep on that drive. Aside from Zipporah’s story, Dan’s high speed driving was enough to keep our adrenaline rushing. I personally had to stay awake just in case we died so I would be the first to know about it. Apparently, 80 mph was a good, decent speed in Nigeria, except when going through a village. Then, the common courtesy would be to slow down to 60 or 70 mph, honk the horn so the pedestrians wouldn’t make a sudden wrong move, and then continue through town.

Wait, what was that in the road? It flashed by so quickly, yet burned a forever memory in our minds. We all noticed it. It was flattened and bloody. We could barely make out that it was a human body, but it was, and we all knew it. The poor soul must not have seen the car coming. Like a deer running into the road, the person didn’t stand a chance of outrunning the speeding vehicle. Whoever was driving the car probably didn’t even realize they had struck a human, otherwise they would have surely stopped to help. We sped on, unable to speak of it any longer.

Keeping up to form, Dan zigzagged his way around potholes and over bumps in the road that seemed to appear out of nowhere. Suddenly, we hit a bump that caused the car to hydroplane. Our bodies floated upward, suspended in midair. It seemed as if everything was in slow motion. As we traveled through the air, the thoughts of dying came suddenly, but there was no time to scream or cry or pray. We landed back on our seats, still alive, still going 80mph. Dan hadn’t even flinched at the wheel. Will and I looked at each other.
“Lufthansa!” we both said simultaneously, causing a roar of laughter to burst out in the car.

As daylight approached, the village of Takum came with it. It was finally time to stop and rest, but first we had to see the site of the house where Dan and Zipporah once lived. We drove slowly up the quiet, shaded street until we came to what was once a beautiful home. We got out and looked around at the pile of concrete rubble. This was the first time Dan and Zipporah had been back since they were forced to flee. The roof was gone, and there were trees already growing where a kitchen and living room had once been. Some colorful tile even covered half of the bathroom wall and the remains of a burnt chair. Dan pointed out the little corner where he had hidden from the murderers.

Zipporah was holding my hand as if to calm me from this horrible sight, but I felt it was I who needed to comfort her. This had been her beloved home, a home to be proud of in a country full of poverty. As I struggled to find some word to encourage this precious woman, she was the one who spoke.

“It is well,” she said. “It is well.”

Her faith in God was more encouraging to me than any encouragement I could possibly bring to this place. As we stood amongst this shell of a home, my mind wandered off to the things that I had recently lost - things that meant more to me than any house or land. Whatever roadblocks lay ahead, whether I was in Africa or America, I knew that I would be able to face them with a greater strength.

Lost in thought, I hadn’t noticed the two men who had been watching us from the other side of the street, one of them holding a gun. He could have killed us, but he didn’t. And what if he did? We had already won the victory - already lost so much, yet gained so much more. But for now, life was to go on, and we would all face our struggles, even if those struggles just consisted of boarding another Lufthansa airplane or getting into a car with Dan Kashibu behind the wheel.
October
Sarah Griffith

Cat scratch hiss
Transparent wanderer, pass
Darkness wisps swiftly through
Extensive arms of night
Haunting the air with excitement
Fright
Sweet, maple-scented warmth of
Night
Sky falls glistening into tomorrow
Bless the day with red hue
Delight
Overtakes all with sensory
Bright
Leaves turn brown then
Crunch, crumble out of
Sight
**Blues**  
*Carter Becerra*

Music flows gently from the guitar  
sweet, yet rugged chimes of the blues.  
The long, strong fingers of his father  
twang and pluck the strings, a lullaby for his son.  
Songs of generations before ring out from his rough voice,  
after he was done, he took a swig of whiskey.

Next to his baby boy, he loved the whiskey,  
and he didn’t have much skill, but he had the guitar.  
All that combined with his story-telling voice  
was the absolute truest music, the blues.  
That was the only thing he knew,  
and that’s what he taught his son.  
He wasn’t always there, but he was still a loving father.

He didn’t always have money and wasn’t always home,  
but he was still the father.  
It’s hard to buy books and shoes  
when the money goes to the whiskey.  
He always apologized, but after awhile it wasn’t enough  
for his son.  
So he continued to try to make money with his guitar,  
and kept singing the blues,  
and sharing his feelings through his voice.

He kept drowning out his sorrows in the bottle of whiskey.  
As hard as it got he kept reminding himself he was the  
“Father.”  
After awhile it was more than just music; his whole life  
was the blues,  
and when he opened his mouth to sing there was no voice.
But he still had his guitar,  
and he still loved his son.  

He soon realized music was not the way for his son,  
and he had to go out and find his own voice.  
But instead of shedding tears he gave that job to his guitar  
because he knew as his boy got older and older that he was  
never the best father.  
And he relied more heavily on the whiskey  
because when it came down to it he only had that and the  
blues.  

Soon he grew too old and tired to even play the blues  
and he wished for one final time he could see his son.  
In the end he could barely clutch the bottle of whiskey.  
Long gone was his voice,  
and he was sad and lonely yet still so proud to be a father.  
Even when he could no longer twang the guitar.  

In the end he always had the blues,  
even though he lost his voice.  
His son showed up to the funeral because even though he  
wasn’t the best, he was still his father.  
At the house the young man shed a tear, then took a swig  
of whiskey and picked up the guitar.
Sickness of the Mind
Kayla Rose

White powder clings to everything… every blade of dead grass, every roof top, even the gnawed fingers of the barren trees that reach to the sky. Everlasting white mixes with the gray of smoke rising and whirling out of chimneys, each stream of it parted by miles on the barely-ploughed, dirt road. Everything around them sits silent and still, including the water of the streams and the singing of anything peaceful. The only thing to be heard is Remy’s song; it is the day of their mom’s funeral, so the doctors let Lyle take his older brother from his prison for that day. They said it is imperative Remy is allowed to grieve.

