

HELLBENDER

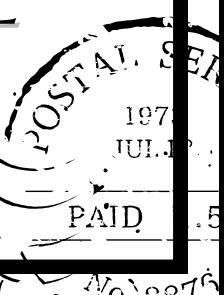
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magazine

Amplifying Incarcerated Voices



2025 | SPECIAL ISSUE





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West Virginia University - English Graduate Program



Cover Art: "We the Equal" by Craig "Champ" Hairston
Issue Design: Elise Zukowski
Submissions Digitizer & Proofreader: Peter Krch

ABOUT US



Formerly known as *Cheat River Review*, *Hellbender Magazine* is a literary journal run by a hardworking team of volunteer graduate students in the MFA, MA, and MA-PWE programs in the English Department at West Virginia University (WVU).

Our Story—

Over the summer of 2023, dozens of academic programs at WVU faced the chopping block as the state's RI flagship university revealed its plans for Phase 2 of what they were calling an "Academic Transformation"^I. Many programs were at risk of being discontinued and one of them was the Creative Writing MFA program, in which many of *Hellbender Magazine*'s staff at the time were enrolled.

However, in true Appalachian fashion, students and faculty across the disciplines joined together to fight back. Our voices received widespread, national recognition from reputable news outlets, including *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times*. After weeks of university-wide protest, the English Department Chair and Creative Writing Program Director successfully appealed the university's recommendation to discontinue the Creative Writing MFA program. Many programs across the university weren't as fortunate.

In any case, amidst all of this chaos, our program's graduate-level literary magazine (formerly *Cheat River Review*) had fallen to the wayside —lost to the ether of expired web addresses and unpublished issues, long forgotten by the overworked and underpaid grad students who'd maintained it. It was decidedly time for a change that we could control.

The challenges we overcame in 2023 inspired us to rebrand and rename our literary magazine: Hellbender. We hoped this change would not only demonstrate our collective strength but would also commemorate the shared experience of overcoming our program's potential extinction for years to come. We came to one simple, unanimous conclusion: "Writers don't forget." And in this spirit, we collectively acknowledged that a transformation of our own making was underfoot.

To honor the muddy water that our MFA program crawled out of, and to represent the metamorphosis we'd all undergone as WVU students and writers, we wanted to create a fresh start for our graduate literary magazine. Our struggles and perseverance also inspired our choice of mascot: the hellbender salamander. These not-so-little creatures undergo a metamorphosis early in life, allowing them to *breathe both in and out of water*. Despite recent declines in many populations, you can still find hellbender salamanders all across the Appalachian region and in various conservatories throughout the country.

Like WVU's Creative Writing MFA program, the hellbender salamander is a *symbol of resilience*. And now, it's a symbol of our lit mag and all of the amazing writers and artists who contribute to it.



LETTER FROM EDITORS THE



Dear Readers,

We couldn't be more excited for this Special Issue of *Hellbender Magazine*, and we're eager for you to dive in—whether you're viewing digitally or in print. Given the nature of this project, we always knew we would have to figure out how to make the issue available in print, because we couldn't stand the thought of our contributors not being able to access their own work. Thanks to the great generosity and support of Morgantown's own Appalachian Prison Book Project, we were able to secure the funds necessary to print and mail copies of this Special Issue to all of our contributors. For this, we're beyond grateful.

This issue is the first of its kind in *Hellbender* history, but we hope it won't be the last. Not only is this our first time making an issue available in print, but each piece contained in these pages (and on the cover) was submitted by someone either currently or formerly incarcerated. The truth is, most people behind bars don't have access to the internet (or if they can send emails, they can't include attachments), so it's becoming increasingly difficult in this digital age of online submissions for these individuals to submit and share their work with others. The *Hellbender* team wanted to do something about that—amplify their voices, if you will—and so this project came to be.

LETTER FROM EDITORS THE



It wasn't easy—there were far more logistical hurdles than anticipated—but the *Hellbender* team is nothing if not resilient, which can also be said of our contributors. The evidence is contained in the following pages. The stories and poems and artwork here moved us to tears at times and laughter at others, but above all, they reminded us why art and writing and creative expression are so important. These things help nurture hope, community, and even healing.

We hope you'll enjoy the Creative Non-Fiction, Fiction, Poetry, and Visual Art in this issue as much as we did, and that you'll feel the closeness to these contributors and the shared sense of humanity that art inspires. Wishing all of our readers both joy and resilience.

In Solidarity,
Elise Zukowski

Hellbender Magazine
Co-Editor-in-Chief



A NOTE FROM EDITORS THE



Thanks to the administrative magic of the English Department at WVU, we've secured our own mailbox for *Hellbender Magazine*, which means—for those who cannot submit online—we will accept mail-in submissions for all upcoming issues:

Hellbender Magazine
c/o West Virginia University Department of English
1503 University Ave
Morgantown, WV 26505

That said, since our team is composed entirely of volunteer graduate students who adhere to an academic calendar, **our submission window is typically contained to the fall semester (September-December), with issues published late the following (usually around May).**

If you know someone who is a writer or artist without access to the internet, please feel free to share our address with them.



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CREATIVE NON-FICTION



A. B. SCHIRMER



The Tee Shirt

The Tee Shirt

My first marathon was The Pittsburgh Marathon. Having trained devotedly for four months with only a few scattered days off I was physically more than ready to run those 26.2 miles. Bring on the aches, the pains, the cramps and the four hours it would take me, the experience would produce a sense of pride and accomplishment.

At the end, there would be a tee shirt. Not just any tee shirt, but a Pittsburgh Marathon tee shirt. Oh, there would be a medallion and a certificate, but what I truly desired was that trophy of cloth with emblazoned lettering: The Pittsburgh Marathon. This tee shirt would announce to everyone that I had run a marathon. I would be among the minority of the population who was able to run that distance at The Pittsburgh Marathon.

I went to the Convention Center in Pittsburgh to pick it up; a medium sized, long sleeved tee shirt would be mine. Finding the registration table I signed in and began looking for my size. The shirt was blue, my favorite color, but no mediums. I searched further. No large. No extra-large.

No 2X's either. "Are you kidding me?" I said out loud. Yet, there it was—a 3X long sleeved Pittsburgh Marathon tee shirt four times my size. The sleeves were three times my arm's length while the waist went past my knees. Even after washing it in hot water three times its quality construction fully ensured it would never shrink.

Where was I going to wear this thing? Nowhere. Who was going to see me wear it? No one. Who was going to ask astonishingly, "You ran a marathon?" No one. To whom would I respond, "Yes, The Pittsburgh Marathon!" No one.

My four hour time goal had been reached. The cramps came. The aches for two weeks reminded me of my accomplishment. But the prized tee shirt and its disappointment stayed hidden in the dresser, second drawer from the top, far left, never to be worn.

ANTOINE
“MR. INSPIREAO”
RIGGINS



How I Met My Love

How I Met My Love

"Don't choose the one who is beautiful in the world, choose the one who makes your world beautiful."

– Unknown

Growing up, I didn't always feel the love I would see on television or at family or friends' houses. I guess it could be attributed to being raised by a mother who possessed a robust drug addiction, and grandmother who was addicted to alcohol. Reflecting on my past today though, I realized, my mother and grandmother showered me with unconditional love, I just couldn't see it due to the television love I was chasing.

I've been imprisoned for the last 20 years, and been in two deeply committed relationships with women who also showered me with unconditional love, and prepared me to appreciate the current love of my life. It's said that, "experience is the best teacher," and the experience I had with my Ex's helped me and My Love's current relationship last the 8 years we've been together.

Me and My Love first met back in 2007, and both were in a tough place in our lives. I was in solitary confinement after being sentenced to life in prison without parole, and My Love had just begun a career in helping people like myself get through their time in prison after receiving a tough sentence. Though I believe My Love possessed feelings for me on a deeper level back then, I just wasn't there yet mentally for a committed relationship. That, and I didn't introduce my pen to the pad much in order to keep a consistent line of communication between us. However, in 2012, I had to do my own appeal on my case, and as always, My Love was there to aide me through it.

Fast forward. After ending my second relationship with my Ex, with whom I'm still friends with today, my elder and mentor encouraged me to pursue a committed relationship with that one who has never left my side the entire time I been imprisoned. He did so by stating the quote I begin this piece with, and at first I wasn't feeling it, especially with just coming out of a relationship. However, as the quote mentioned, "choose the one that makes your world beautiful," and My Love has surely been the most enlightening force during the darkest moments of my imprisonment. My Love has been my motivation, inspiration, mentor, hero, entertainment, driving force to pursue different areas of education I never thought of before we met. So, finally in 2017, after taking my elder's advice, I opened up and gave My Love (Writing) a piece of me, and I self-published my first book titled *Dear Imani (Letters To My Daughter)*.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION // Antoine "Mr. InspireAO" Riggins

Since me and Writing committed to being together for the long run, Writing has not only made me happy during times of despair and defeat, but has encouraged and introduced me to ways to evolve and prosper by using the creative mind in which I possess. Without Writing, I don't know where my life would be today. Writing has not only changed my life, but millions around the world, which is why I vowed to only use my creative skills and talents to impact others in a productive way. I want others to possess the same love me and Writing share, and always remember to follow your heart and gut when in doubt.

To end how I begin, remember, don't choose all the things that make this world beautiful, choose what makes the space around you and your life beautiful.

In Solidarity,

Antoine "Mr. InspireAO" Riggins

BYRON “BULLET”
HAMMOND



The Photograph

Content Warning: death, illness, & mentions of domestic violence

The Photograph

She sat poised, skin a mocha brown, smooth as brown silk on white satin. Her eyes were almond shaped, as black as the darkest night. There was a determination in those depths, fierce, proud, and regal. The easy smile from pouty lips that beckoned and turned away, sat under a pert nose that housed a small collection of freckles. Her hair was done up in a short afro, carefully prodded to form, lined around the ears that flowed into her neck and shoulders. She wore her Flintstone pearls, big, round, white as angel wings. Around her arms, a white fur stole, which her bare shoulders gave her the appearance of elegance and class. Even in black and white the picture had color. To say she was beautiful would be an understatement. Her features seemed to be put together by a master. The fact that she was pregnant at the time added to her glow. It was just a perfect time for the camera to catch it. She was resilient, brave, she was loving and courageous. She said, "family over everything."

