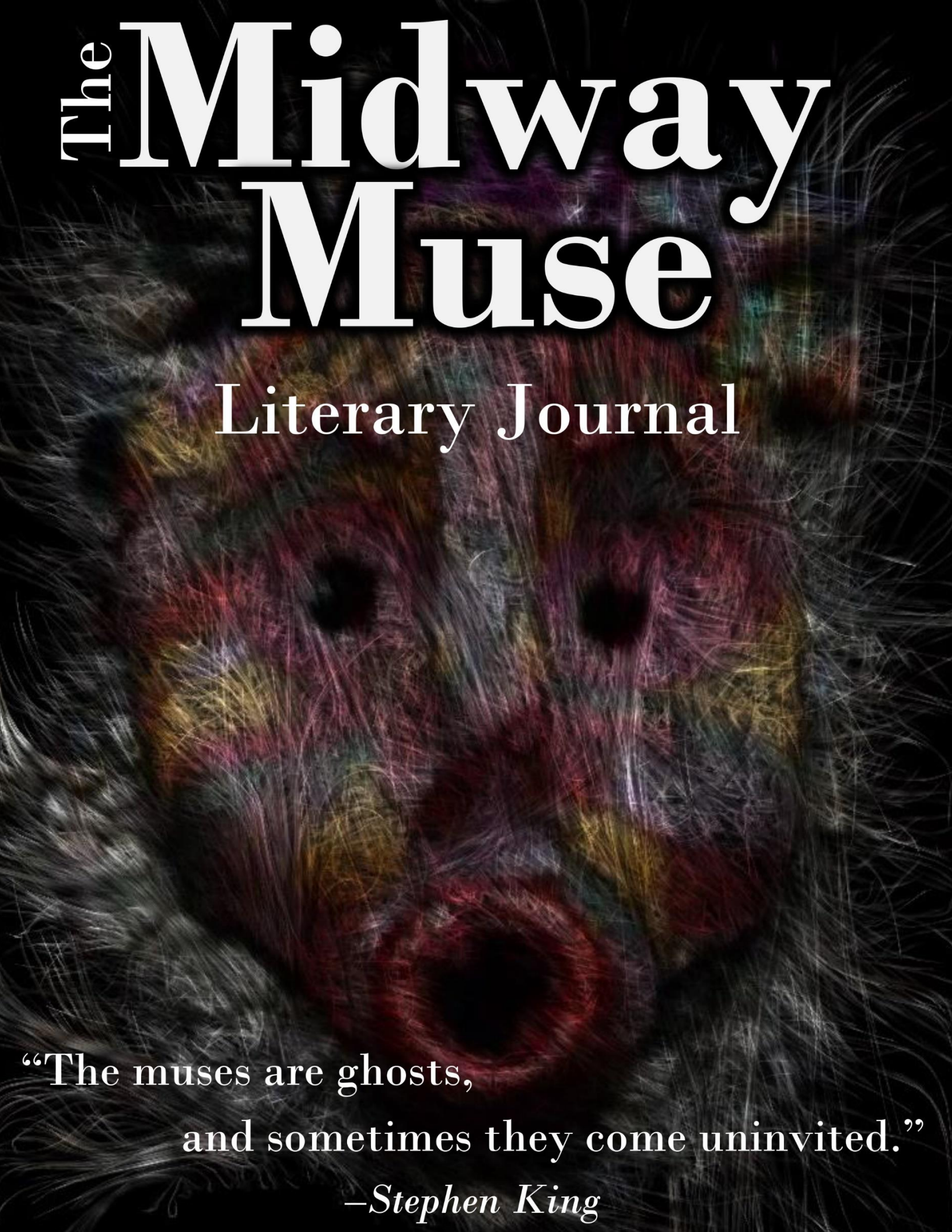
The Midway Muse

Literary Journal



"The muses are ghosts,
and sometimes they come uninvited."
–Stephen King

The Midway Muse

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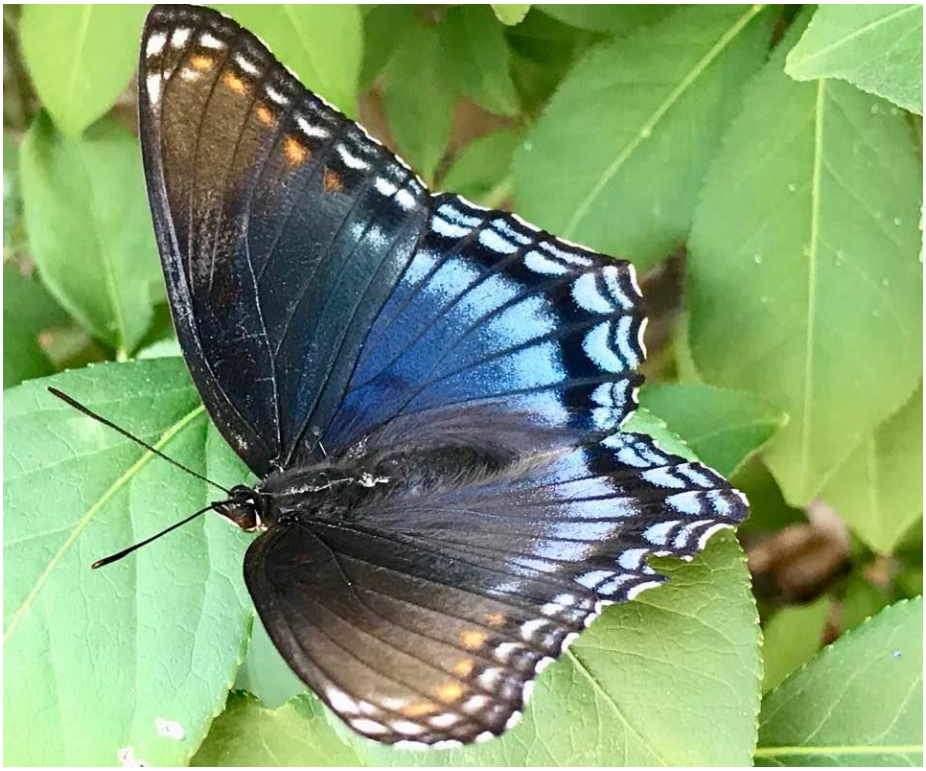
Editor’s Note

Hieroglyphs spilled upon the page bloom forth from inkpots black as throat. The mouth is yawning—screaming, sighing, sucking at the vein of life. Dip in and imbibe the carbon, dragons millions of years liquified. Singularity exists in a drop. Paper wings unfurl, a palpitation; somewhere in the universe, fingers curl.



–Photo by Salah Shakir

Engulfed in the maw of space, the ink in you shifts, gravitating toward something great and faraway, some glowing spot in the matterless void. If you touch Jupiter, you’ll reach right through and keep on sinking—compressing, burning, wringing last breath from the great, red eye of the storm:

marbled and placid, raging beneath.

Train thunders over rails, banshee wailing, flowing over with its bounty of coal: condensed potential, the building-blocks of life on Earth, dying to ignite—issuing up smoke signals as heralds of the end. It bolts past, so close you can sense its screeches, its sighs. You could reach out and touch the blur, and a shadow of a pair of atrial wings wants you to. Would it break your arm at the joint, rip limb from ligament?—or would your fingers simply reach right through? Perhaps it tears the flesh from your touch, and, pressing fingertips to napkin, you write a Rorschach, terrible and beautiful. Pulled in by the Red Spot, some fragile spirit of air alights to nurse the wound, mud-puddling, craving salt. Fingers curl. You liquify and quench the mouth of the world and feel, in it, a sigh.

–Cait A. Smith



–Hannah Waroway

Scarecrow

Straw fills the clothes
I use to hide identities
that satiate my desires
in the wildest of dreams.
Mask my intentions
behind a burlap sack,
withering in the fields
where rotten hay stacks.
Birds fill the skies,