Lyle’s size eleven-and-a-half boots slip off and onto his heels as he picks up one piece of firewood after the other, moving them to the house for later that night. The oaky scent is familiar and the hard grain scratches against his bare fingers. Their father said he would be getting a new pair of gloves this winter… but that was before.

Lyle has about twenty-three hunks of firewood stacked in the wheelbarrow and frost eats at his face, but he feels comforted nonetheless by Remy’s presence fifteen feet to his right on the porch steps. Remy strums a funky tune and thumps the bottom of the guitar in rhythm. It is past time for Remy to be back at the hospital, but Lyle is enjoying Remy’s freedom maybe even more than he is. One of the guitar strings suddenly snaps in the middle of a particularly good chord, setting Remy off into a violent spasm. His meds have long since faded as he shoves his Fender into the snow on the ground. He runs out into the yard thrashing and grunting, pushing his hands against his ears all the while. The front door bursts open, and the arm pierces through the opening.

Remy was the artistic son, hardly role model material.
He wasn’t present at any prevalent parties nor did he have a popular group of friends. As opposed to smoking with the rebels between classes or getting pumped with the jocks after school, Remy would sit in his room above the garage and strum his Fender for hours. He was charismatic in conversation but would only speak when he felt the passion to. The only people who could ever understand him were his little brother Lyle and his mother, naturally; although he did drive her crazy with the constant jam sessions that interrupted her love novels. But boy, could Remy make her laugh on a good day. A laugh his father couldn’t get out of her for years thanks to his endless drunken stupor.

There was always a tense aura between Remy and his father. Over dinner Remy always joked around and hummed little tunes. Father would stay silent with a sour face while Mom and Lyle laughed at Remy’s goofy banter.

“Shut the hell up and eat!” Father would always snap after he reached his breaking point. “Work all day and can’t even come home to eat in peace, you always got to be singing and shit. Well ya know I’m glad you had a good day sittin’ on your ass playing guitar while I’m out there sweatin’ balls trying to keep us all fed!” That always led to a nice after-dinner shouting battle with him and Mom. Lyle and Remy would end up escaping to Remy’s room, drowning out the shouting with hours of music.

Although Lyle tried, Remy would never talk about how their dad treated their mom. He took it a lot harder than Lyle did. He took it personally actually, and besides, Remy would avoid a depressing conversation at all costs but would go to town about anything else. He hated politics and believed in no particular religion. He saw life like a priceless song that made sweet love to the soul. Like that old classic rock song you know that rarely comes on the radio, but when it does you jam so hard your head hurts afterwards. Remy’s eyes were bright green just like Father’s, and you could get lost in
them if you stared long enough. But then he got sick.

It started with an itch. He had an endless itch right below his left shoulder. Then he started rambling, getting confused, getting angry. He started having spasms and hearing voices accusing and blaming him. At first Mom thought he was distraught because he hadn’t moved away to go to college thanks to his ex-girlfriend, but Lyle knew it was more. It wasn’t only his mood that changed… it was him. When Remy locked himself in his closet for a day saying that Father was trying to kill him, Father finally convinced Mom take him to the mental ward and get diagnosed.

They diagnosed Remy seven days before his twentieth birthday. They started medication and let him stay at home but made no promises to how the disease would progress.

“Mrs. Jakobs, this disease can affect different people in very different ways. Some can live perfectly fine independently under medication, some can go through periods of hospitalization, and some can even be hospitalized for the rest of their lives. All we can do is support him and see how the disease progresses with time,” the doctor told his mom. Lyle had a suspicious feeling that somehow he knew what was coming.

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A tape recorder is clicked on under the hanging light, illuminating it in the middle of two steaming cups of cardboard-smelling coffee, a pack of Reds, and a black ash tray. The cop stared with a scrunched face as the young man dipped the cigarette into the flame. Lyle closed his eyes as his tight lips squeezed the filter and his chest expanded.

“Oh, it is cool if I smoke, right? I mean the ashtray was already here.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. You should quit, though. You’re too young to be smoking.”

Lyle snorted a laugh. “That’s the least of my worries, chief. What am I doing here anyways? You guys know what
happened, so what the hell do you need to drag me in for?”

The cop’s attitude lifted, and he replied, “Look son we know exactly what happened, and I’m sorry to see you go through it, especially with what happened to Remy and all, but we need a recorded account of how it led to this, and your dad’s pretty pissed off at the world so he wouldn’t talk to us if we begged. Just speak clearly so the tape recorder gets it all and you’ll never have to repeat it again… sound good?”

“Well, it was about a month after Remy was put in the hospital for good when Mom went all depressed. No one talked to each other, not that Dad was cool with everyone in the first place, but it was like we were three strangers bunking together after Remy left. Besides that, even though the hospital bills were outrageous, Mom stopped working altogether. She couldn’t even drag herself out of bed most days. She stopped living. The fact that Remy could never have a normal life left her feeling helpless, not that it was her fault but I think she looked at it that way.