The eighth of thirteen children, she was a fighter, you could see the determination in her features, the pride in her pose, the will to never say die. I can still hear her voice singing me lullabies, "HILLBILLY WHEELS" was her favorite. I remember how her and my Grandfather had the same eyes. I remember the night those same eyes showed fear as she huddled in my bed and held me as my stepfather tried to kick in my barricaded door. Someone asked her why she put up with it and she hugged me and said, "love gives you the strength to put up with almost anything." The night she shot my stepfather, he climbed into our bedroom window and tied me and my 6 year old sister up. He held us hostage until my mother came to him. My 7 year old self knew he intended to kill her, police found a bag with knives and rope. "Love will make you do anything," she said, "or sacrifice it all." She was in jail for 3 months. I remember substance abuse, the fails, the triumphs, the nights of trembling, crying, and sickness. I remember the laughter and happiness of another sober day. I remember the hysterectomy and the blood transfusion that gave her H.I.V., and how she cried on her then 12 year old son's shoulder as he held her hand. I remember colon cancer and the argument we had about keeping secrets. I screamed "you're my person, my best friend," she responded, "because you didn't deserve that burden." She hugged me and said she was sorry.

I remember at 27, waking up in a cold sweat, crying. I grabbed the phone and called my Aunt. Even at 4 in the morning I knew she was wide awake. She answered and I wasted no time, "What's wrong with my mom?" She hesitated, tried to lie until I told her I just woke up crying and my mom was the only person on my mind. She said she'd been in the hospital for a couple of weeks, in renal failure; "it don't look good," I remember hanging up and telling Tiffany, my lady at the time. I had to leave, my mom was sick, I had to go. 5 days later I

was at a hospital in Loma Linda California. When I got to the room the first person I saw was Tiff. She'd taken care of our affairs and got on a plane. She's as afraid of flying as I am but she said she couldn't let me do this alone. She quickly got to her feet to hug and kiss me, informing me of the situation; it was then that I saw those eyes, fierce, proud, regal and determined. "Bullet," she said in a faint whisper as I rushed to the hand it'd felt like I'd been holding all my life. "Hey beautiful," I responded as the pain meds took her back to sleep.

I argued with the doctor about the amount of drugs she was being given, and what exactly was going on. He told me her organs were failing and there was nothing more they could do but keep her comfortable. He told me about the D.N.R., which led to more screaming, "She wouldn't do that, she's not a quitter!" "It's not about quitting," he said, "The pain she's enduring is unimaginable and it's a wonder she's still with us!" The last time I saw my mother was March 21st, 2001. She asked the doctors to turn off her drip, the bag supplying her pain meds. By this time my Grandmother had arrived and I left so they could have their moment. When my turn came, I was nervous, sad, happy, to finally get to talk to her. Together we called my sister who promptly started crying. Mom apologized about how she raised us but we understood. When she hung up it was my turn. I held her hand and told her she was beautiful, explained how she didn't need my forgiveness. I told her I was a good man, a great father and I owed that all to her. She asked for a mirror and a brush squeezing my hand tightly. I squeezed back and kissed her forehead before turning to grab what she asked for when I heard her breathe, "I love you Bullet," as her grip loosened. I remember just falling into the chair, still holding her hand staring into those eyes, FIERCE, PROUD, REGAL. With her white hospital gown around her shoulders my QUEEN had risen to the angels...

CR AIG “CHAMP”
HAIRSTON
C 

Micro Chapters 1-3

Content Warning: violence & explicit language

Micro Chapters 1-3

Micro Ch. 1

From Heaven to Hell

Our ceiling, heaven's floor. My neck craned to the crystal blue sky. There were red ones, blue ones, yellow ones, pink ones. A panoply of hot air balloons hovered above, decorating the sky with puffy ornaments. My grandfather stood next to me, tall, erect, and focused, a product of his military service. My eyes were frightened to blink as the chased after the most awesome sight they'd seen in all their eight years of existence. Whoosh! The flames shot through the middle of the balloon.

"Granddad, did you see that inferno?"

"I sure did son," he chuckled, "inferno, that's quite a word."

"I learnt it in school. Mrs. Parker's taught me. Why is the balloon shooting fire?"

"Well, the fire heats the air and that's what makes the balloon float."

I leaned my head into my grandfather's waist; he hugged me against him with one arm. "I wish one of those balloons would come down here so I can see it." within a matter of seconds balloons started descending one by one, they were landing all around us. I couldn't believe it, this was the second miracle I'd performed in as many days. Just the day prior I'd asked my grandfather to let me pick the lottery numbers that he played. The numbers actually hit. So, there I was the most magical boy in the world; not sub-human but super human, living in my own heaven.

Micro Ch. 2

A Shark Out of Water

(9 years later)

"What the fuck...?" Those exact words came simultaneously from eight individual mouths. Nobody even reached for their pistol.

We just stood there perplexed, looking at one another. Not one jaw was remiss of its slight hang. As the initial shock subsided every squinted face turned toward... him. The burly white guy on the Harley Davidson

may as well have been a shark in the middle of the Sahara, in fact he would arguably be deemed even more out of place. Sandusky Court, our housing project; our miniature brick fortress surrounded by woods and tucked into a hillside away from the eyes of middle class whites. It was only us here, alone left to fend for ourselves. A miniature society of the less fortunate, creating our own rules, our own court system; there we were, unflinching and ignorant creatures thinking that our microcosm was indeed the universe. Our world, a place where experience became myth, myth morphed into fact, and those facts constructed the rules that we lived and all too often died by. One such rule being that if you were white, pulling up into these here projects and no one knows you, you either made an extremely wrong turn, or you are the police. It was unequivocal, a fact kneaded into our minds; to hell with science our rules had no exceptions. He cut the engine, removed his helmet, and tilted his massive head from one side to the other. His neck crack was impressive for some odd reason.

"What you doing here cuz?" Driz inhaled the smoke from the blunt then nonchalantly blew it in the biker's face.

Slick chimed in. "Yeah, Spring Garden down the road cuz. You in the wrong neighborhood."

The biker looked at us not phased one bit. "Who got crack?" the rasp in his voice was exceptionally heavy.

Everyone burst into laughter. There couldn't have been a dry eye in the crowd. In our world the only people that come to purchase crack and actually call it crack are cops. This is one of those neighborhood past experiences turned myth, turned fact, and was now a rule. That rule said this man is a cop. Hence, the hysterical laughter.

I directed my question to the group. "You got crack?" Everyone answered in the negative except for Driz who held up one finger in the midst of an inhalation. I now directed my question toward him.

"Driz you got crack for this man?"

"Never touched drugs a day in my life," Driz said, as he blew a stream of marijuana smoke in the biker's face.

I tilted my head to the side and shrugged. "Sorry, no crack here officer."

"That's too bad," he held up a huge roll of money "I got money to spend."

I laughed. "Take it back to the station with you."

Driz took a final pull of his blunt then flicked the remainder of it at the biker. The glowing cherry front flipped through the air before exploding in sparks as it bounced off the pristine bike. Out came the guns.

"You black piece of shit." he got off his bike simultaneously pulling a Desert Eagle from the small of his back. Apparently it was my face that looked like the one that needed a gun in it. He effortlessly pointed the gun at me as if there weren't five pointing at him. A voice screamed from the third floor window of the middle building.

"Stone wait!" A few seconds later Teena came running out of the building half dressed pulling on garments with each desperate stride. "Stone, Stone, Stone, put the gun down. Everybody just put the guns down." Teena put her body as a buffer between the biker's gun and myself. "Stone, this is the Governor. Governor, this is Stone."

"This is the Governor?" The look on the biker's face wasn't confusion, but one of shock and amusement as he stared into the face of a seventeen year old kid. I didn't speak, I just stared at the gigantic hole in the triangular shaped barrel.

With her arms spread, hands touching each of our chest, Teena turned to me. "He's here to see you."

"Sorry Governor." He lowered his gun "Your friends really need to learn some respect."

"Let's go upstairs." Teena waved us along. That was the day that I met Tombstone.

Micro Ch. 3

Whose Hell

It turns out the Tombstone wasn't a cop. He was a biker who happened to like crack, and I was a young misguided teen who happened to have the means to help him procure such an item. Tombstone became a frequent face in the neighborhood, hence not a cop. Perhaps there are exceptions to every rule. We had our own private import/export initiative. He would bring guns and money into the neighborhood, I would send drugs out of it. However, after every deal there was a strange exchange, a weird ritual of sorts. Before he would pull off on his bike he would reach into his saddlebag, fish out a bottle of ice water and throw it to me. I never drank it, I would sit it on the curb and walk away. Finally, after a year or so, when he threw me the bottle of water I stopped him.

"What's the deal with the ice water?" my face formed a perplexed look. "It's not even hot out here."

"Since we're asking questions, I got one. How many goddamn names you got?" his face was serious defying the humor in his tone. "I hear people call you Skinny Champ something."

"Skrilla, Skinny Champ Skrilla. That's my artist name. I'm a rapper."

"So, what's with the Governor shit?"

"That was thrown on me by the people. So, what's with the ice water?"

He looked around at the brick buildings that imprisoned us. He said, "Brother, you're living in hell."

Hepulled off laughing without looking back.

I stood there stunned as I looked around at the chaos that was my normality. A baby wandered through the middle court in a diaper, two females were fighting in a hallway over a guy who just pulled off with another female, shots echoed from the City Steps, and there were kids rifling through old man Leonard's clothes as he lay drunken and passed out on the bench.

"Shit." Tombstone was right. My hell was all around me. My hell was outside me. I only wonder if he knew that his was inside him.

DOMENIC COIA



A Note on Suicide

Content Warning: suicide & mentions of violence

A Note on Suicide

988 needs to call 911.

Last year I read U.S. suicides hit an all-time high in 2022. 49,500 Americans took their own lives. In their learn-ed opinion Experts suggest scapegoating gun control. Some surmise such readily available firearms in range of depressives with hare-trigger impulse control is the likeliest of culprits. Never mind every bridge, tall building and bubble bath which have always welcomed the opportunity to host suicides. Is it possible experts draw too broad a conclusion to a matter as complex as suicide on an individual level?

People who apparently have no survivors' guilt tend to shrug suicide prevention off assuming if someone is going to kill themselves, they are going to find a way. How can anyone intervene? Such Que Sera Sera summations seem to suggest Dr. Kevorkian was on to something. If assisted suicide would have gone on to become a time honored American institution perhaps compassionate mass shootings would not be far behind.

Just imagine with me if assisted suicide were to ever become a reality in American Society. In the name of bureaucracy and all the paper pushing it entails, think of all the new jobs this would create. If I could have known when I was growing up I could get a desk job in Dr. Kevorkian's office as a suicide note editor I would never have dropped out. Better yet, let's set up shop here and now. If anyone out there would submit their work to me and can score an A-plus, they can be dismissed early.

Now granted I am not a licensed practitioner in any field where the "P" is as silent as their partners, the pill popping pied pipers of big Pharma. That said, as someone who has been incarcerated decades since they were a teenager, not to mention a millennial who has not gotten laid since before Myspace, I think I have clocked more field time navigating a lonely, desperate hopeless situation than the pros passing out psychotropics to kids so they can taste the rainbow of side effects.