but do not dare come near.
I am the father of the forgotten,
the poached, and the feared.
Holes in this soul do not
bleed me completely dry.
Pull the stuffing from inside
and still I cannot die,
forced to watch the sun rise
and fall at the end of every day.
All of you pass right by me,
but I am doomed to stay.

–Stefan Delipoglou

Shakespearean Sonnet: *a 14-line poem in iambic pentameter and following a rhyme scheme of* ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

Solace in the Shape of You

Should I beseech you, contemplate that dark
unknown; that 4 a.m. beneath spilled ink;
that tidal urge that whispers, “disembark”;
that breathless aching void upon the brink,
where even will-o-wisps have lost their way.
Behold aurora ’neath the frozen sea,
where nightmare’s hypothermic, held at bay,
for that is where you’ll find some ghost of me.
And in the neon buzz of tongue-tied veins,
where desperate lonely blood forgets its name,
as famined spirits crucify their pains,
where world on fire becomes a guiding flame:
Here in the wreck and ruin of rendezvous
is solace in the fluid shape of you.

–Cait A. Smith



–Keelie McClellan

I Love Her

She’s the only light that shines in the darkness. The one star that never ceases to glow on a cloudy night. The single soul to walk among a ghost town. A flower, weeping, almost dead, yet still she tends to it. She places the pot in a different window every morning to see where the most sunlight comes through. She is a steady steamship sailing calmly in rough seas. Broken glass that she is convinced she can superglue back together.

I’m a mess. I close the curtains so I can stay in the comfort of my own darkness. I am heavy rains that stop the stars from shining on a spring night. My body is the ghost town, ready for demolition. I watch my flowers weep and beg for sunlight. These flowers are mirrors, reflections of who I really am. I am a sinking ship, overtaken by the high tides. I am broken glass lying on the floor, waiting to tear open innocent skin.