“Father and I watched her waste away… Dad even stopped drinking to try and wait on her every desire, but the sad part is she didn’t have one. She wouldn’t eat, wouldn’t sleep, wouldn’t speak. Father started right back up with his mistress, the drink.

“I kept on with life as I always had, going to parties and taking ski trips with my buddies. I was trying to avoid the eerily silent house and keep on moving forward; I was a senior in high school and still had the majority of my life to live, so even though my whole family situation sucked, I couldn’t give up like my parents did. And I know Remy wouldn’t want me too either. ‘Life’s like riding a bull, Lyle,’ he used to preach to me, ‘You always know you’re going to get hurt, but if you let go, you’re giving up on a chance for a thrill. Never let go Lyle… no matter what happens and what puts you down because life is worth it man. It is.’ I can’t believe now that I used to roll my eyes.
“I went to visit him a few months into his hospitalization. I didn’t want to see him like that but I felt I had to ‘cause Mom was too busy crying in bed, and Dad wouldn’t give Remy the time of day. Mom being the way she was, like literally giving up on the world, I think Dad saw it as Remy’s fault even though it wasn’t. It wasn’t Remy’s fault he got this disease and couldn’t control it; Dad was such an asshole about the whole situation… ugh.

“But back to the whole hospital thing…I walked in and the place smelled disgusting, like chemicals covering the smell of vomit. A stuck-up elderly lady led me to the visitor’s room which was located in the west wing of the building. At least ten pairs of eyes were scanning my path as I headed to the two-seater table the lady was pointing me to.

“Anyways, all the visiting family members spoke to their imprisoned sons, uncles, wives, and sisters as though they were pre-school kids. I didn’t understand why until a middle-aged man (looking like a bouncer straight out of a Boston bar) escorted Remy into the sunlit room. The bouncer-nurse-man eased Remy into the chair across from me by the arm. Remy’s eyes were hazed over, and he was rubbing the left side of his neck with his right hand.

“The outfit totally changed his look, along with the minor slimming, and the eyes… something about his eyes. His mind was obviously on vacation in Vegas because the man that sat across from me wasn’t Remy. He said scared like a little boy, and hugged himself in the inmate-like outfit. His eyes were glazed, and his stare was distant even though he looked straight at me. Remy was stuffed so far under the meds or maybe the disease, I wasn’t sure, but I knew this wasn’t the older brother I had grown up with.

“I struggled to find something to talk about with him, but the awkwardness drove me to looking around the room frantically for a God-send; he looked so uncharacteristically pathetic, and I was so helpless. A young nurse brought
in a Fender that resembled the one Remy had played back home. That was way nice of her, and if I wasn’t completely embarrassed as hell being there I would have asked her out. Anyways, she brought the guitar over his head and down into his arms. He sat there cradling the instrument as though unsure of what it was but soon found his fingers doing all the work for him.

“Off-tune notes started to choke out from the strings, but they soon formed into all the harmony and peace that once was Remy. It was just like the old jam days when I used to sit in his room and watch him; he bobbed his head in rhythm as he looked at his left hand stroking up and down the neck of the guitar. He never had to look at his right-hand fingers; they knew exactly what they were doing as they danced and picked at the strings. He was truly gifted in that sense because it was easier for Remy to talk through his song than it ever was through words.

“I have to say beauty is in the eye of the beholder… because when he looked up I saw his glazed eyes awake if only for a song. It’s like he came back to me if only for a brief glimpse in time to share his tune with me, but it was more than just a song. I think the music was his way of telling me he was still alive in that diseased travel case that was his body. His spirit was still there even though it was buried, suffocated, and stuffed beyond the schizophrenia and the drugs… he was still there.

“Father called me on my cell as I rode home that day. He sounded urgent and scared. He ranted that Mom had left a letter to Remy and wasn’t home when Father got back from work. He told me to drive around and look for her car before dusk started to set in, that a snow storm was due to hit that night. After he blurted that out and hung up on me, I started to freak out. It was exactly an hour later when we found her slouched in her Buick at the elementary school. Her heart collapsed on the ambulance ride from mixing her
anti-depressants and too much vodka. D.O.A.”

Lyle paused for a long time as his eyes watch the rolling tape in the machine.

“And the letter from your mom, what did it say?” the cop asked.

“The letter to Remy said, ‘I’ll see you in another life baby boy…I’m so sorry.’ She had written it on her flowery grocery list paper… ain’t that some shit?” He tapped another Red from the pack. The smoke swirled in front of his swollen red eyes as he caressed the filter tip with his lips. Lyle, done telling his story for the very last time, reached over the ash tray to the rolling tape recorder and clicked it off.

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A face emerges behind the arm piercing through the door, and the boys’ father is crying for the first time in years as he points the hunting rifle at Remy’s thrashing body. Lyle stands in dreadful awe as he watches his father pull the trigger. The explosion echoes in the trees, and red starts spreading from right below Remy’s breast down to his stomach. The blood spreads like a blooming rose against the white background of the T-shirt. His arms go limp at his side, he falls to his knees, and the haze lifts from his eyes as he looks straight at his little brother. There he is once more… back to his old self if only for that last glimpse in time to say goodbye. His face softens, and his parted lips start to spread in a knowing smile. He lifts his hands toward the sky craving a final embrace, if even from Death himself.
Rachel Finn
Knight of Resignation
Steven R. Ritenour, II

We, Love’s patrons, caught in rapturous dreams,
As Beauty danced upon our hearts and minds.
O’ how we danced along, naked in youth!
Souls entwined under sheets; flesh upon flesh,
With mirth, with grace, with Love, that I have left

I’m like Odysseus, whom Athena
Offers her hand, by which she would guide me
Into your arms; where I had once seen God!
Yet, I will deny the Goddess’ hand.
She is divine, but understands me not!
Yes, the Fates have robbed me of the privilege
Of drowning within the depths of your eyes,
And I have repented the stars that led
Into the warmth of that same Paradise.
It is this melancholy she sees, and
Weeps divinely for me. But tears are blind,
It matters not if mortal or divine!
So I must build my pride, a mighty dam,
In order to forbear this river of tears.
Still, I ponder, how long will I succeed,
Keeping these flood waters from pouring forth?
I pray for strength, for it would be a great loss,
In which the pure memory of our Love
Would wash away in that myopic flow.