Be forewarned I am not going to be an easy "A". I am the product of a Law student and a Psych major both of whom dropped out to provide me a master's degree in resentment. After Mom left, Dad moved in a China woman who made our stern Italian household that much stricter. Catholic school offered little relief. Buttoned up uniforms, sitting up straight knowing there is hell to pay if you let the nuns down. That is where I first learned about suicide. As the clergy damned its victims to purgatory I marveled at the concept of a built-in ejector seat out of this material wilderness.

Any action takes thought. Plans pondered. Ideas idealized. Thoughts become things, shaped by perceptions and feelings. Here in Dr. Kevorkian's office I am the stop gap between you and euthanasia. The red

tape on your Red Cross plan. You will feel like we are trying to kill you with paperwork. Death by a thousand paper cuts. I could keep people alive grading their papers for eons. Adding commas, colons: semi-colons; Hyphenate a mad dash here- add an endless ellipse there... Talk about a dangling modifier.

For some people who commit seppuku, suicide is simply a Fuck You furlough. Much in the vein of the Japanese proverb warning us against drinking poison in the hope the object of our vengeance will die. A way to get back at everyone from beyond the veil for not caring enough about them, by not being around anymore to care about. Right... Could you imagine the person you aspired to guilt trip wearing your suicide as a badge of honor, marketing it into click bait, parading survivor's guilt for likes? I can just see the YouTube tutorials they'll make on how to properly mourn you now. What a legacy.

Somebody else's indifference does not make a difference to who you are. No one is worth you. Sadly some people cannot admit this to themselves. Ponder and it will soon become clear how self-evident this very fact is. Self-preservation is not selfish; it is a biological imperative. Being selfless is meaningless to someone who could not care less about you. Pause and ask yourself is anyone losing sleep putting their self-interest ahead of yours? Interesting how that works out isn't it?

Suicide is a communicable disease. There is a ripple effect for every life lost. How much more so when we lose a cherished celebrity. From Anthony Bourdain to Kurt Cobain and everyone else who does not fit in the rhyme scheme in between, they have inspired copycat suicides. While the world is emptier without them, feeling a strong enough connection to follow them into the dark is not intuition so much as infatuation. I get it. I am still not over Brittany Murphy, but I am not willing to bet she is waiting for me in the afterlife when I don't even have anyone waiting for me in the afternoon.

There is a meditation which prompts us to picture who would come to our funeral once we pass. Every day in prison is a dress rehearsal in my Sunday best state browns. If being alone this long has taught me anything it is this: If someone is not there for you, it is their loss. If your family is a nightmare, find a new one. There is community everywhere. There is a place for you in this world if you but look. Follow your bliss and do not settle for less. Among billions of people there are friends among them. Someone gets you. If you don't keep going they'll never get to. Remember the proverb: What you seek is seeking you.

Nobody really knows what they are doing in this world. We all harbor doubt. Unfortunately a lot of people do not take the time to help the rest of us figure things out. We clash into one another in brief exchanges and go our separate ways. People moving on leave behind the ones who cannot.

To quote Anne Frank: "Paper has more patience than people." Seek guidance in reading. Take what you read under advisory, not as gospel. Remember what works for you, forget what does not. Self-Help is not a one size fits all genre. There is no expert on life. As long as you are not taking away from someone else no one can tell you what to do. Language itself is a construct open to interpretation. Whatever is going wrong you can make right. It is your right. Your birthright. It was won when you outpaced millions of sperm cells to make your mother's acquaintance. You can still take on millions to claim what is yours.

My heart goes out to the young. The brightest generation, self-conscious in the shade of social media. How I wish I could be their lawyer against the voice in their heads trying to evict them. I have been in a cage match with my own for years winning the championship belt I wear around my waist instead of my throat. Forgive me if I am coming off sadder than thou. I mention my own situation in the assurance you can make it. Even though I do not know you, I know you can.

Anonymous attackers can only hit a target you decide to wear. Do they know you? Then how can they know what they are talking about? They do not know what they are doing let alone what you are doing. Why should you save face for someone talking behind your back? Can you respect such a person enough to actually feel insulted? In a strong arm robbery the risk runs in standing up for yourself. In a strong mouth robbery the risk runs reverse; the greater loss and injury is suffered if you stand down. You have nothing to prove; you are living proof.

Feeling isolated or depressed? Then go to a petting zoo. Get yourself some sweet baby yak action. Gaze into its silently thankful eyes as you bottle-feed it the good stuff. Or bake yourself something delicious and don't share it with anyone. But if you really want to make yourself feel good the best way is to make someone else feel better. How? Turn down the noise in your head and listen. Someone will gladly tell you. If you are looking for love, start with kindness. How will you know if it is working? A smile is the most informal of receipts.

I know some depression can be completely paralyzing. And the blues can make it impossible to even get out of bed. If that is the case I won't ask you to get out of bed. I'm going to ask you to lay on the floor. Somewhere you can completely relax. Let go and simply feel the sun. And just wait to die. *Memento Mori*. Here at Dr. Kevorkian's office we are here to ease the transition. Remember you have your whole life to kill yourself.

But we are getting way ahead of ourselves here. Take a number and have a seat in the waiting room please. For over a decade now there is an average of one suicide every 13 minutes so it may take a little while to get to you. So make yourself cozy. We have refreshments, magazines, sci-fi, Wi-Fi for all your what have yous. Don't go anywhere, I will be right with you.

JOHN PIERCE
LANKFORD
C 

*The Birds and the Bees and Me;
Not Necessarily in That Order*

Content Warning: death of an animal

The Birds and the Bees and Me; Not Necessarily in That Order

As my memory serves me well, it was a warm day in the month of June, 2021 that while out on parole, I and two companions took a leisurely stroll at Centennial Park located in Nashville, Tennessee.

The sun was shining bright, making for a rather hot afternoon. Yet, no less majestic was the blue sky and with an occasional westerly breeze blowing, it made this particular day quite fitting for the activity of walking.

During this delightful stroll, my companions, Jimmy and Hillary, engaged in spirited conversation while I lagged several steps behind. Hillary inquired as to the purpose for numerous wooden structures erected on the island of the park's man-made pond.

Without delay, Jimmy explained that the structures were for sheltering a colony of honey bees. The conversation soon shifted to the business end of honey production.

Still walking, I noticed five honey bees cluttered together upon a large elephant leaf floating atop the water. Centering my attention on these congenial little creatures, I found that they were engaged in heated debate.

You may have known that I've been schooled in the art of deciphering their insect language. However, due to my under-application of this specialty field of study is the only excuse I can muster as to the minimal progress I have made in the interpretation of their beautiful language.

Be that as it may, I listened curiously to the discourse of these paltry creatures as they, in their vivacity, spoke one to another. I could make out very little of their conversation. However, by way of a few broken expressions I picked up on, they appeared to be debating over the suitability of their housing, in that it was in close proximity to the water.

Still lagging slightly behind, I followed my companions as we rounded the water's edge.

When the walkway began to straighten, there revealed quite an oddity unfolding within the marshy water. A fallen tree in the advanced stages of decomposition gave rise out of the murky water. Perched atop the trunk of the fallen tree was a large crane. The waterfowl had clutched in its strong bill a struggling song bird. A wretched demise indeed for the captured bird.

My companions reasoned that nature in its true form is, at times, cruel. Of course, this did little to comfort all those who saw the songbird's flailing wings in its desperate attempt to free itself from the fate of being the crane's present meal.

Once the event reached its unsavory conclusion, I gave thought to the passing of all my eager pursuits.
No solid pleasures remain but that of a life spent in meaningless well-wishing.

But considering, in contrast, there appears yet, an ever so confident, optimistic smile from the amiable.

KWELI KAMBON



*Words of No-Condition
(A Letter to Nysha)*

Words of No-Condition (A Letter to Nysha)

Dear One,

When we first locked eyes, you taught me what unconditional Love is. You looked to me with no fault. You never asked much from me, yet I failed to protect you. I thought it would be easy because you were so innocent, so I took advantage of a gift that is undoubtedly heaven-sent.

I thought I could be what you needed from a distance, being a fool in my own mind. Resistant. To the Most High's plan for you to be what you willed. Still not seeing reality, my consequence was tenfold. I had to watch you grow through the lens of a camera, never to hold you again.

Missing all your firsts, I just hope for a glimpse of what it would be to know you.

Even if it's too far gone, I'll always wonder, very close by. I just hope I'm right, in pursuing the fight. To reveal the Truth to you: that I never left.

There's no requirement of you, just showing you what you've always deserved. Unconditionally.

Forever Love,

By Dad

LOREE



Disengendered

Content Warning: racial slur, politics, & gender-related trauma

Disengendered

According to the dictionary Dis as a prefix denotes: to do the opposite; opposite; or absence of, Engendered is a transitive verb meaning: to cause to exist; to bring into being; or to develop. Gendered is an adjective denoting: reflection of, or involving gender differences. En is a prefix meaning: to put into or onto.

My usage of Disengendered was meant to be facetious, but it seems applicable in all its forms in context of the subject matter.

In his first week in office the President signed an executive order declaring that ONLY two (2) genders exist, male and female. Just because he proclaimed it so doesn't make it so. NAI (Native American Indians) throughout this hemisphere have believed otherwise for a dozen millennia or more. Both my maternal and paternal grandmothers were "full-blooded" NAI. By mathematical and genetical reckoning I AM 50% NAI by volume. But according to the same government that now claims there are only two (2) genders, I am only 25% NAI. Currently, according to that same said government, its evangelical and right wing political conservative supporters, as well as the Joe Rogan "Bro-cul-turites," I should not exist.

That is because THEY say that the ONLY reason anyone identifies as Transgender is that they were "indoctrinated" by Liberals and Progressives to be so. I'm here to tell you that is a Damned LIE.

I was born in the late fifties in San Antonio, Texas, a predominantly Hispanic/Latino conservative catholic city. My mother was born in Northern Alabama, and my father in Seguin, TX. Neither could be considered "Liberal" by any stretch of the imagination. It was in this environment, raised in the catholic church, that I first felt and exhibited my Transgenderal nature.

In first and second grades all my friends were girls. My best friend was a girl named Joyce. We were as thick as thieves. During school hours where you'd find one the other would be, if not then real close by. I once told her of a dream I had. I dreamt I was a girl. Joyce was very accepting and nonchalant about that revelation. No judgment. From third grade until junior high I was in parochial school. In fourth and fifth grades my two best friends were Richard and Tareasa. It was a tricky relationship since they didn't like each other.