Blood rushing, or is that the sound of my heartbeat when her hand brushes my skin? I remember the first time. Our hands lock together, and I’m afraid she can feel my fingers trembling

around hers. I watch her lips as she talks, but all I can hear is the racing thunder of my heart in my ears. She leans into me, and I crash. Power outage. The world stops turning in that moment. I awake from my coma and tell myself that this needs to stop, but my heart has yearned for this. Don’t stop kissing me. I need to know what she’s thinking. What is going on in that beautiful mind? Tell me you want me, too.

She is an open window on a sunny summer day. The breeze tickling my skin feels refreshing compared to the recurring cold chills. She is green, open fields against a blue sky. Going 70 down a country road, feeling invincible. Unstoppable. Free. Wild horses galloping across open land. Free to roam the lands they walk on. Free to live and love the way she does. She is safety. She feels like home.

I am a cracked window attempting to stop the bitter cold of winter from seeping inside. I am dead, wilting fields buried under a gloomy gray sky. Stopped traffic in the middle of downtown. Fear and anxiety wrapped in an ironic Christmas present. Feeling trapped. Too small for such a big world. I am a pacing horse stuck in a new, unfamiliar stall.

No windows to let in the light of day. No greens of the grass or blues of the sky. Only the shades of black across the dark wood of the walls and the grays of the aisleway. What is home?

I remember when she asked me. Just a simple title. “Girlfriend.” But it wasn’t simple anymore. It was a complex term with too many meanings behind it. But I love how she says it. The word trickles off her tongue like sweet honey, and I’m a honeybee. When she calls me hers, I melt like a snowman in the middle of June. She adds a gallon of gasoline to my fire every time she says it. Burning passion. Could she feel my insides exploding when she looked me in the eyes and asked me to be hers? Not a lethal grenade but a firework. Beautiful sparks raining down instead of combusting flames. I still tremble when she holds my hand. Tell me you love me.

She is sweet ocean mist. The sounds of squawking seagulls and crashing waves. Running through the middle of lavender fields. Napping in a swinging hammock on a cool summer day. Stargazing. The final piece to a puzzle. She is a soft bed after a long day of work. A warm shower.

Washing away the memories and hurtful thoughts. Calming. Steady and stable. Happiness and Love.

Maybe, just maybe. I am an ocean breeze. Carrying the sweet mist along with me. Maybe. I'm the daylight gleaming on seagull's feathers. Maybe I am the sturdy soil that holds the lavender's roots to the Earth. Maybe, oh just maybe. I am the sun in her summer days and the moon in her nights. Maybe. Am I the stars at which she so lovingly gazes? Maybe. Maybe I am the puzzle and she was my final, missing piece. Maybe I am the room in which you find the soft bed residing. The fuzzy, warm robe you throw on after a cooling shower. Maybe I am those things for her. I can be anything she wants me to be. She makes me believe that the world could stop for me. The way mine does for her. She makes me believe that there is no moon and there are no stars on her nights without me. The way my nights are without her. She makes me believe that summer days are equivalent to winter nights when I'm not by her side. The way I feel when we aren't together. She makes me believe that I am worth it.

I remember when she told me she loved me. She loves me. Those words shake my world like an

earthquake. Splitting the ground in two only to see roses emerge from the cracks. Every flower blooms like springtime when she tells me she loves me. My world that has been enclosed in a cloak of darkness is now uncovered to see light. Beautiful, radiant, shimmering light. A kaleidoscope of colors. I have a roaring fire in my chest now. I've never been in love. But maybe, oh just maybe, I'm in love with her.

She still tells me she loves me.

I love her.

–Faith MacFarlane

Haibun: *a Japanese-style poem combining prose poetry and haiku.*

Germany

This is the forest primeval, its roots mining all the way to Ecuador to support such lofty aspirations. Too high to be heard, wind's bow scrapes lightly on pine tree's feathered frets, as sun, lightyears above, dies in pink ribbons casting blue shadows through black slatted trunks in lattices across the unadulterated snow white. Here fairy tale secrets buried deep beneath winter's thick duvet will keep long after spring's first kiss to bloom innocently again as bluebells, crocus, Edelweiss. The bushy red of fox's riding hood flashes the sole color in the corner of one's eye *nowyouseeit,now youdon't,* while gray wolf camouflages himself against dark bark, his hunger patient as the inescapable night.