And here, still before me, that wondrous deep,
Which I must sail into unexplored fates;
Leaving behind a life void of regret,
And a Love that I will not soon forget!
So I sail on, until I reach Death’s shore,
Forever searching for that Something More!
Buying Snow
Evelyn Chagarov

The cold wind bit into my young, round cheeks. My childish laughter echoed back to me from the snowy hills, and the icy branches waved at me happily. It was winter in Michigan, and I came from a very poor family; sled and snowmobiles were out of the question for us. My father and I had taken our time getting ready for this snow day. We carefully put on as many layers of clothing as we could because we did not have snowsuits. My father gave me his mittens to wear, the ones he had rescued from the garbage can at work. The mittens were old and frayed in places, and the white insulation was starting to escape. For his “mittens,” my father slipped his work worn hands into old socks. It took me a long time to understand the look on his face that day. Written in his eyes was a sorrow and misery of the type that many people will never know. My father bore the burden of not being able to provide for his only child. People often ask me how I can say that my childhood was a happy one, and I always respond that I had everything I needed. I had a father who loved me, who always told me that he “worked [himself] to the bone” to make sure that I had food to eat, clothes to wear and a place to sleep. And for a few months out of the year, I had the snow.

One particular day, my father acquired the lid of a plastic garbage can and brought it home to our trailer for some winter fun. The walls of our home were starting to warp, the floor was not quite level, and the cold always seemed to sneak in no matter how well my father prepared our home for winter, but it was home. My father smiled as he came through the door, an impish grin that I did not see on his face very often. When my father got home from his factory job, he was usually too tired to do much more than fix me dinner and take a bath. Even then, he would frequently fall asleep in the bath and wake up the next morning to get me ready for school and
repeat his day. I knew that my father had something special planned that day.

We trudged through the thick blanket of fluffy snow, our laughter ringing out. My father quizzed me on the meanings of words that, as a third-grader, should have been well beyond my vocabulary. He would ask me questions such as, “What does ‘accumulate’ mean?” My answer would usually be correct. That was not enough for my father, though—he wanted me to go to college and escape the choke-hold grip of poverty. He would ask me to spell the word I had just defined, and I would cheerfully oblige, as I was eager to make my father happy on the way to the hill. The hill was the best place in our town to go sledding because it was so tall and steep. The hill was also right in front of a playground, so children that were too young to sled could play on the swings or the teeter-totter. By the time we reached the hill, my calves burned and my breath came in short puffs. My father put the garbage can lid on the ground and told me to wait while he went to the bottom of the hill. I sat on the lid and waited for my father to give me the okay. As soon as my father called up to me, I pushed off, eager to try out our new “sled.” For a moment, the whole world was a blur. The freezing air numbed my cheeks and whistled against my ears. It was thirty seconds of heaven.

Like most things, the ride to the bottom had to end. When I reached the bottom of the hill, I looked up into my father’s face and saw true happiness. My smile reflected his, and I ran over to my father to give him a hug. As a child, I did not see the whispered conversations behind gloved hands or the stern and judgmental stares of the other families that were at the hill. I only saw my father’s smile, and I felt the love that many people search for and never find.

On the way home, we were less talkative than we had been on the way to the hill. At the time, I assumed that it was because we were both tired, cold, and ready to go home. I know now that my father did not want to face the reality of
scraping together enough food out of our nearly bare cabinets for a meal. He did not want to come home to an inadequately warmed house. At the time, all I knew was that my father loved me, that there would be food to eat and a place to sleep when I got home. My father never communicated how uncertain our situation was, how delicate. My father never complained about money, or the lack thereof. I was a happy and secure child despite the difficulties in our lives.

When my father and I got home, his fingers were so frozen from wearing only socks on his hands that he could not even grasp our house key. Silently, I handed my father the mittens he had lent me and took the key. When my father’s eyes found mine, there were tears in his. I unlocked the door, and we stepped inside and quickly shut the door to the cold. I was alarmed because I had never seen my father cry, so I asked him to tell me what was bothering him.

He smiled when he said that nothing was wrong, that everything was perfect. He told me that I was the best daughter that a father could ever ask for, and he hugged me. When my father hugged me, I could smell his soap—always the same smell of Zest—and I felt his whiskers scratch against my cheek.

At that moment, I realized a rudimentary version of what I know now to be true. Money is not everything—it cannot buy happiness and love. Money cannot buy sledding in the snow during the winter and swimming in the river during the summer. I know now that although money buys the things that are necessary to live, such as food, shelter, and clothes, it does not buy all the ingredients for a well-adjusted, happy adult. Money can buy a lot of things, but I have never met anyone with enough money to buy snow from the sky. I can only hope to remember that lesson with my own children.
Servant
Hillora Lang

Self-appointed high priestess
in the Temple of Bast
I am on my knees
scooping the fifth litterbox
of the evening.