I was nine when I first tried on my mother's clothes. I was nearly as tall as her at that time. The antecedent to this came at Christmas, when my sister got a Barbie doll. She had other dolls, but none so enamored my brothers and I like Barbie did. We would compete with each other to see who could sew the best outfit trying to impress

Barbie, Yeah we were just dumb kids. I tried to "cheat" by using the sewing machine. Mother tried unsuccessfully to discourage me from "playing with the sewing machine. But she noticed I demonstrated a real aptitude for working it. So she made me the family's seamstress. It was kinda funny because the lady at the sewing shop thought me and my three brothers must really adore our little sister to be devoting so much time, effort, and our allowance to the crafting of the Barbie outfits.

Fact of the matter was we were usually assholes to her. It was Barbie we were trying to impress. While like my brothers, there was some prepubescent lust involved in my motivation. But unlike them, I felt more like the protagonist in "The Danish Girl. I wanted to be Barbie. I wanted to dress like her. But since making my own female clothes was NOT an option, I did the next best thing.

My mother was the neighborhood "Hottie." She not only had a lot of really nice clothes, but some really sexy lingerie as well. By this time she'd divorced my father and was catting about the numerous military bases. Consciously I knew it was wrong according to my conservative Catholic indoctrination. But my anima said it was oh so right.

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung expanded upon Sigmund Freud's interpretation of the unconscious and subconscious self. He introduced the concepts of introverted and extroverted personalities. Clearly I'm an extrovert. More importantly he discovered the ANIMA, which is Jung's explanation of one's "True" inner self, as opposed to the outer self or persona that we show the world around us. In another context, and one more relevant to me, anima refers to the feminine aspect of the male psyche. Like it or not, we all have one. Machismo/Bro culture tries to induce us into believing this FACT ain't so.

So I dressed in my mother's clothes as often as I could. It always felt good, felt right. Sometimes I'd prance around out back on the patio. I loved the click clack sound made by the high heels. I'd luxuriate in how they felt on my feet. But because of the conservative Catholic indoctrination I endured for years, I'd always feel wracked with guilt afterwards. It was as if I'd committed some heinous crime and was in fear of being caught. This feeling of euphoria and dread only intensified with the onset of puberty. More so with the added dimension of bondage to my dress up play.

Everything changed when we moved to Southern California. I was thirteen at the time. The sixty eight months I lived, and came of age in the LA basin, felt like an entire lifetime. I learned a lot about myself, about life, and

about how ALL the conservative religious pabulum that was force fed to me my entire life, wasn't the ONLY way to go.

Most importantly I got more in touch with my NAI roots. I discovered I was "Two Spirited," which transcends mere gender binarism. Most NAI, in this hemisphere from the arctic circle to the antarctic circle, believe similarly in more than two genders. Depending on the nation /tribe, they believe in between three to five. All of them recognize "Two Spirited" as a gender type.

I use to think that Transgender meant I could alternate between my male persona, Trapper, and my female persona, LoRee, as the mood struck me. I came to discover I am Genderfluid, which more accurately translates to the term Two Spirited. Unlike dissociative identity disorder, my trans personas are completely cognitive. However, there is a distinct difference between Gender Identity and sexual preference.

Before the contamination of Indo-European Christian culture ALL NAI in this hemisphere were completely indifferent to overt LGBTQ activity. Unlike all the Abrahamic Faiths, we NAI in this hemisphere believed that God's greatest gift to man was SEX. We believe it was meant to be enjoyed by us however, and with whomever we wished. This attitude was a major inspiration/excuse for the Indo-European Christian conquerors to justify their attempted genocide of NAI population. Thankfully they were unsuccessful in that endeavor.

I've largely enjoyed my Transgenderfluidity. When I've gone out as LoRee I'm always "passable." That means so much more than look the part. One must act and sound feminine as well. Example: once a group of us T-Girls went to a Lesbian bar to support a mutual friend who was DJing there. I was passable enough that a pair of gorgeous blonds hit on me, and feminine enough for one to persist after they discovered their faux pas.

Once at a kinky fetish party I met a woman who was amazed that I looked better than most of the real women there. I believe she had latent lesbian tendencies cause she had me shack up with her in the summer of 05. She was a bit forlorn when she saw my wardrobe broke down like this: 70% LoRee clothes; 20% Trapper clothes; and 10% Unisexual clothing, coats, jackets, boots, etc. So much so she felt compelled to go out and buy me a few sets of Trapper outfits. LOL!

I really love it when I go out for a walk at night and some jealous bitch will hollar "skank!" as she drives by. Like Tay Tay say, haters gotta hate.

Unfortunately our new President IS a hater. And Me and my Transgendered brothers and sisters appear to be in the top ten of his "things that need to be exterminated" list. It's definitely on the "To do list" of Project

2025. Worst still is I am incarcerated in the state which has passed the most anti-transgender laws of any in the USA.

Like pre-N*zi Germany, the golden age of sexual and gender freedom in the USA is over. The Oppressive shadow of hate, misogyny, racism, and bigotry ushered in by white christian nationalism will soon blot out the warm sun of love and acceptance. Culture wars shall rage on. It seems Transgenders are the new N***ers or Jews, we are the cause of all our nation's ills. Wildfires, hurricanes, inflation, homelessness, etc. exist because Transgenders exist, amongst other things.

But will someone please explain to me just what in the hell does my Gender fluidity have to do with the price of gas or eggs?

MELVIN SPEIGHT



The Royal Blue Submarine

The Royal Blue Submarine

For a time in the mid '70s, I lived with my mother's parents in North Philadelphia. I look back on those fragmented memories with the glee and understanding of an adolescent. For me, it was a time before trouble. A period of play, eat, sleep and repeat with no concept of time. It was only after scouring my memory that I noticed the youth of my family. My grandparents without the wisdom of experience. My aunt and uncles mere juveniles, barely out of grade school. But the memory that transports me back into my childhood, allowing me to once again walk in the footsteps of little Melvin started with the chirping of the birds.

It was always the chirping that woke me. The birds nestled and chirped in the saplings by the curb, but they seemed like they sat right outside my window and serenaded me.

Once the grogginess of sleep faded, the scent of Bob Evans sausages, the ones in the yellow box, walked the stairs permeating everything but the bathroom. The bathroom, with its bowl full of lavender soaps, sat atop the mirrored medicine cabinet just in front of the baby blue tiled shower. Having washed, I slid superman style down the steps. There was a strip of plastic that ran down the middle of the stairs. I guess to protect the carpet, but for me, it's what made the slide fun. Reaching the bottom successfully, I stood in the living room. I paused, staring at the big 19 inch floor model TV with Scooby Doo on the screen. That meant my Uncle Marky had probably beaten me to the royal blue submarine that was the prize in the cereal box, yet again. Had it been either of my grandparents who had turned on the IV, it would have been tuned to the morning news.

Disappointed, I walked past the plastic covered sofa and loveseat into the dining room. The dining room was dominated by a very large wooden table with matching chairs, a giant china cabinet with dishes I've never seen used, and an old school sewing machine that somehow flips under its own table.

Walking into the kitchen, I speak to my Grandfather seated at the table. "Good morning Granddaddy," I announce, probably a little too loud. He responds in his distinct southern twang accent: "Good morning, Melvin." My uncle is nowhere in sight, I guess he left for school. I hear my Grandmother banging around in the shed kitchen where the stove, sink and cabinets are. She yells out: "Clee," which is short for Cleophis, "your waters done." My grandfather rises, cup in hand and disappears into the shed kitchen. Within seconds he's back at the table not only with his coffee but with a plate full of food. Two sunny side up eggs; two Bob Evans sausages and a big ol' heaping of home fries with onions and red peppers. To say it smelled delicious was an understatement, but being a 4 or 5 year old, all I wanted was some cereal.

Just as I was about to ask, my Grandmother brings me an olive green translucent bowl, and the box of cereal. I can pour my own bowl of cereal, but somebody has to pour my milk, because a gallon of Milk is too heavy. As I pick up the box I can feel it's not full, so I pour the cereal in my bowl. I'm about to ask my grandfather to pour my milk when I see it.

The Royal Blue Submarine!

STEPHEN BENFORD



I'll Run No More

Content Warning: homophobic slur & violence

I'll Run No More

Freak! Faggot! Weirdo!

"Hey asshole, it's not 1977 anymore!" Maybe my favorite insult ever hurled my way.

Assumptions have been made about me throughout my life, some of them unwarranted and some of them brought on by situations of my own making. Covered in tattoos: hands, arms, face, professional and stick and pokes done in india ink with string wrapped around the end of a safety pin. Metal rings and barbells embedded in flesh, using pain to hide pain, pain I've learned to embrace. As I've learned to embrace the insults thrown my way by those who have made their assumptions based on how I look. Black band t-shirts printed with white logos, many worn out from the occasional washing and overwear, cigarette burns and torn off sleeves. Clothes may not make the man but clothes damn sure make for some creative insults.

One memorable moment took place when I was in the ninth grade. It was at a fall carnival in my small New Jersey town. The air was rich with the odors of fried foods and sweets. M&M Mars makes their chocolates right down the road so everywhere you look there are the familiar sights of people in M&M costumes and Snickers banners. The taste of free candy is on my tongue as I'm making my way through the pocketful of chocolate Mars products, Snickers being my absolute favorite. Excitement is in the air. Children scream and shout on carnival rides and yell when they win a prize in one of the games or otherwise let out groans of disappointment.

I'm supposed to meet some friends later on but right now I'm alone. It's that time when night is just beginning to descend in truth, the sky dark purple, almost black. Out of the nearly complete darkness they emerge, walking toward me at a fast pace like predators with their prey almost within their grasp.

Immediately some deep down part of my animal being begins to scream for me to run, run before the pack of angry looking football players can get their hands on me, the freak, the weirdo. What have I done to anger them so? It could be nothing, just the mere presence of my weirdness intruding on the normality of their Friday night.

I'm usually not alone but unfortunately that's how I find myself now and a small glimmer of fear shoots through me as I hear them shout, "You want to disrespect America with your filthy ass faggot?!" As they begin to run I take off a mere fifty feet ahead of them. My black leather steel toed combat boots make slap, slap noises as I run as fast as I can.

The upside down American flag with an anarchy sign painted over it that I have safety pinned to the back of my red plaid pants so that it hangs behind me and gets sat on flaps behind me in the wind. It looks like some kind of cowardly cape as I run faster trying to keep ahead of these angry jock, muscleheads in their football jerseys. They're all jacked up on fried foods and a false sense of angry patriotism brought on by the memories of the events of 9-11, only one year past.

The studs and chains on my leather jacket along with the metal rings on my bondage belt jingle and jangle, making me sound like Santa's reindeer covered in bells. My breathing comes hard and heavy as all of the cigarette smoke inhaled into my young lungs begins to take its toll. My speed begins to falter and I can hear the laughter and threats of my pursuers as they gain on me.