Once upon a time
The woods were lovely, dark, deep
Then never after

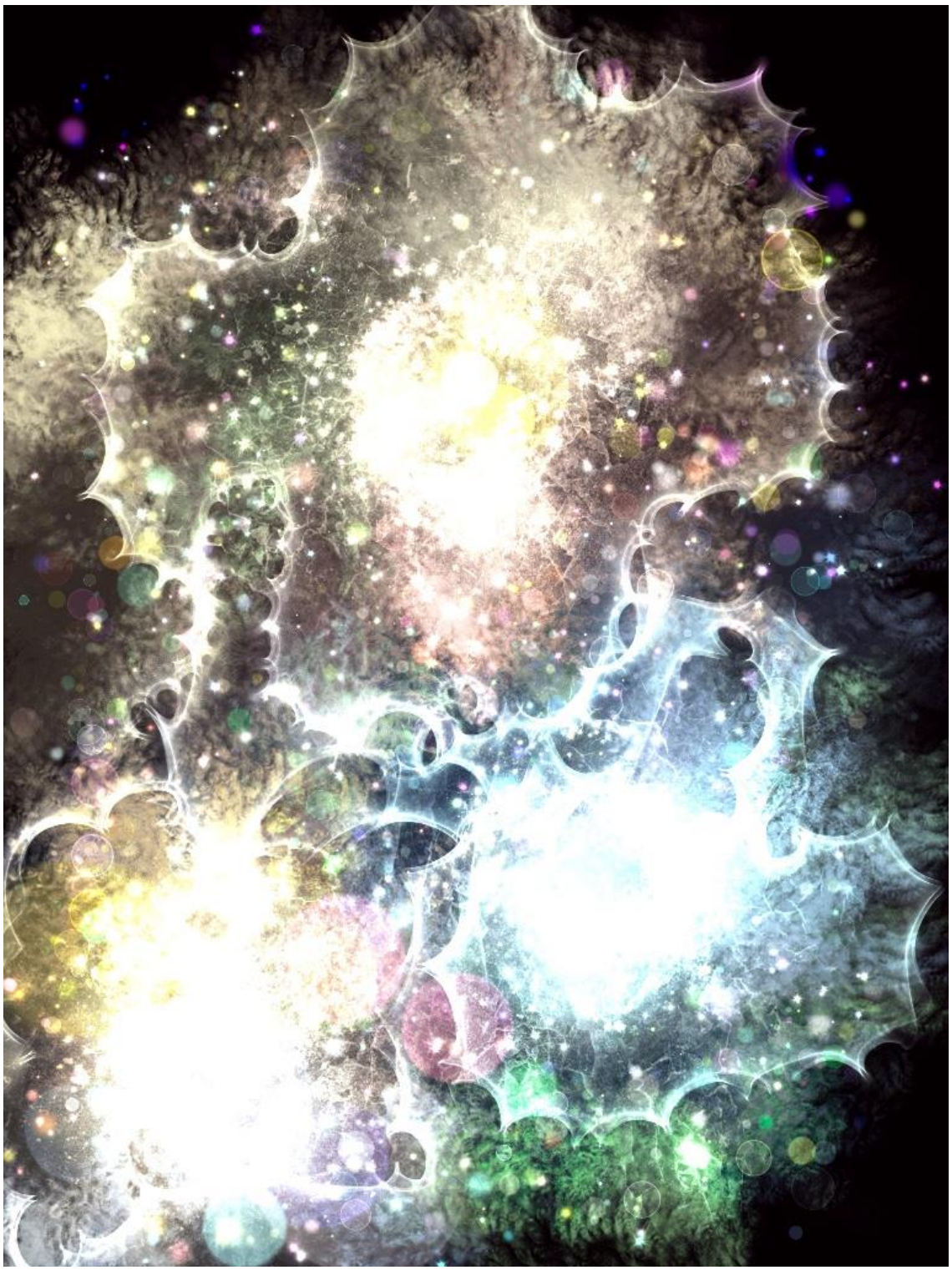
–Rebecca L. Briley

Aster Pond



–Mike Hubrich

Glory



–Dawn Smith

Anaerobic

Solitude sweeps over my
desolate plains riddled with brown
posies that lie scattered
in dead poses upon the ground.
Through the haze comes a voice
to guide me back toward the sun,
but I’ve accepted my choice
and from myself I cannot run.
Argue with me, bitter or sweet,
and find you can’t change this mind
that sees not the same world
of material, space, and time.
I have gone beyond these yet
and found nothing ever still.
I do believe I know the Truth
and wish no one else will.
The haze returns to suffocate
what little green still lives.
Perhaps I’ll evolve still more
from some piece that ran and hid.

–Stefan Delipoglou

Pantoum: *A Malaysian poem following an* ABAB *rhyme scheme and comprised of at least three quatrains. The second and fourth lines of each quatrain are repeated in the next quatrain as the first and third lines, respectively. The first and third lines of the first quatrain are repeated as the second and fourth lines of the final quatrain.*