My vestments – the golden collar,
    azure silk chiton,
    ornamental headdress –
must be packed away in mothballs.
Khaki shorts and T-shirt will do
For this acolyte, this devotee,
    Servant of the great goddess Bast,
    Mother of Cats.
A Tree in Autumn
Charles Alexander Neal

The Autumn Destroyer with fingers bold
has rendered you barren, lifeless, cold
I’ll wait till Spring Old Friend
when you shall bloom with life again.

Alex Sprecher
The year was 1965, and I was a little girl with a honey complexion, big brown eyes, and long plaits. I wore plaits most of the time; however, on special occasions, like Easter, birthdays, church services, or funerals, I got to wear ponytails with big, brightly colored bows at the base. I lived in a neighborhood with big two-story houses painted in yellow, blue, pink, white, and green. My house was white with a wrap-around porch. The inside was clean, but rather plain. The living room furnishings consisted of a couple of brown, fake leather chairs, a few tables, and a couple of cream-colored lamps. The bedrooms had brown, stacked, wooden bunk beds, and the kitchen had a white gas stove. Most of the living areas were heated by a big potbelly heater that sometimes turned red and radiated warmth throughout the room.

My mama, a petite lady with a mahogany complexion, shoulder length, curly hair, and the sassiest of attitudes, was a single parent. She worked as a domestic servant for some rich, white folks who lived in a big, white mansion. Mrs. West, the lady my mama worked for, gave us lots of nice clothing: coats with mink buttons, dainty dresses of pastel colors, neatly pleated skirts, and baby doll shoes. I never had anything new, but gently worn hand-me-downs to wear.

That morning in 1965, Mama awakened me in her loudest voice, screaming, “Hit the floor. It’s time for school.” I put on a pink poodle skirt, a white blouse and lacy, white bobby socks with white sneakers. I was ready for school. I was in the fourth grade, and had no idea I would meet my first love. A theatrical group was to perform the play The Nutcracker Suite at school that day. I knew that story; in fact, I had read it at least five times. Since I was thrilled about seeing the play, I approached Ms. Brown, my teacher, and inquired, “What time is the play?” Ms. Brown replied, “9 am.” My eyes lit up
like fireworks, my palms grew sweaty, and I grinned like a Cheshire cat. I was so anxious to see the toy soldiers in their pristine, red and white uniforms, the ballerinas in their frilly, colorful tutus - and, oh yes, the nutcracker.

About fifteen minutes after I asked Ms Brown, it was time to go to the auditorium. I scurried to the front of the line so I could be in the first row. As I entered the auditorium, my eyes sized up the stage. There, standing on the stage, were all the players: the toy soldiers and the ballerinas in tutus of blue, white, pink, and green that twinkled like stars in the sky. Near the end of the stage, I spotted him: the Nutcracker. The ambiance was electrifying. The play started on time. I was mesmerized by the flutes. They radiated a haunting sound, soft and mellow at some points, high and shrill at others. I was in love. I had to have a flute. Christmas was nearing, and I would ask Mama to buy me a flute.

I walked home that day, not at my normal pace, but with a quickening stride, ever increasing with each step. I raced into the house to tell Mama about the flute; however, she was not at home. I waited, pacing back and forth, scratching my head, saying to myself, “Please, say ‘yes,’ Mama”, and I think I even recited the 23rd Psalm.

Finally, Mama came home. She had anger wrinkles on her forehead, her lips were pouty, and the corners of her mouth turned down. Yes, an unapproachable mood. I proceeded with caution. Using my cotton candy voice, I asked, “Mama, can I get a flute for Christmas?” She just looked at me and stared into space. I didn’t push it any further; to push Mama was something I knew better than to do. That night, and many nights afterwards, I dreamt of playing my new flute. It was long, slender and shining like the sun; the haunting sounds of highs, lows, and shrills were hypnotic.

Two weeks later, the house was decorated with red and white streamers. Crepe paper bells hung from the ceiling. An aluminum Christmas tree that changed from red, to blue, then
green sat in front of a big French window. The aroma of baked
turkey, sweet potato pie, and chocolate cake penetrated the air.
It was Christmas day. I leaped onto the banister and slid down
to get down the stairs faster.

My flute awaited me!

Upon entering the living room, I spied two shiny new
bikes, roller skates, a doll with brown hair who was wearing
a frilly pink dress, big yellow Tonka trucks, and an array of
other toys. But where was my flute?

None of these toys were mine. What did I get? Where
were my toys? I bolted into the kitchen, where Mama was
preparing the rest of Christmas dinner, and yelled, “Mama, did
I get anything for Christmas?”

“Yes, it’s over at Mammy’s house” (Mammy is what
they called my Mama’s sister). She grabbed my hand. With
Mama marching and me skipping, we hurried over to Mammy’s
house.

As we entered, I noticed something in the hallway covered
with sheets. My mama, flashing a dimpled grin, jetted over to the
covered object. She allowed the sheets to crumble to the floor to
reveal a piano. The white keys had a yellow tint, and the black
keys had bits of paint chipped away from them. It had a tall back
like a player piano. Mama planted herself on the bench and
proceeded to play “Joy to the World.” I asked, “Whose piano
is that?” She responded, “It’s yours; isn’t it a grand gift?”