Someone steps out in front of me and I skid to a sudden stop. I fear the worst and try to cut the right around them when an arm reaches out and pushes me behind him. I look up, still gasping for air, and notice the arm belongs to my older friend Jeff. He's wearing his signature black trench coat and a Misfits shirt, his long dreads hanging down his back.

The gang of football players smiles, obviously thinking that they've got another freak to bash — that is until Jeff pulls out a small baseball bat and smirks with a look of violence in his eyes. Emboldened by this I pull off my belt, which must weigh a few pounds with all of its heavy steel rings, and double it up in my fist.

They don't look so much like predators now as they put their hands up and back slowly away. I can see anger momentarily flare back onto their faces as I smirk at them and jingle the belt and flip them off with my free hand. But they know that they won't have my blood this night. This night the freaks stood tall. Two against six, we stood our ground.

After that I decided that I'd run no more. I carried knives, belts, chains, clubs and I've had to use them more than once. I've taken some punches and kicks. I've woken up sore the next day with new bruises. I've swung my skateboard like a medieval weapon of old. But I've never run again.

FICTION



BYRON “BULLET”
HAMMOND



The Pick-Up Game

Content Warning: death & violence

The Pick-Up Game

We met at the rec center in Wilmington, Delaware on 5th street. On a rainy summer afternoon. I was looking to burn off my frustrations of a weeks' worth of ups and downs. Upon entering the gym the first thing I noticed was that the place was packed. The bleachers were filled to capacity.

Feeling let down because I was denied my chance to release my obvious frustrations, I started to head back out the door until I heard her say, "You might as well come sit down because none of us are playing right now." Turning toward the voice, the first thing I noticed were the Jordan 11's on a pair of feet that had to be at the least a size 6, blue basketball shorts, and a long sleeved yellow t-shirt. Sitting down, she looked to be about 5' 6" caramel brown complexion with a pixie cut, like Charlize Theron in *Fast 8*, high cheekbones, and chinky hazel eyes. Momentarily stunned by her beauty I just stared, until I heard this tiny little tinkle, like wind chimes in a light breeze, then she motioned for me to take up the empty space next to her and sit down.

The games lasted all afternoon and before I knew it, 7:00 p.m. arrived. I sat and talked to this GODDESS for 5 hours. I learned her name was Zinnovia but everyone called her Fatts, she was 26 and an avid basketball fan, she said she'd just moved down the street but was a lifelong resident. I replied that I'd just moved to the city also and being new to the area was just trying to work off some tension at which point she asked if I smoked, grabbed her backpack and motioned for me to follow her.

We proceeded to my car where the conversation continued, again her taking the lead. She told me she was a tomboy, growing up with 3 older brothers and a sister to whom she was very close. I told her of my siblings. She asked if I had children, at which point I felt our day would be over once I said yes but surprisingly she was accepting, asking their names, their likes and dislikes, who was more like me and who weren't. We agreed to go to a diner on 4th street for sandwiches after we smoked and continued well into the next 2 hours.

I could not believe how comfortable I was with this young woman. Suffice to say, we continued to see each other but she refused to call it a relationship. Whenever I'd bring it up, she would tell me she had too much going on with school, me with work, and that a relationship was the last thing she wanted and she was content to leave things as they were. I wasn't complaining, was I? For some reason I felt like I wanted more, but I figured in time we'd make changes.

As days turned to weeks, weeks turned to months, demands in both our professional lives began to take its toll, we'd argue over trivial stuff but nothing heavy until one day. I could not get in touch with her, I called, texted, but I received no answers. Feeling antsy, I decided to drive to her house and see what was going on. Knocking on her door provided no results, but her car was in its place so I tried a longshot and called her sister Fatima who answered at once. She screamed at me asking where I was, I told her I was at her sister's and asked her what was wrong. She said, "Come to my house now," yelling the directions before hanging up. As I approached, I'm at once filled with a sense of dread, God forbid she doesn't want to see me again. I can honestly say I love her, more than that, I'm in love with her.

Parking my car I head towards Tima's apartment when the Weekend's song 'Call Out My Name' tells me Fatts is calling my phone. Answering immediately, I blurt out "BABY" and then all I hear are sobs, painful, soul rending.

"What can I do? Please tell me," I plead, feeling as if my own heart is about to stop. All at once she stops crying.

She says softly, "God blessed me the day you came into the gym, I never thought I would find my person but you've made my everyday come true." She said her mother used to tell her fairytales of Prince charming. She said he'd slay all dragons, defeat the evil Prince, he'd ride up on his horse and take her away one night, then she says, "It was all lies!"

She tells me she has stage 4 ovarian cancer, when we met she was in remission, she said she was happy I already had children because she knew she couldn't and our situation could be 'no strings' and we could just enjoy the "freedom of being," she said, sobbing harder.

I cut her off yelling, "Baby I'm here!" feeling the tears slide down my face, as the worst feeling of despair tore at my already struggling heart to keep beating for us!

"I have months left," she cries, "I loved you, I think, from that first day." She told me that this wasn't my fault but she couldn't go through this pain again and with that, I hear the worst sound of my life.

The boom was so loud that not only did I drop my phone but I stumble to my knees, realizing that I heard the sound before it even registered over the phone. Back on my feet, I rush to Timas' apartment where I hear screams coming through the open door. Fatts lay sprawled on the hardwood floor of her sisters' living room, her face so serious and quirky had taken on a peaceful relaxed look. She lay in her sisters' lap as if she'd just closed her eyes for a second, as if at any moment she would open her eyes and smile like it was some bad joke. The gun looking evil and menacing lay to the side. I dropped to my knees grabbing her still warm hand and beg

her not to leave me, praying to a God that at that point I was having a hard time believing in, for him not to take her from me.

I don't know how much time passed before I felt someone else. I can remember being lifted to my feet and being pulled away. I remember lights flashing, people rushing around as I sat at the curb, head in hands, weeping for the loss of the most perfect person I'd ever met.

The funeral was somber, the repast was worse. All three of her brothers approached and offered words of comfort, which I thought I should be offering them. Her oldest brother, Amir pulled me to the side and told me how thankful they were for me loving their little sister. He told me how happy I made her, but all I could think was how happy she made me.

He said they'd all received letters and each one expressed the love we shared and how she wished she could've had my son or daughter. Too overwhelmed, I excused myself and let the tears slide down my face as I drove home.

It's been 8 months since I lost my heart, I'm back at the gym and as usual it's packed. Making my way to the top bleachers, I recall her words in my letter telling me to keep playing ball, since she knew how much I needed the practice and that if ALLAH wills we will meet again in paradise. Smile, she said, it's enough angry faces in the world without me adding to them, go to a few pick-up games, you'll never know who you'll meet.

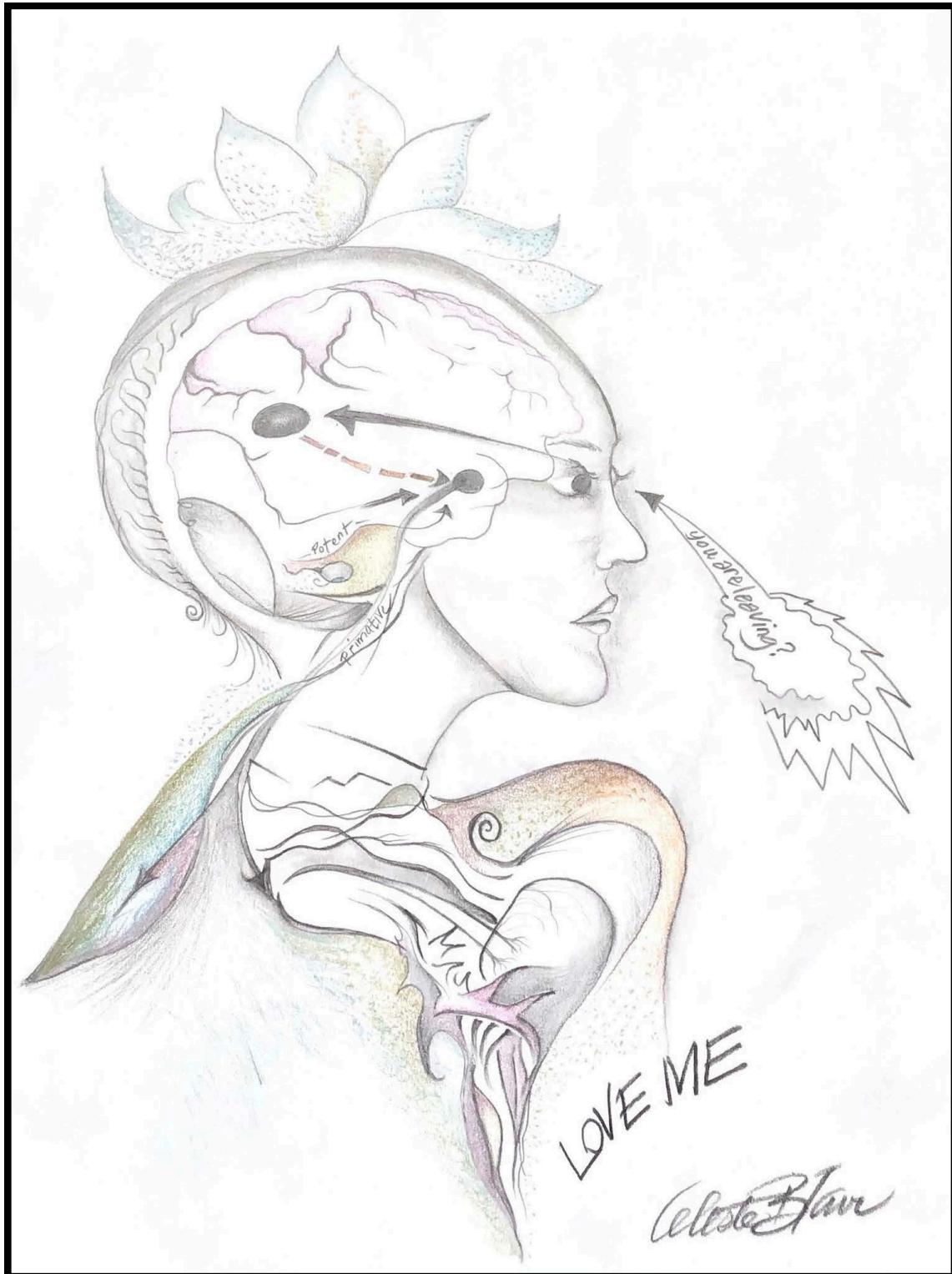
Watching the action on the court I hear, "Is this seat taken?" I see a mass of red hair hiding a set of emerald green eyes and freckles. Looking up from my seat I smile at the young woman, "Nope, it's all yours."