Trial

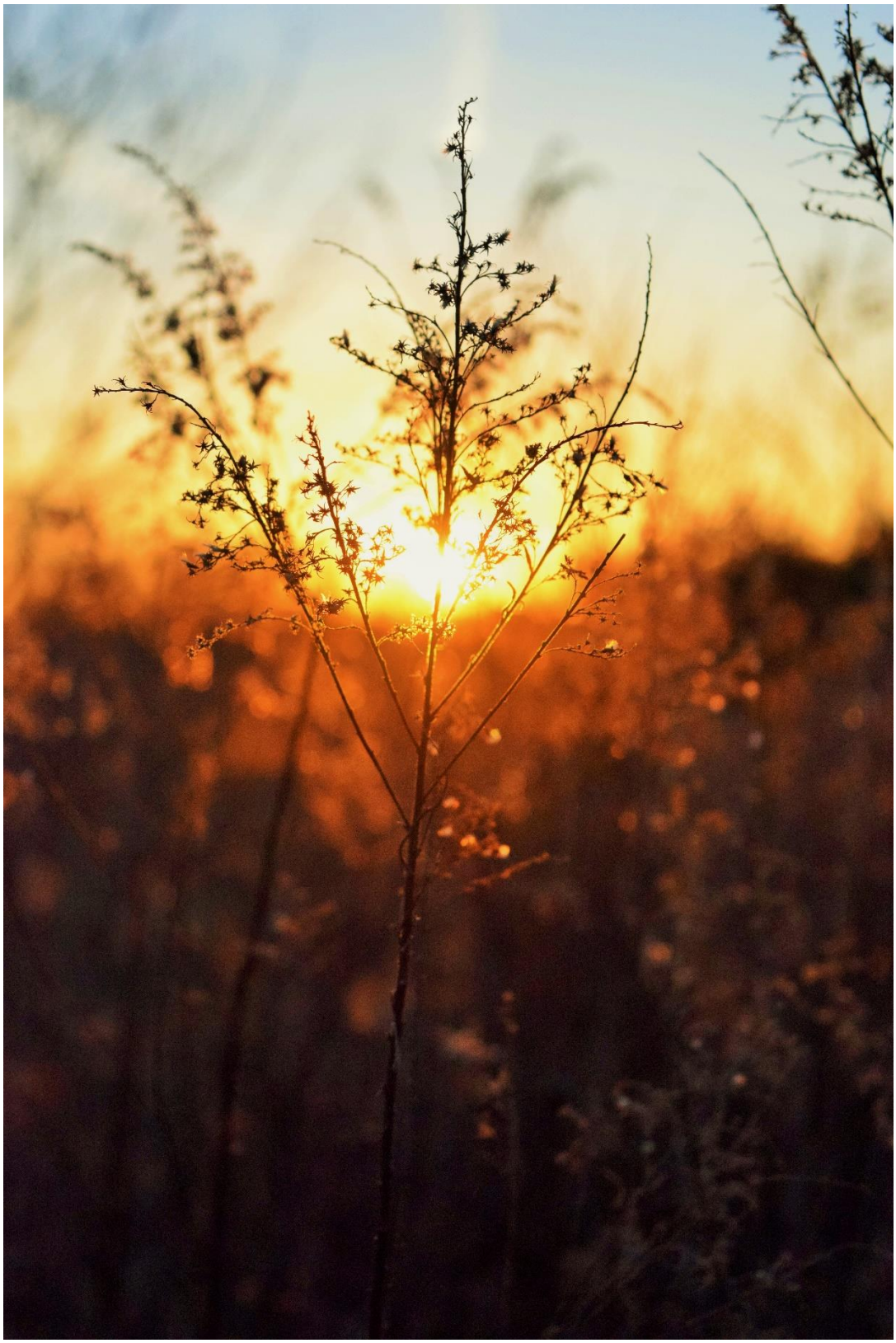
I walk on fire to prove my heart's aflame
I wear the gift you gave: a shirt of hair
I learn new rules each time you change the game
I turn the cheek, unguarded, to your glare.
I wear your shirt of hair with careless care
I sleep on nails, no sharper than your blame
My red defenseless cheeks sting in cold air
I gather sticks and stones to fuel your flame.
I seek your nails, my liberty to tame
No matter what the rules, I lose the game
My sticks and stones no match for words you aim
My heart and feet on fire just the same.

–Rebecca L. Briley

Dew-Web



–Mike Hubrich



–Hannah Waroway

Free Verse Poem

A complex apparatus
rising out of necessity and fear
torn between a past and possibility
please let this be meant for me

I press my lips together
to seal the doubt from escaping
A symphony of whispers
O do not obey

Shining a light on the darkest shadow
allowing hope to break through

Can you see me
I am still here
a cause thought to be lost
found again

–Liz Muller

Lost Freedom

As a child I wanted a bird
No matter what the cost.

Tobi's tenderness, softness
Cultivated my passion for the creature.
His dependency on me blinded me
Into thinking we had a relationship.
His innocence and inexperience
Gave the impression of a look of love.

In truth Tobi was disoriented and lost.
His natural curiosity I mistook for playful antics;
He never sang.

I tried to ignore his sad appearance
As he looked through the window
To the sky.

Today I miss him
More than yesterday,
But I'm conflicted:
Do I miss his presence?
Or my own desire to own him?

Just as Tobi was captured by me,
I am also captured in society's cage.

I could not set him free because he would not
survive,
As I will not survive if I am recklessly abandoned
and free.
Many of us are lost and disoriented
Just like Tobi.