Looking down at the floor, I mumbled, “Yes, Mama”.
I turned and solemnly crept away. I was hurt. I needed to go
lick my wounds. Walking as if I was in a funeral procession, I
went home, ascended the stairs, went over to the window, and
watched the children playing outside with their toys. With tears
streaming down my face, I pressed it against the window and
thought, “Joy to the world? What joy?” That joy she was playing
had eluded me. As far as I was concerned, I didn’t get anything
for Christmas that year.

A year after the piano arrived, a tall, chocolate complex-
ioned, handsome boy named Robert came to my home. He was a friend of my brother and a piano player. I saw him play before. His hands and fingers moved like Mariah across the black and white keys. Rocking from side to side, he played with passion. He asked if he could play the piano. I had no problem with his request. We strolled over to my aunt’s house and he played “A Song for You.” I observed as his fingers and hands danced over the keys. The piano had an accurate tone and pitch, and it appeared to be smiling because of the attention. That day, Robert taught me how to play “Stand by Me.” It was simple, involving only three keys, but I thought I played well. That day was the first and last time I played the piano.

Six months later, on my way home from school, I noticed a big, blue truck backed up to my aunt’s front porch. Two fat men were struggling to put the piano on the truck. They paused momentarily to get a better grip. I ran near the truck and just stood there observing. I looked at the piano, and it appeared to have a face. It looked as if one of the eyes had a single tear in it. I could swear I heard it ask me, “Why?” Responding without speech, I answered, “I don’t hate you. It’s just that you aren’t a flute.” I turned and walked away. I never saw the piano again. I later found out that Mama sold it to a church. I smiled and thought, “The piano is finally bringing joy to someone.”

Life went on without the piano, and I never did get the flute.

As I reflect on the Christmas when I received the piano, I see Mama’s smile, her glowing face, and how proud she was of her gift. I think of all the sacrifices she made, all the extra work she must have done to get the piano, and then I think of how I ignored the piano and refused to even acknowledge it. I am perplexed by the way I felt pain – and delivered pain. How stubborn I was. I reflect on how hurt I was because of the gift, and how I never even considered Mama’s feelings when I rejected it. How selfish I was. The way I acted towards the piano was shameful. I think of Mama asking me that Christmas,
“Isn’t it a grand gift?” I now answer with all my heart, “Yes, Mama, the piano was the grandest gift I have ever received.” In spite of the way I treated the piano, somehow it managed to steal my heart. It now stands at the door of my heart as a sentry keeping out unwarranted stubbornness and selfishness. The only song I ever played on it was “Stand by Me,” but the piano’s presence lives on in me each day. It reminds me to be thankful for all that I’m given and to remember how special it is to receive a gift. The piano; my piano.
Father

Marcus De’Quian Dawson

You told me you were going to spend the weekend with me last summer
I was so excited to finally spend time with you
It had been fifteen years since I last saw you
I wondered if you started to go bald
Or if you had gained weight
after you retired from the military
You said you would be there at 12:00 o’clock on the dot
Saturday morning
You promised me breakfast and a day of just you and me
You said we would play some one-on-one at the park
where you played when you were a kid
You said that you would take me to the beach and show me how to swim, the way you learned in the military
It’s 11:30, I’m straightening up the house, I wanted you to be impressed with the man I had become
I take out pictures of my high school prom; I take out my diploma to the graduation
that you weren’t able to make
I take out my softball trophy and my perfect attendance awards
It’s now 11:45; I’m standing at the door peeping out of the peephole every other second
It’s 11:47, now pacing back and forth waiting for your arrival
I run to the mirror practicing ways to say hello to you,
I practice my high child like voice
I then practice my low manly voice
I decide to use my low voice; I wanted to show you that I had become a man now
It’s now 11:59, I knew that you would be on time; you told me that you had learned timeliness
when you were in the service
It’s now 12:05; I start to panic
What if you lost the directions to my house?
What if you got a flat tire?
I go to the phone in an attempt to call you, but I stop
I wanted you to not get the impression that I was counting
every second for you to come
It’s 12:35; I hear my cell phone ring
It’s you, you tell me that you’re sorry that you’re not able
to make it this time, you forgot that you were having dinner
with your wife’s parents
You said they were counting on you to make them
your famous ribs
I act as if it’s fine, like I had lots of plans this weekend
You apologize once more
I say it’s fine, and hang up the phone
Tears fall from my thwarted face
Real men don’t cry, you once told me
Tears began to flow even more
I wasn’t a man
I was your little boy that you left so long ago.
Toccara Bellamy
“Step right up, and witness the most gruesome thing to walk this Earth! A thing so shockingly frightful! So repugnant! So grotesque! That we wouldn’t dare allow your children to see it!”

This is my life. Has been for a year or so now. Presently, I am the sideshow freak at the traveling carnival. For a dollar, you can peer into my cage and gawk at my deformities. For a dollar, you can look down upon me and cast your judgments, and you can think to yourself, “Thank God our little Johnny and our little Susie came out normal.” But I did come out normal, just like little Johnny and little Susie. I wasn’t always a monster.

I used to be a space explorer for NASA. I was the top scientist in the country. I had successfully completed twenty-three missions in the last three years. Women in my field admired the way I made it to the top. I practically gave my whole life to NASA, those bastards. Now they deny my very existence.

My story starts about a year and a half ago, with the discovery of a tiny black hole that formed in our solar system. No one, not even the President, knew of it. NASA wanted to explore before creating mass hysteria amongst the public. The public is oblivious to anything we do.