CELESTE BLAIR



Love Me

Content Warning: addiction & mental illness



Love Me

Acici is a woman slipping into the throes of addiction.

What you must know is that when people say that, like they are addicts, we must remember this is not just the simple act of using a drug, it is a culture, a space that lacks proper flow. A lifestyle where what matters most is not what is best for you.

It's shallow and fruitless.

For me it was like a spiral, where with each turn and toss, my focus was altered in such a subtle way that it seemed that one day, my priorities were just simply all off wack. My job, my family, my health, my intellect, my spirit, **MY COMMUNITY**, began to take the back seat.

In your darkest days of addiction, you begin to bring harm to those spaces, those relationships.

Slowly, your rickety wheel leaves you stranded, at best. We are capable of regeneration but often we need a little guidance.

Our best bet is to go, spoke by spoke of the wellness wheel and solidify each portion of our life—I understand Acici all too well.

In the aftermath of a divorce, she begins to feel the effects of an emotional hijack. Can it be, after all this time, layered under years of sediment and soil, her fear of abandonment can still rock her world?

Acici became a writer by way of survival. As a young girl, much like me, she learned to tweak the story of her own little life, in an attempt to create a reality where she was safe and in control; a world so fantastical, hers would seem normal.

She mimics the amygdala, an emotional sentinel—stamping on the brains of her never-ending line of lovers; their gifts, their bones, their endings, all mapped out on the road towards her next big dig.

In Poirot's voice she hears, "It's sedimentary my dear." To her it made perfect sense, the little story she created, this illusion of safe and a forever mate, when it ended the formula, you know, the balance of her life was not solid, things got so twisted. It's as if the series of fractures threw her off.

Threatened to bury her.

Fortunately, some girls can't stay buried.

The beginning of our stories are so similar, episodes of uneasy goodbyes—like tripwire along the road of any attempt at true love.

The difference between us is how we were able to react to the cataclysmic events surrounding a divorce. Mine led to incarceration, hers landed her on her therapist's couch.

That's how it is, she can think of a million times when two people are charged with similar things, or are struggling with addiction or mental illness and they have been held much more culpable and dealt with much more severely.

Acici sat on the plush suede chaise, her face turned slightly to the side, just enough to peer out over the bay.

Her focus was on a scene from the distant past and it wasn't visual. No, it was the memory of a smell, the pungent mildew.

She panned right and noticed her therapist, Ms. Sorter, was explaining how common it is for persons who experienced trauma at a young age and their inability to recall the details of their childhood homes or the rooms in which the trauma occurred.

Acici smiled as she found gratitude in her alätg to recall the details of her childhood bedroom, the smell of salt and sand. She could still see the giant blow-up plastic Bozo the clown, the red apple hook rug that she and mommy made, one little strand of yard at a time. She could see the chartreuse, chiffon curtains shimmering and swaying in the Florida breeze. The way it always seemed like summer.

Ms. Sorter provided safe space with a long pause, like the tone of a temple bell from her favorite meditation; the thought reminded her to breathe. Acici mustered up the strength to explain the significance of the smell of mildew- how it served as one of her greatest triggers.

Acici began to recount the details of her youngest memories, it amazed her that she had mostly beautiful images stamped on her heart.

She reveled in this strange truth, the amygdala hijack- when the feelings buried alive inside our hearts, even when they are the smaller part of our recall, still have the power to rise to the surface and send us into fight or flight. It's as if we weren't meant for this concrete, polite, urban space. We are physiologically wired to face down lions, jump from waterfalls, when needed. The same neural pathways that keep us on a tightrope here, would serve us better in our private lives. She pondered all of these thoughts, perhaps life was meant to be deeper, more adventurous. We certainly weren't meant to be caged.

Perhaps it's the contrast of smell that helps her revisit her childhood home with mum in the house. Mum is a quiet person and this may explain why I have always associated scent with the memories attached to her. Mother was always shaping pottery, drying herbs, weaving hemp and nylon rope into macrame- the smells of earth, clay, hemp and flora-dominated the house when she was there.

After the day she said she was going shopping and never returned, wet clothes and towels began to pile up. I was only 5, I didn't understand that our beach stuff would spoil and mildew.

When Sam served me with divorce papers, it's as if they were made of mold.

I saw myself falling into a rabbit's hole, and I know how deep that hole can go.

A chill ran down Acici's spine, as she peered down at her hands, her mother's hands now that she is older, she searched for one more revival of breath.

It was only in knowing the depth of the hole which once consumed her that she sought help from Dr. Sorter. She found a note in her diary one day:

"Sometimes the hole inside you is so large, it threatens to consume you....Claim the events of your life to make yourself yours."

She decided to take her brother's advice, the advice in her diary, and seek the help of a therapist.

The trickiest thing about sobriety is that when so many years have passed, it is easy to forget how the floor of the hole felt on bare feet. How it felt not to feel at all, not to trust anyone, not even yourself. Acici turned her gaze back to the bay and noticed a new boat coming into the marina.

Suddenly, she sees herself, driving her car, fixated on the rear view mirror. She promised herself she would never forget how it felt to drive like that again, never forget how it felt to sleep on a cold steel slab with an itchy-scratchy, used-by-a-bum-blanket.

No man is worth falling that far.

Emotions are fleeting.

She can work this out.

So here she is, like an archeologist on a dig, attempting to dust off the emotions buried deep in her heart and sort it all out one more time; wrestling amygdala as she rears her wild head.

With her, amygdala, it doesn't matter if things appear to have been reconciled. NO matter how many years you've sifted through the soil; shook the contents of the pan, she still shows up unexpectedly.

One of the things she saw in the pan was an amazing drive for life and the pursuit of living that life with absolute love and vigor.

Just as the smell of mildew there are so many other scents that propel me, nourish me: THE SMELL OF PAINT.

If I were to use paint to demonstrate the motion how would it be?

Acici sat back, closed her eyes and pictured herself in the rocky mountains. She's dressed like a gold miner, wearing a worn leather hat, stooped down over a creek with her pan in hand. Her heart thaws and her nerves seem to reconnect as she begins to see little sparkles of gold, rationality, security, hope, all gleaming and reflecting sunlight.

She looked more closely at her painting and she noticed the trigger of abandonment as a cobra, rising out of the pan, blocking out her view of the gold. She forced herself to say out loud, "Viva la Vida."

Once again, her attention shifted back to Ms. Sorter. She laughed as she heard her sounding like Charlie Brown's teacher, but what Ms. Sorter was saying was so powerful.

"Love is the cure. Real love comes from loving yourself; loving yourself enough to find your balance, never let your fight or flight situations be the fool's gold that casts a glare in your eyes.

Back in the car, she calls her mum to tell her how much she loves her.

KEITH “BONES” HICKS



The Split

The Split

The observatory is pristine, everything is carved out of white, deep blue, and green crystal. Huge columns erected around a table and two seats made of equal parts, jade, sapphire and diamond. The light did not just come from above, but almost everywhere at the same time. It was blinding. In the middle of the table sat a deep black spherical done with an unusual magnifying device that the blackness sat inside.

Standing over it is a female whose skin is deep deep black, with beautiful shades of purple and blue underneath, her cheek bones were like mountains, and her eyes the rising sun. In fact where the whites of her eyes would have been was a living flame, as she held back; tears. They are filled with regret, hope lost, sorrow, anger, and yes even spite. Her long sleek body is adorned with pure gold from head to foot. Her love locks hang down to the floor with gold leaf sprinkled throughout. Her countenance is that of the sculpture of Nefertiti. She is royalty personified. Her name is who she is, and in fact what she is, and what she is called is NETER. (Lightning strikes inside the observatory and thunder vibrates everything.)

There is another being, equal and yet opposite. His physique is statuesque, broad shoulders. thick round chest, muscular arms, frozen air rose from his wide nostrils. He is more blue than he is purple and black, his eyes are like emeralds, and he is what he is called, and what he is called is MEIU! (Thunder roars through the observatory.) His hair is that of an afro full of stars. They went to the table together and then stood across from each other; as they peered into the magnifying device.

Metu broke the silence unceremoniously while intentionally looking away from Neter. He spoke in a very measured tone through tightly clenched teeth, "You have already agreed."

Neter then spoke in crisp, sharp enunciation with an unblinking gaze to match. "Agreed to a discussion, not action!" her frozen breath went forth from her mouth.

Metu now facing Neter with his right eyebrow raised high slowly said, "Where you and I stand at this vantage, there is no discernible difference between words and action."

His emerald colored eyes began to slowly hypnotically swirl. Neter once again peered into the darkness of the sphere and flame rose over her pupils like a fireplace.

Metu relaxed his body, let out a sigh, and placed his enormous hand over top of hers. Neter's fire met Metu's soothing mesmerizing, slow and steady swirl. He spoke in his charming baritone. "Then discuss we shall."

Neter studied him skeptically then spoke.

"The most logical way to go about this endeavor...if we decide to action." Metu smirked and leaned in. Neter took notice, paused then continued. "We must use the four forces of nature as a guide of sorts, yes a beacon, a compass of discovery."

Metu tilted his head and nodded in logical agreement. Neter's fiery eyes still un-blinking, she began. "I propose the first law and no further than that."

Metu then said in a thunderous voice, 'What you take a being such as myself to be naive? The first law of nature is by far the weakest of them all."

Neter responded right away. "Does not every particle feel it according to its own mass?" Her flame rose slightly. "Besides, it can be easily understood."

Metu rubbed his chin then began, "The electromagnetic force need not be understood, at least not right away."

"Ha!" Neter scoffed. "So now you ask for light?"

"Not just light," Metu cut in. "You well know, when the electron goes from one orbit to another close to the nucleus, yes a photon is emitted and with that my dear Neter is not just light but... ENLIGHTENMENT!" Lightning flashed and thunder shook the crystal palace.

Neter looked up tensely and iterated at the show, and then at Metu before she spoke. "It is not our place, we are to watch!"

Metu pleaded, "Yes, with discretion! Does not the smallest things bind the biggest?" Metu stood up from the table to his fully ten foot stature. Netar's flesh quickly grew harder than a column of marble.

Through squinting skeptical eyes she then spoke. "I'm only going along to preserve order."

Metu touched her cheeks softly and her stone went to flesh. "You speak of order my dear Neter? then order we shall, with third force." Neter's voice became a roaring of raging rapids. "Ha!" yet another scoff. "Radioactivity! I see....so you and I will go our separate ways."

Metu nodded. "Separate yes...but not before the fourth force."

Neter knew what she must do. "Metu this force holds the quarks to the protons. You wanted to SPLIT with me this whole time!"