–David Rios



–Photo by Cait A. Smith

Conversion

So I created this character:
She is invincible.
She is perfect.
She is bright, hardworking, caring.
Everyone loves her.

But on the inside,
Curtains cover the scattered bones in the churchyard.
Dried leaves hide the teeth on the ground,
Shattered from grinding the pain away.
You would think someone would notice.
Deep down, I want someone to notice

But they don’t.
They wouldn’t understand anyway.
So let me try to explain.

You see a smile on her face all the time.
You never see her angry, or upset.
She spends her time alone, in her room.
She doesn’t talk about herself or her home.
Why?
So you don’t see how much I hurt inside.

I am just a careless tourist here,

Never knowing where I have been or where I am
going.
So listen to her;
She knows what is and what should be.

–Rachel Hendren

Cardinals



–Lilly Pendley

The Beyond

The old black bug sputters, pitching forward, trying to keep going. Alex knows it will stop. She just hopes it will last a little longer, just a little longer to get off these cracked country backroads.

Suddenly, the beetle lurches to a stop. Alex heaves a sigh of frustration, cursing herself for not stopping earlier for gas. She knew there were no gas stations this far from the exit, but she'd hoped the car could make it to town.

NO SERVICE blinks on her screen.

"Great. Just fantastic!" Throwing the useless phone on the seat, Alex climbs out, with a creak of the old door, to stand on the side of the road. *Where the hell am I?*

Chichichichi! Locusts click in the trees; an owl hoots in the woods beside her. Across the road, a small, worn-down house appears in the shadows. Confidently, Alex makes her way, stepping up the damp wooden stairs that squeak and moan beneath her weight.

A low growl. Alex looks to her right. A large,

mangy dog stares up at her through the floorboards of the porch.

Sweat beads Alex's forehead. She steps back. Her foot catches on a loose board and pitches her head-over-heels onto the dirt. The dog bolts from beneath the porch, sending Alex scrambling to her feet.

Hoping the dense wood will distract the dog long enough for her to get away, Alex runs blindly for the side of the road. Fog rises with each harsh breath as she makes for the clearing.

She stops. The dog is nowhere to be seen. She's alone in the woods. The low sun filtering through the bare trees creates a kaleidoscope of color as she pivots, taking in her surroundings.

"Ha. Well, this is amazing. No service, nowhere to go, no way to call someone. This is great. What else, world, what else?" Her scream is lost in the thick canopy of branches overhead. Randomly choosing a path, she wanders purposelessly till her feet find a slight incline. The trees dissipate as the bushes become denser.

Snap! Crunch! Alex's shallow breaths are no longer the only thing she hears. In the dry leaves,

scurrying little animals make their presence known. Chirping crickets pulsate, stopping as Alex gets close, beginning again once they feel safe.

At the peak of the hill, Alex stops climbing to observe the scene. Behind her and to her left, there are trees as far as she can see—but to her right, streetlights twinkle in the growing dusk. Alex squints, trying to judge the distance to the bright horizon. Her stomach bubbles with excitement as she races down the hill, the lights providing direction at last.

Running along beside her, as if to help, little woodland creatures seem to whisper to one another.

“Should we follow her?” the rabbit squeaks nervously. “I don’t think she knows where she’s going! She doesn’t even know where she is.”

“What choice do we have?” the squirrel hisses. “You need to have a little trust. Kipling wouldn’t have sent her in here if he didn’t think she was the right one.”

Unaware of the animals or their conversation, focused on the twinkle of lights in the distance, Alex slows to a walk, her feet continuing on their way to

certain safety.

The branches have thickened again, and they sway in the cool November air. Panting, Alex sinks down on a rock, holding a stitch in her side. Despite the chill air, she's sweating. The woods seems to hold its breath, waiting to see what Alex will do next, as the animals approach her feet.

For the first time, Alex notices the furry creatures beside her. The squirrel is small and cream-colored, with a large, bushy tail that twitches with each movement of the trees. Alex feels a tiny lick on her ankle. She glances down, not wanting to scare the squirrel, and sees the small rabbit. *How weird*, she thinks, *to find a white rabbit with a brown head in the woods!* It gazes up at her with soft, brown eyes, nose twitching.

Holding her breath along with the forest, Alex offers a hesitant hand to the rabbit and squirrel. Their soft sniffs calm Alex's fears, making her feel less lost, and she moves an unsteady finger to the rabbit's head. The rabbit nuzzles her hand, and the squirrel, sensing Alex is different from most humans, jumps into her lap.

Their behavior shocks Alex. “You two are different. You seem to understand that I’m lost,” she says to them, not thinking how bizarre this must sound: a sweaty, wild-eyed girl talking to some forest animals.

“Well, of course we’re different,” the rabbit says matter-of-factly. “All the living things in this forest are different. We can think and talk, just like you.”

Wait. Did he just—? Alex nearly screams. Bewildered, mouth agape, she looks back and forth between the squirrel and rabbit, hoping it is just hunger making her delirious.