I was hand-picked to set off on a one-man mission, correction: a one-woman mission. For my assignment, I was to fly to the hole, take up-close photos, and obtain samples from the surrounding atmosphere. I was also ordered to take various objects and chuck them into the black nothingness and record the data. The flight, which was to take ten days, was disguised as another mission to Mars.

Everything was going smoothly. I phoned my mother to say goodbye and to tell her that I loved her. I arranged for
my sister to take my cat. The take-off went splendidly. I spent my ten days observing space, looking for any changes in our solar system that may have occurred from this hole. There was nothing.

I slowed the speed of my craft upon nearing the black hole. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. I could actually see the hole swirling around, feeding on cosmic dust, and gaining in size. I began with my tasks. I took photos from inside the capsule—hundreds, I think. I lay my camera aside and watched it float upwards. I proceeded to operate the arms of my ship and began to take samples of the surrounding atmosphere. I sent numerous items down the chute, where the ship would blast them into the mysterious black hole. I took notes after each one. A rock: gone. Water: gone. A lab rat: gone, but it is possible that the sheer pressure killed it. I made note of this. I noticed how after each item was received, the hole grew in size, and I immediately made the decision to abort the mission. But it was too late.

I swam through the air in my spacecraft to the control desk and frantically tried to turn my ship around. I watched out the window as the ship fell over the edge of the black hole, as if Columbus sailed over the edge of the Earth. The spaceship was spiraling down. Everything was dark and cold. The computers and control buttons began flashing and the alarms were screaming. I held on for dear life hoping to fly out the other end or possibly into a parallel universe. The blinding safety light came on, and I was able to watch what torturous events this black hole had in store for me. Faster and faster, my ship spiraled deep into the unknown. My body began aching, I thought, from the pressure and force. I was wrong. I looked down at my legs and watched as my body was unwoven, the way a knitted sweater would unravel when a loose thread is pulled. My body was ripped into thousands of tiny pieces. I was floating everywhere, but I wasn’t dead. I could feel my ear hit the control panel in the front of the ship, as my big toe
rammed into the bathroom door in the back of the ship. The spacecraft continued spiraling. Soon, I would be dead.

Suddenly, the craft stopped. The black hole sounded like an empty cave. Then silence. I’m dead. The hole then roared with anger and spat me out with such force that I spiraled upwards and exited the hole. I was the hole’s vomit. My eyes watched as my body wove itself together. My body parts were magnetically drawn to my torso. But something went awry—my body parts were in the wrong places. Limbs, fingers, toes, facial features, and even the unmentionables, all wrong. I screamed in horror. What happened?

The spacecraft automatically began its return flight to Earth. I radioed to NASA that the mission was completed and informed them of my return. I made no mention of the previous events.

I successfully landed off the coast of Texas. One of NASA’s large ships was there to rescue me. The seawater sloshed over the capsule window. I feared for what was to come. The latch turned and the door was opened. My rescuer screeched out in fear. After he pulled himself together, he pulled me to safety.

Back at NASA, the doctors performed all kinds of tests. They had never seen anything like this, and the doctors at NASA have seen some things.

I was no longer a person of importance; rather, I was a thing of curiosity. For months and months, I was subjected to testing, but no answers or cures were found. Then one day, NASA kicked me out. They erased my file and deleted me from their systems. They released stories to the media of how the staged mission to Mars failed and that the lonely passenger, me, was deceased. What was I to do? Where was I to go? I couldn’t go home; my mother thinks I’m dead. Besides, I didn’t want anyone who knew me to see me like this: a freak of Mother Nature.

I mostly hid in alleyways, hiding under boxes. It was
there that a man found me and convinced me to join his traveling circus. He said that I would have my own exhibit, and they would call me The Picasso, on account that my unorthodox body resembles the bodies in his paintings, the ones with mixed up parts. He offered me money, but what would I possibly do with that? I just wanted to belong.

I’ve been here for about a year now, and every day I sit atop my stool and try to tell my story. I yell out, “I used to be a scientist!” But no one ever believes me; they think it’s part of my act.
Imposter
*Stephanie Miller*

Child
He knew my name once
his daughter.
He knew the child who
sat in his lap,
breathed in his exhale.
Now he sees a shadow.
I look back and see a ghost:
my father.

Teen
Yellow strands of sticky
sweet taffy
stretching
across shiny, silver arms
swinging through space.
Nose pressed against the window,
I long for yellow
candy splotches on my tongue.

Young Adult
I squeezed myself into
the poet pile.
You say it’s not any good.
And then
Fsst.
I’m gone.
I’m not a poet.
I am not anything.

Marriage
If he said it was raining diamonds
I would look for a tin bucket and head out the door. One day I walked into an iron beam, hit my head, fell on the floor. When I woke up I didn’t believe him anymore.

*Middle Age*
Trapped by a beam of light the actress feels the brush of the soft velvet curtain at her back. An imposter, she yearns to wrap the crushed velvet around her body, step into the mouth of a cannon and wait for the explosion.
Cutting Edge Career
David Morrison

One hair, Two hair, Head hair, Lap hair.
Red hair, Blue hair, Long hair, Short hair.
Blonde, brown, black, white,
Straight, curly, dark or light.

Mop, dreads, weave, or bob
What an awesome job!

Cut, style, and dry.
Do I dare tell a lie?
Smile, tears, look of shock
Hair all over the smock.