Meter sat down and said. "It has been spun into motion."

Neter dropped a single tear into the sphere. Metu reached out and tried to catch it but failed.

Neter whispered, "Until we meet again my love."

And with that the fourth blue planet from the sun full of earthly beings a flame. And with the space time bounce Metu and Neter got from being imar trans-dimensional beings, they could immediately observe the construction of another society of science on the third blue rock in the solar system. That's when her tear finally reached them, in the form of a meteor. Crashed into their ocean. Metu brought his eyes from the sphere to look for Neter...she was gone.

LA'QUANTA L.

CHAPMAN



ShipRRRecked

ShipRRRecked

Thunderous rumbles from above were lightly heard at the storm's eve. Sudden shifty winds and choppy 30 foot swells set the Saint Cornelia's sails in disarray, careening the old vessel aimlessly off course.

It was summer's last storm, and she was reigning hell upon all seafarers caught in her grasp. Ships went up and down in powerful turbulent swirls on her last breeze.

The Saint Cornelia in her day was said to have been 118 feet of warship once upon a time ago. Since the removal of her cannons, she'd been subject to many myths, a slaves ship, a pirate ship, and now an honest merchant vessel of spices. But hidden deep within her hull were fathomless riches.

Over whooshing winds and a tumultuous downpour, the sounds of voices were heard faintly, yelling commands, "Abandon ship: No, drop anchor now, Set her sails on the port, No her starboard, pull, no shift'er!" All commands were back and forth from Captain to deckhand.

A slight break in the clouds and a squeaky voice from the crow's nest shouted, "Landfall-Laaandfaaalllll!" The gimlet eyed captain peered up with his snaggletoothed grin. Out of all the panic and commotion, the fat kid, the boat boy, raised on bread, fish and salt pork prevailed. He'd kept his poise and was heard loud and clear. "Landfall," he yelled down to the captain below.

In the galley cast iron kettles and pots were heard jingling, clinging, and clattering, as the swaying ship strewed them about.

The Captain's second mate Cinque slept comfortably in his quarters. It was rumored that he could sleep through anything except battle, as the Saint Cornelia rocked from bow to stern. The sounds of shifting cargo, chains grinding, ropes warping and tumbling waves on rough seas were all uniform to his ear.

It was something about this storm that disturbed his rest. But who can control how one sleeps? He felt himself turning, assuming the ship took wave after wave. Until he'd bumped his head on a wall. It didn't feel wooden: the wall was cold and steelish; he thought he'd been at the end of a captor's sword. Then suddenly his senses sparked, hearing sounds unfamiliar to his voyage. Metal on metal, then an acrid stench of burnt antifreeze and rubber as tires screeched. Then a varied assortment of voices unknown to him, not his shipmates.

He'd heard someone else barking commands, not his captain.

"Hey, every man off the bus, not side by side either, two single file lines, shoulder length of the man in front of you!"

Cinque was in disbelief, as the man issuing the orders barked, "Cinque, you up now sleeping beauty?"

"Yeah I guess so," he replied.

"What were you dreaming about?"

Cinque smiled, adding, "It wasn't a dream, talk about waking up to a nightmare!"

He then fell in line, following the rest of the prisoners into the prison.

STEPHEN BENFORD



Mommy Is Sick

Content Warning: drug use & death of a parent

Mommy Is Sick

You know, I'm only ten years old but I thought that medicine was supposed to make you better. Every time that I've been dragged into a doctor's office for another one of those oh so terrible vac-cat-in-at-ons, which at first I thought had something to do with vacation (stupid me) they told me that the shots are so I don't get sick. I am sure that all doctors enjoy sticking us with those stupid needles. "This won't hurt a bit," they say. Yeah stinking right. Another favorite line is, "it's only a pinch." Ha Ha! Not only do adults obviously enjoy hurting us kids but lying to us also.

Oh yeah, so back to what I was saying, if these shots are supposed to stop us from being sick, what is happening to my Mommy? My Mommy gives herself shots every day, right in our apartment. She says that it's her medicine. But Mommy's medicine just seems to make Mommy tired, tired and sick. Sometimes Mommy falls asleep right after taking her medicine, with the needle still in her arm. I feel bad that Mommy is so tired. Mommy throws up a lot too. She doesn't eat very much but she throws up a lot.

My Mommy tells me that her being so sick is our special secret and that I can't tell anyone about it. She says that if I tell people they might try to steal me away from her. I keep Mommy's secret because I love my Mommy and she's sick, so she might need me. What would she do without me? Why would some bad person want to steal me away from Mommy? Te's just the two of us in our apartment and I don't want her to be alone.

I don't have a Daddy. I asked Mommy once why I don't have a Daddy like all the rest of the kids. Mommy told me that I do have a Daddy but that he's a very important man with a very important job and that's why I've never seen him. I'm happy that he's an important man but I just wish that I could be important to him also. Mommy has a lot of friends though and I have a lot of Uncles. Some of the Uncles are sick like Mommy and they take their medicine together. One of the Uncles, Roger, who comes over a lot, brought me a Playstation and a TV. When the Uncles are here Mommy puts me in my bedroom and I play Crash Bandicoot and Spyro, they're my favorites.

One day when one of the other Uncles came over and I was enjoying my newest game, Tomb Raider. I had been playing for a while when I realized that I really had to pee. Mommy has always told me to stay in the room while the Uncles are over because they need to talk about adult things but it had been longer than usual and I really really needed to pee. Moving really quietly so that I wouldn't be noticed, I peeked out the door and only saw Mommy laying there asleep so I hurried into the bathroom to pee. When I was done I went to the kitchen in order to get a glass of water and noticed a funny smell. Mommy was sick again, but I've helped her

before. I cleaned up the puke from my Mommy and she didn't wake up. Sometimes Mommy is just really really sleepy after taking her medicine.

Mommy is still asleep later that night when Uncle Roger shows up. He rubs my head and asks me where Mommy is. "Sleeping," I say, pointing to Mommy on the couch.

"Oh My God!" He rushes over to Mommy.

I don't know what he's so excited for, Mommy sleeps all the time.

Uncle Roger shakes her, yelling, "Nadine, Nadine, Nadine!" He yells over and over.

Nadine is Mommy's name, no one ever uses it though, I call her Mommy and everyone else calls her Moms. Uncle Roger grabs the phone and tells me to go to my bedroom and play my games.

I hear strange noises and voices coming from the other room and when I peek out the door I can see policemen. There are policemen and a man who looks like a nurse who is bent over Mommy and looking at her. He shakes his head at the policeman and pulls a sheet over Mommy. Why is he covering Mommy like that?

I come out of my room and ask, "what's wrong with my Mommy?" The policeman looks to Uncle Roger and then back to me. "Son, your Mother has passed, she was very sick and she passed."

Passed? I think. No, I don't understand.

"What?" I ask him, not understanding what's going on.

The policeman explains what it all means to me and I collapse to the ground. I am crying and pee in my favorite Spider Man pajamas.

I hear the policeman ask if there's any other family nearby.

"Not that I know of," Uncle Roger replies.

Confused, I tell him about all of my Uncles. I see Uncle Roger look to the policeman and shake his head slowly, with tears falling from his eyes.

Uncle Roger sighs deeply and says, "I might be his father. Well, I mean, I am his Father."

At first I'm not sure if I heard him right. The policeman and Uncle? Or Daddy? Roger are talking about birth certificates and social workers while I just sit there still wearing my peed in pajamas, confused. Uncle Roger? My Daddy? Mommy is dead. I might have a Daddy now? I don't know what's going on but one thing I do know, I won't let anyone give me anymore of that damn medicine ever again.

POETRY



A. B. SCHIRMER



*Lady Godiva &
By Flashlight &
I Asked My Dad*

Lady Godiva

I have a new dislike — it snuck up on me —

Life

I guess it's been coming on slowly

at times imperceptible

at other times

it's Lady Godiva slamming me

in the face

with granite breasts.

The cold, hard, naked

truth

nudist on an iceberg cold

no comfort, no mother's milk

only the liquor of harsh

reality —

“Your hope is vanishing — Poof!”

she whispers in my ear —

“Face reality — you're a dead man

bared to the world as I am.”

Though I play deaf

her words have the wrappings

of truth — death clothes

not the swaddling cloths of

birth — but

the wrappings of a mummification

the final tuxedo . . .

I push her away — she'll be back . . .

she returned

more whispers — less hope

“Nothing — that’s you —
No one listens to you
responds to you
communicates with you
because you’re nothing to them”
barely audible — yet I hear
“You are bound they are free
the static of their lives
drowns out
your cries for love
or just one of their moments
but they cannot hear you —
maybe they don’t want to hear
You . . .”
Her voice
the voice of a cold, hard naked truth
grows louder
nagging
“You are almost dead
to them — they’re ready —
having prepared for years —
go to bed — don’t wake up
just die . . .”
I struggle to push her away
more difficult this time —
I know she’ll return . . .
I’ll be waiting . . .

By Flashlight

The light danced into the room. First, to the bottom bunk —
my bunk — empty. Then to the top bunk —empty. Finally to the
table where I sat on the cold steel stool. The beam lingered on
my face, dazzling my eyes, as if waiting for a response. I said
nothing for nothing needed to be said in that moment. I didn't
want to break the mood. The searching rays moved on. She was
gone, but we had met —

By flashlight . . .

How many times had she passed just outside my door: "Hello,
is it me you're looking for?" I heard Lionel Richie's song echoing
in my head. Was I being serenaded by that light? Should I beckon
her to return or wait for thirty minutes as she sought me out
again? I knew she'd be back to see me —

By flashlight . . .

At times I would hide under the privacy of my blanket, pulled over
my head as her beams sought me out. She couldn't see me but the
light never failed to probe. "For I wonder where you are and I wonder
what you do? Are you somewhere...?" Again with the Lionel Richie?
And her light would venture on and I would sigh. Once again we had met —

By flashlight . . .

Most often I would look away, not wanting to notice her
spying, willing myself not to care — ignoring her attempts at
contact. She always appeared in the dark, the lights out,
peering into my private moments. Was she carrying a torch
for me? Though I played hard to get she always returned —

like clockwork — to meet —

By flashlight . . .

I Asked My Dad

I asked my Dad when I was eight
if I could smoke not knowing the fate
or having the skill — I coughed, got sick
and vomited hard . . .

Did he know then what I know now
that he was trapped not knowing how
to escape the leash that had him bound
for years to come?

When diabetes hit he gave up sweets
turning his back on what he loved to eat:
pies, cakes, sugar cookies, delicious
But deadly now . . .

He had a stroke that slowed him down,
his gait was odd, but he trot the town
a mile then two to get
a carton of Camels . . .