“I’m. I’m sorry. Di-di-did you just talk?” Alex stutters. “Could—could you repeat that? If you actually talked, I mean.”

“Of course I actually talked,” Rabbit says practically, as if it has spoken to a human girl a thousand times and is growing tired of it. “We aren’t barbaric animals who only think about eating, sleeping, and surviving. I said, *we are different*. All living things in this forest can think and talk.”

“But—but—why are you talking to me?” Alex

manages to continue, wondering if she hit her head on some low-hanging branches.

“Because you will take us where we need to go,” Rabbit explains patiently. “You know the way to the Beyond.”

“The Beyond?”

“See. I told you she doesn’t know what she’s doing,” Squirrel groans, rolling its eyes. “She looks dazed and honestly kind of senseless. I don’t think she knows what the Beyond even is.”

What the hell is the “Beyond?” And why would they think I’m taking them there? It sounds like someplace out of a sci-fi movie.

Squirrel begins, smirking at Rabbit, “I told you she doesn’t—”

“Hey!” Rabbit interrupts, defensively taking up for Alex. “That’s not nice! I’m sure she knows where she’s going. Besides, Kipling knows better than we do.”

Feeling less and less like she knows what she is doing, Alex speaks up: “Okay, you two. Let’s go to

the Beyond.” She isn’t about to argue with a rabbit and squirrel. She just has to get to the city.

Continuing through the woods, Alex makes a lot of noise. More and more creatures seem to be joining them: a deer or two, a few more squirrels, some snakes, and a couple of owls. The sun is fading fast, and she knows that she needs to find the streetlights before darkness falls and she loses her way again. She picks up speed, aware that the animals are following. She feels their presence, never too close but not far away.

The trees are becoming taller, thicker, making her path harder to maneuver. Twigs and rocks try to trip her; branches scratch at her head and face, attempting to slow her. She has cuts and bruises all over, but the need to go on is more intense than any pain she feels. Alex’s stomach lets out a low growl, begging for food that Alex is unsure she will find. Her hair is tangled with twigs and leaves, and her skin is grimy with sweat. *If only she could jump in a warm shower!*

Trudging on through the dense trees, Alex’s excited breath is matched with the animals’. They all

seem to know she is leading them closer to this "Beyond" place.

"I believe we are getting close, m'lady," a deep, throaty voice calls. "The trees seem to think so, at least."

Whirling around, Alex notices a large buck, at least four feet tall with massive antlers, walking toward her. Awestruck, she stares at the majestic creature, then reaches out to touch his velvety nose. The buck lowers his head, and she smiles.

"This is incredible. Absolutely incredible." Being this close to a buck is something she never thought could happen. "Did you say the trees say we are getting closer? How do they know? They don't have eyes, do they?"

"They sense with their roots," the buck explains with a dignified air. "They can feel the power of the Beyond, always pulsing. They know we are getting close because of the vibrations of our footsteps. They have been with us since the beginning of our journey."

He is breathtaking: large eyes twinkling in the dying sun, soft brown hair tickling Alex's fingertips.

Smiling, she continues, moving toward what she hopes are streetlights. They are becoming brighter—a good thing, as the sun has left the sky and the thick trees have closed in darkly around her. The animals are growing excited, anticipating what they hope to find with the twinkling lights. Even the air is becoming warmer. She must be close!

Reaching the lights, suddenly everything goes bright. Bright beyond anything she has ever witnessed. It is everything and nothing. Squinting into the lights, she sees the animals around her glowing and running. She runs with them, feeling light as a leaf in the breeze.

"We made it! We made it! We made it!" the animals chant.

Alex has no idea where they have made it, but she is happy. She is safe. She basks in the warm glow of the eternal light. The impact of that car… seems so long ago. Ages instead of minutes.

She remembers: running out of gas, running from the dog…but she really can't remember the car that came out of nowhere as she was running toward the woods. The thud of the impact, the sudden jolt. The

silence that followed. And the screaming? Was it hers? Or was it the woman who had taken her eyes off the road—*just for a moment*—to change the radio station?

It's all fading so fast in the bright, warm light. She can't remember anything of the horrific scene, but maybe that is for the best. She likes this newfound comfort she feels. The Beyond is a happy place, a warm escape from the unforgiving winter that is beginning.

–Taylor Stephenson

Ruth

Ruth loved me like no other. Always unconditional, hugs so warm and strong. Always singing while she did the laundry and cleaning, her crisp ironed skirt swishing back and forth, *The Price is Right* on the T.V. playing in the background.

"Play with me, Ruth!" I would beg.
"Hush, child, I got chores that need to be done."

"Wash up, child, before your nap. I will rock you in the rocking chair."
Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home. Creamy dark skinny head on her ample bosom as I sucked my thumb. Her voice soothing me slowly to sleep. "You sleep, child. I'm here, sweet child."