Mop, dreads, weave, or bob
What an awesome job!

Young, old, safe or bold.
Some don’t ever let go.
Others want to be Greta Garbo
Bald, beautiful nothing to mold.

Mop, dreads, weave, or bob
What an awesome job!

Hair, hair, do I care?
Adding a touch of flair.
Wash, dye, and straighten all day,
Sculpting, artwork for pay.

Mop, dreads, weave, or bob
What an awesome job!
Tales of woe, talk of friend or foe.
More than I care to know.
She pays her bill, looking fresh and fly…
Bye. Back in a month, for cut and dry.

Mop, dreads, weave, or bob
What an awesome job!

Kristina Thompson
Why?

_Hazley Carter_

Why can I never find a matching pair of socks?
I’m sure they come in sets of two.

Why do Americans assume that English
is spoken in outer space?
I’m sure George Lucas hasn’t actually been there.

Why is driving fast illegal?
I’m sure work would be twice as fun
If you got there in half the time.

Why can’t I win a game of Scrabble?
Why can’t I ride a unicycle?
Why can’t Arnold Schwarzenegger be President?

Why do I never get the girl?
Why does it hurt?
Why can’t I find my childhood friends?

Why are we at war?
I’m sure there exists a diplomatic solution.

Why do people say “I love you”?
When surely they mean “I enjoy your company.”

Why do people die? Why do people cry?
Why? Why not? Why now? Why me?
I’m sure life would be simpler if we couldn’t ask
Why.
Trahern MacLean
I Am Only the Mortician

Skylar Cole

They want to display their dead like Easter hams,
Foolishly glazed to look pleasant and fresh-
They mourn by decoration and so
I decorate.

His daughter approaches me,
To ask about flowers-
The arrangements, and the meaning behind each bloom.
I smell her Belgian perfume, admire her tailored linen pants
(eggshell, oyster, or cream) and I wonder if she ever sent
candy-grams
To his desk
When he was alive and thinking of his grandchildren.

He was a pilot before this,
Eschewing ridiculous notions like gravity and
Feathers. I do not suppose he would warm to the idea of
being
Trussed and filled with weight.

But I am only the mortician,
And she does not ask me if I would like a brown suit better
than
This navy blue, which washes out the blush I have so
Painstakingly applied.
And what is rouge on a dead face anyway?
All the beauty in the pallor layered off- Why should he look
Excited?

The dead are not excited.
Death has relieved them and granted them
Dead expressions.
They should not look as if they will blink at you.
I reach inside the coffin to adjust one cufflink, the left, which has gone astray
(Even without the tics and twitches, the life under their skins, the dead manage
To misplace their belongings).
He reminds me of a hapless actor who has fallen asleep in his stage face, the
Paint laid too thickly,
Undrying.

I turn back to his daughter, who wonders aloud if the orange lilies wouldn’t be more appropriate
Than the white ones, to set the mood for mourning. I remind her that the orange lilies
Symbolize wealth, not love
And she nods her head in approval.

If I were not only the mortician,
I would tell her that the Tuberose are perfect for her dead father, who loved to fly
And whose pilot wings were pinned to his left sleeve until a moment ago.
And even though I am only the mortician, I will go to his grave
And leave them there, with a bouquet of Tuberose
Which symbolize Dangerous Pleasure.
Society Bred Revolution
Seth Aaron Rodriguez

Society begins with birth
Birth into a world of idealism
Idealism of the utopia
Utopia for aristocracy
Aristocracy makes society
Society of the masses
Masses of corrupt ideas
Ideas that shape our lives
 Lives lived by all generations
Generations morally askew
Askew we’ve been raised
Raised by society.
Ed Walsh
Absent Father
Evelyn Chagarov

I’ve been loved and left so many times,
For imaginary offenses and made up crimes.
I want to know what I will tell my daughter,
When the day comes and she needs her father.

He ran just like the rest.
I thought he was different, the very best.
I was wrong again, what else is new?
I disappeared from his thoughts like the morning dew.

Does he even care that we made a child?
I was asked that, and I simply smiled.
If he walked out on us, then he’s no better,
He doesn’t deserve me, he doesn’t deserve my daughter.

One day he will pay the price of an absent father,
A “father” who just didn’t want the bother.
He will have to face the daughter he made,
And he will wish that he would have stayed.

The price of an absent father is expensive,
But it should be—the crime is offensive.
He will look and be afraid,
Of the very little girl that he betrayed.
Dana McKoy
**Guidelines for Submissions**

**Writer’s Guidelines**

1. All writing entries must be submitted electronically to portals@cfcc.edu as a .doc, .rtf, and/or .txt file.
2. Entries should include title of each work and author’s name, address, and telephone or e-mail address on the first page (or on each poem for poetry submissions). Also, label each writing as poetry, fiction, or non-fiction.
3. Fiction and non-fiction should not exceed 3000 words. Poetry should not exceed 50 lines.
4. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable, but no more than a total of five pieces of writing may be submitted.
5. Portals acquires First North American Serial Rights. All other rights revert to the author upon publication. Previously unpublished submissions only.

**Artist’s Guidelines**

1. All art entries must be submitted electronically to portals@cfcc.edu as a .jpeg, .gif, or .tiff file (with a target dpi of 300 and a minimum image width of 4 inches).
2. Entries should include title of each work and artist’s name, address, and telephone or e-mail address. Also, label each piece of art as either 2-D or photography.
4. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable, but no more than a total of five pieces of art may be submitted.

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