At the VA hospital just before his death
I pushed him to the first floor where
in one swift breath
he pulled out a twenty and said:
“Would you go get me a carton of cigarettes?

BYRON "BULLET"
HAMMOND



I'm Trapped

I'm Trapped

I'm trapped between who I am and who I want to be. Lost like leaves in the wind, drifting on currents that won't let me land. It's like I can see my density but still feel it's too far to reach. I feel the coolness of shadows as they close in from all sides. The cold hands of despair reaching for my back as I continue forward through the darkness in search of a true path to resolution. Salvation is a dream, forgiveness is a nightmare that's gnawed my soul to tatters.

My spirit is unmoored, set adrift, in the seas of hopeless, honorless men who use a six-letter word to abuse more. Characterless characters who are themselves caricatures of themselves. I feel myself sinking into the depths of lawlessness to dramatize the expedient. I despise the weakness of self. The softness that binds me to humility, humbles me in self-doubt, the corrosive teeth of empathy that shares me in the realm of gladiators.

Redemption is a word set against a background of hope that compels me to see better in others, even as others see the worst in me, in themselves, in us all. I'm lost in the land of lies, deceit, conquest. Torture is much more than I can bare to much more than I can share to much more than I can care. I'm trapped between who I am and who I want to be.

CELESTE BLAIR



Free Water

Free Water

My aunt reminds me
this is all an
illusion

I maneuver through
my days
focused
on love

for myself
and the women,
fellow hostages
walking around
me

Yesterday was a
particularly amazing day,
frigid cold,
plenty of room
in the gym

On the stair climber
I closed my eyes
imagined
climbing a mountain
with you

4 hours later

drenched in sweat

feeling alive

satisfied,

powerful,

free

I stood

totally naked

in the only place

I am ever

alone

under the water

in federal shower

number 8

my lucky number

until they gave me

360 months which is a derivative of 8

45

which is,

ironically

how old I was,

when I got it

"got it"

I say it like a disease

but today

the water
was my cure

cure for feeling
captive

I let the water dance
on my face

I have heard women
say it's contaminated
sure,
sometimes it runs brown,
tastes
like metal

other lovers have danced
across my face
who were unclean
but felt
revitalizing

as the water danced
I saw,
in my mind's eye,
a woman

she is longing for
water
she clings

to the memory
of how it felt
when the water
danced on her face

how it was to place
her two hands
together
to serve
her thirsty children

the vision of her
humbled my entire
naked,
grateful self.

letyourillusionbeyourablution

CRAIG "CHAMP"
HAIRSTON



Thor's Hammer

Thor's Hammer

The force with which you wield it,
this is not what bruises and breaks our bones
It's only the underlying agendas
The current created to carry us off,
only to be drowned,
Pulled under by the politics
that have pushed us forward as pawns
I only can wonder, what's in that material?
Perhaps it is partiality, callousness and disdain, elegantly woven into those lofty garments
Those beautiful black robes,
bulletproof gowns pulled over judgmental heads
Rendering you deaf and dumb to certain kinds
Why does Lady Justice look us in the eye,
has someone stolen her blindfold?
Our doubt comes with "NO" (benefit of the),
as you send us to serve
Caging us in the new form of "forbidden"
Wounded before we even participated in your ritual
Bleeding even before you cleared your throat,
the daggers in your eyes pierced us
Why?
Why does equality die when you look at us?
Why is our bar for fairness raised to where we cannot reach?
The sound of the gavel is merely a tap to you,
but to us it's a gunshot
Years tumble and fall from our lives as the court adjourns
We are carted off to wilt away in the slammer
Sure, to you it's a gavel

but to us it's Thor's hammer.

GREGORY FITZGERALD



*The Game &
River Bank &
The Prison Cell*

The Game

On the court, ball in hand;

hearing cheers of the fans.

Taking shots from the line;

slow your breathing, it's fine.

The time comes, make the shot;

Ball soars and finds its spot.

The jerseys and the shoes;

dress the part with the moves.

Shot clock slowly counting down;

ball bounces to the ground.

You are here, on the spot;

All comes down to this shot.

The shot goes around the rim;

After a pass, it falls in.

Friends, family, and teammates;

Celebrate win, feels great.

Nothing will be the same;

After winning your first game.

The Prison Cell

I am neither here nor there;
Seems that I am going nowhere.
Whatever the time or the place;
I see the past in my face.
Sitting here behind these walls;
Day by day my time will fall.

Like the sand in an hourglass;
My time here will come to pass.
All this time I sit here alone;
No time at all for the phone.
I sit here in a concrete box;
Keep listening to the sound of locks.

One day I'll get to the gate;
Sooner or later yet never too late.
Right now I am just stuck here;
least for the next several years.
The prison life isn't meant for me;
day will come when I'll be free.

River Bank

Sitting here on the river's side;
Watching the clouds blow by,
Listen to the sound of trees;
As they blow in the breeze.

Sitting here, toes in sand;
Relaxed with pole in hand.

Time in the great outdoors;
Something that I adore.
Time spent with my loved ones;
Gathered around in the sun.
Fun times, sun times, together;
Just enjoying the weather.

KWELI KAMBON



1 Wish &

If...

1 Wish

If I were granted a wish,
would I think about, or wish the
first thing to mind.

If I were granted a wish,
would it be for more time.

If I were granted a wish,
would it be for my Freedom and
would that wish stipulate the
freedom of mind and body.

If one wish,
would it be in the moment,
reactionary, compulsive.

If I had that one wish, I wouldn't
waste it on money, fame or
ruling the world.

With that one wish, I wish for 3 more.

If...

If it were up to me, the Middle Passage
would've been a luxury cruise, if it
were up to me, we would have a
place to call home, if it were up
to me, the village would still raise
the child, if it were up to me, the
black man and black woman would
live in harmony, no longer in comp,
if it were up to me, we would
still sit in the circle listening
to the elders speak if it were
up to me, we would take our
place with pride, if it were up
to me, we would love and not ask
for it in return, if it were up
to me, our king's throne would
still be the lap of his mother (Queen).

STEPHEN BENFORD



*Cheap Beer &
The Greatest Strip Mall &
Contemplation*

Content Warning: addiction, suicidal ideations, & politics

Cheap Beer

I am from a room the size of a large closet. Stained mattress on the floor. Punk flyers on the walls.

I am from a floor sticky as glue from cheap beer spilling. Soda bottles, beer cans, dirty plates used as an ashtray.

I am from pants that have been mended too many times. Stiff socks in the corner smelling of old cheese.

I am from taping clear plastic over windows to keep in the heat.

Duct tape used to fix holes in couches and worn out shoes.

I am from doing it yourself not because DIY is cool, but because you have to.

I am from stacks of shoplifted DVDs with no cases. CD cases smeared with residue of cocaine and pills.

I am from a loud air conditioner mounted in the window. Out that window an empty lot full of empty beer bottles, torn trash bags leaking, old refrigerators like empty caskets.

I am from a nearly empty fridge. Scrapple breakfast sandwiches from corner stores. 40s from corner bars.

I am from addiction and alcoholism. Unprotected sex and fistfights. Drunken arguments and insults hurled.

I am from not knowing what to do when you're at your wits end.

The Greatest Strip Mall

Sitting alone. Strip mall parking lot.
Late night. Bags rustle in dumpsters.
Raccoons and rodents eat their fill. Only
three businesses open. 24 hour laundromat.
Smells of soap seep into the night. Muffled
buzzing of tattoo machines become louder
as shop door opens. Customers and artists
smoke. Leaning against front window. Fresh
ink shines brighter under fresh layer of
Vaseline. The bright colored light and hum
of neon. Pabst. Budweiser. High Life. Yuengling•
Signs shining bright from bar windows.
Broke down trucks more rust than metal.
Imports with cheap rims. Covered in Bondo.
The nose of a cruiser pokes from behind a
billboard. Sitting. Waiting. In silence.
For the moment when he catches a drunk swerving.
Empty. Lonely. Two lane highway. Street lights
cast their glow on empty parking lots.
Political signs crowd the grass median.
Make America Great Again they proclaim. But
"again" implies a greatness that once existed.
I guess for some that might be true. But for
those of us here. At night. At a strip mall.
Driving cars held together by Bondo. Working
forty hours a week. For minimum wage. Just
to afford rent on a dilapidated apartment.
Just to afford ill done tattoos. Just to

afford a few beers drank in a bar. In a
strip mall that smells of laundry detergent.

Contemplation

Down at the falls.

I hopped the fence in order to sit here.

Under the bridge. On the concrete support.

Surrounded by crushed beer cans,

empty cigarette packs, crappy graffiti.

I sit.

Contemplating life. Contemplating death.

And which one I should choose.

Is this when? Is this where it all ends?

The night is fully dark. But just enough light reaches down here.

It's not quite winter but that time of year when it's already frigid at night.

The tiny waterfall sounds so loud under this bridge.

Diminutive but roaring as a lion.

So cold. Fingers holding my burning cigarette are painfully numb.

Water droplets suffuse the air, making everything damp.

These small drops of water nearly indistinguishable from the teardrops pouring down my cheeks.

It's so cold. My leather jacket and worn Conflict hoody help

but just barely.

I press the burned down butt of my Marlboro against the fresh one dangling from my lips. I inhale deeply of the fresh smoke.

Nicotine floods my bloodstream.

My numb fingers shake as I remove a CD player from my bag,

pressing play. I sit silently. Loud music blasts forth from my headphones. "Survivor" by Fifteen. This song cuts deep into my soul.

Forces me to feel.

I smoke cigarette after cigarette.

I replay the song again and again.

The lyrics an emotional gut punch to my soul.

Forcing me to feel. Forcing me to deal with these emotions. Contemplating what at first appears insurmountable.

Crushed dreams. Squandered opportunities. Lost friends.

Crippling anxieties. Spiraling addiction. Deepening depression.

The world can be such a lonely place. You pushed away anyone who has shown you love.

I roll the razorblade from finger to finger.

Contemplating.

Testing the edge. A drop of deep red blood emerges.

Sitting there and staring at this drop as if mesmerized.

As if answers to every question in the world are contained within.

The song still continues to play and I'm listening.

The razor glints even in the near absence of light.

It could slash through my problems. Bringing it all to an end.

As the music continues to wash over me, eventually I stop listening and begin to feel the lyrics.

The emotion washes over me. Washes away the pain.

I'm not alone.

This pain can be healed.

I glance at the razorblade still nestled in my palm.

Standing, I throw it in the river. It tumbles over and over in the air. Still glinting in the light.

It disappears.

I crush out my cigarette.

Hop back over the fence.

Begin the walk home.

The next song finally begins to play.



Thank you, dear readers and contributors,
for your continued support.

The world is a better place when we make room for art!