Ruth baked chicken in the oven. Savory smells with a hint of lemon.
"Can I help?"
"No, child, you'll burn yourself. Now go and play, child, before dinner."

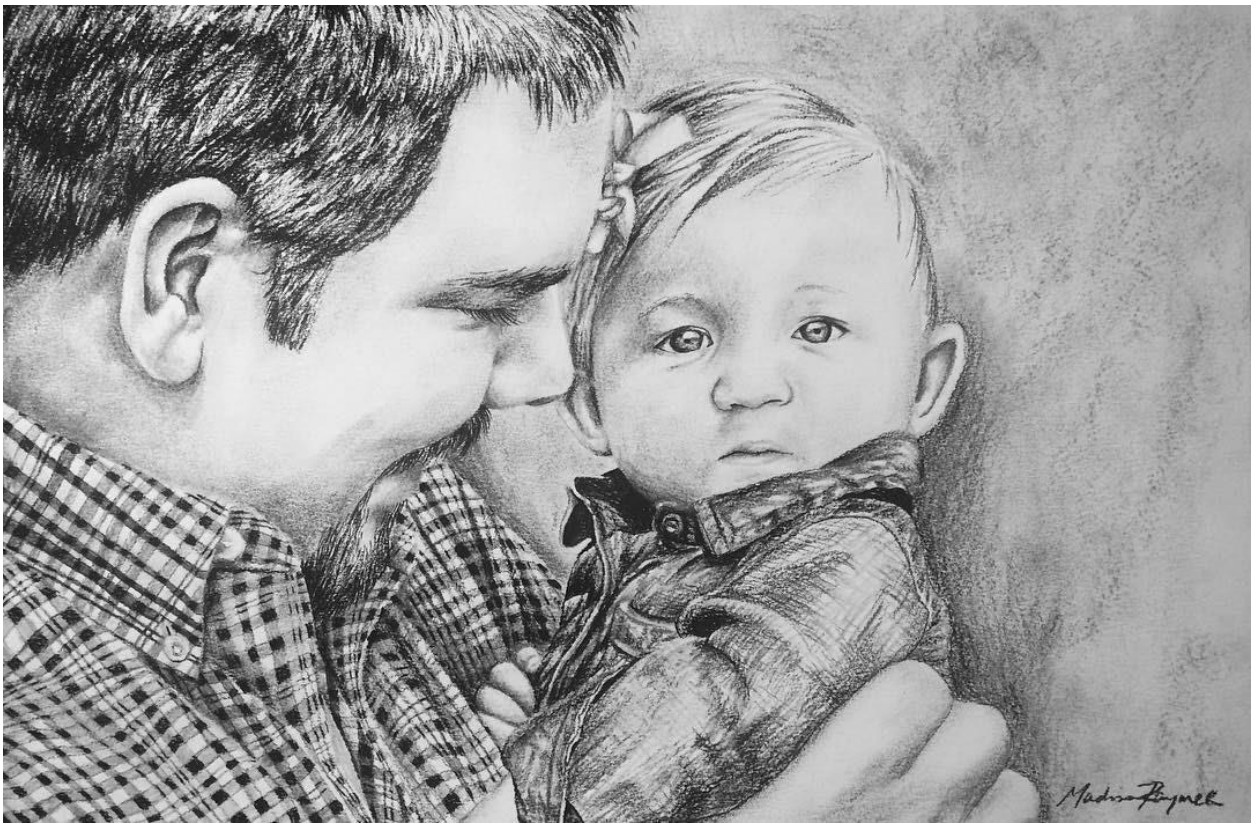
"Bath time before your mama gets home. You get ready now, ya hear, and then I will brush your hair.

Not too much water in the tub. You will be taking a spit bath tonight. We can't be wasting water, child. Hop out quick before you catch a chill."

"Mamma's home, child, best behave now. We will play tomorrow."

–Liz Muller

Drawing of Sp 2017 Alum Shelley Lalumandier's family



–Madison Raymer

Villanelle: *a French, 19-line poem following an ABA rhyme scheme. The first and third lines are repeated alternately until the last stanza, where they become the final couplet.*

Search for Worth

Suppose the lungs of time disturb the earth.
The ebb and flow of respiration through
the breathless, empty space declares your worth.

Lungs sigh for every sorrow; every mirth,
a huff. In winter, breath's a puff and you
suppose the lungs of time disturbed the earth.

Air shifted at the moment of your birth,
as molecules of some great gasp withdrew.
The breathless, empty space declares your worth

worth less than stars who rupture in rebirth
and oscillate in time to breath's tattoo.
Suppose the lungs of time disturb the earth

with butterflies and tempests, to unearth
the Ouroboros sky. "You're just brand-new
and breathless," Empty Space declares. Your worth

can't churn the seas where planets leave wide berth,

yet breath can stir the Zephyr more than you
suppose. The lungs of time disturb the earth
and, breathless, scour the empty space for worth.

–Cait A. Smith

Resting Butterfly



–Salah Shakir

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